

Homeless youth lose hope



The Salvos provide temporary relief for the homeless with food and entertainment.

BY JAMIE FIRST

Fear keeps people from helping the homeless.

That's the view of a 23-year-old man who has struggled on the streets – in both Melbourne and Sydney – for the past eight years.

Carrying a small backpack that contains his only possessions and dressed in dark track pants and a dirty black hoodie, Jason Lennard is one of more than 100,000 Australians who have no home to go to tonight.

He was kicked out by his mother and stepfather when he was 15 and since then he has been left to fend for himself.

"It plays on your state of mind a bit. You don't know what to expect on the streets. You can get bashed, robbed, whatever," Jason says.

The changeable weather is also a constant concern.

The latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that about 40,000 people who sleep rough are aged between 12 and 25.

Melbourne Citymission's Jo Lehmann says the most common cause of youth homelessness is family breakdown.

This can include sexual, physical and emotional abuse, rejection from a parent, conflict regarding sexuality, mental health issues, drug and alcohol addiction and unemployment.

Jason was forced to leave home after his mother sided with his

stepfather and revealed she no longer loved him.

Ms Lehmann says youth homelessness is an issue that doesn't receive enough attention.

"A lot of people are ignorant about it and choose not to believe that there are actually 12-year-olds who are on the streets," she says.

Formerly homeless, Jess – who didn't want to give her surname and wasn't comfortable being photographed – says being a drifter can be overwhelming at times, but it has made her stronger.

"I've seen friends murdered, I've lost others in the Yarra River and I've watched my mates get locked up," the 17-year-old Melburnian says.

"I now know there isn't anything I can't get through since I have been through all this s***."

CEO of Yfoundations and Chair of the National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH) Michael Coffey says youth homelessness is worsening and part of the reason is the housing crisis.

Despite Australia being one of the world's most prosperous nations, one in two young people who apply for emergency accommodation and other youth homeless services are turned away.

Mr Coffey says the demand is far outstripping supply and the range of approaches to the issue needs to be expanded.

"We need more early intervention, more housing and beds for those who are experiencing homelessness and more affordable exit options."

Jason, too, wishes more could be done.

"I would definitely like to see the elderly and all the young kids under the age of 18 off the streets because it's no place for them," he says.

Like many other homeless youth, Jason and Jess are critical of the lack of response to their needs. They have lost all hope and, with it, any aspirations.

"There's so many homeless people and the government doesn't want to do 'jack' about it to try to get us off the streets," Jason says.

Jess is particularly critical of the bureaucracy surrounding the issue. She says the government needs to start concentrating on building more houses for people rather than constantly upgrading shopping centres.

But a report released by the National Youth Commission (NYC) indicates that homelessness is about more than just having a roof over people's heads.

It is about the separation of young people from their families and communities, and a lack of access to the social and economic opportunities that are vital to the foundations of adult life.

The NYC study found that without a stable home environment young people become detached from friends and society, and are at risk of going down the wrong path and suffering from anxiety and depression.

Executive Director of the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) – a peak body that lobbies for change within government – Andrew Cummings says his focus is on providing under 25s with the opportunity to have their own say.

"What we try to do is directly involve young people – to ask them for their opinion about how policies and services have to change in order to better meet their needs.

"Youth homelessness is an issue that affects the whole community, but in many ways it is often harder for young people

because they don't have access to the support services that adults have and that can leave them really vulnerable and isolated," he says.

Jason says that people look at the homeless "differently" and are scared of them.

"If you ask them for a cigarette, they freak. If you ask them for a dollar or something, they freak. They just don't know how to handle us."

At first hesitant to expose where he sleeps, when pushed Jason says he came across a little spot that no one knows about in Birrarung Marr.

"You have to sleep with one eye open because you don't know what's going to happen."

Jess says the hardest part about living rough was never having a place to call home.

"Sometimes you are lucky enough to have a friend's house to stay at, otherwise you just have to sleep on the streets or in a squat."

"After a while though, I got used to it and kind of liked it because I was free from everyone," she says.

Jess ran away from an abusive relationship with her father. However, after years of neglect and the intervention of the Department of Human Services, she is now living with her grandparents.

She and Jason are just two young people gripped by poverty who rely on the goodwill of the Salvation Army and other aid organisations.

"You have to sleep with one eye open because you don't know what's going to happen."
Jason Lennard,
Homeless

Three times a week a Salvos bus is parked opposite Federation Square and provides food, entertainment – including access to video games, music, DVDs and the internet – and socialisation for the needy.

While this gives the homeless a temporary respite, it is just that ... temporary.

Jason is acutely aware that what awaits him if he can't find permanent housing is more of the same – a seemingly endless road, a life of hardship and disadvantage.

He says he has tried everything to get out of his situation and rebuild his life, but just can't find a settled, safe haven.

He has stayed in many housing refuges, but he doesn't like them. He would rather take his chances on the streets, even though they are dangerous.

The constant grind of being without a home can lead to poor self-esteem, malnutrition, substance abuse, mental illness, violence, rape and prostitution.

Conscious of this, Jason advises others who are struggling to "keep their chins up and not to go on the streets because it's not a good place to be".



Jason Lennard says it's a daily fight to survive on the streets.