

29 May 2023

More than shelter report urges better monitoring and reporting to improve outcomes for children presenting alone to homelessness services

Every year for the past 5 years in New South Wales, between 2,300 and 2,600 children aged 12 to 15 have sought services, without a parent or guardian, from Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS).

Today the NSW Ombudsman tabled a special report to the Parliament, *More than shelter – outstanding actions to improve the response to children presenting alone to homelessness services*.

The report assesses what NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) has done to improve the response to children who present alone to homelessness services since the Ombudsman’s Office first reported on this issue in 2018. The second report was in 2020; this is the third.

The report highlights that of the 2,379 children who presented alone to SHS in 2021–22, almost half (1,072; 45%) needed accommodation, and less than half of these received it (483; 45%).

The report also shows:

- Aboriginal children continue to be highly over-represented. Year after year they comprise around a quarter of the 12-15-year-olds presenting alone to SHS.
- Children in out-of-home care (OOHC) comprise more than 10% of the total number of children who are presenting as homeless or at risk of homelessness to SHS.
- The number of 12-15-year-olds presenting alone has not declined over the last 3 years.

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice is responsible for the welfare of homeless children and the service system that responds to them. In the case of children in OOHC, DCJ fulfills the Minister’s statutory role as “parent.”

NSW Ombudsman, Paul Miller said: “Our previous reports emphasised the need for stronger policy, clearer decision-making arrangements, and proper monitoring to measure responses and report outcomes for unaccompanied homeless children.”

“All three reports demonstrate the scarcity of available and reliable information about these children – who they are, why they are presenting alone to SHS, what services (if any) they are provided, and what outcomes are achieved.”

“A particularly concerning issue identified in this report is that we have been unable to source, from DCJ or elsewhere, any reliable data on children under 12 who may have presented to SHS on their own. We don’t know if that is a problem, and if so, how big of a problem. DCJ’s policy now expressly contemplates that unaccompanied children under 12 may be seeking homelessness services.”

The report shows that DCJ has implemented some, but not all, of the NSW Ombudsman’s previous 2020 report recommendations. The department made positive progress by publishing a revised, stronger policy on its role and responsibilities, and those of youth homelessness services, to children who present alone to the services. However, the necessary data is not being collected to show whether the policy is working as intended.

DCJ has not implemented all previous recommendations to improve monitoring and reporting, despite saying it supports them.

Mr. Miller continued, “This lack of outcomes evidence reflects a broader and longstanding gap in what is known about unaccompanied homeless children, about their needs and what happens to them. 5 years after we first reported on this issue...what little we do know, does not give us confidence that the revised policy is achieving significant practical improvements.”

“Last year, DCJ reported to us the outcomes of its implementation of recommendations made in our previous report. **In our assessment, there are outstanding actions needed to improve the response to children who present alone to homelessness services.**”

Read more in the full report

ENDS

Media contact: Denne Dempsey

Manager | Communications and Media | NSW Ombudsman
Level 24, 580 George Street, Sydney NSW 2000
m 0415572092 | e media@ombo.nsw.gov.au

Follow us on [Twitter](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Facebook](#)