

What’s Important To YOUth?

Prepared by The Salvation Army Victoria
Social Programme and Policy Unit

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*The Salvation Army, Australia Southern Territory – Victorian State Council: What’s Important to YOUth?*

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What’s Important to YOUth?

# About The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army is an international Christian movement with a presence in 126 countries worldwide. In Australia, the Salvos are widely known and relied upon to deliver practical responses to individuals, families and communities in crisis. Whilst we interact on a daily basis with people from all walks of life, we recognise a particular calling to those who might otherwise fall through the gaps of our social security nets, those who find themselves on the margins of our communities, and those who struggle to have their voices heard.

This support for disadvantaged Australians is driven by our values: human dignity, justice, hope, compassion and community. We share our community’s belief in a ‘fair go’ for all, which grounds our commitment to social justice and a particular interest in the health and wellbeing of those most vulnerable in our society.

In Victoria, The Salvation Army has been helping people in need for more than 130 years. Today Salvation Army churches, community centres, and social service networks provide more than 350 distinct social program activities in urban, regional and rural areas across the state. These programmatic responses range from frontline emergency support services and highly targeted, intensive interventions, through to more generalist life stage responses.

The Salvation Army provides a wide range of youth services right across Victoria, including youth homelessness, case management, out-of-home care, education, training and employment programs. We know that the young people who become connected with us have all had a rough start to their lives. For too many, by the time they hit their teenage years, they've already dealt with more issues than most of us face in a lifetime. In a society where many young people are staying at home longer and longer after high school, university and into their first jobs, this group of vulnerable youth is having to find their feet much earlier and overcome multiple disadvantages to do so.

In order to help these young people get back on their feet, someone needs to be able to build trust with them. Invariably this trust will be tested and can require great resilience from all involved, however such trusting relationships are essential to reestablishing a sense of hope in the possibilities of the future for those who've been badly burnt by their past. We need to ensure that our services and systems don't close the door on vulnerable young people but instead that we continually find ways to open new doors and keep them open.

This submission has been compiled from feedback given by Salvation Army youth services across Victoria, as well as information gathered from previous submissions in the youth space.

# Education, Training and Employment

The cohort of young people who come into contact with The Salvation Army often have poor educational histories and frequently lack basic literacy and numerous skills. Re-engaging these young people in education and training is critical to help them develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in life. However, most of the young people The Salvation Army works with have struggled to thrive in mainstream schools. Many feel ashamed and lack the self confidence to believe that they can succeed in school and withdraw rather than continue to engage in education. Offering alternative educational pathways to these young people is crucial to enabling them to build the confidence and skills needed to succeed later in life.

## Education Case Study

Ben's problems at school started in Grade 4. When his dad left home, his mum's drinking got a lot worse and he soon found himself having to borrow lunch from other kids. Having no money around the house first led to missing school excursions but by the time he was in high school, his unstable home situation had led to him missing school on a pretty regular basis. By Year 9, it was pretty clear that Ben was on the way out of mainstream education and by the first term of Year 10, it was sealed. For almost a year, Ben avoided any form of education or training - in his own mind he was always going to be a failure.

However, just after his sixteenth birthday Ben got involved with The Salvation Army's Brunswick Youth Services (BYS) through a friend. He went on a few outings with them and started to play basketball on their Monday night team. Before he knew it, he was working with his friend on a multimedia project that was part of the VCAL curriculum. Later when Ben's mum kicked him out of home because he was fighting with her new boyfriend, BYS helped to find him safe accommodation. Ben eventually took up an apprenticeship with an electrician on the condition that he turn up to work on time unaffected by drugs or alcohol. He's now in his second year.

Many of the young people who access Salvation Army services have similar stories to Ben - they've lost a sense of hope for their own lives and they trust very few, if any, adults. Their experience has taught them that mainstream systems weren't designed to deal with their problems and that the easiest way is to opt out before you get kicked out.

## What Works in Education and Training?

Like Ben, many of the young people that The Salvation Army works with do not cope well in mainstream education and have a history of poor educational outcomes. In some cases this can be explained by learning or developmental problems, or intellectual disability. However, it is more often attributable to the influence of chaotic, abusive or neglectful home environments. As the result of early disengagement with school, many lack the fundamental skills, including basic literacy and numeracy, that are critical to workforce participation and vocational fulfilment.

In order to recognise and intervene as early as possible, one of the recommendations from a Salvation Army youth worker was that teacher education should include an introduction to trauma informed practice. This could mean that issues shaping a young person’s behaviours are identified and appropriate responses can be crafted before they disengage with mainstream education systems. Schools may also need to be resourced better in order for student welfare workers to successfully engage with young people, families and partner with specialist services.

Salvation Army frontline services also report that VCAL provides a good opportunity for the young people we work with and that more alternative educational and vocational development opportunities, such as social enterprises, need to be made available. Especially valuable are courses that focus on building fundamental work skills, as well as helping young people acquire industry specific skills that will provide a pathway into meaningful employment. TAFE providers have also been very valuable as they have historically been the largest providers of VET courses and offer a wide range of fundamental courses like basic literacy and numeracy skills and apprenticeships which help build the confidence and skills of the people we work with.

Too often young people engage in a course to fulfil Centrelink obligations but find they are still unable to secure employment after completion. This is frustrating for young people and acts as a disincentive to further educational engagement. Of particular concern are private for-profit providers who target and exploit young people, too often leaving them with significant debts and without the vocational skills they need.

They need one-on-one assertive outreach support to help them access the programs, small class sizes, and flexible course curriculum and structures that allow teaching staff to work with young people on an individualised basis. With this type of intense and personalised support, vulnerable young people can achieve outstanding outcomes.

The defunded Commonwealth Youth Connections program once helped vulnerable young people like Ben to reengage with education and training opportunities. It is estimated that 10,000 young people in Victoria are currently disengaged from any kind of education or training.[[1]](#footnote-1) Supporting these young people to re-engage in school and stay connected to their communities greatly reduces their risk of becoming homeless later in life. Youth Connections provided flexible, individualised responses to young people at risk or disengaged from education and training. In Victoria, the program supported an average of 4,600 young people each year, of which approximately 2,500 were between 13 and 17 years of age.[[2]](#footnote-2) The program had been highly successful in working with young people who are at risk and helping these young people re-engage in education and training and strengthen ties to their communities and family. Funding for Youth Connections ended on 31 December 2014. Without a similar program funded to work with this group of young people, more will disengage from school and be at increased risk of falling through the gaps for the rest of their lives.

# Mental Health, Trauma and Marginalisation

Community-based and non-clinical interventions play a vital role in helping young people who may be experiencing mental health difficulties or who are suffering the effects of trauma. The young people with whom The Salvation Army works have often had to find ways of coping with incredibly difficult life situations. These coping strategies, which may include using alcohol and other drugs, self-harm, violence and criminal activities are symptomatic of the struggle to survive in an environment that usually contains limited supports. Too frequently these activities result in further judgement and marginalisation rather than the care and support that is needed in order to provide sufficient stabilisation for the introduction of more appropriate coping strategies.

A key theme coming from Salvation Army youth workers was that successful engagement frequently depends upon young people being met on their own terms. This requires flexible strategies and responses, which should also include a range of online and social media supports, reflecting the changing environments in which young people interact.

## Mental Health Case Study

Anna is 18 years old and her life so far has been dominated by physical, sexual and emotional abuse. She was often left alone from a very early age and recalls crying for hours without anyone noticing her. Anna’s father was physically and sexually abusive towards her throughout her childhood and later taught her brother to continue the same pattern of abuse.

Unsurprisingly, Anna had a highly disrupted education, rarely attended school and eventually dropped out in year 10. Around this time, Anna made friends with a group of young people who engaged in low level criminal activity and she began to use cannabis and alcohol with them. At 16, she left home; initially spending several months couch surfing and on a few occasions sleeping rough on the streets or in squats. During this time, Anna continued to be sexually abused by the people she stayed with and usually considered this abuse to be the cost of being allowed to stay. Anna’s drug usage increased, expanding to include Ice (methamphetamine) and prescription pills (benzodiazepines).

Eventually, the criminal activities that supported Anna’s drug usage and place in her peer group culminated in a stay at Parkville Youth Justice Precinct. Anna received some counselling and support while at Parkville but without support she returned to homelessness shortly after being released. For several months afterwards, Anna bounced between youth refuges, homelessness, couch surfing, and eventually a stay at a residential withdrawal and rehabilitation program. During this time, significant mental health problems became apparent, including anxiety, depression and feelings of hopelessness, which culminated in a suicide attempt. She was prescribed medication, but in the absence of ongoing support, her accommodation continually broke down and her treatment was unable to be continued. It was at this point that she came to The Salvation Army.

While accommodated at a Salvation Army refuge, Anna reengaged with a mental health service and started to take her medication again. She was also offered counselling which, combined with the stability the refuge provided, helped her begin to deal with the abuse that she had experienced, which is a significant contributor to her mental health issues. Anna has been offered legal support to help her address outstanding public transport fines and other charges related to theft and property damage. She has also improved her literacy and numeracy skills, as well as general living skills, despite having been assessed as having a learning disability. Anna continues to work with her support worker towards recovering from her abusive past and mental health issues. She is currently waiting to access a place in transitional housing, where she will continue to be supported.

The Salvation Army in Victoria provides a range of Out of Home Care (OHC) services to children and young people of all ages who are unable to safely live with their families because of violence, abuse or neglect. Because of their traumatic backgrounds, many children and young people in OHC struggle to build positive relationships with people, may suffer from developmental delays, intellectual disability or mental health issues, and often have poor educational outcomes. According to the Victorian Children’s Court, they are also more likely to have substances abuse issues and are more likely to be involved with the youth justice system.[[3]](#footnote-3) They are also at a high risk of homelessness when leaving care, with 35 per cent of young people leaving care becoming homeless within the first year of leaving care[[4]](#footnote-4) and 25 per cent of those young people still being homeless up to seven years after leaving care.[[5]](#footnote-5) Helping these young people deal with their traumatic pasts and plan for the future is paramount if they are to be able to live successful lives as adults.

Research into the use of therapeutic care in the Out of Home Care (OHC) setting has shown that therapeutic support can help vulnerable children and young people recover from abuse and trauma. The Salvation Army Westcare and SalvoCare Eastern use therapeutic care models for foster and residential care. The models are informed by trauma theory and focus on the physical, mental and emotional state of the child or young person. Participating children experienced increased stability in the care placements, significant developmental gains in their ability to communicate, form relationships and regulate their emotions, and a number of participates were able to restore relationships and be reunited with their families.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A significant body of research has also documented the negative impact family violence and related homelessness has on children.9 Children who experience or witness family violence face difficulties in child development and are at increased risk of mental illness and behavioural disorders.10 These issues can extend into adulthood and result in generational disadvantage.11 For example, research has found that children who experience abuse and/or homelessness are more likely to become homeless and experience violence later in life.12 Children’s unique needs are widely recognised in the homelessness, Child Protection and Out of Home Care sectors, but little additional funding has been provided to family violence services to respond specifically to children’s needs. A more therapeutic approach needs to be tailored specifically to the needs of children who have experienced family violence.13

Based on our experience as service providers in both the family violence and the OHC sectors, we believe that the principles of therapeutic care practiced in OHC could easily be included in the practice of family violence services to better meet the needs of children accessing their services.

# Homelessness and Housing

The number of young people coming to our services looking for accommodation continues to increase. Too many services with limited capacity face a growing line of young people every night looking for a place to stay and nowhere to go. A chronic shortage of crisis accommodation beds makes it impossible to meet demand.

High rental prices, low incomes, and a lack of references make accessing private rental extremely difficult for vulnerable young people. Private rental brokerage programs can be successful in housing young people who have established independent living skills. Current DHS standards allow brokerage assistance for young people who pay up to 55 per cent of their income in rent. For a single young person on Youth Allowance and receiving Rent Assistance, this equals about $170 a week. Despite high housing costs, in 2013-14 the Youth Private Rental Access Program (YPRAP) at St Kilda Youth and Family Services housed 59 young people in private rental at a total cost of $84,900 or an average of $1,450 per young person. Currently, more than 90 per cent of those tenancies have been maintained.

Unfortunately, due to the high costs of housing, even with private rental brokerage support, most young people can only afford to live in share houses in outer suburbs where there is limited public transport. This can make travelling to education, training or employment options much more difficult. Flexible brokerage funding sources are used by YPRAP to support young people in the early stages of their tenancy, however this type of funding is rare and often at risk of budget cuts. Vulnerable young people already have few housing options available to them. Without a continuation of this funding to help services support young people into private rental and support their tenancy, housing options will become even more limited.

In addition to maximising private rental options, other suggestions from Salvation Army youth workers included:

* A housing guarantee for care leavers with supports up to the age of 25 to eliminate homelessness in this vulnerable group
* Provide shared housing, including lead tenant models, with subsidised housing leases for young people
* Providing respite housing and support for young people who return to family and subsequently need time out to ensure the sustainability of reunification
* Long term supported housing models for young people with disabilities or mental health issues

A Salvation Army collaborative event with the Commonwealth Government, “youTHINK: Your Say”, gathered valuable insights on homelessness from young people across the country.[[7]](#footnote-7) These insights included:

* Government should do more to prevent homelessness before a young person gets onto the street. Early intervention at home and at school is required.
* Government should do more to tackle the causes of homelessness and to provide support and assistance to prevent the loss of accommodation. Staying in a difficult home environment is not seen by young people as an appropriate option.
* Many young people who have experienced homelessness are critical of the role of state government agencies.
* There is an issue related to the transition of young people in state care that needs to be addressed. These young people often find themselves making a sudden transition from complete state support to no support and a requirement to fend exclusively for themselves.
* There is a need for more transitional housing and accommodation. Young people find it difficult to access appropriate accommodation and find the rigidity of many shelters, refuges and temporary accommodation hard to accept.
* The private rental market is seen by most young people as the best option for providing long-term, sustainable accommodation. Access to public housing is seen by most young people as an unrealistic option.
* Support for private rental bonds and government endorsed references are seen by many of the young people as a way of allowing them to enter the private rental market.
* The best approach for young people who require accommodation is to find an option that suits individual circumstances and to aim for a ‘first-time’ solution. Putting the effort into getting a young person into ‘a place of their own’ will work better than numerous transitional accommodation arrangements.
* Young people often end up living on the streets because of problems or difficulties at home. The consequences of unemployment and problems paying the bills, too much alcohol or drug use, physical or mental abuse are just some of the things that can result in young people moving out of home.
* Most young people start off by couch-surfing with other family members or mates before they find themselves living on the streets.
* Once they are on the streets young people must face the most basic problems –Where do I sleep? How do I get enough to eat and drink? How do I stay warm? How do I keep myself safe?
* Contact with family and friends is lost and the longer young people stay on the streets the harder it is for them to think about education or getting a job.
* Young people living on the streets can be exploited by other people who use alcohol, drugs, food or a promise of a place to stay as a way of getting them to engage in risky or illegal behaviour.
* After a while on the streets it becomes more and more difficult for young people to get back into education or into a job. This means that it gets just as difficult to find a decent place to live.
* Getting into private rental accommodation is really difficult and there is not a lot of public housing available.

# Young People and Public Transport

Many young people come to our services with significant accumulated fines for minor offences such as travelling on public transport without a ticket. For young people struggling to survive on Youth Allowance or Newstart, paying these fines is practically impossible.

In many cases, young people rely on public transport to get around, even though their budgets are so severely constrained that they cannot afford it. Not being able to use public transport impacts upon their ability to be part of the community, attend a doctor’s appointment, a course or employment, and increases their isolation. Faced with a difficult choice, too many young people are currently taking a risk by evading fare payment and consequently end up with even more insurmountable costs.

The vast majority of fines issued to the young people we work with are revoked due to special circumstances. However, the process to achieve this takes time and is costly to the young person, the support agency, and to the courts to follow these fines up.

Fining vulnerable members of our community, including young people, who have no ability to pay to use public transport is costing the court system a significant amount of money and further marginalising an already disadvantaged and isolated group in our community. Instead of dealing with the symptoms of this problem when it’s already too late, ie. through the courts, a far better solution would be to apply the understanding of exigent circumstances that exists in our justice system, to our public transport system in a proactive manner. In the same way that the NSW Government offers free public transport to school students and pensioners have access to free off-peak public transport in WA and SA, the Victorian Government could make public transport available to vulnerable Victorians on low incomes, who otherwise cannot afford to pay. Not only would this reduce unnecessary costs in infringement processing and courts, but would also ease financial stress amongst low income earners and increase their capacity to attend education, training and job seeking activities.

# Disadvantaged and Vulnerable Young People

## Young People Falling Through The Gaps

Making the transition from adolescence to adulthood is difficult for any young person but for those with traumatic childhoods, who have no family or friends to support them, the transition to independence can be much harder. Many young people do not have any supports to assist them through this difficult period of their life. Most of them have experienced some combination of family breakdown, violence and abuse, involvement with child protection and poor education outcomes. As a consequence of their disrupted and chaotic home environments, they may suffer developmental delays, have learning difficulties and subsequently face mental health issues and addictions. Young people in these situations often do not have their needs met in mainstream services such as schools and are at higher risk of coming into contact with the justice system and becoming homeless.

High youth unemployment rates, restrictions to income support payments, rising education costs and costs of living, all combine to make finding employment and becoming independent increasingly hard for young people. In Victoria, The Salvation Army operates three youth refuges, more than 50 youth support programs and 16 residential care units. Consultations with these services identified the following areas where vulnerable young people are currently falling through the gaps.

## Key Issues for Young People

Vulnerable young people who were never formally involved in child protection but have similar histories and needs are at risk of falling through the gaps because they cannot access the same supports as care leavers.

Our services repeatedly identified a group of vulnerable young people, like Anna, who had experienced disrupted childhoods, family breakdown, and other significant risk factors such as mental illness, substance abuse and violence, but did not have any formal involvement with child protection or statutory care. Salvation Army youth refuges across the state report that 25 to 50 per cent of the young people they work with have had some statutory involvement with child protection. However, services also work with a significant group of young people who come to their service after having left home around 15 or 16 years of age to escape traumatising and/or abusive situations and are now homeless. These young people, who are dealing with similar vulnerabilities to care leavers, are not eligible to receive the same supports put in place for young people leaving care. For example, the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) used to be available to all vulnerable young people at risk of homelessness but recently has been restricted to those young people leaving statutory care. Similarly, the Springboard Program is only available to care leavers and care leavers have access to free TAFE courses whereas other vulnerable young people do not.

Research has widely documented the significant barriers that young people face upon leaving care and the increased support that is required for successful transitions to independent living. The Salvation Army is concerned that a different group of highly vulnerable young people, who were never involved in statutory care but probably should have been, are being missed and increasingly falling through the gaps.

# Young People and the Justice System

Every day The Salvation Army works with people who have been involved with the justice system at some point in their lives. In Victoria, The Salvation Army has
10 chaplains in prisons across the state as well as 23 chaplains in courts who provide more than 10,000 support hours in prisons and more than 30,000 support hours in courts every year. We also work extensively in the Victorian Children’s Court and provide case management to children and young people who become involved or are at risk of becoming involved with the youth justice system.

Our experience of working with youth and adults who offend is that their offending behaviour is almost always a by-product of other issues in their lives. The experience of Salvation Army youth support service providers indicates that the majority of young people involved in youth justice that they work with are experiencing family breakdown, a death in the family, financial stress, or substance abuse. Alternatively, other issues that can contribute to offending behaviour include mental illness, intellectual disability, involvement with child protection, or family violence. Data from the Victorian Children’s Court supports our experience revealing that children from traumatic backgrounds are more likely to be involved with the justice system.

* 35% had previous child protection involvement;
* 16% had current child protection involvement;
* 55% were victims of abuse, trauma or neglect prior to incarceration;
* 66% had been suspended or expelled from school;
* 34% presented with mental health issues;
* 14% were registered with Disability Services;
* 88% of cases had alcohol or other drugs related to the offending; and
* 21% were parents.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The disadvantage and marginalisation these young people experience early in life affects them throughout their lives and increases the likelihood they will be involved with the justice system as adults.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Salvation Army strongly supports justice responses that help to deal with the drivers of criminal behaviour rather than only relying on punitive measures as disincentives. Youth Justice conferencing and other diversionary options have been shown to be successful crime reduction strategies, cutting down on recidivism and giving young people the chance for a more successful future. Because of the indelible impact that incarceration has upon young people, including increasing criminal behaviours, The Salvation Army also supports the call to increase the age of criminal responsibility to 12.

# Conclusion

Because The Salvation Army works with people at all stages of life, the unique opportunities available in working with young people are especially poignant. Long term and entrenched disadvantage is not only tragic and costly for individuals and the community but in most cases is avoidable if young people are provided with the right support and opportunities. The Salvation Army calls upon the Victorian Government to invest in the state’s young people, with a special emphasis on those who are struggling or face difficult barriers to success, so that all are able to share hope for a bright future.

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