

Pathways to homelessness for young people leaving out-of-home care in NSW

This Evidence Brief presents key findings about young people exiting out-of-home care (OOHC) in New South Wales (NSW) from Taylor Fry's Pathways to Homelessness report. We also discuss implications for policy and practice. By better understanding the experiences and pathways of young people exiting OOHC, supports can be put in place earlier to improve outcomes. The analysis uses a linked dataset that includes Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) and 18 other NSW Government and Commonwealth services.

Key messages

- Young people leaving OOHC face a range of challenges and can find themselves particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Between 2011 and 2016, around 1 in 6 (17%) OOHC leavers accessed homelessness services within a year of leaving care, evidence of significant housing instability for this group. Aboriginal young people and females were overrepresented.
- Young people leaving OOHC access a wide range of other government services between their exit and accessing homelessness services. Between leaving OOHC and accessing a homelessness service around a quarter of care leavers accessed an Emergency Department and/or were a victim of crime.
- Previous homelessness, walk-in mental health service use, and court appearances (including Youth Justice Centres and police cautions) are all predictive of increased risk of later accessing homelessness services for OOHC leavers.
- Of the 1 in 6 (16%) OOHC leavers who have already accessed homelessness services in the twelve months prior to leaving care for the final time, 91% are likely to re-present to homelessness services in the following year.
- OOHC leavers need targeted support to reduce their homelessness risk and improve their outcomes. This analysis provides a starting point to inform this work. More unpacking of the characteristics of key at risk groups of care leavers within this dataset could help to tailor and better target appropriate evidence-based interventions.

Introduction

Young people leaving OOHC are particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. The Department of Communities and Justice has worked with Taylor Fry to conduct a

detailed investigation into the services people use before, during and after accessing homelessness services in NSW. Part of the study looked more closely at the pathways to homelessness for young people exiting OOHC.

This Evidence Brief provides an overview of key findings and policy implications from the *Pathways to Homelessness* report for young people exiting OOHC. Policymakers and practitioners are encouraged to use this as a basis for further consideration with stakeholders in their specific areas. Better understanding the experiences and pathways into homelessness for young people leaving OOHC can help us design and implement preventative and early intervention responses to improve outcomes.

Further detailed information about the data and findings is available in the [full report](#).

Why is understanding homelessness for young people leaving OOHC so important?

Young people leaving OOHC have a greater risk of becoming homeless than the broader population (Conroy & Williams 2017) and experience poor social outcomes compared to their peers. Major life transitions such as leaving OOHC often occur before periods of homelessness (Crane et al. 2005). Young people leaving OOHC who have a history of placement instability, significant adverse or traumatic life experiences, poor leaving care planning and limited social and support networks are particularly vulnerable to homelessness after leaving OOHC (Conroy & Williams 2017).



The NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–2023 aims to tackle this growing problem, by providing targeted support to people leaving government services. This includes ensuring best practice planning for exits from government services for high risk cohorts including young people leaving OOHC (NSW Government 2018).

To gain a better understanding of the experiences of young people leaving OOHC, we also need to understand broader service use and where there are opportunities to intervene earlier. This is one of the key aims of the Pathways to Homelessness research.

How was the Pathways to Homelessness analysis designed?

The analysis undertaken by Taylor Fry examined a linked dataset that includes SHS and 18 other NSW and Commonwealth services.

The linked dataset covers 625,861 people, with a case and comparison design:

- The **case cohort** is 202,927 people who accessed SHS in NSW from 1 July 2011 to 30 June 2017.
- The **comparison (control) group** is a random sample of 422,934 people in NSW, matched for age and sex.

The dataset is large enough to be able to meaningfully talk about homelessness risk for the entire NSW population.

A range of analyses were applied to the data, including descriptive analysis, predictive modelling, pathway analysis and cost estimation. These form the basis for the findings presented in this brief. More information on the questions that guided the analysis, the data sets included and the approach undertaken is provided at the end of this brief and is available in the full report.

It is important to note that the dataset does not capture the pathways of all individuals experiencing homelessness. The Taylor Fry analysis focuses on people presenting to crisis accommodation services, and more specifically where a person has sought assistance from an SHS provider or Temporary Accommodation (see Box 1). This is a practical decision as high-quality linkable data exists for this group.

Box 1: Definitions

How are OOHC leavers defined?

For this analysis, the OOHC leavers cohort is aged 14 and over and had finished an OOHC placement, with no further OOHC placements to 30 June 2018. While all young people included in the analysis had at least a two-year break in OOHC placements, some may have had further placements before age 18. OOHC leavers may have left care due to restoration, guardianship, adoption or left long-term care at 18 years when their care order expired. The data does not permit a breakdown of the type of exit from OOHC experienced by each young person.

How are homelessness services defined?

For this study, homelessness services include SHS and Temporary Accommodation (TA). SHS provide services aimed at prevention and early intervention, as well as crisis and post crisis assistance to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. TA supplements SHS in providing time limited accommodation in low cost motels or caravan parks for clients who are homeless. The intention of TA is to provide a bridge to give clients a chance to secure alternative accommodation, whether crisis accommodation or private rental. It is a short-term temporary measure rather than a longer-term response.

What are the types of service presentations?

People presenting to homelessness services are classified based on their housing situation:

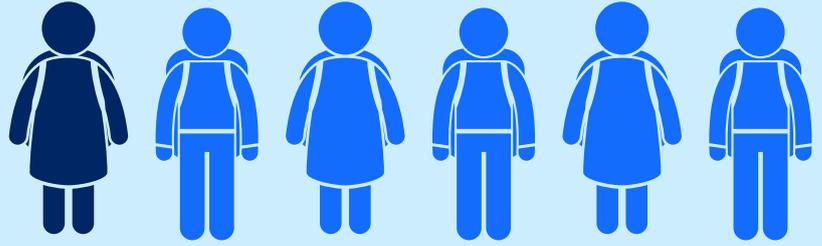
- People with no shelter or living in an improvised/inadequate dwelling are **rough sleeping**.
- People living in short term temporary accommodation, or as a couch surfer with no tenure are **homeless**. This includes people in Temporary Accommodation, noting some may have been rough sleeping.
- People living in social housing, private housing or institutional settings are **at risk of homelessness**.

What did the analysis find?

Key findings about young people leaving OOHC are presented in the following infographic and described more fully in the rest of this brief. Detailed data is available in the full report.

Exits from OOHC

1 in 6 (17%)
 young people who left out-of-home care (OOHC) accessed homelessness services within a year



OOHC leavers accessed a range of services between leaving OOHC and presenting to homelessness services

Of the 17% of young people who accessed homelessness services within a year of exiting OOHC:



3 in 10

accessed an Emergency Department



1 in 4

had a police-recorded victim incident



1 in 6

accessed ambulatory mental health services



1 in 6

accessed Legal Aid

Young people exiting OOHC were more likely than the broader population to access homelessness services in the next year

% of future presentations to homelessness services



Likelihood of accessing homelessness services



13x
more likely



1%



Likelihood of accessing homelessness services while rough sleeping



11x
more likely



1%

Prior use of homelessness services is a strong predictor of future use of homelessness services



Of the total leaving OOHC group:



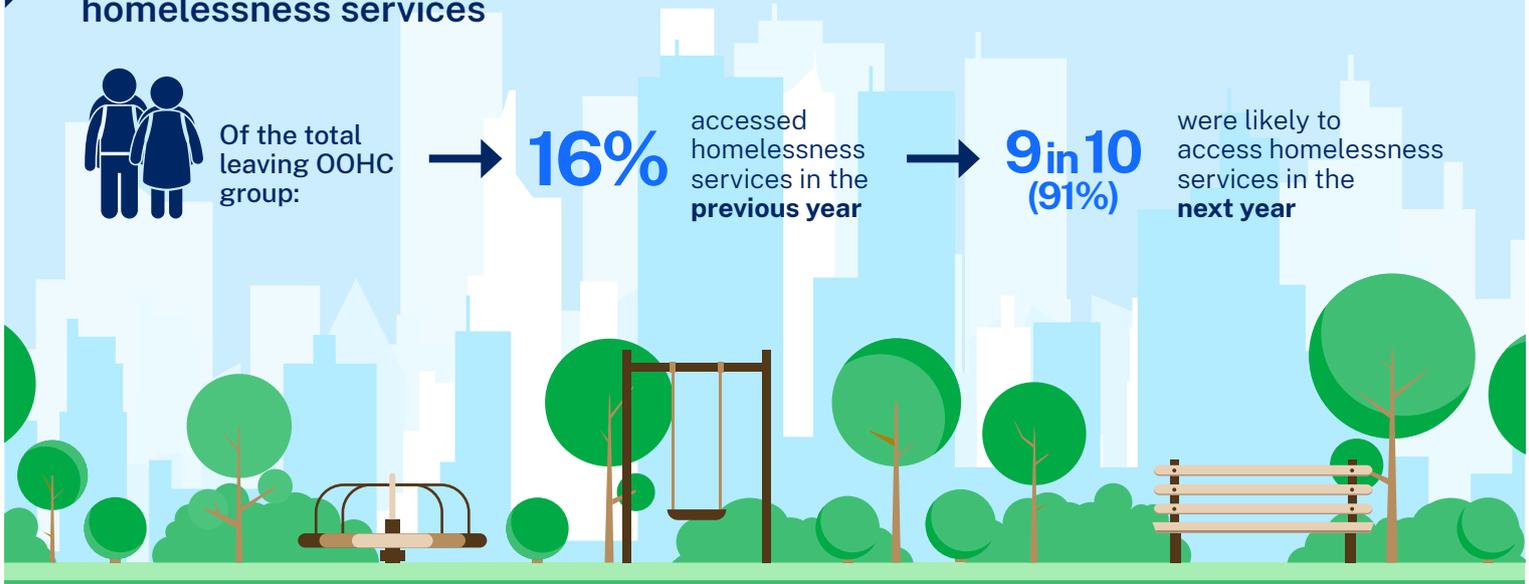
16%

accessed homelessness services in the previous year



9 in 10 (91%)

were likely to access homelessness services in the next year



Who accesses homelessness services after exiting OOHC and what services do they use?

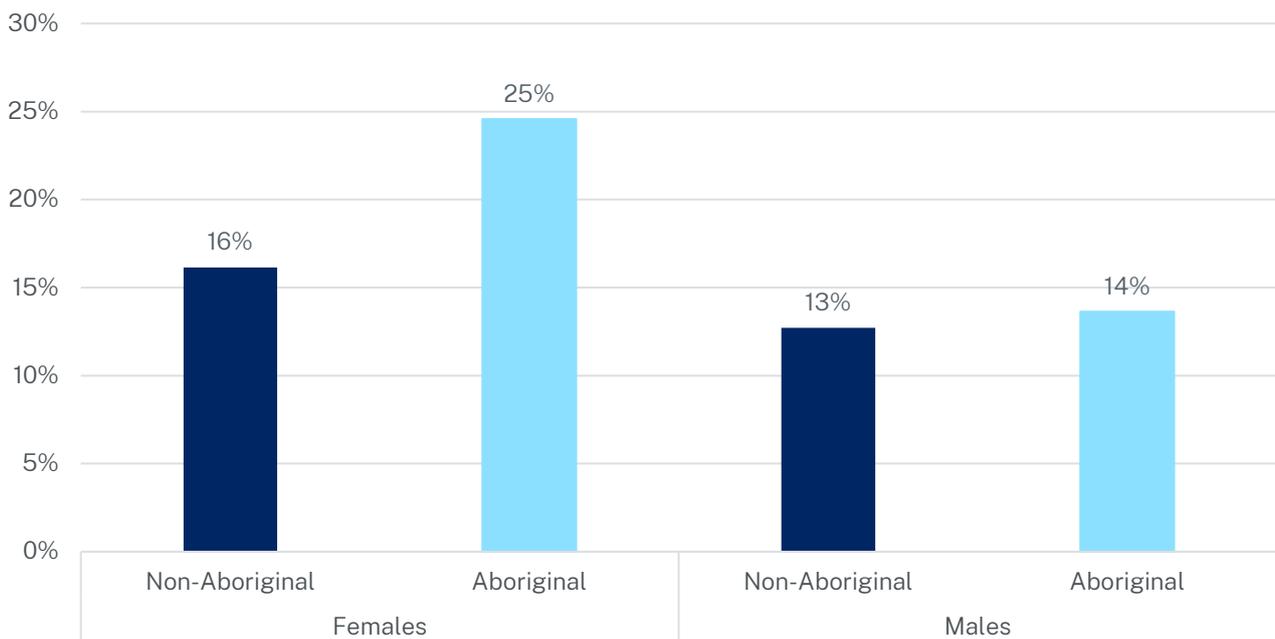
There were around 6,000 people aged 14 years and over who finished an OOHC placement during the period July 2011 to June 2016, and who had no further OOHC placements to 30 June 2018. The majority (83%) of OOHC leavers were aged over 16 years of age at the time of exit. One-third (35%) of OOHC leavers were Aboriginal, reflecting their significant over-representation among children and young people in OOHC.

For exits in the five years to June 2016, around one in six (17%) OOHC leavers accessed SHS in the following year.

Females and Aboriginal people are more likely to access homelessness services after leaving care

The proportion of OOHC leavers accessing SHS is higher for females and for Aboriginal people. Females who identify as Aboriginal have particularly high rates of accessing SHS after leaving OOHC, with a quarter (25%) of Aboriginal female OOHC leavers accessing SHS within a year compared to 16% of non-Aboriginal female OOHC leavers (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Rates of SHS access in the year after exit from OOHC, by sex and Aboriginality, December 2011–June 2016



Source: Pathways to Homelessness, Figure 47

Between leaving OOHC and presenting to homelessness services around a quarter of care leavers accessed an Emergency Department and/or were a victim of crime

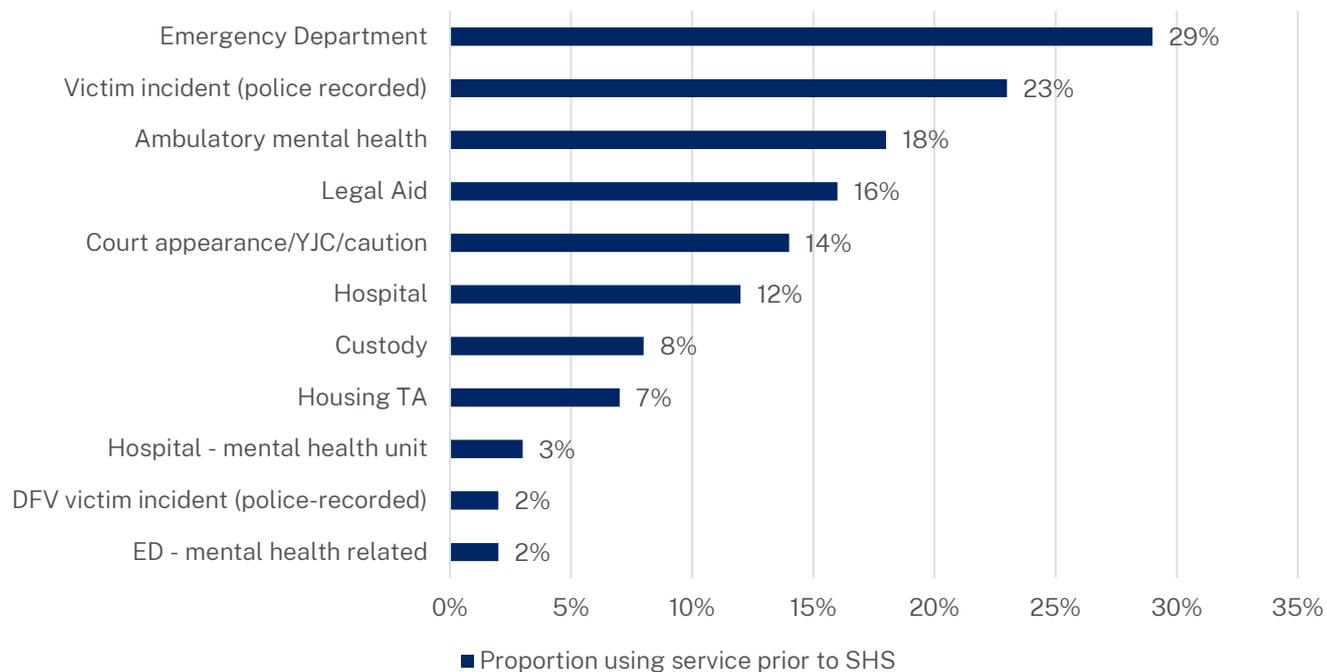
For the 17% who accessed SHS within a year of leaving OOHC, this group also accessed a range of services between leaving OOHC and presenting to SHS:

- 29% accessed an Emergency Department
- 23% had a police-recorded victim incident

- 18% accessed ambulatory mental health services
- 16% accessed Legal Aid
- 14% had court appearances (or YJC or cautions) (Figure 2).

For the group of young people exiting OOHC who later access homelessness services, the heightened personal safety risks they experience prior to accessing SHS are a particular concern.

Figure 2: Services used between the end of an OOHC placement and SHS presentation and presenting to SHS within one year, December 2011–June 2016



Source: Pathways to Homelessness, Table 52

What are the potential early intervention points for young people leaving OOHC?

Young people leaving OOHC have elevated use of homelessness services

To determine potential homelessness intervention points, the analysis looks at other government services people used in the year before accessing homelessness services based on six years of data to June 2017. Table 1 looks at the **risk uplift** (likelihood of accessing homelessness services) and **coverage** of presentations to homelessness services for people exiting OOHC.

An ideal opportunity for intervention is a service with high risk uplift (so prevention is well targeted) and high coverage (so a greater number of people are helped). The analysis also considers the reduction in costs that could potentially come from an effective intervention. The costs compare average 3-year costs for an individual who accesses a given service and then homelessness services to those who just access a given service.

Table 1 shows that when an OOHC placement has ended in the previous 12 months, young people are between 10 and 15 times more likely (risk uplift) to access homelessness services in the next year than people in the general population. While an intervention targeting these young people would only reach between 1% and 3% (coverage) of future presentations to homelessness services,

the additional costs across NSW Government services for young people who exit OOHC and later go on to access homelessness services are significant. Compared to young people who leave OOHC but do not access homelessness services, the costs for those that do access homelessness services are \$60,000 higher per person over three years for any presentations, \$77,000 higher for presentations by young people and \$130,000 higher for those accessing homelessness services while sleeping rough. These costs represent the potential cost savings from an effective intervention that prevents young people from accessing homelessness services in the future.

Table 1: Likelihood of any presentations, new cases, rough sleeper presentations and presentations by young people to homelessness services when an OOHC placement has ended in the previous 12 months

	Risk uplift	Coverage	Additional 3-yr costs across NSW govt.
Any presentations	x13	1%	\$60k
New cases	x10	1%	na
Rough sleeping presentations	x11	1%	\$130k
Presentations by young people (16-24 years)	x15	3%	\$77k

Note: Risk uplift and coverage is based on homelessness service use in the six years to June 2017. Risk uplift is based on the NSW population baseline rate of 0.73% p.a for any presentations, 0.55% p.a for new presentations, 0.06% p.a for people sleeping rough and 1.5% p.a for young people. ‘New cases’ are new homelessness presentations where there has been no homelessness support in the previous 3 years. Costs to NSW government are based on homelessness service use in the three years to June 2014 however, costs have been inflated to 30 June 2020 values.

Source: Pathways to Homelessness, Tables 30, 31 and 32

Based on these findings, young people leaving care could be a potential early intervention point, particularly for young people sleeping rough. While the coverage is low for OOHC, the risk uplift is reasonably high as are the potential cost savings.

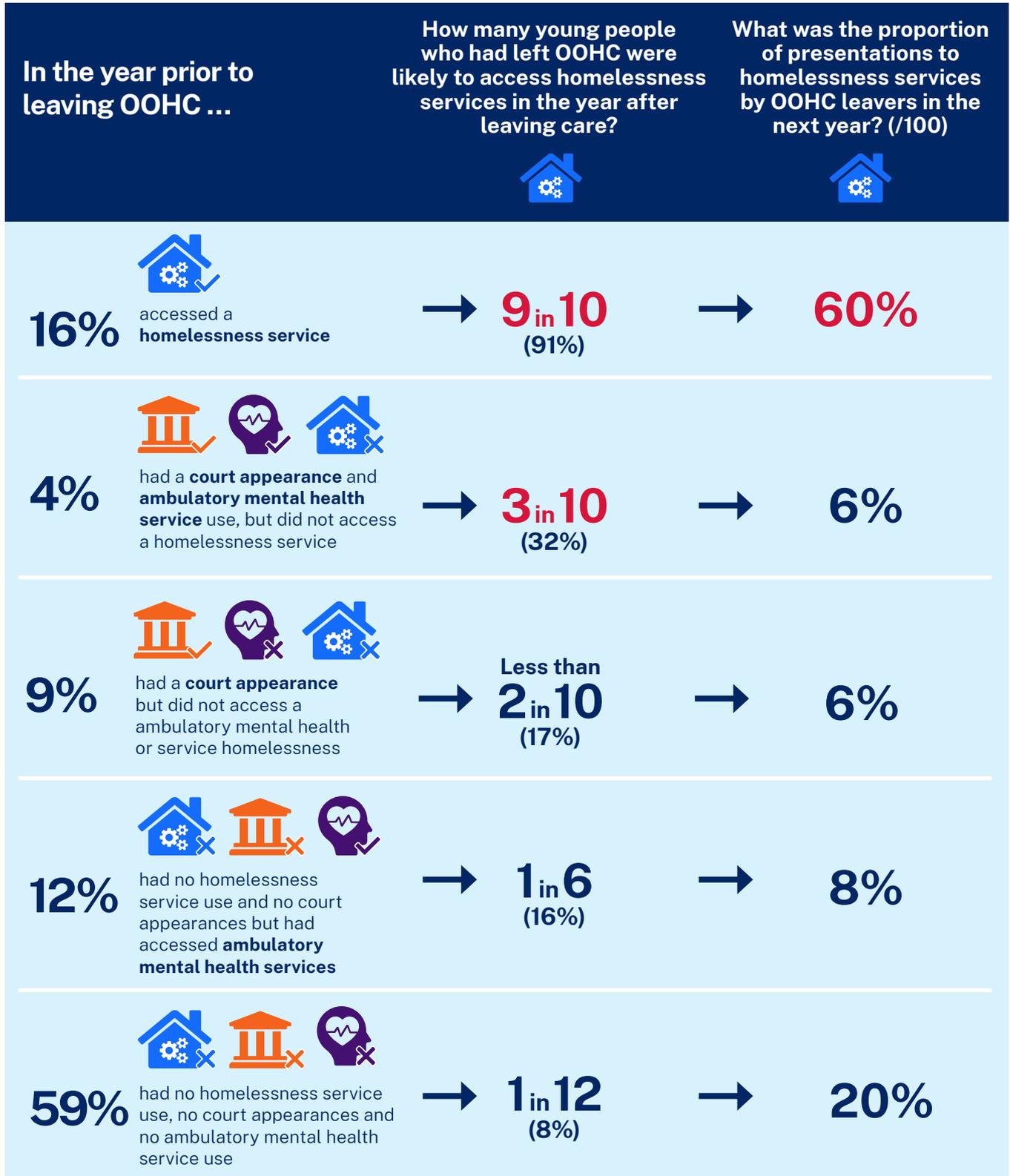
Prior use of homelessness services, mental health service use and court appearances predict future use of homelessness services for OOHC leavers

Prior homelessness service use, ambulatory mental health service use and court appearances (including YJCs and police cautions) are all predictive of increased risk of later presentation at homelessness services for OOHC leavers (Figure 3). We see that, among the group who had recently left OOHC:

- Those who have already accessed a homelessness service prior to leaving care for the final time have a 91% (9 in 10) chance of requiring further homelessness support in the next year. This group is at most risk of experiencing repeat homelessness and makes up 16% of OOHC leavers and 60% of the homelessness service presentations for OOHC leavers in the year after leaving care.
- Court appearances (including YJCs and cautions) and mental health services are indicative of a higher rate of future homelessness service use. One in 3 (32%) OOHC leavers without prior homelessness service use, but who had a court appearance and ambulatory mental health service use, were likely to require homelessness service support in the year after leaving care.

- There is a relatively low risk of presenting to a homelessness service for those without prior service use. Only 8% of OOHC leavers with no prior homelessness service use, no court appearances and no ambulatory mental health service use in the year before exit, were likely to present to a homelessness service in the year after leaving care.

Figure 3: Example segmentation of the risk of accessing homelessness services by young people who have left OOHC, July 2012 and June 2016



What do these findings mean for policy and practice?

Strengthening interventions to prevent exits into homelessness is critical

The analysis provides detailed information about young people at high risk of presenting to homelessness services after leaving OOHC. This information can be used to increase early identification of at-risk groups and inform the development of preventative programs.

More unpacking of the specific characteristics of key at-risk groups of OOHC leavers within this dataset could help to tailor and target appropriate evidence-based interventions. This could include breaking down demographic variables such as gender, Aboriginality, location, and examining other risk factors related to their OOHC experience and broader service usage, as well as the kind of support needs they are presenting with to homelessness services.

Practice improvements could also improve outcomes for young people leaving OOHC. Areas for attention include improving the quality of care to intervene early in factors associated with young people's vulnerabilities to future homelessness and ensuring young people are engaged in leaving care planning and aftercare services.

Preventing exits from government services into homelessness is a priority

A recent study by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) (Duff et al. 2022) sought to develop policy directions for enhancing housing supports for people leaving a range of institutional settings including out-of-home care. The study used linked administrative data from Victorian and NSW Government agencies as well as qualitative interviews with stakeholders and service users. Key findings from the study point to a number of improvements including:

- The Housing First model could be used as a guide to enable more effective coordination of discharge planning, transition planning and post-exit support for people leaving institutional settings.
- There is variation in the ways housing issues are managed as well as significant gaps in how services are delivered. Greater integration of housing supports within and across the housing, corrections and youth justice, out-of-home care, mental health and substance use treatment sectors is needed.
- There is evidence that service coordination roles can effectively promote service integration and emerging evidence that service coordination roles should draw on the lived experience of service users to guide this work (Duff et al. 2022).

Preventing exits from government services into homelessness is critical in reducing the risk and incidence of homelessness across NSW. As the Pathways research findings demonstrate, young people leaving OOHC experience unpredictable exit pathways that significantly increase their risk of homelessness. With no single agency able to address the full range of multiple and complex needs that these individuals may be experiencing, an integrated approach and effective working partnerships between government services to supporting this high risk cohort are critical in preventing exits to homelessness.¹

¹ See [NSW Department of Communities and Justice 2020, No Exits from Government Services into Homelessness Framework](#) for further information.

While the number of presentations to homelessness services for young people leaving OOHC is low compared to other high risk cohorts, the analysis highlights that the ending of an OOHC placement increases the risk of accessing homelessness services in the next year between 10 and 15 times. Compared with those who leave OOHC but do not access homelessness services, the additional costs across NSW Government services over three years for those who access homelessness services after leaving OOHC are between \$60,000 and \$130,000 per person. This points to the importance of thorough leaving care planning and aftercare support, greater availability of transitional and supported housing, and improved access to social housing.

The evidence-base shows a number of emerging interventions to prevent exits into homelessness from OOHC

In 2017, the NSW Department of Communities and Justice commissioned the Homelessness at Transition: Evidence Check by Dr Elizabeth Conroy and Dr Megan Williams to identify the risk factors for homelessness among people leaving government services and effective interventions to address these. The Evidence Check found promising evidence for some interventions, although the strength of the evidence is low (Conroy & Williams 2017).

There is some evidence that Independent Living Programs (ILPs) providing support and training to build young people's independent living skills are effective in reducing rates of homelessness (Conroy & Williams 2017). A single study that supports extending the age of leaving care was also found to reduce the likelihood of homelessness after leaving OOHC.

However, this study was biased towards young people with more stable attachments (Conroy & Williams 2017).

The current evidence-base for mentoring programs, transitional housing and a congregate supported housing model for OOHC leavers is limited. Further research and piloting may find these programs are effective in reducing the risk of homelessness for young people leaving OOHC (Conroy & Williams 2017).



Conclusion

The analysis provides critical information about early intervention and potential intervention points to prevent young people from leaving OOHC and entering the homelessness service system. The analysis points to the need for thorough and timely leaving care planning, continuity of aftercare support for all young people leaving OOHC, greater availability of transitional and supported housing, and improved access to social housing.

The analysis also highlights the importance of further research and improved data systems to collect, coordinate and use data and research to build the evidence-base and to determine the most effective responses to prevent young people from entering the homelessness service system after leaving OOHC.

About the Pathways to Homelessness report

Pathways to Homelessness is a key action under the 2018 *NSW Homelessness Strategy* to improve the evidence base for early intervention and prevention for people at risk of homelessness.

The project focused on four key research questions:

1. For people requiring homelessness support, which other government services have they used before?
2. For people using other government services, how likely are they to require homelessness support?
3. Among the people identified, what other risk factors affect their likelihood of using homelessness services?
4. How do government service use costs differ for people requiring homelessness services?

The dataset comprised SHS and Temporary Accommodation data plus 15 other linked NSW Government and 3 Commonwealth Government health and welfare datasets including Centrelink data, Medicare service information, Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme data, hospital stays; Emergency Department visits; registered births and deaths; ambulatory mental health; ambulance callouts; Controlled Drugs of Addiction; social housing; Temporary Accommodation; private rental subsidy/assistance; out-of-home care; police-recorded victim incidents; Legal Aid; Court appearances; time in custody; and educational attainment. The study cohort comprised 625,861 people.

The analysis used a combination of methods:

- descriptive statistics to understand the key characteristics of homelessness presentations over the six-year period to 30 June 2017
- predictive modelling to identify people with a high likelihood of accessing homelessness services in the future, and associated risk factors to support intervention
- two-way pathway analysis, which looks at homelessness presentations that follow other service use, to identify potential intervention points and estimate the elevated costs across government for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness
- additional analysis on vulnerable cohorts, including financial hardship, mental health conditions, substance use, DFV, exiting custody, and leaving out-of-home care (OOHC).

You can access the [full report](#) on the Department of Communities and Justice website.

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