AIR monthly insights paper

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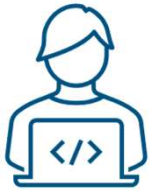
Queensland Family & Child Commission

Queensland Government

New research and analysis

Children identified as AI's most overlooked stakeholders

A study by the University of Cambridge has identified that AI Chatbots on many highly used apps and computer software have an "empathy gap", putting young people at risk of distress or harm when forming a quasi-relationship with the AI. **Researchers stated that the findings indicate a need to prioritise making 'child-safe AI'.**

> **The study provides evidence that children are particularly susceptible to treating AI chatbots as 'real people', forming personal relationships with the AI and putting themselves at risk – especially when the AI 'misbehaves'.**

- Several AIs, such as Microsoft's Bing AI, have purported to be 'adolescent friendly' but have had numerous reports of the AI becoming argumentative and aggressive, which was identified as being particularly harmful to children who do not understand the nature of AI or its relationship to the humans operating it.

- The report also linked several cases of dangerous situations with AI with a child's lack of understanding. This includes a case of Amazon's Alexa instructing a 10 year old to touch a live electrical plug with a coin, and the account of a researcher posing as a 13 year old being provided instructions on how to lose their virginity to a 31 year old by Snapchat's AI chatbot.

A need for proactivity with emerging technologies – for both developers and policy-makers

Despite many large social media companies (such as Snapchat and Meta) implementing safety measures, children were identified as "AI's most overlooked stakeholders", noting that very few companies had well-established policies on child-safe AI. Rather than self-correcting as a reaction to incidents of children being put at risk, it was suggested that AI's entire lifecycle should be informed by children's safety. The study provides a 28-item framework to systematically address risks to children as AI becomes more prevalent.

Children more willing to disclose mental health to a 'friendly robot'

A further Cambridge study indicates that children were more likely to disclose their own mental health concerns to a 'friendly looking robot' than they were to adults. Friendly design and approachability encourages children to engage, potentially placing them at further risk of engaging with a system that fails to understand them or their needs and vulnerabilities.

AI Chatbots have shown they have an 'empathy gap' that children are likely to miss | University of Cambridge

New trauma-informed model of care trial for victim-survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence

A trial aiming to increase access to mental healthcare for survivors of family, sexual and domestic violence (FSDV) is beginning across the country as the number of incidents continues to climb.

The Supporting Recovery pilot program is an Australian Government initiative that will trial a new model of care for victim-survivors of FSDV.

- **Program Objective**: With this initiative to be embedded in existing services, this program aims to promote sustained recovery and address trauma-related mental health conditions for victim-survivors of FSDV.

- **Model of Care**: The Supporting Recovery Model of Care guides service delivery. It involves local care teams based in existing services, case and care management for each victim-survivor, warm referrals to trauma-informed service providers, and contracting new services through Primary Health Networks (PHNs).

- **Collaboration:** The program collaborates with PHNs across different regions, including Gippsland, Hunter New England and Central Coast, South Western Sydney, Brisbane South, Northern Territory, and Country Western Australia.

- **Start Date: The trial is already underway in Gippsland and South West Sydney, with the remaining four sites planned to join the trial by the end of 2024.** Brisbane South PHN held a planning day on 30 July 2024 to seek stakeholder input into the program's implementation, with plans for the pilot program to commence soon in Brisbane.

> **Trauma-informed care** is an approach grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development. This means that often, victim-survivors with mental health concerns can be harmed by institutions tasked with helping them, therefore requiring significant coordination among services to appropriately support victim-survivors of FSDV.

Supporting Recovery Pilot Program. Health.gov.au

Youth Homelessness – Homelessness Australia report

Homelessness Australia released the *2024 Child Homelessness Snapshot* to coincide with Homelessness Week, revealing that over **76,014 Australian children and young people are seeking help from homelessness support services**, with **15,902 children approaching services alone and unaccompanied**.

Queensland saw a **20% increase from the previous year in children still homeless after seeking assistance**, the highest increase nationally in this metric.

Key findings for Queensland
- Children presenting to homelessness services: 1,439 unaccompanied, 12,149 with a family.
- Children still homeless at last contact with services: 6,658 (increase from 5,541 in 2021-22).
- First Nations children remain over-represented: 14,573 First Nations children currently experiencing homelessness, representing 37% of the total in Queensland.
- Regional areas were experiencing a homelessness crisis, with 63% of children experiencing homelessness living in regional areas (5,668 children in Greater Brisbane, 9,768 children in the rest of Queensland).

Discussion and recommendations
- Homelessness Australia observed that the increasing number of children remaining homeless, even after seeking help indicates a "dire lack of affordable housing and chronic underfunding of homelessness support services".
- The report states that the majority of families experiencing homelessness have been driven to this due to lack of affordable housing, income poverty or ongoing domestic violence, arguing that this illustrates "gaping holes in our universal safety net and a failure on core elements of the basic social contract".
- The report makes 5 primary recommendations including:
    – setting ambitious targets to reduce and eliminate homelessness
    – increasing investment in housing and homelessness support services, and
    – developing action plans specific to children and First Nations children.
- The report identifies that the most effective way to end homelessness is by **preventing people becoming homeless in the first place**, indicating a need to shift focus from crisis accommodation and management to prioritising new investment centred on prevention and early intervention measures, increasing housing supply, boosting support for renters, and strengthening supports provided to children and families at risk of homelessness.

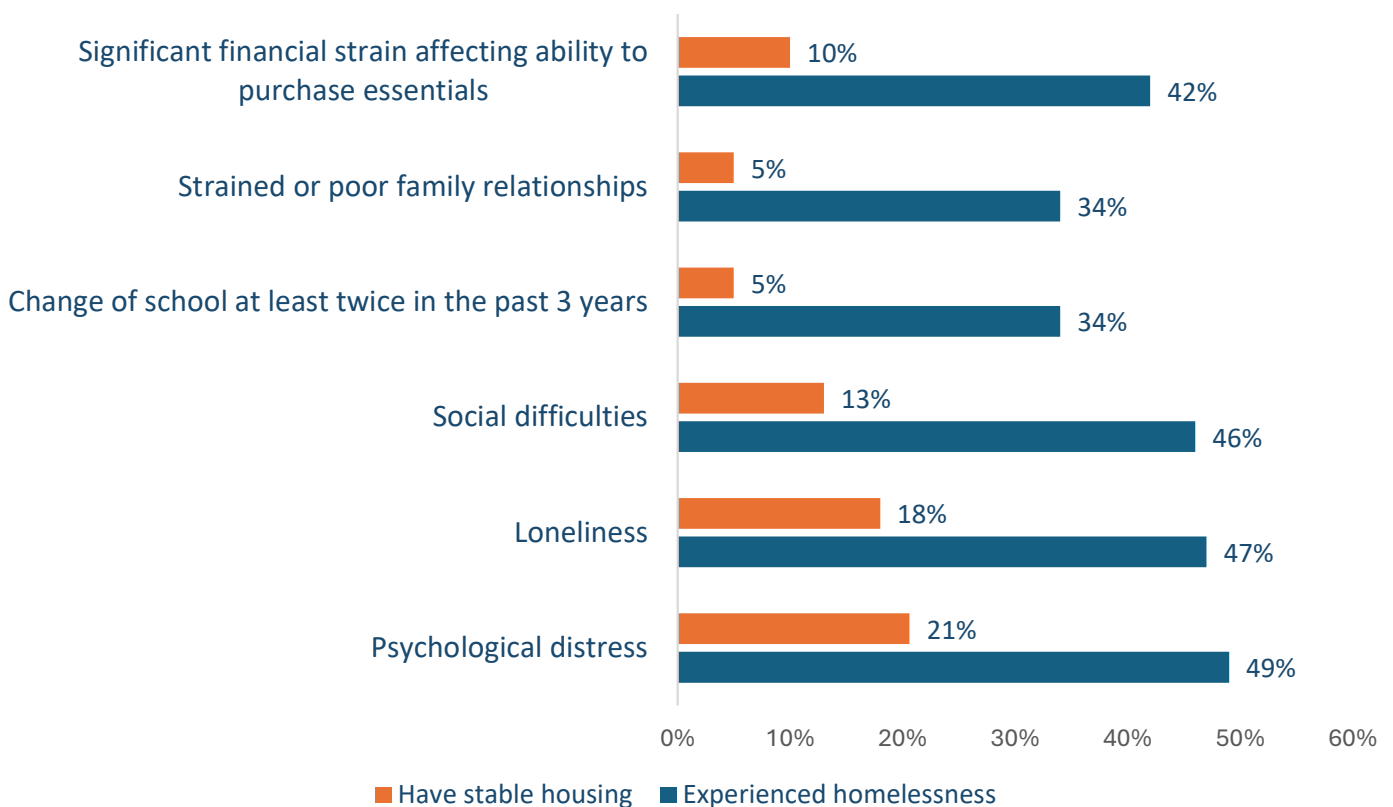2024 Child Homelessness Snapshot - Homelessness Australia

Youth Homelessness Impacts – Mission Australia report

Mission Australia has published the biennial youth homelessness report entitled *The Unfair Divide*. The report reveals that close to **one in 10 young people surveyed had experienced homelessness in the prior 12 months,**[1] and illustrates the significant disparities between the demographics of young people who have experienced homelessness, and those who have not. The report indicates **persistent and increasing rates of youth homelessness**.

Key findings:
Young people with experience of homelessness were much more likely to experience:
- psychological distress (29% compared to 21% with stable housing)
- loneliness (47% compared to 18% with stable housing)
- social difficulties (46% compared to 26% with stable housing)
- mental health concerns (41% compared to 13% with stable housing)
- a change of schools at least twice in the past 3 years (34% compared to 5%)
- strained or poor family relationships (34% compared to 5%)
- significant financial strain affecting ability to purchase essentials or necessitating financial support (42% compared to 10%).

Category	Have stable housing	Experienced homelessness
Significant financial strain affecting ability to purchase essentials	10%	42%
Strained or poor family relationships	5%	34%
Change of school at least twice in the past 3 years	5%	34%
Social difficulties	13%	46%
Loneliness	18%	47%
Psychological distress	21%	49%

The Unfair Divide: 2023-24 Youth Homelessness Report | Mission Australia
[1] According to data collected in the Mission Australia 2023 Youth Survey.

Youth Homelessness Impacts – Mission Australia report (cont.)

Young people who engaged with Mission Australia typically left their service with an improved living situation. Subjective wellbeing is noted as increasing from 65.3 on the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)[2] at entry, to 74.0 on exit – meeting the normal range for Australian adults of 74 to 77.

- 96% of young people at risk of homelessness maintained their housing.
- **77% of young people homeless at entry left Mission Australia's services with an insufficient outcome.** Of these:
  - 7 in 10 were in short-term crisis accommodation
  - the remaining 3 in 10 did not have any accommodation.

This was seen to illustrate the inadequacy of crisis accommodation to affect long-term outcomes.

Mission Australia's recommendations:
1. Put young people at the centre of homelessness responses.
2. Create more long-term housing plus support.
3. Implement universal homelessness prevention measures.
4. Adopt further prevention measures for young people with elevated risks of homelessness.
5. Adopt further prevention measures for young people at immediate risk of homelessness.
6. Implement more crisis responses.

The Unfair Divide: 2023-24 Youth Homelessness Report | Mission Australia
[2] Measured using Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI), a subjective measure of wellbeing.

Schools publishing images of children on social media may be contravening their rights

- A study published in the *Computers and Education Open* journal has stated that schools regularly publish images of children online, relying primarily on parental consent. The study found that this practice is in contravention of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) by failing to recognise and account for the child's agency and potentially coercing children into digital participation.

- Further, publications where children are identifiable were found to be contravening Article 16 of the UNCRC, requiring children not to be subject to arbitrary or unlawful interference in their privacy.

- The study suggests that schools and parents should be discussing with children how their images will be used and allow children to meaningfully participate in decisions relating to how their images are used.

School social media use and its impact upon children's rights to privacy and autonomy - ScienceDirect
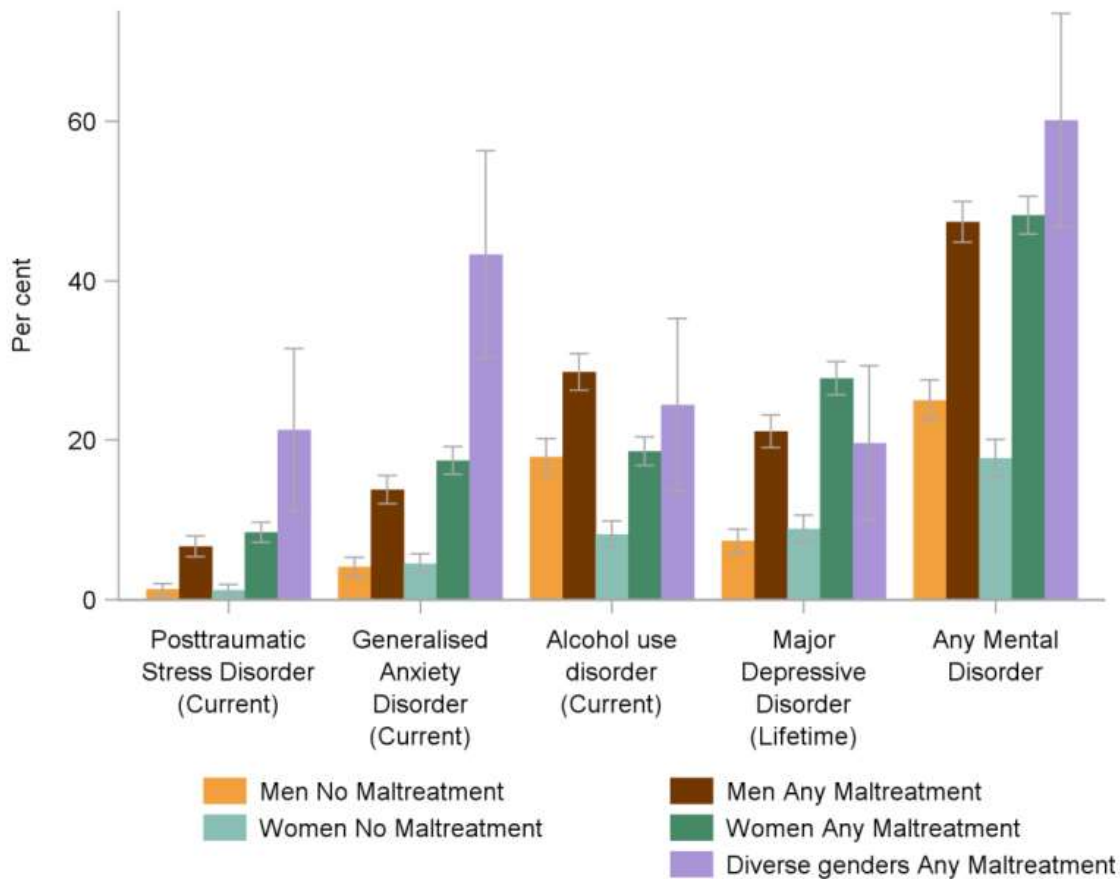
Child maltreatment and gender diversity

The *Australian Child Maltreatment Study* data has been used to identify the rates of mental health disorders and health risk behaviours in people with gender diverse identities and associations with five types of child maltreatment. The study noted that the **findings indicate an urgent need to support young people with diverse gender identities**, commenting this is timely given the worldwide discussion of gender diversity both culturally and at a legislative level.

Key findings:
- People with gender-diverse identities who experienced childhood maltreatment were **significantly more likely to have depression (43.4%)** compared to cisgender[3] men (13.8%) and cisgender women (17.4%).
- Higher prevalence was also identified for posttraumatic stress disorder(21.3%), self-harm (27.8%), and suicide attempts (7.2%).

Figure 1: Prevalence of mental disorders, by gender identity and experience of any child maltreatment

'Child maltreatment, mental health disorders and health risk behaviors in people with diverse gender identities', Journal of Interpersonal Violence.

[3] Cisgender is a gender identity denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

Mental distress and experience of legal problems

A 2024 paper presented data from the Public Understanding of Law Survey (PULS) concerning experiences of justice issues and mental distress.

The PULS survey, which includes the K-6 inventory measure (a six-item screening tool used to assess risk of serious mental illness in the general population), focuses on people's experience of problems that are 'justiciable'. This refers to problems arising in people's lives that raise legal issues (e.g. problems with rented housing, being injured in a car accident, being unfairly sacked from work), even though they might not necessarily recognise them as legal.

Psychological distress and mental illness has been shown to be among the factors most powerfully associated with justiciable problems experienced across numerous legal need surveys. Overall:

- 42% of PULS respondents (2,525 of 6,008) reported experiencing one or more justiciable problem in the previous two years.
- People experiencing moderate or severe mental distress had higher prevalence of justiciable problems compared to PULS respondents overall.
- People experiencing higher levels of mental distress are less likely to try to solve their justiciable problems using self-help strategies and are more likely to obtain help from legal services.
- The PULS found relatively higher use of legal services among populations perceived as facing disadvantage.

People experiencing mental distress are more likely to experience justiciable problems. The nature and number of problems experienced may impact negatively on mental and other aspects of people's lives and wellbeing.

McDonald, H.M. & Jupp, R. (2024). Mental distress and experience of legal problems. Melbourne: Victoria Law Foundation.

Facebook is scanning some users' faces to verify age

- A *Sydney Morning Herald* article has revealed that Facebook's parent company, Meta, has begun to scan faces to verify the age of new users.

- Australia is the first country to undergo the implementation of the age verification on Meta's platforms, before the age verification is enabled on all Meta platforms globally.

- Announced in May, Meta announced it will begin verifying existing users who attempt to modify their date of birth from below 18 years to above. These users will be asked to prove their age by submitting a video selfie, or uploading a copy of their identification. The data is verified by ID verification company Yoti, which has created a biometric facial age estimation system.

Social media and child safety: Facebook is scanning some users' faces to verify age. The Coalition wants laws that go further (smh.com.au)

Updates from other jurisdictions

Victoria - Child abuse project 'Enhanced Response Model' allowed to lapse

- A pilot program designed to increase the speed and efficacy of investigations into child sexual abuse of children in state care lapsed several years ago, despite advocacy from the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People.
- In Victoria between July 2021 and end of March 2023, there were 423 incidents of sexual exploitation in residential care reported to the commission among 165 children.

Child abuse project dumped despite crisis | The Australian

National – Human Rights Commission report: mapping government anti-racism programs and policies

- The Human Rights Commission report on various Australian governments' (at all levels) engagement with anti-racism work has found that **engagement was inadequate, failing to appropriately identify racism or take sufficient action to address it**.
- It was identified that governments and their departments were **reluctant to use the term 'racism'** and that the burden to address racism was predominantly borne by the people and communities being discriminated against.
- Government work at all levels was identified as being primarily ad-hoc and reactive, with most work focussed on internal staffing issues.
- Six recommendations were made, including developing a nationally recognised definition of racism.

Mapping government anti-racism programs and policies | Australian Human Rights Commission

New South Wales – Moving cage to cage: Final report of the Special Inquiry into children and young people in alternative care arrangements

- New South Wales statutory body, the Advocate for Children and Young People, has released its final report on Alternative Care Arrangements (ACAs, known as 'out-of-home care' in Queensland). The report states that **ACAs were found to have increased the risk of children absconding, breaching bail conditions, and ultimately returning to jail**.
- The report revealed that many ACAs cost upward of $2 million per year, and the majority of children spend more than three months in these arrangements, with some spending up to 600 days. More than two thirds of children in ACAs were assessed as being suitable for foster care.
- ACAs were also identified as creating risk of being sexually assaulted, outlining instances of assault occurring perpetrated by case workers, or hotel guests in a hotel being used as a placement.

Moving cage to cage: Final report of the Special Inquiry into children and young people in alternative care arrangements | NSW Advocate for Children and Young People