

# **Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers**

## **Youth Sector Joint Submission**

We thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. This submission will respond to the following clauses in the Terms of Reference through the lens of ending the over-representation and criminalisation of particular youth cohorts in the criminal justice system:

- *(b) the impact of the plan, including the compulsory relocation and displacement of public housing residents on the future net availability of public community housing and the existing decanting plans and the department estimates on the number of people who will permanently leave the area being developed;*
- *(c) the findings and adequacy of consultations with:*
  - *(i) public housing tower residents and their representatives;*
  - *(ii) relevant local stakeholders, such as health, community and education service providers, residents and councils;*
- *(g) the likely impacts of the plan on:*
  - *(iii) the Victorian Housing Register and homelessness while the plan is being delivered;*
  - *(iv) the future of public housing in Victoria;*
- *(h) any other related matters*

This submission is co-authored by Koorie Youth Council (KYC), Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), WestJustice, Youthlaw and Smart Justice for Young People (SJ4YP). KYC, as a dedicated representative organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in policy and advocacy; YACVic, as the peak body and leading policy advocate for young people and the youth sector in Victoria; and CMY, as a statewide not-for-profit organisation working with multicultural young people, are all active member organisations within SJ4YP. WestJustice and Youthlaw are founding members and co-convenors of SJ4YP. Together, our coalition works to shift political and public attitudes, advise the Government on evidence-based approaches, and to challenge policies and practices that harm young people. Our collaboration on this submission reflects our shared commitment to advocating for the rights of Victorian young people, including their right to safe and secure housing. Our desire to respond jointly in respect of the inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers also reflects a shared understanding of the importance of community, social connectedness, education, and access to services in supporting young people to thrive.

## **The problem of over-representation**

'Working Together', SJ4YP's Action Plan to end the over-representation of particular groups of young people in the criminal justice system, focuses on five of the most over-represented groups in the criminal justice system, being:

- First Nations children and young people
- Multicultural children and young people
- Children who live in out-of-home residential care
- 18–25 year olds
- Girls and young women with complex needs

'Working Together' focuses on the common overlapping systemic and structural factors that cause the over-representation of these young people in the criminal justice system. It shows that the over-representation of these young people is due to failings in the current capacity of key government agencies, statutory institutions and community organisations to respond to the needs of these young people and their families.

This means that changes to the criminal justice system alone will not end over-representation. We need a response that acknowledges the interdependency of processes that criminalise these young people, such as targeted policing, and the underserving of these young people with respect to the provision of support services, including access to housing, healthcare, education and employment. While youth crime prevention is not the explicit focus of our work, it is a necessary by-product of the systemic change we are advocating for.

As such, 'Working Together' provides a framework based on 49 systems-level 'Asks' across the whole of government and six individual domains: criminal and civil justice systems; children, families and their community; housing and material needs; health and wellbeing; education; and policing. Access to safe and secure housing is a key preventative and protective factor that significantly reduces a young person's likelihood of interacting with the criminal legal system, which is why SJ4YP has produced a submission into this particular inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers.

## **Impact of displacement on over-represented children and young people**

The experiences of children and young people in insecure housing are different to that of their adult family and community members. We know that for young people in particular, the ripple effects of relocation and displacement will interrupt their access to protective factors that the evidence base tells us enable young people to thrive, including community and social connectedness, education, and support services. Through the proposed redevelopment of the 44 high-rise towers and other buildings, we are concerned that the government has failed to consider the impact of demolition and redevelopment on children and young people currently residing in these buildings and communities, particularly among groups of children and young people who already experience over-policing, structural discrimination, and service exclusion. Furthermore, we also acknowledge the impact of displacement on the caregiving responsibilities of families and extended communities and the resultant stress this will place on children and young people.

First Nations children and young people belong to the oldest continuous culture in the world. As highlighted in KYC's 'Ngaga-dji' report, keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children safe and strong in their culture, families and communities is essential in supporting them to thrive. For First Nations children and young people living in the 44 towers, this impact of the proposed displacement follows a long legacy of dispossession from their ancestral land, colonisation, and intergenerational trauma connected to successive policies of child removal.

Connection to culture and community is also critically important for multicultural children and young people. Through forced relocation, multicultural children and young people living in public housing may have to rebuild or establish these vital connections and support networks.

## **Interrupted access to education and support services**

Interrupted access to education is another core concern for over-represented children and young people. The most recent data collected by the Youth Parole Board in 2018 indicated that 67 percent of young people in Youth Justice custody had been suspended or expelled from school, indicating the critical importance of education and training as protective factors in preventing justice system contact. There is evidence that students who move schools frequently experience poorer social, emotional and behavioural outcomes (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2016). The emotional impact of frequent school moves has also been shown to be associated with increased rates of school disengagement, a more negative attitude towards school and declining classroom participation (Gannon, Budgeon and Li 2023).

Young people from over-represented communities often experience culturally unsafe, developmentally inappropriate or otherwise negative service interactions. These groups of children and young people may have a harder time building trust and rapport with practitioners as a result and often prefer to engage with trauma-based, youth-oriented and culturally responsive supports. People living in public housing who access community services will also face challenges as they will have to move away from their local, trusted providers and build new relationships with new and unfamiliar services. Many residents are being relocated to outer suburban areas, meaning poorer access to public transport, and lower availability of appropriate supports.

## Housing as crime prevention

Residents are being asked to leave public housing for community housing, which many are reluctant to do due to higher rents and insecure tenure. As outlined in MCM's '[First a Home](#)' submission, a lack of stable housing is a key factor in driving up the number of young people on remand or in prison.

With the introduction of the *Bail Amendment Bill 2025*, we may see it becoming more difficult for people (including young people) without stable housing to comply with bail conditions and avoid unnecessary remand and breach - a reflection of what occurred in 2018 with the introduction of strict bail laws. Homelessness is explicitly prohibited in the *Children Youth and Families Act 2005* as a reason to refuse bail; however, the practical reality of finding immediate and safe housing options means that homeless children and young people may spend time in custody for this reason. Along similar lines, homelessness increases the risk of criminalisation for young people and their families, compounding existing risk factors and service exclusion and driving up system contact. Our collective sector experience indicates that homelessness is more likely to be experienced by the five groups of young people we have identified as being over-represented in the criminal justice system. Consequently, addressing homelessness and supporting young people to stay within trusted communities is a critical strategy to reduce their over-representation.

## The importance of meaningful consultation with young people

We have heard mixed reports regarding the approach to consulting young people, their families and communities living in public housing, as part of the redevelopment and inquiry process. Largely, there is concern that the voices of young people have been left out of the conversation, or discussions were held too late as a 'tick box' exercise. There are reports that many public housing residents only learnt of the redevelopment plans when Homes Victoria sought to confirm relocation.

We are concerned to hear reports of ways young people have felt disempowered and disconnected to this process including a lack of clarification about who is running consultation and information sessions; a lack of clarification how the information and experiences shared in these consultations will be used; and an absence of 'closing the feedback loop' by not making it clear how and when the outcome of these consultations will be delivered back to young people. Some young people have reported recounting their experiences after already having been required to relocate away from their home and communities. This can be retraumatising. The lack of meaningful consultation with residents has led to confusion about what's happening and an erosion of trust.

Youth participation actively involves young people in decision-making processes on issues that affect them. Just like any other community member, young people have the right to participate in these processes, so the government can make informed policy decisions, strengthen community connection, and empower young people to participate – building capacity and skills to engage with policy development and become future community leaders. Excluding young people from community responses can lead to feelings of disconnection, alienation, and disengagement from both the community and democratic processes.

Whenever young people are consulted, they need to feel safe to express themselves openly, and that their contributions are valued, respected, and acknowledged. This means:

- Involving young people from the start in design and delivery, ensuring consultation is engaging, relevant and accessible. Consultations should be thoroughly planned with and for young people to ensure that they feel comfortable to provide their own opinions on issues that affect them.
- Ensuring consultations are inclusive and accessible for the diverse needs of participants. If a consultation targets a certain group of young people, ensuring that there are support systems in place for the attendees is crucial for their safety when discussing matters that may potentially be triggering or cause distress. This can include prioritising cultural safety, access needs, and privacy, adapting communication styles, and having support people present.
- Clearly explaining how their information will be used, including the impact and outcomes of the consultation. This feedback loop is essential for ensuring young people feel their contributions are valued.
- Recognising that young people have different experiences and ideas, avoid over-consulting with the same young people.

## Recommendations

1. The Victorian Government should ensure next steps are aligned with the **Eight Shared Principles** outlined by our colleagues at Inner Melbourne Community Legal (IMCL) in their submission to the same Inquiry.
2. In relation to Principle 5 outlined in the IMCL submission, 'Government should centre impacted communities in consultations', when consulting with young people the Victorian Government should:
  - a. **Strengthen youth consultation practices** in line with best practice as outlined in the Youth Engagement Resource Platform (YERP) developed by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic), Victoria's peak body for young people and youth workers.
  - b. **Strengthen consultation practices with First Nations young people** in line with the Values, Knowledge and Actions set out in 'Wayipunga', KYC's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth participation framework.
  - c. **Strengthen consultation practices with multicultural young people** in line with 'Not just ticking a box', the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network's resource and CMY's 'Inclusive Organisations Good Practice Guide' for engaging and supporting youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.
  - d. **Ensure appropriate youth representation** on Homes Victoria Advisory groups and boards – such as the Homelessness Lived Experience Reference Group.
3. The Victorian Government should **embed measures to strengthen government accountability and transparency** regarding the redevelopment, such as through the public release of documents related to current and future plans for the relocation of tenants and rebuilding of housing.
4. The Victorian Government should lead and **support measures to rebuild trust between community members and government**. This should include re-visiting learnings and considerations from the 'hard lockdowns' in 2020, with particular respect to the Victorian Ombudsman's recommendations regarding appropriate community consultation and information sharing with public housing tower residents.
5. The Victorian Government should, at all levels, **urgently invest in affordable and accessible housing stock** – emergency, transitional, social and public housing - to meet a variety of family sizes and configurations, including accommodating larger families, supporting families to remain intact and providing critical support for young people from over-represented backgrounds. This should include an increase in early intervention and support to families and young people from over-represented backgrounds to prevent the escalation of complex issues.
6. The Victorian Government should **acknowledge the specific vulnerabilities of young people from over-represented backgrounds with regard to homelessness** and ensure all government-led strategies respond appropriately to these cohorts. To inform this, the Victorian Government should develop and fund a Victorian specific youth housing and homelessness strategy, in line with Ask Thirty Five of 'Working Together' and the Youth Housing and Homelessness Alliance 'Joint statement to government response to Homelessness Inquiry' to coordinate services, supports and interventions for young people, including dedicated youth-specific social housing properties to meet rising demand.
7. The Victorian Government should **invest in strengthening the cultural, trauma and gender responsiveness of the housing service system** on all levels to meet the diverse intersectional needs of the Victorian community – from personnel, organisational policies and procedures, and accommodation options available – and require services to demonstrate accountability in their implementation of these practices.
8. The Victorian Government should **develop a more detailed and consistent data collection system in relation to migrant and refugee young people** to gain a more accurate understanding of homelessness and housing stress amongst this group, and ensure they are responded to adequately. This is in line with Ask One and Two of 'Working Together' and the CMY submission to 'inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria'.

**Thank you for taking the time to read our submission.**

**We would be pleased to have the opportunity to provide oral evidence before the committee, and expand on these submissions and recommendations.**

**Sincerely,**



## References

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- State of Victoria, Department of Justice and Community Safety (2019) '[Youth Parole Board Annual Report 2018-19](#).'
- Victorian Ombudsman (2020) '[Investigation into the detention and treatment of public housing residents arising from a COVID-19 'hard lockdown' in July 2020](#).'
- Youth Affairs Council Victoria, '[Youth Engagement Resource Platform](#).'
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