

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Statement

HON SHELLEY ARCHER (Mining and Pastoral) [9.54 pm]: I would like to take some time to speak about the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia and its campaign to bring to the state government's attention the increasing rates of youth homelessness in Western Australia. Homelessness in Australia is at record levels. As far back as 1989, the Burdekin report estimated that there were at least 20 000 to 25 000 homeless people across the country. This inquiry was in response to a large number of young people seeking refuge in shelters that had previously been intended for older homeless single men, and an increasing number of women and children who were subject to domestic violence and seeking refuge. The report transformed the delivery of service to homeless young people. However, major recommendations were not implemented, and we continue to see large numbers of young people without adequate shelter.

In 2001 the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that over 105 000 people were homeless in Australia, of whom approximately one-third were young people aged between 12 and 24 years. The Youth Affairs Council estimates that each night over 4 500 young people in Western Australia are homeless, living rough or couch surfing. Often these young people are living in unsafe environments and are not attending school or in any employment. The effects of homelessness on these young people and the community are serious. Many homeless youth are unemployed, poor and highly marginalised. It is important to note that the youth living in my electorate of Mining and Pastoral Region have different homelessness experiences from the youth in urban areas. Often youth in the regions have limited employment and educational opportunities and inadequate and informal support networks. They prefer to stay within the region rather than move to metropolitan areas and they are also likely to be unaware of a variety of benefits and assistance that are available to them from government and non-government agencies.

The current homelessness crisis among our Indigenous youth comprises yet another set of dimensions and is far worse when compared with the crisis being faced by non-Indigenous young people. The recent National Youth Commission inquiry into youth homelessness notes significantly different types of homelessness for Indigenous youth, including forced removal from the country, overcrowding resulting from inadequate housing, and transient homelessness, which involves youths travelling to regional centres to access services. This is especially so for the Indigenous population in my electorate. If their homes are unsafe, they decide not to go home. Rather, they spend their time either living on the streets or couch surfing. The Indigenous youth in my electorate have few choices and few couches on which to rest their heads. It is more likely that they will end up on a piece of concrete or on some floor space with a blanket, if they are lucky. Couch surfing puts an enormous strain on extended families. Youths who spend the night at what they believe to be a safe house put an enormous strain on families that are struggling to provide the appropriate necessities for their own members.

The overall reason for homelessness in both the cities and the regions are complex and varied. Much of the research available indicates that the key factors that contribute to homelessness are conflict; family violence; persistent poverty, which leads to financial crisis and subsequent homelessness; a decline in state housing; and an increase in private rental costs. In some of the areas of my electorate, alcoholism, child abuse and drug abuse, which lead to a dysfunctional home, also contribute to homelessness. Alistair Hope's report into suicides in the Fitzroy Valley provides a clear indication that there are real problems in my electorate with alcohol abuse, child abuse and drug abuse, all of which can lead to homelessness. I recognise the state government's recent commitment to combating this problem, as was outlined in the State Homelessness Strategy. I recommend that its good work carry on through a renewed strategy. It is essential that a sustained approach to tackling the fundamental causes of youth homelessness be continued and that the development of programs to address problems of inadequate shelter for Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth be maintained. The report of the 2007 National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness, which was released this week, provides policymakers with a wealth of information to assist them to ameliorate the situation. I commend the work of the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia and the "Home is where my heart is" campaign, which seeks to make a difference to the lives of young homeless people in WA.