

# The New Zealand Union of Students' Associations

## NZUSA Submission to the Cross Party Homelessness Inquiry

### Official definition of homelessness

The New Zealand Union of Students' Associations believes the current definition of homelessness is inherently geared against tertiary students. As a representative body we have heard examples of where students identify as homeless, but would be seen as exempt under the current definition seen in the Statistics New Zealand definition of homelessness (Statistics New Zealand, 2014)<sup>1</sup>.

We believe that students are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. They are the lowest paid of any beneficiary, and are the only group in society who are forced to borrow to live. They are also vulnerable as they are often lacking knowledge of their rights as tenants. However, while many students struggle with the above, they have rich social networks and are often well connected.

The average rent in all main centres in New Zealand is currently more than a student borrows each week. Rents have skyrocketed while the student loan has failed to keep pace, with the expectation that students work to make up the shortfall. Our Income and Expenditure research shows that students are working more hours in poorer paid jobs than their parents (New Zealand Union of Students' Associations, 2015). When a student has a place to call home, they are still under significant stress. This rises drastically when they do not have security of housing.

Homelessness for youth is generally an area that suffers from a significant lack of research. There are few instances that report the official level of homelessness with tertiary students, but we have heard of a number of instances where students are unable to find a place to call home.

We will be attempting to address this dearth of research later in the year as we undertake our Tertiary Income and Expenditure survey. This longitudinal study has been going for nearly forty years and this year we intend to ask students about their experiences with homelessness.

We believe that there is a significant number of students who would fall under the 'concealed homeless' definition if we defined it as any person who did not have a place to call home for more than a week.

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<sup>1</sup> Homelessness is defined as a living situation where people with no other options to acquire safe and secure housing are: without shelter, in temporary accommodation, sharing accommodation with a household, or living in uninhabitable housing.

For us a place called home is somewhere that is safe, where the individual has dedicated space where they have the ability to be alone, and socialise and are there of their own will.

NZUSA believes the practice of students 'couchsurfing' needs to be classed as homelessness.

### *Sharing Accommodation*

We believe that any student without a fixed address for more than one week is homeless. While the Statistics New Zealand (2014) definition excludes 'students who are staying with friends while looking for a flat', this ignores the complex social and mental impacts of this process.

We have heard a number of students talking about their experiences with homelessness, from spending months couch surfing, to being sexually assaulted and being unable to leave. We know that during the beginning of semesters there is a high level of demand for properties. It is common to see upwards of sixty students interviewing for one place in a flat. The process of finding an affordable flat can be time consuming and overwhelming and in some cases impossible.

Many students rely on the offer of their friend's couch. This is offered and intended to be a short term option and is rarely a viable option in the long term.

Students who are couchsurfing lack 'personal living space' (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Those sleeping in lounges follow the rules of a guest. They have their life dictated by the people they live with, they must rise with the earliest flatmate and must sleep when the latest flatmate decides to sleep. There are few opportunities for a student to have time alone, or to focus on study. Often students do not have a bed to live in and this affects the quality of sleep they are able to have.

While this is manageable for a week, any stay of this nature past a week begins to have impact on a student's wellbeing. The goodwill of their host is often limited to this timeframe also and this sees students on a tour of their friend's flats until they are successful in finding their own accommodation.

While this flux of homeless students is more prominent at the beginning of semesters, it happens outside of this time, with NZUSA knowing stories of students who were homeless for months during key periods such as exams. These experiences cause significant distress and disadvantage for those affected.

### *Halls of residence*

Halls of residence are exempt from a number of legislative requirements much to the frustration of our organisation. However, we believe they should be included in these definitions. A strong focus of defining homelessness is whether the individual feels safe. According to research by Keene (2015) halls of residence are ill equipped to manage and support instances of violence (especially sexually motivated). In many instances the victim is forced to live in close space with the perpetrator. These students are also more prone to being bullied by their peers for attempting to hold their attacker to account.

Halls often have significant financial ramifications for breaking the contractual arrangement between student and hall, regardless of the reason for breaking the contract.

## Current scale of homelessness

We do believe that the level of homelessness in tertiary students is increasing due to the significant financial strain that students are put under. This financial strain is undermining the ability of students to have choice and agency over their actions.

While we lack data on the level of student homelessness, we are happy to share these statistics with the committee once we complete our Tertiary Income and Expenditure Survey in mid-October.

## Experience of different groups in society and evaluation of policy responses that respond to that experience

### *Homelessness for women*

Women are particularly prominent group of concealed homeless. One only needs to compare the number of men's shelters to women's shelters to see that men receive more support. This is alleged to be because women are more likely to stay in an unideal living situation rather than be homeless. The lack of support services available limits their ability to choose and those services available are often at capacity. This leaves women with options such as staying in violent relationships or are taking up opportunities such as 'sex for rent' deals.

Unless women are in situations where they are victims of domestic violence there is little support to assist them with homelessness. Services such as women's refuge have a dialogue that is aimed at women with children as opposed to groups such as tertiary students.

There are claims that women's shelters do not exist as there is not the same level of demand. However, we would challenge this idea, instead stating that the reason there is no demand, is because there is no provision of service.

### *Homelessness for gender and sexual minorities*

Research shows that those who do not fit into traditional roles of sex and gender have significant issues finding a place to call home. Halls of residence can be geared against these students with many halls having gendered bathrooms and some having gendered floors, making them feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in this space. Research also overwhelmingly suggests that trans people are more likely to be victims of assault (Association of American Universities, 2015). We There is an absence of research on student safety in New Zealand. This is an issue that Tertiary Women New Zealand and we are currently working on addressing through a climate survey.

### *Homelessness for ethnic minorities*

Ethnic minorities (especially international students) are vulnerable and at risk of living in transient or overcrowded housing. These students can be unaware of their rights under the Residential Tenancies Act (1986) and can be placed in unsafe environments. Some students from international communities are misled about the cost of living as a student in New Zealand this leads to instances of 'hotbedding' where people take shifts sharing a room or even bed and 'sex for rent' issues. Such an instance can lead students feeling unsafe and without agency to remedy the issue. While many of these students are not New

Zealand residents, there is still an obligation to protect them and ensure they have a positive experience that supports them to be academically successful.

### *Homelessness for Māori*

Despite New Zealand's aims to be a society with opportunity for all, Māori continue to be discriminated against. Taura with Māori names or are physically identified as being a person of colour can result in them being less likely to find housing as people place negative connotations on them. While the Human Rights Act (1993) forbids this, this form of discrimination is hard to prove as taura simply are not selected for flats. In some instances, taura may be aware that they are being judged with preconceived notions about their character and personal qualities. Some landlords believe that Māori are more likely to cause damages and not pay rent in a timely manner. These notions are damaging and often mean that taura are left with second rate housing and second rate landlords who care little for the upkeep of their property and may place them in difficult circumstances.

The manaakitanga that taura offer to their Māori peers can again conceal the level of homelessness. We believe that where pākehā hospitality may last no more than a week, we believe manaakitanga could be supporting taura more. However, this assumes that taura are supported and involved in their community. If taura are disconnected from their community and their whānau (potentially as a result of dysfunction) they are much more likely to become trapped in negative situations as they lack the financial capacity to support their existence and are unable to find supports.

As we are not the organisation that has the authority to speak about the experience of Māori at a national level we speak with some hesitance on the subject. We would recommend that the Cross-Party Homelessness Inquiry make efforts to speak with Te Mana Ākonga (who work alongside us to represent taura at a tertiary level) if they wish to gain deeper insight as to the effects of homelessness on Māori.

### Conclusion

We believe that homelessness is a significant issue for students however, there is a significant lack of research in this area and we believe one of the reasons is due to the strict definition of homelessness that can exclude a number of students from accessing support structures that may assist them to completing their studies in a secure environment.

With a lack of focus from this government on student support, we only anticipate this issue becoming significantly greater in a very short timeframe in the near future.

Finally, we commend the Green Party, Labour Party and the Māori Party involved for leading the way and taking a considered approach to the complex and growing issue of homelessness in New Zealand.

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