

A WSWS investigation into the social crisis in Australia's Mount Druitt

“Youth have been neglected”

Our correspondents

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As part of its investigation into the deepening social crisis in the Sydney working-class suburb of Mount Druitt, the WSWS spoke to a number of young residents about the impact of growing unemployment, poverty and lack of essential services on their lives.

All the health workers and representatives of community organisations interviewed by the WSWS had noted a considerable spike in youth homelessness, along with mental illness, and a dire lack of assistance for young people suffering from these social problems.

According to a report entitled, *The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia*, released by a number of academic institutions in partnership with charity organisations, some 44,000 young people across the country are homeless, though the report notes, “the actual number is thought to be higher.”

The report found that nearly half of young people receiving assistance from homeless services had “slept rough” (i.e., outdoors) before turning 18. Almost two-thirds of young homeless people had been in some form of out-of-home care as children and 53 percent had been diagnosed with a mental illness.

The report documented the tragic impact of homelessness on young people. It found that one in five young homeless women had attempted suicide in the previous six months, while over one in four had engaged in non-suicidal self-harm.

The WSWS spoke to Jessica, a 21-year-old woman forced to “couch-surf,” or move from one friend’s house to another, in Mount Druitt after spending time at a medical facility following mental health issues at the beginning of the year.

Jessica left school in year 10, at the age of 16, after falling pregnant with the first of her two children. For

two-and-half years she was subjected to domestic violence by her then partner. Both of her children were removed. In recent years, she has cared for her mother, who has severe emphysema and is now living in a nursing home at the age of 56.

Jessica explained that when she left the medical facility, after three weeks treatment and with nowhere to live, she went to Housing NSW, the state’s public housing department. “They said: ‘If you want us to house you, you have to apply for four houses every four days.’ They know I will be knocked back, but I have to be knocked back by a bunch of people for them to give me somewhere to live, when they know it will happen. This is on the private rental market.

“They gave me five days of temporary accommodation then I had to apply for a whole lot of accommodation and come in with all the paper work. Since then, I’ve been homeless for three or four weeks.”

Jessica explained: “Things have gotten bad for me and this is the most stressful point in my life except for domestic violence. I didn’t get any support. You only get support if you are together enough to get all the paperwork in, then you can get help. Couch surfing is simpler than trying to go through housing.

“I am on Youth Allowance. I have told them I am homeless but they haven’t bumped me up to Homeless Allowance because I haven’t gone in to fill out the paperwork that says I am not living at home anymore.”

Jessica said her story was a common one. “One of my mates is trying to find a job to support herself and her three kids. No one is helping her. She has to do it all by herself. Youth have been neglected by the government.

“Some of my friends have lived in tents for 3 to 12

months. At the moment they are all pretty well housed but all of them have had housing problems. At my old house we sometimes had 20 people because they couldn't live with their parents. They don't work and if they did then they get fired because people would work for cheaper rates."

Jessica spoke of being driven to tears by her treatment at the hands of the authorities.

"I went into Housing NSW with my duffle bag and all my stuff and asked what they were going to do to help me. They said: 'You have to sign a Case Plan and abide by the Case Plan for us to help you.' It's ridiculous. With applying for houses and going in to Centrelink [the federal welfare agency], I'm pretty much spending whatever time I am not sleeping looking for more paperwork to give them. It's horrible and so stressful.

"I cried the other day in Housing because I just couldn't take it anymore. Then they started helping a little bit. They saw that I was actually distressed. That is what it takes to get any kind of help from the government—you need to have a breakdown.

"And there are two types of breakdowns. Some people like me start crying but other people get angry. They're not bad people—it's just they don't deal with things in the same way. So they get jailed because they don't know how to deal with it. My mum worked in Social Security and she taught me that I had to play their game. And it is a game. They are playing with human lives and disposing of them as if they were plastic characters."

Speaking about the political issues raised by the plight of young people, Jessica noted the growth of social inequality. She denounced the financial elite and their representatives in the parliamentary parties. "They are too caught up in their own money and their mansions and their \$50,000 dinner parties with their corporate buddies. If you used that \$50,000 to feed the homeless of Australia one meal, you would be able to feed the whole state for a night.

"The corporate world is looking down on us as if we are ants that can be disposed of if they don't work properly. There is a pay point and everyone who doesn't earn over that point doesn't matter. We should be counted as people. We aren't numbers. That is what we are as soon as we move into Centrelink. Who can pay rent, food and water and electricity? The vital

things in life are going to be stripped from us because we are not going to be able to afford them."

Asked what kind of work she would like to do, Jessica said: "I would love to be a social worker and nurse. If I had enough money and security to study, that is what I would be doing."



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