# *From Couch to Curb* film launch highlights youth homelessness in Australia

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*From Couch to Curb*, a short documentary film detailing five young peoples' experiences with homelessness, was launched in Melbourne on August 8, together with a panel discussion featuring three of the affected youth.

The 15-minute film was released as part of the August 4–10 Homelessness Week organised by the Homelessness Australia advocacy organisation. More than 116,000 people across Australia are currently without a home, approximately one in every 200 people, with a quarter of these being young people. Every day, an average of 250 people are turned away from crisis centres due to a lack of capacity caused by inadequate government funding.

The homelessness rate reflects an escalating social crisis that is severely affecting children and young people. Of the 24,000 homeless people in the state of Victoria, 26 percent are aged between 12 and 24. According to 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey figures, the causes of youth homelessness include unaffordable and inaccessible housing (37 percent), domestic and family violence (25 percent), and family or relationship breakdown (13 percent).

*From Couch to Curb* was made by five young volunteers with the Melbourne City Mission charity. "A lot of us involved as volunteers are students like me, some are working," one of the filmmakers, Jane Chen, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"We're all really passionate about social justice, especially issues that affect young people. It's been a fantastic experience for me personally. I've been able to apply my studies in sociology in a practical way and to give a platform to people who've experienced homelessness and give them the chance to lead the conversation. Often you just hear about homelessness in terms of statistics, you don't really get the chance to hear from those affected by the experience," Chen said.

Another volunteer, Talha Shoaib, said: "I studied Bachelor of Social Science at Swinburne when I started volunteering. In making the film I learned that I didn't know a lot about youth homelessness. I didn't know just how badly many people in Melbourne are affected by it.

"I think the main barrier that the people in the film have had to cross over is the stereotype that comes with homelessness. It's got a bad stigma to it—people just assume that you do drugs, that you made poor decisions. But I think once they cross that barrier they learn that a lot of other people are in the same boat. They stand up and get their voice out for other people to hear."

The five young people featured in the film experienced homelessness in Melbourne for a range of reasons.

• Zoe Veale, 24, was made homeless two years ago after she and her housemates were suddenly evicted from their share-house. She "couch-surfed" between friends' homes for an extended period. As she explains in the film: "It was pretty terrible, it was not something I ever thought I would experience in my life. So definitely [it was] something that I wasn't prepared for, didn't have resources for, and felt really down about and shamed about."

• Tameika Facey, now 21, experienced homelessness after she turned 16. When she was finishing Year 10 her mother lost their family home and Tameika and her two younger sisters spent the next two years moving between different rental properties. The family had to wage a year-long legal battle to prevent real estate agents evicting them over rental arrears caused by

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overdue Centrelink payments.

• Jess Vamplew, 22, became homeless when she was 19 after going through a family breakdown with her mother in Queensland and moving to Melbourne to study.

• Queenie Willett, a 22-year-old transgender woman, has experienced homelessness since she was 18. Her experiences were among the most harrowing, including sleeping on the streets and exchanging sex for accommodation.

• Ethan Jordan was homeless when he was between 16 and 18 years of age. His parents, who suffer from mental illness and family violence, kicked him out when he was still at school.

Three of the young people, Tameika, Jess, and Ethan, spoke from the film launch panel, together with Melbourne City Mission staff Rosie Scott and Maria Toohill. They elaborated on their personal experiences, discussed the hidden forms of homelessness that exist beyond people living "rough" on the streets, and challenged stereotypes about homeless people.

This author asked a question about the political issues underlying the homelessness crisis, which *From Couch to Curb* did not address. "There are untold billions of dollars to spend on the military, on tax breaks for big corporations and the ultra-wealthy, but when it comes to what ought to be a basic social right, the right to a home, all of a sudden there's no money to be found. It really is an indictment on successive Labor and Liberal governments. What do you think this reflects about our politics that we have this social crisis?"

Ethan Jordan answered: "These are things that are in my thoughts all the time. I'm always thinking—panicking—that the government doesn't care about poor people any more. We're heading down a really dangerous road where there's more segregation in society."

Following the panel discussion Jordan spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "When you're homeless at 16 like I was you've got to kind of raise yourself because your parents can't raise you," he explained.

"I was always stressing out trying to remain engaged with the education system, to stay in school, because I know that's important to keep developing. Not a lot of the teachers were understanding because I'd be sleeping at my desk, after I'd go to work at [fast food outlet] Red Rooster the night before in order to pay for rent and it'd be one o'clock in the morning when I'd get home. Then I'd have to get ready for school at seven o'clock. I couldn't shower a lot of the time because I'd be so exhausted, it was just awful," Ethan said.

"I barely had enough money to survive because you're working as a kid so they underpay you really badly. And Centrelink [welfare payments] is just not enough. One time when I applied at Centrelink they wouldn't approve it because the situation at my family's home was supposedly not that bad and I was not considered independent. So, I just spent three or four months without any money. I'd be going to places begging for money, just to try and get food. I didn't always have the ability to eat, and because I've had health problems in the past, I lost a lot of weight, so much that my bones are really brittle and I bruise easily. My immune system was very low all the time.

"When you're homeless and sleeping rough all the time, it's also really hard to get to job appointments and to even answer the phone to Centrelink, because you might not have credit, your phone might be dead because you get few opportunities to recharge it, you're not thinking clearly a lot of the time because you're hungry, and you're tired. There have been times when I just had to steal just food and soap."

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