

Rate of kids on street soars

EXCLUSIVE

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Hundreds of Victorian children are living in cars, caravan parks, dangerous rooming houses and on the streets, with the young worst hit by the state's ballooning housing crisis.

While the number of homeless people of all ages is on the rise, no group is more affected than children.

There was an 82 per cent rise in babies and young people aged up to 14 being registered as homeless in the two years to June last year, compared with a 33 per cent rise across the adult population.

It is a harrowing trend, say welfare agencies. "The number of children in completely unacceptable accommodation is growing before our eyes," Council to Homeless Persons Chief Jenny Smith said.

"This is our future and we can't underestimate the trauma that preventable homelessness is causing these children."

More than 7200 Victorian children were counted homeless in the year to mid-2015. While most were in temporary accommodation, a growing number were forced to fall back on more desperate arrangements.

The overall figure includes 225 who had slept in cars, 127 who spent a night on the streets, 269 who lived in caravans, 42 who were homeless in a tent and 151 in rooming houses.

Other children would have gone unnoticed, as the figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare only count people who received support from homeless services, although the institute's Tim Beard noted Victoria was among the best at reaching people in need.

It is believed most of the homeless children under the age of 14 were accompanied by a parent, many of whom were fleeing family violence, while there has also been an increase in Australians desperately struggling with the rising costs of housing.

In Melbourne's west, homelessness agencies say they have noticed more families, particularly single parents, in dire housing stress.

UnitingCare Werribee Support and Housing's Jackie Ceratti said there was no crisis accommodation in suburbs such as Werribee, Laverton and Hoppers Crossing, so families were forced to move into often unsafe hotels or motels in faraway neighbourhoods for months at a time.

Whitelion runs outreach youth services in Melbourne and the charity's project manager, Charlotte Kelberg, said while most of the homeless young people they helped in the suburbs were couch-surfing, they saw instances of people sleeping

in cars or on the streets. Children as young as 12 had stayed the night in the park or a tent, Ms Kelberg said.

Whitelion also reported that some young homeless people were falling victim to sexual exploitation – something Melbourne City Mission’s director of homelessness services Sherri Bruinhout described as “very rare but very alarming”.

Ms Bruinhout linked the rise in young homeless children aged 14 or under to more mothers leaving violent relationships as a result of the publicity surrounding family violence campaigner Rosie Batty being named 2015 Australian of the Year, and the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence.

“They saw their stories in Rosie Batty and others and felt that if they asked for help this would be the time they would be able to leave,” Ms Bruinhout said. “Unfortunately at the time we weren’t as well equipped to deal with that and we were under the pump, but the state government have [since] come on board with increased funding.”

While that \$152 million investment for family violence housing assistance has been welcomed by the Council to Homeless Persons, Ms Smith said she was concerned there was no national plan to expand affordable or social housing.

“We can’t afford not to act. There is a certain amount the state government can do, but really we need leadership from the federal government,” Ms Smith said.

A spokeswoman for federal Social Services Minister Christian Porter said a report on funding options for homelessness was due back to Council of Australian Governments by the end of the year.

Service groups recorded more than 95,000 Australians homeless in 2014-15, including 25,502 children.



