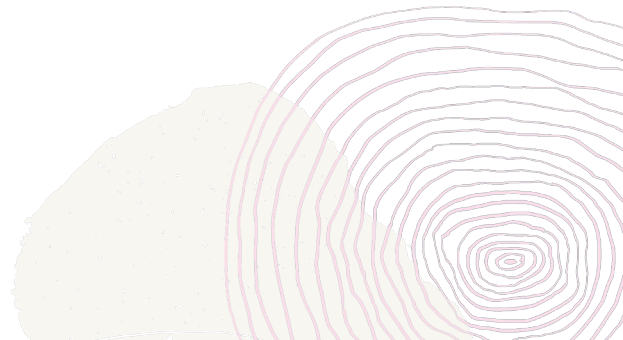




Select Committee on the Cost of Living

Brave Foundation submission
October 2024





Brave Foundation respectfully acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which our organisation is located and where we deliver our support programs across Australia. We pay our respects to their ancestors and Elders, past and present.

Brave's work also brings us into daily contact with many people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. We are committed to respecting the culture and heritage of each person we encounter, both inside and outside our organisation.



Executive Summary

Brave Foundation (Brave) welcomes the opportunity to highlight the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on young parents in Australia. The young parents we work with show remarkable resilience and resourcefulness as they navigate the complexities of raising happy, healthy, and safe families. However, the cost-of-living crisis has intensified these challenges.

Despite limited financial resources, lack of support systems, and societal stigmas, young parents are determined to provide the best possible life for their children. Brave mentors support them in accessing community resources, educational or employment opportunities, and parenting classes to enhance their skills and knowledge. Yet, the barriers they encounter can oftentimes feel overwhelming and isolating, underscoring the crucial need for ongoing support to thrive in their parenting journey.

This submission includes quotes from young parents and key themes identified by our workforce to highlight how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting young parents as they balance the financial cost of daily essentials while striving for their goals and ambitions.

For the purpose of this submission, it is useful to know that the young parents who utilise our program are referred to as 'participants' and the professional workforce that supports them are called 'mentors'. These titles were decided for young parents, by young parents.

About Brave

Brave is a national not-for-profit that equips expecting and parenting young people with resources, referral and education opportunities to facilitate happy, healthy and connected families. Brave's vision is to see a future where every young parent and their child thrives and belongs.

Our core program, Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) is currently funded by the Department of Social Services through the Child and Parenting Support (CAPS) services. Brave supports parents up to the age of 25 provided they started parenting as a teenager.

Our program has achieved significant outcomes by supporting the holistic needs of our participants, who are empowered to self-identify and prioritise goals that are important to them. Participant goals typically focus on accessing basic needs; being an effective parent; building a safe, secure and positive family environment; fostering personal and family wellbeing, and pursuing education, training or employment. Qualitative evidence indicates that the mentoring support participants receive through the SEPT program has a profound impact on their and their children's lives.

A core element of a Brave Mentor's role is to know and connect with local community. Annually, Brave makes around 1000 referrals to community services. In doing so, Brave ensures that existing services are promoted and accessed – enhancing, rather than duplicating support.

Brave utilises a strength based, early intervention approach which includes evidence-based frameworks which enable us to measure the progress and impact of the program for each individual participant as they work towards the goals they have set for themselves and their family.



Impact of the cost of living on young parents and their children

Young parents disproportionately impacted by cost of living pressures are at risk of being trapped in a cycle of financial hardship, instability and limited opportunities - affecting both their and their children's future. Greater than a lack of access to basic necessities such as food, housing, and healthcare, it also has detrimental effects on their mental and emotional wellbeing by exacerbating the stigma, isolation, and disadvantage that often comes with young parenthood.

"Cost of living – it's ridiculous... a huge factor, so expensive we can't do our dreams."

Mentors who work directly with young parents have observed that the number of 'participants who are struggling has risen', with one mentor in a Queensland community reporting that *"approximately 95% (of participants) have asked me for food vouchers, petrol vouchers, nappies, clothes for their children and baby essentials like formula"*. Another mentor noted that *"I have requests for support with food, clothing, bills and baby supplies much more often than when I started two years ago"*. Additionally, many young parents also fear that accessing material aid (e.g. food vouchers) indicates that they are unable to care for their child and could lead to the involvement of statutory authorities.

Participants spoke about being hugely challenged by high costs of living and the profound impact this has on their ability to provide for the basics of life. They stated this also affects access to childcare (private childcare sometimes being only available option), and access to transport (due to the cost of getting a full driver's licence or waitlists for funded driving lessons/test).

Mentors highlighted that some participants are going without essential items for themselves, in order to provide for their children, including forgoing vital healthcare. Participants have also shared that they are frequently confined to their homes or close to home, as transport is a cost they cannot afford – adding to feelings of isolation.

Of Brave's current participants, 68% are facing housing instability, including 17% who are homeless. One mentor said, *"many participants are couch surfing and cannot afford to buy a home, causing issues for their relationships with others and their children, difficulty establishing family routines and sometimes leading to unsafe situations"*. Worryingly, another mentor shared that *"when we (mentors) work with young people to access community support, some providers are not able to provide support due to lack of funding or due to the fact that the young person has asked too many times for help"*. Participants self-identify goals in Brave's SEPT program and unfortunately the high cost of living is a barrier to achieving some of their goals, especially those related to education and employment. The cost of childcare is a barrier – with participants highlighting that *"most of what I was earning, went to daycare"* and *"why would I go to work and pay childcare... I can't afford it... I can stay at home and do that job."*

Cost of living is also a barrier to education - *"The costs involved in study. The time... mostly the time... it's a vicious cycle – I need money and time to study but I need time to make money to study."* Participant comments highlighted that the cost of essentials (i.e. food and fuel) are increasing but support payments were not.

Finally, mentors have noticed that parents are reporting increased mental health issues, saying *"levels of depression and anxiety appear to be rapidly increasing with young parents and, with limited support services available, particularly outreach, it is challenging to support them."* These experiences compound the cost of living pressures and the demands placed on young parents to find solutions for themselves and their families at a time when they feel overwhelmed and unable to make decisions.



Recommendations

1. Invest in tailored, multi-pronged supports for young parents to ensure they can access necessities and are supported to achieve goals to ensure they, and their children, can thrive.
 - a. Increased funding for organisations like Brave Foundation who provide tailored, multi-pronged support for young parents (and refers to other specialised providers) with strong evidence base and proven success.
 - b. Greater flexibility in funding arrangements to ensure support services like Brave can provide relief to participants through brokerage.
2. The federal government commit to implementing the recommendations from the Productivity Commission's recent report: A path to universal early education and care.
 - a. Especially recommendations around making childcare more accessible and free for families on low incomes.
3. Ensure the lived experience and voices of young parents inform policy, programs and practice that impact their lives.
 - a. Brave's youth advisory group 'Empowering the Voices of Young Parents' can provide insights and their lived experience. Brave also works with many other young parents interested in sharing their insights, as well as partnerships with young parent serving organisations.
4. Increased and urgent access to mental health support for young parents.
5. Prioritising and recognising young parents as a priority cohort in housing policies given the multi-generational benefit of providing safe and stable housing to young families.

Conclusion

Young parents are particularly feeling the pressures of the high cost of living and are requiring more intensive and tailored supports to ensure they can thrive alongside their children. Our submission calls for urgent action from the federal government to relieve the cost-of-living pressures for young parents and to increase support for critical, free services such as Brave. Brave emphasises the need for young parents to be recognised at a federal level for their vulnerabilities, but also for their ability to reach their boundless potential when provided with the right supports.