

Emerging Solutions

Family Homelessness Research

Working with Parents

In efforts to house men and women experiencing homelessness, there is a risk that their identity as parents can be overlooked.

The need to recognise this is only increasing as the numbers of families experiencing homelessness rises. In 2010-2011 30.2% of all support periods provided by specialist homelessness services were for family groups, overwhelmingly women with children¹. Given these figures, it is important that workers have the skills and resources to allow them to work effectively with adults in their role as parents, and attend to the needs of their children.

A study of crisis intervention and planned family support with vulnerable families

A National Homelessness Research Project

This fact sheet presents the findings of a research project² into the experiences of 88 families that were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. These families were accessing either crisis intervention or outreach family support services on entry to the study. The research explored their experiences and outcomes over a 14 month period.

Research Highlights

Characteristics of Parents

Overall, this research reinforced existing literature about the circumstances of families who experience homelessness. **The parents in this study were highly disadvantaged in a number of key areas.**

- Parents in this survey had extremely **low levels of employment**, with never more than 23% employed at any one time. The majority of parents in this study had been unemployed for over 2 years.
- Both groups experienced **barriers to their participation in employment**, predominantly due to children and difficulties in securing child care.

I do want to get a part time job but my current situation is kinda getting in the way of that, and I would need to put my child in child care which I can't afford.

- Parents had **low levels of education**, with less than half completing year 12. Where parents had tertiary qualifications they were almost exclusively TAFE qualifications or short courses such as certificates in the responsible service of alcohol.
- **Family incomes were low**, with government benefits the primary source of income
- There was **overall a high representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**, with higher numbers in the crisis intervention group (44%) than the outreach family support group (15.5% of the sample).

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, *Government-funded specialist homelessness services SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2010-11* - Australia Appendix, AIHW, Canberra.

2. *A study of crisis intervention and planned family support with vulnerable families*, Prof. Karen Healy, project funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

“...crisis intervention and outreach family support had a vital role to play in building the resilience of vulnerable families.”

Involvement in community activities

Children were the primary focus for a parent's engagement with the community. Overall, where parents were satisfied with their involvement in community it was due to their children being involved in activities (e.g. sports), or because they were involved in their children's school. Similarly, where aspirations were noted for the coming year, overall the activities parents said they would like to be more involved were for their children.

I'd like to get my child into soccer or something to keep his mind active and his energy levels up.

Parenting

Participants were not asked directly about their experiences or confidence with parenting their children, however we did find that high numbers of parents had recent contact with the child protection system (ranging from over 10% to just over 25%).

Outcomes for Parents

On average, respondents in the outreach family support group reported that over the 14 month period they had experienced improvements in their family relationships and their mental health. They attributed these improvements to improved housing circumstances, communication skills and to better access to mental health services.

Because I've gotten better, which makes it easier to communicate with my family members.

Respondents in both groups who were in an intimate relationship reported substantial improvements in those relationships, which some parents in the outreach family support group attributed to improved communication.

We are learning to speak to each other and coping strategies. We used to just yell and scream at each other but now we just walk away.

A minority of respondents in both samples reported improvement in their employment circumstances over the 14 months in which the study was conducted.

Resilience and impact of the 2011 Brisbane floods

Parents were asked a number of questions about their circumstances following the January 2011 Brisbane floods. Families were asked about the floods impact on their lives, including their participation in employment or training; family relationships; and their children's participation in child care, kindergarten or school.

Overall, the families with the fewest resources reported the greatest negative impact of the floods both at the time of the event and in the longer term. These families had already stretched their often meagre social and practical resources to the limit and became reliant upon emergency support services as a result of the floods.

This was an interesting finding as few studies have looked in to the impact of natural disasters on families who are already experiencing considerable disadvantage. Overall, crisis intervention and outreach family support had a vital role to play in building the resilience of vulnerable families so they were more able to cope with unexpected events. The timely provision of practical support with housing, food and access to household goods, such as whitegoods, was vital to enabling vulnerable families to recover. Outreach family support workers also reported their actions to reduce families' anxiety about the natural disaster by providing families with information (such as emergency numbers) and resources (such as food) they needed in case they were required to evacuate.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Employment and Education

Employment and education are crucial for families' pathways out of poverty and disadvantage.

Policy responses to improve participation in employment and training should focus on removing disincentives in taxation, Centrelink benefit reporting and rates, and child care benefits.

Employment and training programs should target parents who are unemployed, and must ensure that their programs simultaneously address parents' barriers to employment such as child care and finding flexible employment.

Family support practitioners should also work with parents to connect with Job Services Australia providers, and address individual issues that affect capacity to engage in the paid workforce such as dental health, physical and mental health concerns and child care.

Homelessness, family support, training and employment programs should seek to develop positive working relationships and if possible, seek opportunities to collaborate and partner in programs that reach out to parents.

Building resilience

Crisis intervention and planned family support services have an important role to play in building the resilience of vulnerable families so that they are more able to cope with unexpected events. These services can help families achieve resilience through advocacy and support activities that enable families to access and maintain affordable and adequate housing, and through linking families to the range of services and supports that will facilitate their wellbeing and participation in their community.

Increasing transition to, and availability of, outreach family support

Our research data suggested that families using crisis intervention services and those using outreach family support services experienced some similar challenges, with the challenges facing the former appearing to be more entrenched. Despite this, few of the families from the crisis intervention group transitioned to outreach family support services during the study, even though it would appear they could have benefited from the broader range of intervention strategies provided by this model.

There are a number of factors that influence referral to more planned support services; however a key issue is that of capacity. The outreach planned family support services at Micah Projects do not have capacity to take on all referrals from crisis intervention teams. Data from the Australian Council of Social Services 2012 survey of community organisations suggests this is a sector-wide issue, with housing and homelessness services reporting the highest level of unmet need³. Increasing the capacity of the community sector to respond to need in a more planned, holistic and long-term manner is crucial to ensuring people receive the support they need in a service system facing increasing demand.

Housing plus support

In the research, parents reported improvements in mental health, access to services and relationships when their housing circumstances improved, and if they had access to family support services.

Families who are homeless require both long-term housing and support as a primary response. Crisis homelessness agencies should focus on re-housing families in permanent, sustainable housing as rapidly as possible. In addition, homelessness agencies should develop strong partnerships with family support

3. Australian Council of Social Services 2012, Australian Community Sector Survey 2012 - National Report, ACOSS, NSW.



programs so that families are able to be assessed and if needed, referred to a family support service.

Family support practitioners should maintain a focus on permanent sustainable housing throughout any work in addressing other significant challenges faced by parents.

Permanent Supportive Housing is the intentional connection of permanent housing and support services people need to break the cycle of homelessness. While permanent supportive housing is a relatively new approach for families, research is demonstrating its efficacy with vulnerable families, particularly where there are homelessness and child protection concerns⁴⁻⁵. Government, housing and support agencies should explore opportunities for aligning resources to create supportive housing projects.

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 - Brisbane Domestic Violence Advocacy Service
 - Brisbane Youth Service
 - Mater Hospital.

4. National Centre on Family Homelessness 2009, *Family Unification Program; Serving at-risk homeless families and youth*, National Centre on Family Homelessness, Massachusetts.

5. Swann-Jackson, R., Tapper, D., and Fields, A. 2010, *Keeping Families Together: An evaluation of the Implementation and Outcomes of a Pilot Supportive Housing Model for Families Involved in the Child Welfare System*, Metis Associates, New York.