

Emerging Solutions

Family Homelessness Research

Housing

The experience of homelessness is an inherently traumatic event for families. For a family entering homelessness, grief and loss issues for both parents and children have a significant impact, as families lose their home, familiar environments, routines and relationships¹. Following entry into homelessness, families' journeys within the homelessness service system are often protracted and characterised by extreme uncertainty and a profound lack of security and safety². Given this continued unstable and stressful environment, the provision of safe and long-term housing is crucial for the experience of trauma to be addressed adequately³.

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 project⁴ 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.

Housing circumstances⁵

Quality

Families in the crisis intervention sample began the study in much more unstable housing than families in the outreach family support sample. Almost half of these families were living in a boarding house, 'improvised dwelling' such as a car, hostel or motel style accommodation, or rough sleeping. As the study progressed, the housing circumstances of the families in the crisis intervention sample improved to similar levels as those families in the outreach family support sample.

Tenancy

Overall, more secure forms of tenancy such as public housing and community housing was almost exclusively held by families in the outreach family support sample. Again, as the study progressed the tenancy arrangements of the families in the crisis intervention sample improved to similar levels as those families receiving outreach family support.

Instability

Midway through the project, over 70% of families in the crisis intervention sample, and over 30% of families in the outreach family sample, had moved homes in the past six months. By the conclusion of the project these rates had equalised to just under 50% for both groups. Overall this reflects high levels of housing instability, particularly problematic for those families in the crisis intervention sample.

1. Tischler, V., Edwards, V., and Vostanis, P. 2009, 'Working therapeutically with mothers who experience the trauma of homelessness: An opportunity for growth', *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, vol. 9, no.1, pp.42-46.

2. Mission Australia 2011, *Seen and Heard: putting children on the homelessness agenda*, Mission Australia, Australia.

3. Reynolds, F. 2009, 'Homelessness Actually: Evidence for Housing First', *Parity*, vol.22, no.9, pp.48-49.

4. *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.

5. There are two important qualifiers to these findings. Firstly, families were not followed from the beginning of their involvement with services, so overall all participants had spent differing lengths of time in support. Secondly, there was a substantial drop-out rate for those families receiving crisis intervention services as the study progressed (roughly 50%).

“...the provision of stable housing as a first step should be prioritised.”

Satisfaction with housing

At the beginning of the study the majority of families in the outreach family support sample were satisfied with their housing. Families in the crisis intervention sample were far less satisfied, reflecting their generally poorer housing circumstances. By the end of the study however, families in the crisis intervention sample had improved levels of satisfaction. This likely reflects the improvement in housing circumstances of these families as the study progressed.

Housing, early learning and schooling

For parents in this study, their families' housing circumstances affected their ability to involve their children in early learning and school. This was particularly noticeable for families in the crisis intervention sample during the first wave of data collection, occurring over the November-February period, when one school year was ending and another beginning. This study suggests that it is at the beginning and end of the school year that children and young people whose families are in unstable circumstances are most likely to miss out on educational opportunities.

Lots of worries because being in a hostel you don't know where you're going to be.

Housing, health and wellbeing

This study asked families to rate their satisfaction with, and goals for, their health and wellbeing in a number of areas including physical and mental health, employment, involvement in community, family, friendship and partner relationships. Homelessness, poor quality housing or unstable housing was a key theme underlying families' responses to these questions. Both groups of families, but particularly those families in the crisis intervention group who faced more stressful housing circumstances, raised issues concerning the unsuitability of their current living environments for achieving optimal health and wellbeing.

The emotional stuff takes its toll, I feel sick.

It's the stress on top of everything

Housing and aspirations

Families were also asked about their aspirations for the coming year in these areas. Families again noted housing as a barrier to achieving their goals, particularly those families in the crisis intervention group who faced more stressful housing circumstances.

Just being out on our own, our own little family, that would be a lot healthier; especially now with the eldest going to school, I'd like to be able to sit him down in a quiet room

I'm hoping I'll have a stable home where me and my kids can finally be happy

Implications for Policy and Practice

Housing as a first response

Given the transience of homeless families and difficulty engaging families over a longer period of time through the crisis model, the provision of stable housing as a first step should be prioritised.

Housing First approaches emphasise that a homeless individual or family's primary need is to obtain stable housing, and that other issues that may affect the household should be addressed once housing is obtained. Crisis services should focus on quickly supporting families to obtain housing before they are entrenched in transience and homelessness. The provision of affordable, long-term housing for families should be a focus for policymakers.

A key model promoted by the US National Alliance to End Homelessness is rapid re-housing. Underlying the rapid re-housing model is the recognition of the significant traumatic impact of homelessness on people, and the need to minimise the length of homelessness in order to minimise the damage. The key principles of rapid re-housing are:

- Families move directly into permanent housing. There are no temporary or intermediate placements
- Successful rehousing lies in identifying and removing barriers to families obtaining permanent housing
- Provision of the least amount of assistance that is needed to stabilise families in permanent housing
- Families are assisted to connect to mainstream supports in their community
- Housing is the focus, other issues will only be worked on in a voluntary basis, and only if the family identifies goals in these areas.

Rapid re-housing will not break the cycle of homelessness for all families. Those families who require more intensive services in order to achieve stability may benefit from the long-term connection of their permanent housing with support services⁶.

Connecting housing and support Supportive Housing for families

Connecting housing with family support is important for vulnerable families considering the benefits families experienced from a family support model, and the noted difficulties faced by families with housing instability. Supportive housing is the intentional connection of permanent housing and support services people need to break the cycle of homelessness. The key elements of permanent supportive housing are:

- Tenants pay no more than 30% of household income towards rent and utilities
- No limits on length of tenancy
- Participation in support services is voluntary. Tenants are only required to keep to the provisions of a standard lease agreement
- All members of the family have facilitated access to flexible and comprehensive support services specifically tailored to their needs
- Property management strategies include approaches to addressing concerns resulting from issues such as substance use and mental health crises, with the focus on maintaining the tenancy⁷.

While permanent supportive housing is a relatively new approach for families, research is demonstrating its efficacy with vulnerable families. A 2006 analysis of outcomes for two permanent supportive housing projects in California, where support services were voluntary, had retention rates of 94% and 95% after one year. No families were evicted during this time⁸.

6. National Alliance to End Homelessness 2009, *Rapid Re-Housing: Creating programs that work*, NAEH, Washington

7. Corporation for Supportive Housing 2011, *Silos to Systems: Preserving and Strengthening Families and Children Experiencing Recurring Child Welfare System Encounters and Housing Crises*, Corporation for Supportive Housing, New York.

8. Bassuk, E.L., Huntington, N., Amey, C.H. and Lampereur, K. 2006, *Family Permanent Supportive Housing: Preliminary Research on Family Characteristics, Program Models, and Outcomes*, Corporation for Supportive Housing, New York.



Permanent supportive housing has also demonstrated efficacy in addressing high rates of child protection involvement among families experiencing homelessness.

For example, the Family Unification Program in the USA provides housing vouchers coupled with supportive services to families where the lack of adequate housing is the key factor in either the imminent removal of the child from the home, or in delaying reunification efforts⁹. A 1998 evaluation of the program found that 88% of homeless families who received a voucher were still housed 12 months later. Of the group that retained their housing, 90% of families where a child was at risk of removal remained intact, and 94% of families with children in out-of-home care were reunified¹⁰. A 2004 analysis suggested that permanent supportive housing would cost 70% less than maintaining children in foster care¹¹.

More recent studies also support the efficacy of supportive housing for families. The Keeping Families Together pilot provided permanent supportive housing to 29 families with child protection involvement who had experienced homelessness for at least one year. There were substantial outcomes for children, with all 6 of the children who had been placed in out of home care prior to the pilot reunified, and just over 60% of current child protection cases closed. Housing stability was also improved for these families, with 26 of the 29 families remaining in the supportive housing, compared to a comparison group who largely remained within the shelter system¹².

There are a number of evidence based models for addressing housing exclusion and instability for families. **Importantly, permanent supportive housing ventures do not necessarily have to cost extra funding to implement, as government, or individual non-government organisations themselves, can align resources from housing, family support, child protection, early childhood and education to create supportive housing projects.**

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 - Queensland Government Department of Communities
 - Brisbane Domestic Violence Advocacy Service
 - Brisbane Youth Service
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9. Harbuger, D. and White, R. 2004, 'Reunifying Families, Cutting Costs: Housing-Child Welfare Partnerships for Permanent Supportive Housing', *Child Welfare*, vol.83, no.5, pp.493-508.

10. National Centre on Family Homelessness 2009, *Family Unification Program: Serving Homeless and At-Risk Homeless Families and Youth*, National Centre on Family Homelessness, Massachusetts

11. Harbuger, D. and White, R. 2004, 'Reunifying Families, Cutting Costs: Housing-Child Welfare Partnerships for Permanent Supportive Housing', *Child Welfare*, vol.83, no.5, pp.493-508.

12. 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.