

# A homelessness service system to support families



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 330: Supporting families effectively through the homelessness services system

## What this research is about

**This research investigates the homelessness services system for families to identify what is working well; those elements that could be expanded to improve housing and wellbeing outcomes; and the potential for beneficial system redesign.**

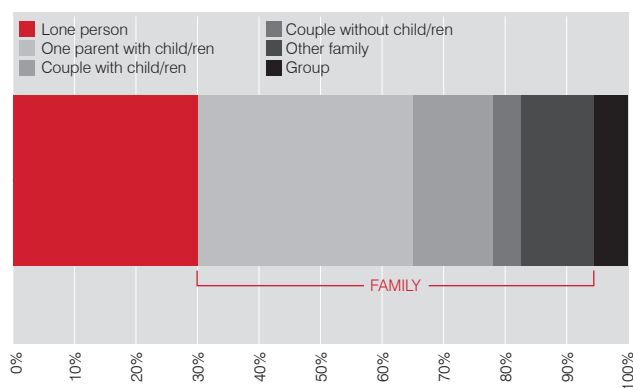
## The context of this research

In 2017–18, 64 per cent of people seeking support from Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) were in a family, having been made homeless due to experiencing domestic and family violence, poverty, and a lack of affordable and suitable accommodation.

### What is a family?

A family is a group of two or more people who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering and who usually live together in the same household. This includes a couple with or without children; lesbian and gay partners; single mothers or fathers with children; siblings living together; and other variations. At least one person in the family must be aged over 15.

SHS clients by living arrangement, 2017–18 (%)



Source: AIHW (2019b) Specialist homelessness services 2017–18 Supplementary tables—National

## The key findings

### Causes and experiences of homelessness

Families have diverse experiences of homelessness. Families who experience, or are at risk of homelessness due to poverty or adverse events have different needs from families whose experience of homelessness is caused primarily by domestic and family violence. The single category of 'families' collects these different experiences and characteristics, with implications for service design and delivery.

Since 2012, homelessness has been defined to include those who live in severely overcrowded conditions, and this has increased the number of families, especially Indigenous families, considered to be homeless.

Housing affordability alone does not cause homelessness, but housing market factors such as higher median rents are associated with homelessness for those who face other adverse events that place them at risk. While domestic and family violence was the main reason most people sought support from SHS in 2017–18, housing affordability stress and financial difficulties were the main reasons for around 16 per cent of clients.

People living in poverty and those on low incomes are extremely vulnerable to financial difficulties, which can place their housing at risk (including the risk of homelessness). These households have experienced significant increases in housing costs over time and are over-represented in homeless support services' client groups. Housing tenure has a major impact on poverty, with recent Australian research finding that most people (52%) with incomes below the poverty line are renting, while only 15 per cent of people in poverty are homeowners without a mortgage.

### Lived experience of homelessness for families

Homelessness tends to be experienced differently by families than by other groups, as they have much lower levels of problematic alcohol and drug use and mental health problems, and tend to be homeless for less time.

Families in poverty often experience a continuum of insecure living conditions, rather than a dichotomy of being 'homeless' or 'not homeless'.

Experiences of family homelessness are shaped not only by contact with service providers but also by the attitudes and behaviours of, for example, family and friends, real estate agents, private landlords and accommodation providers.

Australian research on parents and housing difficulties in rural communities found that parents described interrelated issues associated with mental illness, substance use, housing difficulties and losing access to children. Families in rural areas reported finding it difficult to obtain appropriate housing because 'everyone knew everyone'.

### Children in homeless families

Children in homeless families account for one of the largest groups experiencing homelessness. Nationally, 28.8 per cent of people accessing homeless services are children between the ages of 0–17.

The impact of homelessness on children and parents is significant and ongoing, and often service responses cannot substantially alleviate this. Families experience considerable poverty, limited access to stable accommodation, disrupted routines, financial difficulty, loss of possessions and family pets, loss of social identity as a family, violence, trauma and fear, limited mainstream social and economic participation, and disruptions in access to schooling for children. Studies conducted in the USA show that homeless families with children tend to have weak or unstable social supports. Even those with broader family networks do not perceive these as resources for support.

Families experiencing homelessness are also at high risk of contact with statutory child protection systems. The most recent data linkage research indicates that of the 100,000 children and young people using homelessness services between 2006 and 2009, 30,000 had a notification of abuse or neglect substantiated by a child protection agency. This particularly affects women who have experienced domestic and family violence, and can heighten the risk of separation from children. Once homeless, a woman must demonstrate that appropriate accommodation is available in order to be reunified with her children. However, because she has been separated from her children, she can only be allocated housing for her needs, not for her children, and this can prevent reunification.

### Indigenous families and homelessness

Indigenous people (not just families) generally experience higher rates of homelessness compared with non-Indigenous people and it is highest among young people, including children. In 2017–18, 36.7 per cent of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness were aged 0–17, compared with 28.8 per cent for non-Indigenous people aged 0–17. Indigenous Australians are also over-represented as clients of homelessness services.

Indigenous families' circumstances affect their risks of homelessness, including disadvantages in health and education, barriers to private rental including widespread discrimination, and social and kin ties and cultural obligations that lead to overcrowding. Indigenous meanings of 'family' are much broader than Western-centric ones where family is often seen as nuclear. Restricting guest activities and attempts to reduce overcrowding by housing providers may be antithetical to Indigenous notions of family and family obligation, but housing is not generally resourced or designed for this broader meaning of family.

Factors that place Indigenous families at risk of homelessness include large utility debts (e.g. electricity and water bills) for which social housing tenants in some jurisdictions are charged. Some of these debts were related to poor property condition and water leaks, and others to high water usage as a result of overcrowding. Other debts also place tenancies at risk, especially car registration and fines, and state debt recovery issues (unpaid fines).

Access to temporary and emergency accommodation, while generally described as working well for families with children, is sometimes constrained for Indigenous families. Some service providers report that hotels turn away Indigenous clients in need of crisis accommodation. This was considered to be due to racism, which makes it particularly difficult to accommodate Indigenous families.

There is an unmet need for services which are perceived by Indigenous clients as culturally safe. Indigenous families may feel more comfortable accessing Indigenous-specific services, which are not available in all areas.

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## Support needs of families

Families in Australia experiencing, or at risk of homelessness often have support needs related to physical or mental health; socioeconomic disadvantage; disability; experiences of trauma and adversity; debt; and other social and economic adversity. Women escaping domestic and family violence and their children often also have support needs related to safety and contact with the criminal justice system or Family Court.

Families with specific characteristics and circumstances are at higher risk of homelessness because of their access to services or number and complexity of support needs. These include:

- services are often not sufficiently resourced to effectively support families with older children and teenagers with challenging behaviour and complex support needs
- refugees and migrants are not well supported by all services
- strict eligibility criteria for some services, including the maximum age of accompanying children, the age of young parents, and clients who use alcohol or other drugs or who have mental health problems
- larger families are harder to house
- single parents often face discrimination in the private rental market
- the circumstances of vulnerable families often make it difficult for them to meet financial obligations and rental arrears are common
- clients who need case management or similar support, in addition to transitional housing, are sometimes not provided with the support they need, and this places tenancies at very high risk of failing
- families with complex or additional support needs, including problematic gambling and alcohol and other drug use, are challenging for services
- many services and information systems are only or mostly available online which is a barrier to families who only have a phone or limited access to data or Wi-Fi.

## The homelessness service system for families

Research participants for this study were service providers who work in housing and homelessness support. The homelessness system was described by participants as being made up of both housing and non-housing support service systems. Housing support provided by the homelessness system includes SHS emergency and crisis accommodation, but also includes transitional housing, assistance with accessing community and social housing, and assistance in accessing subsidies to support entry to or sustaining tenancies in the private rental market.

Non-housing support is provided primarily by the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) sector, funded by SHS.

There are elements of the system that are currently **working well** to support families:

- Family support services and housing providers are identifying and working with families whose tenancies are at risk.
- Financial counselling, brokerage funding and intensive support for parents and children with complex support needs are used by services to support tenancies.
- Assertive outreach and flexible support for families who are homeless are effective in reaching people who are not supported by usual service models.

**Challenges** with the existing system include:

- lack of affordable housing, especially long-term housing
- failures of integration with health, justice, child protection and immigration service systems
- very high levels of vulnerability in clients, driven by poverty and shortfalls in critical services such as mental health and alcohol and other drug treatment
- prevention and early intervention are critical to homelessness policy and practice, but there are very few robust measures of homelessness prevention and no systematic national data collection in this area.

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### What this research means for policy makers

There are potential benefits of increased collaboration among service providers, and changes to the organisation of emergency accommodation responses, to meet families’ needs and support their choice and agency.

Broader policy and program initiatives could incorporate a national homelessness strategy; boosting affordable housing supply; ongoing funding for Rapid Rehousing programs; prevention and early intervention responses; and supporting women and their children escaping domestic and family violence to establish secure housing. Supportive permanent housing and Housing First options combined with community-based services, permanent housing will assist families to avoid homelessness.

Streamlined access to services, combined with a system-wide ‘no wrong door’ approach to the service delivery system, including streamlined assessment processes, can improve service access and intervention.

The effectiveness of system integration in producing positive client outcomes needs further examination, including integration of homelessness, domestic and family violence, mainstream services (such as child welfare, housing, health, justice, education, employment, drug and alcohol services), and cross-sector initiatives for parents exiting care or other facilities such as prisons.

Ongoing evaluation is necessary to assess whether homelessness systems are effective, and this also requires the development of robust and holistic outcome measures. Outcome measures in turn need to be supported by data collection systems to capture and monitor progress.

### Methodology

This research reviewed Australian and international research literature and held workshops with practitioners and policy stakeholders in NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

#### TO CITE THE AHURI RESEARCH, PLEASE REFER TO:

**valentine, k., Blunden, H., Zufferey, C., Spinney, A. and Zirakbash, F. (2020)** *Supporting families effectively through the homelessness services system*, AHURI Final Report 330, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.



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