



Supporting families effectively through the homelessness services system

From the AHURI Inquiry

An effective homelessness services system

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Acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Service
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DFV	Domestic and family violence
NAHA	National Affordable Housing Agreement
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NHHA	National Housing and Homelessness Agreement
SAAP	Supported Accommodation Assistance Program
SHS	Specialist Homelessness Services program
WESP	Women's Emergency Service Program

Glossary

A list of definitions for terms commonly used by AHURI is available on the AHURI website www.ahuri.edu.au/research/glossary.

Executive summary

Key points

- The current homelessness services system has strengths and challenges as well as constraints on its effectiveness for different population groups, including different groups of families. Families experiencing homelessness because of domestic and family violence have different service needs and characteristics from those who are homeless for other reasons.
 - Census and service use data show that in the last few years there has been a disproportionate increase in the number of families who are homeless. This has been led by rising numbers made homeless due to experiencing domestic and family violence, poverty, and a lack of affordable and suitable accommodation. In 2017–18, 64 per cent of people seeking support from Specialist Homelessness Services were in a family living arrangement.
 - Homelessness is driven by both structural and individual factors, and effective systems need to respond to both. More needs to be known about how and in what circumstances the interaction of structural and individual factors lead to family homelessness in Australia.
 - Access to material resources lowers the risk of homelessness. Socio-economic disadvantage heightens the risk of homelessness for families who experience other adverse circumstances such as mental illness. Poverty itself is a risk factor for homelessness, and housing tenure has a major impact on poverty. In Australia, a growing proportion of the population live in private rental accommodation, and most people below the poverty line are renting (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019; Davidson et al. 2018).
 - Prevention and early intervention are critical to homelessness policy and practice, and are especially critical for families who are at risk of homelessness. There are significant potential benefits in the development of robust measures of homelessness prevention and better knowledge about effective practice and policy in early intervention.
 - Access to housing is essential to address homelessness in families, but long-term housing is not available to every family who needs it.
 - The reliance of the homelessness service system on the Specialist Homelessness Services program means that most support provided is intended to address individual risk factors and not structural drivers of homelessness. This could be addressed by increased housing supply, through better partnership arrangements between longer term housing providers and Specialist Homeless Services (SHS) providers and housing policies that resource those providers.
-

- The homelessness service system exists within broader factors associated with welfare systems and housing markets. However, the homelessness system is not generally defined to include those sectors that could address structural factors, such as long-term housing.
 - In the absence of a service response that includes housing supply, the homelessness system will not be effective for all families who need it.
 - The challenges of family homelessness highlight the need for more rigorous conceptualisation of the category of ‘homelessness’ and more rigorous outcome measurements in service delivery. Both are necessary to the design and implementation of effective and well-targeted support.
 - When asked about the elements of the system that are currently working well to support families, service providers and policy stakeholders described:
 - 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.
-

Key findings

Families and homelessness

There has been a disproportionate increase in the number of families who are homeless in the last few years. The Australian Homelessness Monitor, drawing on ABS and AIHW data, reports that this has been led by rising numbers made homeless due to experiencing domestic and family violence, poverty and a lack of affordable and suitable accommodation (Pawson et al. 2018). Indigenous and non-Indigenous homeless Australians are alike in that the single largest reported cause of their homelessness is domestic and family violence, with women and children most likely to seek access to homelessness services (Spinney and Zirakbash 2017).

Families escaping domestic and family violence can be invisible in official homelessness service statistics, as they do not seek assistance from service providers, tending to share overcrowded housing and live temporarily with ex-partners, friends and family. Overall, they have much lower levels of problematic alcohol and drug use and mental health problems than other groups experiencing homelessness, and tend to be homeless for less time.

Compounding this invisibility, there are fewer sources of national data on family homelessness than for other groups. While data on homelessness among all population groups is limited, the ABS estimates homelessness among different demographic groups, by sex, age and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status. However, the homelessness estimate derived from the census does not report on homelessness by household composition. National data on homelessness by household type is available from the Specialist Homelessness Services program (SHS) collection, which relates to people seeking assistance from services and may therefore be substantially confounded by an increase in service capacity or increased help-seeking.

Causes and experiences of homelessness

Housing affordability alone does not cause homelessness, but Australian research has shown that housing market factors such as median rents are associated with homelessness for those who face other adverse events that place them at risk (Johnson et al. 2015). Moreover, housing stress places families at risk of poverty, and at risk of homelessness. While domestic and family violence was the main reason why 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 (AIHW, 2019b).

People living in poverty and those on low incomes are extremely vulnerable to financial difficulties, which can place housing at risk, and these groups have experienced significant increases in housing costs over time (Saunders and Bedford 2017) and are over-represented in SHS client groups (AIHW, 2019b).

Poverty is a risk factor for homelessness, and housing tenure has a major impact on poverty. In Australia, a growing proportion of the population live in private rental accommodation: almost one-third (32%) of Australian households in 2017–18, an increase from 30 per cent in 2015–16 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019). The most recent Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW study of poverty in Australia found that most people (52%) below the poverty line are renting, while only 15 per cent of people in poverty are home owners without a mortgage (Davidson et al. 2018).

Previous research into the lived experience of family homelessness has found that the impact of homelessness on children and parents is significant and ongoing. 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 (Hulse and Kolar 2009; Hulse and Sharam 2013; Moore et al. 2008; Spinney 2007).

The homelessness service system

The homelessness service system exists within broader welfare systems and housing markets. The effectiveness of the systems is influenced by broader social factors, including levels of poverty and inequality.

Insights from service providers and stakeholders who participated in this project show that there are elements of the existing system that meet families' needs, but also that there are challenges in providing long-term support, especially accommodation. When asked about the elements of the system that are currently working well to support families, service providers and policy stakeholders described:

- 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.

The homelessness system was described by participants as being made up of several service systems, and of both housing and non-housing support. Housing support provided by the homelessness system includes SHS emergency and crisis accommodation, but is not restricted to it as it 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. This is primarily done through referrals to other agencies.

Non-housing support is provided primarily by the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) sector, funded by SHS. While non-housing support is very important to meet the needs of families at risk of homelessness, our informants were also clear in expressing that capital investment for housing, rather than just recurrent funding for services, is needed to address families' needs.

Many challenges in the existing system were described. Among them is a lack of long-term and affordable housing in many locations, which can make it difficult to help a family in crisis beyond provision of crisis and temporary accommodation. Support for other needs related to health, education and employment may also be difficult for families to receive due to waitlists or service gaps.

Systemic issues around service gaps were also discussed, including waiting lists for services, and inconsistent integration between housing and health, child protection, mental health, alcohol and other drug and criminal justice services. Our research participants said that homelessness should be a whole-of-government issue, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), housing and health systems. In recent years, the NDIS has complicated access to support for many vulnerable people, and there are still shortfalls in mental health service provision.

Policy development options

There has been recognition for some time that homelessness is driven by structural and individual factors, and that homelessness systems are fragmented and jurisdictional rather than holistic and national. The challenges of family homelessness highlight the need for integrated housing and non-housing support, and for more rigorous conceptualisation of homelessness and measurement of policy impact.

While there is consensus that homelessness is driven by both structural and individual factors, and that responses need to address both, the homelessness system is too narrowly defined to incorporate these drivers. Options for policy development include redesigning the homelessness service system to include long-term housing providers, and to include assessment of the impact of health and justice systems on housing outcomes. Better empirical evidence on the impact of structural and individual factors could also improve interventions. Insights from international research can serve as the basis for policy interventions to assess and address the impact of different drivers of homelessness on different family types. This evidence should then form the basis of better designed and better targeted interventions.

The study

This research project builds on previous research and the insights of practitioners and policy stakeholders in NSW, Victoria and South Australia. It aims to examine the capacity of existing systems of measurement to identify what is working well, those elements that could be expanded to improve housing and wellbeing outcomes, and the potential for system redesign where that would bring benefits. The project is part of a wider Evidence-Based Policy Inquiry reviewing the evidence base and providing policy recommendations for reconfiguring the Australian homelessness services system in order to strategically and systematically support the prevention and minimisation of homelessness for people of all ages.

The Inquiry addresses the research question: How can the homelessness service system be redesigned and implemented to be effective for different groups across the life course? In seeking to answer the overall Inquiry research question, each project has its own set of research questions.

There are three supporting Inquiry research questions:

- 1** What can we learn from national and international homelessness service systems for the future?
- 2** What are key levers for creating an effective homelessness service system?
 - a.** Balance of early intervention, prevention and crisis
 - b.** Funding and commissioning
 - c.** Relationships between specialist and mainstream services.
- 3** How might Australia reconfigure our homelessness service system in order to effectively support the prevention and minimisation of homelessness across the life course in the future?

There are three supporting research projects for the Inquiry. Each of the projects examines the Australian homelessness service system from the perspective of a different group of homeless people, and all focus on the particular needs of Indigenous Australians. This project, which focuses on experiences of families, was guided by four research questions:

- 1** How is integrated early intervention and prevention working in practice? What is working well? What needs improvement? What are the opportunities for significant systemic changes?
- 2** How effectively are existing arrangements providing support to families who are most at risk of homelessness? What opportunities exist for these arrangements to be reshaped to improve outcomes?
- 3** What lessons can be learnt from how homelessness systems in other countries conceptualise, design and deliver support to families?
- 4** What are the best ways to understand and measure change for families receiving support from the homelessness system? What data systems, outcomes measures, and theories of change should underpin interventions for families?

This project had three methods: a literature and policy review, policy and practice workshops, and interviews with policy and data stakeholders.

1 Families in the existing homelessness system

The homelessness services system is intended to prevent and address homelessness and incorporates policy and practice frameworks from local to national levels. There are known strengths and challenges with this system as well as constraints on its effectiveness for different population groups. This project aims to investigate the components of an effective homelessness services system for families.

- Families have diverse experiences of homelessness and improving responses for parents and children across this range of experiences and characteristics is a key policy concern.
- Existing services for families often provide family support services in ways that are valued by clients and improve outcomes, but these services often cannot provide long-term accommodation, which is a critical need.
- Families represent a high proportion of clients of specialist homelessness services; this is because domestic and family violence is a leading cause of homelessness.
- Concepts and definitions matter to how homelessness and the risk of homelessness is understood and measured:
 - 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.
 - Prevention and early intervention are critical to homelessness policy and practice, including family homelessness, but there are very few robust measures of homelessness prevention and no systematic national data collection in this area.

This research project builds on Australian and international research, and the insights of practitioners and policy stakeholders in three states: NSW, Victoria and South Australia. Its aim is to examine the capacity of existing systems of measurement to identify what is working well, those elements that could be expanded to improve housing and wellbeing outcomes, and the potential for system redesign where that would bring benefits.

1.1 Why this research was conducted

This project aims to investigate the components of an effective homelessness services system for families, and the elements of existing housing and human services that work effectively for families in different circumstances. It addresses several well-known and long-standing challenges facing the existing homelessness system as well as strategies for reforming them. These challenges include:

- **The fragmented and incomplete nature of the homelessness system for families in Australia.** Typically, this system is conceptualised as national agreements around homelessness services, state and territory strategies, and specialist homelessness services (SHS) that provide a range of services to support families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (Brackertz, Fotheringham et al. 2016). However, while it is recognised that homelessness is driven by both structural and individual factors, requiring housing and non-housing support across a range of sectors, this broad range of responses is not generally recognised as part of the homelessness system.
- **The challenges in balancing specialist and holistic service responses that address both housing and non-housing needs of families.** Services that primarily provide family support often have different capacities and expertise from agencies that manage properties and tenancies. Agencies that manage properties and tenancies typically have limited capacity to provide casework support (Parsell et al. 2019). In contrast, agencies that are funded to provide a range of social, financial and therapeutic support services to families at risk of or experiencing homelessness can potentially provide seamless service delivery (Breckenridge et al. 2016; Breckenridge et al. 2014). However, these family support programs provide case coordination and referrals, but not accommodation, and often cannot support long-term housing outcomes for families.
- **The provision of support for families who are experiencing homelessness, especially those experiencing ‘multiply excluded’ homelessness** (Fitzpatrick et al. 2013). Families with complex and multiple support needs require integrated support that addresses their needs, including their housing needs. However, the competition between service providers and the fragmented nature of the service system can lead to barriers in service delivery and difficulties in effective communication between services and families (Cripps 2007; Spinney 2012; valentine and Hilferty 2011; valentine and Katz 2015).
- **The still emergent evidence base on effectiveness in homelessness responses.** While prevention and early intervention are recognised as critical to homelessness policy and practice, there are very few robust measures of homelessness prevention and no systematic national data collection in this area (valentine et al. 2017). Outcome measures for specific homelessness responses, such as SHS programs, while recording accommodation outcomes at the end of support periods, are generally unsupported by theoretical frameworks that identify causal factors and mechanisms for change.

This research project is part of a wider Evidence-Based Policy Inquiry¹ reviewing the evidence base and providing policy recommendations for reconfiguring the Australian homelessness services system in order to strategically and systematically support the prevention and minimisation of homelessness for people of all ages. This project, which focuses on experiences of families, was guided by four research questions:

- How is integrated early intervention and prevention working in practice? What is working well? What needs improvement? What are the opportunities for significant systemic changes?
- How effectively are existing arrangements providing support to families who are most at risk of homelessness? What opportunities exist for these arrangements to be reshaped to improve outcomes?
- What lessons can be learnt from how homelessness systems in other countries conceptualise, design and deliver support to families?
- What are the best ways to understand and measure change for families receiving support from the homelessness system? What data systems, outcomes measures and theories of change should underpin interventions for families?

1.2 Can the homelessness service system be redesigned and implemented to be more effective for families?

Significant resources are invested in supporting families who experience homelessness. Families with children are generally a priority for services and receive immediate support, and there are areas and sectors that work well. However, the challenges in the homelessness system are unlikely to be addressed by additional programs or the enhancement of existing services. System redesign may be necessary, but even prior to that, consensus is needed on foundational questions.

- **How useful is the category ‘families’?** Families who experience homelessness or the risk of homelessness for reasons of poverty or adverse events other than domestic and family violence have different needs from families whose experience of homelessness is caused primarily by violence. The single category of ‘families’ groups these different experiences and characteristics, with implications for service design and delivery. Service redesign may benefit from more specific targeting and building on the elements of existing systems that are working well for different family groups.
- **Which agencies, interventions, and policies are responsible for ‘homelessness services’?** If homelessness services are understood to be those funded through the SHS program, there are significant challenges in defining and measuring early intervention and prevention because these services tend to support people who are already at significant risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. If, however, homelessness services are understood to address a spectrum of homelessness risks and experiences, there are significant challenges in defining and monitoring accountability, service integration and holistic responses, because evidence on robust measures of service integration between sectors is still emerging and monitoring is resource intensive. However, there are significant potential benefits from improved knowledge about whether and how integrated services and early intervention efforts are effective for families.

¹ <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/research-in-progress/ahuri-inquiries/an-effective-homelessness-services-system>

1.3 Policy context

1.3.1 Homelessness policy frameworks

Although it has been more than 10 years and a change of government since its release, the 2008 White Paper, *The Road Home* (Commonwealth of Australia), is the most recent national policy addressing homelessness nationally in Australia. The paper is therefore still relevant, especially as key aims such as halving homelessness by 2020 was set as a target. It outlines a response to homelessness prevention and intervention through three strategies:

- 1 Turning off the tap: prevention and early intervention
- 2 Improving and expanding services: achieving sustainable housing, improving economic and social participation and ending homelessness
- 3 Breaking the cycle: moving people quickly through the crisis system to stable housing with the support they need (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: ix).

The Road Home acknowledges structural drivers of homelessness such as entrenched disadvantage, unemployment and the shortage of affordable housing, and focuses on targeting groups who are at risk of homelessness such as older people in housing stress, women and children leaving violence, Indigenous Australians and people leaving state care (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: ix). It describes an increase over time in the number of families who are homeless and those seeking support from SHS. It notes that families 'need early intervention services to stabilise their housing and address the underlying issues that are putting them at risk of homelessness' (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: ix), such as domestic violence and entrenched poverty and disadvantage (see also Brackertz et al. 2016).

The Road Home notes that the major causes of family homelessness include family and domestic violence, unaffordable and unsuitable housing, decreasing social security supports and single parent (female-headed) families living in poverty. Importantly, it also notes that homelessness driven by domestic violence is different from other forms of homelessness because women and their children who escape abusive relationships may return to the perpetrator numerous times and cycle in and out of homelessness due to limited access to money, family and financial supports or stable housing (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: 7).

Until 2018, the key Commonwealth policy frameworks for family homelessness were the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) and the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) established by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2009. The NPAH aimed to ensure that all Australians have access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing that contributes to social and economic participation. It was aligned with the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (Council of Australian Governments 2013), which seeks to bring together the efforts of all Australian governments to make a real and sustained reduction in the levels of violence against women.

Both the NAHA and National Affordable Housing Specific Purpose Payment were succeeded by a new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) (Council on Federal Financial Relations 2018), which came into effect on 1 July 2018.

The objective of the NHHA is to contribute to improving access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing across the housing spectrum, including measures to prevent and address homelessness, and to support social and economic participation. Several national priority cohorts are specifically identified in the agreement and are expected to be addressed in each jurisdiction's homelessness strategy. Notably, families are not specified as one of these, but one family type, i.e. women and children affected by family and domestic violence, is:

- women and children affected by family and domestic violence

- children and young people
- Indigenous Australians
- people experiencing repeat homelessness
- people exiting institutions and care into homelessness
- older people (Council on Federal Financial Relations 2018).

Family homelessness is therefore not articulated adequately within these broad policy frameworks, and nor are measures of data collection to measure and assess policy impact. These broad policy frameworks are supported by statistical measures. In 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) developed a statistical definition of homelessness. Under this definition, people are considered homeless when they do not have suitable accommodation, or if their current housing arrangement is inadequate, they have no tenure, the lease is not extendable, or the conditions of their dwelling limit their control of and access to space for social relations (ABS 2012). However, information on families is also incomplete within this measure because the definition is based on people rather than families (Spinney and Zirakbash 2017). People living in severely crowded dwellings are included within this definition and many, if not most, of these will be living in family groups (ABS, 2018).

1.3.2 Policy foundations: domestic and family violence

Recent increases in homelessness have been substantially driven by rising numbers of women in need of accommodation or other help due to experiencing domestic and family violence, and housing affordability stress (Pawson et al. 2018).

Domestic and family violence is the most commonly reported reason for needing housing services and disproportionately affects women and their children. The effects of violence on homelessness are gendered: domestic and family violence was mentioned as a reason by 23,961 men and by 89,004 women (AIHW, 2019b). The rate of people seeking assistance due to family and domestic violence has been increasing over time as the main reason for people seeking assistance. In 2017–18, this rate was:

- 76 per 10,000 females—32 per cent more than in 2013–14 (57 per 10,000 females)
- 22 per 10,000 males—40 per cent more than in 2013–14 (16 per 10,000 males) (AIHW 2018b).

In 2017–18, more than 1 in 5 clients seeking specialist homelessness services as a result of family or domestic violence were aged 0–9 (22%, or 26,500) (AIHW, 2019c; see also Flanagan et al. 2019)

Refuges have been the mainstay of homelessness accommodation provision for women and their children who have experienced domestic and family violence for over 40 years. However, in recent years there have been efforts to augment the housing response for people who have experienced violence, to include ‘safe at home’ initiatives which are designed to combine legal, judicial, policing and home security provisions with homelessness prevention and economic security measures to allow women and their children to stay in their home where possible.

Spinney (2007) describes the historical conditions which are responsible for the contemporary links between domestic and family violence and the homelessness service system. The opening of feminist domestic violence refuges marked the beginning of the linking of homelessness with domestic and family violence, which was to have long-term consequences. The first feminist women’s refuge in Australia was established in Sydney in March 1974 and, by June 1975, eleven further refuges had opened in Australia. Shortly after the Labor government had begun to fund some refuges, the political crisis of November 1975 led to policy changes in refuge provision, and in 1976 the Liberal Federal Government cut its funding of refuges. In 1983, the

Labor Party was returned to power in the Federal Government and almost immediately, \$4 million was granted to the Women's Emergency Service Program (WESP). In 1983, all Commonwealth crisis accommodation services were brought together under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) and WESP was included as a sub-program. Some women's groups objected to this as they were concerned that funding for domestic and family violence issues would be restricted to crisis accommodation only (Hopkins and McGregor, cited in Spinney 2007). A compromise was reached whereby it was agreed that non-accommodation services would also be funded through SAAP. This created the anomalous situation whereby non-accommodation domestic violence services were funded through an accommodation program. Therefore, the reason that many of the domestic and family violence services are still funded through SHS funding (SAAP's successor) derives from the tactics of feminist service providers in the 1970s to seek funding to develop a homelessness response rather than a primary focus on other issues such as the criminality of perpetrators or public perceptions of domestic violence (Spinney 2007).

In 2000, Chung, Kennedy et al. made explicit links between homelessness and domestic violence. They argued that in order to live without violence from intimate partners, women are forced, or encouraged, to leave their home and seek alternative accommodation (Spinney 2007). Hence, women and children would be able to remain in their homes if rigorous and enforced legal sanctions against perpetrators were in place, and that the removal of perpetrators would prevent some homelessness (Chung et al. 2000).

In a national meta-evaluation of 'safe at home' initiatives, Breckenridge, Chung et al. (2015) note that they are being implemented in most Australian jurisdictions with the aim of enabling and encouraging women and their children to remain in the family home while the perpetrator is removed.

'Safe at home' initiatives are underpinned by the principle that the perpetrator is solely accountable for their violence and controlling behaviours, and consequently that partners and children should not be made homeless or displaced from families, friends and schools. They are characterised by the delivery of four distinct service responses:

- a focus on maximising safety using a combination of legal, judicial, policing and home security provisions to exclude the perpetrator from the home and protect victims from post-separation violence
- a coordinated or integrated intervention response involving partnerships between local services
- a homelessness prevention strategy that includes ensuring women are informed about their housing options before the time of crisis, at separation, and which provides support for women to maintain their housing afterwards
- recognition of the importance of enhancing women's economic security (Breckenridge et al. 2015: 3).

These initiatives, if sustained and successful, may reshape policy significantly from the understanding of homelessness driven by domestic and family violence as primarily a responsibility of the homelessness service system to a more integrated service and system response. Pawson, Parsell et al. (2018) consider that 'safe at home' initiatives have the potential to reduce homelessness as long as there is adequate permanent social and affordable housing available. However, a significant challenge to their effectiveness is that women may not be able to afford housing costs once their former partner has been excluded and ceased their economic contribution. This has led to the evolution of 'safe at home' programs from a focus of staying at home to incorporating a home of choice, which may involve moving. In these cases, 'safe at home' measures allow women time to plan their next move (Pawson et al. 2018).

1.4 Existing research

This research project builds directly on three recent AHURI reports: one on the homelessness system, and two on families affected by family and domestic violence and other vulnerable groups. Together, they highlight challenges and strengths both in terms of overall systems and policies and in service delivery and individual support.

Systemic challenges in homelessness policies and programs

A recent synthesis report by AHURI (Brackertz et al. 2016) on the effectiveness of the Australian homelessness system defined it as consisting of:

- national agreements that set the funding context and circumscribe homelessness service priorities, but do not represent an overarching vision to address homelessness. Note that a new national agreement has since come into effect, described in Section 1.3, which similarly lacks an overarching vision.
- state and territory homelessness strategies in each jurisdiction
- specialist homelessness services (SHS) in each jurisdiction, which provide a range of services to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Key findings of the report relate to the causes and experiences of homelessness, and the policy context:

- Risk factors for homelessness are multidimensional interactions between structural and individual drivers: for example, the impact of housing and labour markets on homelessness risk differs between people affected by problematic alcohol and other drug use and those who are not (citing Johnson, Scutella et al. 2015).
- Risk factors for homelessness are affected by geography: homelessness is higher in regions where there is greater income inequality and high-density dwellings, and a higher proportion of men, sole parents and Indigenous persons. Importantly, however, this research describes relationships between rates of homelessness and a range of different housing and labour market structural indicators, not the prevalence of homelessness among families or other demographic groups. This is important because, as will be discussed below, there are significant gaps in data relating to typologies of family homelessness in Australia (Brackertz et al. 2016 citing Wood, Batterham et al., 2015; see also Parkinson et al. 2019).
- 'Optimal homelessness responses should address both individual and structural risk factors' (Brackertz et al. 2016: 11), but there is no national system that addresses structural drivers.
- While individual services and homelessness responses work well, the specialist homelessness services system data indicates a lack of progress on many indicators. This is compounded by gaps in evaluation evidence and data. Overall, there is 'limited evidence to allow for a comprehensive assessment of how Australia's homelessness service system is performing as a whole' (Brackertz et al. 2016: 2) and the evidence that is available indicates limited effectiveness.

The effectiveness of housing and other services for vulnerable people

A more recent AHURI report (Flanagan et al. 2019), on housing outcomes for women and children escaping family and domestic violence, found that housing that is available and affordable is lacking.

- SHS programs provide most crisis responses, including crisis and emergency accommodation, yet have little capacity to assist with long-term housing after this initial support. Most of these services have access to few or no properties, although many have formal or well-established informal relationships with state housing authorities and community housing providers.
- The social housing system remains a valued and valuable option but is often inaccessible to families, in part because availability is limited and in part because it is so tightly targeted to those with the most complex needs. In addition, some social housing areas may be inappropriate for families.
- There is increasing policy and program reliance on subsidies for accessing the private rental market, but this is unrealistic in many higher-cost and competitive rental markets for many families who have recently escaped violence.

Another recent AHURI report (Martin et al. 2019) on the role of social landlords in relation to crime and non-criminal anti-social behaviour investigated cases of legal responses and termination proceedings to vulnerable tenants. In many cases, social housing landlords' legal responses frustrate other more ameliorative and preventative ways of addressing misconduct and related support needs and result in the eviction and homelessness of vulnerable people and families. Social housing landlords generally have a strong commitment to assist women affected by domestic violence into safe housing. However, this commitment may falter as violence becomes framed as 'nuisance' in tenancy legal proceedings. Some women are evicted because of violence against them. Tenancy obligations and liability impose hard expectations that women will control male partners and children. Some women are evicted because of conduct that oppresses and victimises them—including violence against them. Where children are involved, social housing landlords typically make additional efforts to avoid termination, but in the determination of proceedings, children's interests are a marginal consideration.

1.5 Research methods

The research design for this project builds on previous research and practitioner wisdom, rather than restating problems with existing systems on which broad consensus already exists. The project had three methods: a literature and policy review, policy and practice workshops in three states, and interviews with policy and data stakeholders.

1.5.1 Literature review

The literature review was designed to identify lessons from homelessness and family support service systems in other countries, and the principles behind the design and delivery of interventions:

- **Intervention outcomes:** whether and how homelessness interventions have been effective, for which families in what circumstances, and through which arrangements of contracting (including outcomes-based contracting) and funding. This part of the review was focused on New Zealand, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. These countries have similar policy settings to Australia as well as differences from Australia that allow for useful comparison.
- **Theoretical underpinnings of policy design:** how families' experiences of homelessness are understood, how 'outcomes' are conceptualised and measured, the role of specialist and 'mainstream' services, whether and how early intervention and prevention is prioritised, and the extent to which homelessness services are responsible for addressing domestic and family violence and other risk factors for homelessness.

The search terms 'family homelessness system, parents, parenting' were used to search the databases Scopus, Google Scholar, Informat: Humanities & social sciences collection (includes Parity journal), ProQuest Central, Sociology a SAGE full-text collection, PsycINFO, Ovid nursing database; and the websites of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), AHURI, and the ABS.

1.5.2 Practice and policy workshops

Stakeholder workshops were held in three jurisdictions: New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria.

Site selection was determined by criteria identified in the first phase of the research in consultation with the Inquiry research team. These criteria included regional and metropolitan experiences, characteristics of both the local area (socio-economic disadvantage, proportion of overseas-born and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, housing mix) and service network.

Participation at the workshops was via invitation from the researchers, who used their professional network and knowledge of the jurisdictions and the advice of key NGOs, such as peak organisations in housing and homelessness, to identify participants. Workshops were facilitated by members of the research team. The UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (HC180739), Swinburne, and University of SA granted ethical approval of the project.

Detailed notes were taken at workshops, and photos of whiteboard/note-taking exercises were taken to facilitate analysis. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The workshop notes and interview transcriptions were read, and through an iterative process key recurrent themes were identified and synthesised.

New South Wales

Two workshops were held: one in central Sydney and one in regional NSW. In addition, five individual telephone and face-to-face interviews were held with staff from government agencies and NGOs working in metropolitan and regional locations. The workshops were of 1–1.5 hours duration and the interviews 30–60 minutes. There were 20 participants in total, including CEOs, team managers and frontline service provider staff. Represented organisations included housing and domestic and family violence (DFV) peak bodies, government housing and human services agencies, SHS services, community housing providers, a local Aboriginal Land Council, and a specialist service for Indigenous women that provided brokerage services and support.

South Australia

Four workshops were held: three in Adelaide and one in regional South Australia. In addition, seven individual telephone and face-to-face interviews were held with managers and CEOs working in metropolitan and regional locations. The interviews and workshops lasted between 1–2 hours. There were 35 individual informants in total. Represented organisations included service providers, housing providers, peak bodies, the criminal justice sector and local government.

Victoria

Three workshops were held: two in Melbourne and one in regional Victoria. There were 26 participants in total. Represented organisations included peak housing NGOs, family service providers, SHS service providers, community housing providers and an Indigenous-specific housing service.

2 Homelessness in families

- There has been a disproportionate increase in the last few years in the number of families who are homeless. This has been led by rising numbers made homeless due to experiencing domestic and family violence, poverty and a lack of affordable and suitable accommodation.
 - In 2017–18, 64 per cent of people seeking support from specialist homelessness services were in a family living arrangement.
 - Indigenous people generally experience higher rates of homelessness compared with non-Indigenous people and it is highest among young people, including children. The legacy of colonisation is deeply implicated in the contemporary disadvantage of many Indigenous people, which is the context of Indigenous experiences of both domestic and family violence and homelessness.
 - Families have diverse experiences of homelessness. Notwithstanding this, research shows that the impact of homelessness on children and parents is significant and ongoing.
 - Families who experience homelessness typically experience multiple adverse events, including mental and physical ill health. Housing market factors such as median rents are associated with homelessness for those who face other adverse events that place them at risk.
 - Poverty is a risk factor for homelessness, and housing tenure has a major impact on poverty. The risk of poverty is higher for households renting privately than for homeowners or home purchasers.
 - Homelessness escalates the risk of contact with statutory child protection services. This particularly affects women who have experienced DFV. 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.
 - 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.
 - More needs to be known about the interaction of personal and structural causes of homelessness for Australian families.
-

2.1 Causes, characteristics and consequences of family homelessness

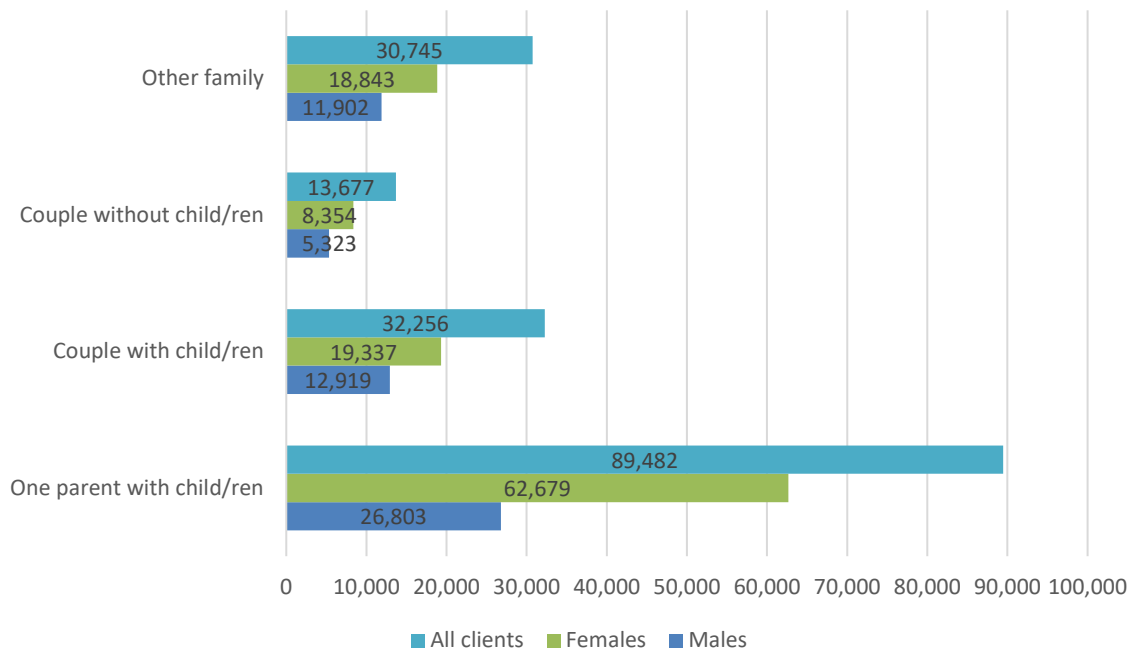
2.1.1 Homelessness among families in Australia

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) defines a family as 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. There must be at least two people to form a family, with at least one person in the family aged over 15. Single parents with children who live elsewhere, and people who are not related to each other but are living in the same household (such as a share house or chosen family) are not considered a 'family'.

There has been a disproportionate increase in the number of families who are homeless in the last few years. This has been led by rising numbers made homeless due to experiencing domestic and family violence, poverty and a lack of affordable and suitable accommodation (Pawson, Parsell et al. 2018).

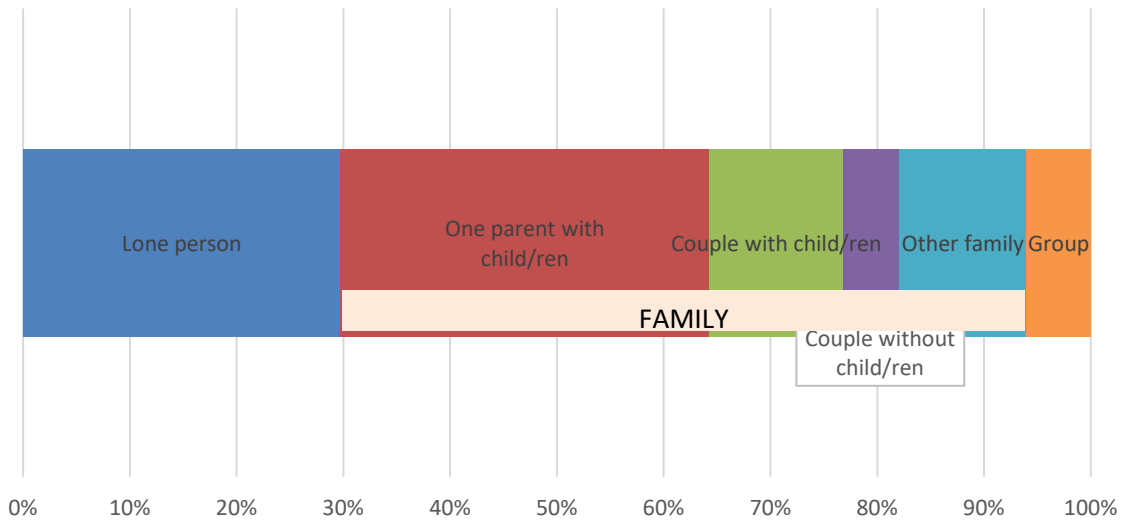
In 2017–18, 64 per cent of people seeking support from SHS were in a family living arrangement (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Figure 1: SHS clients in family living arrangements by gender, 2017–18



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

Figure 2: SHS clients by living arrangement, 2017–18 (%)



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

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 (AIHW, 2019b). 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 (AIHW, 2012).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous homeless Australians are alike in that the single largest reported cause of their homelessness is domestic and family violence, with women and children most likely to seek access to homelessness services (Spinney and Zirakbash 2017). Indigenous Australian women are up to 35 times more likely to experience domestic and family violence than non-Indigenous Australian women (Council of Australian Governments 2010), and this is a major contributing factor to homelessness in Indigenous families.

Indigenous people generally experience higher rates of homelessness compared with non-Indigenous people and it is highest among young people, including children (Spinney et al. 2016). 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 (AIHW, 2019b). The legacy of colonisation is deeply implicated in the contemporary disadvantage of many Indigenous people, which forms the context of both experiencing domestic and family violence and homelessness.

Indigenous Australians are also over-represented as clients of homelessness services. Of those who were classified as homeless, 70 per cent (down from 75% in 2011) were living in 'severely' crowded dwellings, 12 per cent were in supported accommodation for the homeless and 9 per cent were in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018).

Homelessness tends to be experienced differently by families than by other groups. Overall, they have much lower levels of problematic alcohol and drug use and mental health problems, and tend to be homeless for less time (Fitzpatrick and Christian 2006). Some homeless families sleep in cars or tents but most, if they can, stay with friends and family, often in overcrowded conditions, in specialist homelessness services accommodation, or in hotels and motels (Hulse and Sharam 2013).

Studies conducted in the USA show that homeless families with children tend to have weak or unstable social supports. Even those with family networks do not perceive these as resources for support (cited in Aratani 2009).

Moreover, families escaping domestic and family violence can be invisible in official homelessness service statistics as they do not seek assistance from service providers, tending to share overcrowded housing and live temporarily with ex-partners, friends and family (Zufferey et al. 2016).

Compounding this invisibility, there are fewer sources of national data on family homelessness than for other groups. While data on homelessness among all population groups is limited, the ABS estimates homelessness among different demographic groups, by sex, age, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status. However, the homelessness estimate derived from the census does not report on homelessness by household composition. National data on homelessness by household type is available from the SHS collection, which relates to people seeking assistance from services and may therefore be substantially confounded by an increase in service capacity or increased help-seeking.

2.1.2 Structural drivers: national welfare regimes

The homelessness service system exists within broader factors associated with welfare systems, levels of poverty and inequality, and housing markets. Some suggest support for homeless people is framed within the limited confines of neoliberal notions of fiscal austerity, decentralisation of responsibility, and individual opportunism (Alaazi et al. 2015). While some countries with comparable social welfare systems to Australia have instituted housing guarantees, Australia has a system of rationed crisis housing, but no guarantee of the right to safe, accessible and affordable long-term housing.

Homelessness is embedded in national welfare regimes and cannot be seen as separate to their evolution, and Australia's status as a liberal-welfare regime forms its homelessness policy context. (Esping-Andersen 1990; Whiteford 2015). Notwithstanding this, differences between individual jurisdictions, especially in terms of income distribution and housing affordability, have a strong influence on the risk and extent of homelessness. Urban geographies in such societies as Australia and Canada are also marked by 'colonial histories, neoliberal revanchism, a highly individualised mode of life, and a growing housing affordability crisis' (Alaazi et al. 2015: 35).

Different welfare regimes are associated with different levels and manifestations of homelessness. The extensive welfare systems in Scandinavia are associated with much lower rates of homelessness than countries with less robust social safety nets. The nature of homelessness in Scandinavian countries is also distinct, tending to be associated mostly with complex support needs, rather than poverty and housing affordability. A study comparing the scale and profiles of homelessness in the liberal welfare system in the USA and the social-democratic welfare system in Denmark found that the overall level of shelter use relative to population size to be about three times higher in the USA than in Denmark. Over an 11-year period from 1999, the annual prevalence rate in Denmark was around 0.15 per cent of the total population, compared to 0.51 per cent in the USA (Benjaminsen and Andrade 2015).

The social-democratic government of Finland has taken steps to reduce homelessness by taking a Housing First approach in two tailored programs: Paavo I (2008–2011) and Paavo II

(2012–2015). The central goal of the national strategy and the programs Paavo I and II was to specifically end long-term homelessness and adapt the Housing First model in Finland (Pleace et al. 2015: 20-21). Finland reduced congregate shelters and replaced these with approximately 2,500 new scattered individual housing units, preventative services and floating support (Koivisto 2019). Significant reductions in long-term homelessness have occurred, with long-term homelessness decreasing by 35% throughout the programme period of Paavo I and Paavo II (cited in Pleace 2017). However, in terms of household type, families are a very small proportion of those defined as homeless in Finland and over half of the homeless families are immigrant families (Koivisto 2019).²

2.1.3 Structural drivers: poverty and housing affordability

Housing affordability alone does not cause homelessness, but Australian research has shown that housing market factors such as median rents are associated with homelessness for those who face other adverse events that place them at risk (Johnson et al. 2015). Moreover, housing stress places families at risk of poverty and at risk of homelessness. While domestic and family violence was the main reason why 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 (AIHW, 2019b).

People living in poverty and those on low incomes are extremely vulnerable to financial difficulties which can place housing at risk, and these groups:

- 1 have experienced significant increases in housing costs.** People on income support payments experienced more significant increases in housing costs from 2007 to 2015 than others. Median housing costs increased by 27 per cent, but average equivalised housing costs rose by 45 per cent for recipients of the Age Pension (after adjusting for inflation), and by 32 per cent for recipients of the Parenting Payment (Saunders and Bedford 2017).
- 2 are over-represented in SHS client groups.** More than 60 per cent of SHS clients' main source of income in 2017–18 was Newstart allowance (29%), Parenting payment (18%), or Disability support pension (16%) (AIHW, 2019b).

Poverty is a risk factor for homelessness, and housing tenure has a major impact on poverty. In Australia, a growing proportion of the population live in private rental accommodation: almost one-third (32%) of Australian households in 2017–18, an increase from 30 per cent in 2015–16 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019). The most recent ACOSS and UNSW study of poverty in Australia found that most people (52%) below the poverty line are renting, while only 15 per cent of people in poverty are home owners without a mortgage, and the risk of poverty is more than twice as great for households renting privately than for home owners or home purchasers. People in community housing have higher rates of poverty than those in private rental, which is driven by the lower incomes of this group (Davidson et al. 2018).

2.1.4 Family perspectives on homelessness

Causes and impact of homelessness

Previous Australian studies have explored family homelessness from the perspectives and experiences of families themselves (Hulse and Kolar 2009; Hulse and Sharam 2013). These studies found that the impact of homelessness on children and parents was significant and ongoing, and that often service responses could not substantially alleviate this. The 'Right to

² Finland had a homelessness rate similar to that of Australia (0.4% of the population), but the actual number of homeless persons is relatively small compared with the number in Australia because of the smaller overall population.

belong' project involved in-depth interviews with 20 families who had experienced violence and who were living with at least one of their children in accommodation that was conditional and uncertain—transitional housing, with friends and family, unaffordable private rental accommodation, motels/hotels, and crisis accommodation and transitional housing (Hulse and Kolar 2009: 6-16). This created considerable uncertainty for mothers (and fathers) and their children. As Hulse and Kolar (2009: 42) describe:

Many of the women had not had stability in their lives for some time, in relationships, in material circumstances, in housing and in the area in which they lived. For many, their lives were on hold; waiting to know where they would be living, waiting for assistance that they required, waiting to know where their children could attend kinder and school, and waiting for court cases to be resolved. Nonetheless, many women tried to exercise their agency as citizens in such an uncertain environment.

Similarly, the 'Families on the edge' project explored the lived experiences of family homelessness through a longitudinal and qualitative study that involved 152 in-depth interviews, over three waves, with the adults and adolescent children in 57 families, who were mostly single-parent families (40 single mothers and six single fathers), with some couple families and other caring arrangements (Hulse and Sharam 2013: 2). They found that families experienced 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 their children (Hulse and Sharam 2013). The authors (Hulse and Sharam 2013: 4) advocated for an empowerment and strengths-based approach to families as they had experienced numerous human rights violations:

...families experienced substantial breaches of human rights: they did not have adequate housing, an adequate standard of living or safety and freedom from violence; and a broad range of other human rights were diminished, including respect for privacy, family and home; freedom from discrimination; and the capacity to participate in mainstream social institutions.

Other findings from the research are:

- family homelessness invokes fear of loss of children
- 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
- being homeless is expensive: for instance, the costs of crisis accommodation, takeaway food, and moving into and out of accommodation and storage costs
- families are sometimes offered, or referred to, temporary accommodation which is unsafe
- by accepting support, parents have to give up control over their lives, including being able to choose where they live, with whom, and when
- losing pets can be a major stress factor for families who become homeless (Hulse and Sharam 2013).

The authors note that families in poverty often experience a continuum of insecure living conditions, rather than a dichotomy of being 'homeless' or 'not homeless' (Hulse and Sharam 2013). Families who experience homelessness can find themselves in inappropriate and insecure situations whether they seek support from services or not, and the support offered by services sometimes does little to alleviate, in the short to medium term, the family's stress or to make them feel any greater sense of control (Spinney 2010).

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, and families in rural areas found it difficult to obtain appropriate housing because 'everyone knew everyone' (Reupert et al. 2015).

Indigenous families

Alaazi, Masuda et al. (2015, citing King, Smith, et al., 2009; Moreton-Robinson 2003) note that studies of Indigenous people worldwide have continued to emphasise the therapeutic importance of connection to land, community, and family. Movement and moving between places (city, Country) has been noted but posited not as 'cultural nomadism' but rather, as 'a negative consequence of colonialism that has exacerbated the instability of Indigenous people's lives' (Alaazi et al. 2015: 34).

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 (Alaazi et al. 2015).

In an Australian study, Spinney, Habibis et al. (2016) found that 75 per cent of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness were living in crowded housing, with an average of 12 people in each residence. Alaazi, Masuda et al.'s (2015) analysis suggests that interventions targeted at Indigenous people experiencing homelessness can benefit from broader social policies that integrate Indigenous peoples' notions of land, family and community as a fundamental part of the urban built and social environment.

Fathers

The research on fathers who are homeless includes the perspectives of incarcerated fathers, who felt 'dormant', powerless and helpless as fathers when incarcerated. They reported difficulties in achieving a 'good father' role and aspiring to 'start over' with their children (Arditti et al. 2005: 267). In the USA context, Schindler and Coley (2007) spoke to a small group of fathers living in a homeless shelter about how they made meaning of their experiences, which related to contextual constraints such as unemployment, rules and restrictions of shelters and reassessing their parenting and masculine role identities. They suggested that homeless shelters can be an important point for intervention to assist poor and homeless fathers (Schindler and Coley 2007). Australian authors McArthur, Zubrzycki et al. (2006) noted that little is known about fathers' experiences of homelessness and fathering. Sole fathers with children in their care who are homeless are a minority group within the overall population of homeless families.

Mothers

Numerous studies focus on the demographics and characteristics of homeless mothers and children in the shelters system in the USA. Stryon et al. (2000) interviewed formerly homeless mothers about their lives before and after leaving the shelter system in New York. The women's life stories highlighted experiences of poverty, neglect, abuse, difficult interpersonal relationships, and mental health issues, but they spoke positively about the support provided by the shelter system.

When considering young mothers, in the USA, Dworsky and Meehan (2012) interviewed 27 young mothers, who were current or former residents of a shelter, about their mothering experiences. The young mothers recounted two important mothering responsibilities: to address their child/ren's basic needs and teach them about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. While the women spoke about their children with affection, they did not speak favourably about the children's fathers, whom they described as being irresponsible. In contrast, an Australian

study interviewed 24 young mothers about their views on mothering in the context of their relationship with their partners. The researchers found that these young women expected their partners to take on their fathering responsibilities (Keys 2007). These studies highlight young mothers' differing expectations of children's fathers, indicating that diverse experiences of parenting and relationships need to be considered when providing services to young mothers who are homeless (see also Zufferey 2020).

Children

One Australian study on the experience of children (Moore et al. 2008: 39) found that they understood homelessness to be connected to whether or not they feel at 'home' through a sense of connection to their family and community and the absence of fear, instability and insecurity. Thus, family members may not always feel 'homeless' because they do not have a house, even if they are defined as such.

Violence at home is one of the major predictors of whether children and young people will experience homelessness. In one study of homeless mothers with children, more than 80 per cent had previously experienced domestic violence (Rukmana 2008).

Many sole women are separated from their children and therefore are not counted as a 'family' household in data collections. A US study (Barrow and Laborde 2008) found that mothers' accounts emphasised stressful events and conditions as common precursors of mother-child separations: housing loss, domestic violence, substance abuse, institutional confinement, and children's needs. Homelessness of mothers and family dispersion are linked. Barrow and Lawinski (2009: 167) note that 'among the multiple stresses poor families face, separations can serve as necessary, though compromising, coping strategies offering respite for mothers or continuity and stability for children while other demands are addressed'.

The responses to children in families experiencing DFV are recognised as problematic in many instances because fragmented services can cause harm to safety and wellbeing and increase the risks of homelessness. A study by Walsh and Douglas (2009) on early intervention and child protection approaches argues that when children from low socio-economic status backgrounds are identified as at risk of homelessness, the focus of child protection should be on resourcing parents rather than removing children, partly because reunification may never be possible if parents cannot afford suitable accommodation. Once homeless, a woman must demonstrate that appropriate accommodation is available in order to have her children restored to her. However, because she has been separated from her children, she can only be allocated housing for her own needs, not for her children, and this can prevent reunification. The research suggests that in many cases where parents are provided with material support, the need for more coercive state intervention is reduced.

An Australian research project on DFV, child protection, and family support services (Macvean et al. 2015) found that, historically, the challenges to effective collaboration between these service systems include fear of the consequences of removal and problematic child protection practices. A significant problem has been the focus on mothers, blaming them for 'failure to protect' and placing pressure on them, either formally or informally. Other challenges arise from appropriate governance and administrative structures, differences between jurisdictions, and differences between services, including:

- organisational philosophies
- responsibilities
- thresholds for intervention
- risk assessment practices (Macvean et al. 2015: 10).

The consequences of these failures and challenges can increase risks to children, while responses such as provision of housing can facilitate the provision of integrated support that addresses multiple needs (Humphreys and Healey 2017).

2.1.5 Service responses

Integrated responses to increase choice and agency

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.

Previous research has found that there are numerous challenges at individual, service provider, program and community levels in engaging hard-to-reach families, including for Indigenous families, young parents, fathers, and those not using services designed to assist them (Winkworth et al. 2010). Key policy messages include that housing services and Centrelink could further engage with isolated families to offer support and information and to (re)gain the trust of parents. For example, such formal services could partner with informal networks, such as playgroups and parent groups, to contribute to an integrated service system that builds parents' trust and capacity, that increases social connectedness and supports parents in non-judgmental ways (Winkworth et al. 2010).

When exploring homelessness collaborations, Cosgrove and Flynn (2005: 127) argued for increased collaboration among researchers, activists, policy makers, and homeless families in order to assist staff to 'avoid using deficit-oriented, victim-based models of intervention'.

In New York, Barrow and Laborde (2008: 157) examined the situation of homeless women with 'minor children living apart from them' and found that there is a 'tension between perspectives and aspirations of mothers and the agendas and social processes through which institutional systems manage the family life of women marginalized by homelessness and disability'. Women's agency in shelter settings was reduced to 'unpalatable choices among constraining alternatives' such as being forced to comply with mental health treatment, parenting classes, HIV tests, group sessions and random drug screens in exchange for being able to use the telephone, and have visiting privileges and contact with their children (Barrow and Laborde 2008: 165). Similarly, a Canadian study of families living in the emergency family shelter system found that families experienced the services environment as restrictive, disruptive to family routine, and having little privacy, and advocates the timely rehousing of families (Sylvestre et al. 2017).

Marra, Lin et al. (2009) examined social and service supports and parenting outcomes over time for mothers experiencing homelessness and substance abuse disorders and who are also receiving case management services, and found that supportive social networks are beneficial. However, conflict in support systems can increase the use of harsh disciplinary parenting practices, which has implications for the provision of consistent and non-conflictual support from organisations and service providers, including in crisis shelters, housing, legal and child welfare services (Marra, Lin et al. 2009: 355). Tischler and Vostanis (2007) explored mothers' experiences of homelessness in relation to their mental health, support and social care needs and found services and support offered by staff and other residents in shelters useful but limited because of the lack of resources to address the needs of homeless mothers. This study highlighted that services need to work together to meet the multiple health, social, psychological and housing needs of homeless mothers.

Long-term housing to ensure sustainable support

Numerous studies have found that supportive permanent housing and Housing First options that consider access to housing as a human right and social justice issues are pertinent for families to exit homelessness (Healy 2011; Swann-Jackson et al. 2010). Culhane, Park et al.

(2011) also argue for community-based services, permanent housing and assisting families to avoid homelessness.

Numerous studies, including the large Family Options Study in the USA, have highlighted that there is a mismatch between what homeless families want and what is offered by the homelessness service system. One key finding about access and eligibility is that 'homeless system interventions systematically screen out families with housing and employment barriers, despite the presumption that these families are the families who need interventions in order to achieve housing and economic stability' (Shinn et al. 2017: 293). There is little research on eligibility restrictions on Australian families and homelessness services, although many DFV and housing services do not have the capacity to support people with problematic alcohol and other drug use and mental health problems.

When comparing the effectiveness and relative costs of different interventions to assist families experiencing homelessness, including long-term housing subsidies, project-based transitional housing, community-based rapid re-housing and usual care, families involved in the Family Options Study clearly viewed permanent housing subsidies as the most attractive option, which 'raises challenging questions as to whether the current emphasis in Australia on transitional approaches is the most effective way of tackling family homelessness' (Johnson and Watson 2017: 211).

2.2 Implications for policy development

Homelessness among families, as with all population groups, is complicated and driven by multiple intersecting causes. The responsibilities of the homelessness system to address risks of homelessness, and to intervene early to prevent homelessness, compounds this complexity as not all families with the same risk factors for homelessness will experience homelessness. Why some Australian families experience homelessness and others do not, and which benefits from which services in which circumstances, is knowledge in which there is currently a gap, but which could benefit policy and practice.

Interactions between arguably the four most critical elements of a homelessness system design—housing supply and markets, social security, and human services delivery—are often poorly defined and measured, and lessons from international jurisdictions are limited because these elements vary between jurisdictions. There are gaps and breaks in the homelessness system that are challenging to address, in part because of these gaps in knowledge of the roles of different factors and sectors. Nevertheless, there are promising developments in addressing these multiple intersecting drivers at the level of local practice in many areas, and multidimensional policy responses, particularly relating to domestic and family violence.

3 The current homelessness system for Australian families

- Service providers and policy stakeholders describe the experiences and characteristics of families who experience homelessness:
 - Often, families have multiple support needs related to physical or mental health, socio-economic disadvantage, disability, experiences of trauma and adversity, debt, and other social and economic adversity.
 - Women escaping domestic and family violence and their children often have support needs related to safety and contact with the criminal justice system or Family Court.
 - 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.
 - From the perspective of service providers, 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 and areas where a new system is needed 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 treatments.
-

3.1 Effectively supporting families who are homeless and at risk of homelessness: practitioner and stakeholder insights

This section presents the findings from workshops with homelessness service providers and stakeholders which were intended to capture insights and diverse perspectives on the challenges of delivering homelessness services for families, and discover what is working well. Given their expertise and experience in working with vulnerable families, workshop participants focused on individual circumstances and drivers of homelessness, rather than forces such as housing supply (although representatives of local government and housing peak body organisations also talked about housing supply). Nevertheless, many of their insights have implications for policy addressing both structural and individual drivers.

3.1.1 Families' experiences of homelessness

Families in Australia experiencing homelessness, or the 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. People who are listed on tenancy databases (registers that record information about tenants who have had their tenancy agreements ended, and which are available to landlords who pay for access) face barriers to housing, and this is a common experience for women who have experienced violence.

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. Concern was also expressed about older children not accessing refuges, and fears that they may be remaining with a perpetrator of violence or becoming homeless.
- Refugees and migrants are not well supported by all services.
- There are strict eligibility criteria for some services, in particular related to the maximum age of accompanying children, to the age of young parents, and to clients who use alcohol or other drugs or who have mental health problems.
- Larger families are harder to house. Most housing providers and programs place restrictions on overcrowding and on children sharing rooms. In the private rental market, larger homes are more difficult to find and more expensive to rent.
- 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. Families at risk of homelessness are vulnerable to the effects of increases in the costs of household essentials, especially utility bills. This can be compounded by debts incurred via Afterpay and credit cards.
- 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. There are unmet demands for services to support people who use crystal methamphetamine (ice) and who need residential rehabilitation support.
- Many services and information systems are only or mostly available online. This is a barrier to support for some families, who only have a phone, with limited access to data and Wi-Fi.

Indigenous families

Indigenous participants provided information both on locally promising service initiatives, and on broader systemic challenges and needs. Non-Indigenous participants discussed their own perspectives on service gaps and areas where support seems to be working well for Indigenous families, and the advice and insights they received from Indigenous colleagues.

It is important to highlight that the many social disadvantages Indigenous families face have direct implications for the risks of homelessness they face. Health and education disadvantages and barriers to private rental, including widespread discrimination, are well documented, as is the importance of social and kin ties and cultural obligations that lead to overcrowding (Habibis

2011; Memmott et al. 2012). All of these place tenancies at risk as do social housing policies that terminate tenancies for breaches, including overcrowding (Martin et al. 2019).

Access to temporary and emergency accommodation, while generally described as working well for families with children, is sometimes constrained for Indigenous families. Motels turning away Indigenous clients in need of crisis accommodation was raised by some workshop participants. 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.

Support needs that place Indigenous families at risk of homelessness include large utility debts, primarily electricity, but also 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 for driving an unregistered vehicle, and state debt recovery issues (unpaid fines).

In terms of specific service responses that are thought to be effective or promising, access to brokerage funding is useful because it can pay for items such as rental arrears, bills and travel for 'sorry business' to assist clients to travel to a funeral, and to assist people moving back to Country or elsewhere, for example, from a capital city to a regional town.

In terms of principles of service provision, stakeholders said that assertive outreach is important for working with Indigenous people. It is important that services employ Indigenous workers to respond to Indigenous families and act as cultural consultants. There are benefits in collaboration between sectors and agencies, including Indigenous and social housing providers, private rental real estate agents, and civil and administrative tribunals.

Stakeholders reported the challenge of differentiating cultural practices from practices that place children at risk of harm, especially in contexts of socio-economic disadvantage. Service providers 'try to be culturally sensitive' but sometimes 'bump up' against Western systems such as Centrelink—for example, the situation of 'aunty' caring for children, but not having Centrelink funds and perhaps not able to afford to house and feed the children. Systemic issues, especially the mismatch between Western systems and what Indigenous people want, were identified: service providers need to recognise the importance of learning about and understanding Indigenous families and family practices, and that what non-Indigenous people see as 'extended' family is 'close' family to Indigenous people. Services need to acknowledge links between family kinship systems.

Stakeholders described the accounts they hear from Indigenous colleagues about the failure of schools and other systems to support culture. This is compounded by the ongoing effects of dispossession and colonialism on Indigenous people's connection to culture and community. Many Indigenous people have been denied knowledge of their own history and do not understand or connect to culture in meaningful ways.

3.1.2 Challenges and gaps

The homelessness system was described by participants as being made up of several service systems, and of both housing and non-housing support. Discussions emphasised the centrality of SHS; however, participants also said that homelessness should be a whole-of-government issue including the NDIS, housing and health systems. Housing support provided by the broader homelessness system includes SHS, but is not restricted to it, as it also includes accommodation not provided by SHS, including emergency and crisis accommodation and transitional housing, community and social housing, and subsidies to support entry to or sustaining tenancies in the private rental market.

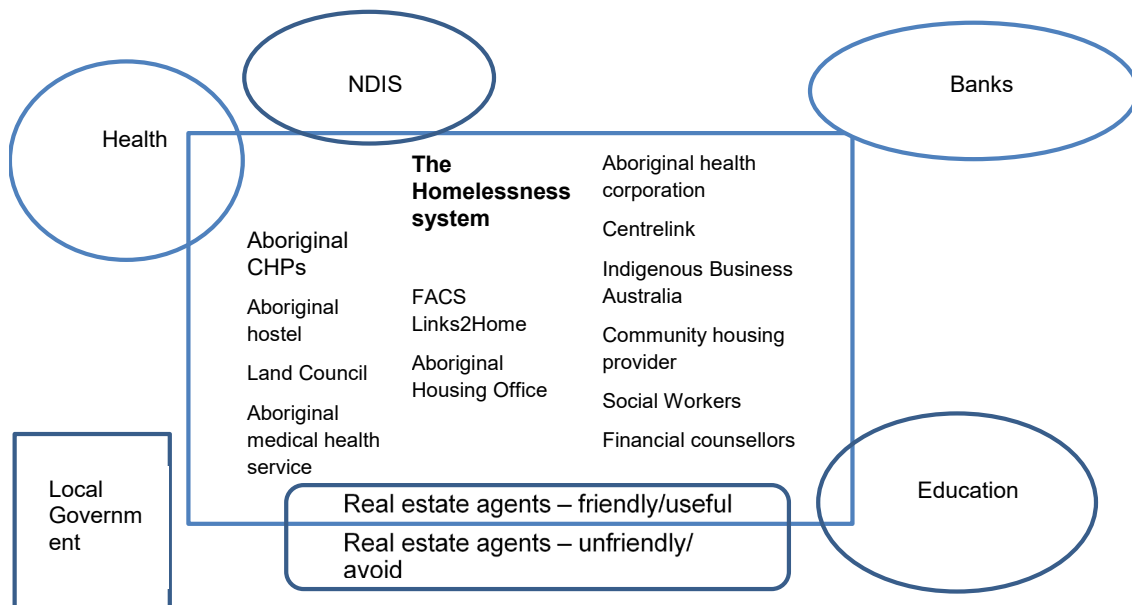
Non-housing support is provided primarily by the NGO sector in all jurisdictions, and this indicates the need for a well-resourced, skilled sector that can provide both housing and other types of support. While services are very important in meeting the needs of families, participants were also clear in their views that the homelessness system requires capital investment for housing, rather than just recurrent funding for services.

System integration

Systemic issues around service gaps were also discussed, including integration between housing and health, child protection, mental health, alcohol and other drug services, and criminal justice services. Participants reported that in recent years, the NDIS has complicated access to support for many vulnerable people and there are still shortfalls in mental health service provision.

To illustrate this perspective from service providers, Figure 3 below is based on a mapping exercise from one of the workshops in regional NSW. It shows what was thought to be inside the 'homelessness system' at the local level, and elements on the boundaries, or outside the system, for example the NDIS, and health. Local government was completely outside, as were banks. The latter were specified as examples of businesses not exercising corporate social responsibility by, for example, not contributing to home ownership schemes for low-income households.

Figure 3: The homelessness system in one regional NSW location: service provider views



Source: Stakeholder workshop, NSW

Access to services

The impact of service systems that are not generally conceptualised as part of the homelessness system, for example government departments of health and justice, have direct effects on housing and homelessness services. Increases in the costs of living, for example, utility bills, also have an impact on clients and services. Services reported scrambling brokerage funding to assist clients with bills. These findings align with the most recent reports on poverty in Australia and the gaps between income received by the lowest-income Australian families and the income necessary to sustain a minimally healthy standard of living (Davidson et al. 2018; Saunders and Bedford 2017).

Other push factors outside the homelessness system that add to the burden on services are spouse visa rules³. Women on temporary visas, such as partners or spouse visas, often have no income because they have no access to employment or social security payments, and are generally ineligible for services related to housing, healthcare, childcare and education. While domestic and family violence is a valid reason to apply for a different visa, applying for permanent residency can be a lengthy process. Another factor that affects separated parents' ability to access housing is Family Court shared parenting locational orders that restrict the parent to residing in a certain location. This can affect a parent's housing options and can add to housing stress if they must live in a higher cost housing area (Flanagan et al. 2019).

Access to permanent housing

The availability of permanent housing, with access to support as needed, was identified by service provider and peak organisation participants as a priority. Addressing homelessness and the risk of homelessness is only possible if service providers can offer affordable and safe housing.

The lack of long-term and affordable housing and support options in many locations can make it difficult to help a family in crisis beyond the provision of crisis and temporary accommodation. There is also a lack of a continuum of care, because the system is set up so support periods are limited and it is not possible to work with people over a longer period. Exits from emergency and transitional housing, due to the lack of availability of long-term affordable housing options, are major challenges in many regional and metropolitan areas. Fragmentation between services, and weak connections between practitioners providing different types of services, can occur because relationships and networks cannot be prioritised when demand for support is so high.

While the homelessness system is focused on addressing needs, participants emphasised the relative lack of resources allocated to addressing the causes of homelessness. A lack of housing supply and affordability means competition for scarce resources. Waiting lists for social housing are long—nationally, as at 30 June 2018, there were 140,600 applicants on a wait list for public housing, and half of the households not in greatest need spent more than two years on the waiting list before public housing allocation (AIHW, 2019a).

The broader problem of affordable housing supply can be traced through recognised problems with lack of exit points from crisis and temporary accommodation. This increases the burden on SHSs in terms of longevity of stay, and thus affects throughput and vacancies.

Families, especially single women who have children over eight years of age and who receive the Newstart Allowance (\$601.10 per fortnight as at July 2019), face difficulties in higher-cost areas because of the price of private rental housing. While most are eligible for Commonwealth Rent Assistance, this is capped to a maximum of \$161.14 per fortnight for a single person with one or two children. Therefore, such a household's weekly disposable income would be around \$381.12 per week⁴. Median rent in Australia in 2016 (all dwellings) was \$335 per week (ABS 2019). Even if we were to assume that a parent rented a two-bedroom dwelling, suitable for a parent and child, the average of all median weekly rents for two-bedroom dwellings in NSW in the March quarter of 2019 was \$398 (NSW Department of Family and Community Services 2019). While there are regional variations and rents may be cheaper in some states, to be effective and allow single parent households to avoid housing stress, deeper subsidies are required.

³ See Department of Home Affairs rules relating to visa subclasses (i) 820 (ii) 801 (iii) 309 and (iv) 100.

⁴ <https://www.dss.gov.au/about-the-department/benefits-payments>

In regional areas, rent is typically less expensive, but affordable private rental properties are often unavailable due to competition or are offered by unscrupulous landlords in poor states of repair and in stigmatised areas. In all areas, subsidised private rental properties are not suitable for some clients. For example, those not in paid employment and those with complex needs are unlikely to be able to afford rent at the end of the subsidy period (for example NSW's scheme Rent Choice is time-limited).

Social housing was identified by participants as an important option, especially for clients with complex support needs who require safe, secure and, most importantly, affordable housing. However, policy stakeholders reported that investment in social housing is insufficient to meet demand. In regional areas, social housing estates may be unsafe, or perceived as unsafe, because of their location, lack of access to services and transport as well as prevalence of community violence.

Temporary accommodation, which is designed to meet short-term immediate needs, and transitional housing, which is typically provided for periods of 3–18 months, may have support attached, including access to brokerage funding, referrals to other services and case coordination. However, in some cases this support is not available with temporary or transitional accommodation.

3.1.3 Promising practice and policies

Information sharing and collaboration

At the local level, service agencies are working well. Despite systemic challenges, local networks and practices of interagency collaboration are reported by participants to be working in an integrated way and meeting families' needs. Agencies reported that they worked together to solve problems, drawing on whatever resources were available in the different services. Close relationships between sectors were evident. Co-location is an effective existing strategy for collaboration. It supports referrals and allows staff to take clients from one agency to the next. However, there was also geographical variation in how agencies worked, or did not work, together. Some areas had effective service networks and government departments worked closely together with NGOs, while in other areas they did not.

Importantly, however, there are barriers to information-sharing. In some cases, the provision of support is dependent on clients contacting agencies to which they have been referred, and this does not always happen. The sharing of client information between agencies, which could address this, requires consent, and this in turn can require time and resources that agencies struggle to find.

Flexible service responses

In working together, services also ensure that families with children are prioritised. Entry into the homelessness service system was described as promising for families who have positive experiences of 'no wrong door'; warm referrals; initial intake, assessment and referral; and individualised care. Homelessness services will extend beyond what would be a standard amount of funds if necessary to ensure that a family with dependent children have a place to sleep that night. Families who are assessed on first presenting to services as having the highest and most complex support needs are accorded priority status. However, some participants described limitations and restrictions on services providing immediate crisis response, especially for people who have experienced family violence. There are limited crisis accommodation resources in some areas, especially those that can offer after-hours assistance. Sometimes, people need to travel some distance from their home town for a service, where there is no capacity at the local level.

In each jurisdiction, several examples of individual initiatives and programs were nominated as promising for different groups of people. For example, services have increased their focus on risk factors such as financial management and offer financial literacy and financial counselling as part of their services. This allows families to understand the real cost of credit. This is important because many clients have large utility bills: The real cost of electricity has increased and this is placing pressure on households who have to choose between paying bills and paying rent, which can endanger tenancies.

Examples of good practice included:

- Assertive outreach: especially for rough sleepers or homeless families with children, assertive outreach is important in reaching people and assisting them where they are, instead of staff waiting for people to come to them in their office.
- Providing consistency and choice: services need to be sufficiently mobile and flexible so that provision is not determined by geography and people can keep their case worker.
- Proactive actions by housing providers: to sustain tenancies, housing providers need to, for example, identify rental arrears early and also identify underlying causes.
- Partnerships between sectors: some service providers are actively reaching out to real estate agencies to improve their understanding of domestic and family violence and the availability of private rental assistance and other support.
- Financial literacy: training in this area can help families understand how to manage rent and bills and to understand the real cost of credit and household goods hire.

The advantages of flexible delivery were repeatedly pointed out in the workshops and solutions were described as effective if they were local and responsive, rather than 'one size fits all'.

The role of peak bodies and large non-government organisations with research and policy advocacy responsibilities was described as, in part, identifying the priorities of key policy practitioners and actors, and responding to those priorities. For example, it is useful to present government ministers with 'good news' stories that describe the experience of individuals in ways that seem to be authentic to their lives, and present the benefits of interventions in terms of economic impact.

3.1.4 Implications for policy development

There are existing programs and practices that are working well, but there are also significant shortfalls in the homelessness system. Moreover, the usual definition of the homelessness system as constituted primarily by SHS is too narrow for effective policy development, especially in the domains of prevention and early intervention.

Outcomes are likely to be improved by enhancements to the provision of support addressing personal and structural drivers of homelessness, and this incorporates housing supply and broad social determinants of homelessness risk, including poverty.

Promising practices and programs that represent potential foundations for improved systems include:

- Promising interventions include the 'stay at home' initiative for women leaving DFV and their children, but to be effective this requires integrated support, including interventions to address women's safety and economic security, perpetrator accountability and homelessness prevention.
- Local practices of collaboration and integration are generally thought to be working well in responding to families' needs, especially those who are in crisis and need emergency support and accommodation.

- Where available and adequately resourced, Indigenous-specific and flexible services can provide effective support. The needs of Indigenous families are significant and multifactorial, which is related to the ongoing processes of colonisation and the incapacity of systems to accommodate Indigenous family and social obligations.

Critical areas in need of improvement include:

- long-term and affordable options for families, including those transitioning from SHS
- integration of housing and non-housing support: while the provision of housing without social, economic and financial support is not effective for some families, the provision of social and financial support is only effective if housing is not accessible and affordable
- incorporation of systems often thought as separate from the homelessness system, including immigration, health, and justice, into homelessness responses. This is especially critical for families who are at risk of homelessness as an early intervention and prevention response.

4 Policy development options

There has been recognition for some time that homelessness is driven by structural and individual factors, and that homeless systems are fragmented and jurisdictional rather than holistic and national. However, while strong examples of practices at the local level in responding to families' needs are evident, systemic gaps remain, both in long-term affordable housing and in evidence-informed interventions that target structural and individual drivers. The challenges of family homelessness highlight the need for more rigorous conceptualisation and measurement, improved data collection, and sustained support in early intervention, crisis, transitional and long-term housing.

Challenges include:

- The category of 'families' brings together the very different experiences and needs of:
 - parents (mostly mothers) and their children escaping domestic and family violence
 - single or dual-headed families where violence is not present.
- The category of 'homelessness' brings together diverse experiences and service use (e.g. overcrowding, couch-surfing and SHS use), and the 'risk of homelessness' is also a single descriptor for a broad array of experiences and characteristics. The use of these single categories to describe such diversity is indicative of a system response that cannot provide sustained and targeted responses to address this broad range of needs.
- Outcome measures for success have not been developed in specialist homelessness services, and this is especially true of early intervention and prevention measures. These outcome measures should reflect, given the multifactorial nature of homelessness, both personal risk factors (for example, workforce status, access to services and mental health) and housing outcomes (for example, housing stress, quality and duration of housing).
- Broad agreement on the structural and individual drivers of homelessness has not been translated into resources that address these drivers.
- Broad agreement that homelessness is caused by structural and individual drivers has not translated into an understanding of which of these drivers predict homelessness and in what circumstances.

4.1 Improving service responses

4.1.1 Access to permanent housing

There is no right to housing in Australia. A 'housing first' response, that is, access to permanent housing, with additional support if needed, mitigates the detrimental effects of homelessness and the shelter environment on the outcomes of families and children. There is clear evidence that when long-term housing assistance is offered to families experiencing homelessness, families can obtain and sustain stable housing (Culhane et al. 2011; Johnson and Watson 2017). Changes to housing, income support and homelessness policies are needed to holistically respond to and reduce family homelessness.

4.1.2 Early intervention

Prevention and early intervention responses can, if effective, help at-risk people before they become homeless. In 2017–18, more than half the people (57%) seeking SHS assistance for the first time were housed, but at risk of homelessness (AIHW, 2019c). There are significant opportunities for early intervention in the SHS and mainstream services to prevent homelessness for families and children.

Broader policy and program initiatives can address prevention and early intervention through structural drivers. These initiatives would incorporate a national homelessness strategy, boosting affordable housing supply, ongoing funding for Rapid Rehousing programs, and supporting women and their children escaping domestic and family violence to establish secure housing (Homelessness Australia 2017). At the population level, primary prevention of homelessness has been formulated as ‘fundamentally about addressing poverty and the adequate supply and access to affordable housing’ requiring both addressing the supply of affordable housing that people in poverty can attain, and addressing poverty (Parsell and Marston 2012: 37). Parsell and Marston (2012: 38) indicate the importance of feedback loops and interactions between interventions in noting that ‘both types of structural changes are necessary to realise sustainable homelessness primary prevention, but efforts to eradicate poverty will likely enhance the sustainability of homelessness prevention and likewise contribute toward related wellbeing objectives’.

4.1.3 Streamline access to services

Research indicates that flexible service access points, combined with a system-wide ‘no wrong door’ approach to the service delivery system, including streamlined assessment processes, can improve service access and intervention (Homelessness Australia 2017). This requires adequate funding for SHS, crisis and transitional housing programs, along with other housing and ‘safe at home’ options.

4.1.4 System integration

The effectiveness of system integration, in producing positive client outcomes needs further examination, including integration of homelessness, DFV, 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 (Brackertz et al. 2016: iv). Flanagan, Blunden et al. (2019) note that there are efforts towards system integration at the policy, program and practice levels, but gaps remain, including in the knowledge and skills of practitioners and resource constraints, which lead to unmet demand and waiting lists, and perverse outcomes from the policy domains of income support, immigration, child protection and the Family Court.

4.1.5 Measuring outcomes

Homelessness Australia (2017) suggest that a homelessness outcomes framework be developed, in partnership with the states and territories, which is aligned to an affordable housing outcomes framework. Consulting with service providers and service users in the family homelessness system could contribute to developing and evaluating outcomes that better suit their service needs.

4.1.6 Service user-led research and evaluations

Co-research and service user-led research can provide new insights into the homelessness service system. A Canadian consumer-led study interviewed people who experienced homelessness and mental health problems in a Housing First facility and found that experiences of past trauma, substance use, legal issues, disability, food and money insecurity were recurrent themes in service user perspectives (Coltman et al. 2015). However, the themes of self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion were also present (Coltman et al. 2015: 49). Led by researchers from the Lived Experience Caucus, the study provides an example of service user-led methods and how unequal power relations in the research process, in policy development and in practice can be reconfigured. Friedman (2000) also provided training for homeless mothers in the research process, which she states supports the notion of ‘power with’ women living in poverty who experience homelessness to challenge

society's unequal economic arrangements. Such approaches could be adopted in Australian research.

4.2 Improving the conceptual and empirical foundations of policy

System redesign requires strong theoretical and empirical accounts of the causes of homelessness and the different ways that homelessness is characterised and lived by families. This section proposes insights from international research as the basis for policy interventions to assess and address the impact of different drivers of homelessness on different family types.

The need for a theorised account of homelessness was noted more than 20 years ago by Neale and this remains salient for understanding family homelessness, which is driven by factors relating to both family characteristics and structural forces:

Homelessness cannot be explained simplistically or atheoretically as either a housing or a welfare problem, caused either by structural or by individual factors, with homeless people deemed either deserving or undeserving. Accordingly, any helpful response in the form of welfare policy or provision cannot be simplistic or atheoretical either (Neale 1997: 58).

As noted by Neale, debates around the causes of homelessness tend to be organised around two primary categories of structural and individual factors or drivers. In the case of family homelessness, the reliance on SHS responses implicitly prioritises individual factors. Structural drivers may include housing affordability, availability and suitability, labour markets and the social security nets provided by different welfare regimes. Previous Australian research has found that housing markets are associated with homelessness (Johnson et al. 2015). In contrast, demographic and individual risk factors that can contribute to family homelessness include domestic and family violence, family characteristics (such as female-headed households), poverty, evictions, financial resources, community and family supports, mental health problems or a parent exiting prison (Pleace and Quilgars 2003).

However, while Australian policy responses have not extensively incorporated the insights of research on structural and individual factors, more recent scholarship has shifted this typology in new directions, with implications for measuring and testing interventions. To summarise this scholarship, UK authors have conceptualised the 'new orthodoxy' homelessness as an interaction of structural factors and individual characteristics. According to this orthodoxy, the conditions for homelessness are created by structural factors, and individuals with personal vulnerabilities are then more likely to experience homelessness than others (Fitzpatrick 2005; Pleace 2000). As an example of this, Canadian researchers have argued that contributions to an individual's and family's vulnerability to homelessness is cumulative, associated with the lack of adequate housing, income, suitable services and supports, and discrimination (Gaetz et al. 2013; Paradis et al. 2014). They argue that homelessness occurs in the contexts of:

- structural economic and societal barriers for families living in poverty who have been discriminated against, such as limited opportunities to access affordable, safe and stable housing, which can impede access to employment, housing, justice and support services
- systems failures that include the transitions between homelessness and mainstream service systems, such as from institutional care, in for example child welfare, corrections, mental health, addiction and acute health settings, as well as a lack of support for immigrants and refugees
- individual and relational aspects such as trauma, family violence, limited supports and extreme poverty (Gaetz et al. 2013; Paradis et al. 2014).

Fitzpatrick (2005), however, is among those who have criticised the distinction between individual and structural drivers as theoretically and empirically inadequate (see also valentine 2015). Emphasising that *predicting* homelessness in individuals or communities is challenging because of the importance of feedback loops and complex causation, Fitzpatrick nonetheless hypothesises four causal mechanisms:

- 1 economic structures: social class interacts with other stratification processes and welfare policies to generate poverty and to determine poor individuals “and households” [sic] (non-) access to material resources such as housing, income, employment and household goods
- 2 housing structures: inadequate housing supply and a deterioration in affordability can squeeze out those on lower incomes; tenure and allocation policies, coupled with the collective impacts of private choices, can lead to residential segregation and spatial concentration of the least advantaged groups
- 3 patriarchal and interpersonal structures: these can lead to the emergence of, for example, domestic violence, child neglect or abuse, weak social support, relationship breakdown
- 4 individual attributes: personal resilience can be undermined by mental health problems, substance misuse, lack of self-esteem and/or confidence (Fitzpatrick 2005: p13).

While this is a theorised system of multiple nested causal factors, and not empirically tested causes of homelessness among families in Australia, it does represent a conceptual advance on dichotomous arguments that posit homelessness as a result of either structural or individual factors. It is also empirically rich in that it incorporates the significance of local housing markets and support systems in addition to national policy frameworks and economic environments. It represents the range of salient structures and attributes that should be included in systems of service design and delivery, but currently are not included. The implications for policy relate to the potential for improved assessments of need and risk at community and family level, which should then inform better targeted and more effective service responses.

4.3 Typologies of family homelessness

The research base on reshaping Australia’s homelessness system for families is informed in large part by international research. There have been several studies on elements of existing systems, including responses to DFV, housing options available to women and children (Flanagan et al. 2019) and the roles of early intervention, crisis, and long-term support. However, the overall Australian system for families has not been the subject of as much scrutiny, and it is increasingly evident that homelessness experiences and risk factors vary between jurisdictions and that it is not possible to generalise from international research:

- In some jurisdictions, such as Denmark, homelessness among families is rare and this is due to the intensity of efforts to reduce homelessness, broad social safety nets and population size.
- In other jurisdictions, notably the United States, which is the origin of most qualitative and quantitative research, homelessness is a risk faced by a much broader group of families.

More therefore needs to be known about the nature of Australian families’ risk factors for homelessness and experiences of homelessness, service needs, and effectiveness of support received. Bassuk and Geller (2006) identified several gaps in research on homelessness among families in the US, which remain salient in the Australian context:

- gaps in evidence from experimental studies that analyse the effects of housing subsidies and services, and their interactions with each other

- gaps in evidence from evaluation and intervention studies that describe the type and intensity of support provided, moving beyond general descriptors such as ‘case management’ or ‘family support’
- gaps in knowledge of salient differences between families: ‘researchers have largely viewed the homeless family population as homogeneous. Additional work on typologies that stratify the characteristics and service needs of homeless families might help better align the allocation of housing subsidies and services with different levels of needs. For example, we know that interpersonal violence and victimisation impede a mother’s capacity to become self-supporting, form sustaining relationships, access care, and parent without a range of supports’ (Bassuk and Geller 2006: 796).

In 2005, Heintjes synthesised evidence from a range of AHURI reports to outline broad principles for effective prevention and intervention. She found that people experiencing homelessness have diverse needs, including housing, counselling, health-care, skills, training, employment and education (Heintjes 2005). Homelessness is an accumulation of other disadvantages, including poverty, alcohol and other drug use, overcrowding, mental illness and domestic violence. Heintjes (2005: 4) notes that housing is not enough in itself to end homelessness. Equally, and conversely, Parsell and Marston (2012) argue that disadvantages such as alcohol and other drug use and mental illness do not of themselves cause homelessness, and that the availability of housing is a social determinant of homelessness outcomes.

These analyses indicate that changes to the homelessness system will be effective only if they incorporate interventions addressing the broad economic and social drivers of homelessness. While a critical part of the system, SHS is nevertheless only *reactive* to the effects of these drivers, which include income support, labour markets and rising housing costs. Both structural and personal factors affect homelessness, but it is also clear that the effects of adverse circumstances, including domestic and family violence and mental illness, present lower risks of homelessness to those with material resources. Homelessness is most likely to happen to already disadvantaged people, and risk factors are cumulative (Heintjes 2005).

More needs to be known about the Australian experiences of homelessness in families and the interactions of structural and personal drivers for people at risk. For example, domestic and family violence interventions to address homelessness are constrained by housing affordability—when the stock of low-cost homes dwindles, it is harder for women with children to find adequate housing. Where social housing is not present in sufficient quantities, and private rental subsidies are ineffective in high-cost, high-demand rental markets (Flanagan et al. 2019), poorer housing outcomes, or increased homelessness is the result.

Studies of typologies of family homelessness could advance Australian knowledge about the characteristics of families and their support needs. In the USA, for example, Culhane, Metraux et al. (2007) tested a typology of family homelessness based on patterns of public shelter use: temporary, episodic and long stay. In the USA, most homeless families stay in public shelters for brief periods, exit, and do not return, with approximately 20 per cent staying for long periods. Stay patterns were only partially explained by household characteristics, such as unemployment, disability, behavioural and medical treatment histories and having children in care. They found that families with long stays in shelters are no more likely than families with short stays to have these issues. Families with repeat/episodic stays have a higher likelihood of experiencing intensive treatment, disability, unemployment and having children in foster care. Larger families and families with an older head of household take longer to exit the shelter system, presumably because of access to housing, such as larger families needing larger rental units, which are scarce. Pregnant women and women leaving abusive situations tend to exit the shelter more quickly, but they are also more likely to return. Predictors of return to shelter include exiting without a housing subsidy and lower educational attainment or work history.

Differences in shelter usage, exiting quickly and returning are accounted for by a combination of:

- family composition (larger families, older heads of households, being black)
- predicament (domestic violence, pregnancy/newborn status)
- resources at exit (housing subsidy) (Culhane et al. 2007: 4).

However, the ability to identify distinct subpopulations of homeless families based on their patterns of exit and re-entry is complicated by policy and the 'social welfare functions of the public shelter system itself' (Culhane et al. 2007: 26). An alternative conceptual framework for providing emergency assistance to homeless families could provide more flexible, community-based alternatives to shelter, including relocation grants and various types of rental assistance, coupled with support services (Culhane et al. 2007: 26).

4.4 Evaluating effectiveness

Assessing the effectiveness of homelessness systems is challenging because family wellbeing and participation outcomes such as employment, which act as protective factors against homelessness, are determined by factors that are beyond the control of homelessness services, and prevention and early intervention outcomes are often difficult to identify. Nevertheless, outcome measures are necessary to assess whether a homelessness system is effective, and outcome measures in turn need to be supported by data collection systems to capture and monitor progress.

There are increasing efforts to identify meaningful and feasible outcome indicators for different components of the homelessness system, and to measure outcomes for clients. The national peak body, Shelter, argued in a 2019 submission to Treasury that national frameworks, including the current NHHA, have been 'plagued' by the absence of data and measurable outcomes, especially in terms of housing supply (National Shelter 2019: 9).

A 2016 study of the specialist housing system (SHS) found that, generally, effectiveness measures include:

- examining cost effectiveness
- addressing unmet need
- targeting priority groups
- prioritising early intervention and prevention
- system integration (for which limited data exists)
- a reduction in the number and rate of homeless people (Brackertz et al. 2016: 6).

Client outcomes include:

- access to housing
- education
- employment
- social inclusion (for which limited data exists)
- reductions in multiple support periods (Brackertz et al. 2016: 6).

The report found that SHS contributes to improving client housing, education, training and employment status, but there is insufficient data about social inclusion to assess its impact on that domain (Brackertz et al. 2016). When exploring system capacity and unmet need, the demand for homeless services is much higher than the capacity of the system to respond effectively, with little change over time in the proportion of priority group clients, including Indigenous people and women leaving domestic and family violence and seeking support (AIHW 2019b; Brackertz et al. 2016: iv). There was also an increase in the number and rate of homeless people—increasing by 4.6 per cent between the 2011 and 2016 censuses, with total numbers increasing from 102,439 to 116,427 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018).

Regarding system cost effectiveness, people experiencing homelessness are high users of government services, including child welfare, health and justice systems. In Australia, Brackertz, Fotheringham et al. (2016: iii) argue that ‘successful interventions into homelessness have the potential to decrease welfare payments, increase taxation receipts, decrease expenditure associated with placing children in care and expenses related to evictions’. However, in another context, research in the USA found that compared with adults who are homeless, homelessness among families has not been found to be associated with a significant increase in hospital, health service use and child welfare placements, except for foster care use by families who are episodically homeless (Culhane, Park et al. 2011: 823). For families, shelter usage patterns (brief, episodic, long-term) tends to replace the use of mainstream services, but this does not affect mainstream service usage on exit. The most substantive recent Australian study on the costs of homelessness was based largely on the experiences of single men and single women, and argues for a dedicated family homelessness study (Zaretsky et al. 2013).

4.5 Final remarks

It has long been recognised that the homelessness service system is faced with significant challenges. These are driven in part by the complexity of federalism and shared responsibilities between Commonwealth and state and territory governments, in part because of the range of individual circumstances and characteristics that place individuals and families at risk, and in part because homelessness is a function of employment and housing markets, personal experiences, and available services. Yet, the primary response to homelessness and the risk of homelessness to families remains with SHS, which can provide effective support in many cases to address some of these factors, but often cannot effectively respond to problems in housing supply, poverty and gaps in other services. Pathways from SHS to long-term, secure and affordable housing options are necessary to address families’ needs. These pathways are not available to many families in the current homelessness system.

Additional challenges and potential benefits lie in better responses to domestic and family violence, and in early intervention and prevention. DFV services are funded as homelessness services for historical and political reasons, but there is a recognised need for these services to be funded as a whole-of-government, integrated response. Early intervention and prevention are policy priorities but there are constraints on the capacity to provide support, and to identify and replicate success.

The relationship between homelessness services and other services is often effective in terms of local practice, but less clear in systemic and policy terms. This presents ongoing challenges for defining success in meeting the needs of families and in identifying elements of the homelessness system that would benefit from significant reform.

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