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Executive Summary

Supporting families effectively through the homelessness services system

From the AHURI Inquiry

An effective homelessness services system

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Title	Supporting families effectively through the homelessness services system— Executive Summary				
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ISBN	978-1-925334-95-1				
Key words	Housing assistance and social policy, homelessness, private rental market.				
Series	AHURI Final Report	Number	330	ISSN	1834-7223
Publisher	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited Melbourne, Australia				
DOI	10.18408/ahuri-7119201				
Format	PDF, online only				
URL	http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/330 (full report)				

Recommended citation

valentine, k., Blunden, H., Zufferey, C., Spinney, A. and Zirakbash, F. (2020) *Supporting families effectively through the homelessness services system*, AHURI Final Report 330, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/330>, doi: 10.18408/ahuri-7119201.

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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.
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- 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.
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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.

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Acknowledgements

This material was produced with funding from the Australian Government and state and territory governments. AHURI Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial and other support it has received from these governments, without which this work would not have been possible.

AHURI Limited also gratefully acknowledges the contributions, both financial and in-kind, of its university research partners who have helped make the completion of this material possible.

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