



# Fighting for my family

A longitudinal study of families  
experiencing homelessness

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JULY 2013

**Hanover**   
HOUSING - SUPPORT - RESEARCH





## The research team

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## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the women, men and adolescent children who participated in the 152 interviews on which this report is based and without whom this research would not have been possible.

We wish to acknowledge Dr Shelley Mallet (Hanover) for her support (late 2010 onwards) and Dr Andrew Hollows (Hanover) for his (to early 2010), as well as

Associate Professor David Mackenzie (Swinburne) for his expert advice throughout.

This research was supported under Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme (Project LP0883848) with a significant financial contribution and in-kind support by Hanover Welfare Services.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council, Hanover Welfare Services or Swinburne University of Technology.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Jean McCaughey wrote the first Australian study to recognise and investigate homelessness amongst families with children in 1992.<sup>1</sup>

Much of what we have learnt about homelessness experienced by families since 1992 is about the prevalence and duration of homelessness; identification of families vulnerable to, or at risk of, homelessness; and the efficacy of service interventions.

This study sought to broaden and deepen understanding of homelessness amongst families through investigating their experiences as citizens (rather than clients of services) over an 18-month period. It investigated how they cared for their children and went about their lives during and after periods of homelessness, the interactions they had with a range of people and organisations, and their perspectives and reflections on their experiences.

This report is the result of collaboration between researchers at Swinburne University of Technology (Swinburne) and Hanover Welfare Services (Hanover). The research method was longitudinal and qualitative. It involved 152 in-depth interviews, over three waves, with the adults and some adolescent children in 57 families. Most were single-parent families (40 single mothers and six single fathers), with the others being couple families and other caring arrangements.

The main findings of the research are:

## 1. Homelessness and poverty

- There is a continuum of insecure and difficult living conditions experienced by some families rather than a dichotomy between being 'homeless' or 'not homeless'.
- The housing conditions of most of the families improved over the three waves, although it often took 18 months to resolve homelessness and many were not yet 'settled' at the end of the research
- Resolving homelessness did not in itself end poverty; poverty is chronic and cumulative, not episodic.

## 2. Families and caring

- Homelessness is about loss: a progressive stripping back of the elements of family and home, which the families regarded as effectively one and the same.
- Family homelessness invokes fear of loss of children; those who voluntarily separated from their children chose the terms of their loss rather than permitting circumstances to disempower them totally.
- Caring for children normally occurs in the private sphere, but a consequence of homelessness is that the boundary between the private and public spheres is permeable, with more scrutiny, and sometimes surveillance, of caring practices by others.
- Parents/carers had clear ideas about what was required to care for their children and resisted any erosion of their agency and being marginalised. They found that support agencies sometimes perceived them as 'being difficult' or 'having an attitude' because of this.
- The families experienced, and were exposed to, violence from a range of people (other than intimate partners) during their homelessness, which meant that they were not safe.
- Some of the families were offered, or referred to, accommodation which was unsafe. This often re-traumatised family members; cumulative experience of abuse and violence, or fear of these, layered new onto existing trauma.
- While much trauma remains to be managed, many of the parents, and some of their teenagers, talked in Wave 3 of the personal growth they experienced through the period of their homelessness.

<sup>1</sup> McCaughey, J. (1992) Where Now? Homeless Families in the 1990s, prepared for Hanover Welfare Services, Policy Background Paper no. 8, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

### 3. Social identity, participation and belonging

- The participants in the research had a very strong social identity as families; they did not understand how families with children were not seen as a priority when they observed others without children getting assistance.
- Homelessness was not just a material crisis about lack of housing and money, as the parents/carers had thought, and their experience shook their sense of place in community and of belonging.
- The families resisted being marginalised as ‘homeless’ and saw themselves as families who are part of the mainstream.

### 4. Major implications for policy and practice

Considerable advances have been made in recent years in recognising, and developing a policy framework for addressing, family homelessness in Australia and in models of service delivery. Within this context, the research findings suggest some important future directions for policy and practice:

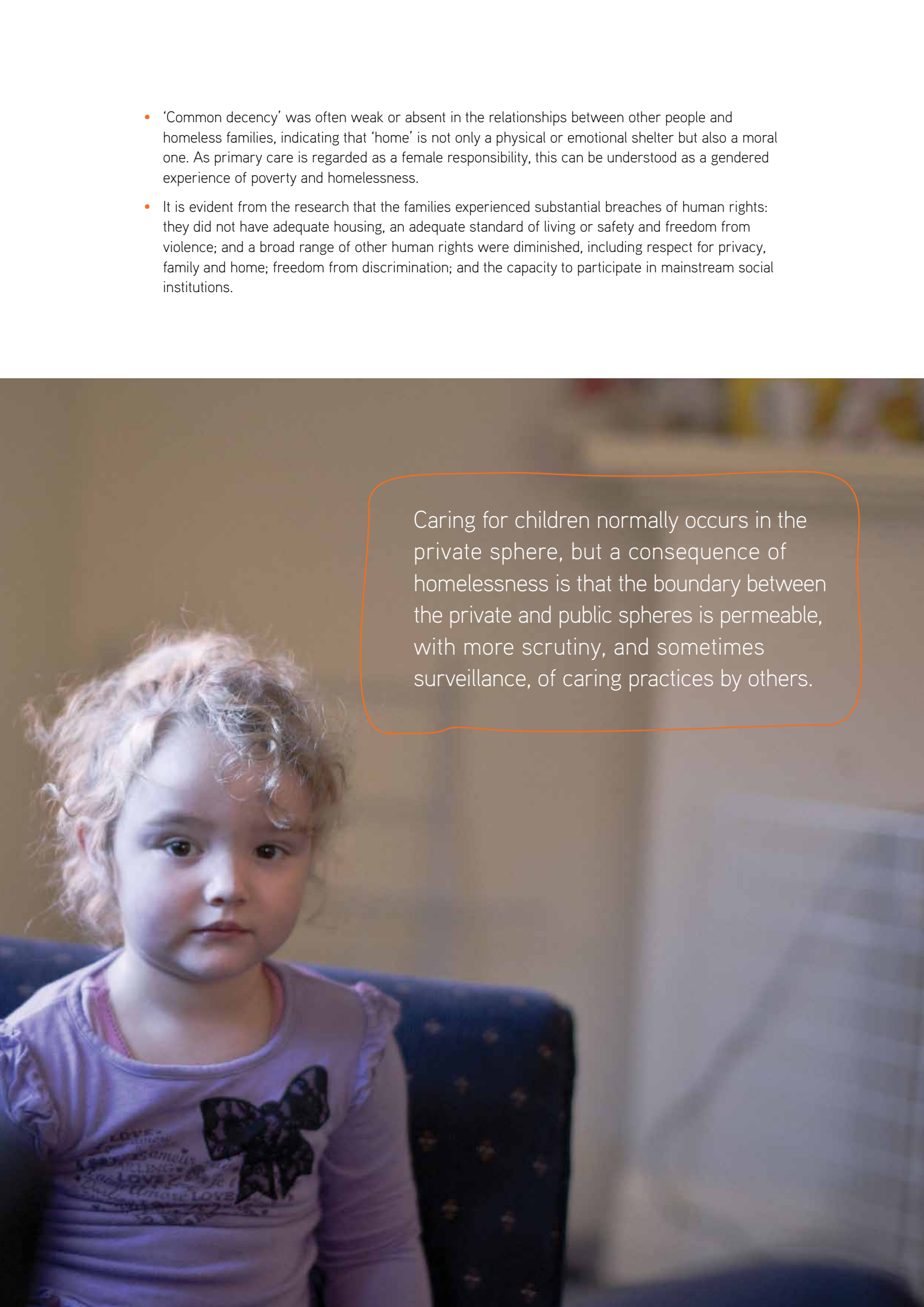
- A renewed focus on anti-poverty strategies is required, including measures to improve the supply of affordable housing for families with children, recognising that a service-based model cannot be fully effective (and is likely to be increasingly ineffective and costly) without this. There is only so much that good practice can achieve when there is a lack of safe, appropriate and affordable housing for families with children.
- Approaches to family homelessness should respect and support the family as a unit and empower parents to care for their children, drawing on a new ‘ethic of care’ which is sensitive to issues of power and control for the families in the lead-up to, and during, their homelessness. Families should not be reduced to individual ‘clients’.
- A more explicit strengths-based approach to family homelessness is required which utilises mainstream agencies and services, recognising the resilience of families and their resistance to being marginalised. Whilst the families interviewed in this study were realistic about their ‘deficits’ (e.g. lack of education, limited experience of work and low level of skills), they also drew in many cases on substantial strengths (e.g. in budgeting, parenting skills, community engagement and literacy concerning psychological trauma) which enabled them to work to attain some stability for themselves and their children.
- Programs and practice must work in a way that keeps families seen and heard by ‘the mainstream’. For example, it is important to accommodate families in safe housing types and areas, particularly if they have experienced domestic and family violence; to accommodate families in areas where children go to school; and to provide housing in conjunction with employment and training services.

### 5. Reflections on the research approach

The research approach enabled a number of crucial new understandings over and above the findings discussed above:

- Family members faced considerable difficulty in being recognised and supported as citizens in practice, which affected their sense of a ‘fair go’ and diminished their sense of belonging.
- The families did not consider they were marginalised or socially excluded. This runs counter to policy frameworks which see family homelessness as an extreme manifestation of social exclusion.
- Experiences were shaped not only by contact with service providers but also by the attitudes and behaviours of family and friends, real estate agents, private landlords and accommodation providers and a range of other people in the community.
- The families were propelled downwards in terms of poverty, and outwards in terms of belonging, through the attitudes and behaviours of a range of people and organisations. In this way, ‘social exclusion’ can be redrawn as a set of relationships between the ‘excluded’ and the ‘excluders’.

- 'Common decency' was often weak or absent in the relationships between other people and homeless families, indicating that 'home' is not only a physical or emotional shelter but also a moral one. As primary care is regarded as a female responsibility, this can be understood as a gendered experience of poverty and homelessness.
- It is evident from the research that the 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.

A young child with curly hair is sitting on a blue chair, looking directly at the camera. The child is wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt with a dark bow on the chest. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

Caring for children normally occurs in the private sphere, but a consequence of homelessness is that the boundary between the private and public spheres is permeable, with more scrutiny, and sometimes surveillance, of caring practices by others.

# 1 - INTRODUCTION

It is two decades since the first Australian study to recognise and investigate homelessness amongst families with children was published.<sup>2</sup> Since that time, family homelessness has increased, as is recognised in the Australian Government's White Paper on Homelessness, *The Road Home*, which emphasised the need to provide housing and support for families with children to prevent and address homelessness, with particular emphasis on 'breaking the cycle' so that children who experience homelessness do not go on to experience homelessness and social exclusion as adults.<sup>3</sup>

Most of what we know about family homelessness is framed within a social policy/social work framework in which people are viewed predominantly as clients of services with needs to be assessed and accommodation and/or support to be provided through professional intervention, either directly or through referral to other organisations. This approach is clearly essential in planning and delivering services for very vulnerable groups, but it has limitations in terms of understanding experiences of homelessness more broadly.

This report is the result of a collaboration between researchers at Swinburne University of Technology (Swinburne) and Hanover Welfare Services (Hanover) which aims at extending and deepening understanding of homelessness experienced by families, through a focus on lived experiences of citizenship. The collaboration first explored this approach in a small-scale study, finding that parents endeavoured to exercise their personal agency and exert control, albeit in difficult circumstances, and that they strove to re-establish a 'normal life' for their family in which they and their children were members of mainstream society. Parents with caring responsibilities were aware of particular risks to their family unit posed by homelessness, including losing their children. A further finding was that experiences whilst homeless diminished the parents' sense of belonging to the broader community.<sup>4</sup>

The second research project, which is the subject of this report, takes this approach further. It is based on a larger-scale longitudinal and qualitative study which examined not only the relationships of people in homeless families with governments and service providers, but also with their family and friends and other members of the community. It explored expectations and experiences of rights and responsibilities and experiences of participation and belonging.

## 2 - FAMILIES, HOMELESSNESS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CITIZENSHIP

### 2.1 Family homelessness

International research has found that homelessness experienced by families differs in some important ways from that experienced by other groups. Homeless families have much lower levels of substance abuse and mental health problems, are homeless for shorter periods, engage in strategies to empower themselves and are more likely to be in employment and less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour than other people who are homeless.<sup>5</sup>

In the Australian context, much of what we know about family homelessness comes from two sources: periodic enumeration of the homeless population in conjunction with the five-yearly Census of Population and Housing, and analysis of client data from what are now called specialist homelessness services (formerly Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services). The enumeration associated with the Census applied a definition based on cultural norms about minimum acceptable standards of housing and

<sup>2</sup>McCaughey, op.cit.

<sup>3</sup>Australian Government (2008) *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, White Paper, Australian Government, Canberra.

<sup>4</sup>Hulse, K. and Kolar, V. (2009) *'The Right to Belong': Family Homelessness and Citizenship*, Swinburne University of Technology and Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne, pp. 42-3.

<sup>5</sup>Fitzpatrick, S. and Christian, J. (2006) 'Comparing homelessness research in the US and Britain', *European Journal of Housing Policy*, 6(3), pp. 313-33.

found that family homelessness increased to 2006.<sup>6</sup> However, it is difficult to establish a comparable estimate for 2011 due to changes in the definition of and reporting on homelessness, which now focuses on individuals rather than family groups.<sup>7</sup> Few homeless families sleep in public view, instead living with partners or ex-partners, friends and family, often in overcrowded conditions; and in hotels and motels, not all of which are counted in enumerations of the homeless population.

Analysis of data from specialist homelessness services applies the definition of homelessness applicable for such services, which currently recognises that families may live in accommodation that meets culturally determined minimum housing standards but be homeless due to lack of safety and privacy and other prerequisites for family life.<sup>8</sup> It includes those whose housing meets community standards but which is unsafe and over which they have no control. Whilst this source also focuses on individuals, it does report on families who seek and are offered assistance as a 'special interest group'. Using this source indicates that domestic violence is a major pathway to homelessness for women with children, along with housing and financial problems.<sup>9</sup>

Until the last few years, there was surprisingly little other research into family homelessness, particularly in respect of the perspectives of single fathers, children living with their parent/s whilst homeless, and single and couple families with children where domestic violence was not a factor contributing to homelessness.<sup>10</sup> There has been a welcome increase in research into family homelessness, in part stimulated by the Australian Government's investment into research on homelessness following the White Paper on Homelessness (2008). For example, the experiences of homeless fathers have been investigated in two studies,<sup>11</sup> along with a small number of studies into the experiences of children who are homeless with their families,<sup>12</sup> and a new study is tracking people who are identified as being homeless or 'at risk' of homelessness, including some with dependent children.<sup>13</sup>

Much of the research into family homelessness has a social policy/social work perspective and aims to improve services to clients through professional interventions. Whilst this is valuable and important, it also has its limitations. The status of 'client' is defined in terms of relation with a service provider. It does not take into account the strategies that parents use to empower themselves and support their families, nor the effects of gender. Viewing family homelessness in terms of 'risk factors' does not enable an understanding of how members of homeless families go about their lives during and after periods of homelessness, how they exercise their autonomy, or their perspectives and reflections on their experiences. Most research focuses on individuals as clients rather than members of family units, de-emphasising relations of care

<sup>6</sup>Chamberlain, C. and Mackenzie, D. (2008) *Counting the Homeless Australia 2006*, Cat. no. 2050.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

<sup>7</sup>Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness*, Cat. no. 2049.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

<sup>8</sup>As set out in Section 4 of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994. The Homelessness Bill 2012 is expected to replace this Act.

<sup>9</sup>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) *Specialist Homelessness Services 2011-2012*, Cat. no. HOU267, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.

<sup>10</sup>Some notable exceptions include Bartholomew, T. (1999) 'Family poverty, family homelessness and the systems abuse cycle', *Family Matters*, 51, pp. 37-40, and Kolar, V. (2004) *Home First: A Longitudinal Study of Outcomes for Families Who Have Experienced Homelessness*, Final Report, Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne.

<sup>11</sup>McArthur, M., Zubrzycki, J., Rochester, A. and Thomson, L. (2006) "'Dad, where are we going to live now?": Exploring fathers' experiences of homelessness', *Australian Social Work*, 59(3), pp. 288-300; Barker, J., Kolar, V., Mallett, S., McArthur, M. and Saunders, V. (2011) *More Than Just Me: Supporting Fathers Who Are Homeless*, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, Hanover Welfare Services and Melbourne Citymission, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra.

<sup>12</sup>Noble-Carr, D. (2006) *The Experiences and Effects of Family Homelessness for Children*, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, Canberra; Moore, T. and McArthur, M. (2011) "'Good for kids": Children who have been homeless talk about school', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(2), pp. 147-60; Kirkman, M., Keys, D., Bodzak, D. and Turner, A. (2010) "'Are we moving again this week?": Children's experiences of homelessness in Victoria, Australia', *Social Science & Medicine*, 70, pp. 994-1001; Taylor, M. and Edwards, B. (2012) *The Influence of Unstable Housing on Children's Wellbeing and Development: Evidence from a National Longitudinal Study*, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra.

<sup>13</sup>Scutella, R., Johnson, G., Moschion, J., Tseng, Y.-P. and Wooden, M. (2012) *Journeys Home*, Research Report no. 1, Wave 1 Findings, report prepared for Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.



and dependency within the family unit, their experiences as a family unit and the particular risks faced by parents and children who are homeless. Finally, most research takes a 'snapshot' at a point in time or within the time frame of client assessment and intake, service delivery and service exit. This limits capacity to situate homelessness in the context of family experiences over a longer period of time.

## 2.2 Lived experiences of citizenship

This research uses the framework of lived experiences of citizenship to investigate the experiences and perspectives of members of families as they deal with homelessness on a day-to-day basis, through their contacts not only with specialist homelessness and other welfare agencies but also with family members, friends, neighbourhoods, kindergartens and schools and as they participate in various ways in economic, social, political and cultural life.

There has been renewed interest in the concept of citizenship as a means of inclusion, since there is basic equality in citizenship (or membership) that applies to everyone, however much they earn or what their circumstances or needs are. Citizens thus differ from clients (who are defined in terms of relationship to service providers) and consumers (who are defined in terms of their ability to compete in markets). Citizenship is based on equal status but increasingly also recognises difference. Groups who were excluded from full membership have sought to achieve this through social movements; for example, campaigns to recognise the full membership of the polity of people with disabilities. Thus, citizenship is about membership, and corresponding rights and responsibilities, but also about recognition, identity and relationships, and these can be fluid and change over time.<sup>14</sup> Increasingly, there is focus on relations between groups of citizens as well as between citizens and the state. The modern idea of citizenship is thus less about ascribed status, instead viewing people as purposive agents who have considerable autonomy, with governments having a role to make sure that citizens can exercise their autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

Whilst citizens have a more equal status than clients or consumers, each of these concepts centres on individuals rather than families. Indeed, there is a robust debate about children as citizens with rights which are distinct from those of their parents.<sup>16</sup> Families who experience homelessness accordingly risk state-sanctioned interventions to protect the rights of their children. This dynamic between caring responsibilities and protection of the rights of children is a particular feature of family homelessness,<sup>17</sup> and blurs the boundaries between the private sphere of family and home and the public sphere of professional interventions.

In this project, we draw on the work of Ruth Lister, who has considered how caring fits into a discourse of citizenship. She suggests that citizenship should synthesise both 'an ethic of justice' (or rights) and 'an ethic of care' (or responsibility).<sup>18</sup> An ethic of justice is abstract, centring on fairness and impartiality, the formal rules which stem from them and the rights that they might entail in the public sphere. An ethic of care emphasises responsibilities that stem from specific relationships in concrete circumstances and which often occur in the private sphere. Synthesis of the two enables us to think about interdependence in human relationships; in particular, those giving and receiving care in family units.<sup>19</sup>

This study examines the ways in which people in homeless families negotiate specific relationships in concrete circumstances where they give and receive care. It also explores the ways in which people attempt to negotiate the public and private spheres under conditions of considerable stress. It refers to 'the meaning that citizenship actually has in people's lives and the ways in which people's social and cultural

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Lister, R. (2003) *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*, 2nd edn, New York University Press, New York, and Joppke, C. (2008) 'Transformation of citizenship: Status, rights and identity', in Isin, E., Nyers, P. and Turner, B. (eds) (2008) *Citizenship Between Past and Future*, Routledge, London.

<sup>15</sup>Lister, op. cit., pp. 106-7.

<sup>16</sup>Invernizzi, A. and Williams, J. (2008) *Children and Citizenship*, Sage, London.

<sup>17</sup>See Hulse and Kolar, op. cit., for a discussion in the Australian context.

<sup>18</sup>The terms were first used to delineate different types of moral reasoning in Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>19</sup>Lister, op. cit., pp. 101-7

backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens'.<sup>20</sup> We focus on everyday lived experience and the ways in which families who are homeless understand and negotiate rights and responsibilities, participation and belonging as they provide care for their children. The only means of discovering this is through the voices of people in homeless families, as we discuss next.

## 3 - ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The fieldwork component of the research applied the theoretical understanding of lived experiences of citizenship to an in-depth understanding of the ways in which families who experience homelessness understand and negotiate their rights and responsibilities and engage in economic, social, political and cultural life. In this context, families are defined simply as parents, relatives or carers with dependent children.

The research had a longitudinal design in which adults and some adolescent children in homeless families were interviewed three times over an 18-month period about the effects of homelessness on their lives as citizens. The research method involved in-depth interviews covering a broad range of areas and issues, including: relationships and children; housing circumstances; social connectedness; engagement in education, training or work; voting; perspectives on personal agency and control; home; place; belonging; entitlement and support. The research design and method received ethics approval from both Swinburne and Hanover.

### 3.1 Recruitment and retention

Participants were recruited with the assistance of a diverse range of organisations and also through the internet. Using the internet enabled recruitment of people who were not clients of specialist homelessness services or other welfare agencies and hence were among the 'hidden homeless'. In total 57 families were recruited, including four who were recruited too late to join in Wave 1 and were assigned to Wave 2, as shown in Table 1. More than two-thirds of the families in Wave 1 were retained over the three waves, which is a good result since many were in crisis when first interviewed and their circumstances changed rapidly, creating challenges for ongoing contact.

Table 1: Families participating in the research

| SAMPLE                                 | WAVE 1 | WAVE 2 | WAVE 3 |
|--|--------|--------|--------|
| Original families (adults)             | 53     | 40     | 37     |
| Additional families at Wave 2 (adults) | N/A    | 4      | 4      |
| Total families interviewed by wave     | 53     | 44     | 41     |

The characteristics of the families who participated in the research were as follows:

- Most were single-parent families: 40 single mothers and six single fathers. There were also nine couple families, one grandmother-headed family and one carer with an aged parent.
- There were 10 migrant families, of whom all but one were of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. A further seven families had CALD backgrounds. There were six Indigenous families.
- Most families (70%) lived in middle and outer suburban Melbourne, with the remainder from inner suburban Melbourne (12%) and regional Victoria (16%).

The family composition and diversity status of the achieved sample was good. There were fewer families in inner suburban Melbourne and regional Victoria than targeted, due to the cost of rental housing in inner areas and the locality of supported housing and rooming houses and 'affordable' motels in suburban Melbourne.

<sup>20</sup>Hall, T. and Williamson, H, 1999, cited in Lister, op. cit., p. 3

### 3.2 Interviews and analysis

A total of 152 interviews were completed across the three waves, as indicated in Table 2: 138 with adults and 14 with adolescent children. The relatively small number of adolescent children was due largely to the families comprising only younger children; adolescent children were often living with other relatives as a result of homelessness.

Table 2: Completed interviews by wave

| SAMPLE              | WAVE 1 | WAVE 2 | WAVE 3 | TOTAL INTERVIEWS |
|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|------------------|
| One adult           | 43     | 36     | 33     | 112              |
| Two adults          | 8      | 6      | 6      | 20               |
| Adolescent children | 4      | 5      | 5      | 14               |
| Grandmother         | 1      | 1      | 1      | 3                |
| Adult carer         | 1      | 1      | 1      | 3                |
| All interviews      | 57     | 49     | 46     | 152              |

Interviews at Wave 1 lasted between 30 and 90 minutes as adults talked about how they came to be homeless and the practical and other implications for them and their children. Wave 2 interviews were usually much shorter as the emphasis was on what had changed since the first interviews and the interviewees' reflections on these changes. Wave 3 interviews were often longer as the interviewees looked back on their experiences, reflected on what they had learnt and how this had changed their perspective, and outlined their hopes for the future. Adolescent children aged 13 and over were interviewed either on their own or in the presence of, or together with, their parent, with the consent of both parent and child. The adolescent interviews varied considerably but in general they were shorter than for their parents. This related in part to adolescents' lack of direct involvement in addressing their housing situation.

The interviews were electronically recorded, with the permission of the interviewees, and transcribed. A detailed analysis was conducted using NVivo software.

### 3.3 Presentation of research findings

The research participants wanted someone to hear their story. Most self-identified as homeless and saw 'family homelessness' as an economic force beyond their control. They were keenly aware that the problem was affecting other families, not just their own. This meant that many wanted others to know what it was like to be homeless, so that the general community and government could take action. Some compared the prevalence of homelessness to bushfire and flood tragedies which were occurring at the time.

We present a summary of the findings of the research in sections 4 to 7. Each section provides the 'big picture' from the analysis of interviews with the parents and children. More detailed papers are also available on each of the section themes. The research findings are illustrated with quotes taken from the interview transcripts to demonstrate the views expressed. These are verbatim quotes except where it was necessary to make minor changes, such as the removal of names, to preserve confidentiality.



## 4 - SOMEWHERE TO LIVE

The primary focus of the families when first interviewed was, not surprisingly, seeking adequate housing. Forty-seven of the families had had periods of 'settled housing' in recent years but 10 did not appear to have been settled for many years, moving between various forms of insecure and poor-quality accommodation.<sup>21</sup> Almost all relied on the private rental sector for housing and had done so for most of the adults' lives. Indeed, only seven of the 57 families had been homeowners, with five leaving due to domestic violence and two due to repossession.

Relationship changes, some associated with domestic and family violence, and moving in and out of private rental housing are interwoven in the lives of the families. Around half had taken their previous tenancy as part of a couple but were now seeking private rental housing as single parents. Unlike others in the community experiencing relationship breakdown and domestic/family violence, the families in this study lacked the financial and other resources to stabilise their situation. All were on low incomes and most lacked, or had exhausted, other forms of social support from families and friends. When first interviewed, most had had periods in which they had moved between family/friends, various types of crisis accommodation such as motels and rooming houses as well as private rental and, in some cases, public rental.

### 4.1 Negotiating private rentals in a more competitive market

Almost all of the families were affected in one way or another by increased competition in the private rental market from the mid-2000s. They struggled to access private rental, even where they had successful tenancies in the past. Some talked about reaching the two-year mark in a tenancy as a significant milestone in securing their future. With two years 'under their belt' they had an important reference which could make or break future attempts to find a private rental property. Achieving two years was increasingly difficult.

The families were acutely conscious that they faced growing competition for private rental. Many mentioned house inspections with 20 or even 50 applicants in regular attendance. Insufficient income meant they could not compete with dual-income, working households who could offer more rent in advance or simply pay more than advertised.

Rentals are hard to get now. People are offering extra money ... and there were 20 more people ... waiting to see the property ... people who aren't single parents and people who have two incomes. (Family 12 Wave 1, single parent with one child who separated as a direct result of homelessness; two other children were sent to live with their natural father who was seeking sole parental responsibility)

Most felt that agents and landlords did not want children in their properties, and certainly not within a single-parent family. Sometimes this was exacerbated by discrimination on other grounds such as having a disability, having Indigenous status, having lived in public housing or having rented a property that burnt down.

When you tell people that your house just burned down, they're like, "I'm not renting it to you". (Family 23 Wave 1, couple with three young children)

The families needed to provide references and copies of income statements and to pass credit reference checks. They were immediately disadvantaged if they had been homeless, as this is in itself a bad reference. Others had no rental history to provide, which was almost as bad as a poor tenancy record, which some families had. In some cases, the families had been blacklisted as a result of prior tenancies.

I ... said, "Please don't blacklist me, I've tried to do the best I can" and he said, "No, no, I won't, I won't". [I] did find out ... that they had blacklisted us. (Family 35 Wave 1, then a couple with one child and expecting a second child)

It was increasingly difficult for the families to maintain their private tenancies if their circumstances changed; for example, if an adult lost their job or a family member became ill. Experience of the sector prior to the mid-2000s had given them reason to suppose that they could negotiate repayment agreements when they had a change of circumstances, particularly losing a job. In the newly competitive market, agents demanded

<sup>21</sup>Including 53 families in Wave 1 and four families interviewed for the first time and allocated to Wave 2.

full payment by the due date. Having arrears had, in the past, been seen as reasonable by the families. Now they were confronted with agents starting proceedings for eviction immediately when they failed to comply with their tenancy agreement, even where they had sought to make part payment. Some families did not understand how this could happen where there were children involved.

As a result of these changed market conditions, even those families who had previously been able to sustain tenancies in the agent-managed sector found that this was no longer a possibility. Instead they had to find accommodation managed by private landlords, typically through word of mouth.

I actually got private rental, but I did because I knew someone that knew someone that knew someone.  
(Family 32 Wave 1, female single parent with four children)

Whilst there was more flexibility in access than in the agent-managed sector, with some landlords prepared to take on families with children and with poor credit histories, the accommodation was often of poor quality and sometimes unsafe, particularly the electrical wiring.

That was just a private rental. It was basically a run-down shed we were living in. That was what I could get ... They don't like renting to single mothers. (Family 33 Wave 1, single parent with two daughters)

The families had few effective rights that they could exercise to try and improve their circumstances. Some ended up sharing with unrelated people in order to afford the rent, but this was rarely successful. Often they had to leave accommodation for a variety of reasons, including sale or redevelopment of the property, the landlord wanting the property for their own purposes, or eviction due to rental arrears.

At this stage, the families had run out of options in the private rental market other than rooming houses. Some had lived in this type of accommodation before, but those who had not done so were initially very shocked by the high rents, poor quality and conditions of tenancy.

It had a lot of alcoholics and drug addicts there so I didn't want to be around them. There was an African bloke that actually bashed his wife and stuff and, yes, it just wasn't a real nice place. (Family 54 Wave 2, male single parent with son)

Rooming houses varied: some were registered and some not, some were associated with drugs and alcohol and others less so. None of the families saw them as suitable accommodation for their children and in some cases there were very serious concerns about safety, privacy and being told to leave if they complained about the conditions.

At some stage in this process, many families contacted specialist homelessness services or other welfare agencies for support in finding somewhere to live.

## 4.2 Securing a better place to live

When we first interviewed the 53 families in Wave 1, they were in diverse living arrangements. Given the recruitment which targeted homeless families, not surprisingly, most were in various forms of crisis or temporary accommodation. Over the three waves of interviews, there was an improvement in the housing circumstances of many of the families, as shown in Table 3. This is a positive finding and indicates the concerted efforts of the parents to move out of crisis and the support received by many families from specialist homelessness and other services. There is a note of caution, however, in that families in crisis accommodation in Wave 1 were the most likely to drop out due to inability to contact them for subsequent interviews.

**Table 3: Summary of changing housing circumstances of families by wave**

| HOUSING CIRCUMSTANCES  | WAVE 1 | WAVE 2 | WAVE 3 |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Crisis                 | 23     | 7      | 5      |
| Temporary/transitional | 19     | 17     | 13     |
| Longer-term            | 11     | 19     | 23     |
| All families in wave   | 53     | 43     | 41     |

### 4.2.1 Finding shelter and addressing immediate needs

Twenty-three families were living in crisis accommodation at Wave 1; this ranged from squatting to rooms in motels, and from rooming houses to sharing overcrowded accommodation with their family of origin. Some found these arrangements themselves whilst others had some financial support from service agencies. There was little or no security in any of these arrangements and the families often lacked privacy, and sometimes safety, with the private sphere of home and family often permeated by the public sphere, in which their parenting was conducted in view of others.

A number of families cycled in and out of specialist crisis accommodation. These centres are intended to provide very short-term housing of up to 13 nights. A period longer than this brings the accommodation under the remit of the *Residential Tenancy Act 1997* which would prevent the providers from evicting the occupant at short notice. In practical terms this meant sleeping somewhere else on the 14th night and returning in the morning. There was no guarantee that the agency would find a place for the night 'out', as Family 12 discovered on one occasion.

And that was really shit. That's when I felt really homeless again and that disjointed from, this disjointed from society feeling. (Family 12 Wave 1)

Not surprisingly, parents living in crisis accommodation were preoccupied with the immediate needs of their families: feeding their children, keeping them clean and doing the laundry.

Ham sandwiches and frozen dim sims in the microwave and that kind of thing ... You can get those noodles in the foam cups ... you can top them up with dehydrated vegetables. (Family 37 Wave 1, single mother, living in motel room with two children)

Over the three waves, most of these families were able to move into other types of accommodation, although five remained in crisis accommodation in Wave 3. These five had multiple issues including a long history of homelessness, substance abuse and health issues and, in three cases, periods of imprisonment. Four were male single parents and the other an Indigenous female single parent with a large family.

### 4.2.2 Re-establishing daily routines while 'in limbo'

Nineteen families were in transitional/temporary housing at Wave 1, in which the arrangement was time-limited and sometimes the accommodation was shared. This was often an improvement on crisis accommodation in terms of adequacy and appropriateness, enabling them to establish basic routines of daily life. By Wave 3, 13 families were living in transitional/temporary housing, 11 of whom were in agency-managed transitional housing. Six of the families had been in the same transitional housing throughout the three waves (one for almost five years), two had moved from one transitional house to another and three had moved from crisis to transitional housing. Whilst the families were often initially excited by their move into transitional housing and were able to establish the routines of daily life in better conditions than they had enjoyed previously, this was often followed by worry about the instability of their situation, in which key decisions were outside of their control.

Well, not knowing, just being in limbo is really bad, I didn't think it would be this bad, it's starting to get to me now, in limbo, not knowing when or what [the agency] have got in the back of their head to do with us. (Family 32 Wave 3)

This sense of instability was exacerbated by the 90-day leases which the families had to sign. They did not know whether the housing provider was serious about enforcing the leases or not, although in practice many were renewed. They did not know whether, and when, they would get an offer of public housing, even if they have been approved for segment 1 priority. Their ability to plan was also affected by conditions around living in transitional housing, which ranged from the requirement to demonstrate that they had searched for private rental housing to restrictions on non-resident partners or other family members sleeping over. There were also perverse effects such that those who tried to help themselves through finding private rental housing or a job were penalised through loss of place on the housing wait list and having to vacate their transitional housing, even if the improvement in their circumstances was likely, or turned out, to be temporary. It was difficult for the parents to continue to exercise autonomy and control in these circumstances.



I'm just – keep fighting. Like I keep calling anyone and anywhere I can to find out – I'm not working, I'm not earning any money, and why do we need to go to court? (Family 7 Wave 3)

#### 4.2.3 Enduring instability in some longer-term housing

Of particular interest are the 11 families who identified themselves as being homeless in Wave 1 when they appeared to be in longer-term accommodation. Their recruitment into the study extends our knowledge of homelessness. Five were living in private rental and considered themselves to be homeless due to uncertainty associated with one or more of informal tenancy arrangements, unaffordable rents and poor quality and inadequate housing. In two cases, the property had just been sold and it was unclear whether they could stay on. Six families living in social housing considered that they were homeless, primarily due to exposure to neighbours whose behaviour was violent or antisocial and/or where they had had to accept accommodation in areas far from other supports.

By Wave 3, 27 families were living in what appeared to be longer-term housing types (16 in social housing and 11 in private rental). Of those in social housing, five continued to be unsettled due to problems with violent neighbours, overcrowding and locality. Of the 11 who were living in private rental housing at Wave 3, four were still unsettled, with two facing further eviction. The others were settled but remained vulnerable to losing their tenancies. Of those in private rental, none was Indigenous and only two were families where domestic violence had been a factor in their homelessness, perhaps indicating that they were unlikely to be approved for priority social housing (segment 1). Only four of the families in private rental had been in transitional housing, with the others mostly not gaining assistance, or the assistance they wanted. One family, who had approval for segment 3 public housing status, understood this to be as good as being refused. Most tenancy arrangements were short-term and through private landlords rather than real estate agents.

In summary, whilst there was a general improvement in housing circumstances over the three waves, this was more complex than a progression from crisis to transitional to longer-term housing. Of the families interviewed in all three waves, there were few instant 'happy endings' in terms of more secure housing. Only five had moved from crisis to social housing over the period, including a male single parent whose wife had gambled away all their money and who was allocated public housing, and a couple allocated new housing by Aboriginal Housing Victoria. For all the other families, improvement in their housing circumstances was slower and less linear, typically involving insecurity as reflected in both mobility and 'treading water' whilst waiting for longer-term housing.

#### 4.3 Seeking assistance with housing

In attempting to resolve their homelessness, many of the families sought assistance from specialist homelessness services and other welfare organisations. This was often a last resort after trying to resolve their situation by themselves or with the assistance of family and friends. In recounting this period, the families generally did not distinguish between specialist homelessness services and other welfare organisations. This can be explained by organisations that had many different programs, by the array of service demarcations and referrals, and by the fact that many families used any number of services depending on what they could obtain as assistance. In moving between organisations they also moved across differing service philosophies.

At Wave 1, which is when most first came into contact with housing agencies, they encountered a system which, due to limited resources, has to ration assistance very heavily. In common with other users of homelessness agencies, the families complained about being given the wrong information and referrals that were inappropriate, being told to come back later and needing to re-tell their story over and over again. They felt they were 'treated like a number'.

We didn't feel managed, we almost felt like inhuman. (Family 18 Wave1)

For the uninitiated, housing assistance is a very complex administrative system.

It's a learning curve, figuring how it all works. (Family 12 Wave 1)

While a shock at Wave 1, the families learnt about the 'front door' services' role as gatekeepers to support, transitional housing and getting a public housing application done. They also realised that there are strategies

that could be adopted. Some realised they had to embellish their stories in order to be eligible for assistance, although some strongly objected to the need to do this.

[It's] unfair because you try to teach your kids not to lie. (Family 52 Wave1)

Unlike other people seeking assistance, the homeless families differed in some significant ways. The families initially had strong expectations that they would be assisted. They assumed being a 'family' would put them at the front of the queue and that they would not be on their own. Even if they could not get housing for themselves, they assumed that their children's right to safety and security would ensure the family was provided with something.

People with children really need to have a bit more of a first choice or something because children should not be homeless. (Family 12 Wave 1)

Many in the short term were referred to motels, rooming houses and other accommodation that was inadequate to their needs and frequently unsafe.

[The agency] tried to get me a place in [X], but when I got there, there was 10 prisoners. I said, "I can't put my kids with prisoners, no way". (Family 1 Wave 1, single father with two children)

For some families, being denied assistance was not something they had contemplated. In time, most did receive some kind of assistance, although the way they understood their crisis brought many into conflict with the homelessness service system. They saw themselves as fighting for their family but believed that agencies saw them as aggressive, dishonest, undeserving or having 'too much attitude'. Parents described being at their 'wits' end' trying to work out which 'button' to push that would get them the help they required. Three families successfully sought the intervention of their local Member of Parliament. Support often only became available when they had 'reached the bottom', and this was deeply disturbing because it did not fit with the model of care and protection they practised or with what they thought were Australian beliefs.

The families assumed that their eligibility for assistance would be straightforward, but found even homelessness to be a slippery concept.

But according to them, they're not considering it [couch-surfing] as [homelessness]. (Family 52 Wave 1, single mother of four children)

Their sense of self and family was challenged when they were deemed, as they saw it, to be less deserving than refugees or 'bad' people such as drug users.<sup>22</sup>

So because I don't have drug and alcohol issues I'm not as classed as high-up need, so if I took Propane I'd be up there, you know what I mean. (Family 12 Wave 1)

Four families who had been unable to obtain assistance at Wave 1 dropped out of the study by Wave 2. Each was in a very precarious situation. At Wave 2, four families still had been unable to obtain assistance with their housing. At Wave 3, one family (52) who had spent weeks couch-surfing and was about to be evicted from their private rental had still not obtained support although the parent (a single mother) had been seeking assistance on a weekly basis for years. Another two had stopped all supports. Only one family (a non-custodial single father) had not sought housing support.

Despite the difficulty some families experienced in obtaining housing assistance, and the problems some had with their support workers, support was highly desired, valued and important. The families needed to know that someone cared.

It was comfort for us, it made us feel a bit better knowing someone was out there helping us. (Family 26 Wave1)

The families' experience of seeking housing assistance differed from that of other homeless people in a significant way. They felt that they were, as families, part of the mainstream, and as such entitled to

<sup>22</sup>See Spinney, A. and Nethery, A. (2012) "'Taking our houses": Perceptions of the impact of asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants on housing assistance in Melbourne", *Social Policy and Society*, 12(2), pp. 179-189, which was based on this research and provides a fuller account of this issue.

assistance. This proved to be to be less than straightforward, even though the adults believed that their children held separate rights that commanded even greater attention. Their identity as family and their assumptions about social solidarity shaped their expectations and responses to homelessness support, and meant that at Wave 3 they were left feeling less certain about things they had previously believed to be fundamental to Australian life.

#### 4.4 Summary

The families understood homelessness primarily as inability to access adequate housing. Some had been able to move between private rental properties in the past and to negotiate arrangements to sustain their tenancies if they got into difficulties. This was no longer possible in an environment of increased competition in the private rental sector from the mid-2000s. This resulted in a downward spiral in which the families' options were progressively diminished: from the real estate-managed sector to houses rented by individual landlords, to marginal housing such as rooming houses.

The housing circumstances of most of the families improved over the three waves, reflecting their own efforts and the accommodation and support provided by the network of specialist homelessness services and other agencies. The key priority for the families was that their housing be safe. Safety involved accommodation which enabled privacy and the ability to exclude others, and in which families could live without fear. It also involved not living in housing which was a threat to health and safety. Perspectives on caring and safety are further developed in section 6.

Instability in housing prolongs homelessness. This includes the insecurity associated with 13-day limits for some types of crisis accommodation and 90-day leases in transitional housing. The research found that the insecurity associated with private rental housing and sometimes social housing, despite affordable rents and security of tenure in the latter, also means that some families are not settled. This finding adds to our understanding of homelessness as being about more than physical housing conditions; it includes the instability in rental arrangements and lack of control over one's environment which make it difficult to conduct the social relations of everyday life.

## 5 - GETTING BY – AT A COST

Almost all of those interviewed came from backgrounds which could not be described as advantaged in terms of material circumstances. Whilst families in all walks of life experience life disruptions, including family breakdown and the effects of domestic and family violence, the families in this study did not have the financial resources to deal with a crisis, or ongoing difficulties, in their lives. For many, this was exacerbated by having family and friends who lacked the financial and material resources to help them. In this section, we examine how they attempted to maintain control of their financial situations in these circumstances.

### 5.1 The cumulative financial costs of homelessness

At Wave 1, the focus was very much on the necessities of daily life, which included getting enough food and being able to wash/shower and provide clean clothes. This was a constant struggle and a few families camped out or slept in cars when there were no funds to pay for motel rooms and rooming houses. Many families sought emergency relief to address these immediate needs.

We spent a lot of time in charities, which is really hard. (Family 19 Wave 1)

Other strategies that were resorted to included use of food vans, scavenging from charity bins, selling or pawning possessions, taking on debt (formal and informal) and, in rare cases, theft and fraud. However, families were aware that these were, at best, short-term solutions to their financial problems.

Whilst many of the families got some assistance from homelessness services with their housing costs, living in crisis accommodation such as motels and rooming houses was expensive and it was a constant struggle to try and maintain as much normality as possible for a family in these circumstances.



I've tried to set up and keep things running as normal as possible, but I get \$900 a fortnight and I'm paying \$840 a fortnight here. (Family 33 Wave 1, living in a motel)

There were also significant costs associated with moving; particularly with repeated moves. The cost of storage was considerable, not just in terms of paying to hold onto possessions but also because they usually had to be relinquished later or were lost or stolen.

We ended up paying \$700 [a] month in storage, then we were paying up at [X] caravan park, \$500 and something dollars – \$530 a week. (Family 18 Wave 1)

The experience of living in crisis accommodation left many heavily indebted. The cost of motel rooms and rooming houses, even when some financial support is provided by a homelessness service, was beyond families' available income. Very few were able to keep working while they were in crisis, so all had been reliant on benefits and credit for some, if not all, of the period of their homelessness. Many struggled with the debt and in some cases it threatened their ability to maintain the housing they moved into during the course of the study.

Although 27 families had improved their housing circumstances by Wave 3 and were living in types of accommodation with rents set according to their incomes (transitional, public, social), they were still often in financial crisis. More families said they used emergency relief in Wave 3 than Wave 1; this is an important finding. In addition, some families were having difficulty managing debt at Wave 3, even though at face value their circumstances had improved in other respects, as we examine next.

## 5.2 Debt and financial control

In many cases, the families 'coped' financially because they had access to unsecured loans, either from family, friends or commercial lenders, or because they became indebted to providers of services including utilities, mechanics, storage providers and childcare centres. Some of these unsecured loans carried a heavy cost penalty and, if families were unable to maintain repayments, they were pursued by debt collectors with the threat of having remaining belongings seized, or in the case of fines, of being gaoled. For those who borrowed from friends or family, there was the risk of losing those relationships. Debt also meant losing future income, as repayments took an increasing proportion of their benefits or wages. While the ability to access credit enabled them to have somewhere to live and feed their families, it often had a significant and negative effect on people's ability to re-establish their lives to an adequate standard of living once their housing circumstances improved. Further, they found that the consequences of debt were not considered by government and not-for-profit service providers in assessing their risk of homelessness or their capacity to re-enter the private rental housing market.

A very significant finding of the research was the extent to which the families took control of their financial situations and adopted highly disciplined approaches to expenditure and paying down debt. Central to this was a determination to prioritise housing costs and never to become homeless again.

I will never ever not pay my rent again, never ... Now I think the rent's got to be paid, because I would never put my kids through that again, and we can just scab food. (Family 31 Wave 1)

Ability to maintain strict financial control was aided by technology such as banking direct debits and prepayment plans.

Now that we're here we've done a direct debit ... Yes, it is hard, but we've got a roof over our heads, the doors lock, it's secure, I feel a lot more comfortable for my children to come here. (Family 26 Wave 1)

Electronic banking also enabled Centrelink to administer payments so that mobility and unstable housing did not have, in itself, a negative impact on receiving income support.

The need for financial prudence, however, was tempered by the parents' desire to ensure that children were not penalised to the point of being excluded from key social relations. Parents wanted their children to be able to socialise with their friends and to participate in school activities such as excursions. Sometimes, they took on debt to make sure that their children could continue to be part of the mainstream. The consequences are that, for some families, attempting to remain part of the mainstream means that such expenditures can contribute to ongoing financial crisis.

### 5.3 Loss and recovery of possessions

Almost all the families experienced loss of possessions. Sometimes this was relatively minor, but for others sudden or progressive loss of possessions was a physical manifestation of loss of home and had not only financial but also other consequences which parents felt undermined their capacity to provide care and protection for their children.

The families talked about different types of possessions. These included key household goods such as fridges and washing machines; items of personal value which evoked memories of people and/or places, such as wedding rings, photos or special objects; and children's toys and belongings.

I've lost a lot of things ... I've got a few little plastic containers that are just that – my photos and my little mementos. (Family 55 Wave 2)

The loss of possessions was keenly felt at a number of levels. Losing essential goods creates a considerable financial burden when they are subsequently replaced. Some items, such as children's paintings, are 'irreplaceable' because of the memories that attach to them.

I left my wedding ring, my antiques; I had to leave all that sort of stuff on the side of the road, and a lot of it was stolen. (Family 18 Wave 1, man and woman)

Parents were very upset about loss of their children's possessions, particularly where their children were attached to these. They feared that the loss meant disruption and discontinuity for their children, affecting their security at a profound (ontological) level. Loss of possessions also cut away at their confidence as parents who could provide for their children's physical and emotional needs.

At Wave 1, many of the families had already lost some possessions. Those who had fled domestic violence often left everything, or almost everything, behind. Others lost possessions through house fires or evictions. Some were later able to retrieve things but faced hefty storage and removal costs. Possessions often ended up spread around with numerous friends and family and at commercial storage facilities. Sometimes friends would not give things back.

Some families couch-surfed, but although the possessions they took with them were minimal they were sometimes a burden and an expression of loss of autonomy and control. One family talked about not being able to throw clothes into the corner if you were too tired to deal with them.

You have to be really tidy, or you feel like you have to be tidy. (Family 52 Wave 1)

Just as we understand domestic and family violence to be about control which is often manifested through destruction of possessions and cruelty to animals, the families experienced a loss of control associated with loss or destruction of possessions. It seemed in many cases, such as evictions, that loss involved overt displays of power over them. The emphasis of the families on possessions was as much about regaining a sense of control as much as it was on the materiality of things.

Once the families went into transitional or permanent housing they quickly gathered their possessions together again, if they could, notwithstanding the restrictions associated with transitional housing, or set about replacing what they had lost. New possessions were an important part of moving on and making a home.

I've built up furniture-wise but that's going through Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, buying it cheap from Create and things like that. (Family 22, Wave 3)

For some, the need to have new items was important, but they were financially prudent, waiting for specials or using No Interest Loans Schemes (NILS). However, most were satisfied, if not enthusiastic, to have second-hand or free stuff whose availability was an important element of the families' financial recovery.

### 5.4 Getting ahead financially through paid work

Finding paid work was a longer-term strategy for getting ahead financially. Between Waves 1 and 2, participation in work increased from seven to 14 parents and by Wave 3, 17 of the families had a parent in paid work, as illustrated in Table 4, although this was less than half of those interviewed in Wave 3. Some parents were obliged to work or train as a condition of receipt of income support payments and many of the others wanted to work when their children were older.

**Table 3: Summary of changing housing circumstances of families by wave**

| ACTIVITY                      | WAVE 1 | WAVE 2 | WAVE 3 |
|-------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Study/training                | 7      | 9      | 4      |
| Work                          | 7      | 14     | 17     |
| Not in study/training or work | 39     | 21     | 20     |
| All families                  | 53     | 44     | 41     |

Many were able to access government employment programs, some of which also provided cheap and free childcare. This helped with the practicalities of getting work. However, many were constrained by caring responsibilities for young children, and for children and adults with disabilities, as well as by their own health and lack of skills and experience. In consequence, work was frequently low-paid and very part-time or casual; one person worked as little as an hour a week doing ironing.

Although some people worked at different stages, this was never enough to move them off income support payments. All of the families received such payments and/or family tax benefits during the three waves of interviews. A significant factor in working as a means of economic improvement was the impact of wages on their Centrelink payments. Many parents calculated that they were only marginally better off, in financial terms, as a result of working. This affected the number of number of hours worked and the type of work, with some opting to work in the informal economy, which carried its own risks.

There's no point working because what happens is when you earn over a certain amount, Centrelink starts taking 50 cents out of every dollar that you earn, and effectively you're working for half the hourly wage. (Family 57 Wave 3)

Nevertheless, the motivation for getting a job or studying was not only about money. It was also about being part of the mainstream, as we discuss in section 7.

## 5.5 Summary

Being homeless is expensive: the costs of crisis accommodation are often considerable, there are additional costs when living in single-room crisis accommodation (such as such as takeaway food), and there are costs for moving into and out of accommodation. The cumulative costs of homelessness lead to financial crises in which the families have a limited number of strategies available, each of which carries its own risks. These include including accessing emergency relief, participating in the informal economy and taking on debt. In addition, the loss of possessions and costs of reacquiring essential possessions such as fridges, and/or high storage costs, all made it difficult to have enough to live on.

The research has highlighted that, although financial problems were a contributory cause of homelessness, for many families the financial impacts of being homeless were cumulative and inhibited recovery from crisis even where their housing circumstances had improved. Tellingly, more used emergency relief in Wave 3 than in Wave 1. Policies aimed at ending homelessness need to take account of the additional costs of homelessness and the extent to which families have accrued commitments to repay debt even when their housing circumstances have improved.

Possessions, such as washing machines, not only have practical and financial benefits, but also represent 'good parenting'. Getting by financially is also about families wanting to maintain their children's position in the mainstream. Loss of these possessions reduced the parents' capacity to care for their family, to keep their children clean and well-presented and to preserve memories. Many of the parents experienced repeated occasions when their control, and hence power to protect their family, was seriously challenged for financial reasons. Regaining material possessions is a symbol of personal control and is important for rebuilding a sense of home.

## 6 - A SAFE PLACE FOR CARING

It is well documented that domestic and family violence is a major factor precipitating homelessness for women and children. Families can be 'homeless at home' if basic essential criteria for safety cannot be met even if they have suitable housing. These criteria have been developed in work on domestic and family violence and include not only physical violence and abuse but also emotional, financial and other types of abuse.<sup>23</sup> The resulting trauma is often psychological as well as physical.

The research found that some families in the study were exposed to abuse or violence during their homelessness, and many others lived in fear of violence towards themselves or their children. They also feared for their safety in other ways, including being re-traumatised by exposure to certain situations or places.

### 6.1 Experiences of violence and fear while homeless

Many of the families had previous exposure to violence perpetrated by those with whom they had the closest biological and intimate relationships. Some volunteered that they had experienced violence or abuse in their family of origin, both in the past and, in some cases, more recently. In addition, a third of those interviewed had experienced domestic and family violence as a contributing factor to their current period of homelessness, corresponding to other research in the area. One woman's partner had attempted to murder her, at least one other interviewee had witnessed a violent murder (in addition to family violence) and some women had been raped. The parents were particularly concerned about the effects of violence on their children, feeling that they had been unable to protect their children from harm.

While none of the families reported intimate partner violence during the research period, many were subject to violence from relatives and strangers. The families experienced violence from family members, co-residents, neighbours, other service users and some accommodation providers. This applied to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families. It applied across the spectrum of crisis and marginal housing types (motels, rooming houses, crisis accommodation) and transitional housing, but also in what would normally be regarded as more secure, longer-term housing.

Being homeless put pressure on relations with family. This could be particularly damaging if family members were already traumatised by their earlier experiences.

[My brother] lost the plot with us. He arsed up at me. He just did what their father did, but not hit me. He was in my face, screaming. I just, I couldn't forgive him for that. (Family 27 Wave 2)

In some cases, the places that the families had to live in were unsafe and increased their exposure to violence.

At night time, in fact, I sleep behind the door to save my children. Yes, because no lock. (Family 30 Wave 1, living in rooming house)

Families experienced violence in accommodation they found for themselves and in accommodation that they were referred to by homelessness services.

We, myself and my son, in the first refuge experienced bullying and vicarious trauma, and it was quite significant stuff. (Family 25 Wave 1)

Violence also contributes to financial costs that make recovery from homelessness difficult. For example, a single mother and her teenage daughter were both sexually assaulted in a rooming house by the landlord and his son. They had to move and could only afford a studio apartment where they shared one bed. In order to have time to support her daughter, the mother worked as little as possible, but this placed them on a knife's edge in terms of making the rental payments.

She's got actually more breaking down than I do, so I would like to help her with her study. She's quite behind and it's not easy for her to cope and try to make herself feel and look normal at school. (Family 45 Wave 1, mother and daughter in rooming house)

<sup>23</sup>We adopt the definition of domestic and family violence as 'A pattern of coercive behaviour used to maintain control over a partner, through a combination of physical, emotional, sexual or financial abuse, enforced social isolation and intimidation', from Cunningham, A. and Baker, L. (2004) *What About Me! Seeking to Understand a Child's View of Violence in the Family*, Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System, London, Ontario.

The parents prioritised safety above all else and had to make very difficult judgements, in one extreme case judging that the family was safer sleeping in a car than living in a rooming house.

[Agency] said that my kids are not in a safe environment, yet they're telling me to go to a place where there's prostitution ... But my kids were safer with me in the car – lock the car, drive away, doesn't matter. (Family 52 Wave 3)

Asked at Wave 3 whether homelessness had changed their view of what made a home, people consistently described home as a safe place to be a family.

Security, being able to be safe in your own home and be secure in your own home. If you're not safe and you're not secure and you can't feel safe and secure, how are you supposed to work and how are you supposed to go to school, and how are you supposed to cope with anything else? (Family 22 Wave 3)

The longitudinal design of the study was important in highlighting the effects of cumulative experience of abuse and violence. When this occurred whilst families were homeless it was deeply traumatic. For some families this was unexpected, but for many it added to previous violence and abuse in their families of origin and with partners and ex-partners.

I had a minor stroke, or they think I may have had a minor stroke ... so that's stress related ... How do you sleep and relax when you've got people [calling you a] cunt and a slut and a whore and the kids are getting abused and, "We're going to rape you, you cunts", and it's – can't they just get a life and leave us alone? (Family 22 Wave 3, public housing tenant with 'neighbours from hell')

Many of the families lived in fear. Fear of violence was very damaging but there were other fears as well: threats to parents' health and that of their children from external factors that they could not control. Some premises were damp or had other problems such as unsafe electrical wiring. Two families caught scabies. There was constant fear that children would get sick – and some did – or that they would be unsafe. Again the parents wanted to protect their children from harm in these respects.

The parents were also concerned about their own health and their capacity to care for their children. Some talked about experiencing stress and depression which caused them to question their capacity to care for their children. One woman had lost so much weight she feared her family of origin would intervene and take her daughter. She said they were convinced she was on drugs and could not see how stressed she was.

And everyone's like, "Why are you so skinny?" and it's like, "Because I'm that stressed", but they couldn't understand it. (Family 51 Wave 2)

Two parents talked about having 'foggy brains', being the corrosive impact of stress and depression on their ability to make decisions. Another mother said she had fallen through the cracks before and was frightened that if she had another breakdown she would lose her daughter.

I just don't know why they're pushing me to that point that I have to actually snap and be in hospital and my child be in some fucking service somewhere before I'm taken notice of. (Family 57 Wave 2)

As a result, 14 families had given care of their children to someone else, usually an ex-partner or family member, but occasionally foster care organised through the Victorian Department of Human Services. Sometimes the other parent was perceived to be neglectful or hostile to the children, but the relinquishing parent believed they were choosing 'the lesser of two evils'.

[It was] weird and painful because at that time, at the beginning of it, I had a place, like I was staying with my dad and my brother so I had somewhere, but at the back of my mind knowing that my mother was sleeping in the car and stuff like that ... It was a little bit weird for me and my dad; I didn't feel like it was a good place for me at the time. (Family 7b Wave 2, 13-year-old son who lived with his father while his mother and sister lived in rooming houses or slept in their car)

One single mother of four children had a miscarriage while they were living in her car. She was hospitalised for nearly two weeks, during which time the children went into state care. As a former ward herself, this mother was tormented by being forced to relinquish her children.



Many parents were frightened that they would lose their children, either through voluntary relinquishment because they could not cope or where this was threatened by ex-partners, accommodation providers and others. For example, when one parent complained to her rooming house provider about unsafe electrical cords, the proprietor made threats about her parenting.

They came back with various allegations of me being out late at night with the baby and all sorts of things and threatened to report me ... It was really a power game and I didn't want to risk playing them and losing my child. (Family 13 Wave 1)

The families often had histories of violence and trauma, and parents were highly motivated to protect their children from such harm or re-exposure to trauma. They were, however, unable to fully control their environments while homeless and many were exposed to violence and experienced fear. The fears they held were well-founded. A significant number addressed such threats by voluntarily relinquishing their children for a time, although in some cases this led to custody disputes. It is a testament to their care that only one child was reported as experiencing physical harm. Safety remained the overriding concern of the parents, including psychological wellbeing, as we discuss next.

## 6.2 Children, trauma and families

The longitudinal method revealed participants' views on the immediate needs of the families at different times and the shift in priorities over time. This allowed insight into not only how the families approached their current circumstances but how this related to issues in their past. This provides an understanding of the extent to which their identity and world view informed their response to their crisis.

In responding to questions about responsibilities and rights, a very clear 'core' belief set emerged. The parents saw it as their responsibility to raise healthy, educated and psychologically well children. For children with disabilities, it was to enable the child to be their personal best. Within this belief set, there were different foci of concern through the three waves.

At Wave 1, when the majority were in some form of crisis accommodation, the main concerns of the parents were the inability to provide nutritional food, the disruption to schooling and regulation of the children's behaviour and attitudes. The latter involved the desire both to compensate (especially with material things) and to engage with their children about their circumstances.

It sort of makes you feel like a bad mother. I love my children, I love my children, and I usually feed them healthy food. (Family 12 Wave 1)

A small number of families used childcare during the crisis phase of their homelessness. Childcare meant that a parent knew their child was safe, was eating good food and had stability and routine while the parent looked for housing. It was possible for them to have their children in childcare because they could postpone payment.

Kinder has been really good. They know everything that's been going on and I'm not ... Her childcare bill is \$1700 at the moment. (Family 51 Wave 1)

At Wave 2, food concerns were replaced by a more general concern for children having friends and being positive and happy. Concerns about schooling focused on doing well at school rather than missing school. There was far less stress on material things as compensation.

At Wave 3, most were very positive about their children who they thought were happy at school and doing well socially. There were concerns about teenagers, particularly with preparing for VCE. The teenagers themselves downplayed their own stresses.

I don't ask for extensions like I did before, so I think that we're getting there. (Family 32b Wave 3, daughter starting VCE)

An attachment to the idea of the rights of the child<sup>24</sup> was evident in how parents prioritised their children's psychological wellbeing before all else. There was a particular desire to prevent psychological harm.

I just didn't feel that she should have to be exposed [to drugs and alcohol]. (Family 35 Wave 1, child lived with grandmother while mother slept in car or at agency)

In nine families, a parent had been a ward of the state as a child and many of them had childhood experience of child protection services. Seventeen families had had some kind of intervention or threatened intervention by the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) during the research. Three families had had a child go into temporary care with DHS at some point. Two had a child who was made a ward.

While there was some fear of DHS intervention, and former wards had negative experiences of state care, there is surprisingly little rancour towards DHS. This can be explained by families of origin often being the source of trauma. DHS intervention was viewed as welcome or at least necessary rather than as a threat by many of the families. This reflected the parents' own often traumatic childhoods. They were putting their children's welfare before anything else. One single father with three children agonised over whether to move to the country, revealing the anxiety involved in ensuring that the children's needs took priority.

I'm always mixed up about, thinking about, well, should I do something, but if it's for me or whether it's for them or whether it's for us or what's better for me or for them or for us. I've kind of decided that it's got to be what's better for them, but then who's to decide what's better for them? I mean, I am their parent, but am I making the right decision? (Family 20 Wave 3)

The focus on psychological wellbeing reflects the parents' own experience of trauma, and of counselling or therapy (63%). Through psychotherapy the adults acquired cognitive tools and life skills that allowed them insight and empathy. They had goals and strategies. They were very articulate about their needs. While much trauma would remain to be managed, the process of psychotherapy had in other respects empowered them. Just as some parents said they wouldn't want to change what had happened to them because of the personal growth they experienced, their teenagers likewise believed they were better people for the experience of homelessness.

I wouldn't change any of it if I could because I guess that is who I am today. (Family 33b Wave 1, teenage daughter)

### 6.3 Family pets, trauma and safety

Pets occupy a very special place in the lives of those who have them, and for families they are frequently a core element of family life. Many parents had experienced very considerable stress and pain as a result of their homelessness and they were anxious to shield their children from such hurt. The loss of pets and its impact upon the children therefore took on a particular emotional quality.

Almost half of the families (27 of 57) wanted to talk about their pets; losing, keeping or acquiring new pets was an important part of their experience of homelessness. Mostly the families had cats and dogs but some had birds, lizards, spiders, rabbits, guinea pigs, fish and even, in one case, a sheep.

At Wave 1, some families had faced or were facing the loss of much-loved family pets as they were living in crisis accommodation of various types where it was not possible to have pets. The families were typically propelled into homelessness with little preparation, but also assumed they could find a new rental property quite quickly. They literally lurched from crisis to crisis. In some cases, such as fires or forced evictions, pets had to be found, and then a home found for them.

Some families had friends looking after their pets, but were anxious that they would not get them back, becoming afraid that their friends would come to love the animal too much. Others were hoping to get assistance through channels such as Animal Aid.

They've taken everything else off him, and I just can't take his cats away from him ... I've got to a point where I think they can't take anything else away from us, they can't hurt us any more than they have already. (Family 19 Wave 1)

While much of the focus was on their children's feelings, pets were also important to some adults. For parents who were frequently isolated, alone and under enormous pressure, pets were vital companionship which benefited their mental health.

<sup>24</sup>Gadda, A. (2008) Rights, *Foucault and Power: A Critical Analysis of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Edinburgh Working Papers in Sociology, no. 31, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh.

It was just a really dark, heavy feeling and my depression got so bad. I would stay up in my bedroom and wouldn't want to come out. That's why I got the dog, so I could go outside and start walking.  
(Family 51 Wave 1)

The loss of pets at Wave 1 was an emotional wrench for both children and adults. While parents worried about the impact on their children, their own attachments were very evident. Pets are family members and a source of solace. However, they complicated the families' future housing options. A standard rental lease prohibits pets. While none of the families mentioned previous problems, some were concerned that their pets would make obtaining a future tenancy difficult.

At Wave 2, as housing circumstances began to improve, some families had been able to get their pet(s) back or to get new animals as part of renewing the routines of everyday life and stabilising their family. By Wave 3, as housing/living conditions had improved further in many cases, new animals were an important part of the process of making a home. Some had chosen dogs to protect their family if they continued to feel unsafe, for example, because of the area they lived in.

It's an awful world. You know what I mean? So, they can't – she can't go anywhere. That's why we got the big dog. (Family 20 Wave 3, living in public housing)

For almost half of those interviewed, losing pets was part of the process of stripping back their family and was a very potent symbol of their loss of control; it was 'like losing a family member' and came on top of the loss of possessions discussed in section 5. Getting pets back or obtaining new ones provided emotional support to children and parents, as well as practical benefits for health and safety. Families who had experienced violence and suffered trauma often found particular solace in their pets.

## 6.4 Summary

In addition to confirming other research findings which show that that exposure to abuse and violence is a major pathway into homelessness for families with children, this research found that it was difficult for some families to avoid abuse and escape violence *whilst* homeless. Those responsible included family members (other than partners or ex-partners), co-residents, neighbours, other service users and some accommodation providers. This is an important finding and suggests that safety is a basic need in considering any housing solution, particularly where children are involved. This is particularly the case where parents and/or children are already traumatised by prior abuse or violence.

Parents were well aware of the consequences of abuse and violence, and also identified other threats to health and safety such as poor quality housing. They sought to protect their children but often lived in fear. Pets were important for about half the families and for both parents and children, particularly where there was trauma through exposure to abuse and violence.<sup>25</sup> Pets also made the families feel safer. Losing pets was a part of dismantling family and home; regaining them, or getting new ones, was a potent symbol of rebuilding family and home, and reassertion of autonomy and control.

The families repeatedly sought assistance and were ready and willing to engage with service providers. They readily communicated their needs and fears regarding violence and trauma. Service delineation and inadequate funding meant responses were mostly short-term, piecemeal and often inappropriate. Yet it is hard to overstate the importance to the families of their experiences of receiving good support. While families are not amongst the visibly homeless – that is, sleeping in public view – their presence in the waiting rooms of welfare agencies could hardly fail to be noticed. Homeless families are not a 'hard to reach' population.

<sup>25</sup>Searby, R. (2011) 'Pets and companion animals: Why this is an important issue', *Parity*, 24(4), pp. 5-6.

## 7 - BEING PART OF THE MAINSTREAM – BELONGING

By applying ideas about citizenship as practice which draw attention to social identity, participation and inclusion, the research was able to determine how the families' perceptions and views in regard to their selves, their children and society changed over time.

For many of the families, their experience was seen, by Wave 3, as a kind of journey. They had done a lot of soul-searching. Many had experienced trauma earlier in their lives and had undertaken psychotherapy, and this meant that they had good skills to bring to bear on understanding and responding to their situation. Their reflections on their experiences of homelessness, and on social relationships in particular, provide a powerful insight into the ways in which social identity, participation and inclusion all contribute to a sense of belonging.

### 7.1 Social identity as a family

Social identity refers to how people see themselves as part of a group or groups, as opposed to personal identity, which refers to individual characteristics and traits.<sup>26</sup> Those interviewed for this study strongly identified primarily as families. The families did not just experience a material crisis; their sense of place in community, of belonging, was seriously shaken. Many responded to their experience of homelessness by taking control of their lives and using it as a basis for personal transformation and for working to change aspects of the Australian community.

In Australia, 'family' identity and the 'rights of children' are validated and valorised in many ways.<sup>27</sup> When the families first approached homelessness agencies for assistance they assumed that their status within a family with children would ensure rapid attention to their needs. They were therefore surprised when they sought housing assistance that being a family did not seem to matter.

I'd also like her to look at me as a human being with kids and a family. (Family 35 Wave 3)

They had believed that families were entitled to support. They assumed that if they ever really needed help from the community it would be there.

If they need help, you just can't just leave a fallen soldier, can you? You've got to pick them up, they're human beings; everyone falls. (Family 26 Wave 3)

Conscious of the stigmatising impact of the term 'homeless', the interviewers avoided using this term and instead referred to the families' 'housing situation'. Yet despite this, 45 families used the word at least once themselves in response to the questions. They believed homelessness was common, including amongst families, and hence a mainstream issue. It was seen as a housing and cost-of-living issue and related to the prevalence of domestic violence. 'Homeless' was a label they were willing to accept, not just because it gave them access to housing, but because it was a statement of fact. The families felt the stigma of homelessness but unlike being part of a family, it was a label, not a social identity.

Most of the parents had strong preconceived ideas about what they expected to get when they approached homelessness agencies, which were informed by their social identity as family. This is important, as ideas about their entitlements shaped their relationship with agencies, particularly if they were disappointed, and affected the extent to which they felt they had choice and control in regard to those relationships and the decisions they were required to make about assistance that was offered.

The families actively resisted any erosion of their agency and presumptions of their exclusion from the mainstream of society. They felt that they had little or no control in relation to access to accommodation and support services, but kept asking until they got what they needed. The extent to which the families insisted on their needs being met has added greatly to our understanding of family homelessness.

<sup>26</sup>Hogg, M.A. and Vaughan, G.M. (2002) Social Psychology, 3rd edn, Prentice Hall, London.

<sup>27</sup>For example, Council of Australian Governments (2008) National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. The framework's motto is 'Protecting children is everyone's business'.

The families were asked at Wave 3 to reflect on their experience of agencies. Equal numbers at that point in time felt positively (nine) and negatively (eight), with three times as many reporting mixed feelings (24). The families were uniform in wanting material assistance (both housing and financial support), and in wanting to be treated with respect and dignity.

I don't go to them [agencies] very often because I believe it's my children, my job, so I'll go out and I'll do what I need to do. (Family 39 Wave 3)

The need of families to maintain control, and for parents to exercise their mandate as the expert on their family's needs, whilst recognising their need for considerable personal support, is an important dynamic for service agencies to recognise. The relationship between the agency and the families may suffer from unnecessary conflict if this is not understood and if conditions are imposed that undermine the parental role. At Wave 1, the families wanted agencies to understand the priority for getting their children to school and the myriad other things that children need, the first and most important being safety and routine. In later waves the lack of recognition was reflected in the effort to place families into private rental when they had tried this before and knew that they had had inadequate income to make it work. Not only does this undermine parental decision-making, it also leads to families being further impoverished when the tenancy fails and a new cycle of homelessness occurs.

Despite living in very difficult circumstances, and moving around, some parents were remarkably resilient, had a strong sense of personal agency and developed strategies to try and improve their circumstances. In some cases, these strategies were at odds with the assumptions and requirements of the homelessness service system, whilst in others they were more in tune with, and enabled by, support from that system.

The process that they had been through was often called 'fighting for my family'. It was a fight that kept them motivated and in some cases politicised them. The experience of homelessness had been for many a 'journey'. At Wave 3, they had at a cognitive and emotional level regrouped and in some senses were more settled than they had been, even if their housing circumstances were still unstable and they were financially vulnerable.

## 7.2 Participation in the mainstream

### 7.2.1 Children and schools

The families in this research did not see themselves as marginalised, but as part of the mainstream. The parents were supported by 'everyday institutions' which took a family-focused approach to child welfare, permitting the families to maintain a strong sense of participation in and belonging to the mainstream community.

The parents remained focused on the needs of their children over the three waves. Two-thirds (37) had school-aged children. Of these, 22 had school-aged children with some kind of wellbeing issue. This vulnerability on the part of the children meant that parents suffered even more anxiety and stress. Of the 22, 14 of the children had psychological issues and some were under the care of mental health professionals. Overwhelmingly, the parents' concerns focused on the psychological impact of homelessness on their children.

At Wave 1 when most were in crisis, apart from surviving day to day, parents' concerns centred on children missing school or the trauma of changing schools.

Yeah, I don't want to move her around too much. I want to create a sense of ... The biggest thing for her would be a sense of normality. (Family 11 Wave1)

Schools were a primary source of support for families, since they shared the parents' focus on the psychological welfare of children as well as education. They were also a conduit to getting specialised support for the children.

But she [daughter] shut right down. I went to see the school's psychiatrist and the school principal and asked if they could help her. (Family 39 Wave 1)

The support of schools affirmed their role as parents within a family. At a time when they were unable to exercise much control over what was happening to their family, the schools validated parents and provided normality.



They've given her one-on-one counselling, shown her around the school and just taken her under their wing. (Family 9 Wave 3)

Over Waves 2 and 3, keeping their children in school and happy at a school was incredibly important to the families. Schooling provided education, which was viewed as very important, but also stability and normality.

Parents who felt happy with their children's school felt affirmed. However, if the school was not working out for the child they removed them to a new school. Some parents went to considerable lengths to have their child at the same school they attended prior to becoming homeless but long drive times to and from school took a toll on both parents and children. Parents actively engaged with schools; for some, schools were literally a large part of their community, contributing to a sense of belonging.

## 7.2.2 Social relationships

Very few of the families had strong or close relationships with their family of origin. Sometimes this was because they were migrant families (10) or came from backgrounds in which leaving a relationship, whether due to domestic and family violence or not, meant that they were shunned by their families. Some had very difficult relationships with ex-partners and 'in-laws'.

Thirty-nine of the 57 families moved during the three waves of the study. While a few were reluctant to put roots down when they knew they would be moving again, having children in childcare, preschool or school meant that children did create place-based relationships. Children's conception of time means they live much more in the moment and will form attachments. If children are engaged, it makes it hard for parents to avoid being engaged themselves. By Wave 3, the children had largely 'bounced back', as the families put it.<sup>28</sup>

They settled down and they got to know the neighbourhood, they got to know a couple of the kids in the neighbourhood, so they feel as if there's some sort of network. (Family 52 Wave 3)

For families with children, place-based attachments are fundamental to belonging. The research provides insights into how place and belonging is actually transformed by children's needs and routines. While preference was for places that were familiar and near loved ones, 'family-friendliness' was highly sought after. This was construed as having neighbours with children of similar ages with whom children could safely socialise.

I felt like I belonged ... Some neighbourhoods you say "hi" to your next door neighbour but this one is like everyone's – it's like one of those fairy tales. It's like those stories you watch on *Desperate Housewives*. (Family 52 Wave 3)

Not surprisingly, then, friends were important in providing both assistance such as a place to stay and moral support. That said, many claimed not to have friends, while others saw homelessness as a means to break with the past. This was especially true for those who had issues with drugs or alcohol. At Wave 1, the families tended to talk about the recent past rather than their immediate situation. For some, calling on their friends for assistance had caused a breakdown in the relationship. These families were very hurt by this process. Families were also pressured by agencies to stay with friends, which appears counterproductive in terms of long-term recovery.

[Agencies would ask,] "Have you got friends you can stay with?" We'd pretty much almost exhausted our friends through that period. (Family 18 Wave 1)

At Wave 2, there was a greater sense of loss and isolation. While many had friends, their circumstances, lack of money and sometimes change in location prevented a lot of social contact, especially in person. Families were disappointed by friends and acquaintances who avoided them. They also struggled with friends' inability to understand their circumstances.

<sup>28</sup>This finding is in contrast to other research; for example, McCoy-Roth, M., Mackintosh, B. and Murphey, D. (2012) 'When the bough breaks: The effects of homelessness on young children', *Child Trends*, 3(1), pp. 1-11; Gibson, C. (2010) 'Homelessness and child wellbeing', *Communities, Children and Families Australia*, 5(1), pp. 35-45; Moore, T., McArthur, M. and Noble-Carr, D. (2011) 'Lessons learned from children who have experienced homelessness: What services need to know', *Children and Society*, 25(2), pp. 115-26.

Only a couple of my friends only sort of really know about it, but I don't think they really can relate.  
(Family 44 Wave 2)

At Wave 3, families were more settled and had had time and space to reflect. Some parents had new partners but there was still some isolation. The families had become very sensitive to the varied forms that abuse could take place in relationships.

[Homelessness has] made me realise how selfish people can be ... I also have less compulsion to help them. (Family 6 Wave 3)

Many families gained valuable insight into their relationships and were empowered by the new understandings they had. For some, the experience of homelessness reinforced their lack of trust in people, but for a sizeable group it was a catalyst for revelations or insights that were ultimately empowering. They gained an insight into either their own behaviour and thinking or that of those close to them. These understandings were not always without distress, but they had explanatory power and/or offered direction. By Wave 3, 'trust' was often described as something that had been negotiated, was being renegotiated or always required negotiation. This suggests renewed emphasis on control and power in relationships.

I know that I can trust people; I just choose not to ask for anything. (Family 11 Wave 3)

Overall, families were probably more careful and considered about friendship, rather than hardened. Belonging involves relationships of trust. This is an important addition to our understanding of the impact of homelessness on friendships and therefore belonging.

### 7.2.3 Wider social and economic participation

Despite their circumstances, 17 of the 53 parents interviewed in Wave 1 were able to maintain their involvement in social activities. This ranged from being a 'soccer dad' and coaching footy at school, to attending church, camping, volunteering, playing bowls and having a stall at a market, to attending a homeless persons' support group and other self-help groups. At Wave 2, participation in social activities of this type had declined, with 10 parents still engaged, and at Wave 3 increased slightly again to 12. The reasons for this are unclear, but may include the increase in numbers of parents in work or study/training in Waves 2 and 3, as shown in Table 4. The need to feel connected to the mainstream was, for the parents, a significant motivation for becoming involved in work or study/training.

I'm back full-time [studying] ... I really want a real job ... I want to be a good role model; I want my kids to be important to someone too. (Family 31 Wave 1)

Work was another means of participating and having visible membership of the broader community. Not everyone could work due to parents/children having a disability or the presence of young children. Despite an often low financial return, being employed engendered a sense of belonging to the mainstream. For one family, work meant paying taxes and therefore being literally counted, included and heard.

I'm so proud of my appointment job because it's real and legal and I'm going to do a tax return.  
(Family 6 Wave 2)

In summary, participation in everyday life is an important element in belonging.<sup>29</sup> For the children, and often for their parents, school was central to participation in community life. In other respects, the families participated through friendships, with children more likely to form place-based attachments. The nature and type of other types of participation was chosen by family members.

## 7.3 Inclusion

One of the most interesting aspects of the research was the extent to which experience of homelessness affects perceptions of inclusion/exclusion in political life. Many, but not all, of those interviewed chose to comment on their political views, providing rich data about the negotiation of citizenship.

<sup>29</sup>See Lister, R., Williams, F., Anttonen, A., Bussemaker, J., Gerhard, U., Heinen, J., Johansson, S., Leira, A., Sim, B. and Tobio, C. (2007) *Gendering Citizenship in Western Europe*, Policy Press, Bristol, p. 9.

The background to the first wave of interviews was the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria. In the early interviews, this emergency and the community response to it figured quite strongly. On one hand, the families felt a part of the community; they shared the pain of the victims and the pride in the wider community coming to the aid of those affected. On the other hand, there was a realisation that the 'real Australian way [of] "Help thy neighbour"' had been lost except in such major emergencies. A number of families likened homelessness in Australia to a disaster, but one that is ignored. One family who made a donation of \$10 to the bushfire appeal remarked on the response:

Was absolutely fabulous, but it takes disasters, where there's disasters happening every day. (Family 8 Wave 1)

Homelessness changed the motivations and direction of both adults and children. Some were engaged in advocacy; others were training for roles in community welfare or law, or wanted to become real estate agents to combat discrimination. Volunteering was aimed at helping others.

What you need in life, I think, [is] to try and help everyone ... Why do people go without when other people have extra? (Family 14 Wave 3)

A teenager explained how she thought she could make a difference.

Before this happened I just wanted to be a forensic scientist, but now ... I want to be a counselling psychologist so I can help anyone who needs help. (Family 32b Wave 2)

Within the literature on homelessness there is a concern that residency requirements for electoral registration disadvantage homeless people.<sup>30</sup> The capacity to vote is widely regarded as a fundamental right of citizenship (as it is more traditionally defined). The research found that the families, who went to the polls twice during the study (a federal election and a Victorian state election took place in 2010), voted if they wanted to, with only one adult seeing homelessness as a barrier.

I'm big on the whole election thing and I don't just go and vote for whoever. (Family 2 Wave 1)

At Wave 1, there was considerable support for then-prime minister Kevin Rudd and his pledge to end street homelessness.

I noticed when Kevin Rudd said he was going to help make sure to get basically everyone off the street. (Family 44 Wave 1)

At Wave 2, cynicism about voting was stronger, and there was clear disapproval of Julia Gillard replacing Rudd as prime minister. Despite the investment made into housing by the federal Labor government, most of the families felt that that they did not benefit. Overall, a significant proportion was now disenchanted.

I must say I refuse to vote because of things like housing. (Family 20 Wave 2)

Arguably, the families' experience in this regard reflected that of the general population over the same period.<sup>31</sup> Asked about their perception of, or feelings towards, government there was little difference in attitudes between Waves 1 and 2 and little change at Wave 3, although responses became more emphatic, if not angry. The theme that dominated was loss. Loss of status and entitlement was frequently explained as being the result of loss of community values, including the demise of egalitarianism. They felt alienated.

I don't think many people work in that community sense anymore. It's just out for themselves and it's just a selfish world. (Family 51 Wave 3)

<sup>30</sup>Castles, S. (2001) 'No home, no vote: How is that fair?' *The Age*, 5 June; Costar, B. (2004) *Bringing Democracy Home: Enfranchising Australia's Homeless Citizens*, Homeless Sector Workshop; Lester, N and Guerra, A. (n.d.) *Improving Access to Voting Rights Amongst the Homeless in Brisbane*; Lynch, P. and Harrison, B. (2003) *Votes for the Homeless: Submission to the Victorian Government Regarding Homelessness and the Right to Vote*, Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic, Melbourne.

<sup>31</sup>Bean, C. and McAllister, I. (2012) 'Electoral behaviour in the 2010 Australian federal election', in Simms, M. and Wanna, J. (eds) (2012) *Julia 2010: The Caretaker Election*, ANU ePress, Canberra.

## 7.4 Summary

The families saw themselves as being part of the mainstream. Through the three waves of interviews, they talked about the ways in which their experience of homelessness had affected their senses of self, their family relationships, relationships with other groups, and membership of and inclusion in the broader society. Collectively, and cumulatively, these shaped their sense of belonging.

First and foremost, they had a strong social identity as families which shaped their views. This affected their contact with support agencies, both in terms of the assistance parents thought should be available to protect their children and whether they felt their family unit was supported.

Identity as a family also shaped the ways in which they participated in mainstream institutions such as schools and received support that was also available to other members of the community. There was an emphasis on social relationships, particularly friendships, although engaging in work and study was also seen as participation.

Finally, there were a range of views on citizenship more generally. There was a strong view that community values of equality and mutual support had weakened in Australia, except in the case of natural disasters. Strong identification as a family meant resisting any implication that families who were homeless were not as deserving of assistance as, for example, bushfire victims.

## 8 - CONCLUSION

The research investigated the lived experiences of citizenship of families (parents/carers with children), who identified as being homeless at the commencement of the study, through an 18-month period. The research findings (presented in sections 4 to 7) enable some conclusions to be drawn about the nature of homelessness for families as conventionally understood (briefly summarised in this section) but, importantly, also broaden understanding of the dilemmas associated with caring for children in situations which are unsafe and potentially harmful to their emotional and psychological wellbeing, as well as broader issues of social identity, participation and belonging. In addition, we consider implications of the research for framing policies and programs on family homelessness and reflect briefly on the research approach.

### 8.1 Homelessness and poverty

**There is a continuum of insecure and difficult living conditions experienced by some families, rather than a dichotomy between being homeless or not homeless.**

The families understood homelessness primarily as being about difficulties in accessing housing in the context of lack of financial resources and ability to meet the cost of living. Most came from backgrounds which were not financially secure and their family and friends were in similar positions. They did not have the financial resources to deal with life's disruptions.

**The housing conditions of most of the families improved over the three waves, although many were not 'settled' at the end of the research.**

An increase in competition in the private rental market from the mid-2000s pushed families who were previously coping out of the agent-managed sector into the landlord-managed sector, and subsequently into various types of crisis accommodation such as rooming houses, motels, couch-surfing and other very temporary arrangements. These crisis arrangements were completely inadequate for families with children, lacking basic facilities, and were often unsafe. Many families were able to get accommodation through specialist homelessness agencies, although sometimes this was inappropriate for their needs, at least initially. Instability in housing prolongs homelessness, including the effects of conditions attached to crisis and transitional accommodation. Importantly, some families in longer-term accommodation were not settled and still considered themselves homeless due to ongoing instability in tenure, overcrowding and exposure to violence.

**Resolving homelessness did not in itself end poverty; poverty is chronic and cumulative, not episodic.** Being homeless with children is very expensive, and the cumulative costs contribute to ongoing financial crisis. Parents engaged in different short-term strategies, including using credit, to improve their financial situation, some of which carry considerable risk. Notwithstanding an improvement in their housing circumstances, families struggled to repay debt, and more used emergency relief in Wave 3 than in Wave 1. Getting work may be part of a longer-term solution and has other benefits, but in the short term it did little to alleviate financial problems.

## 8.2 Families and caring

**Homelessness is about loss: a progressive stripping back of the elements of family and home, which the families regarded as effectively one and the same.**

The families experienced loss: loss of settled accommodation, loss of possessions, loss of family pets and loss of family support and friends. This loss can be understood at both a material and an emotional level; for example, loss of possessions incurred expenses but also was seen by the families as threatening their ability to parent: to keep their children well-presented and clean and to preserve memories.

**Family homelessness invokes fear of loss of children; those who voluntarily separated from their children chose the terms of their loss rather than permitting circumstances to disempower them totally.**

In this process of cumulative dispossession, parents feared that their family might be stripped back further through loss of their children. This fear was very real; 14 families had relinquished care of at least one of their children, usually to an ex-partner or family member but occasionally to a foster carer, and 17 had some form of intervention, or threatened intervention, by DHS acting in its child-protection capacity during the three waves of the research.

**Caring for children normally occurs in the private sphere, but a consequence of homelessness is that the boundary between the private and public spheres is permeable, with more scrutiny, and sometimes surveillance, of caring practices by others.**

The research highlights the complex set of unavoidable obligations between parents and children and between families and the state, which are often overlooked. Throughout the 18 months, the parents each kept trying to find a place which was safe for living in and caring for children, initially in terms of day-to-day care, such as feeding their children, and subsequently, as their housing circumstances improved, centred on having control over their immediate environment; re-establishing the routines of everyday life, including regular schooling; rebuilding social connections; and, for some, participating in study or paid work.

**Parents/carers had clear ideas about what was required to care for their children and resisted any erosion of their agency and being marginalised. They found that support agencies sometimes perceived them as 'being difficult' or 'having an attitude' because of this.**

The parents focused on enabling the emotional and psychological wellbeing of their children, and sometimes themselves, particularly where they had experienced trauma. This corresponds to a distinction between 'caring for', referring to day-to-day tasks such as providing food and clean clothes, and 'caring about', referring to the feelings that people have for each other, particularly where protection of dependents is involved.<sup>32</sup>

Despite sometimes very difficult living conditions, the parents each sought to assert their autonomy and maintain as much control as possible over their family's circumstances. In this they were assisted by a range of 'everyday' institutions such as childcare, schools, GPs, Centrelink and the Victorian DHS.

**The families experienced, and were exposed to, violence from a range of people (other than intimate partners) during their homelessness, which meant that they were not safe.**

The number one priority for the families was to be safe in their housing, with privacy for caring and the ability to exclude others, and to have a place in which they and their children could live without fear, but this was often not achievable.

<sup>32</sup>Graham, H. (1983) 'Caring: A labour of love', in Finch, J. and Groves, D. (eds), *A Labour of Love: Women, Work and Caring*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.



Safety was of paramount concern, with one-third having experienced domestic and family violence as part of their pathway into homelessness, and many more having experienced violence earlier in their lives. Many also experienced abuse and were exposed to violence during homelessness. This came from family members, co-residents, neighbours, other service users and providers of some accommodation.

**Some of the families were offered, or referred to, accommodation which was unsafe. This often re-traumatised family members, with cumulative experience of abuse and violence, or fear of these, layering new onto existing trauma.**

Homelessness services have a difficult task in that they are not everyday institutions and they lack resources to cope with the demands upon them. This manifests in pressing families to stay with family of origin, referring those with children to rooming houses or refuges which are unsafe, and threatening eviction or actual evicting families from transitional housing properties. All of these can be seen by parents as undermining their families and generating greater risk of having to separate from their children, either voluntarily or not, and has been called an 'ongoing system of abuse'<sup>33</sup>.

**While much trauma remains to be managed, many of the parents, and some of their teenagers, talked in Wave 3 of the personal growth they experienced through the period of their homelessness.**

By Wave 3, most families were in the process of rebuilding their lives. Some components of this were material: better housing conditions and strategies to stabilise their finances. There were other important elements of making home and shoring up family life, including regaining possessions and pets, or getting new ones, and re-establishing social connections, including place-based connections, particularly for the children. Families were assisted in this by accessing counselling, psychological services and psychotherapy.

### 8.3 Social identity, participation and belonging

**The participants in the research had a very strong social identity as families; they did not understand how families with children were not seen as a priority when they observed others without children getting assistance.**

Whilst they accepted the label of 'homeless' as a factual one and as a means of getting the assistance they required, the participants in the research had a strong social identity as families. They believed that families with children were entitled to support when facing homelessness and had assumed that if they ever needed help, it would be provided. When they first approached specialist homelessness services and other agencies, they found that this was not necessarily the case and were often shocked.

The families saw the ethic of care and the ethic of justice (discussed in section 2) as one and the same, but in practice found that the ethic of justice (formal rules and rationing) often trumped the ethic of care. They expected to be supported as a family unit and could not understand how this could be the case. Families often did not understand the homelessness support system, since these are not an everyday institution, and did not feel that they received support that gave due recognition to families as a social unit.

**Homelessness was not just a material crisis about lack of housing and money, as the parents/carers had thought, and their experience shook their sense of place in community and of belonging.**

Families' contact with homelessness and other agencies was time-consuming for a while when they were in crisis but, as their housing circumstances improved, this contact declined. The families receive support from mainstream institutions such as doctors, dentists and counsellors that was also available to other members. Schools were a central conduit of support for their children.<sup>34</sup>

The parents wanted their children to be clean and well-presented, to go to school and to have friends. There was an emphasis on retaining and building social relationships, although they had learned to be cautious. The families wanted to engage in the mainstream, including work and study, as they were able. The research supports the view that 'belonging is not a fixed state, nor just a material one; it involves also emotional and psychological dimensions' and that an important element of belonging is participation.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Bartholomew, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>34</sup>The research corresponds with a study of younger homeless children which found that schools can help provide a sense of belonging and link them with supports to help them through their experience of homelessness (Moore and McArthur, op. cit.).

<sup>35</sup>Lister et al., op. cit., p. 9.

**The families resisted being marginalised as 'homeless' and saw themselves as families who are part of the mainstream.**

Whilst their experiences had shaken them, the families had strong views on citizenship more generally. They felt that community values of equality and mutual support had weakened in Australia, except in the case of natural disasters. They did not understand why homelessness experienced by families did not evoke the same type of support. Some had followed political debates about homelessness and there was some disillusionment that such a high-profile policy issue had not translated into practical community support when they needed it. They resisted any implication that families who were homeless were not as deserving of assistance as bushfire victims. In this sense, the research has a contribution to make to recent debates about social inclusion, referring to the multiple dimensions of membership of a community and the processes through which some people and some families are excluded.

## 8.4 Implications of the research for policy and programs

Considerable advances have been made in recent years in recognising, and developing a policy framework for addressing, family homelessness in Australia. The framework, outlined in the 2008 Australian Government White Paper, *The Road Home*, and subsequent government homelessness strategies, funding and administrative arrangements, supports prevention and early intervention through program delivery, intensive case management and improved connection to a range of government and non-government agencies, as well as improved access to social housing. The policy framework has been embedded in National Agreements endorsed by all Australian governments, most notably the National Affordable Housing Agreement<sup>36</sup> and the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap)<sup>37</sup>. Preventing and addressing family homelessness is also a key element of national plans agreed to by all governments, including the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children<sup>38</sup> and the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children<sup>39</sup>. There has also been significant investment in research and trialling different models of early intervention 'on the ground'.

Within this context, the findings of this research have many implications for policy, programs and practice. Of these, three appear particularly important.

**A renewed focus on anti-poverty strategies is required, including measures to improve the supply of affordable housing, recognising that a service-based model cannot be fully effective without these.**

The approach to family homelessness embedded in national agreements and plans relevant to homelessness discussed above entails a service-based approach, which envisages assistance to families in finding housing, resolving debt, improving school attendance for children, linking parents with education and employment, expanding social networks and reducing risk of domestic and family violence.<sup>40</sup> The adults interviewed in this study were grateful for assistance they did receive, particularly when they could access additional support for their children, although in many instances they found that the assistance was often not available to them when they needed it or in the form that they needed it. However, they saw homelessness for families primarily as due to an economic force beyond their control, exacerbated by their personal circumstances. The implications of this are the need for a renewed focus on the underlying factors which mean that low-income families are vulnerable to homelessness if their circumstances change. This includes the need for measures to enable low-income families, particularly single-parent families, to maintain a decent standard of living from a combination of income support payments and wages (appropriate to their circumstances)

<sup>36</sup>Council of Australian Governments (2009) National Affordable Housing Agreement, COAG, Canberra, <<http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/housing/affordable/national-agreement.pdf>> (accessed 5 June 2013)

<sup>37</sup>Council of Australian Governments (2008) National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap), COAG, Canberra, <[http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/health\\_indigenous/indigenous-reform/national-agreement\\_sept\\_12.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/health_indigenous/indigenous-reform/national-agreement_sept_12.pdf)> (accessed 5 June 2013)

<sup>38</sup>Council of Australian Government (2009) Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020, COAG, Canberra, <[http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/child\\_protection\\_framework.pdf](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/child_protection_framework.pdf)> (accessed 5 June 2013)

<sup>39</sup>Council of Australian Governments (2009) National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children, COAG, Canberra, <[http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05\\_2012/national\\_plan.pdf](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/national_plan.pdf)> (accessed 5 June 2013)

<sup>40</sup>Australian Government (2008), op. cit., p.29.

and strategies to improve the supply of affordable housing available and accessible to such families to prevent homelessness.

**Approaches to family homelessness should respect and support the family as a unit and empower parents to care for their children, drawing on a new 'ethic of care' which is sensitive to issues of power and control for the families in the lead-up to, and during, their homelessness.**

The parents interviewed for this project were of the view that they had primary responsibility for the care of their children and that the onus was on them to ensure that their children's rights were upheld, a view which resonated most clearly with the approach taken in the National Framework for Protecting Australian Children.<sup>41</sup> They had believed they belonged to a community that was committed to the rights of children but found a community ill-prepared to provide for the most fundamental right, that of safety and shelter. They found that they were supported by everyday institutions such as schools in their quest to protect and care for their children, but found specialist homelessness services difficult to understand, including the rules of access, and often did not feel that the system gave due recognition to the family unit, their role as the 'expert' on their own family and the difficult decisions they had to make in recognising that children had separate rights to care and protection. In particular, parents could not understand why services could turn away a homeless child, irrespective of whether that child was accompanied by his/her parents or not. Traditionally, homelessness services have catered for individuals, not families as a social unit, and some were set up to protect individuals from their families. Parents are treated as individual clients and increasingly children are also considered as individual clients, potentially undermining relationships of care and dependency.

**A more explicit strengths-based approach to family homelessness is required which utilises mainstream agencies and services, recognising the resilience of families and their resistance to being marginalised.**

The Australian policy framework for family (and other) homelessness in Australia centres on a combination of preventing homelessness through identifying individual 'risk factors'<sup>42</sup> and mitigating homelessness through provision of services in a more holistic way than previously. There are potentially many benefits to be gained from such an approach in terms of services but a downside is that families can be viewed as having a 'bundle of deficits'. The families interviewed in this study were realistic about their 'deficits' (e.g. lack of education, limited experience of work, low level of skills), but also drew in many cases on substantial strengths (e.g. in budgeting, parenting skills, community engagement and literacy concerning psychological trauma), which enabled them to work to attain some stability for themselves and their children. Many of the parents showed considerable resilience and ingenuity in addressing their circumstances, however, grim these were. The research findings support the development of a more explicit, strengths-based approach<sup>43</sup> which recognises that people can resolve their own situations and make their own decisions if they get the support they require. The capacity to develop strengths-based practice, whilst it accords with much practice in professions such as social work, is affected by resources; the more constrained resources are, the higher the likelihood of rationing service to those with the greatest deficits, negating a strengths-based approach.

## 8.5 Reflections on the research approach

The research approach explored the everyday lived experience of citizenship of the families as they negotiated homelessness. This is a very different approach to much of the research into family homelessness which is about prevalence and duration of homelessness; identification of families vulnerable to, or at risk of, homelessness; and the efficacy of service interventions.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Council of Australian Governments (2009) Protecting Children is Everyone's Business, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup>Scerra, N (2012) 'Strengths-based practices: An overview of the evidence', *Developing Practice: The Child, Youth and Family Work Journal*, 31, pp. 43-52.

<sup>43</sup>As recognised by the Australian Social Inclusion Board (2011) Strengths-based approaches to service delivery, Australian Government, Canberra, <<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/strengths-based-approaches.pdf>> (accessed 13 June 2013)

<sup>44</sup>This approach contrasts with *Journeys Home: Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability*, Australian Government, Canberra, <<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/housing-support/programs-services/homelessness/journeys-home-longitudinal-study-of-factors-affecting-housing-stability>> (accessed 28 June 2013), which is a longitudinal and quantitative study of income support recipients which examines risk factors, individual characteristics and intervention points in respect of homelessness

The research approach enabled a number of crucial new understandings over and above the conclusions discussed above:

- Whilst family members had a formal *status* as citizens, they faced considerable difficulty in being recognised and supported as citizens in practice.<sup>45</sup> This difference in practice affected their sense of a 'fair go' and diminished their sense of belonging.
- The families did not consider they were marginalised or socially excluded. This runs counter to policy frameworks which see family homelessness as an extreme manifestation of social exclusion.
- Experiences were shaped not only by contact with service providers but also by the attitudes and behaviours of family and friends, real estate agents, private landlords and accommodation providers and a range of other people in the community.
- The families were propelled downwards in terms of poverty, and outwards in terms of belonging, through the attitudes and behaviours of a range of people and organisations. In this way, 'social exclusion' can be redrawn as a set of relationships between the 'excluded' and the 'excluders'.
- 'Common decency' was often weak or absent in the relationships between other people and homeless families, indicating that 'home' is not only a physical or emotional shelter but also a moral one. As primary care is regarded as a female responsibility, this can be understood as a gendered experience of poverty and homelessness.

Finally, it is important to note that a citizenship approach clearly links with the way in which we understand human rights more generally.<sup>46</sup> It is evident from the research that the 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.

<sup>45</sup>Lister, R., op. cit., ch. 1, discusses this distinction and its implications, drawing on the contradictions that it raises.

<sup>46</sup>United Nations, General Assembly (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25(1) and relevant provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

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INSIDE BACK COVER

