More than just a roof

A study of family homelessness in Queensland

MORE THAN JUST A ROOF:
A STUDY OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN QUEENSLAND

**A Report of the
Family Homelessness Research Project**

October 2003

QUT

**Centre of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies
In conjunction with**

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by
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Abbreviations and acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CAP	Crisis Accommodation Program
CRS	Community Rent Scheme
CSHA	Commonwealth State Housing Agreement
DV	Domestic Violence
FAYS	Family and Youth Support Services
FEAT	Family Emergency Accommodation Townsville
HEF	Housing Establishment Fund
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
RTA	Residential Tenancy Authority
SAAP	Supported Accommodation Assistance Program
SFI	Strengthening Families Initiative
SHA	State housing authority
SHAC	Shelter Housing Action Cairns
SHAP	Supported Housing Assistance Program
TAASQ	Tenant Advocacy and Advisory Services Queensland
TICA	Tenancy Information Centre Australasia

Preface

The reality of children and their adult carers having no roof over their heads, that is, family homelessness, is one of the major social tragedies confronting our society.

As this research Report argues, thousands of Queenslanders experience this unacceptable reality each year. None of us who sleep comfortably in our homes should ignore this phenomenon of social exclusion.   The impacts on children are horrendous precipitating emotional, behavioural, health and educational problems which may significantly disrupt their development.

Social policies which address educational, health and welfare needs all become secondary when finding somewhere secure to live is the critical and urgent need.

And yet, as the Report argues, family homelessness is a phenomenon requiring more than the provision of affordable housing, though the challenge to governments (federal, state and local) to lift their game in that regard is paramount.

The title of this Report, *More Than Just a Roof,* is designed to give evocative support to the Report's findings that measures beyond the mere provision of housing are required to address the needs of family groups facing a housing crisis. A clear message was conveyed by agencies who work in this field that they are wary of becoming accommodation providers if they are not properly resourced to address the complex and multi-faceted needs of homeless families.

So, in addition to improved access to housing and housing assistance, the Report's recommendations include:

❖ policies and practices which identify families 'at risk' of becoming homeless;

❖ improved and integrated service responses, including dedicated child care facilities and 'Indigenous friendly' practices in services dealing with homeless families;

❖ better access by clients to complaints services;

❖ enhanced use of domestic violence protection orders to reduce the risk of family homelessness.

The Report is addressed primarily to the Queensland State Government (especially Departments of Housing and Families, and Queensland Health), though it recognises that the effectiveness of State programs is contingent on Federal and local government support. Co-operation with State agencies and, in particular, the Minister for Families the Honorable Judy Spence MP, and the Minister for Housing the Honorable Robert Schwarten MP, during the preparation of the Report gives us confidence that the State Government will give serious consideration to the Report's recommendations.

The Uniting*Care* Queensland Centre for Social Justice initiative to pursue this research as an exercise independent of Government resulted from feedback in the Centre received from service delivery agencies including Lifeline Community Care and Micah Projects Inc.   The perception was that family homelessness was a growing social justice issue and that a substantial project which gives voice to those affected by it was urgently needed.   The Centre became the lead agency and contributor for the project which was joined by the

following partners who contributed financially to the research: Micah Projects Inc., Social Action Office (Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes Qld), Queensland Shelter, Brisbane City Council, Lifeline Community Care (Families Division), and Wesley Mission Brisbane.

This effective and considerable partnership of stakeholders interested in this matter collaborated with the Queensland University of Technology Centre of Philanthropy and Non-profit Studies to provide matching funding and the research expertise necessary to complete the project. The research commenced in March 2003 and was completed seven months later.

It is important to note that the collaborating research partners are committed to pursuing follow up strategies to ensure that the Report has practical impact.

As Chair of the Project Management Committee, I wish to thank all who assisted in the research but chiefly Mr Peter Walsh, the senior researcher, who deserves full credit for this important and scholarly Report. He was supported and supervised by Professor Neal Ryan and Professor Myles McGregor-Lowndes who maintained an active interest in the project. My thanks also go to members of the Project Management Committee who met regularly and provided valuable advice:

Shelley Nielsen, Adrian Pisarski, Annette Arnold, Karyn Walsh, Jim DeCouta, Candy Page, David Baker, Roksana Khan, Narelle Smith, Heidi Matheison, and Kate Kunzelmann (Secretariat).

Dr Noel Preston
Project Management Chair
Uniting*Care* Queensland Centre for Social Justice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Objectives of the research

There were three objectives for the research:

➢ to identify the nature and extent of family homelessness in Queensland;
➢ to identify and assess the nature and adequacy of current responses to family homelessness by government (Commonwealth, state and local) and non-government agencies; and
➢ to make recommendations for improved and innovative responses to family homelessness at policy, program and service delivery levels for government and non-government agencies.

Overview of research on family homelessness

In summary, a brief review of the literature on family homelessness identifies a number of consistent themes and issues.

➢ Family homelessness can be understood as resulting from the complex interaction of structural factors and individual capacities. Key structural factors include access to affordable housing along with issues of poverty and unemployment. Affordable housing is particularly important. However, a range of interpersonal and individual factors also play a role. Effective responses require a balance of interventions directed at both sets of factors.

➢ Domestic and family violence plays a key role in homelessness, particularly for women and children. The links between domestic violence, the experience of abuse in childhood, current child abuse and homelessness creates an 'insidious' impact. An understanding of the 'totality of violence' present in some families is required.

➢ Homelessness is one of the most damaging disruptions to family life and impairs parental functioning. Humiliation, isolation and fear of child protection intervention are some of the issues facing parents in homeless families.

➢ The impacts of homelessness for children are quite dramatic, particularly in terms of behavioural problems, health problems and adverse educational outcomes. Reducing the residential instability for children in homeless families is critical to avoid interruptions with schooling and the associated adverse impacts on children's health and development.

Quantitative assessments of family homelessness in Queensland

➢ There are a significant number of homeless people who are not using SAAP services. It is possible that less than one third of families experiencing homelessness are using SAAP services.
➢ Domestic violence is the most significant cause of family homelessness for people accessing SAAP services.

> ➢ Access to SAAP accommodation for both couples with children and males with children appears to be a significant problem.
> ➢ Drug and alcohol issues appear to be prevalent for couples without children. This group were provided with drug and alcohol support more than any other client group in SAAP.
> ➢ Residential instability is a major cause of homelessness for couples both with and without children. Eviction and/or usual accommodation being unavailable were the main reasons for these client groups seeking SAAP assistance in over 40% of support periods.
> ➢ Poverty or "financial difficulties" is a significant issue for homeless families in SAAP.
> ➢ Couples with no children had the highest proportion of unmet needs in SAAP.

Methodology

Data collection for this research consisted of five main sources:

> ➢ An analysis of issues raised in focus groups and interviews with 62 homeless families;
> ➢ A detailed demographic and statistical analysis of the characteristics of families participating in the research;
> ➢ An analysis of SAAP and ABS data relating to homelessness in Queensland;
> ➢ A detailed literature review of Australian and international studies relating to family homelessness;
> ➢ A series of validation workshops with government and non-government sector agencies involved in responding to family homelessness.

Overview of families participating in the research

There were 62 participants who were involved in focus groups or interviews for the research project. The profile of these participants was:

> ➢ 80% were women and 20% men;
> ➢ 43% were Indigenous;
> ➢ 43% highest educational achievement was grade 10 or primary school;
> ➢ Two thirds were in receipt of sole parent pensions as their main source of income;
> ➢ 85% had stayed in 2 or more places in the last 12 months – almost a quarter (22%) had moved more than 5 times;
> ➢ Families had stayed in a number of different places – with friends/relatives, in a tent with the kids, sleeping rough in parks, in cars, caravan parks.
> ➢ Over half (53%) had 3 or more children;
> ➢ Average age of children was 9 years (age range was 8 weeks old to 25 years);
> ➢ Over half the families had children not currently living with them (mostly in care);
> ➢ Parents with low educational achievement were more likely to have children not living with them;
> ➢ Parents who had moved more than 3 times were more likely to have children not living with them;
> ➢ Average age of women when they had their first child was 20 years (age range was from 15 years to 35).

Key themes emerging from the research

> ➢ Families have experienced patterns of housing exclusion as a result of a combination of factors including exclusion from private rental through being 'blacklisted' on

tenancy databases, discrimination from real estate agents and exclusion from public housing as a result of past debts. For some, exclusion from conventional options meant resorting to extremely precarious and insecure living arrangements (cars, tents, etc).

➢ Gaining access to housing and housing assistance has been a major issue because of affordability problems, difficulties in accessing public housing and a lack of supported housing options catering for families.

➢ Poverty and financial stress facing the families has made them vulnerable to a housing crisis and accentuated housing affordability problems.

➢ Domestic and family violence has been a major contributing factor for the homelessness experienced by many of the women and children.

➢ Drug and alcohol problems have been prevalent for a number of the families. Drug and alcohol abuse was often related to ways of dealing with depression and stress from the circumstances of homelessness.

➢ The impact of homelessness for the children involved has been significant, including emotional impacts, behavioural problems, schooling disruptions and difficulties in getting children to attend school.

➢ For the parents involved, important issues were the need for support in parenting (particularly managing children's behavioural problems), the impact of stress and other negative feelings on the capacity to parent, the lack of child care (especially respite care), the fear of child protection intervention and concerns about being judged as bad parents.

➢ Indigenous families faced some special issues including overcrowding, often linked to the importance of extended family networks, extreme discrimination and issues arising from violence in remote communities.

➢ Access to and treatment by services was a major issue, particularly the lack of information about available services and poor treatment by some services experienced by a number of families. Positive characteristics of services included flexibility and responsiveness, respect, practical assistance and regular, supportive contact with agency staff.

OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The report provides a series of recommendations based on the two key overarching themes of the research, namely the need to improve access to housing and housing assistance and the need to improve access to services and support.

Access to Housing and Housing Assistance

Recommendation 1:
That the Commonwealth Government commission an independent and transparent review of the effectiveness of the Commonwealth Rent Assistance scheme in delivering housing affordability for low-income households. This review should include an examination of the benefits of rebalancing funding arrangements for housing assistance to improve the supply of affordable housing.

Recommendation 2:
That the Queensland Government examine options for increasing state funding levels for public housing as a social investment in creating a Smart State.

Recommendation 3
That the Department of Housing undertake an implementation project to develop a more formal and consistent approach to linking vulnerable and 'at risk' tenants to support services at the local area office level. This work should aim to:

- Develop a monitoring system to identify potential 'at-risk' tenancies on the basis of a set of risk indicators such as rent arrears, consistent complaints from neighbours, difficulties with maintaining property standards, etc.
- Identify potential support agencies in the local area and develop referral protocols to these support agencies.
- Consider establishing a dedicated position such as Housing Support Coordinators in each Area Office to provide a point of coordination between the Department of Housing and support agencies.
- Develop a more formal relationship with the Department of Families at the local level.

Recommendation 4
That the Department of Housing undertake an independent review of policy and practice in relation to treatment of debt incurred by tenants and clients of the Department. This review should aim to:

- Examine current practices across Area Offices in relation to how clients with debts are treated, with a particular focus on consistency of treatment;
- Clarify a policy position in relation to treatment of debt and access to assistance by clients who have incurred debts with the Department;
- Make recommendations for how this policy is communicated to clients and applied with consistency across Area Offices of the Department

Recommendation 5
That the Department of Families and the Department of Housing jointly lead, in conjunction with non-government service providers, a Linkages and Protocols project aimed at developing appropriate policy and practice tools to facilitate better integration between SAAP and the broader social housing sector.

Recommendation 6
That the Departments of Families and Housing place a higher priority on the provision of additional emergency and medium-term accommodation units for families in SAAP/CAP.

Recommendation 7
That the Department of Housing establish a 'brokerage' fund to provide financial assistance to families and households in housing crisis. The fund should aim to improve access to private rental housing and to assist eligible clients to remain in private rental. The fund would also aim to assist clients to access overnight or emergency accommodation where no other option is available.

Recommendation 8
That the Department of Housing re-instate the housing access, outreach and re-location functions of TAASQ services.

Recommendation 9
That the Residential Tenancy Authority establish a clear monitoring mechanism to ensure that recent legislative amendments dealing with the impact of tenancy databases are being implemented effectively. Consideration should be given to whether the Industry Forum convened by the RTA is such an appropriate mechanism.

Recommendation 10
That the Residential Tenancy Authority and the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commission jointly undertake an in-depth investigation into discrimination in the private rental market in Queensland with a view to developing and proposing appropriate responses such as law reform, education campaigns and other appropriate strategies.

Recommendation 11
That the Department of Housing and the Department of Local Government and Planning incorporate provision for the development of local area homelessness strategies in the proposed State Planning Policy for Housing and Residential Development.

Recommendation 12
That the Local Government Association of Queensland undertakes a project to assist local councils in Queensland in the development of local area strategies to address homelessness and housing affordability issues. This work should aim to identify a range of possible actions and instruments that councils could adopt as part of a broader strategy to respond to homelessness.

Access to Services and Support

Recommendation 13
That the Department of Families establish a new family support initiative in each Departmental region to support homeless and vulnerable families and their children. The Victorian Strenthening Families Initiative should provide the basis for implementation of this new initiative.

Recommendation 14
That the Department of Families establish a dedicated child care facility for children of families who are homeless or in crisis as a component of a new state-wide family support initiative. The potential for funding this component through the Commonwealth's Child Care Programs for children with special needs should be explored.

Recommendation 15
That the Queensland Government provide recurrent funding for a state-wide Homeless Services Information and Referral System.

Recommendation 16
That the Queensland Government establish a mechanism to enhance accountability of services provided by the non-government sector. Such a mechanism should have the authority and capacity to receive and investigate complaints by users of community services and, where appropriate, provide a point of redress for clients. Consideration should be given to extending the existing Ombudsman Office to establish a Community Services Ombudsman to fulfil this role.

Recommendation 17
That the Department of Families take a lead role across government and in conjunction with the non-government sector in the development of an industry approach to improving quality of service provision.

Recommendation 18
That the Department of Families in conjunction with the Queensland Police Service and the Department of Justice undertake a review of the implementation of the uptake and use of ouster orders with a view to ensuring that these provisions are being utilized for the maximum benefit of persons aggrieved by domestic and family violence and recommending ways to improve implementation.

Recommendation 19
That the Department of Families negotiate with all regional domestic violence services to incorporate a Fax-Back program into their current service provision. Current service activities should be adjusted to accommodate this function, based on existing funding allocations.

Recommendation 20
That services dealing with homeless families and individuals, including SAAP agencies, adopt policies and practices that are 'Indigenous-friendly', including cross-cultural training, regular liaison with Indigenous-specific services. A particular emphasis should be placed on taking active steps to recruit Indigenous staff.

Recommendation 21
That the Department of Families, Department of Housing and Queensland Health develop a more comprehensive program of support for young women who are pregnant and/or parenting, with a particular emphasis on those who lack access to support from family or others.

Recommendation 22
That the Department of Families establish a 'best practice' research and dissemination capacity as a means to inform service providers on outcomes from existing service trials and trends emerging from research literature indicating directions for best practice in family support and effective interventions for vulnerable people.

1. INTRODUCTION

The public perception of homelessness typically focuses upon the older single male sleeping in the bus station or on a park bench. The highly visible nature of those who are chronically homeless periodically rises to the surface of public attention and is often a source of disquiet for those responsible for managing public spaces frequented by the homeless.

Since the mid-1980s, with the introduction of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), homelessness has been recognised as an issue warranting a joint response from both Commonwealth and state governments. As it is often described, it is the 'flagship' program response to homelessness.

In the late 1980s, there was also the 'discovery' of the plight of young people who were homeless. The National Inquiry into Homeless Children by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, headed by Brian Burdekin (HREOC, 1989), highlighted in a way not seen before, the crisis of homelessness for young people and shattered many of the stereotypes of homelessness. This ground-breaking inquiry unmistakably placed the issue of youth homelessness on the public policy agenda.

The issue of family homelessness is, however, not so visible or publicly accepted. Indeed, recent market research undertaken by the Victorian Homelessness Strategy to find out about broader community attitudes to homelessness indicated that the general public did not accept that there are homeless families in Australia (VHS MAC, 2001).

For many of the agencies working with families who are homeless and in crisis this is not news. As one agency recently reported: "Family homelessness is hidden homelessness. Although homeless families are not as visible as park dwellers, their plight is just as real". (Hopkins, 2003: 3)

This report seeks to make a contribution to developing an improved understanding of the issues and experiences facing families who are homeless and in crisis.

The research project that forms the basis of this report has arisen from a growing concern by a number of agencies about the seemingly increasing prevalence of homeless families presenting for assistance. These agencies have been the instigators of this research. With the support of the Uniting*Care* Centre for Social Justice, a partnership arrangement was entered into with QUT to investigate the issues of family homelessness in more depth with a view to gaining a better understanding of the nature and characteristics of family homelessness and what was required to provide more adequate responses to the issue.

The research has drawn primarily on speaking directly with homeless families through a series of focus groups and interviews. As such, it seeks to give voice to the experience of these families.

The research does not claim to provide a comprehensive account of the issue of family homelessness. The limited resources available for this study have imposed corresponding limitations on the scope and methodology of the research. This has meant that other perspectives such as those of service providers and key policy makers were not able to be included to the fullest extent.

Rather, this research represents a contribution to developing a better understanding of the issues for homeless families, inviting further discussion and research.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the research does pose a series of recommendations for improving responses to homeless families and these proposals require serious consideration.

Objectives of the Research

There were three main objectives for the research:

1. To identify the nature and characteristics of family homelessness in Queensland;
2. To identify and assess the nature and adequacy of current responses to family homelessness by government (Commonwealth, state and local) and non-government agencies; and
3. To make recommendations for improved and innovative responses to family homelessness at policy, program and service delivery levels for government and non-government agencies.

Overview of this report

This report consists of five key sections. This introduction provides an overview of the rationale and objectives for the research. Section 2 explores the dimensions of family homelessness in two parts – first, an overview of the current state of research on family homelessness is provided and, second, an analysis of the quantitative data on family homelessness in Queensland is reviewed, based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the SAAP National Data Collection Agency. The background to the research project, including methodology and a profile of the families participating in the research is provided in Section 3.

The 'heart' of this report is contained in Section 4 where the key themes and issues arising from the focus group discussions and interviews with homeless families is reported.

Finally, Section 5 of the report explores the implications of the themes and issues emerging from the primary data collection with homeless families and proposes a series of recommendations for improving responses.

2. DIMENSIONS OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

What do we know about the dynamics relating to family homelessness and how prevalent is it? This section of the report explores the dimensions of family homelessness in two parts. First, an overview is provided on the current state of research on family homelessness, identifying a number of key themes and issues arising from a review of recent research literature. Second, an analysis is undertaken of the quantitative data available on family homelessness in Queensland. Two main sources of data are used to obtain a clearer picture of family homelessness – an analysis of the 1996 Census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics providing an estimate of homelessness on Census night 1996 and an analysis of data collected by SAAP agencies in Queensland.

AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

This section will review a number of key themes and issues arising from the literature on family homelessness[1] in terms of pathways into family homelessness, housing and support issues, impacts of homelessness on parents and parenting and the impacts of homelessness for children of homeless families.

The issue of family homelessness has received relatively little attention in the Australian research literature compared to international studies, prompting some to suggest that family homelessness as an issue has been "overlooked" (Bahro, 1996)[2].

The main Australian studies of family homelessness are Bartholomew (1999), Bahro (1996), Efron (1996), Horn (1996) and McCaughey (1992). A key protagonist for family homelessness in Australia has been Hanover Welfare Services, a large service delivery agency for homeless families in Melbourne. McCaughey's (1992) study was commissioned by Hanover in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Family Studies and this research represents the first serious attempt to examine family homelessness as an issue in Australia. Hanover have also been instrumental in undertaking other research studies examining issues such as the health status of children in homeless families (Efron, et al, 1996) and the characteristics of families using their services (Horn, 1996, 2001). This agency is also undertaking a longitudinal study of family outcomes for 42 families who have experienced a housing crisis (Kolar, 2003).

Bartholomew's (1999) study involved in-depth interviews with 30 families residing in or having recently left private hotels as well as focus groups with outreach and/or referral workers in the field. McCaughey's (1992) study interviewed 59 people who had approached Hanover Welfare Services in Melbourne.

Whilst there is a relatively sparse literature on family homelessness in Australia, there have been a significant number of studies conducted in the United States on this issue over the past 10 years or more. Despite the fact there are obvious demographic, cultural,

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[1] This section draws on literature primarily relating to family homelessness and has not canvassed the broader literature concerned with homelessness in general.

[2] Certain issues associated with family homelessness have received more detailed attention. For example, research on domestic violence has been significantly enhanced through the Commonwealth Government's *Partnerships Against Domestic Violence* (PADV). An important contribution has also been a special edition of *Parity* (Council to Homeless Persons) on 'Responding to Family Homelessness' in February 2002. This issue contained a number of useful articles from practitioners about this issue.

institutional and other differences between the contexts of family homelessness in the United States compared with Australia, the US studies nevertheless do have some relevance. The United Kingdom research literature on this issue also appears to be sparse.

Pathways to family homelessness

Reflected throughout the literature is an attempt by researchers to understand the 'causes' of family homelessness and/or the pathways by which families become homeless. At least three related approaches to this issue emerge from these discussions: a complex combination of structural and personal factors; a focus on risk factors (and, to a more limited extent, protective factors) and the 'insidious' impact of violence. A common characteristic of family homelessness also appears to be the extent to which families have 'doubled-up' with relatives or friends prior to becoming literally homeless.

Combination of structural and personal factors

Within the research literature, there is a general recognition that family homelessness is the result of a combination of structural factors and individual characteristics. McCaughey (1992) points out that pathways to homelessness for the families involved in her research were complex and the result of a number of social factors as well as more personal factors: homelessness is directly related to poverty, unemployment and to lack of affordable housing, but …

> *There are other complex causes, often linked, that are deep-seated and difficult to deal with. These include poverty and unemployment, the instability of family and other relationships, the violence of men towards women, lack of personal support networks, health problems, and the inability of families to cope with problems, to establish some control over their lives and to use available services.* (p6)

She goes on to identify a number of patterns emerging across the families including unhappy families of origin (poverty, violent and/or drunken fathers, sexual abuse, being placed in statutory care), poor performance at school, unemployment and poverty, unstable relationships, lack of family support, poor health, involvement in crime, frequent moves and lack of affordable housing.

Jacobs (1994) characterises early debates about family homelessness in the United States as starkly polarised and one-dimensional: at one end of the analytical spectrum, families were homeless as a result of a shortage of safe, affordable housing and, at the other end, homeless mothers, by virtue of individual psycho-pathologies, were held largely responsible for their families' situation.

However, these sorts of simplistic, dichotomous explanations of family homelessness are inadequate. Jacobs argues that the problem of family homelessness needs to be seen as the result of complex interactions among larger structural trends and the individual capacities of the families. What is required is neither simply housing nor primarily human services – it is a combination of structural and individual interventions to provide an "economic package" (education, employment training and placement, child care) and a "care-giving package" that includes home management skills, parenting education, parent support (Jacobs, 1994: 397).

In a similar vein, Rog and Gutman (1997), on the basis of a large evaluation of a homeless program for families, note that, although permanent affordable housing was "absolutely necessary" for homeless families, it was not itself sufficient to achieve stability and self-

sufficiency. What was also required was continuing and comprehensive health, housing and support services.

However, other researchers argue that family homelessness is more straightforward than this. Shinn (1997) notes, on the basis of her longitudinal study of 564 homeless families, homelessness is essentially a temporary state that is resolved by the provision of subsidised housing. Even for those with severe mental health problems, subsidised housing is a key factor, although in these circumstances she concedes there is more evidence that "social services are also required"(p755).

In a subsequent study (Shinn, et al, 1998), four key variables are identified as contributing to homelessness for families: persistent poverty, behavioural disorders (including mental health and substance abuse problems), impoverished social networks and loss of affordable housing. However, she concludes that "subsidised housing was virtually the only predictor of residential stability after shelter" (p1655).

The state of play in the research around this issue is summed up by one researcher in the following terms:

> To ignore or deny the underlying structural causes, just as to ignore or deny the impact of personal histories and personality features, is disruptive for an effective action. In the public debate about homelessness, the policy makers typically tend to ignore or underestimate the impact of structural causes; the lobbyists tend to ignore or underestimate the impact of personal factors. (Avramov, 1999:24)

Risk factors and 'predictors' for family homelessness

In the US literature, a common approach appears to focus on identifying particular risk factors or 'predictors' that make families more vulnerable to homelessness. In a review of a number of empirical studies on family homelessness, McChesney (1995) identifies a set of eight risk factors for family homelessness: single mother headed family; minority family; young age of family head; substance abuse by mother or her male partner; childhood victimization (sexual or physical abuse, foster care); adult victimization (domestic or sexual abuse); pregnancy or recent child birth; and lack of social support (particularly housing support).

Similarly, Bassuk and her colleagues (1997) identified a number of childhood and adult risk and protective factors that predicted family homelessness. Childhood predictors included foster care placement and mother's use of drugs. Adult risk factors included minority status, recent eviction, interpersonal conflict, frequent alcohol or drug use and mental health problems. On the other side of the coin, protective factors included receiving cash assistance or a housing subsidy, high school education and having a larger social network. Figure 1 below provides a summary of some of the factors involved in family homelessness.

Burt (2001) fills out the association between childhood difficulties and adult homelessness. She identifies a number of childhood experiences as risk factors for later homelessness, including using alcohol and other drugs at an early age, having school problems, childhood abuse or neglect, foster care and running away from home.

In a quantitative study, Wong and others (1997) identify a "proportional-hazards model" for predicting exit and re-entry to shelters for homeless families in New York. Key variables include race and ethnicity, family size, age of family head, pregnancy status and public

assistance recipiency status. They conclude that gaining subsidised housing results in a substantially lower probability of shelter readmission.

Figure 1: Risk and protective factors for family homelessness

			Public Sector Assistant for Low-Income Families	
			↓ ↓ ↓	
Background Factors	Childhood/ Distal Risk Factors	Proximal Risk Factors	Precipitating Risk or Protective Factors	
Gender Parental Socioeconomic Status Race/Ethnicity	Events and Conditions in Childhood	1 Work History 2 Mental Health Status 3 Chronic Health Conditions 4 Educational Attainment 5 Victimization 6 Drug & Alcohol Use	1 Monetary Resources 2 Social Resources 3 Non-Cash Benefits 4 Current Health Status 5 Current Substance Use 6 Primary Tenancy 7 Pregnancy 8 Dependent Children 9 Partner Violence	**Homelessness**
			↑ ↑ ↑	
			Housing & Job Market Conditions	

Source: Bassuk, et al, 1997

The 'insidious' impact of violence

Throughout the literature a consistent theme emerges about the insidious role that violence plays in family homelessness. Within the Australian context, the links between domestic violence and homelessness for women and children have long been recognised (Chung, et al, 2000; Bagshaw, et al, 1999; Keys Young, 1998; Niel and Fopp, 1992; Nunan, 1995). This research shows that in order to live without violence from their partners women are forced or encouraged to leave their home and seek other accommodation, resulting in considerable social and personal disruption and financial disadvantage. These difficulties are further compounded for women who are experiencing other debilitating problems such as mental illness or substance dependency.

The impact of domestic violence for children is also a cause for concern. Evidence suggests that there are often negative effects on children who witness or experience domestic violence (Bradshaw, et al, 1999; Smith, et al, 1996; Hague & Malos, 1994). However, there are also concerns about the extent to which there are sufficient services in Australia targeting children to deal with these impacts (Chung, et al, 2000).

The issue of family violence facing Indigenous women and children has also been highlighted by a number of recent reports, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence (2000) and the Fitzgerald *Cape York Justice Study* (2001).

The North American research highlights the links between domestic violence, childhood abuse and homelessness. A study by Columbia University of 439 homeless families in New

York (Institute for Children and Poverty, 1998a) found that 80% of homeless parents experienced family violence at some point in their lives, with 70% having experienced violence or abuse in their own childhood. This report paints a gloomy picture: "Worse yet, today's homeless children will likely follow in their parents' footsteps when they grow up" (p1).

Bassuk and others (2001) in their study of multiply homeless families in Worcester found that the experience of interpersonal violence, especially during childhood, was highly associated with residential instability. They concluded that:

> *… housing vouchers alone may not be enough to prevent repeat episodes of homelessness. The pernicious effects of violent victimization are also associated with severe residential instability. Therefore, to help keep families from returning to shelter, providers and policy makers must be aware of the pervasiveness of childhood sexual abuse and recent partner violence and its relationship to repeated shelter use.* (p317)

These findings are amplified by a number of other quantitative and qualitative studies examining the experiences of homeless families headed by single women who had experienced domestic violence from their partners and, often, childhood physical and/or sexual abuse (Burt, 2001; Styron, et al, 2000; Metraux & Culhane, 1999; Rog and Gutman, 1997; Bassuk, et al, 1996; Browne, 1993).

The links between domestic violence and child abuse is a theme in recent Australian research indicating evidence that different types of violence may occur simultaneously in the same family, and that the presence of one form of violence may be a strong predictor of the other (Tominson, 2000). This research indicates the need to deal with the 'totality of violence' present in families and to develop a more adequate understanding of the relationship between domestic violence and child abuse and its effects on various members of the family, especially children who witness domestic violence and may themselves be assaulted.

Doubling up arrangements

A common theme that comes through from the research on family homelessness is the extent to which families had 'doubled-up' with relatives or friends prior to becoming literally homeless. This was one of the most frequent living arrangements for the families in Bartholomew's (1999) study of families staying in private hotels. The US research also reflects this trend, noting that doubling-up arrangements with relatives or friends frequently ends as a result of conflict (Page and Nooe, 2002; Metraux and Culhane, 1999; Wong, et al, 1998). The prevalence of doubling-up arrangements for homeless families has led Wasson and Hill (1998) to propose a three-stage model for families moving into homelessness: primary residence to doubling-up to homeless shelter. They note that the doubling-up arrangement usually ends as a result of conflict or "sharing difficulties" (p320).

Homelessness and parenting

Another theme in the literature relates to the issues involved for parents in homeless families and the impact of homelessness on the capacity to parent. As Bahro (1996) points out:

> Homelessness is one of the most damaging disruptions to family life. The very basis for bringing up children, namely safety and stability of living conditions, has vanished, leaving the parents with a shifting ground for all attempts at "successful" parenting … The parent will feel … unable to attend to the child's perceived and real needs. Preoccupation with essential living conditions robs the parent of the energy that is needed for maintaining a positive and meaningful relationship with the child. (p226)

Hausman and Hammen (1993) reinforce this sentiment. They highlight the "double crisis" of parenting in homeless families: "many of the factors that contribute to family homelessness may also impair parental functioning" (p358). The parents' capacity to provide support and respond to children's needs is eroded by the experience of homelessness.

In their New York study of the subjective experiences of homelessness for families and children, Choi and Snyder (1999) describe how parents related humiliation, frustration and indignation along with sadness at children's suffering as one of the realities for parents of homeless families. Similar sentiments come through from the families participating in Bartholomew's (1999) study.

McCaughey (1992) reports how, with each move, families shed more and more possessions, thus making it even more difficult to re-stabilise. This was also an issue for the families in the study by Choi and Synder (1999), for the families staying in temporary private hotels as part of the study by Bartholomew (1999) and for those in the study by Styron and colleagues (2000).

Another theme that comes through from the literature is the heightened fear by parents in homeless families about the possibility of child protection intervention. This was an issue in Bartholomew's (1999) study of families placed in private hotels as a form of emergency accommodation. He notes that these families were the victims of systems abuse "whereby the same system that placed families in a particular living situation now required them to alleviate the situation" (Bartholomew, 1999: 112). A concern about possible child protection intervention appears to be warranted, however. Metraux and Culhane (1999) report on a number of US studies where a significant proportion of homeless families did not have all their children with them and in some cases had none with them. This situation was attributed to child welfare intervention (p374-5).

The fear of child protection intervention can be one of the factors leading to increased isolation from support networks for parents in homeless families. In some cases, children were the sole source of social support for parents (Styron, et al, 2000). Similarly, Torquati (2002) reports how the participating mothers in her study had tenuous networks and a history of disrupted relationships. Isolation from support networks is not confined to the parents. Torquati and Gamble (2001) report how half the children in their study of children in homeless families did not identify any friends in their social network and Schmitz and colleagues (2001) report that feelings of isolation were a distinguishing feature for children of homeless families in their study.

Impacts on children

The impact of family homelessness on children is also a major theme in the research. As Hausman and Hammen (1993) point out, virtually all the high risk conditions that have a negative impact on children come together in the situation of homelessness. A number of studies report consistent patterns or impacts for children in three main areas: behavioural problems, health problems and adverse educational impacts.

Behavioural problems

The impact of homelessness on the behaviour and general mental health of children is also a major issue identified in the literature. Homeless children are significantly more likely than the general population to experience behavioural problems such as sleep disturbance, eating problems, aggression and overactivity, and emotional problems such as depression, anxiety and self harm (Amery, et al, 1995; Vostanis, et al, 1996; Vostanis, et al, 1997, Vostanis, et al, 1998). Vostanis and others (1997) point out that such problems are related to exposure to adverse life events that precipitate homelessness – family breakdown, abuse, witnessing domestic violence and poor social networks.

Efron and others (1996) in an Australian study of 51 homeless children found that over one-third of the children had significant behavioural disturbances as rated by their parents. Horn (1996) also found that children in families who had moved often in the preceding twelve months showed more problem behaviours than those who had not.

Danseco and Holden (1998) found that homeless families whose parents had undergone a significant number of life stress events and had extremely high levels of parenting stress were significantly more likely to have children who exhibited behaviour problems. Heightened levels of child behavioural problems and associated parental distress are consistent with other findings on the mental health of homeless children and their families (Holden, et al, 1995; Schteingart, et al, 1995). Similarly, Page and Nooe (2002) found that residential instability was related to the acting-out behaviour of children in their sample of homeless families.

Health problems

Winreb and others (1998) found that homelessness was an independent predictor of poor health status and high service use among children. Health problems for children included high rates of acute and chronic illnesses, nutritional problems, high rates of emergency room use and hospitalisation (p555). Asthma was particularly prevalent, with homeless children twice as likely to have asthma (p560). Nunez (2001) found that over 50% of children become sick more often after homelessness, with asthma as the most prevalent illness. He also found that children were more likely to become ill if they had witnessed violence or abuse (p369).

Similarly, an Australian study involving 51 children in homeless families (Efron, et al, 1996) found that children in the study group had higher than average occurrence of asthma, ear infections, skin problems and development delays. This study also noted that the health issues facing homeless children in Australia may not be as severe as those reported for homeless children in international studies mainly due to the more favourable climate.

Adverse educational impacts

In the Australian study of 51 homeless children conducted by Efron and others (1996), over half the school aged children had attended 5 or more different schools and the children had extremely limited social interactions. Nearly half of the parents had moved house 4 or more times in the preceding 12 months. Similarly, Vostanis and others (1998) found that homeless children were significantly more likely than the general population to have delayed development. Nunez (2001) in a study of 350 homeless families in New York City found that:

- three quarters of school age homeless children perform below average in basic literacy and maths;
- one in four homeless children repeats a grade in school (reinforcing further feelings of exclusion etc.);
- frequent school transfers are a common cause of problems. He estimates that it takes a child 4-6 months to recover academically from a change of school.

Bahro (1996) highlights that reducing the number of housing moves for children in homeless families is critical to avoid interruptions with schooling and the associated adverse impacts on children's health and development.

Summary

In summary, this brief review of the literature on family homelessness has identified a number of consistent themes and issues.

- Family homelessness can be understood as resulting from the complex interaction of structural factors and individual capacities. Key structural factors include access to affordable housing along with issues of poverty and unemployment. Affordable housing is particularly important. However, a range of interpersonal and individual factors also play a role. Effective responses require a balance of interventions directed at both sets of factors.

- Domestic and family violence plays a key role in homelessness, particularly for women and children. The links between domestic violence, the experience of abuse in childhood, current child abuse and homelessness creates an 'insidious' impact. An understanding of the 'totality of violence' present in some families is required.

- Homelessness is one of the most damaging disruptions to family life and impairs parental functioning. Humiliation, isolation and fear of child protection intervention are some of the issues facing parents in homeless families.

- The impacts of homelessness for children are quite dramatic, particularly in terms of behavioural problems, health problems and adverse educational outcomes. Reducing the residential instability for children in homeless families is critical to avoid interruptions with schooling and the associated adverse impacts on children's health and development.

QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENTS OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN QUEENSLAND

Summary

- There are a significant number of homeless people who are not using SAAP services. It is possible that less than one third of families experiencing homelessness are using SAAP services.
- Domestic violence is the most significant cause of family homelessness for people accessing SAAP services.
- Access to SAAP accommodation for both couples with children and males with children appears to be a significant problem.
- Drug and alcohol issues appear to be prevalent for couples without children. This group were provided with drug and alcohol support more than any other client group in SAAP.
- Residential instability is a major cause of homelessness for couples both with and without children. Eviction and/or usual accommodation being unavailable were the main reasons for these client groups seeking SAAP assistance in over 40% of support periods.
- Poverty or "financial difficulties" is a significant issue for homeless families in SAAP.
- Couples with no children had the highest proportion of unmet needs in SAAP.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics

An estimated 25,650 people in Queensland were homeless on Census night 1996, and 105,300 Australia-wide (Chamberlain 1999). Table 1 below provides a breakdown of circumstances for all homeless people in Queensland on census night.

Table 1:   Accommodation of homeless persons in Queensland on Census night 1996

	Number	%
Boarding house	5,774	23
SAAP	2,264	9
Friends/relatives	12,665	49
Improvised dwelling	4,946	19
Total	25,649	100

Of interest is that only 9% of homeless people were estimated to be in SAAP accommodation.

In terms of family homelessness, Chamberlain's analysis of the data does not provide a state breakdown of household type but the **national data** indicates that:

- There were 10,300 homeless couples without children Australia-wide on Census night. Only 1% was staying in SAAP accommodation, 65% were staying temporarily with friends or relatives and 24% were in improvised dwellings or sleeping rough.

- There were 7,200 homeless families with children on Census night – 10,800 adults and 17,000 children. Half of these families were couples with children and the other half single parents with children.
- 91% of the 2,100 homeless families with children staying in SAAP accommodation were single parents with children, while 77% of the 2,400 homeless families staying in improvised dwellings were couples with children.
- There were 6,000 children staying with one or both parents in an improvised dwelling on census night.

Data from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

SAAP is the key program response by government to homelessness. In Queensland, joint Commonwealth-State funding of $44.6 million was provided under SAAP in 2001-02 for 195 agencies. A breakdown of SAAP funded agencies in Queensland by primary target group and funding allocation is provided in Table 2 below.

Table: 2 **SAAP agencies: recurrent allocations and mean funding per agency, by primary target group, Queensland, 2001-02**

Primary Target Group	Agencies	Agencies	Recurrent Allocation	Recurrent Allocation	Mean Funding Per Agency
	(number)	(%)	($)	(%)	($)
Young people	70	35.9	15,917,000	37.0	227,400
Single men only	11	5.6	3,826,000	8.9	347,800
Single women only	1	0.5	360,000	0.8	359,900
Families	27	13.8	3,631,000	8.4	134,500
Women escaping domestic violence	51	26.2	12,630,000	29.4	247,700
Cross-target/multiple/ general	35	17.9	6,608,000	15.4	188,800
Total	**195**	**100.0**	**42,972,000**	**100.0**	**220,400**

Support Periods in SAAP

A support period commences when a client begins to receive support and/or supported accommodation from a SAAP agency. The support period is considered to have finished when:

➢ the client ends the relationship with the agency; or
➢ the agency ends the relationship with the client.

If it is not clear whether the agency or the client has ended the relationship, the support period is assumed to have ended if no assistance has been provided to the client for a period of 1 month.

In 2001-02, there were 18,350 clients of SAAP agencies who were provided with 41,000 support periods.

Table 3 below provides a breakdown of SAAP support periods by client group for Australia. From this, it can be seen that by far the largest client group for SAAP in Queensland is single males, accounting for approximately 54% of all support periods, with families accounting for 20% of support periods.

Table 3: SAAP support periods: client groups by State & Territory, 2001-02 (%)

Client Group	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total	
									%	Number
Male alone, under 25	13.1	12.8	12.1	12.8	14.8	15.5	21.7	8.8	13.0	22,500
Male alone, 25+	44.3	20.1	41.2	25.3	19.7	29.7	24.4	23.3	32.5	56,300
Female alone, under 25	11.4	13.6	10.1	10.9	15.3	13.8	21.9	14.5	12.3	21,200
Female alone, 25+	12.6	13.5	16.7	19.7	15.0	10.5	9.1	20.8	14.7	25,500
Couple, no children	1.1	5.5	2.0	1.9	1.4	2.5	0.8	2.0	2.6	4,500
Couple with children	1.3	5.4	2.5	2.1	2.7	3.6	3.6	2.9	3.0	5,100
Male with children	0.6	1.8	0.7	0.5	0.9	2.0	0.8	0.4	1.0	1,700
Female with children	14.0	25.8	14.3	25.1	29.6	21.9	15.6	26.2	20.1	34,900
Other	0.6	1.5	0.4	1.6	0.6	0.5	2.1	1.0	0.9	1,600
Total	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*..*
Total (%)	**27.0**	**25.3**	**23.6**	**8.2**	**8.2**	**3.3**	**1.5**	**2.7**	**100.0**	**..**
Total number	**46,900**	**44,000**	**40,900**	**14,300**	**14,300**	**5,800**	**2,600**	**4,800**	**..**	**173,400**

Source: SAAP Client and Administrative Data Collections (AIHW, 2002)

Based on the national data collection for SAAP in 2001-02, the following points can be made:

- Families were provided with approximately 20% of all support periods by SAAP agencies in 2001-02 (8,000 support periods out of a total of 41,000 support periods across all SAAP client groups);

- Of the four types of family groups in SAAP, women with children were by far the most numerous, making up 73% of total family support periods and 14% of all support periods;

- There were some significant regional variations. Female clients with children made up 46% of all support periods in the Remote and North West region, 36% in the Ipswich/Logan region and 30% in the Sunshine Coast region (compared to 14% for Queensland). Couples with children made up 15% of all support periods in the Caboolture and Redcliffe region and 14% in the Ipswich/Logan region (compared to 2.5% for Queensland). Table 3 below provides a breakdown for SAAP support periods by region and by client group.

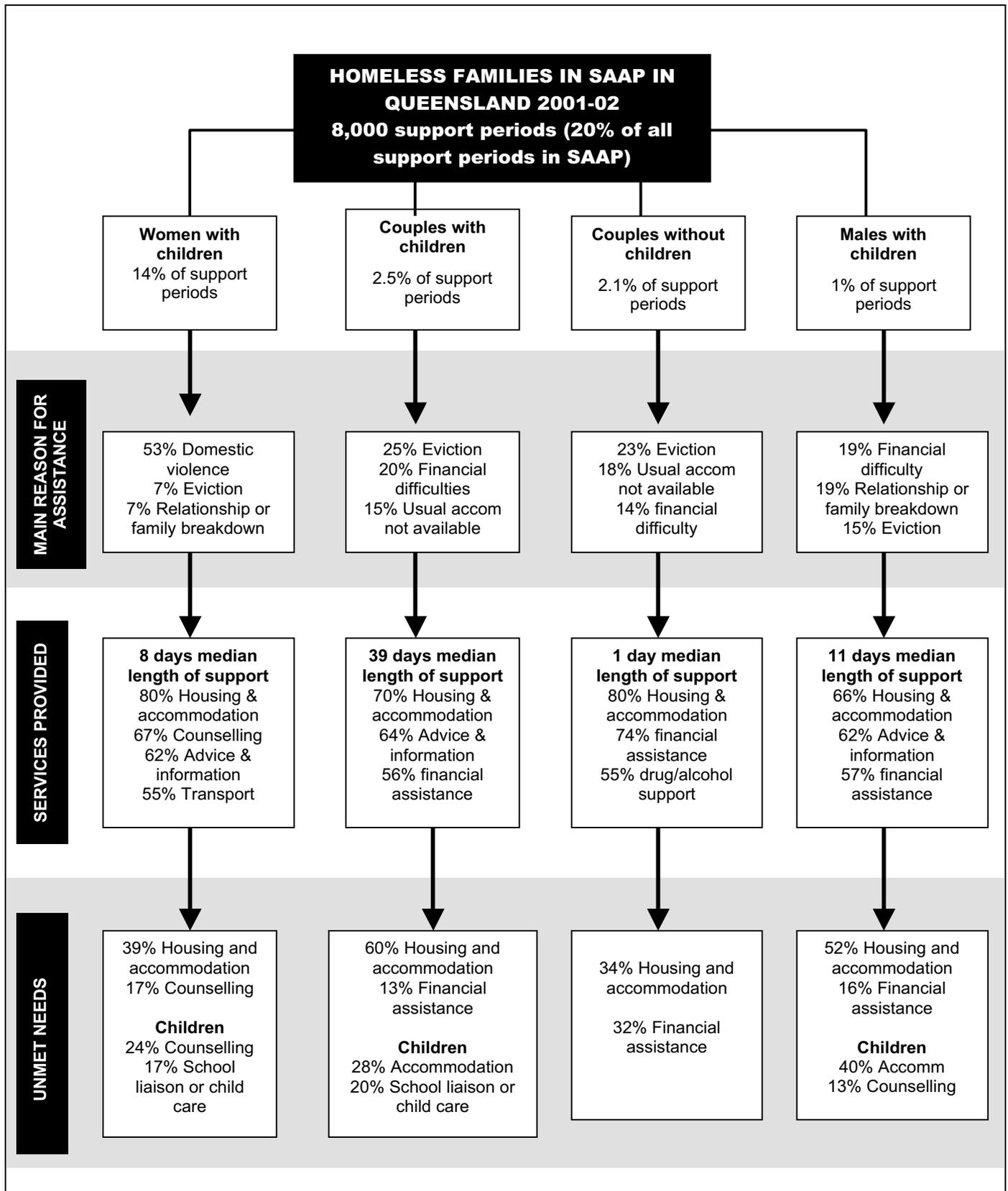**Table 4: SAAP support periods: region by client group, Queensland, 2001-02 (%)**

Region	Male alone	Female alone	Couple no children	Couple with children	Male with children	Female with children	Other	*Total*	Total %	Total Number
Remote & North West	10.6	42.0	0.2	0.9	_	46.1	0.2	*100*	5.6	2,150
Cairns & Tablelands	64.3	28.5	2.8	0.1	0.1	4.1	0.1	*100*	38.9	14,700
Townsville and Hinterland	38.0	27.1	1.2	8.8	2.5	22.3	0.3	*100*	7.0	2,650
Mackay/Whitsundays	57.8	14.2	0.5	5.2	1.1	20.8	0.5	*100*	1.7	650
Central Queensland	34.1	33.2	2.0	5.0	1.3	23.7	0.6	*100*	5.5	2,100
Wide Bay Burnett	55.2	19.1	1.4	2.1	1.1	19.6	1.6	*100*	3.6	1,350
Toowoomba and South West	60.9	11.4	1.4	5.4	0.6	19.6	0.8	*100*	3.3	1,250
Caboolture and Redcliffe Peninsula	29.0	29.3	1.1	14.5	3.2	23.0	_	*100*	0.7	300
Sunshine Coast	26.8	34.3	1.6	4.4	1.2	30.3	1.4	*100*	2.7	1,050
Brisbane	65.3	18.8	1.9	2.1	0.8	10.7	0.5	*100*	22.8	8,600
Ipswich/Logan	17.5	23.2	4.7	14.4	2.9	36.4	0.9	*100*	2.0	750
Gold Coast/Redlands	43.1	34.4	1.8	2.8	0.9	16.7	0.3	*100*	6.1	2,300
Total (%)	53.9	26.5	2.1	2.5	0.7	13.9	0.4	*100*	100.0	…
Total (number)	20,350	10,000	800	950	250	5,250	150	*….*	…	37,750

- The main reason given for seeking support varied according to family type. In 53% of support periods for female clients with children, assistance was sought primarily for domestic violence. For couples both with and without children, the most common reason for seeking assistance was eviction. Relationship or family breakdown was the main reason for seeking assistance for male clients with children.

- The types of services provided to families by SAAP services included accommodation or housing, counselling and general support/advocacy. Drug/alcohol support or intervention was provided to couples without children in 55% of support periods in 2001-02.

- In terms of unmet needs, couples with children and males with children, although only a small group, both reported relatively high levels of unmet need in the area of housing and accommodation (59% and 53% respectively). Female clients with children also reported a high level of unmet need in relation to accommodation and housing (39%).

- There were 8,200 accompanying children in SAAP in 2001-02 (making up 12,100 child support periods) with 91% of these children aged less than 12 years old. The vast majority of these children (87%) were in the company of their mother or female guardian.

- For children accompanying women, the highest proportion of unmet needs was for counselling (24%) followed by school liaison or child care (17%). For children accompanying males, however, the highest proportion of unmet needs was for accommodation (40%). This was also the case for children accompanying couples (28%) followed by school liaison or child care (20%).

Figure 2 below provides a summary of the 'pathways' of family homelessness in SAAP in Queensland, based on the latest available data.

Figure 2:   Pathways of Family Homelessness in SAAP, Queensland, 2001-02[3]

HOMELESS FAMILIES IN SAAP IN
QUEENSLAND 2001-02
8,000 support periods (20% of all
support periods in SAAP)

MAIN REASON FOR ASSISTANCE

SERVICES PROVIDED

UNMET NEEDS

Women with children	Couples with children	Couples without children	Males with children
14% of support periods	2.5% of support periods	2.1% of support periods	1% of support periods
53% Domestic violence 7% Eviction 7% Relationship or family breakdown	25% Eviction 20% Financial difficulties 15% Usual accom not available	23% Eviction 18% Usual accom not available 14% financial difficulty	19% Financial difficulty 19% Relationship or family breakdown 15% Eviction
8 days median length of support 80% Housing & accommodation 67% Counselling 62% Advice & information 55% Transport	**39 days median length of support** 70% Housing & accommodation 64% Advice & information 56% financial assistance	**1 day median length of support** 80% Housing & accommodation 74% financial assistance 55% drug/alcohol support	**11 days median length of support** 66% Housing & accommodation 62% Advice & information 57% financial assistance
39% Housing and accommodation 17% Counselling **Children** 24% Counselling 17% School liaison or child care	60% Housing and accommodation 13% Financial assistance **Children** 28% Accommodation 20% School liaison or child care	34% Housing and accommodation 32% Financial assistance	52% Housing and accommodation 16% Financial assistance **Children** 40% Accomm 13% Counselling

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[3] Data from AIHW, 2002

3. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH STUDY

This section of the report provides background details on the research in terms of the methodology and a demographic profile of families participating in the study.

METHODOLOGY

Scope of the research

At the outset of the project, the Management Committee established some broad parameters for the scope of the research. These included the following:

* Within the available resources for the project, it was considered unrealistic for the research to attempt to canvass the issue of family homelessness in a comprehensive way across Queensland. Hence, it was decided that the research would focus on four geographical areas of Queensland. The areas selected were:
  ➢ Cairns,
  ➢ Townsville,
  ➢ Caboolture and
  ➢ Brisbane City.

* Cairns and Townsville were selected on the basis of being large regional centres with a significant population of Indigenous people. Caboolture was chosen on the basis of being an urban centre with high population growth, on the fringes of the Brisbane metropolitan area. Whilst Logan City and Ipswich were also considered as potential centres for the research, it was considered that these two areas in particular had been the subject of other research. For example, the other Uniting*Care* Centre for Social Justice research project on vulnerable children had focused on the Inala-Ipswich corridor.

* It was considered important that, as far as possible, the research capture issues relating to family homelessness for Indigenous people. However, it was also recognised that issues of homelessness amongst Indigenous people, including family homelessness, is an even more complex phenomenon.

Defining 'family'

For the purposes of the research, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definition of 'family' was adopted. The ABS defines a family as:

> *… two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household. The basis of a family is formed by identifying the presence of either a couple relationship, lone parent-child or other blood relationship. Some households, therefore, contain more than one family.* (ABS, 2001)

On the basis of this definition, it was decided that the scope of the research would include:

* couples with no children;

- couples with children;
- females with children; and
- males with children.

The category of "couples with no children" is often not included in studies relating to families (see for example Bartholomew, 1999). However, it was considered important to include this group. Whilst a couple may present as having no children, this may not necessarily be the case, due to the fact that they may have children but not have them in their care (a similar point is made by Metraux and Culhane, 1999).

Definitions of Homelessness

The definition of homelessness has also been a contentious issue. Chamberlain (1999) argues that there is an "emerging agreement" about how homelessness should be defined in the Australian context, based upon work by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992). They identify three segments in the homeless population:

- *Primary homelessness*
  People without conventional accommodation, such as those living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter.

- *Secondary homelessness*
  People who move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another. This group includes people using emergency accommodation (such as crisis shelters); young people staying in youth refuges; women and children escaping domestic violence (staying in women's refuges); people staying temporarily with other households (because they have no accommodation of their own); and those using boarding houses on an occasional or intermittent basis.

- *Tertiary homelessness*
  People who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis. Residents of private boarding houses do not have a separate bedroom and living room; they do not have kitchen and bathroom facilities of their own; their accommodation is not self-contained; and they do not have security of tenure provided by a lease.

This definition of homelessness differs from service delivery definitions such as that contained in the *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994*, which states:

A person is homeless if, and only if, he or she has inadequate access to safe and secure housing. A person is taken to have inadequate access to safe and secure housing if the only housing to which the person has access:

(a) damages, or is likely to damage, the person's health; or

(b) threatens the person's safety; or

(c) marginalises the person through failing to provide access to:

    (i) adequate personal amenities, or

    (ii) the economic and social supports that a home normally affords; or

(d) places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing.

Chamberlain (1999) points out that the SAAP definition recognises that in practical service delivery terms, SAAP must be able to assist those who are about to become homeless as well as those who are actually homeless. Hence the definition provides a mandate for the major activities of SAAP and this is its over-riding purpose.

The Victorian Homelessness Strategy, however, has adopted a definition of homelessness from the Victorian Council to Homeless Persons. With this definition, a homeless person is someone who:

> *… is without a conventional home and lacks the economic and social supports that a home normally affords. He or she is often cut off from the support of relatives and friends, has few independent resources and often has no immediate means and, in some cases, little prospect of self-support.* (VHS MAC, 2001)

This definition moves beyond a predominant housing focus and recognises the inherent poverty and social marginalisation affecting people who are homeless.

The variety of definitions serves different purposes. The Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992) definition has been adopted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as the basis of *counting* homelessness (Chamberlain 1999), whereas the Victorian Homelessness Strategy definition may be a more appropriate way of *describing* homelessness.

Although Chamberlain's (1999) definition is now widely used, the issue remains a source of debate in the research literature (see for example Chamberlain, 2001), particularly in relation to cultural appropriateness. Keys Young (1998) identified a culturally specific definition of homelessness for Indigenous people in the following way:

- *Spiritual forms of homelessness*: relating to separation from traditional land or family;
- *Overcrowding*: a hidden form of homelessness causing considerable stress for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities;
- *Relocation and transient homelessness*: resulting in temporary, intermittent and often cyclical patterns of homelessness due to transient and mobile lifestyles, including the necessity to travel to obtain services;
- *Escaping an unsafe or unstable home*: particularly for women escaping domestic and family violence;
- *Lack of access to any stable shelter*: resulting in the worst form of homelessness.

Researchers exploring the issues of homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families consider this definition to be much more appropriate (Cooper and Morris, 2003).

The notion of a homelessness 'career' has become prominent in some discussions of homelessness (Piliavin, et al, 1993; May,2000). This perspective has been picked up by Chamberlain and Johnson (2001) in what they describe as three temporal stages of a homelessness 'career', namely:

- *At-risk*: people who are in housing crisis on a short, medium term, or on-going basis;
- *Homelessness*: people experiencing primary, secondary or tertiary homelessness;
- *Chronic homelessness*: people for whom homelessness has become a way of life

Chamberlain and Johnson (2001) argue that recognizing the different 'career' stages of homelessness allows for design of more appropriate responses – most obviously, those experiencing short-term 'at-risk' homelessness require a different form of response and support than those who are chronically homelessness.

For the purposes of this report, the Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992) definition has been adopted, with a focus primarily on those experiencing primary and secondary homelessness.

Data collection methods

Data collection for this research consisted of five main sources:
- An analysis of issues raised in focus groups and interviews with 62 homeless families;
- A detailed demographic and statistical analysis of the characteristics of families participating in the research;
- An analysis of SAAP and ABS data relating to homelessness in Queensland;
- A detailed literature review of Australian and international studies relating to family homelessness;
- A series of validation workshops with representatives of government and non-government sector agencies involved in responding to family homelessness.

Focus groups

Focus groups and interviews with homeless families constituted the major source of primary data for this research project. Overall, 62 individuals participated across 8 focus groups and two sets of interviews that were conducted from April to June 2003.

Participants for the research were recruited through non-government agencies dealing with homeless families. Table 4 below provides details of the focus group location and agencies involved in recruiting participants.

Each participant was paid a flat fee of $25 as a reimbursement of their time and costs associated with participating in the research.

Focus groups were conducted using a standard schedule of questions (see Appendix 1) and lasted approximately 1.5 hours in duration. Each session was audio-taped and detailed notes were transcribed shortly after.

Focus groups followed a set format involving the following steps:

- Introduction and background to the project: a two page hand-out was provided to all participants with relevant contact details.
- An overview of QUT ethical requirements including an emphasis on confidentiality and non-identification of information disclosed: participants were offered a consent form to sign if they agreed to participate.
- A simple data collection form was administered to capture demographic details: a form was handed out to participants who were asked to fill it out.
- Tape-recording each session: participants were requested to give permission to record the session.

All participants provided consent to be involved in the research. No objections were made to audio-taping of focus group discussions, however, each of the four participants who were interviewed on an individual basis declined to have the interview tape-recorded.

Table 5:   Details of focus groups

Date	Focus Group location	No.
12 April 2003	Focus group with clients of Micah Projects Inc – South Brisbane	7
1 May 2003	Interviews with clients of SHAC – Cairns	2
7 May 2003	Focus group with current clients of Clare Homes – Toombul (Brisbane).	6
7 May 2003	Focus group with ex-clients of Clare Homes – Toombul (Brisbane).	7
9 May 2003	Focus group with Young Mothers for Young Women – Dutton Park (Brisbane).	9
13 May 2003	Focus group with clients of Caboolture Family Haven – Caboolture.	9
14 May 2003	Indigenous families Focus Group through Micah Projects Inc – South Brisbane.	8
20 May 2003	Focus group with clients of Family Emergency Accommodation Townsville (FEAT).	8
5 June 2003	Focus Group with clients of St Vincent's Community Services – Cairns.	4
5 June 2003	Interviews with clients of St Vincent's Community Services – Cairns.	2

Validation workshops with government and non-government agencies

This research relies primarily on the voices of homeless families themselves as they have emerged through the focus group discussions and interviews. A limited number of interviews were also conducted with staff from non-government agencies, primarily those agencies involved in recruiting participants for the research. These interviews were helpful in gaining a better understanding of the context for the agency and the participating families.

The main point of entry to the research for government and non-government sector workers was through a series of 'validation' workshops at key stages of the research. The following workshops were held:

- In March 2003, at the commencement of the research, a workshop was convened in Brisbane with government and non-government agencies to discuss the purpose and objectives of the research, to seek feedback on the proposed methodology and to engage the cooperation of agencies in carrying out the data collection.

- Similar workshops were also convened at around the same time with agencies in Townsville and Cairns to brief them on the research objectives and to seek their cooperation and active involvement.
- In late July 2003, two workshops were conducted in Brisbane as part of the Uniting*Care* Centre for Social Justice conference to present preliminary findings of the research and to gain feedback on these findings.
- In August and September, a series of final 'validation' workshops were conducted in Cairns, Townsville and Brisbane in order to refine the key findings and issues from the research and further develop a set of draft recommendations. These workshops proved to be quite useful and valuable feedback and suggestions were received.

Participants in these workshops represented a reasonably diverse set of interests including Commonwealth and state government program managers, large and small non-government service providers (including SAAP funded agencies involved in providing family accommodation), non-government sector peak bodies, local government officers and one councillor.

Additional low-key discussions were also held with a limited number of officers from the Departments of Families and Housing in order to gain a clearer understanding of contemporary developments within these two key government agencies relating to family homelessness.

Data analysis

Attempts have been made to avoid the use of impressionistic data to 'confirm' some pre-conceived notions. Issues raised in the findings relate to themes that have been raised across at least three of the focus groups. Where there are issues that have arisen in only one or two of the focus groups, this has been indicated.

Limitations of the methodology

There were a number of limitations to the research.

- The sample of families involved in this research is not representative. It has not been drawn from a random sample. Nevertheless, in comparison to other research studies, the sample is still significant and is likely to reflect the general population of homeless families in Queensland.
- The research project has been unable to determine overall trends in terms of whether or to what extent family homelessness is changing over time. The lack of comparable quantitive data has been an issue here.
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were poorly represented in the study sample. Only three of the participants were from different cultural backgrounds.

Appropriateness of focus group methodology

The focus groups were exploring a number of sensitive topics that required some preparedness on the part of participants to disclose personal details about their lives and family circumstances that could be, at least, potentially uncomfortable. Apart from one of the focus groups (Young Mothers for Young Women), participants in each of the focus groups generally did not know each other prior to coming together in the group. The common thread for the participants in each of the groups was that they were all clients of the agency hosting the focus group. In that sense, there was an equal footing.

Morgan (1997) points out that "the discussion in focus groups depends on both the individuals that make up the group and the dynamics of the group as a whole" (p60). Generally, each of the focus groups took some time to 'warm up'. However, in each group, there was usually one or two extroverted individuals who were quite happy to 'dive into' the discussion and this helped to break the ice for others.

There was also a need to be sensitive to the gender differences. Not only were the vast majority of the participants' women (80%), but they were also women who, in some cases, had experienced horrific abuse at the hands of male perpetrators.

OVERVIEW OF FAMILIES PARTICIPATING IN THE RESEARCH

Summary

- 80% were women and 20% men.
- 43% were Indigenous.
- 43% had highest educational achievement being grade 10 or primary school.
- Two thirds were in receipt of sole parent pension as main source of income.
- 85% had stayed in 2 or more places in the last 12 months – almost a quarter (22%) had moved more than 5 times.
- Families had stayed in a number of different places – with friends/relatives, in a tent with the kids, sleeping rough in parks, in cars, caravan parks.
- Over half (53%) had 3 or more children.
- Average age of children was 9 years (age range was 8 weeks old to 25 years).
- Over half the families had children not currently living with them (mostly in care).
- Parents with low educational achievement more likely to have children not living with them.
- Parents who had moved more than 3 times more likely to have children not living with them.
- Average age of women when they had their first child was 20 years (age range was 15 years to 35 years).

A total of 62 people participated in this study, however, demographic data is available for only 60 of these.

Data was collected through a four page survey administered at the beginning of each focus group (Appendix 2). It collected demographic information on the following variables:

- Age - in years
- Gender
- Ethnicity (Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Islander, or South Sea Islander, or neither)
- Marital status - 7 options (married, divorced etc)
- Highest educational achievement - 8 options (completed senior high school, etc)
- Current employment status - 10 options (working full-time, etc)
- Main source of income - 10 options (newstart allowance, etc)
- Number of places stayed in past 12 months - 5 options (1, 2-3 places, 4-5 etc)
- Children? (yes, no)
- Age of children - space provided for 5 children's ages
- Do you have any children who are not currently living with you? (yes, no)

The survey did not instruct respondents on how to answer the questions. As such, people could 'tick more than one box', or select more than one option to answer the question. However, few people took this option, and the data was coded as if all persons only listed one response. The answers of participants who listed more than one option were occasionally changed to reflect the most important response, or coded to "combination" reflecting their combination of answers. Also the categories of responses were changed if many people selecting "other" specified the same thing. As a result of these changes the form of questionnaire results is not identical to the questionnaire itself, and is instead changed in a way that clarifies the responses. These changes are detailed as the results for the relevant item are presented.

- ***Age***

The mean age was 32.17 years old (*SD* = 9). Ages ranged from 18 years to 55 years. The median was 32.

- **Gender**
 80% of participants were female (n = 48) and 20% were male (n = 12).

- **Ethnicity**
  Twenty-five persons (43.1%) identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and thirty-three (56.9%) people did not. No-one indicated that they were of South Sea Islander origin. Two people did not respond.

- **Marital status**
  Half the people in this study were either in an "other 'live in' relationship (de facto)" or "never married" (with approximately a quarter of people in either). Fifteen percent of the respondents were "separated- not divorced", and slightly less "divorced". A new category 'single' was created as a few people who chose 'other' specified 'single'.

**Figure 3:   Marital status of participants**
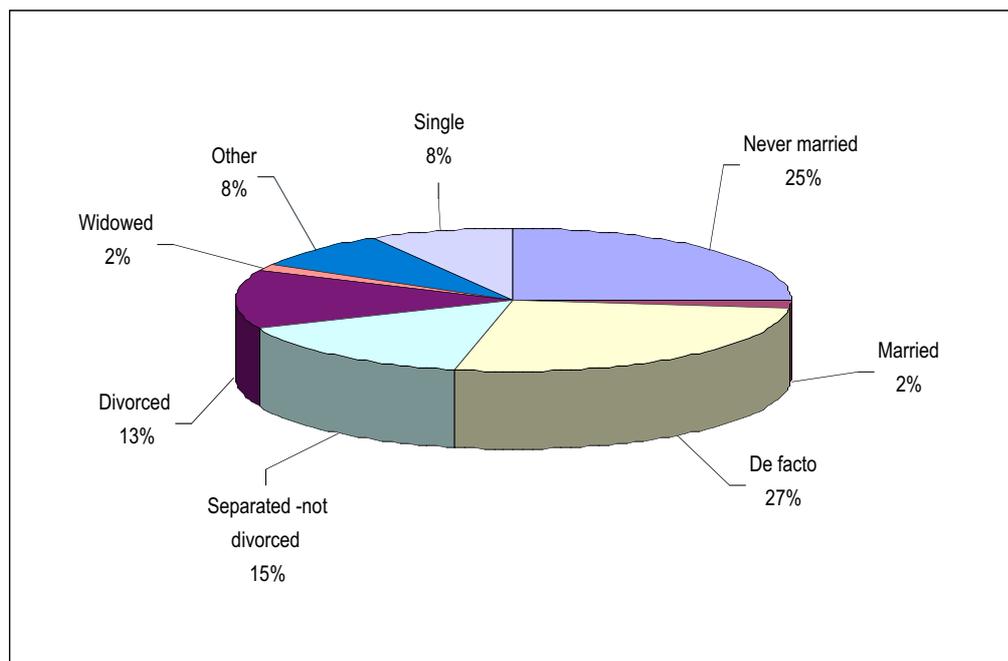
- **Educational achievement**
  In regards to highest educational achievement, just under two thirds of respondents chose some form of high school, half of which selected "junior high school" and half "senior high school". When one accounts for the fact that of the thirteen persons who had a trade, technical certificate or a diploma, three of them had also completed junior high school, and four had completed senior high school, the number of people who had high school education increases. Including those people who had completed high school and a trade/technical certificate, 36% of participants had completed senior high school, and thirty-five percent had completed junior high school.

It is likely the persons who listed only their trade certificate as their highest educational achievement will have some high school education, but did not note it here. Thus, the majority of participants had some form of high school education (senior or junior) and/or a trade, technical certificate or diploma.

Of the four people who chose "other", three did not provide information and one person specified that they were "attending university". No-one selected "post graduate qualifications", "a university or college degree" or "no schooling". Two people did not respond.

Figure 4:   Educational achievement of participants
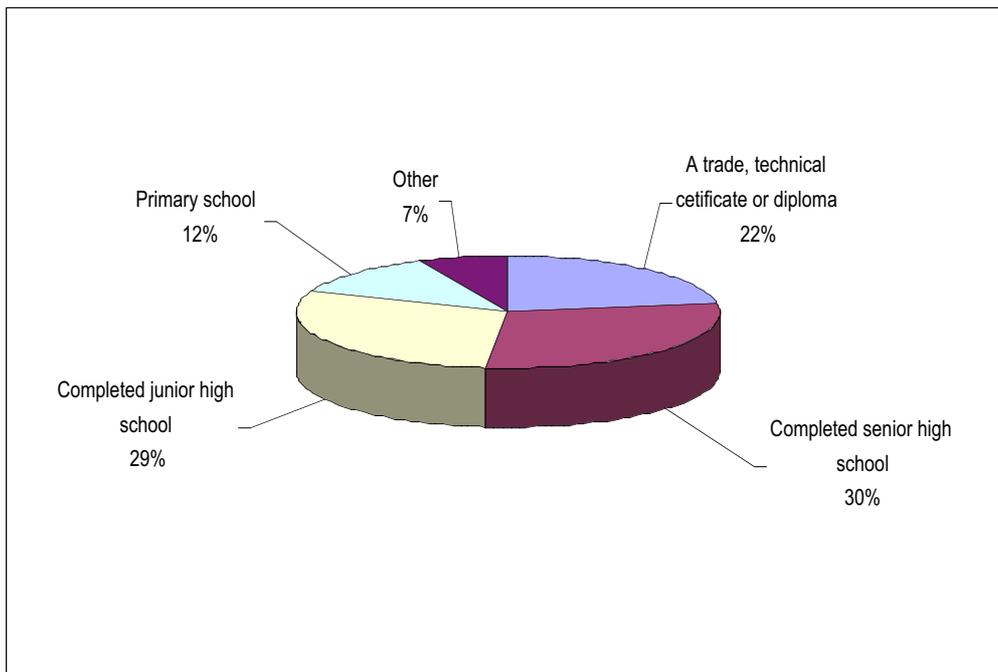
- • *Current employment status*
  Two fifths of people were on a sole parent's pension. The next largest group were part-time workers, 15% of the respondents. Thus the majority of people were on a sole parent's pension.

  For the two people who selected "other" one said they were self-employed. Another specified Department of Veterans Affairs pension, but also ticked "home duties". She was classified as other. No-one was "working full-time", on an "aged pension", or "retired- self-supporting". Two people did not respond.

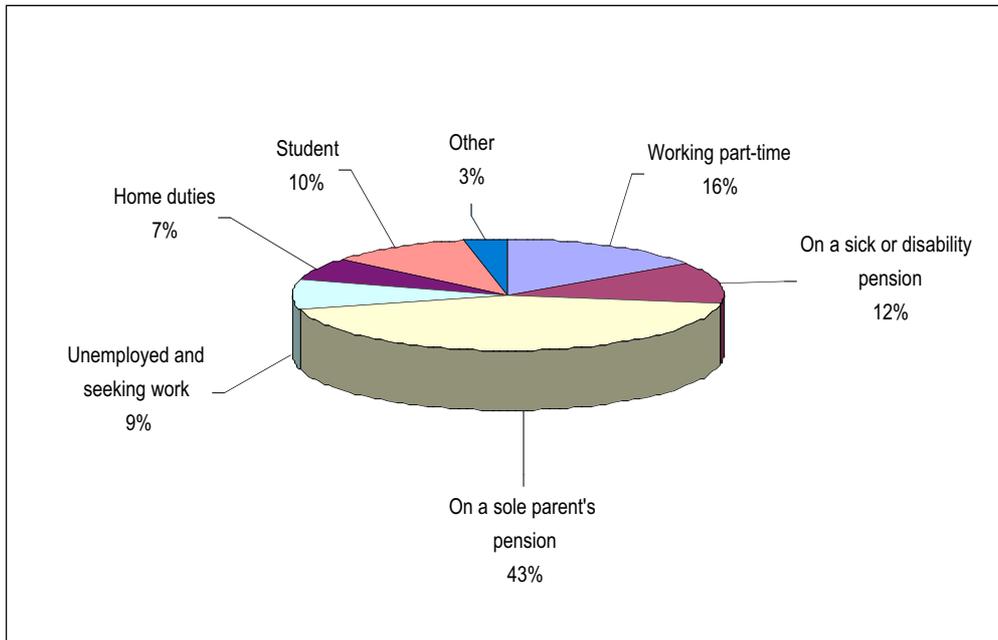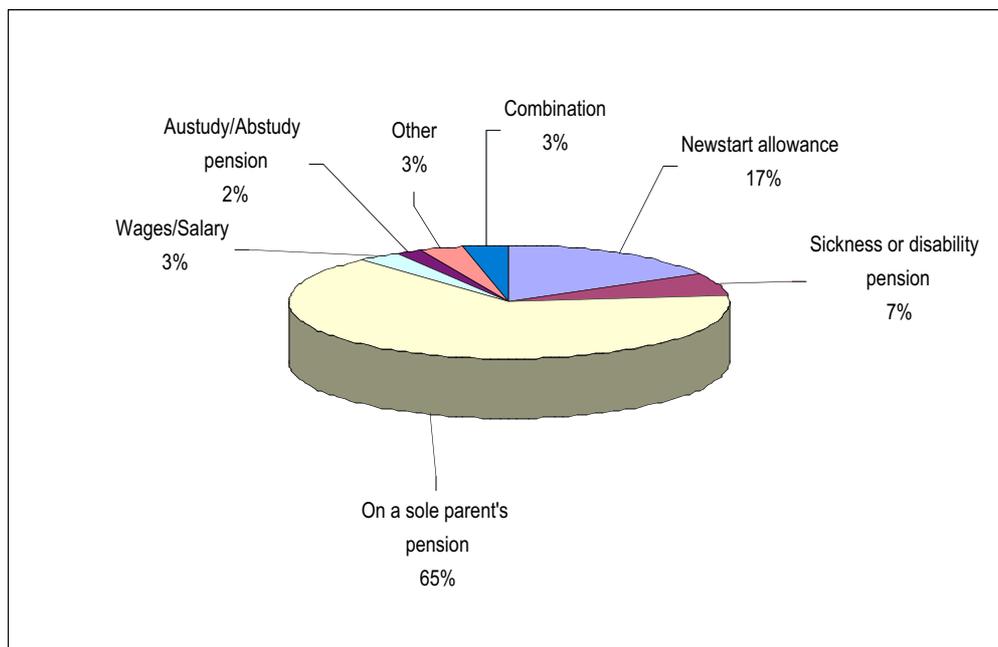**Figure 5:** **Current employment status**

Figure 6: **Main source of income**

- *Main source of income*
  For "employment status", only 40% of respondents selected "a sole parent's pension", where 64% listed it as their main source of income. The next most common income source was the "newstart allowance", received by 17% of participants.

One person said they received income in the form of "wages/salary" and "other" specifying a pension education supplement. They were put into the category "combination". The second person who was classified as "combination" said they received both the sole parent's and the disability pension.

No-one selected "youth allowance", an "aged pension", "retired- self-supporting", or "special benefit".

- ***Number of places stayed in the past twelve months***
  As seen here, this item was categorical, not continuous. Just fewer than 60% of persons had stayed in between one and three places in the last year. Of the remaining persons, half had stayed in four to five locations, and half in more that five.

Figure 7:   Number of places stayed in the past 12 months
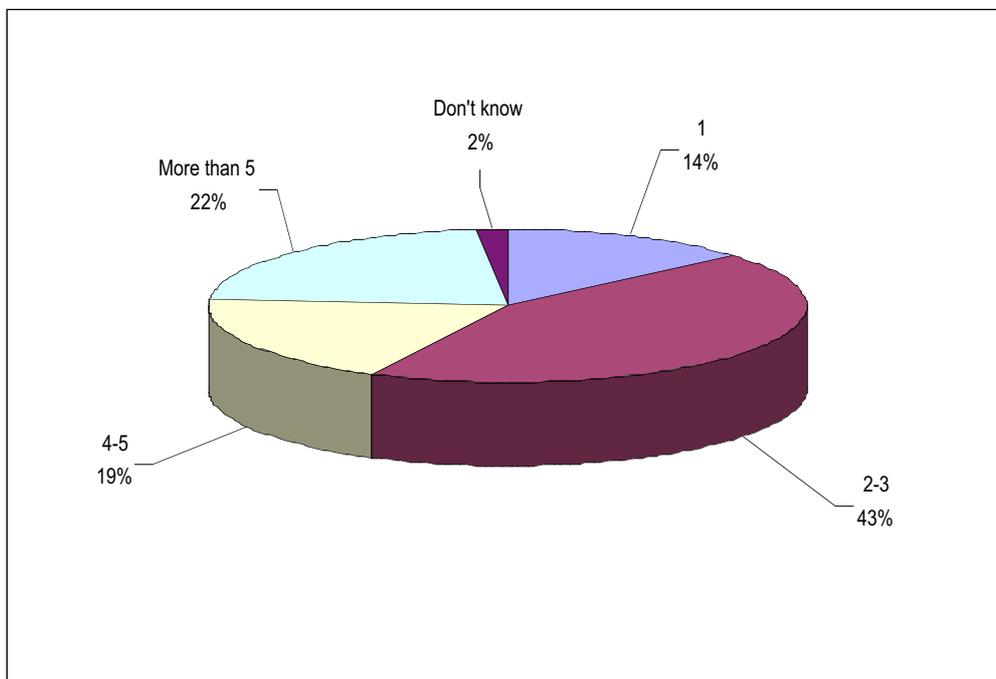
- ***Children, yes/no***
  All the participants had children except for two people.

- ***Number of children***
  As the questionnaire did not specifically ask the number of children a person had, this variable was created. This information was gathered from respondents who either ticked the box for how many children they had, or who wrote their ages in (Question ten, Appendix 2). The mean number of children was three and a quarter (*SD* = 1.83). The number of children ranged from one to ten. The median was three children, and the mode was two (as 27% of people had two children, 23% had four children). To investigate if the mean was overly affected by the two persons who had ten children, it was calculated again, excluding these respondents. The mean was three children (*SD* =

1.3), and the range from one to five children. Information was not available for five people.

- ***Age of children***
  The mean age of the children was nine years and nine months old (*SD* = 6).

- ***Persons age when they had their first child***
  The mean age of people when they had their first child was 21.5 (*SD* = 5.5). The youngest new parent was 15 and the eldest 43. The mean age of new mothers was 20.93 (*SD* = 4.58), and the ages ranged from 15 to 35. The median was 20, and the mode 21. Almost half (43%) of women had children when they were 19 years old or younger. The mean age of new fathers was 24 (*SD* = 8.44), and the ages ranged from 16 to 43.

- ***Children not living with them***
  Half the respondents had some children not currently living with them.

Comparisons

As this survey detailed personal circumstances, statistical tests were performed to determine if different types/groups of people had different circumstances.[4] As there were only 12 men in the focus groups (20% of the participants), no comparisons could be made for gender. Comparisons were made between people who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and those who did not and there were no significant differences between them for all of the variables.

- ***Education and whether children are at home or not.***
  Two groups of people were compared, those who had a trade/technical certificate and/or senior high school ('advanced' education), and those who had completed junior high school or primary school ('basic' education).[5] Persons who had 'advanced' education were more likely to have their children living with them (66% had children living with them). Conversely, persons who had 'basic' education were more likely to have their children not living with them (71% had children not living with them).

- ***Number of children and number of places stayed in the last year***
  People who stayed in 2-3 places in the last year have significantly more children, about 3, than persons who have stayed in 4-5 places, about 5.[6]

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[4] For all statistical tests an alpha level of 0.05 was used.

[5] This chi-square was significant χ_ (1, *N*=54) = 7.5, *p* < .01.

[6] People were categorised into four groups according to how many places they had stayed in the last year. A one-way ANOVA was employed to see if people from these groups differed as to whether their children were living with them or not. The 'don't know' category of the number of places stayed in was excluded as it had only one person. The model was significant $F_{(3, 50)}$ = 4.12, *p* < .05. For post-hoc analysis, Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) was calculated. Persons who have stayed in 2-3 places in the last year have significantly more children than persons who have stayed in 4-5 places (*M* = 3, *SD* = 1.3 and *M* = 5, *SD* = 2.79, respectively).

4. KEY THEMES EMERGING FROM THE RESEARCH

Summary

- Families have experienced patterns of housing exclusion as a result of a combination of factors including exclusion from private rental through being 'blacklisted' on tenancy databases, discrimination from real estate agents and exclusion from public housing as a result of past debts. For some, exclusion from conventional options meant resorting to extremely precarious and insecure living arrangements (cars, tents, etc).
- Gaining access to housing and housing assistance has been a major issue because of affordability problems, difficulties in accessing public housing and a lack of supported housing options catering for families.
- Poverty and financial stress facing the families has made them vulnerable to a housing crisis and accentuated housing affordability problems.
- Domestic and family violence has been a major contributing factor for the homelessness experienced by many of the women and children.
- Drug and alcohol problems have been prevalent for a number of the families. Drug and alcohol abuse was often related to ways of dealing with depression and stress from the circumstances of homelessness.
- The impact of homelessness for the children involved has been significant, including emotional impacts, behavioural problems, schooling disruptions and difficulties in getting children to attend school.
- For the parents involved, important issues were the need for support in parenting(particularly managing children's behavioural problems), the impact of stress and other negative feelings on capacity to parent, the lack of child care(especially respite care), the fear of child protection intervention and concerns about being judged as bad parents.
- Indigenous families faced some special issues including overcrowding, often linked to the importance of extended family networks, extreme discrimination and issues arising from violence in remote communities.
- Access to and treatment by services was a major issue, particularly the lack of information about available services and poor treatment by some services experienced by a number of families. Positive characteristics of services include flexibility and responsiveness, respect, practical assistance and regular, supportive contact with agency staff.

INTRODUCTION

This section of the report outlines the key themes and issues arising from an analysis of the data collected through the focus groups and interviews. It draws primarily on the experiences and views articulated by the 62 participants involved in the research. The issues and themes identified here have been raised in at least three of the focus groups. Where there are issues that have arisen in only one or two of the focus groups, this has been indicated.

Throughout this section of the report, extensive use is made of short, direct quotes from the participants involved in the research. Direct quotes have been assigned a code in brackets [ ] that corresponds to each participant-assigned code. Whilst these codes are non-identifying (in keeping with the ethical requirements of the research), they are also used as a way of indicating the diversity of responses across the participants and the focus groups. In

addition, where appropriate, slightly more detailed case-study examples are used to put a more human face to some of the issues. All names and other potentially identifying information have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

Nine key themes and issues arising from the research have been identified:

- Patterns of housing exclusion;
- Access to housing and housing assistance;
- Financial stress for the families;
- Domestic and family violence;
- Drug and alcohol issues.
- Impacts of homelessness for children;
- Parenting and parent support issues;
- Issues for Indigenous families;
- Access to and treatment by services;

PATTERNS OF HOUSING EXCLUSION

Not surprisingly, a strong theme emerging from the focus groups related to housing exclusion. Patterns of housing exclusion occurred due to a range of factors including being 'blacklisted' on tenancy databases, discrimination in the private rental market and exclusion from public housing assistance as a result of past debts. The end result for many of the participants was an inability to access either the private rental market or the public housing system. Consequently, a number of the families had experienced periods of highly precarious and inadequate living arrangements (cars, tents).

'Blacklisted' on tenancy databases[7]

A major issue raised by participants across all the focus groups was being 'blacklisted' on tenancy databases and, as a consequence, effectively barred from the private rental market. The most consistent database arising from the discussions was the Tenancy Information Centre Australasia (TICA). Overwhelmingly, participants talked of the unfairness with the use of tenancy databases and the lack of control or redress that listed tenants have with this system. As four of the participants put it:

> *"Even if you pay off your debts, your name still stays on the list. That's wrong I reckon".* [4]

> *"There's no recourse once you get put on TICA. You can't appeal against it".* [10]

> *"We can't get a house because of TICA. Once you get on there, you're buggered".* [57]

> *"How do you get 'un-blacklisted'?"* [41]

Participants also raised the issue that even to telephone to enquire about a listing on a tenancy database was difficult and expensive with a cost of around $5 per minute – "and even then they put you on hold" [2].

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[7] Tenancy databases collect information on the history of tenants in the private rental market. This information is used by property managers to screen prospective tenants to minimise the risk of tenants defaulting. Being listed on a database is likely to affect future chances of finding a further rental property (see Guthrie, 2002).

Discrimination in the private rental market

Another consistent theme across the focus groups was the extent of discrimination participants had experienced in their attempts to access the private rental market. This issue was especially amplified for the Indigenous families involved in the research. Being a "single mum", young or on a low-income were some of the reasons participants suggested as the basis of discrimination.

> *"Real estate agents have knocked me back because of my age".* [31]

> *"There's lots of discrimination in private rent when you have kids. They tell you, 'we don't have kids in this place'".* [26]

However, the practice of discrimination was often subtle. As one participant said:

> *"They cover their backsides from* [being accused of] *discrimination and victimization. They don't have to disclose why they're not giving you a property".* [35]

A number of the participants, particularly younger participants, indicated that, in their attempts to obtain private rental housing, real estate agents were requiring references from previous tenancies. However, with a lack of history in the private rental market, they were unable to provide the required references.

> *"All the real estate agents want references but I don't have any so what am I supposed to do"?* [33]

Debts with the Department of Housing

Across each of the focus groups, participants raised problems arising from debts with the Department of Housing. Many of the families involved in the research had incurred a debt with the Department, either as a result of an un-paid bond loan or as a result of public housing tenancy (rent arrears or un-paid property damage). Because of the debt, participants had a strong perception that they were unable to access any assistance from the Department. This meant they could not have their names on the wait-list for public housing, which also affected their ability to access other forms of community housing such as Community Rent Scheme (to be eligible for CRS housing, prospective tenants must be on the public housing wait-list).

Participants had a <u>perception</u> that the Department was inflexible with policy relating to debt and that, until the debt was paid off, no assistance could be provided by the Department.[8]

> *"Housing Commission won't give you a house while you have a debt. They knocked me back because of the debt. If you're on TICA, Housing Commission is the only damn way you can go".* [10]

There was a view that the Department of Housing "made it difficult" to pay off debts because direct-debit options were seemingly not available for repayment of debt. Many of

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[8] Whilst this was a perception held by participants in this study, the official policy of the Department of Housing in relation to debt is not as rigid. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this report.

the participants had previous experience of direct-debit payment options and this was seen as the best way to manage regular expenses such as rent or debts.

There was also a perception from a number of the participants that the Area Office staff of the Department were inflexible.

> *"We started to fall behind in rent … when we got to 8 weeks behind in rent we decided to leave. Housing Commission refused to allow us to pay half the debt and extend for another 2 weeks".* [8]

Precarious living arrangements

For a number of the participants, exclusion from both the private rental market and public housing assistance resulted in experiencing periods of extremely precarious and inadequate living arrangements that included living in cars or tents.

For one woman, after being evicted from the boarding house where she was staying with her 11 year old son, the only option was her van:

> *"I was living in my van for three months with my 11 year old son. You've got to do what you've got to do".* [31]

For many of the participants, a breakdown in conventional housing arrangements often meant relying on friends or relatives to put them up temporarily. These arrangements where often tense and ended up in conflict and another move. For two women in two different focus groups, this kind of conflict meant they had to resort to staying in their cars.

> *"I was staying at my friend's place but one of the other women staying there didn't like me and I didn't want to cause any more conflict. There was nowhere else to go* [but the car]*".* [58]

> *"I was staying at a friend's house and waiting to get into Housing Commission but they kicked me out so I ended up sleeping in the car for three months with one of the kids".* [39]

Another woman with four children (aged 13 years to 3 years) resorted to using a tent when she got kicked out from her friend's place:

> *"I was staying with friends but we got kicked out, so I ended up staying in a tent for five days with the kids".* [50]

Similarly, one father of two teenage children described how he had spent three months living on the beach in a tent with the children after they were evicted from their Housing Commission house. [32]

One young woman looking after her two youngest children had just moved into a women's shelter the day before. She told how she had spent the 6 nights prior to that "sleeping in the park". [51] However, she was quick to point out that she was on her own and had arranged "emergency care" for the children until she could sort something out.

ACCESS TO HOUSING AND HOUSING ASSISTANCE

The other side of the coin with housing exclusion was the importance of gaining access to some form of housing assistance. Participants across the focus groups raised a number of issues relating to access to housing and housing assistance. Particular issues here included the lack of access to affordable housing, particularly public housing, the lack of housing options for families and the need for support in exiting supported accommodation.

Lack of access to affordable housing and public housing

Gaining access to affordable housing was a key issue for the families involved in the research. Many of the participants talked about how they experienced affordability problems in the private rental market.

> *"I was paying more than I could afford in private rent - $170 a week".* [24]

In particular, getting into public housing was seen as the 'ultimate' solution for affordable housing. In each of the focus groups, participants (who were generally staying in supported accommodation) expressed their hope of eventually being able to get into 'Housing Commission'. This was the case even for those who had previously been evicted or had past debts. As two of the participants said:

> *"If you get into Housing Commission, you're half right. It's not big rent and as long as you pay your rent you're right".* [57]

> *"I'm hoping to move into Housing Commission. I'm paying $140 a week now in private rent".* [33]

For one of the participants who had managed to get into public housing, life had become considerably more affordable.

> *"Compared to before, I'm now paying $70 a week with the Housing Department for a three bedroom house but before I was paying $150 a week for a 2 bedroom place".* [24]

However, there was also a sense of frustration in attempting to get into 'Housing Commission' with long wait times in the areas where families were interviewed. There was also a general lack of understanding about how the public housing system worked and for many, on the basis of their past experience, a lack of trust in the system. This kind of sentiment was expressed by one participant in the following way:

> *"You have to fight for housing tooth and nail. You have to push and push – you have to go in* [to Department of Housing] *to find out where you are on the wait-list".* [23]

In a number of the focus groups there was also a perception that there were a 'lot of empty housing commission homes' and a sense of frustration that these 'empty houses' should be made available.

With exclusion from both the private rental market and the public housing system, options become obviously more limited and more precarious. Many of the participants talked about enduring high rents and poor facilities in caravan parks, boarding houses or hostels. Two of the participants described their situations in the following terms:

"I actually had a place – a caravan park at Willowbank. My ex-defacto turned up with my three girls and asked me to take them. I handed the caravan over to her and ended up in a boarding house paying $280 a week. Then I had to go to charity after charity just to get food because all our money was gone just to put a roof over your head. With my past – I'm blacklisted and owe Housing Commission money". [1]

"We had no references and there was discrimination by real estate agents. We were thinking of going to a caravan park but the rent was $300 a week". [9]

Lack of housing options for families

Participants talked about the lack of emergency and supported housing options for families, particularly where two adults and children are involved and there is no domestic violence. One of the few single fathers involved in the focus groups described it in these terms:

"The issues are different for families – you have to split yourself up. There's nowhere for a roof together. The battle is that I wanted to hold on to my kids". [1]

But similarly for one of the women:

"No-one could take us as a family". [3]

One of the couples participating in a regional focus group also expressed their frustration about the lack of options for families:

"We went through every emergency housing group but there was absolutely nothing available. She [partner] *can go to a women's shelter but I've got to punch her up to get her there".* [57]

Participants across a number of focus groups raised the issue of lack of appropriate housing options for large families, particularly where there are five or more children. This issue was highlighted by a number of the Indigenous families for whom the problem of overcrowding was a consistently recurring theme (see below).

Support to find exit accommodation

Participants across a number of the focus groups discussed the need for more support from supported accommodation providers to find alternative accommodation on exiting supported housing. For many of the participants staying in medium-term supported accommodation (up to 6 months) there was a heightened sense of anxiety about what the next step would be. One young woman who had previously stayed in supported housing expressed her concerns about the exit arrangements from the accommodation:

"After six months they tell you to move. They give you this help but then say goodbye, go back to where you started from". [29]

For others who were currently in supported housing, there was a high level of uncertainty about the future and a sense that the 'clock was ticking'. This was exacerbated for those who had previously been excluded from other housing options:

"I'm terrified about what's going to happen next [after leaving supported accommodation]". [53]

"What happens after I leave here [supported accommodation]*? I'm on TICA so I'll need to go and beg".* [10]

"I've only got two months left here [in supported accommodation]. *I'm anxious about what's the next step.* [The support worker] *is great but she can't work miracles".* [11]

POVERTY AND FINANCIAL STRESS

The families participating in the research were all on a low income – 94% were in receipt of a government benefit or pension. The precariousness of people's financial situation made them vulnerable to a housing crisis and accentuated housing affordability problems. It has already been noted above that the costs of renting privately have caused considerable financial stress for many of the families

Many of the participants talked about how unexpected or unplanned additional expenses would tip them over the edge financially, resulting in an inability to pay rent and often leading to eviction. For one of the participants, medical expenses had created financial difficulties that led to a housing crisis.

"My husband is a diabetic and my son has asthma. The high costs of the medicines meant we got behind in rent. We got two weeks notice". [19]

For another couple, juggling rent and other expenses proved to be difficult and led to their eviction, along with their four children.

"We all get behind in rent sometimes. It only takes the baby to get sick or something like that and you have to use the rent money. We got a little bit behind … it ended up going to court and we were out. From then on, we haven't been able to get back on top. If she [real estate agent] *had been more flexible we would've been right".* [57]

For one of the women and her then husband, the high costs of car repayments, along with personal difficulties, brought on a crisis.

"We bought a car and the repayments were really high. We thought we could handle the repayments of $400 a month. The car was crap and we had to fix it. Sometimes big repairs were needed. I had a drinking problem and everything got on top of us. We ended up with debts with the Housing Commission". [9]

This woman also suggested what she thought was needed to assist with financial difficulties:

"What's needed is to have someone come in and give support and help work out budgets and to sit down and listen and provide some sort of feedback". [9]

One young woman had taken some extreme steps to deal with her financial situation:

> *"I took up being a stripper in the city for a while to raise money and I got my own place. That's how I got my place. The kids want me to go back to stripping again because they know we have to move again".* [11]

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Across every focus group, domestic and family violence was raised as a major issue. Many of the women participating in the research had been subject to domestic violence. In some cases, the violence had been quite extreme and potentially life-threatening. For example, one woman described how her husband had shot her with a hand-gun [31].

For some, domestic violence had been a recurring issue over a number of years and across a number of partners. As one woman put it:

> *"Every single relationship I've had has been DV".* [48]

Domestic violence was often the precipitating factor in moving. For example, one woman said that she and her children relocated to Gympie because she was being stalked by her ex-husband [50] whilst another woman said she was "constantly moving" to keep away from her ex-husband who had been violent to her and had sexually abused her son [54].

One woman described herself as living a "nice middle class life" and she was involved in running the family business. However, her life was turned upside down when she "had to leave because of the 'domestic situation'" [22]. She eventually ended up in supported accommodation, but it has taken her "a couple of years" to get back on top.

One Indigenous woman [60] told how she had moved to Cairns because of her partner's violence while they were living in a remote Indigenous community. She was particularly concerned for her children's safety (see Box 1 below).

Domestic violence had also resulted in some of the women being caught up in debts with the Department of Housing. Two of the women described their experiences in the following ways:

> *"I was living in Housing Commission for 13 years but took off because of my husband's violence. He damaged the house, now I'm responsible for that debt as well".* [35]

> *"I left him. I had to get away because of the DV. I just packed up the children but it meant that I incurred a debt for rental and maintenance".* [50]

The impact of domestic violence had been devastating for these women and for their children. Two of the women described the experience for their children in the following ways:

> *"My two year old has watched it all. We've moved about 20 times since she was born. She's watched me get beaten up by her father. Once, he beat me up and knocked me unconscious while I was holding her".* [10]

> *"My kids are all grown up now but when they were younger I was in a very violent relationship. Kids learn from the violence they see – it's a repetitious cycle. My*

middle daughter is now in a very ugly [violent] *relationship. That's because when she was a little person, that was the lifestyle she learnt".* [6]

For some, there had been a cycle of abuse and violence beginning in their family of origin where their own fathers had been perpetrators of domestic and family violence. One young woman who had been a victim of domestic violence from her partner talked about her childhood experience:

"With my own childhood, my father was abusive to my mother and he sexually abused my older sister. I didn't become aware of this [sister's sexual abuse] *until I had my first baby".* [8]

Several of the women also indicated that, as well as their own experience of domestic violence from their partners, their children had been sexually abused by these partners.

In one (regional) focus group, two of the women participants voiced concerns that the Queensland Police Service was not responsive to situations of domestic violence. However, this was not an issue or claim arising from any of the other focus groups.

Box 1:   Donna

Donna is a 30-year-old Indigenous woman with 4 children aged 14, 12, 9 and 7. She is currently living in one room cabin in a caravan park in Cairns with her sister and her sister's child aged 11 years old. She doesn't know anyone in Cairns and staff from one support agency said that she was someone who had "slipped through the net".

She came to Cairns from a remote Indigenous community but left because of the violence. She said that she had come to Cairns because she "wanted to be left alone with the kids". She said it's been hard for the kids. They have suffered "abuse every day from Sunday to Sunday".

Donna said that she was "struggling with the kids" and that it was hard to put them in school. She was also struggling financially. Sometimes there is no food in the home and she cannot afford to buy clothes for the kids. She is paying $220 per fortnight for the cabin and her sister is also paying $213 per fortnight. She is currently in receipt of the sole parent pension.

Donna doesn't drink and she doesn't want to stay in the park with other Indigenous people. She said: "I don't want to be on the street with my kids. Sometimes I sit with tears in my eyes – I want the kids to have a home. I want to see the kids grow up".

The living conditions in the caravan park are intense. Donna said that the other kids in the caravan park can be a problem. "The other kids are swearing at my kids and another resident threatened to bash my daughter. People are blaming my kids for fighting with other kids. I get angry and feel like bashing the kids. It makes me upset".

She is currently being supported by a local agency who has arranged appropriate long-term housing for her family.

DRUG AND ALCOHOL ISSUES

A recurring theme across the focus groups was the prevalence of drug and alcohol issues for a number of the people involved in this research.

For some of the participants, past drug use had been quite heavy leading to addiction and associated chaos in their personal and family lives. For one couple, they had embarked on the difficult road of rebuilding their lives through treatment for drug addiction and intensive support from a non-government agency:

> *"Our kids were taken off us because basically we were unstable – moving every six months or so. We had a drug habit which we really regret".* [4]

One participant, the father of a 14 month old child, related how his homelessness was due to a combination of "drugs and debt" resulting in rent arrears, being breached by Centrelink and needing to regularly rely on food vouchers [47]. Another father of three children who had been severely affected by excessive alcohol abuse said that he "might be going to detox" [46].

Many of the participants who had experienced some form of drug or alcohol problems related their excessive use of alcohol or other drugs was a way of dealing with depression and stress resulting from their circumstances. One of the women described it in the following terms:

> *"I was depressed – having four kids it was really hard to look after them, all under 6 years old. It eventually got to the point where I had to take it* [drugs] *all the time. It started out as recreational but got more serious. When I took speed, I felt like I was invincible – no pain, no hurt".* [8]

For this young woman, drug use had a dramatic effect on her children and their behaviour:

> *"Before taking drugs, the kids were happy and settled. They became unsettled in terms of their behaviour – they became more withdrawn and got upset all the time".* [8]

For another woman, the trauma of her husband leaving her with a young child tipped her over the edge, leading to her excessive use of alcohol (see Box 2 below).

Box 2:   Stella

Stella talked about how she was "living the good life in Melbourne". Her marriage to her first husband split up and she eventually re-married her second husband – a "younger man". She was a "regular church-goer" and things were going well until her second husband suddenly walked out, leaving her with a 6 month old baby. The experience of her husband leaving her was "devastating".

At this point, she describes her situation as becoming "chaotic" and, looking back now, she was "depressed" – "it dragged me down". She sold everything, bought a caravan and started to travel around Australia with her young child. She said that she became a "party animal" and started to drink heavily as a way of dealing with her depression and anguish.

She ended up in a major centre in North Queensland where her sister lived and continued her party lifestyle. As a result, "I got done for DD [drink driving] three times". She consequently moved to another regional centre in NQ and lived in a caravan park but was eventually evicted, once again because of her drinking. As a result she ended up in a women's shelter – "it was horrifying to be in a women's shelter. I had hit rock-bottom. I went way too far and stuffed up big-time". She was eventually able to gain access to medium-term accommodation in a SAAP agency that provided her with ongoing support to sort her life out.

"They put up with me and allowed me to make a few mistakes. They gave me a time of grace and gave me time enough to sort out priorities. I'm now in Housing Commission and doing all right".

IMPACTS OF HOMELESSNESS FOR CHILDREN

In each of the focus groups, time was spent discussing what participants thought were the main impacts of homelessness for their children. There were a number of consistent themes emerging across the focus groups in terms of emotional impacts, behavioural issues for the children, and schooling disruptions.

Emotional impacts

Parents talked about what they considered to be the emotional impacts on their children as a result of the family's circumstances.

> "*It's been hard for my youngest son* [11 year old] *especially when we were staying in the car for a couple of months. He's back on track now – he's got his own room* [in supported accommodation]". [39]

Two separate participants in one of the focus groups indicated that their children had attempted suicide, which they believed was as a result of the instability and stress of their circumstances:

> "*My daughter really took it to heart – she's tried to commit suicide*". [32]

> "*I've got a daughter* [15 years old] *who wants to commit suicide. She's tried three or four times … it's because of having nowhere to live, no stability*". [31]

Some of the participants talked about how their children would either be withdrawn or angry. One woman's nine year old daughter had said to her:

> "*I'm angry at you – you made me move*". [21]

Some of the parents believed that when the children were younger (under 10 years old) they coped better with moving and instability. However, this was certainly not the reality for one parent with a young child:

> "*Every time we move it takes me about 6 months to get my daughter re-settled – toilet training, constant tantrums, telling me she hates me, she hates this house. She wants to move back to the old one*". [26]

Behavioural problems

Across the focus groups, participants described how their experiences and circumstances had impacted on their children's behaviour and, in particular, described some of the behavioural problems their children were experiencing. Fighting or aggressive behaviour was a common issue raised by participants:

> *"My children don't get on at all together. My daughter* [15 years old] *is very violent – she hits the little one. I just don't know what to do. I find it very difficult to deal with. My 12 year old son and my 15 year old daughter don't get on at all. My 5 year old son – I think he's got ADD* [Attention Deficit Disorder] *and he just wants to fight all the time".* [2]

> *"My 1_ year old – she's a psycho".* [51]

As noted above, the impact of domestic violence had been quite devastating and one of the women attributed her child's aggressive behaviour towards her as a result of him witnessing domestic violence from her two ex-partners:

> *"My seven year old is violent because my two ex-partners were violent. He pulls a knife on me and says he's going to kill me. I had two violent ex-partners … I try to talk to him but I'm no psychologist".* [3]

Other forms of behavioural problems with the children were also raised as a source of major concern for participants:

> *"It's big* [the impact] *because the children blame the parents for the situation* [being homeless], *so they rebel. They start hanging out with other kids".* [12]

> *"It's not good. My 8 year old's misbehaviour gets to the point I can't take it anymore".* [58]

> *"They get upset. They know we should be doing better. You're trying the hardest you can and you get the kids chucking it in your face".* [56]

> *"My daughter* [14 years old] *is now sexually active; she's tried alcohol and drugs through all this. She wants to go back to Redcliffe to be with her friends and my 8 year old doesn't want to go to school".* [11]

Schooling disruptions and 'school refusal'

The issue of schooling disruptions was raised in each of the focus groups as a major impact for the children of these families. The mobility of the families meant that there were frequent changes of schools:

> *"The kids have been in something like six schools over the last 2 years. I can't even remember half the names of the schools".* [36]

A common theme for many of the parents was difficulty in getting their children to go to school. This was an issue raised by participants in each of the focus groups. For example, one woman's 14 year old daughter had not been to school for the past 2 months. She

attributed this to be a result of the stress they had been under and, as a result, she believed her daughter was "scared to be around people" [35]. For another woman, her 14 year old son was refusing to go to school and she was "always getting phone calls from the school" about her 11 year old daughter [18]. Getting children to school was not just an issue for parents of teenage children. One of the women said how she was having trouble getting her 6 year old to go to school [38].

A number of the participants acknowledged that the disrupted nature of their children's schooling was having an impact on school performance and this was a source of concern to them.

> *"Her* [daughter's] *school work is suffering and it's my fault".* [11]

In only one of the focus groups, participants indicated that the agency they were being supported by had organised counseling for their children to address the issues associated with schooling difficulties and other behavioural problems.

The temporary nature of the accommodation families were currently staying in was a source of concern for some parents in terms of the possibility of further disruptions to schooling:

> *"I'm worried about having to move out of the area* [after supported accommodation finishes] *and disrupting my 11 year old's school. My son is in a special class and I don't want to take him out".* [39]

One of the participants highlighted the over-crowded living situations for some of the Indigenous families, which created stress for the children and meant they had no "learning space":

> *"Living in the same room as the kids stresses them out. They have no learning space".* [43]

PARENTING AND PARENT SUPPORT ISSUES

The issues and impacts facing children of the families involved in the research underscore a number of issues facing the participants as parents. There were quite a number of issues relating to parenting and parent support issues: the need for support in parenting, particularly in dealing with and managing children's behaviour; dealing with the impacts of homelessness on the parents themselves and on their parenting; the lack of child care options; the fear of child protection intervention; a sense of embarrassment and fear of being judged as a bad parent; and inter-generational issues.

The need for parenting support in dealing with children's behaviour

A strong theme emerging in each of the focus groups was the need for parenting support, particularly in dealing with and managing children's behaviour. This was an issue that participants spent considerable time discussing.

A key issue for participants was the lack of support available to assist in managing the difficult behaviour of their children. As one participant described:

> *"I was at the end of my tether with the kids. I went to the Families Department for help and all they did was tell me to go to Caboolture Mental Health. The kids were fighting all the time and my son was damaging the house. He wouldn't go to school. That's why I'm blacklisted, because of the damage – seven holes in the walls. The kids are supposed to be on medication* [for ADD] *but I'm not going to put them on it. There's not enough services. I needed support with the children. I was worrying about am I going to get kicked out because my kids are running amuck".* [11]

When asked 'what would have helped' in terms of dealing with the children, one participant suggested:

> *"With four kids under six years old,* [it would have helped] *if someone had of picked up that there was a problem – support people who come around, trained to pick up on problems with the parents".* [8]

In one of the focus groups there was an extended discussion between the participants on different strategies that could be useful in managing their children's behaviour. The issue of using physical punishment was a particular issue:

> *"Nothing works with the kids".* [1]
> *"Our 5 year old has a time-out chair. She's not in our care but* [partner's] *parents take her to Griffith Uni on the Gold Coast and she has a time-out chair that works better than a smack".* [5]
> *"The time-out chair works".* [6]
> *"Kids ask, 'if it's alright to hit me, why can't I hit'. My kids get grounded and they're not allowed to leave the house or play with friends but none of it seems to work. They're supposed to be home by 5 o'clock and I'm out looking for them at 6.30".* [1]

Impacts on parents and parenting of children

There were a number of consistent themes raised by participants in terms of the impact of homelessness for them as individuals and as parents. Many talked about regular feelings of stress, guilt, depression and anger. The notion of 'stress' was the most frequently cited descriptor of the impact of homelessness.

Many of the participants talked about how they had struggled to cope with this stress and how this had affected how they parented their children. One of the women put it in these terms:

> *"When you are frightened of losing your stability, it transfers through to your kids and you get niggly at them. The stress changes how you relate to the kids. You get depressed and angry and take it out on them. It puts pressure on their little hearts to take responsibility for something not their fault".* [55]

The pressure of coping with the difficulties participants were facing had an impact on how they were able to parent their children. As one person said:

> *"In the end you've got the frustration of the finances. The pressure builds up and you smack them anyway and you've got that guilt as well. I try not to use violence".* [3]

In the course of their residential instability, many of the participants had stayed with friends or relatives. However, this often added to the stress of the situation and ended up in conflict and eventually another move for the family.

> *"It's stressful especially when you're staying with people – your kids get the blame all the time. You can't be yourself – you're forever telling the kids to be quiet".* [58]

> *"It's hard living with people when you've got children and they have children as well".* [12]

> *"It's stressful with a two year old, especially when you're staying with people".* [59]

Lack of child care

For a number of the families involved in this research, lack of access to child care was a major issue, particularly access to respite care for the children. This issue was often raised in the context of the stress parents talked about in relation to the constant responsibility of caring for their children, mostly on their own.

As one of the women said:

> *"I'm exhausted – it's been years and years without a break. I get tired and depressed about being responsible all the time.* [55]

Whilst informal care arrangements could sometimes be worked out with friends or others, this was often not a satisfactory solution to child care.

> *"Often the only option* [for child care] *is other people in the same boat as you. It just creates more stress".* [54]

The lack of child care, especially respite care, places additional pressure and stress on the women and affects their ability to parent.

Access to child care was also an issue in terms of being able to look for work.

> *"I need access to day care so I can look for work. He likes day care".* [59]

Fear of child protection intervention

For many, there was a fear of the possibility of child protection intervention and a number of the participants had children who were in care of the Department of Families. One young couple (under 21 years old) had their two children in care of the Department and was trying to stabilise their living arrangements in an effort to regain custody. Similarly, an older couple, with a history of drug addiction, had custody of their eight week old child but had their two older children in care of the Department and they were working with a support agency to regain custody (see Box 3 below).

Box 3:   Corrine and Tony

Corrine and Tony are a couple in their early 30s. They have three children aged 5 years, 3 years and eight weeks old. Their two older children are in care of the Department of Families and they are currently looking after their new-born child. Tony and Corrine are both recovering from drug addiction and are currently on the methadone program.

Corrine has a childhood background of sexual abuse from her stepfather, starting when she was 12 years old. She had two children from her first marriage and these children are in the care of their father. Following her separation with her first husband, she formed another relationship and suffered two miscarriages. These experiences led to her using drugs and consequently being charged for drug offences and associated offences such as break and enter. She currently has three children to Tony.

Tony has also had quite a disturbed childhood and suffered physical abuse from his mother. He has been in and out of jail over a period of ten years for a series of offences including armed robbery, mostly relating to drug use.

Both Tony and Corrine are now maintaining a successful tenancy in long-term community housing and with on-going support from a community agency. The support agency and the Department of Families are negotiating the permanent return of the two older children. Support is still required while negotiating this process.

One of the women interviewed talked about how she had turned to drug use as a way of coping with the difficulties of looking after her four young children on her own and with no support. She had a heightened fear of child protection intervention that led to a vicious cycle of isolation.

> *"I isolated myself because I was frightened that Children's Services* [Department of Families] *were going to come in. It was a vicious cycle that meant I kept on having no support with the kids".* [8]

The lack of services and assistance in dealing with conflicts and issues was a source of frustration for some. For example, a man in one focus group who had two of his three children in care of the Department expressed a strong sense of disappointment and anger with the intervention by the Department:

> *"Family Services are all too quick to butt in but they don't help to find out where to go for assistance. They don't give you information or phone numbers. In two years I've had no more than 5 hours of contact".* [7]

His suggestion was that there should be some form of "compulsory family therapy – a roundtable with everyone to work out the future". However, as another participant pointed out: "With counselling services, prices are astronomical". [4]

Sense of embarrassment and fear of being judged

In a similar vein as the fear of child protection intervention, participants across the focus groups also expressed a fear of being judged as being a 'bad parent' by others generally.

> *"People are ashamed to ask for support – they are embarrassed. I was embarrassed. I thought people would think I was a bad mum".* [10]

> *"You get worried about people's perceptions of you as a parent. People are judgmental about single mums".* [54]

> *"But we don't put ourselves in these positions. None of us would be in this position if we could help it, hey".* [48]

A number also talked about a sense of embarrassment and shame because of being homeless and were acutely sensitive about being judged by others, including, at times, professionals and workers in services:

> *"Being homeless is embarrassing – people look down on you".* [32]

> *"I felt really embarrassed standing in line for food* [at the street van] *but I had to feed the kids".* [11]

Inter-generational issues

In the process of analysing the data from the focus groups, one of the more subtle themes to emerge related to the possibility of inter-generational cycles of problems for the families involved in the research. For some parents, their own childhood patterns seemed to be repeated with their children. One participant put it in clear terms:

> *"When I was growing up I had ADD but was undiagnosed. With my daughter, I couldn't seek help until she was 5 and now she is in care of the Department. I can see the patterns in my life* [as a child] *being repeated by her".* [4]

Other comments from participants relating to this issue included the following:

> *"I was a kid in care, now my two children are in care".* [15]

> *"I took off from home when I was 13, now my 14 year old daughter is running away".* [11]
>
> *"I also had an unstable childhood with four step-fathers and lots of uncles".* [10]

In one focus group discussion, when participants were asked how they came to know of the agency they were being supported by, one participant replied that her mother had previously been a client.

ISSUES FOR INDIGENOUS FAMILIES

Indigenous families constituted over 40% of the participants involved in this research, including one Indigenous-specific focus group in Brisbane. There were four key issues emerging for these families: overcrowded housing, the importance of family links, escaping violence on remote Indigenous communities and the extent of discrimination.

Overcrowding

A recurring issue for many of the Indigenous families involved in this research was overcrowding, generally as a result of one family having nowhere to go and relying on relatives and other family members to provide accommodation. Two participants' stories are typical examples:

> *"I was staying with mum. She had 6 of her cousin's children plus 4 of her own. There were 11 kids and two adults staying in 2 adjoining rooms with 2 double beds and three single beds".* [42]

> *"I was staying with a friend in Cairns who had 6 kids. I had my four kids plus my four year old nephew and a foster daughter in a four-bedroom house".* [41]

Extended family networks

Closely related to the issue of overcrowding was the role that extended family networks play as both a potential resource but also as a potential threat to housing stability. For a number of the Indigenous participants, loss of accommodation often meant going to stay with other family members or relatives, as some of the participants' comments above indicate. However, the resulting overcrowded accommodation places additional pressure and an increased risk of eviction on the whole group.

This was particularly an issue in Far North Queensland. A local coordinator with an Aboriginal housing cooperative in Cairns described the situation in these terms:

> *"A lot of people have family ties in Cape York. Once they get a house everyone comes down to stay. You can't kick family out. But they often don't kick in for rent and it becomes unsustainable".*

Escaping violence on remote communities

Donna's story (Box 1 above) highlights some of the issues facing Indigenous families escaping violence on remote communities in the Cape York area. This was a similar story for another participant in one of the North Queensland focus groups. Karen was 33 weeks pregnant with her fourth child. Complications with the pregnancy meant she required

specialist care and she was transferred to a hospital in a major regional centre. She had been with "an abusive man" for a number of years but she had to leave behind her other three young children. For the sake of her unborn child she was not going to return to the community. For both Donna and Karen, they arrived in a large regional centre not knowing anyone and with few options for ongoing support.

Discrimination

It has already been noted above that discrimination was a major problem for the families involved in this research. However, this issue was particularly acute for Indigenous families and especially pronounced in attempts to access the private rental market.

ACCESS TO AND TREATMENT BY SERVICES

In each of the focus groups, participants consistently raised issues relating to their experiences of accessing services and assistance. There were three main aspects emerging around this issue: difficulties in accessing services; issues about treatment by services and positive features of services.

Access to services

The major issue consistently raised in relation to accessing services and assistance was the lack of information about what services were available. The mobility of the families often meant that they would arrive in a new town but with no local contacts or knowledge of services and assistance available.

Word of mouth was often mentioned as the main way people heard about services and there was a sense that there was a degree of luck involved in finding out about available assistance.

> *"I found out about* [non-government agency] *by word of mouth, so I was lucky. There's nowhere to get information".* [1]

> *"It's hard to know what assistance is available. You've got to be lucky* [to get into services]*".* [58]

> *"Getting information about services is an issue. I didn't know anyone when I came to Brisbane. The doctor helped me and found information for me. It comes down to who you know".* [28]

> *"There's nothing to tell you about what services are available here in Townsville".* [51]

> *"There's no education on what's available in terms of assistance".* [12]

Negotiating the maze of services was difficult, expensive and time consuming.

> *"I spent 40 to 50 phone calls to try to get help".* [3]

Treatment by services

One of the more alarming issues arising from the focus groups was a series of feedback about people's experience of and treatment by services, both government and non-government. In many cases, treatment by services had been poor. A number of the participants complained about judgmental, rude and inconsistent dealings with staff from both government and non-government agencies.

> *"They* [a non-government agency] *made me feel like a criminal for asking for a $30 food voucher".* [50]

> *"We had just escaped from this guy I was with and when I turned up at* [the women's shelter] *they said 'not you again' – the way they spoke to my son, they made him cry".* [48]

> *"They* [non-government agency] *make you feel like it's a privilege to be there".* [51]

> *"I was told by* [non-government agency] *that I can only get assistance once and I can't come back for another 6 months".* [40]

> *"Going to services – people aren't friendly. The workers put you down. The* [non-government agency] *was judgmental. It's embarrassing enough to have to ask for help".* [11]

For some of the participants there was a strong sense of anger and powerlessness about their inability to seek redress for poor treatment by non-government agencies. One of the women who felt particularly aggrieved from her treatment by an agency exclaimed in desperation:

> *"Who do you complain to?"* [48]

Treatment by the Department of Housing was consistently raised by participants as a problem, particularly with front-line staff of Area Offices.

> *"The attitude by Housing Commission was judgmental – they pick out who they want. The Housing Commission bloke had it in for me".* [32]

> *"We were about two months behind in rent. I rang Housing Commission and tried to work out something. I asked if we could please pay an extra $30 each week to make up the rent. She said you've been given this date to pay the rent by. We weren't given an opportunity to get back on top".* [9]

As discussed above, many of the participants had debt problems with the Department and there was a strong sense of inflexibility and inconsistency with how debts were treated.

Other government agencies were also singled out for special mention, in particular Centrelink. There was generally widespread confusion about entitlements and assistance available from Centrelink and inconsistencies in information provided:

> *"The Centrelink manager doesn't like me. Different people tell me different things. Housing Commission is the same. Why can't they be human?"* [53]

> *"They* [Centrelink] *made me feel like I was going crazy. Every time I rang them I was told something different".* [48]

Positive aspects of services

Not all the feedback relating to treatment by services was negative. The discussion in the focus groups about poor treatment by agencies arose without prompting. In order to balance out this type of discussion, participants were also asked about their positive experiences of services.

Participants generally spoke highly favourably about the support agencies with whom they were involved. In all but two of the focus groups staff from the support agencies were not present.

Participants identified four main characteristics that related to positive experiences of services:
   ♦ flexibility and responsiveness;
   ♦ being treated with respect;
   ♦ practical assistance and support; and
   ♦ regular contact with support staff in a non-threatening way.

A key issue for a number of participants was **flexibility** by agencies in how they dealt with clients, particularly some degree of flexibility in accommodation arrangements to allow for a planned exit.

> *"They* [agency] *let me stay a little longer until I had a new place sorted out. They gave me space to gradually move in and manage all the moving bills".* [55]

The same woman, talking about the same agency, described her appreciation for the flexibility in how she was treated, particularly in the early stages of her contact with them while she was still in 'crisis mode':

> *"They* [agency] *put up with me and allowed me to make a few mistakes … they gave me a period of grace".* [55]

Another participant, also talking about the same agency, highlighted the importance of **responsiveness** in dealing with her crisis situation.

> *"They* [agency] *responded immediately. They paid for a cab over from Centrelink and put me in a hotel for a week".* [48]

Being treated with **respect** was especially important for the participants, particularly in the context of other experiences of feeling judged and embarrassed. As two of the participants said in reference to two different agencies:

> *"They* [agency] *make you feel like a real person. They make you feel like you deserve it* [support from the agency]".* [54]

> *"[The agency]* doesn't judge you. It's a problem if people look down on you".* [1]

Getting **practical assistance** and support from services was also seen as very important, including practical activities involving the children:

> "*They* [agency] *helped me get a fridge, a phone book, they helped with the gas connection bill … things like that are really important*". [54]

> "*They* [agency] *have organised camps for the kids, free movies … things I generally can't afford. The kids don't miss out*". [20]

Participants also talked about the importance of **regular contact** in a non-threatening way from support workers. One participant indicated the importance of this:

> "*[The support workers] are great. They come around and see you at least once a week*". [53]

Similarly, one young woman described her experience in the following way:

> "*The support worker from* [non-government agency] *was great – one of the most mellow people, very calm and provided practical assistance. She didn't give up. Being around someone who is calm when you're stressed is really important. When my child was driving me batty, she just calmly took him and took over*". [29]

CONCLUSION

The themes and issues emerging from the families involved in this research resonate with many of the issues identified in other research studies discussed in section 2 of this report. The combination of both structural and personal factors in mediating family homelessness for the participants in this research come through quite strongly. The families are clearly affected by a range of structural issues such as poverty and financial stress, lack of access to affordable housing and a lack of connection to employment opportunities. However, there are also personal support issues that are involved. As one of the participants put it: "You need the housing <u>and</u> the support" (original emphasis).

The problems that participants in this study experienced with debts with the Department of Housing were also echoed by the families in Bartholomew's study.

The issue of domestic and family violence is also strongly related in both this study and other research. Clearly, this is a major contributor to family homelessness, especially for women and children. A major concern is the impact of domestic and family violence on the children in these families, particularly where children are subject to abuse. It is also important to note the experiences of childhood abuse and violence reported by some of the participants in this study are also found in other research. Calls for a focus on the 'totality of violence' within the family (Tomlinson, 2000) are more than ever relevant.

It is also not surprising that the parenting issues reported in this study were the source of real difficulties. The behavioural and other impacts for the children involved here are completely consistent with the findings from other studies. This should be the cause for great alarm, particularly if we take seriously the evidence from the study by Columbia University that "today's homeless children will likely follow in their parent's footsteps when they grow up" (Institute for Children and Poverty, 1998: 1).

The findings from this research seen in the context of findings from other Australian and international research have some important implications. These will be explored in the following section of this report.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

An overarching theme emerging from this research is the importance of a combined approach to provide both housing and support to adequately address the complex issues facing homeless families. This idea also comes through clearly in the research literature.

This section of the report brings together the main findings and issues identified by the families participating in the research with issues and concerns raised by service providers (both government and non-government) in the series of workshops that were held to validate the research findings. There are two main objectives. First, to identify the implications of issues arising from the research within the context of current responses and recent developments likely to impact on homeless families and second, to propose a series of recommendations aimed at improving responses for these families.

Whilst homeless families are the primary focus of this research, the recommendations proposed in this report are also likely to benefit homeless people in general. Indeed, it would be counter-productive to add to the fragmentation of the policy, program and service delivery system by treating family homelessness in isolation from broader responses.

The implications and proposals for future directions are organised around the two key themes of improving access to housing and housing assistance and improving access to services and support for homeless families and children.

ACCESS TO HOUSING AND HOUSING ASSISTANCE

Access to affordable housing is obviously a key issue affecting the families involved in this study. The failure of the private rental market to provide a viable housing option for the families highlights the importance of the social housing sector, and in particular public housing, in providing a genuine alternative in accessing affordable housing. There are a number of issues and implications arising from the research that relate to improved access to affordable housing. These include:

- Problems with current supply of public housing;
- Policies and practices of the Department of Housing;
- Fragmentation of SAAP accommodation and other housing options;
- Need for more flexible opportunities for brokerage;
- Options for improving access to the private rental market; and
- The role of local government in affordable housing and homelessness.

Supply of public housing

Levels of public housing in Queensland have traditionally been lower compared with other states and territories and compared to the national average (4% of Queensland housing stock compared to a national average of 6% [AIHW, 2001]). The recent policy context of public housing provision in Queensland has created additional pressures. Put simply, there are declining resources, growing demands and increased operating costs for public housing.

One of the primary issues impacting on public housing provision is the decline in real terms of Commonwealth and state funding for public housing under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA). Since 1996 the Commonwealth Government has applied

'efficiency dividends' across funding programs and without indexation for inflation, this has resulted in a decline of Commonwealth base funding under the CSHA of 14%.

The declining funding base for public housing is reflected in the following indicators for public housing in Queensland (Department of Housing, 2002):

- Total households assisted has declined from just over 57,000 in 1997-98 to 55,500 in 2001-02;
- New households assisted has fallen from 9,100 in 1997-98 to 6,500 in 2001-02;
- Dwelling commencements and purchases has fallen from 900 in 1997-98 to 320 in 2001-02 and a projected 300 in 2003-04.

At the same time demand has been increasing with almost 27,000 applicants on the waiting list at 30 June 2002 (AIHW, 2003) and an average wait time of 1.3 years (much higher in some areas)[9].

With declining supply and increasing demand, public housing has become increasingly targeted to housing people with 'special needs' and with 'priority housing needs'.

Corresponding to the decline in capital funding under the CSHA, Commonwealth funding for Rent Assistance has increased dramatically. However, the inadequacies of the Commonwealth Rent Assistance scheme as an effective policy response to ensure that low-income households can live free of housing stress has recently been highlighted by research undertaken by the Australian Council of Social Service and National Shelter (ACOSS, 2003).

The Queensland Minister for Housing has been a consistent and vocal 'champion' of public housing and, in the face of the obvious funding pressures, has sought to maintain Queensland's public housing system as a viable and responsive solution to the needs of low-income households and as a way of 'improving people's lives'. This vision should receive greater recognition within the budget process. Along with this, the Commonwealth Government should undertake a thorough review of the effectiveness of rent assistance including the benefits of rebalancing funding for housing assistance towards improving the supply of affordable housing.

Recommendation 1:
That the Commonwealth Government commission an independent and transparent review of the effectiveness of the Commonwealth Rent Assistance scheme in delivering housing affordability for low-income households. This review should include an examination of the benefits of rebalancing funding arrangements for housing assistance to improve the supply of affordable housing.

Recommendation 2:
That the Queensland Government examine options for increasing state funding levels for public housing as a social investment in creating a Smart State.

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[9] Despite these pressures, it should also be noted that client satisfaction with the Department of Housing has increased over this time (76%) and is well above the national average (69%).

Department of Housing policy and practice

The patterns of poor and/or inconsistent treatment by some Department of Housing staff and exclusion from public housing experienced by the participants in this study raise issues about the adequacy of current policies and practices within the Department in relation to prevention of homelessness.

A number of recent developments within the Department will assist in improving responses. In particular, the recent restructuring of Area Offices to upgrade front counter staff positions to Housing Officers and the creation of Senior Housing Officer roles and Senior Client Manager positions is likely to significantly improve the quality of client interaction with Area Officers of the Department and reduce the inconsistency of treatment of clients.

The Department of Housing is also concerned about developing appropriate responses to support vulnerable and at-risk tenancies in public housing and, to this end, has recently commissioned a research project to investigate policy and management arrangements for 'sustaining tenancies' in Queensland public housing. The Department has also commissioned a small-scale evaluation of three family support services it funds to assess the extent to which these services have assisted the Department in tenant management. Both of these projects are due to report in the near future and are likely to provide valuable insights and directions for future action in supporting vulnerable tenancies.

However, notwithstanding these recent efforts, what emerges from this research is a picture of families being evicted or excluded from assistance by the Department of Housing for a range of reasons who subsequently go on to seek support from SAAP and other support agencies. These families then start the process of trying to regain entry into the public housing system, as it is generally the most viable and affordable housing option available to them. Thus, a 'treadmill effect' or 'revolving door syndrome' is put in motion. At the same time, local Area Offices of the Department are not well linked with other local housing and support agencies that often end up responding to the consequences of eviction and other forms of exclusion.

The results of this research highlight the importance and urgency of exploring options for the Department of Housing to put in place a more robust set of arrangements to help prevent exclusion in the first place through better strategies for support of vulnerable tenancies including better linkages with local support options and through reviewing policies and procedures for the treatment of clients who have incurred debts.

Supporting vulnerable tenancies

Most state housing authorities (SHAs) have some form of response in place to provide support to vulnerable tenancies. These responses can be broadly categorised as one or, more frequently, a combination of organisational responses along a three-stage continuum:

- *A programmatic and state-wide funding of dedicated support agencies* to provide case management and other services for vulnerable and at-risk tenancies. The most developed example of this kind of response is the Supported Housing Assistance Program in Western Australia (see Box 4 below). This program operates in conjunction with a number of smaller programs (such as the Aboriginal Tenants Support Service). Housing Tasmania has also established the Community and Direct Tenancy Program, which funds non-government support agencies to provide a combination of housing and support to vulnerable tenancies.

- *The provision of designated housing support positions* within the operational offices (at an area or regional level) of the state housing authority. This is a more common approach and these kinds of positions are in place in Victoria (Housing Support Coordinators), the Australian Capital Territory (Specialist Housing Managers), in New South Wales (Intensive Tenancy Managers) and in South Australia (Housing Support Coordinators). Generally, these roles provide an in-house capability to coordinate assessment and referral to support agencies for at-risk tenants, to organise assistance around debt and financial management issues and to liaise and review with other housing staff on clients' progress.

- *Partnership arrangements* with other government and non-government service providers in the provision of support. To varying degrees, this approach is typical within most state housing authorities and it generally involves some form of formal agreement or arrangement between the state housing authority and the other service providers. This approach is perhaps most well developed in South Australia where the Housing Trust in partnership with Family and Youth Support Services (FAYS) within the Department of Human Services is running a number of tenancy demonstration projects related to the management of vulnerable tenancies. This is also the approach adopted in Queensland, most notably the Interagency Collaboration Improvement Project aimed at improving services to tenants with a mental health illness. Protocols and partnership agreements with mental health services have been a key to the success of this approach. Similarly, the 'Same House Different Landlord' program is another example of this approach whereby tenancy management of an at-risk tenancy is transferred to a community housing provider for provision of specialist support.

In both Victoria and South Australia, an important piece of underlying infrastructure has been the development of a set of 'triggers' or risk indicators to identify clients who may be in need of support.

Box 4: The Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP), Western Australia

SHAP has operated since 1991 to support tenants who are experiencing difficulties in maintaining tenancies due to rental arrears, property standards, antisocial behaviours or a combination of factors. Tenants may also experience a range of other problems, which impact on their tenancy such as depression, domestic violence, alcohol and drug problems and unemployment.

HomesWest provides funding to independent community agencies in each of its regions which, in turn provide regular support to tenants identified by HomesWest staff in each region. Generally tenants who are referred to the program are in danger of eviction from their properties or have a history of tenancy problems. Funding for the program is recurrent and is approximately $1.1 million per annum. Involvement with SHAP is voluntary and after referral the agency will make contact with the client to arrange an assessment and develop a plan of action. There is no defined time period for support and where clients do not cooperate or keep appointments, the agency, with HomesWest agreement will terminate support.

The program is generally well regarded by HomesWest staff and by the agencies providing services as it supports people who might otherwise become homeless due to a poor history in maintaining tenancies. The stated objectives of the program are:

- HomesWest and the agency selected to undertake the support, agree to provide support to a minimum of six tenants and their families (if applicable) for a period of 12 months from the commencement of the agreement.
- The support required will be identified by HomesWest in the referral and a written plan for assistance will be developed by HomesWest, the agency and the tenant to assist them to overcome the identified deficiencies or address the identified referral issues. Support will be for a period of 12 months from the commencement of participation, with reviews at 3 monthly periods, but may be extended if necessary.
- Supports may include referral to other agencies for specialised assistance. General support will include: visits to the tenant on a regular and systematic basis to assist with identified issues; financial and budgeting support/training; family and child support and/or referral; and assistance/training in maintaining a total home environment

In the period from January to June 2001 there were 265 participants in the program. Of these, 50 tenants' situations improved, 31 were resolved, 42 made a successful exit from the program, 3 were evicted, 4 refused on-going support, the agency withdrew support for 11 participants, 17 vacated and 107 were unresolved with on-going support. Of the 265 participants, just over 70% were from Aboriginal backgrounds.

Reasons for referral varied and often were a combination of factors including arrears, antisocial behaviour and tenant liability/standards. Average time on the program was 9.6 months but this varied considerably between clients and agencies.

Source: Stanton Consultancy & Cameron and Associates, 1999; HomesWest Information paper, 2002.

The outcomes of this research highlight the importance of improving the Department's linkage to local support services for vulnerable tenants, many of whom are families (particularly sole parents with children). Within the context of the recent improvements to Area Office and client service operations, there is an opportunity for the Department's Area Offices to become a more integrated and central component of local social infrastructure arrangements.

Whilst current practices of local partnership and liaison with industry, community and other government agencies are critical to this, a stronger organizational capacity is also likely to be required. In addition, a more formal relationship with the Department of Families at a local level should be a priority. The principles, protocols and practices learnt from the experience of partnership with Queensland Health for clients with mental health problems could be extended in a more formal partnership with the Department of Families.

Hence, implementation of improved support for vulnerable tenancies will require:

- Development of a monitoring system to identify potential 'at-risk' tenancies on the basis of a set of risk indicators such as rent arrears, consistent complaints from neighbours, difficulties with maintaining property standards, etc.
- Identification of potential support agencies in the local area and development of referral protocols to these support agencies.
- Consideration of establishing a dedicated position such as Housing Support Coordinators in each Area Office to provide a point of coordination between the Department of Housing and support agencies.
- A more formal relationship with the Department of Families at the local level.

Recommendation 3
That the Department of Housing undertake an implementation project to develop a more formal and consistent approach to linking vulnerable and 'at risk' tenants to support services at the local area office level. This work should aim to:

- *Develop a monitoring system to identify potential 'at-risk' tenancies on the basis of a set of risk indicators such as rent arrears, consistent complaints from neighbours, difficulties with maintaining property standards, etc.*
- *Identify potential support agencies in the local area and develop referral protocols to these support agencies.*
- *Consider establishing a dedicated position such as Housing Support Coordinators in each Area Office to provide a point of coordination between the Department of Housing and support agencies.*
- *Develop a more formal relationship with the Department of Families at the local level.*

Treatment of debts

The issue of debts with the Department of Housing was a major theme in each of the focus group discussions for this research. Confusion, misunderstanding and inconsistency in treatment of debts were key issues. The introduction of the new housing legislation provides the Department with greater flexibility in how debts can be treated. However, in the workshops with service providers, there were concerns about how these provisions would be implemented.

With the introduction of the new legislation, it is now timely to undertake an independent and thorough review of policy and practice in relation to treatment of debt incurred by tenants and clients of the Department.

Recommendation 4
That the Department of Housing undertake an independent review of policy and practice in relation to treatment of debt incurred by tenants and clients of the Department. This review should aim to:

- *Examine current practices across Area Offices in relation to how clients with debts are treated, with a particular focus on consistency of treatment;*
- *Clarify a policy position in relation to treatment of debt and access to assistance by clients who have incurred debts with the Department;*
- *Make recommendations for how this policy is communicated to clients and applied with consistency across Area Offices of the Department*

Fragmentation of SAAP and other housing options

A number of issues relating to current SAAP service delivery arrangements for homeless families were raised in the agency interviews and workshops.

- Current service delivery arrangements are fragmented and there is a widespread lack of coordination between SAAP services and the broader social housing sector. As one worker suggested: "the SAAP sector is not connected". Yet at the same time, SAAP agencies rely on community housing providers for exit options for their supported housing clients. As one SAAP agency noted in their annual report: "The number of families moving on to CRS remains consistently and worryingly low, out of 115 families that we housed only 4 were housed in CRS housing" (Stainbrook, 2003: 8).

- There is fragmentation and lack of integration at a program level and this is reflected at the service system level. There are strong boundary issues between government departments and programs do not 'fit' together and do not facilitate collaboration.

- The need for some form of protocols between the SAAP sector and community housing providers and between community housing providers and the Department of Housing was raised as a potential solution. However, it was also acknowledged that "protocols are the result of building a relationship" and this has to happen first.

- Sharing of information between agencies could be facilitated by the development and use of a core referral form and other shared practice tools across agencies. In Townsville, SAAP agencies have initiated a one-off project that aims to develop some of these tools.

- The capacity of non-government agencies to take on additional support roles is extremely limited and taking on additional units of accommodation for homeless families requires additional support workers.

- A more "complete package of assistance" could be provided if there was greater access to brokerage funds. Some families do not need to come into SAAP housing and a more appropriate response would be to provide cash assistance to help maintain existing housing.

The quest for improved integration between SAAP and other service sectors is by no means a new issue – this was a central focus on the 1998 Queensland evaluation of SAAP (see Spall, 1998). The evaluation recommended a process for sub-regional service integration and, consequently, a number of small scale consultancies were undertaken by the Department of Families to facilitate that process. However, despite these efforts, little progress appears to have been made. The possible exception is in Townsville where the SAAP sector has initiated the Townsville Area Regional Supported Housing Project (TARSH) to develop a set of common practice tools (such as assessment and referral forms, etc).

Dennis and others (1998) note from a North American perspective that nearly every piece of research on homelessness over the past decade has called for improved systems-wide integration to more effectively address homelessness. However, achieving this has proven to be elusive and that incremental change is often the way in which most systems evolve. Similarly, Hambrick and Rog (2000) in their review of organisational coordination efforts to address homelessness conclude that smaller-scale, 'point-of-delivery' coordination seems to produce more success.

A useful model in this regard is the Linkages and Protocols initiative of the South Australian Department of Human Services. This initiative, involving the SAAP sector, provides a range of tools for improved coordination of services for people with complex needs. This kind of approach should be adopted in Queensland with a focus on improving the linkages between SAAP agencies and other housing providers, especially those funded through the Department of Housing's Community Housing Program. Another clear message from the research is that leadership is essential for improving integration (Dennis, et al, 1998). In this regard, the Department of Families and the Department of Housing should take a joint leadership role to initiate a Linkages and Protocols project with the non-government sector.

> ### Recommendation 5
> *That the Department of Families and the Department of Housing jointly lead, in conjunction with non-government service providers, a Linkages and Protocols project aimed at developing appropriate policy and practice tools to facilitate better integration between SAAP and the broader social housing sector.*

It is also clear that the demand for supported accommodation for homeless families far out-strips supply. For example, SHAC, one of the main agencies for homeless families in Cairns, reported that in the year to June 2003, 131 families were turned away (Hopkins, 2003). Similarly, FEAT in Townsville reported for the same period that of the 291 families requesting accommodation, only 115 were able to be housed (Stainbrook, 2003).

A higher priority should be placed on providing additional emergency and medium-term accommodation units for families in SAAP/CAP.

> ### Recommendation 6
> *That the Departments of Families and Housing place a higher priority on the provision of additional emergency and medium-term accommodation units for families in SAAP/CAP.*

Brokerage assistance

Given the limited options available in the SAAP system for families, consideration should be given to the establishment of a 'brokerage fund' to enable service providers to purchase private accommodation when no other options are available. A number of agencies are already providing brokerage funds to clients they cannot assist in other ways, however, this is usually undertaken on a low key scale drawing on funds obtained through other sources. As one of the service providers noted in relation to brokerage funds: "We need to be able to provide a more complete package of assistance".

The Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) in Victoria provides a useful model for this approach.

> "The HEF is a $6 million Victorian government initiative providing financial assistance to households in housing crisis by responding to a range of emergency situations and diverse housing circumstances. The program aims to improve access to overnight emergency accommodation and private rental housing for homeless people and minimise homelessness by assisting eligible tenants to remain in private rental. HEF

funding is provided through the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement". (Victorian Department of Human Services, HEF Guidelines, 2001)

The use of brokerage funds has also been a core component of services funded under the Victorian Government's Strengthening Families Initiative (see Box x below for more details). The independent evaluation of this initiative found that: "Brokerage worked exceptionally well as a means of engaging with the family and addressing practical goals for the family" (SPICE Consulting, 2001: 4).

> ### Recommendation 7
> *That the Department of Housing establish a 'brokerage' fund to provide financial assistance to families and households in housing crisis. The fund should aim to improve access to private rental housing and to assist eligible clients to remain in private rental. The fund would also aim to assist clients to access overnight or emergency accommodation where no other option is available.*

In the series of validation workshops with service providers, one of the issues identified was the time and resources required by staff of support agencies to find accommodation for families and to assist in re-location once suitable accommodation had been found. This effort and resources required meant staff time was diverted from some of the more important tasks of providing the support that is part of their core function. It was noted that previously this kind of housing access and outreach function was performed by the Housing Resource Services (now Tenant Advocacy and Advisory Services Queensland). However, this kind of role was no longer a component of the service agreement with the Department of Housing.

> ### Recommendation 8
> *That the Department of Housing re-instate the housing access, outreach and re-location functions of TAASQ services.*

Private rental provision

Families involved in this research experienced regular and systematic exclusion from the private rental market for a number of reasons including listing on tenancy databases, discrimination and affordability problems.

The issues raised in relation to tenancy databases are consistent with other research that has identified a number of serious problems with their operation, particularly inaccurate, trivial or vexatious listings, inappropriate threats to list tenants, refusal to remove a listing and non-disclosure of listings to tenants (Guthrie, 2002; Lavarch, 2002; Adkins, et al, 2003).

Recent steps taken by the Queensland Government through amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1994* to deal with the practice of listings on tenancy databases are a welcome move and are to be commended. The amendments will hopefully lead to improved practices by property managers in the use of tenancy databases and are likely to address a number of issues raised in this report, at least in the medium term. The Queensland Government has demonstrated national leadership on this issue. It will obviously be important that the

implementation of the amended legislation is monitored. The Industry Forum convened by the Residential Tenancy Authority would provide an ideal mechanism to undertake this monitoring.

The practice of discrimination in the private rental market however is a more difficult issue to deal with and will require a detailed consideration of possible responses including law reform and other strategies. This issue should be more thoroughly investigated by the Residential Tenancy Authority in conjunction with the Anti-Discrimination Commission.

Recommendation 9
That the Residential Tenancy Authority establish a clear monitoring mechanism to ensure that recent legislative amendments dealing with the impact of tenancy databases are being implemented effectively. Consideration should be given to whether the Industry Forum convened by the RTA is such an appropriate mechanism.

Recommendation 10
That the Residential Tenancy Authority and the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commission jointly undertake an in-depth investigation into discrimination in the private rental market in Queensland with a view to developing and proposing appropriate responses such as law reform, education campaigns and other appropriate strategies.

Role of Local Government

Responding to family homelessness and homelessness in general, requires the active involvement of all levels of government and the community. While the Commonwealth and state governments carry a joint responsibility for the funding and administration of SAAP, increasingly the role of local government in dealing with this issue is being recognised, particularly its role in facilitating the provision of affordable housing.

The involvement of the Brisbane City Council in this research project has highlighted the important role that local government has to play in addressing homelessness. Brisbane City Council is demonstrating a 'good practice' approach by local government in responding to homelessness (see Box 5 below).

Whilst the size of Brisbane City Council places it in a unique position to respond to the issue, there are nevertheless some actions that could be undertaken by local councils more generally through their roles in community planning, management of public spaces and planning and regulatory provisions.

All local councils in larger regional and urban areas should be encouraged to develop a strategy for responding to homelessness as part of their corporate and strategic planning processes. A particular focus should be placed on identifying incentives to maintain the provision of low-cost and affordable housing and monitoring the provision of such housing.

In 2003-04, the Department of Housing, in conjunction with the Department of Local Government and Planning, will be preparing a State Planning Policy for Housing and Residential Development to assist local governments to plan more effectively for broad

housing outcomes (Department of Housing, 2003). This initiative provides the opportunity to encourage a more concerted local government response to homelessness.

Box 5:   Brisbane City Council Homelessness Strategy

Brisbane City Council has recently developed a five-year Homelessness Strategy that aims to:
- reduce Brisbane's homeless population by increasing the supply of appropriate accommodation and support; and
- Improve the safety of homeless people and those at risk of homelessness by providing better access to existing services and facilities.

The Council has so far initiated a number of projects including:
- Outreach and Brokerage Service that assists homeless people to access accommodation and other vital services;
- An Information and Referral Service which will be developed to act as a single contact point;
- Boarding House Safety Grants which aim to avoid the further closure of boarding houses;
- Upgrade of park facilities by the installation of storage facilities, showers and additional toilets;
- Support for Homelessness Taskforce, providing a co-ordinated approach to addressing homelessness;
- Red Cross Night Café for homeless young people;
- Crisis and Transitional Housing – making available a number of properties to be leased to social housing providers for crisis and transitional housing;
- The Brisbane Housing Company (BHC) is a new non profit company established with Council and the state government;.
- Albert Park Flexi School (APFS), a joint initiative between Council and Education Queensland, provides education for young people who may be at risk of homelessness.

The development of local area homelessness strategies by councils could also be facilitated by assistance from the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) in identifying a range of possible actions and instruments that councils could adopt as part of a broader strategy. The experience of Brisbane City Council in this regard would be valuable.

Recommendation 11
That the Department of Housing and the Department of Local Government and Planning incorporate provision for the development of local area homelessness strategies in the proposed State Planning Policy for Housing and Residential Development.

Recommendation 12
That the Local Government Association of Queensland undertakes a project to assist local councils in Queensland in the development of local area strategies to address homelessness and housing affordability issues. This work should aim to identify a range of possible actions and instruments that councils could adopt as part of a broader strategy to respond to homelessness.

ACCESS TO SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Along with improved access to housing and housing assistance, the homeless families involved in this research were also clearly in need of improved access to services and support. The main implications arising from the research that relate to services and support include:

- The need to develop and trial new models of family support for homeless and vulnerable families;
- A stronger focus on the needs of children including child care;
- Improving service system coordination and access;
- Improving quality and accountability for service provision by non-government service providers;
- Domestic violence responses;
- Support for Indigenous families;
- Support for young women who are pregnant and parenting; and
- Building a better knowledge base of effective practice with homeless and vulnerable families.

New models of support for homeless families

The families participating in this research indicated the need for more specialist support to deal with a range of multiple and complex issues, particularly in relation to parenting and management of their children's behaviour. However, it was also clear that this type of assistance is generally not available.

Queensland Health currently funds three major early intervention and family support initiatives:

- Early Intervention for Safe and Healthy Families Initiative (EISHFI);
- the Early Intervention and Parenting Support Initiative; and
- the Expanded Child Health Centre Initiative.

These initiatives deliver a range of services including enhanced access to Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) and the Family CARE Home Visiting Program. However, service providers made the point that existing family and parenting support options are "not geared" to the families being supported by SAAP agencies.

One useful model for family support appropriate for the families involved in this study is the Victorian Strengthening Families Initiative (see Box 6 below). SFI was developed to provide targeted family support in order to avoid intrusive statutory intervention and divert families from child protection involvement. The SFI model involved a strengthened service response through providing funding to agencies traditionally involved in providing secondary services to families. A service model emphasising flexible and home-based case-management and in-home support was adopted.

The Strengthening Families Initiative has been evaluated and found to be an effective model of family support (SPICE Consulting, 2001). In particular, the program was found to be effective in addressing a number of key parenting and family issues raised by the families in this research (such as children's behavioural problems and school attendance).

Given the relevance of this initiative to the family characteristics and circumstances of the families involved in this research and the fact that it has been evaluated as an effective response, priority consideration should be given to adopting this model within the Queensland context.

Box 6: The Strengthening Families Initiative (SFI), Victoria

The Strengthening Families Initiative (SFI) is a family support strategy funded by the Victorian Department of Human Services. It has been operating since July 1998, and has, as its central purpose, provision of support for families, children and young people where welfare concerns have been identified. The SFI is not intended to respond to families with children or young people who are at risk of significant harm, as defined in the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989*. Rather, the three main aims of SFI are: to enhance family functioning; to improve family connectedness; and to reduce the intervention of Child Protection in families' lives.

SFI is targeted at families with children and adolescents aged between 0-18 years who have one or more risk factors (eg. history of abuse, homelessness, violence, drug and alcohol issues, poverty, isolation, children or adolescents with conduct disorders, challenging behaviours, school refusal). Priority is given to certain families according to a hierarchy of three levels of risk factors.

Fifteen community service organizations were chosen to develop and deliver services for SFI, and these operated in nine Department of Human Services regions across Victoria. The SFI model comprises four components to help families: assertive outreach; case management; in-home support; and purchasing of other services (brokerage). Brokerage funds may be used to purchase a range of goods and services for families (utility bills, rent arrears, whitegoods, car repairs, child care, school camps, tutoring, etc).

Families are referred to the SFI services either by Child Protection, a range of community service organizations, or through self-referral. Acceptance into SFI services relates to decisions about the level of need in the family and an assessment of the family's requirement for case management services.

The evaluation of SFI established that there was clear progress in families in relation to issues of child behaviour and school attendance. Outcomes achieved for families using SFI were established as very positive using a range of measures such as: goal attainment and client satisfaction; worker satisfaction and family perception of outcomes achieved as a result of intervention

Source: SPICE Consulting, 2001

Recommendation 13
That the Department of Families establish a new family support initiative in each Departmental region to support homeless and vulnerable families and their children. The Victorian Strengthening Families Initiative should provide the basis for implementation of this new initiative.

Stronger focus on the needs of children including child care

The needs of children in homeless families should be a paramount concern for all involved in responding to homelessness. A clear message from this research and the research literature in general is that failure to intervene runs the risk that "today's homeless children will likely follow in their parent's footsteps when they grow up" (Institute for Children and Poverty, 1998a: 1).

A combination of quality or enhanced child care along with parenting support is vital for effective interventions for children in disadvantaged families. Reviews of the research of these programs indicate that there are several features common (McLoughlin and Nagorcka, 2000):

- The most effective outcomes for children are achieved when families receive both child-focused programs (such as enhanced child care) as well as parent-focused programs (such as home visiting);
- Effective programs go beyond education and place a strong emphasis on fostering parents' own development;
- Successful programs provide services from centres based in local communities of high need;
- Working in partnership with other services is essential since no single intervention can address the range of needs affecting families.

Access to quality child care and respite care was a major issue for the families participating in this research. The current system of child care is obviously not geared to these families. In order to address this, the new family support initiatives recommended above should also be funded to provide a dedicated child care facility for children of families who are homeless or in crisis. The potential for funding this component through the Commonwealth's Child Care Programs for children with special needs should be explored.

Recommendation 14
That the Department of Families establish a dedicated child care facility for children of families who are homeless or in crisis as a component of a new state-wide family support initiative. The potential for funding this component through the Commonwealth's Child Care Programs for children with special needs should be explored.

Improving service system access

The lack of integration between SAAP services and the broader housing system has been discussed previously and it has been recommended that the Department of Families and the Department of Housing take a joint leadership role to initiate a Linkages and Protocols project with the non-government sector as a way of developing a range of practice tools to improve access for SAAP clients to other forms of social housing.

Another related issue that comes through from this research is the need to improve access to services. This was a consistent message from the families involved in the research who indicated that gaining access to services was a matter of "luck". For service providers, the time and resources involved in referring clients to services, and particularly locating

appropriate accommodation options, was considerable and diverts scarce resources from other important support functions.

Access to the service system appears to be increasingly dependent on effective advocacy to negotiate the multiple and concurrent support arrangements required by these families.

Other jurisdictions have taken steps to address some of these issues such as the lack of clearly visible entry points to the service system, the lack of readily available information about service options and poor coordination across services for people experiencing homelessness (see for example Thomson Goodall, 2001).

The Brisbane City Council has identified the need for a central point of access and referral for services responding to homelessness based on the experience of Sydney City Council who has established such a facility. As part of their homelessness strategy, the Council has proposed a model that incorporates the use of existing call centre infrastructure to provide information and referral for homeless people. However, an initiative of this nature requires the involvement and financial contribution of the Queensland Government. This type of facility also needs to be available on a state-wide basis. The domestic violence 1800 number provides a current example of this type of accessibility.

Irrespective of who 'owns' this kind of facility, it is somewhat incredulous that in the 21st century, such a service is not available to provide improved access for families and individuals experiencing homelessness. Funding for a state-wide homeless services information and referral system should be made available as a matter of priority.

Recommendation 15
That the Queensland Government provide recurrent funding for a state-wide Homeless Services Information and Referral System.

Quality and accountability by non-government service providers

The issues raised by the families in this research about poor treatment by services (both government and non-government) highlight first, the importance of adopting a quality approach to the provision of services for vulnerable people and second, the lack of avenues available for vulnerable people in Queensland to deal with grievances against service providers when they have been subject to poor treatment.

In the service provider workshops, the point was made that problems with quality service provision is reflective of the under-resourcing of the sector. It was also recognised that service standards had been developed across a number of community service programs and community housing.

On the basis of a converging body of theory, research and practice, Shorr (1988, 1997) identifies the characteristics of programs that provide quality services and have been effective in changing outcomes for high-risk children and their families. These include:

- Flexibility in the way services are provided and a preparedness to regularly cross traditional professional and bureaucratic boundaries;

- Successful programs see children in the context of their family and in the context of their communities;
- Staff of successful programs are seen by those they serve as people who care about them and respect them – people they can trust;
- Services are coherent and easy to use, without an over-reliance on referral and they provide continuity in relationships, especially at critical life junctures;
- Successful programs try to reduce access barriers of money, time, fragmentation, geographic and psychological remoteness.

It is no surprise that many of the positive aspects of services described by the families in this research correspond with a number of these characteristics.

In order to respond to the issues raised by families about poor treatment by services, there are two complementary strategies that should be pursued to improve quality of service provision – a top-down approach to investigate and take action on complaints and a bottom-up strategy to educate and promote quality service provision.

First, the Queensland Government should establish a mechanism with the authority and capacity to receive and investigate complaints by users of non-government community services and, where appropriate, provide a point of redress for clients. There are several models that could be adopted. One approach is the New South Wales model of a Community Services Ombudsman to deal with complaints about the conduct of a service provider or their employees (see Box 7 below). This kind of model is similar to the role of the Health Rights Commission in Queensland, established with a legislative base with the authority to investigate complaints. A less formal approach would be the appointment of a 'client advocate' to promote and develop a positive culture of client rights and to provide advice and information to clients and services (ACTCOSS, 2002).

The second strategy required to address poor treatment by services is the development of an industry wide approach to improving quality of service provision. Although service standards have been developed for SAAP and community housing, a more active process of engagement with the non-government sector should be developed to promote quality in service provision. The Department of Families should take a lead role in developing a quality strategy in service provision.

Box 7: New South Wales Community Services Ombudsman – roles and functions:

- Dealing with oral and written complaints about the conduct of a service provider or an employee or carer of such a service.
- Review complaints handling systems within services or in program areas and make recommendations for improvement.
- Inquire into major issues affecting consumers and services.
- Monitor, review and set standards for the delivery of community services.
- Educate and inform service providers about how to improve their services to consumers and inform consumers about their rights.
- Promote access to advocacy support for consumers of community services and ensure that services enable consumers to participate in decisions that affect them.

Recommendation 16
That the Queensland Government establish a mechanism to enhance accountability of services provided by the non-government sector. Such a mechanism should have the authority and capacity to receive and investigate complaints by users of community services and, where appropriate, provide a point of redress for clients. Consideration should be given to extending the existing Ombudsman Office to establish a Community Services Ombudsman to fulfil this role.

Recommendation 17
That the Department of Families take a lead role across government and in conjunction with the non-government sector in the development of an industry approach to improving quality of service provision.

Domestic violence responses

This report has previously highlighted that the impact of domestic and family violence for the women and children involved in this study has been dramatic. Domestic violence has meant that the women and children have had to flee their homes resulting in their homelessness and associated crisis.

Recent legislative amendments in relation to domestic and family violence places Queensland as a leader in this area. Since May 2000, legislative provisions have been in place for the issuing of 'ouster orders' requiring the respondent to a domestic violence order to leave the home rather than the aggrieved being the one who has to flee. In addition, there are now provisions allowing tenancy leases to be amended as part of the order, enabling the removal or addition (depending on the circumstances) of names to a lease. This provision will assist people aggrieved by domestic violence to avoid incurring debt as a result of leaving the home or, alternatively, enabling the respondent's name to be removed from the lease.

These provisions are important and have the potential to address a number of the issues affecting women and children involved in this study. However, service providers also raised concerns about the implementation of the legislation and the extent to which provisions such as ouster orders are being used. As one of the leading jurisdictions in domestic violence legislation, the Department of Families should undertake a formal review of the implementation and uptake of ouster orders to ensure that these provisions are being used for the maximum benefit of those aggrieved by domestic and family violence. Such a review should be undertaken in partnership with the Queensland Police Service and the Department of Justice.

> ### *Recommendation 18*
> *That the Department of Families in conjunction with the Queensland Police Service and the Department of Justice undertake a review of the implementation of the uptake and use of ouster orders with a view to ensuring that these provisions are being utilized for the maximum benefit of persons aggrieved by domestic and family violence and recommending ways to improve implementation.*

An innovative approach to dealing with domestic violence has been trialled through the Logan City regional domestic violence service. The Fax-Back program involves a strong working relationship between local police and the domestic violence service and entails the police faxing an 'authority to contact' form signed by aggrieved persons to the Fax-Back worker in the domestic violence service for subsequent follow up. An evaluation of this response has been positive and represents a good example of cross-agency work between the Queensland Police Service and domestic violence services.

This model of service provision should be adopted by all regional domestic violence services as part of their existing funding allocations. Existing service activities should be adjusted to accommodate this function without the call for additional funding.

> ### *Recommendation 19*
> *That the Department of Families negotiate with all regional domestic violence services to incorporate a Fax-Back program into their current service provision. Current service activities should be adjusted to accommodate this function, based on existing funding allocations.*

Support for Indigenous families

A significant proportion of participants in this study were Indigenous people (43%). Indigenous people are also disproportionally represented in the SAAP system in Queensland (24% of all clients in 2001-02). Given such high levels of representation, it is essential that services adopt policies and practices that are 'Indigenous-friendly', including taking active steps to recruit Indigenous staff.

> ### *Recommendation 20*
> *That services dealing with homeless families and individuals, including SAAP agencies, adopt policies and practices that are 'Indigenous-friendly', including cross-cultural training, regular liaison with Indigenous-specific services. A particular emphasis should be placed on taking active steps to recruit Indigenous staff.*

Young women pregnant and parenting

This research and the literature on family homelessness have indicated that young parents are particularly at risk of homelessness. The average age of the women participants in this study when they gave birth to their first child was 20 years. There is an opportunity to develop preventative strategies targeting young women who are pregnant and/or parenting who have little access to support from family or other informal networks.

Queensland Health currently fund a number of child and parent support programs. However, the extent to which these programs and responses reach vulnerable young women and their families should be reviewed. A combined approach should be developed across the Departments of Families and Housing in conjunction with Queensland Health to develop a more comprehensive program of support for young women who are pregnant and/or parenting and who lack access to support from family or other support networks.

> ### Recommendation 21
> *That the Department of Families, Department of Housing and Queensland Health develop a more comprehensive program of support for young women who are pregnant and/or parenting, with a particular emphasis on those who lack access to support from family or others.*

Building a better knowledge base

This research highlights the importance of building a better knowledge base of good practice in working with homeless and vulnerable families. The Department of Families has funded a number of trials under its *Queensland Families: Future Directions* initiative. Many of these trials are targeting vulnerable families. It is essential that the lessons from these initiatives are disseminated broadly. Similarly, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services are also undertaking research into effective interventions for strengthening families and communities.

The Department of Families should investigate opportunities for enhancing a research and dissemination capacity to inform service providers on outcomes from existing trials and trends emerging from research on best practice in family support for vulnerable people. Opportunities to collaborate with the Commonwealth on this matter should be pursued.

> ### Recommendation 22
> *That the Department of Families establish a 'best practice' research and dissemination capacity as a means to inform service providers on outcomes from existing service trials and trends emerging from research literature indicating directions for best practice in family support and effective interventions for vulnerable people.*

CONCLUSION

Many of the issues discussed in this report and the proposed initiatives to address these issues have been canvassed previously on many occasions in numerous reports.

The calls for better coordination and integration between SAAP services and other housing providers, strategies to improve access to services, the need to increase the supply of affordable housing, the importance of prevention and early intervention are all part of a familiar script that is all to often rehearsed but not quite acted upon.

The issue of family homelessness is too serious to ignore if for no other reason than the conclusion that "today's homeless children will likely follow in their parent's footsteps when they grow up" (Institute for Children and Poverty, 1998a: 1).

As Lisbeth Schorr pointed out 15 years ago, the solutions to complex problems such as family homelessness are in fact "within our reach" (Schorr, 1988). What is required is essentially leadership and this leadership must come from the Queensland Government through a combined approach between the Departments of Families and Housing.

If Queensland is to be truly a 'smart state' then intervention to prevent inter-generational cycles of disadvantage must surely be a 'smart' strategy.

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APPENDIX 1

Family Homelessness Research Project

Questions for interviews and focus group discussion

Demographic details:

Self-administered data form to be handed out.

Current situation:
- Where are you and/or your family living at the moment?
- What do you consider to be the main reasons for your loss of accommodation/residential instability [that led to you becoming homeless]?
- What were the circumstances that led to loss of accommodation/housing?
- How many different places have you stayed in the last 6 months?
- What were the main reasons for moving/changing accommodation?

Access to support and assistance:
- What sort of support and assistance do you/did you require (eg: child care, family support, health services, personal support, counselling, education, training, etc)?
- How easy or difficult was it to gain access to support and/or assistance?
- What barriers or difficulties did you encounter in gaining access to support/assistance?
- How much contact have you had with social welfare agencies?
- What kind of support/assistance would have prevented residential instability?
- What kind of access do you have to informal networks of support (friends, family, neighbours, etc)?

Impacts:
- What do you think have been the main impacts on you as a result of residential instability/becoming homeless?
- How would you describe your health during this experience?
- What impacts has your experience of residential instability/becoming homeless had on your children?
- Other?

APPENDIX 2

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Family Homelessness Research Project

Focus Group Participants' Form

The following information will be helpful in collating data for this research project. Please take a few minutes to answer these questions. Please DO NOT place your name on the form.

1. How old are you?   _____ years

2. What is your gender?   M ≤ F ≤

3.   Do you identify yourself as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or are you of Australian South Sea Islander origin?

    Yes - Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander .... ≤

    Yes –South Sea Islander.. ≤

    No .... ≤

4.   How would you describe your current marital status?

    Never married .... ≤

    Married .... ≤

    Other 'live-in' relationship (de facto) .... ≤

    Separated but not divorced .... ≤

    Divorced .... ≤

    Widowed .... ≤

    Other .... ≤

5　　　　What is your highest educational achievement?

　　　　Post graduate qualifications .... $\leq$

　　　　A university or college degree.. $\leq$

　　　　A trade, technical certificate or diploma... $\leq$

　　　　Completed senior high school... $\leq$

　　　　Completed junior high school.. $\leq$

　　　　Primary school .... $\leq$

　　　　No schooling .... $\leq$

　　　　Other *(please specify)* . _____ $\leq$

6.　　　　How would you **best** describe your current employment status?

　　　　Working full-time .... $\leq$

　　　　Working part-time .... $\leq$

　　　　On a sick or disability pension.. $\leq$

　　　　On a sole parent's pension .... $\leq$

　　　　On an aged pension .... $\leq$

　　　　Retired - self-supporting .... $\leq$

　　　　Unemployed and seeking work.. $\leq$

　　　　Home duties... $\leq$

　　　　Student .... $\leq$

　　　　(Other *(please specify)* _____ $\leq$

7. What is your main source of income?

Newstart Allowance .... ≤

Youth Allowance .... ≤

Sickness or disability pension .... ≤

On a sole parent's pension .... ≤

On an aged pension .... ≤

Retired - self-supporting .... ≤

Special Benefit .... ≤

Wages/Salary .... ≤

Austudy Payment .... ≤

(Other (please specify) _____ ≤

8. How many different places have you stayed in the past 12 months?

Once .... ≤

2 – 3 times .... ≤

4 – 5 times .... ≤

More than 5 times .... ≤

Don't know .... ≤

9. Do you have any children?

Yes .... ≤

No .... ≤

10.   If you do have children, how old are they now?

   Child 1 .... ≤

   Child 2 .... ≤

   Child 3 .... ≤

   Child 4 .... ≤

   Others.. ≤

11.   Do you have any children who are not currently living with you?

   Yes .... ≤

   No .... ≤