

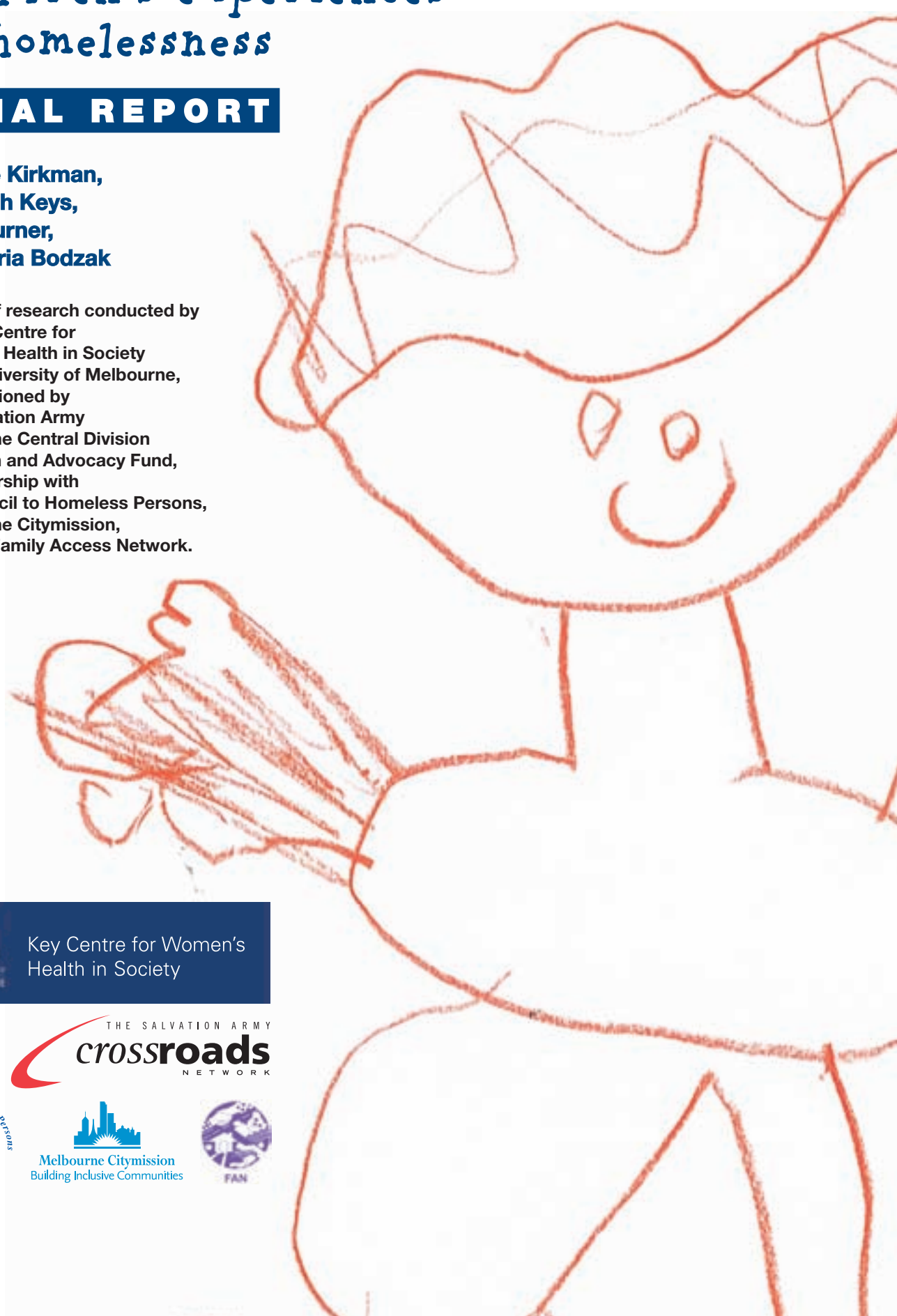
“Does camping count?”

Children's experiences of homelessness

FINAL REPORT

**Maggie Kirkman,
Deborah Keys,
Alina Turner,
and Daria Bodzak**

Report of research conducted by
the Key Centre for
Women's Health in Society
at the University of Melbourne,
commissioned by
The Salvation Army
Melbourne Central Division
Research and Advocacy Fund,
in partnership with
the Council to Homeless Persons,
Melbourne Citymission,
and the Family Access Network.



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“Does camping count? As in camp. *[Interviewer: If you were, if you were sort of living there; it depends on if you were on holiday.]* Well, we kind of were living there for a while because we had nowhere else to live at the, at the time. ... We lived in a caravan park, then we got a house in (another place) and then we moved to another caravan park then we moved to a shelter. It was kind of like a house, for about two weeks. Then we moved across the road from that and then we moved—do I have to write down all the names of them? There's the one in (a street), there's the caravan park and there's the shelter thing, then there's across the road from the shelter and then there's the caravan park and then there's my dad [inaudible] and then there's one, my best friend's place, then there's here, then there's the place in (street name) and there's my brother's and then there's my brother's again. Twelve. And then there's—does being at hospital count? ... When you were first born, you lived in there. *[No. Unless you had nowhere else to live.]* Camping, and then I lived at the shelter, okay, so then that's nine, basically. ... And I haven't even counted them all yet. ... I won't be able to remember them all.”

Duane, 12 (drawing each place in which he has lived)

Acknowledgements

The researchers and funders thank all the research participants: children, their parents and guardians, and the case workers. They were generous with their time and in sharing their thoughts and experiences. It has been an honour to work with them and we hope this report does them justice. We also thank staff of service organisations who, while giving priority to the needs of their clients, assisted in recruitment for the research, and the children who pilot-tested the research instruments and gave creative and constructive advice.

The research was commissioned by The Salvation Army Melbourne Central Division Research and Advocacy Fund, in partnership with the Council to Homeless Persons, Melbourne Citymission, and the Family Access Network.

A reference group comprising the following members guided the research: Ms Sue Carlile (Family Access Network), Dr Deborah Keys (Melbourne Citymission) (from January 2009), Ms Janet Jukes (Salvation Army), Dr Shelley Mallett (Melbourne Citymission), Ms Deb Tsorbaris (Council to Homeless Persons) (to January 2009), and Mr David Wright-Howie (Council to Homeless Persons). The report's recommendations were written by the reference group.

The research was conducted at the Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, Melbourne School of Population Health, The University of Melbourne, by Dr Deborah Keys (to December 2008) and Dr Maggie Kirkman (from January 2009), with Ms Alina Turner (to February 2009) and Ms Daria Bodzak (from February 2009). The research was designed by Deborah Keys who also wrote the literature review on which the Background to this report is based. Interviews were conducted by Alina Turner (who also refined the materials) and Daria Bodzak. Maggie Kirkman supervised data-gathering, analysed the data, and wrote the report.

Published by The Salvation Army Australia Southern Territory, Melbourne.
95 Railway Road
Blackburn, VIC 3130
Australia
www.salvationarmy.org.au

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Suggested citation: Kirkman, M., Keys, D., Turner, A., and Bodzak, D. (2009).

"Does camping count?" Children's experiences of homelessness.

The Salvation Army Australia Southern Territory, Melbourne.

<http://www.kcwhs.unimelb.edu.au/publications/reports>

ISBN: 978-0-7340-4107-4

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Summary

In Victoria, children constitute a third of people attending homelessness services. This research aimed to gain insight into the homelessness experience of children accommodated in transitional support services in an urban setting. It is the first major investigation of children's perspectives on the experience of homelessness in Victoria.

Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the University of Melbourne Behavioural and Social Sciences Human Ethics Sub-Committee of the Human Research Ethics Committee, and a reference group was appointed to oversee the project. Informed consent was sought from all participants, with special care taken to ensure that children were able to understand the process. Fundamental to this project was endorsement of the principle that children are competent to participate in research that is ethically sound and in which they are treated with respect.

We interviewed 20 children aged 6 to 12 from diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, as well as 12 parents or guardians and 8 case workers from homelessness services. Children were interviewed using a set of interactive activities designed both to make the experience enjoyable and to provide diverse opportunities for children to express their thoughts. There was value in having multiple sources of information: not only a range of activities, but parents or guardians to provide background and context. Children could have a different perspective from the parent who was interviewed and having, in some cases, more than one child from the same family contributed to an appreciation of families' changing circumstances.

Most children were living in transitional supported accommodation and had been there for less than a year. They had experienced between three and eleven changes of residence, which had included hotels or motels, other varieties of emergency accommodation, refuges, sleeping rough or in cars, rooming or boarding houses, and caravan parks.

Children revealed their concept of 'home'. Home is a place where significant family members live. It has enough room for each person to be comfortable and give them some privacy, and it feels safe. Safety comes from not having to share with strangers, especially people affected by drugs and alcohol, and from living in a friendly and familiar neighbourhood. Home has a sense of permanence, of structural stability, and of being 'ours'.

[Interviewer: What's it like for you when you move house?] "Sometimes a bit angry, sometimes a bit weird. ... Like, I, like, go inside and pack everything so we can go to the new house, and like, so many trucks and stuff in the driveway, and it just feels weird. ... Because I haven't seen the house. Because my mum—We've seen the front of the house, me and the boys ..., but I haven't looked in it, so we don't know really what it was. [Yes. And what is it that makes you angry when you move house?] Because people are moving around stuff, like things, like, that are mine. They're just little boxes. I could help with that, and people say, 'No, no', and I say, 'It's my stuff!' And they say, 'No, I'm doing it', and I have to go everywhere and go places because it's so hot and cold and makes me angry. [What would make you feel better, do you think? What would you like to happen?] Well, ... I would have liked the house if it was a bit bigger and more stuff not happening and the rent wasn't so big. I would have stayed there. Me and my mum would have stayed there. But then I wanted to stay there for a long time, and Mum said, 'We won't be moving until you're in grade six', and she was a bit wrong."

Britney, 6

Some parents had clearly tried to avoid making their children feel homeless. Nevertheless, children understood homelessness as having nowhere consistent to live or not knowing where you would sleep each night. Experiencing chaotic sequences of accommodation left children feeling confused, insecure, sad, and angry. It could make children feel responsible for their discouraged and unwell parents and their younger siblings. Children lost or did without familiar possessions, treasures, toys, and pets. It made many children expect instability as a way of life.

It was evident that unstable housing adversely affected children's sense of security, their mood and behaviour, their physical health, and their overall experience of childhood. Children became 'clingy' and fearful, threw tantrums, wet the bed, behaved aggressively, and demonstrated profound unhappiness. Problems that had precipitated homelessness continued to affect children; these included family violence, broken relationships, and parents grappling with drug and alcohol dependence. It was evident from children's accounts that they can come to expect instability as a way of life, which is associated with a sense of helplessness and lack of agency.

As families moved from one temporary accommodation to the next, they lost touch with the extended family. Children left behind grandparents, parents, siblings, and friends. They constantly faced the need to meet new people and make new friends. They became disconnected from any sense of community.

Children had changed schools almost as often as they had changed houses. They often did not feel part of the school community, fell behind in their work, and became disaffected with the pursuit of education. It can take heroic action on the part of parents to maintain adequate connection with school; some parents may have been too overwhelmed by their own problems to be able to provide the support that children needed, for schooling and other aspects of their lives. For some children, school had come to represent disruption, loss, and failure.



Charity, 11 — Timeline activity

When we asked about service delivery, we heard the frustration of children and their parents at not being able to find somewhere to live that was theirs and that enabled them to remain in a familiar community. They spoke of workers who had treated them with respect and consideration and representatives of some organisations who had not. They had diverse experience of services designed for children, ranging from apparently none at all to involvement in camps, group recreational and creative activities, tutoring, and personal support.

The workers said that children were sometimes left out of arrangements when their parents were being helped through homelessness. They called for more child-focused resources, especially dedicated children's workers; more family-appropriate housing stock; an emphasis on very early intervention; and resources that enable children to maintain security, stability, and connection to school and community. This requires close collaboration across the sector and with other organisations and government departments. Most workers spontaneously said that children should be treated as clients in their own right.

The overwhelming conclusion to be drawn from this research is that children whose families have been affected by homelessness are vulnerable to diminished security, stability, and the chance to become and remain part of a community. At a time of increased government commitment to homelessness service provision, we hope that results of the research contribute to evidence that informs the development of policy and programs to assist children who have experienced homelessness, improving their health and well-being.

"I've been living there for about eight months. Maybe—no, about six months, yeah. But, yeah, I enjoy it. There's just some people that aren't very nice around there. ... People just yell out the front and, you know, try to do stuff to our house and to other people and, you know, and they're just silly out the front of their house and screaming and yelling and music is on all the time. ... They just play music all the night when me and my mum are trying to sleep. ... Mum just tells me to ignore them. ... They know us, but my mum and the people kind of—well, she just turned on my mum for no reason and now she yells all the time. And it's not just at Mum; she yells at other neighbours just for no reason. And her friends and—like, the lady upstairs, she's an older lady, and they pick on her and stuff, and, you know, they're just nasty people but. ... What I like about it is, like, it's big I suppose. Like in a way my room, I like my room. You know, like the house isn't so big. Like we've had bigger houses, a lot bigger but, you know, what can you do? ... I suppose I want to move. ... Yeah, because, like, the people around there and the neighbourhood and stuff, so I suppose there's not much that you can like about the area, you know. But I do love my school a lot. Because of my friends and that, you know. It's a good school. ... *[Interviewer: And does the place feel like home at all, where you live?]* Yeah, it does feel like home. It does. Yeah, it does. Like, yeah. It does. I know that Mum, Mum's going to always look after me, so, yeah, I know it does, it does feel like home, but just the people that disturb it is, you know, yeah. ... I feel safe, but it's just when, I suppose, people start yelling and, you know, swearing and stuff and, you know. We just shut the blinds; my mum just shuts the blinds and closes the windows and ignores her, and like she'll play a game with me or watch a movie with me or something like that. But, yeah. *[When people are yelling outside, does it feel like they might come in, or does it, you know, does it feel unsafe then?]* Well, my mum rings the police. ... They can't really do much."

Madison, 11

My family



Dominique, 8 — Family drawing

Recommendations

This research presents children's perceptions of their homeless experience as well as parents' and services providers' views of the impact of homelessness on children. Through the empirical research and the literature review on children and homelessness, gaps in our knowledge and understanding of this largely overlooked research, policy, and practice field are identified. The recommendations outlined below have been developed with reference to both the research findings and the literature review.

Children indicated that parental stability, continuity of community connection, and safe and secure accommodation are key issues that impact on their experience of homelessness. Recognising that these research findings are supported by the literature about the impact of homelessness on children, we recommend that:

1. A “*NO MOVES — NO EVICTIONS*” policy position be adopted for families and children, and that the homelessness service system at all levels, from crisis to permanent housing, is re-developed to support this aspiration.
2. Community connection is recognised as paramount and, where desirable, families are provided with accommodation in their local area or community.
3. All families and children experiencing homelessness are placed in appropriate, safe, and affordable accommodation.

There needs to be greater provision for long-term support for families experiencing homelessness, tailored to the needs of children and their families. Parents and service providers noted that some children who experience family homelessness need additional personal support. We recommend that:

4. As part of a more extensive, longer-term support program, brokerage funds are available to support the health, educational, and social inclusion needs of children experiencing homelessness.
5. A strong, collaborative, bilateral partnership between the Office of Housing and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is established that enables collaborative working relationships between homeless services and schools. Through this relationship, resources that address the needs of children and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness should be developed and made available.
6. A strong, collaborative, bilateral partnership between the Office of Housing and Health Divisions of DHS, particularly community health, is established to assist in more effective and responsive interventions that address the health needs of children and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
7. A range of service models is piloted and promoted to meet the diverse characteristics and needs of children in families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in urban, rural, and remote settings. It is evident that one service system or program does not suit all families.

A review of the family homelessness research and policy literature reveals that, while family homelessness is now identified as a priority issue, there is no coherent policy platform for the development of a programmatic response. The following recommendations are designed to address this issue.

8. Develop family homelessness policy as a platform for a programmatic response that:
 - Recognises that family homelessness is a children's rights issue that falls within the Government and Service Provider's obligations under the Victorian Human Rights Charter, and Australia's international obligations including but not limited to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
 - Addresses structural disadvantage and social exclusion and promotes social inclusion.
 - Prioritises timely intervention responses that are seamless and tailored to the needs of children and their families who are homeless.
 - Recognises and responds to the needs of key homeless family populations (such as single parents and families escaping violence).
 - Identifies the range of policies (including urban or social planning, public/social housing, immigration) as well as housing, service, and transport infrastructure that create and perpetuate family homelessness.
 - Articulates the relationship between housing and support across the homelessness continuum (from at risk of homelessness or precarious housing through to chronic homelessness).
 - Articulates across-governmental relationships.
9. Establish a Victorian family homelessness training and practice reflection program and agenda with transparent goals and priorities.
10. Ensure that children are acknowledged and fully incorporated in both homelessness service administrative data and case management with performance targets and annual reviews for accountability and improvement purposes.
11. Promote more research into the homelessness experiences of children and families so that their voices can better inform service system and program design and practice.

Background to the Research

The Size of the Problem

Homelessness is a significant problem for Australian children. While we cannot know the exact numbers of children who experience homelessness, census data and data collected from Australia's Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) indicate that the numbers are substantial and rising.

SAAP is the major service delivery response to homelessness in Australia. It provides recurrent funding to non-government, local, and community organisations, with funding to SAAP shared by Federal and State Governments. Its main aim is to provide crisis and transitional supported accommodation and related support services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

In the 2006–07 SAAP data collection period, 69,100 accompanying children were assisted by SAAP funded services. Of these, just under a third (21,400) were in Victoria. An additional 24,900 children aged under 18 who were without accompanying parents or guardians received assistance from SAAP services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2009a). Australia-wide, one child in every 64 overall and one in every 39 children aged 4 years or younger accompanied a parent or guardian to a SAAP agency (AIHW, 2009a). Children were most likely to be accompanying a female adult, usually their mother; 22.3% of SAAP support periods were for a woman with accompanying children, 4.1% for a couple with accompanying children, and only 1.3% were for a man with accompanying children (AIHW, 2009a). Almost half (44%) of all accompanying children were aged 4 years or younger and more than a quarter (29%) were aged 5 to 9 years. That is, three-quarters of all accompanying children were aged 9 years or younger. Indigenous children are over-represented and children from CALD backgrounds under-represented in SAAP services (AIHW, 2009a). Children attend services across the range of housing support sub-sectors: generic family, youth, domestic violence, and cross-sector. Children who do not attend SAAP services are not included in these figures; many more children are likely to be experiencing homelessness than are reported by the SAAP data-collection agency. The rise in numbers (up 26%) between 2005 and 2006 of accompanying children attending SAAP services represents a rise in support periods without accommodation (up 36%) rather than a rise in support periods with accommodation (up 5%) (AIHW, 2009a).

In parallel with this rise in numbers has been increasing acknowledgement that children attending homelessness services constitute a distinct group with specific needs. The Commonwealth Government's White paper, *The Road Home: A National approach to reducing homelessness*, notes that "the potential impact of homelessness on young children is extremely serious and can only be addressed by a specific focus on their needs" (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008, p. 11). In Victoria, homelessness services are accredited against the Homelessness Assistance Service Standards (HASS) (2001) which

include a specific section on supporting parents and accompanying children. The SAAP program was not designed to meet the needs of children (Strategic Partners, 1997). It is only in the last 10 years that comprehensive data on children have been collected.

There are increased expectations in the sector that services working with adults with accompanying children should also be working with children across a broad range of issues; for example, connecting children to community, assessing and responding to health and developmental needs, and facilitating continuing attendance at school. This is a significant workload expansion for caseworkers. Several studies have found that children's needs are commonly unassessed and unmet because of lack of resources, staff skills, and time, along with a perception that meeting the needs of parents will also meet the needs of accompanying children (Horn & Jordan, 2007; McNamara, 2007; Resolve Community Consulting, 2004; Strategic Partners, 1997).

What the Literature Tells Us

Increasing awareness of family homelessness over the last two decades has been met by a growing body of research in developed countries, particularly the United States. The research has included investigations of the impact of homelessness on children accompanying their parents into homelessness services. In common with research into other homeless populations, it has tended to be problem-focused. Problems investigated among children experiencing homelessness include adverse effects on health, education, and development. Initially, research aimed to ascertain the prevalence of such problems or problematic behaviours among children who were homeless; cross-sectional quantitative studies on these topics continue to dominate the field in the United States. In Australia and the United Kingdom, the research has tended to be broader in scope and more varied in method, with qualitative research methods as common as quantitative. Research using qualitative methods has both contextualised the findings from the quantitative studies and extended our understanding of the experience and effects of homelessness on children.

While children have increasingly been the subjects of research they have rarely been active participants. Commonly, researchers have obtained information about children's health and well-being from their parents. Descriptive data are also collected from workers in the field. Researchers have until recently been reluctant to interview children for two main reasons: children have been perceived to be immature or unreliable reporters, and there are valid ethical concerns about the risk to vulnerable children of additional distress caused by research participation. Nevertheless, there has been a gradual recognition of both the importance of hearing directly from children and the right of children to be heard. Given the continuing emphasis on quantitative data about health and development, the engagement with children has been predominantly through the administration of scales and standardised tests. Few studies have given children an opportunity to speak about their own experiences and express their understanding of homelessness.

We present here only a brief overview of the relevant literature, emphasising Australian research. A fuller account is given by Keys (2009); see also Noble-Carr (2006).

Pathways into family homelessness

The causes of and pathways into family homelessness are complex. Structural factors include poverty, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, insufficient public housing, and gender-based violence. Structural factors can be compounded by co-existing, often related, family- and individual-level factors such as substance abuse, financial difficulties, and health problems (Kolar, 2004; Norris, Thompson, Eardley, & Hoffmann, 2005; Walsh, 2003).

In Australia, people living in a variety of family configurations seek assistance from SAAP services. The main reasons given for seeking assistance are associated with family configuration. Victorian data (AIHW, 2009b) indicate that couples with children most commonly specify eviction or being asked to leave (24%) and financial difficulty (16.2%). Women with children seek housing assistance because of domestic or family violence (57.5%); this is the sole reason reported by more than 8% of female clients. Men with accompanying children seek assistance for three main reasons: relationship breakdown (19.5%), eviction or being asked to leave (15.3%), and financial difficulty (14.8%). Reasons for seeking assistance are only one step on the family's path to homelessness; it is, of course, simplistic to equate them with causes of homelessness.

Research interviewing children about homelessness and its effects

Our understanding of children's experiences of homelessness and its effects can and should be informed by many voices, including those of workers, teachers, parents, and children themselves. The smallest contribution thus far has been from children, who are rarely invited to share their thoughts. In the United States, a handful of studies report on interviews with children about their experiences of homelessness (Anooshian, 2003, 2005; Baumann, 1994, 1996, 1999; DeForge, Zehnder, Minick, & Carmon, 2001; Herth, 1998; Heusel, 1995; Schmitz, Wagner, & Menke, 2001). In the United Kingdom, the Children's Research Centre, Dublin, undertook a major study with 20 families that included 40 children (Halpenny, Keogh, & Gilligan, 2002).

In Australia, Strategic Partners' (1997) investigation of case management is an early example of engaging directly with children in SAAP services. For this national research, 50 children, along with 51 parents, were interviewed about their experiences with SAAP-funded services, supplemented by extensive consultations with the sector. A small-scale study was conducted in Victoria for the Council to Homeless Persons, in which eight children (aged 5–12), eight parents, and two SAAP workers were interviewed (Resolve Community Consulting, 2004). In the last decade, only one major Australian study included interviews with children who had experienced homelessness (Moore, Noble-Carr, & McArthur, 2007). It was conducted by the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University in order to inform service systems that work with children. Twenty-five children and young people aged 6 to 21 years, two thirds of whom were under 14, participated. Five parents and 20 workers, most of whom worked in SAAP or Child Protection, were also interviewed.

Adults' voices: Australian studies

Several significant studies of family homelessness in Australia have captured the perspectives of parents and workers; these include McCaughey (1991, 1992) Thomson Goodall Associates (1994), and Walsh (2003). They also provide adults' insights into the experiences and needs of children. In Victoria, not-for-profit homelessness service providers (The Salvation Army, Hanover Welfare Services, HomeGround Services, Melbourne Citymission) have undertaken research with clients that has shed light on children's experience of homelessness (Bartholomew, 1999; Efron, Sewell, Horn, & Jewell, 1996a; Horn & Jordan, 2007; Kolar, 2004; St Lukes Anglicare, 2005). In the only longitudinal study of family homelessness in Australia, the Hanover Family Longitudinal Outcomes Study, parents from 42 families were interviewed over two years with the aim of understanding pathways out of homelessness and identifying factors associated with achieving and maintaining housing and family stability (Kolar, 2004).

How children experience homelessness

In summarising what we know about the ways in which children experience homelessness, we draw on the national and international research.

Children's understanding of 'home' and 'homelessness' has received scant attention, but there is some evidence from cross sectional studies using qualitative methods undertaken in Australia (Moore et al., 2007; Resolve Community Consulting, 2004; Strategic Partners, 1997), the United States (Anooshian, 2003, 2005; DeForge et al., 2001; Schmitz et al., 2001), and the United Kingdom (Keogh et al., 2006). These concepts encompass more than a consideration of accommodation status. For example, many children in an Australian study said they did not feel homeless, even while living on the street or in temporary accommodation, because they felt safe and secure under the protection of their parents and families; feeling homeless was associated with the absence of a sense of safety, security, place, and connection to supports (Moore et al., 2007). Individual variation is evident in children's accounts. Moore et al. note that children will not experience homelessness identically despite sharing similar circumstances; even siblings respond differently according, they argue, to age, amount of information they were given, their relationships with family, and the roles they adopted. Aware of the **stigma of homelessness**, children in several studies reported that they did not tell their school friends or others about their situation (DeForge et al., 2001; Keogh, Halpenny, & Gilligan, 2006; Moore et al., 2007).

The **transience** associated with homelessness can leave children expressing **sadness, anxiety, and a sense of loss**, coupled with a **desire for stability and permanent housing** (Moore et al., 2007; Resolve Community Consulting, 2004). The most commonly cited loss expressed by children of all ages was that of family and friends (for example, Strategic Partners, 1997). From her experience as a support worker in Australia, Bryant (2003) concluded that children can feel grief over the loss of a 'normal' life. Moore et al. (2007) identified family separation, often resulting from domestic violence or family breakdown, as probably the most significant problem for children, with many wishing for reunification and worrying about absent family members. Children also missed pets and important belongings (Moore et al., 2007; Strategic Partners, 1997). Nevertheless, children can convey acceptance or even note advantages in moving, such as making new friends, moving to improved conditions, and having an adventure (Moore et al., 2007; Resolve Community Consulting, 2004).

Children's feelings of **safety and security are often compromised** by homelessness. They may have endured exposure to violence within the family before or during homelessness, in their neighbourhood, or in environments accommodating homeless people, all common experiences

for the homeless population (Moore et al., 2007; Nunez, 2000). Security is linked to stability and children have been found to value routine and predictability (Moore et al., 2007). Inevitably, routine and predictability are the very things homelessness disrupts (Bartholomew, 1999).

Lack of personal space and privacy, of secure possessions, and of outdoor play space were perceived as difficult by some children in shelters or emergency accommodation in the US, Ireland, and Australia (DeForge et al., 2001; Halpenny et al., 2002; Moore et al., 2007; Strategic Partners, 1997). Children in Australia mentioned a lack of toys and an absence of things to do at the accommodation services where they were staying, and almost all expressed a wish for more toys to be provided (Strategic Partners, 1997). In the same study, when children were asked what they liked about their SAAP service, many cited playing with other children at the service, playing outside, and playing with pets (in a service with a resident cat).

Possible effects of homelessness on children

There is evidence that children who experience homelessness are also subject to a variety of problems. However, the co-existence of homelessness with these problems does not provide evidence of a causal link. It has been concluded that there is an underlying continuum of risk. Homelessness is the extreme point of poverty and instability; it exacerbates the adverse effects of pre-existing circumstances on development, health and well-being, behaviour, and academic achievement (Lindsey, 1998; Schmitz et al., 2001). Buckner (2008) notes that, although most studies have found that children who are homeless experience greater problems than housed low-income children, the results are inconsistent. The literature includes examples of factors other than housing status being found to play a greater role in outcomes for children, such as lack of overall stability (Schmitz et al., 2001) and the mother's psychological distress (Bassuk et al., 1997; Graham-Bermann et al., 1996; Harpaz-Rotem, Rosenheck, & Desai, 2006).

International and Australian surveys of parents and children have found **significant problems in physical and mental health, development, well-being, and behaviour** among children who are homeless. A much smaller body of qualitative research contributes the perspectives of parents, workers, and (occasionally) children. The Victorian Children's Resource Program (2005) records that the impact of the trauma and stress of homelessness on health and well-being will differ according to the child's developmental stage. More frequent moves may also be associated with greater negative effects on health and well-being (Bartholomew, 1999; Efron, Sewell, Horn, & Jewell, 1996b). Children who are homeless commonly experience poor dental health, asthma, skin problems, vision problems, and recurrent headaches (DiMarco, 2007; Efron et al., 1996b; Grant et al., 2007; McLean et al., 2004). The physical health of the children experiencing homelessness in an Australian study was found to be better than that of children in homeless families in the United States, despite higher-than-average incidence of ear infections, asthma, and skin problems (Efron et al., 1996b). Poor nutrition and hunger may result from homelessness, although no Australian data on hunger or nutrition are available.

Children tend to experience **elevated stress levels** (Davey, 1998; Page & Nooe, 2002) and may have **poor mental health**, manifest in depression, behavioural problems, and severe academic delay (Cumella, Grattan, & Vostanis, 1998; Menke & Wagner, 1998; Schmitz et al., 2001; Vostanis, Grattan, & Cumella, 1997; Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994). In Australia, Efron et al. (1996a) concluded that children are affected psychologically by their experience of being without a home and the precursors to homelessness. Parents in Australian studies report that children can be withdrawn, unsettled, angry, even suicidal, and suffer sleeping difficulties and bedwetting (Moore et al., 2007; Walsh, 2003). Some children have been found to exhibit aggressive behaviour

(Bartholomew, 1999; Walsh, 2003), possibly not knowing how else to express their anger or frustration (DeForge et al., 2001). Anooshian (2005) found that children's problematic aggressive behaviours were associated with having experienced family violence. Being settled may help; for example, there was evidence from one study that behavioural problems, such as aggression, withdrawal, regression, clinginess, sleep difficulties, and defensiveness, tended to disappear as children settled in to the routine of a shelter (Douglass, 1996).

A systematic review of the literature found that children who are homeless tend to have **lower intellectual functioning and decreased academic achievement** than domiciled children, although the researchers caution that data are drawn from relatively few studies (Parks, Stevens, & Spence, 2007). In Australia, research with children staying at Hanover Welfare services found higher than average levels of developmental delays (Efron et al., 1996b).

The well-being of children is dependent on the quality of their relationships with and care provided by parents or other caregivers; children may acknowledge feeling secure because they trust and rely on their parents. However, **homelessness can adversely affect both the quality of parent-child relations and the parental role** (Lindsey, 1998; Moore et al., 2007; Resolve Community Consulting, 2004). In some cases, children assume responsibility for the care and protection of parents (Horn & Jordan, 2007; Moore et al., 2007; Zammit, 2008), particularly where there is family violence, parental mental illness, or parental drug or alcohol abuse (Moore et al., 2007; Wright-Howie, 2008). Mothers who had previously lived in shelter accommodation reported experiencing closer relationships with their children but a disruption in their roles as disciplinarians, providers, and caretakers (Lindsey, 1998). There has been some acknowledgement that sibling relationships can be affected by homelessness (Moore et al., 2007), although it is not a well-researched topic.

The mobility associated with homelessness means that children commonly **leave familiar neighbourhoods, schools, and extended family**; they are usually separated from existing friends and have to form new friendship networks (Horn & Jordan, 2007; Resolve Community Consulting, 2004). Being without money or transport often makes it impossible to visit old neighbourhoods and friends (Moore et al., 2007).

International and Australian studies have found that high levels of mobility also lead to **disruption to schooling, compromised learning, and school refusal** (Efron et al., 1996a; Horn & Jordan, 2007; Keogh et al., 2006; Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004; Walsh, 2003). Mental health problems, such as anxiety, stress, and isolation, are likely to limit children's school attendance and their ability to engage with learning (Keogh et al., 2006), as are hunger and poor nutrition (Nunez, 2000) and overcrowding in temporary accommodation (Keogh et al., 2006; Strategic Partners, 1997). **Stable housing can lead to improvements** in educational achievement (Kolar, 2004), although they may be insufficient to protect children from an elevated risk of later homelessness associated with poor or truncated education. Nevertheless, school has been found to be an important and often valued aspect in the lives of children experiencing homelessness (Keogh et al., 2006), providing stability, normality, and safety in times of insecurity and change (Moore et al., 2007; Rafferty et al., 2004).

Policy and Program Responses

Internationally, the impetus is towards more integrated service systems, prevention of family homelessness, early intervention (particularly in relation to early childhood development), and a focus on working with children within the context of their families and communities. Recognition of the adverse effects of temporary accommodation is reflected in the UK's commitment to providing more social housing and investigating the conversion of temporary accommodation to permanent. The US and Canada are taking a Housing First approach, which aims to minimise stays in transitional accommodation and bring about rapid placement in permanent housing. In both the UK and Canada, national frameworks and action plans have been developed to coordinate and advance opportunities for children to develop their full potential. Responses to children who are homeless fall within programs targeting neighbourhoods or populations that are 'vulnerable' or 'at risk'. In the US, federal programs have been developed that target children who are homeless. (For further details, see Keys, 2009.)

The policy environment in Australia and Victoria

At the broadest level, responding to the needs of children who are experiencing homelessness must be guided by the relevant rights covenants and legislation. Australia is a signatory to the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. In Victoria, children's rights are also covered by the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, and overseen by the Victorian Children's Rights Commissioner. Policy and program responses fall within *The Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, *The Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*, and The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner's (OCSC) Child Safety Policy.

Although there is no dedicated policy response to children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Australia, either federally or at the state level, there are two relevant national initiatives: the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, and the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2009–2020). Victoria also has a new Integrated Family Violence service system which is pertinent to homeless children. The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) proposes a more integrated system and embraces a public health approach in which there is more emphasis on prevention than tertiary responses.

The Commonwealth Government's White Paper, *The Road Home: A National approach for reducing homelessness*, provides guidelines that include tailored responses for children, with a particular emphasis on preventing homelessness, providing additional support, and ensuring children's engagement in education. It reveals a broad social inclusion agenda and a focus on prevention and early intervention, but acting on this agenda is delegated primarily to the states. The White Paper states that the Victorian Government must achieve a 20% increase in numbers of families maintaining secure, sustainable housing after domestic violence. The state government must also work with children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to increase by 50% the number receiving additional support and engaged in education; it has until 2013 to achieve this goal. Three specialist support approaches are suggested: regional child support workers, brokerage funds for homelessness services to meet the needs of children, and better links between Child Protection and homelessness services (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008).

Victoria has led the way in homelessness initiatives. However, neither the Victorian Homelessness Strategy (VHS) nor the Youth Homelessness Action Plans (YHAP1 and YHAP2) have included a strong or comprehensive focus on children. The Charter of Rights and the Homelessness Assistance Service Standards (which includes a section on children), developed as part of the VHS, are important steps forward in meeting the needs of children attending SAAP services. A new Victorian Homelessness Strategy is being developed. Although it does not include a specific policy framework for children who are homeless, children aged 10 to 25 are covered by the Vulnerable Youth Framework, currently being written to guide action in schools, communities, and services.

Current provisions for children in Victoria

The following programs are the main examples of what is currently available in Victoria for children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The Statewide Children's Resource Worker Program provides secondary consultation, information, support, and resources to workers in SAAP-funded agencies for their work with accompanying children. Each region differs in its range of activities, such as training, the promotion of best practice, advocacy, and (occasionally) counselling and activity programs for children. There are nine workers across Victoria.

Children's support workers have been funded in women's refuges. However, with rare exceptions, generalist homelessness services do not receive funding for specialist children's workers.

A few pilot projects have been funded by the Federal Government, notably the Bright Futures Demonstration Project and the Education Development Project.

The Bright Futures Demonstration Model, delivered by Merri Outreach Support Service, comprises three integrated streams: child-centred assessment and case planning support, enhanced case management, and therapeutic group work. It works directly with children and provides secondary consultations and joint case management to referring agencies. The model incorporates working closely with parents and workers to support children at the time of crisis to minimise the impact of homelessness on their health and well-being. An evaluation of the project found the therapeutic group work to be its most successful component, because it was effective and well received by agencies (McDonald & Campbell, 2007).

The Education Development Project is a joint initiative between Hanover Welfare Services and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence that aims to improve children's education outcomes. Twenty-three children in school years five to nine are supported at two sites. The project seeks to improve the connection and communication among individuals, families, schools, and the community and to ensure that educational needs are given due attention.

Some agencies delivering homelessness services have developed their own innovative models to meet children's needs. For example:

The Melbourne Citymission Young Pregnant and Parenting Program is an outreach program that provides housing assistance and support during pregnancy and parenting to young people aged 15–20. It also gives information and advice to other Melbourne Citymission services about supporting young parents and runs playgroups for young mothers experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The Family Access Network (FAN) is a youth agency responding to the needs of young people, young families, and accompanying children experiencing or at risk of homelessness. It

offers transitional support, a private-rental brokerage program, a life-skills program (including young mums' group), same-sex-attracted/transgender/intersex pilot project, youth counselling, and family mediation. The **Children's Program** is funded through a philanthropic trust and employs a Children and Young Families Support Worker who provides individual and group work and brokerage services.

Resilient Kids (Eastern Children's Resource Program) is part of the Statewide Children's Resource Worker Program under the auspices of Wesley Mission. Resilient Kids provides secondary consultations to workers in SAAP-funded services, facilitates training, develops and maintains networks, participates in research and community development, and offers group work and counselling. It runs therapeutic groups, social and recreational activities such as camps, and short-term counselling for children who have experienced family violence or homelessness.

Justification for and Aims of the Research

There is a surge of interest all around Australia in developing appropriate policies for assisting children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Such policies need to be built on evidence, especially evidence gleaned from the communities in which the policies must operate.

The literature reveals that children who are homeless are at risk of poor health and diminished well-being. Their development (physical, psychological, social, and educational) can be damaged and delayed by disruptions to important relationships and the failure to establish or maintain a familiar environment. With more than 69,000 children accompanying their families into homelessness services each year in Australia, a third of whom are in Victoria, it is of critical importance to understand more fully the impact of homelessness on the lives of these children.

Hearing what children have to say is a vital prerequisite for improving service delivery to this vulnerable population. There is increasing recognition that children have the right to be consulted in matters that affect them and that "research about children should be with children and not something that is done to children" (Greig, Taylor, & McKay, 2007, p. 173). Enabling children's voices to be heard through rigorous, ethical research can provide opportunities for children to influence their future while acknowledging and advancing their human rights.

The aim of our research was to understand the homelessness experience of children accommodated in transitional support services in a large urban context in Australia.

We developed five specific **research questions**:

1. How do children experience housing instability?
2. What is children's understanding of home and homelessness?
3. What is the impact of homelessness on the health and well-being of children?
4. What effect does homelessness have on relationships between children, parents, and other family members?
5. What effect does homelessness have on children's non-familial social networks and sense of social connectedness?

An important further **objective** was to provide evidence that would inform the development of policy and programs to enhance the health and well-being of children who have experienced homelessness.

The Research Project

While maintaining the emphasis on children's participation and experiences, it was decided to provide additional context by including among the participants parents (or guardians) and workers from the homelessness sector.

Ethical Matters

Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the University of Melbourne Behavioural and Social Sciences Human Ethics Sub-Committee of the Human Research Ethics Committee, Project number 0830303.

A reference group was appointed to oversee the project.

We sought informed consent from all participants. The documents we used are in Appendices 1–4. Children were given an informed consent kit consisting of an information letter, a charter of rights, and a consent form, all written in accessible language. We adapted the charter of rights and the information packs from those developed by researchers at the Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, with their permission. The researcher read the documents to each child who then signed the consent form. Parents and workers were given information letters and consented in writing to their own participation. Parents (or guardians) also signed a consent form giving permission for their children to participate.

Care was taken in recruitment to circumvent problems arising from the dependent relationship between case workers and participating children and their parents or guardians. Case workers made it clear to potential participants that participation was voluntary and that choosing not to participate would have no ramifications for the service they are given. This was also stated in the information letter.

Fundamental to this project was endorsement of the principle that children are competent to participate in research that is ethically sound and in which they are treated with respect. The research was designed to ensure protection, privacy, and confidentiality, and took account of the power imbalance between children and adults, especially case workers and the researcher. In order to give the child participants some control over the research process, children were given choices, where possible. For example, they chose whether or not a parent sat in on their interview and whether the audio recorder was turned off. Some activities gave them a choice of responding through drawing, writing, or speaking.

The interviews were designed to be pleasurable experiences for children and as benign as possible for adults, but the researcher was alert to the possibility of distress and prepared to stop an interview as appropriate. A protocol for managing adverse events, including participant distress and discovering a child at risk of abuse, was developed with each service (Appendix 5).

Recruitment of Participants

Three groups of participants were sought:

1. 20 children, aged 5–12 years, currently supported or accommodated by youth or family homelessness services. For ethical reasons, children living in crisis accommodation were not recruited. Equal numbers of boys and girls were sought.
2. 20 parents (one parent or guardian of each child participant).
3. 10 workers who work directly with children and families experiencing homelessness in family or youth homelessness services.

Services working with homeless people were invited to participate in the project through the email newsletter of the Council to Homeless Persons. Meetings describing the research were also held with researchers, managers, and children's resource workers at three services: Melbourne Citymission, The Salvation Army, and Family Access Network. At these meetings, the researcher outlined ethical aspects of the research, distributed copies of the research questions, and explained the recruitment procedure. These matters were reiterated to case workers who expressed interest, emphasising how to identify children and parents who met research criteria and were capable of participating, as well as information on volunteering to be participants themselves.

Case workers then approached parents of children identified as eligible, explaining the purpose of the research and what children would be asked to do, and giving them an information letter, a consent form, and copies of the children's interview schedule. The recruiting worker liaised with volunteer parents and the researcher to arrange suitable times for interviews.

Our goal was that each parent who gave permission for a child to participate would also consent to being interviewed, but an interview with a parent was not a prerequisite for a child's participation.

Funding did not extend to translation of materials or employment of interpreters. Within this constraint, every effort was made to include participants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Where potential participants could converse in but not read English, case workers and researchers read the information to them, simplifying the language where necessary.

Workers volunteered for an interview after learning about the project or were invited to participate on the recommendation of the reference group. Their inclusion was based on their experience and expertise working with children and families experiencing homelessness. Each was given a copy of the information letter and consent form.

The Research Process

Children and parents were interviewed at the services from which they were recruited or at their homes with a case worker present. When parents agreed to be interviewed, their interview took place before the child's interview. Whether or not they were interviewed, all parents with participating children were asked to complete a questionnaire giving background information. Children, often in consultation with their parents, decided whether the parent sat in on the child's interview. If the child was interviewed alone, the researcher treated the information given by the child as confidential, planning to reveal to a case worker or parent only disclosure of abuse or the child's experience of distress provoked by the interview.

Interviewing children

The children's interview and activities were piloted by five children (aged 5–12 years) known to members of the reference group, after which some minor changes to content and design were made.

Children were interviewed using open questions to encourage them to tell their story in their own words. During the interview, each child was offered a set of activities designed both to make the experience more enjoyable and to provide a range of ways to communicate their stories. The activities were derived from the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) and built upon some of the activities used in the ACT study (Moore et al., 2007). They included "About Me" and "Friends" activity sheets with stickers, sentence-completion cards about feelings and safety, a spider diagram for illustrating the frequency of activities, and a page for drawing "My Family". Children were also given paper and pencils for drawing the places in which they had lived, with car stickers to represent moves, and boxes in which worries could be posted. The children's interview schedule is attached as Appendix 6; activity sheets are attached as Appendices 7–10. Each interview began with the "About Me" activity. Questions and activities then covered "Your family", "The place you are living in now", "Feelings", "Safety", "Where you lived before and moving house" (with a timeline activity), "Your school", "Friends", "Things you like", "Things I do" (with a spider diagram activity), "Favourite things and people", "Worries", "Getting some help", and "The future". The interview concluded by asking the children what they would wish for if they were granted three wishes.

After the interview, children were given a small gift to the value of \$5 to thank them for their participation.

Interviewing parents and guardians

One parent or guardian for each child completed a questionnaire giving demographic information about their family, including the number of schools attended by children and their housing history. Parents were interviewed about their children's experience of homelessness in the context of the parents' stories of their own experiences. The questionnaire is attached as Appendix 11 and the interview schedule as Appendix 12.

Families were reimbursed \$50 for their time and the expenses incurred through participating in the research.

Interviewing workers

Workers were interviewed at the service or by telephone. Workers were asked about how children experience housing instability; its effects on children's health and well-being, on family relationships, and on wider social networks; the factors that might mediate these effects; and how services do and should provide for children. The interview schedule is attached as Appendix 13.

Analysis

Questionnaire

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise questionnaire data in relation to the participants as a whole, not individuals.

Interviews

All interviews were recorded, with the participants' permission, and transcribed. After each interview, the interviewer made notes about matters that might not be evident from a transcript, such as whether children seemed eager or reluctant to talk, or what appeared to be the reason for requesting an end to recording. Pseudonyms were given to each participant and identifying details removed from the transcripts or disguised.

Transcripts were read repeatedly and analysed thematically, guided by the aims of the research and the existing literature. Constant comparative analysis was used to conceptualise possible relations within the data.

My family



Robert, 6 — Family drawing

"I'm six, but I'm a little bit young to be six. ... My favourite family is my mum. My mum has that kind of hair. There's her face, and I'll draw her neck, and her body and her arms. I'll probably draw that over, so that nobody knows I drew a bad picture."

— Robert, 6

What We Found, 1

Recruitment took longer than expected. Ethics Committee permission to begin the research came towards the end of 2008, so Christmas and absences over January disrupted people's availability. Thereafter, parents and their children were remarkably willing to participate in the research, given their circumstances, but the instability with which they live inevitably affected the research plans. Appointments were made but not kept, or made and postponed several times, sometimes for distressing reasons including injuries and deaths among family members. More often, the sheer impossibility of making and adhering to plans when daily life is often unpredictable upset the parents' best intentions. It is also possible that parents made appointments because they wanted to please the case worker, and then did not keep them because they preferred not to participate in the research.

Nevertheless, the goal of 20 child participants was achieved, although only 12 parents with adequate English were willing to be interviewed. In five instances, two children from the same family were interviewed; four of these instances included a participating parent, meaning that 16 children had a parent or guardian participating in the research.

Eight case workers from six service providers were interviewed, four in person and four by telephone. They represent a range of roles and experience with children in unstable housing, including early intervention management, general management, health and outreach support work, and support work with young families. Among the programs and services they provide are therapeutic groups, facilitation groups, resolution of complex family problems, direct case work, community development work, and Front Door assistance. The providers had experiences with different age groups, including families with children ranging in age from newborns to teenagers, children aged 8 to 12, children under the age of five, and clients of any age. Most workers have whole families as their clients; a few focus on children.

The children's interviews took about 45 minutes each, with a range of 25 to 75 minutes. Interviews with parents, guardians, and workers lasted about 30 minutes, with a range of 15–50 minutes.

About the Children and their Parents, from the Questionnaire

The children, their parents and guardians (all women), and case workers were recruited from the following services: Crossroads Jacana, Family Access Network, Hanover Welfare Services, Mary Anderson Family Violence Service, Melbourne Citymission, Merri Outreach Support Services, Peninsula Youth and Family Services, Salvation Army EastCare, Uniting Care Connections, Uniting Care Harrison, and Wesley Mission Melbourne.

Most children and their parents were born in Australia, although they described themselves as identifying with a wide range of cultures. These are set out in Table 1. One child whose mother recorded him as having Australian cultural identity spoke a language other than English at home, attended a school where that language and culture were the context of education, and dreamed of going to live in his parents' country of birth, suggesting that the identities listed are more complex than they appear in such a blunt summary.

Table 1: Country of birth and cultural identity*

<i>Parents' country of birth</i>	<i>Number</i>	
Australia	10	
UK	1	
Lebanon	1	
Turkey	1	
<i>Parents' cultural identity</i>		
Anglo-Australian	6	
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	1	
Other ethnic identity	6	Italian: 1 English: 1 Greek: 1 Greek-Australian: 1 Lebanese-Muslim: 1 Turkish: 1
<i>Interviewed child's cultural identity</i>		
Anglo-Australian	2	
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	1	
Other	13	Australian: 5 Nigerian-Australian: 2 Greek-Australian: 2 Lebanese-Muslim: 2 Maori: 1 Not stated: 2
<i>Cultural identity of all children in participating families</i>		
Anglo-Australian	2	
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	4	
Other	25	Australian: 11 Greek-Australian: 4 Lebanese-Muslim: 3 Nigerian-Australian: 2 Maori: 1 Afro-American Australian: 1 Not stated: 5

* From questionnaires completed by 13 parents and guardians (all were women) on behalf of 17 interviewed children and 16 other children; 2 parents of 3 children did not return questionnaires

Participating children were aged from 6 to 12 years; there were 12 girls and 8 boys. Further details are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Children's age and sex*

<i>Age of children interviewed</i>			
	<i>12 Girls[^]</i>	<i>8 Boys</i>	<i>20 Children in Total</i>
Range	6 – 12 years	6 – 12 years	6 – 12 years
Median	11 years	10 years	10 years

Age of all children in participating families

Number	36
Range	<1 – 19 years
Median	10 years

* From questionnaires completed by 13 parents on behalf of 17 interviewed children and 16 other children. Two parents of three children did not return questionnaires, although children's ages were stated in other activities.

[^]No age was given for 1 girl; she reported being in Grade 3 which suggests her age as about 7 or 8 years.

The majority of children were living in transitional supported accommodation and had been there for less than a year, although five children had been in the one place for longer than a year. Their mothers and guardians most commonly reported that they were not living permanently with their partners. (Please see Table 3 for details.)

Table 3: Current living situation *

<i>Type of accommodation</i>	<i>Number</i>
Office of Housing house/flat	1
House/flat rented through private rental	1
Transitional supported accommodation	8
Other	3

Length of stay in current accommodation

Less than 1 month	0
1–3 months	2
3–6 months	3
6–12 months	3
Longer than 1 year	5

Partner living with parent completing questionnaire[^]

Yes	4
No	4
Stays some of the time	1
Not Applicable	4

* From questionnaires completed by 13 parents on behalf of 17 interviewed children and 16 other children; 2 parents of 3 children did not return questionnaires

[^]All questionnaires were completed by the mother

As can be seen from Table 4, parents record having limited social support for their families, with the major source being a service worker.

Table 4: Social support for family**

<i>Source</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Sort of</i>	<i>Blank</i>
From mother (or female guardian)	2	4	2	5
From father (or male guardian)	1	6	0	6
From brother/sister	2	6	1	4
From other family member	3	4	1	5
From friend	4	2	3	4
From housing worker/social worker/counsellor	12	0	0	1
From ex-partner	0	3	0	10
Other	1 [‡]	0	0	0

* From questionnaires completed by 13 parents and guardians (all were women) on behalf of 17 interviewed children and 16 other children; 2 parents of 3 children did not return questionnaires

#Question: "Does your family have any ongoing help or support from any of the following people?"

‡(outreach support worker)

Government benefits and allowances were the major source of income for almost all parents completing the questionnaire, as can be seen in Table 5. More than half of those who answered the question reported experiencing times when the family had no income.

Table 5: Parents' employment and income*

<i>Source of income</i>	<i>Number</i>
Government benefits and/or allowances	12
I do not have any money coming in	0
Child support	1
I have my wages	0
Other	2 [‡]
<i>There have been times when the family had no income</i>	
Yes	4
No	3
No Answer	6

* From questionnaires completed by 13 parents and guardians (all were women) on behalf of 17 interviewed children and 16 other children; 2 parents of 3 children did not return questionnaires. Two parents gave two sources of income

‡1 is a Red Cross payment

Children had experienced many accommodation moves, with most mothers reporting between three and eleven changes of residence during the lives of children interviewed. Older children in some families had experienced even more moves (up to 17). Details are in Table 6.

Table 6: Children's frequency of moving accommodation*

<i>Number of times interviewed children moved in previous year</i>	<i>Number</i>
0	5
1	3
2	2
3	5
4	2
<i>Number of times interviewed children have moved in their lives</i>	
0–2	0
3–5	4
6–8	6
9–11	5
12–14	1
15–17	0
No response	3
<i>Number of times all children in participating families have moved in their lives</i>	
0–2	7
3–5	7
6–8	9
9–11	7
12–14	2
15–17	1
<i>Number of times oldest child in family has moved in life</i>	
0–2	1
3–5	2
6–8	5
9–11	3
12–14	1
15–17	1

* From questionnaires completed by 13 parents on behalf of 17 interviewed children and 16 other children; 2 parents of 3 children did not return questionnaires

Children in participating families had experienced a wide range of accommodation types. In order of frequency, these included hotels or motels, other varieties of emergency accommodation, refuges, sleeping rough or in cars, rooming or boarding houses, and caravan parks. Table 7 provides details of children's accommodation.

Table 7: Types of accommodation experienced by children*

	<i>Refuge</i>	<i>Hotel or Motel</i>	<i>Car or sleeping rough</i>	<i>Caravan park</i>	<i>Rooming house or boarding house</i>	<i>Other emergency accommodation</i>
All children in participating families	8	13	7	3	5	9

* From questionnaires completed by 13 parents on behalf of 17 interviewed children and 16 other children; 2 parents of 3 children did not return questionnaires

Very few children had attended only one school; almost all children interviewed had been to more than three. Five of the children interviewed had attended five or more schools, and this pattern of instability was repeated throughout all the children in participating families, as can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8: Number of schools attended by children*

<i>Interviewed children</i>	<i>Number</i>
1 school	1
2 schools	2
3 schools	4
4 schools	5
5 schools	2
6 schools	3
No response	3
<i>All children in participating families</i>	<i>Number</i>
1 school	1
2 schools	8
3 schools	6
4 schools	6
5 schools	2
6 schools	3
Has not yet started school	7
<i>Oldest child in participating families</i>	
1 school	0
2 schools	2
3 schools	3
4 schools	4
5 schools	2
6 schools	2

* From questionnaires completed by 13 parents on behalf of 17 interviewed children and 16 other children; 2 parents of 3 children did not return questionnaires

“My favourite food is good, but I can’t really eat because until these scratches is gone away. ... It’s eczema. ... I’ll just write down what I can’t eat but will eat. ... I’m just going to have allergies. ... Strawberries.”

[Interviewer: Does home where you’re living with your mum, does that feel like a safe place to you?] “No. ... There’s not really any places safe. [Nowhere feels safe? What about Nanny’s? Does that feel safe?] A little bit. Because like I, Mum probably told you, about her ex. ... And he, he used to come around the house with a like, sometimes gap, cap guns and sometimes real guns and shoot around the house. ... And when Mum was pregnant with (my little brother), she had to—I was going to go outside and ... I only put one step outside and then came back in because the—and then two minutes later there was a gunshot. And I, and I, I never, never, ever took nearly one step outside without someone out there. ... And I wanted my mum or my nanny.”

Britney, 6

What We Found, 2

About the Children's Experiences, from the Interviews

Most children appeared to enjoy the interview and associated activities, although some were clearly sad as they recounted difficult aspects of their lives. Only one child asked to turn off the recorder before the end and to conclude the interview; she showed no evident distress but a great deal of interest in the gift. One mother contacted her case worker after the interview to say that she had found it very helpful and had decided to talk to her children about their experiences, having become more aware of how they had been affected by homelessness.

Although some children were articulate about their experiences, others were less so. Nevertheless, all children revealed some aspects of their stories through the activities, such as posting worries in a box or drawing. Their comments and drawings remind us that, although these are children whose lives have been disrupted by homelessness, they are also children with the interests and quirks and charm and problems of children everywhere.

[Interviewer: What's your mum like?] "If I'm being naughty, she lets me off. Mum, she's always nice to me, and whenever we have chocolate my dad doesn't let me but my mum does. And when we don't have that much money, she just lets us watch movies. ... We can watch DVDs like Harry Potter, 'cause we've got 1 to 4. And sometimes, when I'm really good, we have some popcorn, but sometimes she makes them too salty. And then our dad lets us have some Coke 'cause we don't want to have water and we're begging for some Coke. ... Sometimes we dress up in Mum's clothes and we say that we're Mum. And she gets angry but not, like, mad. She says, 'Oh, you silly kids, put my clothes back'."

Emily, 10

It was evident that children often had a different perspective from the parent who was interviewed. If parents had tried to protect their children from insecurity and worry, children could describe relatively benign circumstances while parents revealed greater problems. If parents were overwhelmed or incapacitated by their experiences, they might be unaware of or underplay their children's distress or awareness of housing instability.

Having (in five cases) more than one child from the same family contributed to an appreciation of families' changing circumstances. The family structure, family life, and family housing were not the same for each child.

The interviews revealed that children's experiences of unstable housing and homelessness are complex and dynamic. Complexity, change, and individual variation could nevertheless be accommodated within themes that are consistent with the research questions. The themes are 'Home, homelessness, and housing instability'; 'Health and well-being'; 'Parental and family relationships'; 'Community connectedness'; 'Participation in education'; and 'Service delivery'. Each theme is described in the sections that follow.

We do not give numbers of children in each category because children reported different feelings or meanings associated with various periods in their lives, and because parents and siblings might give differing accounts. Rather than assess ‘truth’ claims, we acknowledge the reality of diverse and changing perspectives, all of which contribute to complex experiences. In each case, examples rather than complete lists are provided.

Home, Homelessness, and Housing Instability

Children helped us to understand various aspects of their concept of ‘Home’ and ‘Homelessness’, usually indirectly rather than in clear statements. They also gave evidence of the effects of instability as well as of remarkable resilience.

Concepts of home

For many of the children, **home is where significant family members live**. For example, Salim (12) said that “a house is just a house” and he feels at home with his family, which is all that matters. To Agatha (12), her current place feels like home because she is safe with her family there. She said, “I hope that one day we can actually find a place, like a proper home, and that way we’re near our friends and near our family, and we can all be happy.” Charity (11) values their new house, but being home and safe also means to her that “I’ve got my family around me”. Charity said she felt safe in the past, even with moves and bad people, because “we always had Mum with us”.

Although space does not define a home, one criterion of a good home is being **not too cramped**. Kane (6), for example, loves where he is living now because “It has my own room”. According to his mother, “He’ll say, ‘Oh, remember when we lived in that one little room?’ Because it was just such a hard time for him”. Although Emily (10) likes her current house, it would feel more like home if there were enough space for people to have some privacy.

Privacy can be compromised by having to share accommodation, especially in emergency housing, so one important criterion of home is **not living with other people, especially strangers**. Duane (12) thinks of his current place as home because it is not shared with anyone apart from family members. John (9) expressed concern about having his extended family share his accommodation, especially when they have their own problems of instability and substance abuse; his mother revealed that their homelessness was instigated by violence from a family member.

A satisfactory sense of home is best achieved **in a safe neighbourhood with things to do locally**. Having friendly neighbours and not living among people affected by drugs and behaving violently was a common theme in children’s accounts of ‘home’. Angela (11) likes the size of their current house but does not feel safe there because “most of the time when I’m trying to get to sleep, like you would hear like music and people screaming, and it’s really annoying. And there’s this guy that lives down the street and he’s—and we’re not allowed to talk to anyone but especially him ‘cause ... he scares me. ... And my mum said that he was out of gaol”. One of the reasons Charity (11) feels at home is “because the neighbours are really nice and we know them”. Being able to invite friends over is an important aspect of home. John (9), for example, does not feel completely at home because he can not have friends to play there.

Home needs to be secure; it is important to children to live in a place **that is robust and not temporary**. Robert (6) said his current house is not home because it is full of spiders and falling down; a light fitting fell and nearly hit him. According to Robert, it feels more like “a garage” than a home. Britney (6) described her current house as not feeling like home because “everything’s falling apart and everything’s getting ruined and there’s a hole in the roof and there’s heaps of problems about it because it’s so small and I see things wrecked and stuff”. Temporary accommodation, however pleasant, sometimes does not feel like home. Madison’s (11) great hope is to be “safe and settled in our own house with no trouble around the neighbourhood or anything”; she finds it “upsetting” not to have her own home. Simone (12) said that the one thing that would help her the most is, “Probably just to live in a house so we don’t have to move any more”. Miranda (12) is thrilled that they have their own house, built by a charitable organisation: “We don’t have to move again. It’s ours”.

Some children cherish a **past in which the family seemed to be happy, safe, and together**. Home then becomes something that they once had and for which they yearn. Duane (12) said that his main home will always be their original family home interstate; it was “beautiful there” and he misses his friends. This is the only place for which Duane gave a full address. Annemarie (8) said a place that felt like home would be like “our old house”, and Angela (11) longs for the place where the family lived with her father before he left.

Concepts of homelessness

Most children did not tackle the topic of homelessness directly, or did not accept that they had been homeless. For ethical reasons the concept was not emphasised, sometimes not even named, with children. Maria (12), for example, said she has had many moves but has never been homeless. The mother of Simone (12) said that she was careful to avoid the topic of homelessness with her children and tried to protect them from it; this was the case with a few other parents. Charity (11) spoke more of what being homeless meant to her mother than to herself: “It was sad, ’cause Mum was always upset ’cause we didn’t have anywhere to stay”. Similarly, Agatha (12) said she was not aware of homelessness when she was very young but feels sad in retrospect, mostly for her parents: “When I was little, we didn’t have anywhere to go, and I was too little to really know anything, so when my parents told me I got a bit upset and just thought about what they had to go through. It made me a bit upset and stuff to hear about it”.

Some children associated homelessness only with **sleeping rough**; few had had that experience although some had feared it. Annemarie (8) said that she felt homeless when they first moved and thought they were “moving into the streets”. It was more common to recall the awful feeling of **not knowing where you will sleep tonight**; children said that this could make them feel homeless. Charity (11) said, “It’s really hard, ’cause you never—’cause we don’t really know where we’re moving to, and we never have anything with us.” Similarly, Simone (12) felt “a bit frightened about where we were going to stay and everything. ... At the start, I was at my friend’s house, and then my mum—’cause I wasn’t sure about anything at the start, and then my mum picked me up and I didn’t even know that we weren’t going to go back to our house that we lived in”.

A further refinement of the experience of homelessness was **not having enough to eat** while in temporary accommodation. Britney (6) said she felt homeless when they had “barely any food” and when she had to leave her friends. Although Emily (10) and Agatha (12) did not mention it, their mother spoke of not having enough food at times, although she and her husband had tried to shield their children from the worst effects of homelessness.

Expressions of instability

The meaning and effects of unstable housing were evident in children's accounts, particularly in **memories of chaotic sequences of accommodation**. Duane (12) rattled off diverse dwellings including camping, caravan parks, shelters, other people's houses, and a boarding house. Simone (12) was one of the children who had to ask her mother to help her list all the places in which they had lived, saying, "Does it include if we only stayed there for a few nights?" Emily (10) said, "I hope that we can move to a new house soon, so that we don't have to keep moving back and forth, and forth and back." Britney (6) said that moving makes her feel "angry and weird"; her mother said that Britney has moved nine times, during which they were in danger from an ex-partner who shot at them, as well as dealing with problems arising from the mother's drug dependency: "Britney was—she was confused, very confused. She's like, oh, 'Are we moving again this week? Are we going to move again this week?' And it's like, 'I don't know'."

An aspect of constantly moving is **the drudgery of packing and carrying**; many of the children spontaneously mentioned this. In the process, they were aware of **leaving behind familiar things or doing without them**. Annemarie (8) said their first move was sudden and away from all that was familiar, including her pets. Haydar (9) spoke of possessions that were sold when they first lost their house: "That house was more gooder, because I lived lots there. ... We had a big garage; we made parties and my birthday party inside there. And then we sold stuff". Several children felt that they had been denied pets because there was nowhere reliable to keep them, and others had had their toys packed away for years and had nothing to play with. It meant a great deal to some children that they had been able to hold on to a familiar treasure, such as Emily's (10) teddy, although she had had to leave her cat behind. Now that Miranda (12) and her mother and sister live in their own house, she especially values that they have their own possessions on the wall and on shelves around the house.

One striking feature of the children's accounts was that, for many, **instability is expected**. Staying for a long time might be "one or two years", as Maria (12) said. The mother of Darcy (10) said of her children, "They know that one day we might get kicked out on the street again." According to his grandmother, Robert (6) needs frequent reassurance that he is secure with her despite his chaotic life, including the incarceration of her partner for violence and the drug problems of his mother. The mother of Angela (11) and Dominique (8) said they did not fully unpack but kept a pile of clothes for each of them in the kitchen, ready to move at short notice.

The expectation of instability is associated with a sense of **helplessness or lack of agency in finding a home**. Madison (11) feels unsafe in her current accommodation, but said, "Well, you know, what can you do?" Britney (6) spoke of getting angry about seeing her things being moved in boxes and not being able to take charge of them herself; she wanted to stay in the last house and now she wants to stay where she is; why can't her mother make it happen? Mark (10) said that he has stopped reacting when he moves because he has moved so often, although his mother reported that Mark was crying about his lack of stability on the way to the interview. When she had no home to stay in, Angela (11) "felt scared and worried, like, we might not get a house, or, sometimes, I feel like I don't know what's happening". The mother of John (9) said that, when he expressed concern about not having a home, she told him and his siblings that they had to "deal with it" because there was little she could do.

Children may escape “druggies and stuff” and “people that we don’t know and are drunk in the house” (Darcy, 10), but then discover that they are **rejected by neighbours in “good” areas** because the family is perceived as transient or homeless, another effect of housing instability. For this reason, some parents endeavour to hide their status, such as the mother of Simone (12): “I didn’t want to tell anyone that I’ve got nowhere to live and, you know, that I can’t support myself. ... I don’t tell them now. ... I worry that the neighbours would—the neighbours know that this is a transitional house and, you know, I get judged because of it”. The grandmother of Robert (6) said that other children are not allowed to play with him because his behaviour is odd, which may be because of his developmental disorder rather than unstable housing; but Robert’s grandmother also said that she does not let him play with children in the Housing Commission area because she wants to keep him away from “those type of kids and mothers”.

Despite the vicissitudes of their lives, **some children show remarkable resilience**, identifying each move as a new opportunity, as did Salim (12). Miranda (12) was able to see potential for meeting new people in each move, even though the experience of moving was “odd”. Madison (11) described making the small space in which she and her mother currently live “tidy” and “cosy”, a kind of bulwark against the threatening neighbours who make her feel “scared”. Angela (11), when asked what it was like for her when she moves house, said, “Scared, but always thinking of, like, ‘This could be a good opportunity, like, for something new, and to start something different’.”

“If you could have three wishes, what would they be?”

Duane Munroe, 12

“Help for my mum. To see my dad again. And (to go back interstate). ... To see everybody again.”

Maria Spinetti, 12

“To be a cheerleader. ... A hairdresser. ... And a model.”

Madison Petkovic, 11

“So we could own our own big, big house. ... To be simply as happy as you can be, and, I don’t know. To have everything you want. Yeah. To have everything you want. To have money. ... Yeah, have, be rich.”

Britney Barnett, 6

“A car for myself. A house for myself; not Mum: just me. And clothes and stuff.”

Annemarie Dougherty, 8

(Interview concluded, at child’s request, before this question.)

Mark Dougherty, 10

“A two-storey house with a swimming pool and a bungalow, ninety eight million dollars, and to be able to talk to animals.”

Darcy Smith, 10

“A house, not to go to school, and a motorbike.”

Kane Parkes, 6

“To be rich. To be a superhero. To have ice powers *(to put out bushfires)*.”

Simone Larson, 12

"I don't know; just a dog or something, 'cause wherever we've been staying, there's never been a place where we could have animals or anything."

Angela Akingbade, 11

"My dad would live in Australia, my mum will get better from her health problems, and that, well, the last one would be kind of hard. It would either be that we had a car, or that I go to the high school with all my best friends."

Dominique Akingbade, 8

"My daddy comes back, our family is nice and rich, and we have a pool and spa. And I can fly."

Salim Moudgil, 12

"Going back to *(the country where I was born)*. Fly. Superpowers."

Zaina Moudgil, 6

"I wish to have a nice bicycle. ... To have a nice house, to have a nice bed, to have a nice house, nice skates, nice windows."

Robert Browne, 6

"I wish that I had a pet squirrel. I wish that I had a fluffy pen. Nothing else now."

Miranda Gowan, 12

"For a pet bilby, to own a lolly shop, and I don't know what the third one would be. ... To be an animal for a day. ... A bee."

Charity Gowan, 11

"More wishes. I'd wish that my mum never had a stroke, 'cause then she could remember what happened, and I wish that my poppy didn't get sick. ... I wish that we still lived with my dad."

John Alfred, 9

"I wish the world was made of chocolate. I wish I had a thousand dollars. Actually, make that a million. Oh, and I wish I had a genie for me, for myself, so that I could make wishes every day."

Haydar Mehmet, 10

"I want to get a wrestling belt. Not a real one. They're \$23 at the shops and I wish I had a wrestling set, and it's a big guys' wrestling set. And I wish I had the little people wrestling set and I wish I had the little baby and tiny sets."

Emily Pappas, 10

"My first wish would be that I was a billionaire. My second wish would be that I had another one of these stuffed love hearts, 'cause they're really cool. And my third wish would be that I could go to one of David Copperfield's shows; that would be so cool."

Agatha Pappas, 12

"One would be to find a proper home that can be like ours, and it can be a home that, we own it. There's no problems or moving around. And we can have a proper room where there's enough space for things we need. My second wish would be, my mum's been begging my dad about getting a licence and a new car. Well, not necessarily new, but a car that she can drive and take us to school or go to shops to buy food. My third wish would be to go to (the country where my parents were born), I think. To see my other family and stuff. I really want to meet them because I've heard my auntie over the phone and she's really nice."

Health and Well-Being

The literature reveals adverse effects of homelessness and housing instability on children's health and well-being. These were echoed among participants in the current research. There was usually evidence within children's accounts, often augmented by parents and guardians, although sometimes adults told of problems not revealed by the children. On the other hand, there were also some parents who seemed unaware of the children's worries. As would be expected, there was a range of parental awareness and concern, from those who did their best to protect their children to those evidently too overwhelmed by their own problems to focus on children. In general, unstable housing appeared to have affected children's sense of security, their mood and behaviour, their physical health, and their ability just to be children.

There was **evidence of insecurity** in children's "clinginess" to their parents or guardians. For example, the mother of Miranda (12) and Charity (11) said, "They're a lot more clingy these days than they used to be", although this is improving with their new house; while they were homeless, they had been "never happy, never smiling", "disorientated", and "alienated by their friends". The mother of Darcy (10) commented that all four of her children, the oldest of whom is 19, have become very dependent on her, refusing to go to bed until she does, even if it is 4 o'clock in the morning. According to their mother, Angela (11) has developed anxiety and Dominique (8) had "attention tantrums", but both had settled since being able to stay in the one place: "At the moment, after 13 months, I'd say the kids have really stabilised. They look forward to going to school". She fears what will happen when they have to move again. Anxiety is manifest in comments about fear of having to sleep on the street, not having enough food or clothing, and concerns (such as Madison's) about where she lives: that "people just try to wreck it and stuff".

Problematic behaviour from other people in the areas in which children are housed with their families is a major source of insecurity and anxiety to nearly all the children. Threats to security mean that some children cannot play outside, including Darcy (10), who is restricted "Because there's too many druggies". The mother of Simone (12) described hiding in their room in transitional accommodation with the door shut because of the violence outside. The mother of Agatha (12) and Emily (10) said that, since they lost their house, her husband has been very depressed, does not trust people, and is over-protective of the children, refusing to let them go to friends' houses or have them to visit, although Agatha's account suggests that he is more lenient with her than with Emily.

Along with insecurity and loss comes **profound unhappiness**. Zaina (6), for example, said, "The old house doesn't make me cry; this house makes me cry. Yeah, when I go to school, that school makes me cry, and other school doesn't make me cry". Charity (11) recalled how she felt when they had no permanent home: "It was sad 'cause Mum was always upset 'cause we didn't have anywhere to stay and 'cause she couldn't get to her family much, and Nana was sick then, so, yeah". The mother of Angela (11) and Dominique (8) described them as "upset and crying" when she had to take them out of school and move from motel to motel, adding that they became "depressed" as the weeks went by.

[Interviewer: If you were to start at a new school, you would feel?] "Safe, because he doesn't know which high school I'm going to. [He doesn't? And who's he?] Mum's ex. ... [Before the house that you're living in now, where did you live before that?] ... A friend of ours that we have to live with before we had this house. [And what was it like living there for you?] Annoying, because of her son. ... They kept on crying too much. [They were crying? And what were they upset about, do you know?] Me bashing him. [Mother (laughs): That's true.] ... [Interviewer: So what was the move like from the last house? ... How did you feel about moving?] Happy, because we were away from (that friend's) house. ... Because she's annoying. ... I kicked her in the face when she tried to put me in the shower with all my clothes on. I kicked her in the face. [Mother: You just about broke her nose.] ... [Interviewer: Is there any particular reason why you didn't get along with her?] Because she was a sook as well. ... Because when my mum just started talking to her, she started crying. [Mother: She used to yell at him all the time, so I used to yell back.] ... (Draws another house where they stayed with another friend.) They're like the best. Their son (name) wouldn't cry. ... I bashed her son, but he wouldn't cry. ... I bashed him, really knocked him out. I whacked his head on the concrete. [Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?] Happy, because he hurt his sister. He hurt his sister so I hurt him. ... (Doing the friends activity) One mean kid: me. (Mother laughs) [Interviewer: You? So why do you class yourself as a mean kid?] 'Cause I start all the fights at school. [Interviewer: And why do you think you do that?] I don't know. For fun."

Darcy, 10

A few children were **chronically angry**. Britney (6) revealed diffuse and powerful anger throughout the interview; it seems to be often directed at her mother and her brother. Darcy (10) boasted of being violent towards his mother's friends and their children when Darcy's family was staying with other families, and he now prides himself on being the school bully. He said that what he likes doing best of all is "Bashing people. ... Because it's fun." Darcy's mother said he has witnessed violence against her all his life and has become very protective of her as well as violent to others. John (9) said he gets very angry, sometimes punching walls and his sister: "The friend's we're staying at, he's going to get me a punching bag so instead of taking it out on her, I can take it out on the punching bag. And he's going to get me boxing gloves so I don't hurt my knuckles, or sprain my arm like I did last time."

The absence of structure and predictability may well be responsible for the **behavioural problems** identified in some children. The mother of Duane (12) said that he had stolen from school and that she was working with his teachers to help him. The grandmother of Robert (6) said he had developed antisocial behaviour including smearing his faeces on walls; she has worked hard to make him more socially aware and skilled: "I rang [the service] up one day in tears trying to get respite with him. It was just too much. I said, 'Look, I love him dearly, but I need a break'. ... I couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't go on public transport, even have a coffee or read the paper. I couldn't take him on walks 'cause he'd abuse people or spit, but now he's great. Now we go on bike tracks and everything." A few parents described the onset of bedwetting in their school-aged children, associated with losing their familiar home and routine. One of these was Kane (6), whose mother did what she could to help him feel secure and happy, such as taking him to the library or the park, and even putting up a tent for him in their single room to give him some privacy.

Physical ill-health could be associated with homelessness. For example, the mother of Angela (11) said she has physical symptoms of anxiety, including abdominal aches, and did not want to leave her mother to go to school. Emily (10) developed anaemia, saying she did not eat a lot at the time it was diagnosed. According to Emily's mother, "She was very thin, and I thought—to me, it looked like she was eating, but after, she needed more red meat and things like that. ... She was always really skinny. You know when you've got all these things as a parent, you can miss little things in your children?" Emily's mother also said that her youngest child missed a screening test at school because they were moving so often, but her hearing deficit was eventually recognised. Some children have health problems that are not caused by unstable housing, but instability exacerbates the problem or undermines its alleviation. Britney (6), for example, has severe eczema and a range of allergies, and Robert (6) was described by his grandmother as having a developmental disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The mother of John (9) said that there is a lot of chronic illness among his four sisters, all younger than John.

"The girls are fighting more. I mean it's normal to fight, I can't say it's not normal. It's just—especially sisters. But it just got to the point where they were really snappy. ... The problem, I think, lies because my eldest daughter, she sort of took on the role of the second adult in the house because of everything that's going on. ... The way she acts towards her sister is more of a motherly role. Or if I will say something to Dominique, Angela will come over and repeat it. ... And then, you know, Angela will come and actually talk to me and say, 'Mummy, I don't want you to worry'. Things like that. ... She sits and worries about what's going to happen, where we're going to move, and. *[Interviewer: When did she start doing that?]* When we got put into the motel. ... It was a one-bedroom motel, very run down. We were there for five weeks. ... They were depressed. Very, very depressed. There was nothing to do, I was sick, it was summer time, it was very hot, and because it was a very old motel, it had a tin roof so the room would just get really hot. ... It was all full of dust, and I developed a chest and throat infection, and I got very sick on top of my other illnesses. So, the kids got bored, and then they got to the point where they were jumping on the beds, and I think that's where Angela mainly got the motherly role, because I was a lot of the time in bed, because I was so sick, so she was the one sort of looking after her brother or sister. ... It helped, but I didn't want—it's not her responsibility."

Mother of Angela, 11, and Dominique, 8

In some cases, children's health and well-being were **adversely affected by problems that preceded and contributed to homelessness**. Family violence, especially intimate-partner violence, is the most obvious. Britney (6) experienced repeated threats and gunshots from her mother's partner. John (9) was aware of violent acts from several family members towards his mother, including "my step-dad put a knife to my mum's throat, and there's sort of a scar there". John's mother thinks that witnessing violence has adversely affected him even more than the homelessness. Madison (11) underplayed the family violence discussed by her mother, describing it as "a little bit of dramas". The mother of Duane (12) reported an abusive relationship with her partner but said that Duane was less aware of it than his older brother. To Duane's great distress, his father has completely rejected him as his child. The constant theme of Duane's interview was yearning to be back in his original home interstate with his father and friends.

Marriage break-up was also a sadness for children in itself and often the beginning of homelessness. The mother of Madison (11) said that, when her partner left, Madison “lost a big part of her life because he was there all the time. He was like a father. ... It just seemed that she was happier then, more than what she is now. ... A lot of her behaviour changed. She’d have mood swings, tantrums, started hitting walls and throwing things.” Angela (11) and her sister Dominique (8) miss their father, who has returned to his country of origin.

One mother said that her family blamed their homelessness on her husband’s betting on horse races, but that it was caused by falling into debt with loan sharks, being declared bankrupt, and losing the home they owned. All of these things contributed to the family’s sense of anxiety and despair. Among other problems with which a few children were coping was drug and alcohol abuse. Britney’s (6) mother reported having drug-induced psychosis, which precipitated being ejected from her mother’s house and has contributed to Britney’s problems. Britney’s mother became paranoid and was afraid to leave the motel room, even for food; Britney was in her care at the time.

Children were often very **concerned about the health and well-being of their parents**. Fathers had had heart attacks, one mother had had a stroke, a few had chronic health problems, but some children just worried about their parents’ unhappiness and difficult lives. Concern about parents was frequently associated with a **child assuming parental responsibility**. While Dominique (8) was fairly light-hearted about their moves, her sister Angela (11) expressed responsibility for her mother and her sister. Dominique dwelt more on her father’s absence, and described her sister as “mean” and “bossy”. This is how Mark (10) thought his family saw him, and felt unappreciated for the care he took of them. His mother said, “Mark’s such a sweet kid and, you know, he looks after me, really. You know, I think it would be great for his confidence just to have something that he can do that’s not with his younger brother and is just his”. The mother of Madison (11) said of her that, “She wants to be an adult since all this has been happening; like she wants to be the boss and she thinks that I’m the child. She likes to tell me what to do”. Several other mothers made similar statements. These children who took upon themselves the family’s burdens tended to be the oldest in the family.

Some children are **seeing mental health professionals** for their problems. John (9) said he needs counselling because he has trouble coping with his father’s death. The mother of Angela (11) reported that she had had counselling to deal with insecurity and unhappiness but neither of them were satisfied with it. Britney (6), according to her mother, is in the care of a psychologist.

Some children described **people who contribute to their well-being**. Madison (11) praised a helpful school, especially the principal, and assistance from a support service. Angela (11) valued the attention of the family’s case worker, who “gave me like someone to talk to, which was her, so that if I had any worries or anything”. Agatha (12) is grateful for the opportunities she has at school, supportive teachers, and extra activities; she and her sister are both aware of the cost to her parents of Agatha’s school fees. Agatha said she is inspired by the story of JK Rowling, who wrote her first Harry Potter book as an impoverished single mother.

It is important to note that Miranda (12) and her sister Charity (11) demonstrate the **sense of well-being from having their own house**, which their mother helped to build, through a charitable organisation. After suffering adverse effects on their health and well-being from being homeless, Charity said, “It’s fun, ’cause I have my own room, and it’s even better because I know that we won’t move again”.

My Worries

Duane Munroe, 12

Little Worry	My brother in (another state).
Medium Worry	Losing or Doing something to upset my friends. <i>(Also said "My house")</i>
Big Worry	My mum She's Disabled.

Maria Spinetti, 12

Little Worry	Moving schools
Medium Worry	Meeting someone you don't know
Big Worry	Getting in trouble for doing something BAD Seeing a dog that looks scary

Madison Petkovic, 11

Little Worry	School stuff I homework If I left something some were If I had to do soming (=something)
Medium Worry	Important things that I have to do
Big Worry	My mum somone being sick my cat

Britney Barnett, 6

Little Worry	When I see a dog that woofs all the time. When I get scared I get really, really, really upset. <i>(Dictated to interviewer)</i>
Medium Worry	When I get upset. <i>(Dictated to interviewer)</i>
Big Worry	When I get scared and get very, very frightened. When I get frightened I get upset and scared, when I get scared. <i>(Dictated to interviewer)</i>

Kane Parkes, 6

Medium Worry	Moving house
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Simone Larson, 12

Little Worry	Not getting to do things because we don't have enough money making no friends at new schools moving to far away from school and have to change
Medium Worry	Having no-where to live not seing my friends when we move house, or family

Angela Akingbade, 11

Little Worry	Spiders My friends
Medium Worry	A car My cats
Big Worry	Family My Mum The House High school My Dad New school

Dominique Akingbade, 8

Medium Worry	I worried that my cat won't come when we move
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Annemarie Dougherty, 8

(Child terminated the interview before this question was asked.)

Mark Dougherty, 10

Little Worry	getting false teeth getting sick.
Medium Worry	Not much friends Breaking a bone
Big Worry	Getting a dises (=disease)

Darcy Smith, 10

Little Worry	People coming to our house.
Medium Worry	(<i>My mother's ex-partner</i>) knowing where I go to school
Big Worry	Drugies around where we live

Salim Moudgil, 12

Little Worry	upsetting a friend forgeting my locker key
---------------------	---

Zaina Moudgil, 6

Little Worry	Home Dogs sckalool (=school) cat
---------------------	---

John Alfred, 9

Big Worry	Vizens (= <i>Visions; about his father's death</i>)
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Haydar Mehmet, 10

(*Did not name any worries*)

Robert Browne, 6

Medium Worry	Bombs, like under the ground and you think they're real. (<i>Dictated to interviewer</i>)
Big Worry	My worry is spiders. ... A big worry. ... Horns. People who beep me and scare me. ... That's a big worry. (<i>Dictated to interviewer</i>)

Emily Pappas, 10

Little Worry	cleaning my room
Medium Worry	Homework on time
Big Worry	helping clean the hole house

Agatha Pappas, 12

Medium Worry	When I havent got my home work done when there is not enough petrol in the car when my parents are upset when my little brother is upset
Big Worry	When my dad doesn't feel well

Miranda Gowan, 12

Little Worry	charity not caching the 2nd buss
Big Worry	Nanner getting sik again Pop getting realy sik again

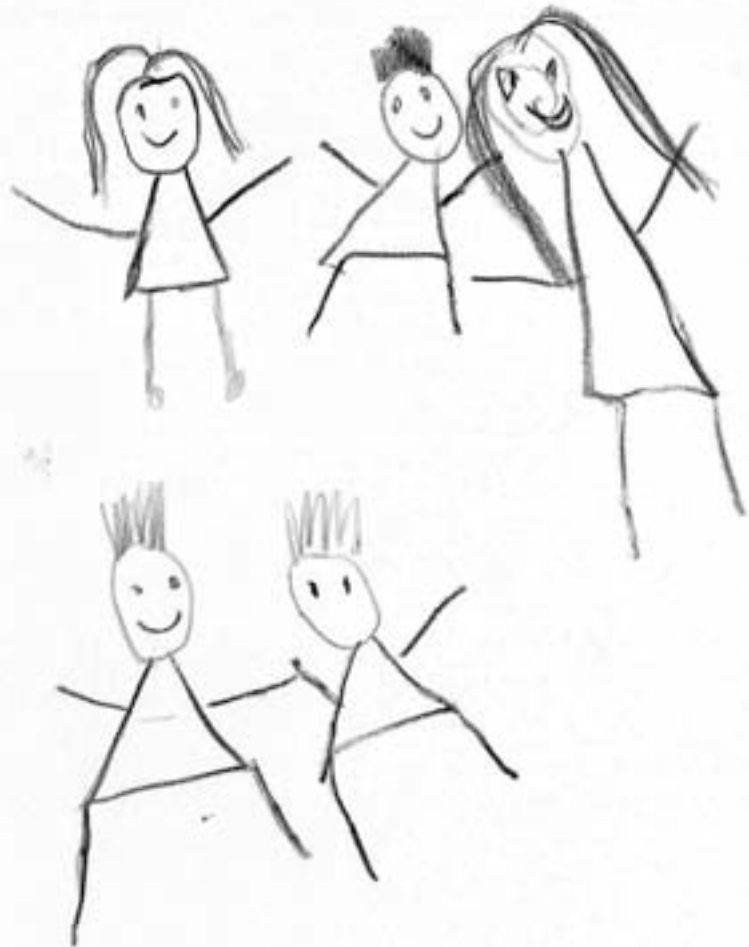
Charity Gowan, 11

Little Worry	that I will miss the bus
Big Worry	My Mum will have anothe stroke

Children wrote their worries on pieces of paper and posted them in boxes labelled Little Worry, Medium Worry, and Big Worry.

Unless otherwise stated, all worries are transcribed as children wrote them.

My family



Zaina, 6 — Family drawing

Parental and Family Relationships

Homelessness and unstable housing could adversely affect relationships within the nuclear family and beyond it to the extended family, although sometimes family problems were factors in the initiation of homelessness.

Relationships between children and their parents can change in complex ways, including the ‘clinginess’ of children to their mothers and the assumption by children of the parental role, both described in the previous section. One very touching example of the complexities of family relationships and the different perspectives within the family is the example of Miranda’s (12) and Charity’s (11), whose mother did her best to protect her two daughters, including sleeping in her car outside the houses of friends who were able to give beds to the girls for the night, and forcing herself to find the energy to take them to a park or to other free entertainment. Now that they have their own house, she says she needs to regain her daughters’ respect. Their view of her is a mother who goes out of her way to make their lives not only secure but fun.

Some children spoke of **close and nurturing families**; often they were families that had stayed intact despite their housing problems. For example, Emily (10) talked of the fun she had with her family. Her sister Agatha (12) described close family relationships; she said that, after the most recent move, “I think we became more closer as a family here”. Charity (11) said, “What I like most about my sister is that she’s really nice to me, and we don’t fight that much. And what I like about my mum is that she loves me lots.” Haydar (9) spoke of enjoying being with his family and feeling safe when they all (parents and two children) shared a bed, but also said he found his sister irritating. Haydar said the bed was a fold-out sofa bed.

While parents did their best for their children under very trying circumstances, examples were recounted of **poor relationships with parents because of homelessness**. Parents have so much to deal with that they might not be available to their children when they need them; parents may see the children as demanding more than they are capable of giving. For example, Britney (6) expressed anger at her mother for the housing instability, lack of privacy, and her mother’s pregnancy, and said that she would prefer to stay with her grandmother. Madison (11) described a close and loving relationship with her mother. Madison’s mother, however, said that they both found it very difficult when they were first homeless and moving in and out of transitional accommodation: “She was with me the whole time. There was a time where I just couldn’t handle it and she did go and stay with my sister for about three months, because I just needed to sort things out.” The mother of Agatha (12) and Emily (10) spoke of the difficulties parents face and how it can disrupt their relationships with their children; what was hard on them was “Probably us being really introverted, upset, not being able to handle their—kids’ normal antics, like, ‘I want this, I want that’, and they couldn’t understand why we were so agitated. ... I tried to make them understand that we had to leave. Of course, they could see the tears in our eyes every time we tried to talk to them. And they just stopped and looked at us. And they’d say, ‘Why is Mummy and Daddy so sad?’ I guess they see the weakness in parents”. The mother of John (9) said that her relationship with him had deteriorated since they had been homeless; she has trouble coping with her circumstances, and reported that John “wants attention, but it’s like, ‘Hello? How many kids I got?’ ... I have five. I have four at home and one in care”. John’s mother is now trying “talking to him, and not yelling at him or anything”, which she said is helping their relationship.

"I lost control of my girls when we didn't have a stable home. There was times when they'd stay at friends' houses but I wouldn't stay, because one girlfriend would take them. She had eight kids when she took my two; she had six of her own plus my two. So it was easier in that order to have only one parent in the house, if that makes sense. I was actually outside, living in my car. ... They were very disorientated, very disorientated, yeah. They just needed stability, which is what everyone needs. Moving all the time is not good for anybody. ... They lost all their friends. Even though they stayed at the same school, they became a little bit alienated by their friends because of the fact that their friends knew that they were moving all the time. Their friends knew that they didn't have a home. ... They'd come home from school quite unhappy sometimes because their friends—just peer pressuring and ganging up on them because they didn't have a home. ... And not being able to be in sports as often as they'd like. We'd tried a couple of hockey teams and things like that. But with moving and different addresses, and getting back to that one place at hockey that—we lost our sports and things like that. Pets—we lost our pets. ... They had a guinea pig and rabbit each and they both died, unfortunately. Just with the yanking them to friends and having friends look after them. ... Little things like that, I think kids miss more than their home. It's what makes a home, I suppose, to have your friends come around or feed your guinea pig or rabbit, or whatever. ... I tried to get them to as many birthday parties as possible, brought them up to—wherever we were back to any school events that were on. The animals we used to visit and made sure they still kept their cages clean until we lost them. Tried—even though I didn't feel like it, to take them to the park, which was hard on the parent, I'd say, being mum or dad, to actually get the energy to put a smile on to go to a park and play with them. When you go—when you've got nothing behind you anyway, it's pretty hard sometimes to do that for them. ... *[Interviewer: What's the most important thing that your family needs now?]* "Now? Now that we've got a home? It's just time to build our relationship back together to what it was. So I don't think—they lost a lot of respect for me when we were homeless, is the way I look at it. A lot of respect, and I think I have to build that respect back up with my daughters. They thought I let them down, so. ... It's more like, 'Why can't you do it, Mum, when every other mum could do it?'"

Mother of Miranda and Charity

[Can you tell me a little bit about your mum?] ... "She's fun. ... When it's raining and that, she'll jump in the puddle to splash us first before we splash her. She likes playing games with us. She just likes to have fun. ... Mum will play Monopoly with us, or games, or Mum will hop around in the garden with us and stuff."

Miranda, 12

"And then from (our last suburb), we moved to our house now. And this place is my favourite place because we're never going to leave this place, and I know that, and I have my own room, and everybody has their own room, and the lounge room is really big, and now we have a couch. 'Cause we didn't have a couch and Mum had to order one, and she ordered one in January but it only just came, so we're really happy. And, yeah, this is my favourite place. ... And I love this place because we know who built it. 'Cause we—Mum got the house built by (a charitable organisation), so we know who built our house, and Mum helped build our house. She had to put in 1500 hours and she did that really easily. And Mum wants to go and help with the bushfires."

Charity, 11

Some children have also experienced **poor or lost relationships with siblings** because of housing problems. When the family had to leave his father interstate, Duane (12) lost contact with a brother who stayed behind. Duane misses him and worries about him. Other children, including Darcy (10), have lost contact with siblings, sometimes because a teenager has decided to be independent. The mother of Simone (12) said her two daughters had fought more since they were without a stable home, and she fought with them too. A few children, such as Dominique (8), described bossy older siblings—in each case, those who appeared to have adopted a parenting role—and said that they fought with them. These disputes sounded no more serious than siblings everywhere could describe, although the extra responsibility assumed by the older child could be attributed to the family's unstable housing. Other problems, especially reports of siblings being violent towards each other, most likely arose from the experience of violence in adult relationships and were exacerbated by insecurity and the mother's difficulty managing her own overwhelming problems.

Poor or diminished relationships with the extended family could be caused by moving away or by what precipitated the move. For example, the mother of Emily (10) and Agatha (12) said that they had lost contact with the extended family because they blamed her husband for all their problems. The mother of Duane (12) said that her ex-husband had refused to allow her to have contact with other people, including her extended family, and that relationships had still not been restored. It was common to hear how difficult it was to see the extended family because children had to move away from them with their parents to find supported housing. According to the mother of Kane (6), when they went into emergency housing, “he was taken away from everything he knew, and then it was just me and him”. Simone (12) has been unable to see her extended family much because they have been moved out of their former area to find supported accommodation; there was also a need to hide from her mother's abusive partner. The mother of Miranda (12) and Charity (11) said that they had lost contact with the extended family when they were homeless because they had to move away, but also because she lacked “the patience” to make the visits when their clothes were in storage and life was just too hard. Now that they are in their own home, Miranda and her mother and sister have been able to invite their extended family to visit. She said, “The happiest I ever felt was this Christmas. ... When we had Christmas at our house, so everyone was there; we had a fun day. ... Nan, Pop, our aunties, Mum”.

Community Connectedness

Children's accounts gave insights into lost connections with communities, yearning for past experiences of belonging to a neighbourhood, and inability to establish new connections because of transitory accommodation.

Most children described experiences of being **disconnected** from the community, often because the area is **unfamiliar and they move too frequently** to feel they belong. Angela (11) said, "Sometimes I feel here, like, a bit like lonely, 'cause my friends aren't around". She felt she belonged where she used to live: "I've lived there for longer, and I know the places better, and my friends are there. ... We had a really big backyard and front yard, and we had friends we'd walk to school with". Although Angela and her sister Dominique (8) have lived in their current place for more than a year, they know that it is only temporary, which is a deterrent to putting down roots. Zaina (6) misses her familiar environment, school, and friends: "That girl, she plays with me. She lived next to my house, and she plays with me sometimes, but now she's not here. ... Now I'm far away from her, and she's far away from me". When Charity (11) was asked what it was like to keep moving house, she said, "Annoying, knowing that you don't have the same place each time. ... When you keep moving around, you don't know any of the people around you, so. But when you're in a house that you can stay in, you know that people are there, and you know who they are, and you know that they're nice or that they're not".

Children also feel **disconnected** because the **area feels alien or unsafe**. For example, Haydar (9) feels under threat from neighbours who, he says, raid the family's vegetable garden. His family does not talk to anyone in the community: "I don't walk around here and stuff. I never play around in the garden, in the playground and stuff. I just go home—go to school and then come back, and watch TV and that's all. I don't go outside. I don't go outside." Madison (11) loves her school and has friends there, but hates the violence and unpredictability of her neighbourhood where "I feel a bit scared". Although she and her mother know they need stability and want to be part of a community, Madison's mother said that the most important thing for her family is: "We need to get out of where we are. ... It's a really, really rough area, and we have trouble there all the time. So we're thinking about moving again. ... I'm just sick of moving. I just want to be in one place where I'm happy".

Joining a club or organisation is a good way to become part of a community, but children who are without stable accommodation **can miss extra-curricular activities**. John (9) said, "I used to play basketball, but we had to move to here". The mother of Angela (11) and Dominique (8) said they could not enrol in any activities because, when you are homeless, "You can't plan. ... You know, the children want to start some activities; they're interested in hobbies, for instance dancing, singing, acting, whatever. I can't do anything". This was a common theme. Table 9 presents data from the children's interview where they used stickers on a spider's legs to illustrate how often they did a range of activities. It is particularly notable that more than half of the children never participated in sporting teams outside school hours; a substantial minority never have a school friend over to play or play with a friend from a previous school.

My family



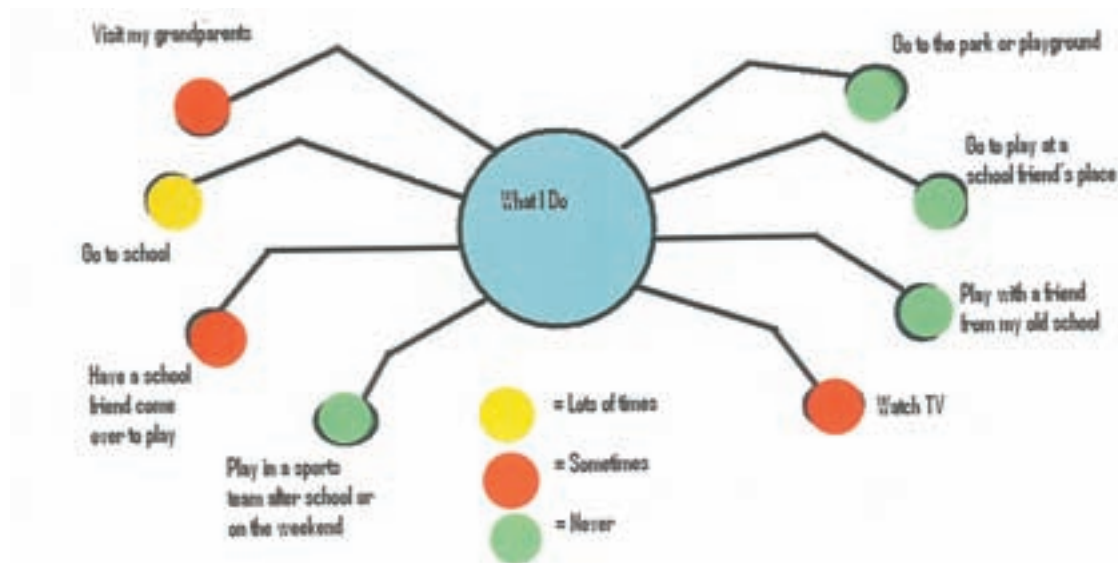
Madison, 11 — Family drawing

Table 9: The things I do*

Activity	Lots of times	Sometimes	Never
Visit Grandparents	4	11	4
Go to school	18	1	0
Have a school friend come over to play	5	8	6
Play in sports team after school/weekend	2	6	11
Watch TV	8	11	0
Play with friend from old school	4	7	8
Play at school friend's place	3	12	4
Go to park or playground	3	12	4
















* Results of the "Spider Diagram" activity; one child did not participate in this activity.

Some children do **express connection** with their community, either because they have lived there for long enough to build up relationships and familiarity or because it is a relief to be somewhere safe at last. Simone (12) has been in her current accommodation for over a year, and said, "It's good. ... We've got nice neighbours next door, and it's easy to invite my friends over, 'cause when we were living in the last place, I couldn't really invite my friends over, 'cause it was too far". Emily (10) feels connected to her area: "It's nice, because I made some good friends here, and I'm a little bit popular at school". Emily's school is close to her house where the family has lived for a few years. Nevertheless, she still misses the place where she felt she really belonged and her old house was bigger, with more room for them all; this house is only temporary and her father will not let her go out without him unless she is going to school. Emily's sister Agatha (12) seems to be more connected to her community, giving less evidence of her father's restrictions on outings: "I remember when I was little and we lived at our old house. I was too little to remember what happened there, like what I did, but now I'm older and I can remember what I did here, so it feels like this is the place I've been all the time, so I can remember this as a place of my home". She still spoke of her loss of previous connections, saying the saddest she ever felt was "When I last moved, 'cause I had friends there and I just thought—I thought that I wouldn't see them, and I actually haven't seen them for a long time, 'cause it's far away and we kind of lost contact and we were really close from when we were in prep, and also when I was in kinder and stuff. It was really hard when I had to move around 'cause I had to make new friends here".



Darcy, 10 — Spider diagram

Friends at school

Best friends	Nice kids	OK kids	Mean kids
			
			
			
			
			
			
			

Use the stickers!

Britney, 6 — Friends sticker activity



Miranda, 12 — Timeline activity

Participation in Education

As is evident from Table 8, ‘Number of schools attended by children’, children who have no stable home change schools frequently. This can have adverse consequences for their commitment and sense of belonging to a school community, their social networks, and their educational achievements. Because school is such a dominant part of a child’s life, the ramifications of homelessness can coalesce around school, which can represent exclusion, isolation, and failure. Some parents are able to maintain a commitment to their children’s education despite their difficult circumstances, while others are overwhelmed by the struggles of daily life. The mother of Darcy (10) was so determined to keep her children at the one school that, after they had gone to emergency accommodation, the family rose at 5.30 a.m. on school mornings to make the very long trip to school. Now that they are closer to the school, Darcy can have friends over to play. Because the mother of Mark (10) and Annemarie (8) was concerned about the effect of having to go to a succession of schools she had not chosen, she home-schooled her children for a while, but found this too difficult to manage without a stable home. Some parents did not want the school to know about their circumstances, but others, such as the mother of Angela (11) and Dominique (8), explained to teachers what the children were dealing with, and were pleased with the response. According to her mother, Angela had been so “scared” about going to yet another school that “it got to the point where it was making her sick. ... There was a lot of crying at school. ... I’d say about three quarters of last year; a very long time”. However, “she had a very supportive teacher, ... who knew our story and would help”.

One of the most common school-related themes in children’s accounts was the **constant making and breaking of friendships**, which has been noted in the Community Connectedness section. As Emily (10) said, when you move schools, “It’s kind of sad, because then you miss all your friends that you’ve just made, and they’re like really nice and friendly, and then all of a sudden you lose your friends, like your best friends, and then you feel really lonely when you get to the new school ’cause you don’t know anyone.” Her sister Agatha (12) missed the friends she made at her previous school but said, if she had to move again, “I would feel way more upset than the first time I moved, because I’ve been so attached to all the people here, and I’m really, really, really close friends with them, and I think it would just break my heart to move again. ’Cause I don’t know what I’ll do. I’ll just sit there crying all the time ’cause, yeah. I found the friends”.

“I’ve been to lots of schools. ... I don’t really like losing friends, ’cause—well, it is good that I move around, because when I grow up I can go around and have lots of friends, but also I’m actually not being around them, and they’re thinking, ‘Oh, John doesn’t want to be my friend any more’, but I’m not actually there, so.”

John, 9

Children may feel that **school represents a string of changes, disruptions, and losses**. One mother said she left her abusive partner by getting on the school bus with her children and going to a police station. They did not return to that school or the area. Duane (12) recalled five school moves; his mother said there are adverse consequences for him socially and scholastically when the moves are in the middle of the year, with fewer problems when they move between years. The mother of Miranda (12) and Charity (11) described the isolation they experienced at school because of their homelessness: “Even though they stayed at the same

school, they became a little bit alienated by their friends because of the fact that their friends knew that they were moving all the time. Their friends knew that they didn't have a home. And that was a sad, sad thing. ... Just peer-pressuring and ganging up on them because they didn't have a home". Miranda has begun at the secondary school which Charity will also attend, and they all feel that school will be better now that they have a home of their own. The mother of Britney (6) said, "She gets stressed out, upset, having to move away, meet new friends, especially changing schools. Like she's going to be changing to her third school this year. ... She gets really aggressive and angry, and attitude really big time, and then cries and says she has no friends, and things like that. She says that, sometimes, you know, 'I hate that school. I want to go to another one', so she wants to change schools every year because she thinks that's how it goes". Britney's mother thinks her current small school is very good for her, but said that they will have to move again because of the time limit on transitional housing. Zaina (6) said she cries each day when she has to go to her new school and misses her old one: "I like the other school because some people play with me, and I liked my after school care and I liked it there. ... I hate school. I want to go to the other school, and my dad doesn't take me there because it's a very long way to get there".

Although children, especially the younger ones, tended to speak little of school work and to emphasise the social network or sense of exclusion at school, it was evident, sometimes from parents' accounts but also from manifest reading problems, that their **academic standards can be adversely affected by frequent moves and insecurity**. For example, the mother of Kane (6) said that his education had suffered because of homelessness: "He was having to go to his school in the shared accommodation, and he wasn't doing well at all. ... The school thing was really hard, because he had a lot of time off from school. Then I put him into a different school. ... He really hated that school. And when I moved here, he loves his school now. ... I think it's just because he's more settled. We've got our own home. The school, he just likes the teachers, the routine that we've got now". Being in shared or inadequate accommodation makes it hard to concentrate or to find the time and space to read or perform other educational tasks. John (9) said he had been kept down at school because he couldn't keep up with the work: he had missed too much school. John thinks he has been to about 13 schools; his mother put it at fewer, although she said, "He's been to so many schools that it's just unreal". The mother of Miranda (12) said that she "slipped heaps" at school with the weight of worry and responsibility she felt with constantly moving and her mother's ill-health. Now that the family is settled, Miranda's mother said, "I've never known a kid to come home from school so happy she's got homework." Some parents, such as the mother of Mark (10) and Annemarie (8), said they were unable to tell how well the children were doing academically or whether they had fallen behind.

Children who have experienced homelessness may **behave disruptively at school**; Duane (12) is one example. According to his mother, he was stealing from school and displaying behavioural problems because he was so unhappy and insecure. There was evidence of school staff endeavouring to help children with these difficult problems, including Darcy (10) who boasted of being a bully. Darcy said, "I can tell one of my teachers about what's happening and stuff and she'll tell my principal what's happening, and she'll tell me what he said when I spoke with her. ... Then I could help Mum at home move and stuff". The school has given him time off to manage all their housing moves. Despite this, one of Darcy's three wishes was "Not to go to school".

Children may have **mixed feelings** about changing schools, as about moving house: pleasure in novelty and expectation, trepidation about starting again and meeting new people, awareness that circumstances improve with time, and concern about not fitting in. Angela (11), for example, feels supported by her school but does not yet have a sense of belonging because she lacks the economic security that they appear to have. What Angela likes about school are

“the teachers, and the principal, and—they’re really nice people.” But she does not like “Most of the kids there. ... Some of them I like, but the other ones are, like, snotty and mean. ... They’re like, sort of like greedy. And, sometimes I would be, like, talking, and they might, like, talk about something, like, for example, iPods, and, I don’t know, like, how they assume that they’re going to get all the things that they want. ’Cause it just makes me feel like, just feel, like, left out.”

Some children made it clear that they **feel supported by their school**. The case workers interviewed said that, if possible, they spoke to teachers about children’s housing problems to alert them to their special needs. Madison (11) said the school principal has been helpful and that the school will provide extra assistance without charge. An after-school program has helped her with homework. Madison said of her school, “I love it”. According to Madison’s mother, “She’s pretty good with schools, ’cause she’s really friendly, so she fits in pretty much straight away. But it’s just—starting over again, I guess. It’s hard on her, too, and she feels a bit embarrassed when she first starts a new school. She’s had two new schools in the past two years, a year and a little bit”. Charity (11) is clear that it has been to her advantage to stay in the same school: “It’s really nice ’cause I know everyone, and I’ve been there for three or four years. And the people there are really nice and they support you and they encourage you to do things”.

A few children appeared to be **doing well at school**, socially and academically, especially those who had sufficient time to become established in the school community. Salim (12), for example, said that he enjoys school, is pleased that he has been able to stay at the same school, wants to do well academically, and worries about not doing so. Salim’s ‘favourite thing’ was his Grade 6 photograph from the previous year. Children may **want to establish themselves in school** as part of a secure life. Simone (12) hopes to stay in her current house because “it’s close to my school and I don’t really want to change again”. Miranda (12) went to four different primary schools but wants to stay at the same secondary school. She thinks they might have a good chance of continuing to find accommodation on the school bus route.



Robert, 6 — Timeline activity

Service Delivery

Children's accounts of the homelessness sector's delivery of services to them and their families varied from apparent unawareness to detailed knowledge. This was the only theme for which parents and guardians usually provided more information than children, perhaps reflecting children's less prominent position in service encounters. It is also the only theme in which we include the service workers' interviews, in order to record professionals' perspectives on service delivery. In all other themes, children and their parents and guardians were so informative that we needed to use the service workers' accounts only to see that they were consistent with what could be learnt from children and their parents.

Children on service delivery

About half the children were **vague about or expressed ignorance of service delivery**. For example, Duane (12) knew that services had helped his family but said, "I don't know the names but Mum does"; Salim (12) knew the name of the social worker but was vague about details; and Darcy (10) said nothing about services received, but when asked what service would help him most, replied, "A house away from all the drug people". Giving some insight into why children might be unaware of services, Simone (12) said that she had a little contact with workers during the school holidays but otherwise her mother saw them.

A few children seemed knowledgeable about service delivery but did not describe child-specific assistance. John (9) named several services and their functions, saying one worker was especially helpful: "She helped us in court and everything, so when we'd go to court and try and get Elizabeth back, but we haven't got her back yet. Yeah, they would help us. And she'd give us food and stuff".

Other children specified ways in which **service delivery worked for children**, including speaking to them personally, providing cinema tickets, inviting them to outings and camps, helping them to join clubs, and organising tutoring and homework groups. For example, Charity (11) enjoyed the activities provided for children by several services: "Like this weekend we're going rock climbing, and we go on camps and things, so that our parents can have time for themselves, and so that we can have fun with kids our ages". Miranda and Charity's mother endorsed their experience of services for children: "It's really great to know that they're still out having fun, and they're taken to places where you can't afford to take them yourself". Charity identified dealing with services as her mother's responsibility, saying she did not know the details because "Mum doesn't really talk about that much". According to Charity, workers do know what children want, which is "that we needed a house and that we wanted our stuff back".

Parents and guardians on service delivery

It was usually parents and guardians who gave details of services. They tended to emphasise assistance in finding accommodation and its inadequacies. When asked about services for children, a few were **not able to specify any child-focused help**. Two of these were among the families with additional drug and violence problems. Another was the mother of Simone (12), who was grateful that services had helped them with housing, even if the housing was inadequate. However, she seemed reluctant to take advantage of other opportunities available to her and her children, such as special education funds for people using homelessness services. It seemed partly that she did not want to identify herself as homeless, but also that she feared being judged by others as inadequate.

Some parents had **sought and received specialised help for the children** in their care. This included therapeutic groups for teenagers, an intensive learning program, tutoring, a service worker being available for children to call them, and help with arranging dental or psychological care, as well as the recreational activities mentioned by the children. The mother of Britney (6) had found “All of the Front Door services” to have been especially helpful. “Without them, I would’ve, yeah, probably been close to suicide, because everyone else treated me like a piece of shit. ... They’re just happy, supportive, you know. ... If we’re sitting and having a talk with one of the workers and the kids need to be occupied, one of the workers always goes, ‘Oh’, you know, ‘I’ll sit with your kids and play with them and keep them happy, and,’ which is really, really good. ... More caring, which a lot of other services aren’t.” The mother of Mark (10) and Annemarie (8) said her children’s involvement in services had been limited “because I was trying to get my head around everything”. They had gone to a children’s camp after their mother had rung the worker “and said, ‘Take my kids or I’m going to kill them’. Because we moved three days before Christmas. The father didn’t want the kids, so I had all five kids at home and my car broke down. So we’re in a new suburb, and yeah. So she organised for them to go to that camp. ... Life saver”.

The mother of Angela (11) and Dominique (8) spoke at length about working her way through friends, government departments, and Front Door services. The standard of care varied widely, both in housing services and care for children: “Being that this was all new for me and the kids, I would’ve expected [Service A] to have helped more, even counselled the children, at least, because I didn’t know what we were going through. I couldn’t give any answers, and I couldn’t even tell them what tomorrow was going to be like, or what was going to happen when the eight weeks was up. No one was helping us in that aspect. ... Someone could have spoken to them. Spoken to them, but in a positive way, not like, ‘This is the worst’, because all that they were seeing was that time was running out and no one was giving us any space.” Finally, another service had helped the children: “The worker was great. And she tried to help me connect to other services, especially with my health, the children, and so on. Angela, my eldest, got connected to community health service counselling.” She was pleased that attempts had been made even if the counselling was not ideal. However, Angela and Dominique’s mother was most concerned that there seemed to be little priority given to families, especially local homeless families: “What I’ve been through has been the most horrible experience. And I don’t see how the government can’t put the families before anyone else. And the fact that they put foreigners, as well, before Australian families in need. They would house a refugee family before a homeless family here. It’s horrible. I mean, it’s great if we can help other countries, but I think we need to help home first”.

The mother of Miranda (12) and Charity (11) thought her children had been given all that was available, but that other children need more direct contact with service workers: “I know some families that have been homeless, I suppose their mum and dads haven’t coped as well, and I think those kids needed or still do need a lot more contact. ... I just had phone calls saying, ‘How’re you going? Have you been looking for rentals?’ I’d say, ‘Yeah, yeah.’ And, ‘How are the kids?’ I’d say, ‘Yeah’, but for someone to actually come and see the kids themselves, I think, would’ve helped out a lot more than just feedback through me. ... Sometimes Mum and Dad can say they are fine, and maybe the kids aren’t so fine. Without—not necessarily Human Services getting involved, but maybe, yeah, just a smiley face for a kid to see walking through the door instead of a down mum and dad all the time”.

"I was through domestic violence, so I just wanted somewhere safe to be able to get my head clear. And I found that everywhere I went, it kind of made it worse, because I had—everybody else's problems were there, and I didn't get that time by myself to have that, you know, the time that I needed. It was just a massive—being passed around, passed around, passed around, passed around, and all I wanted was just—maybe even if there was just one room for me and him, just to have by ourselves, where there wasn't people coming in and out of your room. All the kids there wouldn't leave the room alone; they'd be banging on the door. The girls would be fighting, drug addicts. This drug addict girl threatened to prick me with a syringe. You know, just these people that had problems that were beyond—. There was somebody there who had lost her mind completely. She was going around saying, talking to herself, and shouting at me every time, sort of, me and him did anything. So we couldn't even come out of our room to go to the toilet. You felt like, 'What do you do?' You know? It was just a horrible experience. And these people who have got all these other problems are just put with people kind of like me and him. There just needed to be more segregation of these people, instead of pushing everybody that's homeless with drug addicts who are homeless all together in this one building in this one place. That was just ridiculous, you know. ... And the fights, and the craziness there was just very confronting, and finally realising how long people had been homeless for, the different situations of homelessness. ... Kane was actually sleeping in the tent in my room, so I had a bed and he had a tent. And there was glass and mould, and it was just disgusting. No heating, no—. This was winter time; it was cold. And the floors and that was rotten, and the walls were mouldy, and we were paying \$195 a week to live in this situation."

Mother of Kane, 6

Service workers on service delivery

There was broad agreement among the eight workers that there needs to be more resources dedicated to children, who need to be helped from the outset to maintain security, stability, and connection to school and community. One worker described children as "vulnerable witnesses" who want, above all, "some certainty". Another worker was "glad the White Paper does make children within homelessness a priority". The main themes about service delivery from the workers' interviews are that children are sometimes ignored; assistance given to parents can benefit children; it is important to work with families as a whole; there should be many more specialised children's workers; that children need stability; and that the sector should work together and with other organisation to provide comprehensive support for children. Although emphases may differ, what the workers said was not inconsistent.

Workers cautioned that **children may be left out** of service provision even if only because contact with parents may take place in school hours. If workers rely on parents to report children's needs, they may be overlooked because parents are too overwhelmed by their own problems. However, one central concern was that there is an institutionalised philosophy of focusing on parents. One worker said, for example, "SAAP (Supported Accommodation Assistance Program)'s whole philosophy was—you know, one of the questions was, 'If you go in and the mother's sitting on the chair and the children are all filthy, what do you do? Do you go to the children or the mother?' 'You go to the mother, because you've got to work with the mother to be able to get to the children'. Still the same, 20 years later." Another worker, reiterating the common theme of inadequate staff and funding, said, "We need to advocate for children, support children, but we don't have the resources to do it."

Nevertheless, workers did not discount **the importance of working with parents**: if parents are unsupported they cannot help their children; if parents are anxious and stressed, their children will be, too. Ultimately, access to children is through the parents. As one worker said, “If we don’t have the parents on board, we don’t have the contact with the children”. Workers were also conscious of not taking over parental responsibility: “It’s not making decisions for these parents; it’s kind of educating them and giving them the options that are out there, and explaining to them why your child might benefit from this. ... Very rarely do I meet parents who don’t have the best interest of the child in mind. ... They’re homeless, and their priority is finding that house and shelter and being able to feed their children. ... You can’t sit there and talk to a parent about having the child take swimming lessons if they don’t have a place to live.” The interviews with children made it clear that they rely on their parents to steer them through the crises of homelessness, and that housing instability can disrupt or distort children’s relationships with their parents. Case workers were alert to the need to contribute to strengthening rather than weakening the parent-child bond.

Most of the workers emphasised **working with family as a whole**, which entails working with the children, as well as their parents, as individuals. This may require identifying the children as clients. One worker said, “I think SAAP needs to actually say, ‘Yeah, this is about the family’, and ‘Let’s count those children as targets’. Let’s say, instead of getting the client through in 13 weeks, which is impossible, we need to say, ‘That family can have six months and you can work on this with the children’.” Another worker from a housing service said their system does its best to care for children, making referrals to other services when they can: “The biggest barriers I encounter are getting those referrals through and linking children to those services. And, you know, that’s just general with the entire homelessness services; there’s not enough resources, and not enough funding, and so, therefore there are long wait list times. ... How much longer does a child have to wait on a wait list before they can actually be seen by someone? Is there anywhere else I can go?” As another worker put it, “SAAP needs to recognise them (children) as being clients in their own right, with funding support to adequately address them”.

Even when working with the family as a whole, a majority of the workers said that they needed more **specialised children’s workers** as a standard part of service provision, because, as one worker said, “they’re able to spend the time with the children and looking at the children’s needs”. According to another worker, “A lot of organisations will have a family come in, and will have the parents’ needs addressed. The children often get overlooked because they don’t have the resources or they don’t understand what the children need, because they’re not specialised in that area.” And a third said, “The two things that I think would make a huge difference. If it’s not the targets, then giving us, giving services, children’s workers. Not just a children’s worker like they did years ago for the whole region, where they just give you some information. You actually need a hands-on”. Workers made these comments, one said, in light of “the growing number of homeless children”. Specialised children’s workers can work with children as individuals but also run groups for children of various ages; one of the workers interviewed talked about what she had been able to achieve in such groups, improving children’s self-esteem, consolidating connection with a community, and intervening in the generational transmission of problems endemic to chronically homeless people. This worker said, “A lot of parents aren’t aware of the impact of homelessness on the very young ones. ... They think that they’re too young to know what’s going on, they’re asleep, they don’t realise that we’ve moved from house to house. ... That probably reflects, as well, that the workers—that’s not always brought to their attention, either”.

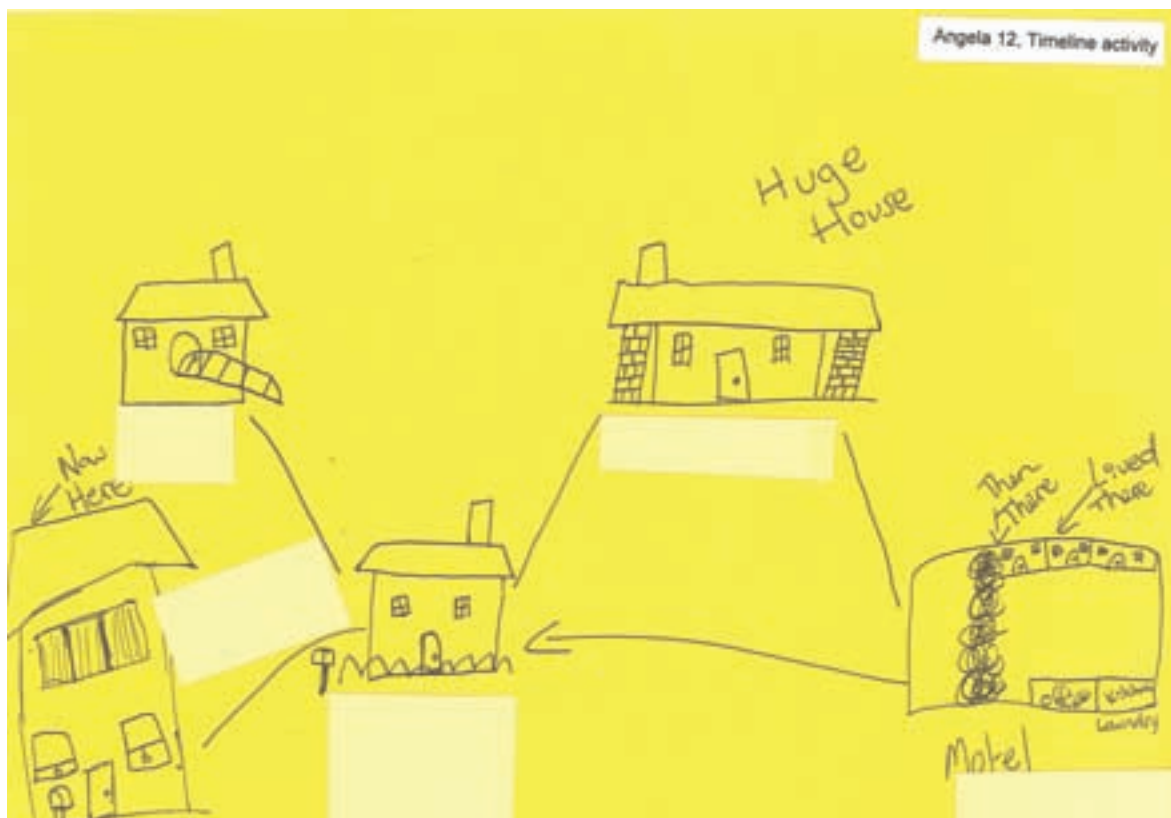
In providing services to children, preferably using specialised workers, the workers interviewed emphasised that **early intervention** is vital, one commenting that some areas are better resourced than others; for example, in providing local enhancement programs for pre-school and early primary children. One worker wanted to stress that ‘early intervention’ was a term bandied around by policy makers but not understood as it should be: “They’re talking about all this early intervention stuff and this youth stuff and this, but they should be doing an early intervention with the children. Because if we want to resolve what’s happening with these families, why aren’t we there when they’re two or three or four or five?” According to another worker, most services require a crisis or a problem before they can intervene, and cannot contribute to early intervention and preventative work with children.

With the age group 6 to 12, school is a central feature of children’s lives. Some workers reported that they did their best to **work with the school** to support children. This is aimed at keeping children engaged with school, but also helps teachers to understand what the children are going through and to see children as individuals and not just a set of difficult behaviours.

Underscoring children’s engagement with school is the desirability of services being organised in ways that do not disrupt schooling, reflecting the wider need of **maintaining children in familiar surroundings**. Inadequate housing stock makes this difficult to achieve. One worker said, “You’ve just got to go with wherever the vacancy is. If they had a system where the Front Door had a pool of properties, you could actually keep them within their locality. You’re actually not breaking down those community supports and the kids’ linkages to their families”. The fundamental problem of **inadequate housing stock** was a dominant theme in the workers’ interviews, referring to its distribution, its quantity, and its quality. As one said, “A caravan is not a solution for a family with children”. Related to this is the model of transitional housing management (THM), which keeps people moving on and exacerbates the experience of insecurity. According to a worker, “With the current model of THMs, most of the services are giving them three months, 90-day leases, and the THMs are giving notice to vacate at the start of the tenancy, which creates this anxiousness, ‘We can’t put our roots down’, which impacts on the kids. ... And then they go for another three months of, ‘Are you working on your housing plan? Yes/no? We’re not going to give you another extension on the lease after this one’. So it keeps them in constant anxiety and heightened state of stress. Kids, again, are sponges; they pick it up, you know. They’re very good emotional filters from the parents and significant others”.

However, while acknowledging the centrality of having somewhere to live, workers said it is **vital not to concentrate just on housing**. Child-focused service provision needs to be alert to children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development and to provide for health, leisure, educational, and therapeutic needs. Achieving a more comprehensive view of the needs of children and families also means working closely with a wide range of services and government organisations. These include, in addition to homelessness services, a range of education services, specialist organisations for children, child protection, and crisis assessment and treatment (CAT) teams for mental illness. One worker said that better service collaboration is required: “If the services were better linked, and there was more open communication between the services, I mean, that could only benefit the child”.

A neat summary of what would happen for children in the service workers’ ideal world was given by an experienced worker: “Lots of early intervention, or a therapeutic intervention, I should say. Looking at a child as a client in their own right and meeting their needs. Parent-child activities and programs. Parenting skill workshops and all that kind of stuff. And often, building partnerships and collaborations throughout the sector to meet service gaps”.



Angela, 12 — Timeline activity

Conclusion

The research reported here is the first major investigation of children's perspectives on the experience of homelessness in Victoria and joins a limited international literature. Victoria is the state with the highest recorded number of children accompanying families into homelessness services in Australia; children constitute a third of people using these services. Because the research was conducted in Victoria and is informed by interviews with case workers currently practising in the State, the results are of particular relevance to Victorian policy and practice. However, they also contribute to building a picture of children's experience of homelessness throughout Australia, in conjunction with previous research described in the introduction.

This research aimed to gain insight into the homelessness experience of children accommodated in transitional support services in a large urban environment in Australia. To do so, interviews were conducted with 20 children aged 6 to 12 from diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, as well as 12 parents or guardians and 8 case workers from homelessness services. Most participating children were living in transitional supported accommodation and had been there for less than a year.

The interviews revealed that children's experiences of unstable housing and homelessness are complex and dynamic, encompassing a range of problems with their sense of security and well-being, their mood and behaviour, their physical health, and their overall experience of childhood.

A powerful image of transience and instability is that of separate bags of clothes, one for each member of the family, not put away in drawers but on the kitchen bench or a cupboard under the stairs, ready to be picked up and carried at a moment's notice. This was familiar practice to more than one family. It was evident from children's accounts that they can come to expect instability as a way of life, which is associated with a sense of helplessness and lack of agency.

The children's interviews suggest that, once they feel secure in their housing, children's concerns appear to diminish. However, the families represented in this research alert us to the possibility that an important role is played by the parents' physical and mental health status and their capacity to be aware of and respond to their children's needs. These factors (housing stability, parental capacity, and children's sense of security) are likely to be interrelated.

"We have never really unpacked. So this is our in-between mode, because there's no point, like—because it's not our home, and we know we're moving. There's a lot of things that—under the stairs there's a cupboard that's just—. We don't want to unpack it. So we have a system going now where the clothes get washed and everyone's got an assigned bag".

Mother of Angela 11 and Dominique 8

The research reported here built on research conducted by the Institute of Child Protection Studies in the Australian Capital Territory (Moore et al., 2007), extending what is known about children aged 6 to 12 and children from a range of cultures and ethnicities. We found, as did they, that some children felt connected to and supported by their families and that their parents mitigated some of the negative effects of homelessness, but this was not such a strong theme among these very young children as it was with the wider age range of the participants in the ACT study.

Accounts given by these children and their parents, while not emphasising health, are consistent with research cited in the Introduction, reporting, for example, poor dental health, asthma, and skin problems among children experiencing homelessness (Buckner, 2008; DiMarco, 2007; Efron et al., 1996b; Grant et al., 2007; McLean et al., 2004). Children reported most vividly their sense of insecurity, stress, and unhappiness associated with homelessness, echoing the results of studies from around the world using, on the whole, quantitative methods of measurement (such as Davey, 1998; Page & Nooe, 2002). It is also evident from these interviews that children reported being affected by problems preceding, precipitating, and operating concurrently with homelessness, as much as or even more than the homelessness itself (as in Schmitz et al., 1995). The expressions of violence, aggression, and anger described by some children in this research are consistent with the effect on children of experiencing and witnessing violence described by Anooshian (2005).

That some of these children were able to look upon the next move as an opportunity and that most of the children presented wishes and worries that occupy children in stable homes should serve to remind us that homeless children have strengths as well as problems (see Douglass, 1996; Herth, 1998), and that some of these children's concerns are the common concerns of childhood.

The recent White Paper confirms increased government commitment to the provision of homelessness services. We hope that results of the research serve as evidence to inform the development of policy and programs to assist children who have experienced homelessness, improving their health and well-being. Whatever model is identified as best for children—whether nominating children as individual clients in the context of their families, increasing specialist children's workers, or reducing case loads to give workers more time with each member of the family, for example—it is evident that children need stability and that their needs and their families' needs are congruent but not identical.

This research was a cross-sectional study of 20 children. As such, its contribution to understanding children's experiences of homelessness should be augmented by larger, longitudinal studies that enable the tracking of children into youth and adulthood, designed to reveal the determinants and associated factors of a range of outcomes, including health and well-being, community connectedness, residential stability, and contact with various government and legal systems. These determinants and factors might include the reason for homelessness, the age at which a child became homeless, the duration of unstable housing, the child's position in the family, consistency of schooling, the presence of parental illness (physical or mental), history of violence in or to the family, the degree of community connectedness, and the extent of social and institutional support for the family.

Nevertheless, this study has collected complex data from a hard-to-reach population. Its engaging activities and appropriate, flexible interview questions encouraged even the youngest children to communicate their thoughts and experiences, not only about their immediate circumstances but also about their history. The reflections of the children's parents and guardians helped to contextualise and illuminate the children's accounts. It is one of the few examples in the world of research that enables children to be active participants rather than investigating them second-hand, through their parents or guardians, or assessing their performance on standardised tests or other instruments.

The overwhelming conclusion to be drawn from this research is that children whose families are homeless need security, stability, and the chance to become and remain part of a community. Without these things that so many in our society take for granted, children's health and well-being suffer, their family lives are disrupted, and their education is limited. Ten-year-old Emily summed up the hopes of the other children when she said, "I hope that we can move to a new house soon, so that we don't have to keep moving back and forth, and forth and back."

[Interviewer: What else could help you and your family at the moment?] We've got a—I don't think we'd necessarily need it, but just so that we know what's going on. We have a small little TV that's not very good and it's analogue, and it's soon going to die out, and it's not been at its best, and it's been really hard to find channels. So it would be really nice to have a nice TV so we could actually watch the news and watch movies and stuff. I know my mum needs a workspace as well. That would help us because in my room there's like a separate area that's a work area for us to do homework, and it's not really big enough for mum to do things, like fill out forms and do paperwork, 'cause my sister and my brother and that, at the same time, want to do homework and stuff, so we need like a bigger workspace. I think that's about it."

Agatha, 12

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Appendices

Ethics documents

1 Charter of children's rights

You have the right to have your say in research

We believe that children and young people should be involved in any research that focuses on their lives

You have the right to NOT meet with the interviewer

You don't have to do it if you don't want to!

You have the right to be informed about what we'll ask you to do

We will help you understand what you're being asked to do. We'll use child-friendly words and activities

You have the right to privacy

We will not identify you in our reports unless you give us permission.

You have the right to benefit from the research

We hope that our project will make things better for children. We will give you a gift for participating

You have the right to complain

If you're not happy you can tell us or our supervisors and we'll take it on board.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

If you would like any more information about your rights you can talk about them to one of our researchers. If you're not happy with how you have been treated or anything about the research you can contact Maggie on 8344 0759

Your Rights

A Charter of Rights for Children and Young People involved in Research.

We are committed to making sure that children and young people who are involved in our research have choices, are protected and get the most out of being a part of our projects.

You have the right to choose which research activities you do

It's up to you if you get involved in the research or not and how you want to be involved.

You have the right to stop participating

If you want to stop working with us you can at any time.

You have the right to confidentiality

If you tell us that you aren't safe, that you are being hurt or if we are worried about you we will need to tell someone about it. Otherwise people won't know which specific things you told us.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN POPULATION HEALTH
Charter developed by ACU National

2 Children's consent form



I _____ (please write your name) agree to take part in a project about homelessness. My parents/carers have agreed for me to take part in the project as well.

I KNOW.....	Please tick
It is okay for me to stop being part of the project whenever I want to.	
I will meet with a researcher and we will talk about my life and what it's like when you have no-where to stay or have to keep moving around to different houses.	
If anything we talk about makes me feel upset, the project will be stopped. The researchers will tell my parents/carers. We will be given the names of people I can talk to about what is making me upset, if that is what I want to do.	
What I say during the project is special and belongs to me. The researchers won't tell anyone else that I took part.	
The only time the researchers would have to tell someone else is if they were worried: - that I might be badly hurt by someone - that I am not being cared for properly - that I might hurt myself - that I might hurt someone else.	
To say thanks I will be given a small gift. I will get the gift even if I decide not to answer some of the questions or if I change my mind later on and I don't want to take part any more.	
There will be a MP3 player taping what we say. I can turn it off if I want to.	
If I have any questions about the project, I can contact either: Maggie Kirkman on 8344 0759 or the University of Melbourne on 8344 2073	

MY NAME:

MY SIGNATURE: DATE:

RESEARCHER'S NAME:

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE:

3 Parents' consent form



Key Centre for Women's Health in Society
Melbourne School of Population Health

Children and Homelessness Project

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

I, (parent / guardian) have read and understood the information provided in the information letter to participants. Any questions I have asked about this research have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree that my child/ren, named below, may participate in an interview.

I understand that my child's interview will be audio-taped for the purposes of gathering research data and that these audio-tapes will be destroyed after 5 years. I agree to complete a brief survey to provide background information about my family's circumstances, which will also be destroyed after 5 years. Until then, we will keep any information you or your child tell us securely, as described in the information letter, to protect your privacy.

Realising that participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw my consent at any time, I agree that research data (including artwork, stories and other material) collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify my child or my family in any way. I understand the researcher aims to protect my child/ren's confidentiality within the limits of the law and she will take all steps possible to keep the identity of my child/ren private. If my child discloses that they are at risk of abuse, I understand that this concern will be passed on to me and to a worker at the service that is supporting my family.

NAME OF PARENT / GUARDIAN:

SIGNATURE:

DATE:/...../.....

NAME OF CHILD (1).....

NAME OF CHILD (2)

NAME OF RESEARCHER:

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER:

I wish to receive a copy of the summary of research findings

☐ yes ☐ no (please tick)

This consent form will be retained by the researcher

Children and Homelessness Project

FOR PARENTS INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THEIR OWN INTERVIEW

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with an information letter to keep.
2. I understand that my participation will involve an interview and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the information letter.
3. I acknowledge that:
 - the possible effects of participating in the interview have been explained to my satisfaction;
 - I have been informed that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
 - the project is for the purpose of research;
 - I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded, as described in the information letter, subject to any legal requirements;
 - I have been informed that with my consent the interview will be audio-taped and I understand that audio-tapes will be stored at University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after five years;
 - my name will be referred to by a false name in any publications arising from the research and the researcher will do her best to keep my identity confidential;
 - I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT:

DATE:/...../.....

NAME OF RESEARCHER:

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER:

I wish to receive a typed copy of my interview to check

☐ yes ☐ no Please tick

This consent form will be retained by the researcher

4 Workers' consent form



*Key Centre for Women's Health in Society
Melbourne School of Population Health*

Children and Homelessness Project

SERVICE PROVIDER CONSENT FORM

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with an information letter to keep.
2. I understand that my participation will involve an interview and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the information letter.
3. I acknowledge that:
 - the possible effects of participating in the interview have been explained to my satisfaction;
 - I have been informed that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
 - the project is for the purpose of research;
 - I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded, as described in the information letter, subject to any legal requirements;
 - I have been informed that with my consent the interview will be audio-taped and I understand that audio-tapes will be stored at University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after five years;
 - my name will be referred to by a false name in any publications arising from the research and the researcher will do her utmost to protect my anonymity, although due to the small number of people being interviewed there is still a chance someone may identify me;
 - I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT:

DATE:/...../.....

NAME OF RESEARCHER:

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER:

I would like to be provided with a typed copy of my interview: ☐ yes ☐ no Please tick

This consent form will be retained by the researcher

5 Managing potential risks guidelines

Managing potential risks and adverse/unexpected outcomes: Children and Homelessness Project

Interviews with the children and their parents will in most cases be conducted in the services through which they are accommodated and supported. Workers will therefore be on site to provide support in the event that any of the experience distress.

If participants express a strong desire to complete the interviews elsewhere, in a location judged appropriate by the researcher, contact will be made with the participant's case worker to ensure that s/he is available to make contact with the client if support is required.

A protocol will be developed with each service from which recruitment occurs to establish procedures to support participants in the event of adverse or unexpected outcomes. The protocol will include the following steps to be taken by the researcher.

Child participant experiences distress

If a child becomes distressed during the interview, the interview will be terminated. A parent or worker will be advised and if appropriate the interviewer will discuss with the child whom they could talk with about their concerns or grief and provide Kids' Help Line number. Advising a worker and discussing options for further support will not always be necessary as some children may be distressed due to short-term concerns, such as nervousness about the interview. The interviewer will make a judgement of whether further support is necessary based upon the circumstances.

Adult participant experiences distress

If an adult participant experiences distress s/he will be encouraged to follow up with their worker for support. If the researcher has concerns about the well-being of the participant, she will suggest to the worker that the participant be contacted for support.

If the participant appears to be clearly and imminently suicidal or homicidal, the researcher will inform the participant they have a responsibility to take some action. The researcher will give the participant a choice as to whether they would like to speak to a worker at the service or at another service or whether they would like to researcher to speak to a worker on their behalf. If the worker is not immediately available and the researcher decides it is necessary to contact a CAT team, she will do so.

Child at risk

Children and parents will be informed in the information letters that there are limits to confidentiality and that a child's safety will be paramount.

If a child discloses abuse during the interview, this will be reported to Child Protection or a worker.

Interview documents

6 Children's interview schedule

Children and Homelessness Project

Interview Schedule: Children

As much as possible children will be encouraged to tell their own stories. These questions and activities are to elicit stories or to provide prompts where children need encouragement to engage with the topic. They provide a 'tool box' with a range of questions and activities to suit the skills and preferences of the participating children. It is hoped that all children will respond to all sections of the schedule in some form or other; however activities offered will be age and skill appropriate for the individual child and children will have some choice in which activities they undertake. Researcher will respond to the individual strengths and preferences of each child and tailor the interview to their needs.

Before starting:

- Set out materials including activity sheets, stickers, coloured pencils and food and drink.
- Explain that we're going to do some activities together (that we hope will be fun) and ask them some questions about their lives. Reassure them that they won't be hard questions and they don't have to answer them all if they don't want to.
- Explain each of the Children's Rights (using cards for young kids)
- Give them a copy of the Children's Rights to take away
- Explain that although we will not tell their family members or workers what they tell us, they can tell people what we talked about in the interview.
- Read through Consent form and get name and signature.
- Show them the audio recorder and turn it on.

About you (and me) USE 'ABOUT ME' WORKSHEET

About myself activity:

The aim of this introductory activity is to put the child at ease and open up communication between the researcher and child.

Child and researcher complete 'About me worksheets' with headings: likes, dislikes (e.g. favourite food, colour, movie or TV show, sport or game, joke etc) and then share them.

Worksheet will be colourful and appealingly designed (by a child) with room to write or draw.

- What grade are you in?

Your family

- Who do you live with? *[Can draw if wish to]*
- Can you tell me about them?
- What do you like most about your family?

The place you are living in now

- How long have you been living there?
- What's it like? *[Can draw if wish to]*
- What do you like/don't you like about it?
- Does it feel like home (or is home somewhere else, where)?
- Does it feel like a safe place?
- How long you think you might be staying there?

Feelings / How happy you feel USE ABOUT ME WORKSHEET

Children rate their level of happiness 'most days I feel.....'

Using smiley face stickers (4 choices: big grin, smile, neutral to sad face)

Safety/feelings activity: sentence completion cards

'The most fun I ever had was _____'

'The saddest I ever felt was when _____'

'The happiest I ever felt was _____'

'It feels a bit scary when _____'

'When you start at a new school you'll probably feel _____'

'When you move house it feels _____'

'When I'm in bed at night I feel _____'

'I get worried when _____'

'I hope _____'

'I feel really safe when _____'

Children pick cards which are spread face-down on table; they can answer in written (use form) or verbal form.

Where you lived before & moving house

- Where did you live before?
- Did you want to move?
- What is it like to move house (especially when you may not even know you are going to move)?

Timeline activity

Children draw their 1st house, 2nd house, 3rd house on long piece of paper with moves between indicated by car stickers.

The researcher assists where necessary.

The children explain the story of the moves or what they liked/disliked about the various places.

- How did you feel when you didn't have your own home to stay in?
- Some children feel like they're homeless. Did you feel like you were homeless?
- Did anything else change? (prompt new school?, living with the same people?)
- Did it change anything with what family and friends you saw and how you got on with them?
- What's your favourite place you've ever lived?
- Why was it your favourite?

Your school

- Tell me about your school?
- What do you like about school?
- What don't you like?

Friends activity

Nicest kids, okay kids, meanest kids, best friends chart

With researcher, child names children from his/her class and they place sticker figures in the appropriate category on a chart.

Allows discussion of the relationships with schoolmates and identifies problems and positives.

- How many times have you moved to new schools?
- What is it like for kids when they start a new school?

Things you like

- What do you like doing best? (who with, where & how often)
- Where is your favourite place?

Spider diagram activity: Things I do

On large sheet of paper (researcher to assist where necessary)

- Spider body labeled 'things I do'
- Spider legs labeled with different activities (e.g. go to school, go to a school friend's house to play, play in a sports team on the weekend, watch TV, visit my grandparents, see friends from my old school, have a friend from school come to play at my house, go to the playground/park, play outside)
- Children put stickers on the spider feet to indicate frequency (i.e. Lots of times, sometimes, never)

n.b.: includes activities that most children will be able to say yes to.

- What is your most special thing? (prompt 'toy, photos, pet')
- Did you bring it with you when you moved?
- Who are your favourite people? (when, where do you see them)
- Do you often see other people in your family other than your parent/s, brothers/sisters?

Worries

Children identify up to 10 worries and rank them into big worry, middle sized worry and little worry by posting them in labeled containers.

- are there any worries you feel okay telling me?"

Children identify worries and write them on cards (researcher assists if necessary, otherwise does not ask what the worries are)

Getting some help

- When your family needed somewhere to live did anyone help you?
- Did anyone else know that you had nowhere to stay?
- Do you or your family still get some help from any other services or people (Who? Does that help)?
- What else would help you or your family at the moment?
- Do you think workers know what children want?




The future

- Where would you like to live if you could choose?
- If you could have 3 wishes what would you wish for

7 About me activity sheet

About Me

You can draw or write your answers

My age	
My favourite food 	
My favourite colour 	
My favourite sport 	

My favourite movie or TV show



My favourite game



Most days I feel

CHOOSE A FACE STICKER AND STICK IT
HERE!

8 Feelings activity sheet

Feelings

The most fun I've ever had was...

The saddest I've ever felt was when...

The happiest I've ever felt was when...

It feels a bit scary when...

When I start at a new school I'll probably feel...

When I move house it feels...

When I'm in bed at night I feel...

I get worried when...

I hope...

I feel really safe when...

9 Friends chart

Friends at school

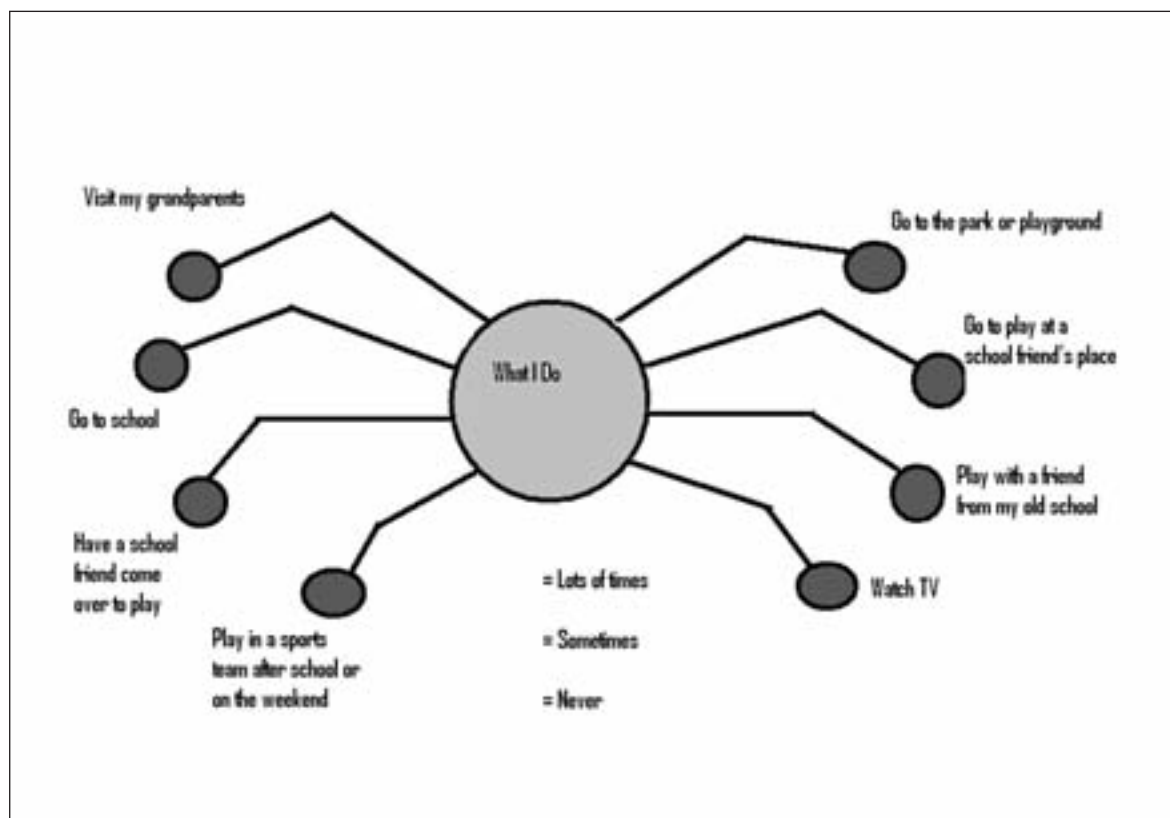
Best friends	Nice kids	OK kids	Mean kids

Use the stickers!

My family

Where I live now

10 Spider diagram



11 Parents'/guardians' questionnaire



Children & Homelessness

To be completed by researcher

Pseudonym _____

Interview date (dd/mm/yyyy) _____

Service name _____

SURVEY QUESTIONS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Which country were you born in? _____ Please write

What is your cultural identity?

☐ Anglo-Australian

☐ Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

☐ Other ethnic identity _____ Please write

What is your child's (or children's) cultural identity?

Child 1 _____

Child 2 _____

Child 3 _____

Child 4 _____

CHILDREN

How old are your children? Please write ages

Child 1 _____

Child 2 _____

Child 3 _____

Child 4 _____

Do your children live with you?

☐ Yes

☐ Some of the time

☐ No

☐ Other

CURRENT LIVING SITUATION

Where are you living?

☐ In an Office of Housing house or flat

☐ In a house or flat rented through private rental

☐ In transitional supported accommodation

☐ Other _____ Please write

How long have you lived in your current place?

☐ Less than 1 month

☐ 1-3 months

☐ 3-6 months

☐ 6-12 months

☐ Longer than 1 year

If you have a partner does your partner live with you now?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Stays here some of the time
- ☐ Not applicable

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Does your family have ongoing help or support from any of the following people?
(Please tick all that apply)

- | | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Your mother (or female guardian) | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Sort of <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Your father (or male guardian) | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Sort of <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A brother or sister | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Sort of <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Another family member | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Sort of <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A friend | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Sort of <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Housing worker/social worker/ counsellor | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Sort of <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Ex-partner | | | |
| Other _____ Please write | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | | Sort of <input type="checkbox"/> |

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

Where does your money come from? (Tick all that apply)

- ☐ Government benefits and/or allowances
- ☐ I do not have any money coming in

☐ Child support

☐ I have my wages

☐ Other.....Please give details

Has there been any time when your family had no income?

PREVIOUS LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

During the last year how many times have you and your children moved?

Please write number of times _____

How many times has your child moved during their life?

Please write number of times

Child 1 _____

Child 2 _____

Child 3 _____

Child 4 _____

Has your child ever lived in:

Please tick for each child

	Refuge	Hotel or motel	Car or sleeping rough	Caravan park	Rooming house or boarding house	Other emergency accommodation
Child 1						
Child 2						
Child 3						
Child 4						

How many schools has your child attended?

Child 1 _____

Child 2 _____

Child 3 _____

Child 4 _____

12 Parents'/guardians' interview schedule

Children and Homelessness Project

Interview Schedule: Parents/guardians

"Thanks for agreeing to help us with this research. We hope that talking to parents, workers and kids about what it's like for kids when a family has trouble finding a place to live will help services work out the best way to help families and kids in this situation. I don't know whether you've noticed any changes in the kids since you've had this problem with housing, but I wanted to start by asking you about that."

	Prompts	
What do you think it's been like for your child/ren being homeless/having to move out of home?	Do you think the situation has affected their:	Has their general health been better/worse?
	Health	Have you got a family doctor that they see?
		Mood/ Happiness
		Sense of security
	Behaviour	
	Relationships	Family members Friendships Neighbourhood connection Extended family connection
	Education	Have they had to change schools? How have they managed the change? Do you think they've missed much at school?
	Anything else?	
Can you tell me a bit about what's been happening for you and your family and where you've lived?	How did you end up with no-where to live? Where did you go?	Moves Kinds of accommodation

	What was happening with the kids? Who knew?	What happened about school? Teacher? Family/friends?
I wanted to talk to you about just before you found yourself with no-where to live.	Where were you living just before this happened? Did you go to any services for help at that time? Could anything have been done to help your family at this point?	Which ones? Was that helpful? If so, what?
When your family first found themselves without a place to live...	What did you feel you most needed?	
	Did your children have anything special they needed?	Have you or they had any help with this?
	What's been the hardest for the kids?	
	Were there things you did to try to help the kids? What things did you, or others do, that helped?	What helped the most? Is there any kind of help the kids needed that they didn't get? e.g. help settling in to a new school from teachers
Have your kids been involved with any other services?		
	What would be most helpful for kids in this situation?	
What's it like for the kids living where you are now?	Is school nearby? How do they get there? Do you have friends/family in the area?	

	Are you able to keep in contact with friends/family? What about the kids' friends from where you lived before?	
What's the most important thing your family needs now?		
Thinking about the future...	How long do you think you'll stay in current accommodation? Where do you think you'll go when you leave?	
	Have your kids talked about where they'd like to live?	

It's been really good talking with you. That was really helpful. I realise you have a lot on your plate at the moment so I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me about this.'

If participants have requested to see a transcript of their interview, the researcher will remind them that they will send them a copy to look at and they can ask for deletions and corrections at this point.

The researcher will finish the interview on a positive note. The focus will of course depend upon the content of the interview. However, the intent will be to provide positive feedback.

For example: 'It sounds like you've been working hard to get this housing stuff sorted out so good luck with that' or

'It sounds like you're doing everything you can to make this easier for your daughter/son/children.'

13 workers' interview schedule

Interview Schedule: Service providers

How do children experience housing instability?

What are children's understandings of home and homelessness?

What is the impact of homelessness on the health and well-being of children?

What effect does homelessness have on relationships between children, parents and other family members?

What effect does homelessness have on children's non-familial social networks and sense of social connectedness?

Do you see any other effects?

What factors mediate these effects?

(Prompts: reasons for homelessness, time homeless, etc?)

What other services are the families/children you see involved with?

(Prompt: Child protection?)

How does the homelessness service system work with children?

How much work is done directly with children?

How well does the service system meet the needs of homeless children?

Does this differ according to the age of the child?

Are there gaps? If so, what are most important gaps?

Are there service barriers regarding working with children in homelessness services?

How can the needs of children who are living in homeless families be best met?

(Prompts: homelessness service models? who's the client? Cross-sector collaboration?)

ISBN: 978-0-7340-4107-4



“Does camping count?” Children’s experiences of homelessness **FINAL REPORT**

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Spine...

297mm high,
5mm wide