Hanover Family Outcomes Study

First Report

Profile of participating families and their experiences of homelessness

Michael Horn & Michelle Cooke

August 2001

Hanover
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Profile of participating families and experiences of homelessness

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1.   Introduction

1.1   Family Homelessness

Hanover has been concerned at the increase in homelessness and housing crisis experienced by families over the past decade. In 1991, Hanover and the Australian Institute of Family Studies collaborated to undertake a qualitative study that sought to document the pathways into homelessness for families. Jean McCaughey's sensitive portrayal of the spiral into housing crisis experienced by the 33 participating families clearly demonstrated the effects of poverty and disadvantage on family well being and social participation (McCaughey 1992). The increasing demand from families resulted in the restructure of Hanover's crisis services in inner Melbourne, including the introduction of a crisis accommodation and support facility specifically for families and their children in 1994.

The best available data shows that homelessness has continued to increase across Australia over the past decade. For example, demand on homeless services in Victoria has increased by between 8% and 14% annually over the latter part of the 90's (Department of Human Services 2001).

The extent of visible homelessness is still relatively low in Victoria and Australia compared to many Western European countries, Canada or the United States. According to an analysis of ABS 1996 Census data by Chamberlain, only 7% of those individuals experiencing homelessness in Victoria on census night in August 1996 were without shelter, termed 'primary' homeless (Department of Human Services 2001). The largest proportion (67%) were found to be in 'secondary' homelessness, which included emergency accommodation, refuges, staying temporarily with friends or relatives or in boarding houses. The other 26% were counted as 'tertiary' homeless being residents of boarding houses on a medium to long term basis. A total of 17,840 individuals in Victoria and 105,300 nationally have been calculated as homeless on census night in 1996 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999).

Families with accompanying children represent a substantial and growing proportion of households experiencing homelessness. Demand presenting at welfare services from families in housing crisis has steadily increased (Horn 1994, Bartholomew 1999). Nationally in 1999-2000, one-quarter of clients (support periods) of homeless services were accompanied by children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2000). We have estimated that at least 52,700 dependent children in 25,100 families experienced homelessness sufficient to become clients of homeless services in that year. On a single day across Australia, over 8,200 children in families are being assisted as clients of homeless services. These figures do not include those families and their children who are homeless but have either been turned away from homeless services (due to lack of capacity) or have not sought assistance in 1992. Don Edgar described the development of family homelessness as 'a growing social scandal' (McCaughey 1992). The above evidence shows that the scandal has worsened over the past decade.

Jean McCaughey's research pointed to the potential and real consequences of homelessness on the children in families. Hanover therefore collaborated with the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne to investigate the extent of possible harm for children in terms of health, development and well being. The study, 'Can we stay here?', completed in 1996 found that children experiencing homelessness suffered serious disadvantage likely to have long-term impact on their development if targeted assistance and support was not offered (Efron et al 1996). The random sample of 31 families and 51 children found that:

- 29% of the families had moved house six or more times in the preceding year
- over 90% of families were reliant on government benefits or pensions
- over half the children of school age had attended five or more schools
- the children experienced a range of physical health problems significantly higher than the general population, such as asthma, ear infections, eczema and accidents
- 50% of school age children had social or academic competency scores in the clinical or border-line range
- over 33% had behavioural problems within the clinical range requiring treatment.

This level of disadvantage in respect of health and development may be considered representative of the experience of homelessness characterised by transience, with occasional nights without safe or secure shelter (see for example Wood (1990), Parker (1991), Zima (1994)).

It is evident that the early years are critical to the development of children and their maturation into adults able to fully participate as productive members of the community. Stable, safe and secure housing is clearly a critical element leading to non-housing outcomes for children, including health, education and psychological well-being. The source for the study sample, Hanover Family Service, albeit a statewide service, is based in the inner city of Melbourne and would generally receive calls for assistance from families who have exhausted all other options and have significant personal needs. The above profile may, however, be compared to the large scale national data collection undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare for the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) in 1998 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2000). This research obtained a profile of 8,800 children in families using homeless (SAAP) services over a six-week period. It should be noted that 40% of this sample were using services provided for women escaping domestic violence. The profile of the children showed that:

- 47% were aged 0-4 years, 42% aged 5-12 years
- 31% had lived in three or more homes in previous year
- 19% had been without housing in the month prior to assistance
- 21% of primary school age children had changed schools once and 11% two or more times in the year before assistance
- 67% had witnessed domestic violence
- 16% had experienced physical abuse, 5% sexual abuse
- 18% had a parent/guardian with substance abuse

- 31% reported to have behavioural problems, 27% anxiety and 11% learning difficulties or developmental issues

The above research evidence provides a picture of the extent of this social problem, the pathways into homelessness and the impact on both families and especially their children. Up to now research and advocacy has focussed on the causes and consequences of family homelessness. Whilst Hanover was committed to ensuring that its services to families in crisis remained relevant and responsive to needs, we believed that services should be effective in achieving lasting or *long-term outcomes* for families. The independent evaluation of the national Supported Accommodation Assistance Program expressed concern at the lack of objective data available on client outcomes (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services 1999). To date there has been no substantive study to follow up families in order to assess the long-term impact of their housing crisis and the outcome of assistance provided by services such as Hanover.

Thus, there is very little understanding of the pathways *out* of homelessness for families, in particular:

- Barriers to stable and secure housing (including access and discrimination)

- Decisions about housing location and the links to job opportunities

- Extent of housing mobility after crisis

- Development of community links and personal support networks

- Longer term impact on child development and family wellbeing

Interim or program 'exit' outcomes can be measured and have been used to monitor the destination of clients in terms of housing category, living situation and employment status. These exit indicators may suggest positive longer-term outcomes for families such as secure tenure in affordable housing or improved skills and resources to enable retention of housing. However, it is not possible to evaluate the effectiveness of assistance and support without longitudinal follow-up of clients after exit. This knowledge is essential to both validate and enhance agency practice.

Data on the experience of homelessness suggests that, for the majority of households, their experience is a single or one-off crisis. Hanover's client data shows that, over a five year period, 79% of those who had stayed at Hanover Southbank's crisis accommodation facility had done so on only one occasion (Horn 1999). More recent research across six inner city Services in Melbourne shows that only 18% of the 1,617 households seeking accommodation in a four week period had made prior use of homeless services anywhere in Australia over the previous year (Thomson Goodall 2000).

Analysis of the national SAAP client data reinforces this picture: it illustrates that 65% of all clients made only a single use (as a client) of any homeless service in Australia over a 12 month period (1999-2000) (AIHW 2000). It should be noted that those clients who made multiple use of SAAP services may have done so for positive reasons, that is, they may have moved from crisis accommodation into transitional accommodation or support as a stepping stone to independent secure housing.

It is important to note that the above data only indicates the extent of demand and use of homeless services over the specified periods. We should be careful not to conclude from the above that individuals or families do not experience episodic homelessness due to continuing poverty, lack of appropriate housing or personal factors. Clearly many households, even though their immediate crisis may have been resolved with or without the direct assistance of services, continue to struggle in insecure and unsustainable housing.

However, homelessness for the majority, especially families, should not be considered a permanent condition or state of being. Rather, it may be characterised for most as a period of housing stress or insecurity, which may include a brief period without shelter, caused by a range of precipitating factors.

It is critically important that we become better informed about the pathways out of crisis. We need to understand the decisions which families make concerning housing choices, especially the association between housing location, availability of support networks and job or training opportunities.

1.2   The Family Outcomes Study

Why is it that some families do experience episodic or recurrent homelessness? It is essential to gain a better understanding of the barriers to long term housing stability. Information is needed to ascertain whether the immediate service exit outcomes of families are maintained over an extended period of time. We do not have what particular factors contribute to maintaining family and housing stability after exit from welfare services.

In order to address these questions, Hanover has developed a longitudinal study designed to follow a group of families over a two-year period. The aim of the study is to increase our understanding of the pathways out of homelessness, and to identify the key issues associated with establishing and maintaining family and housing stability.

The findings presented in this report are based on the analysis of the data from the first stage interviews with a total of 42 families. These findings focus on the profile of the families, their pathways into homelessness and their circumstances after exit from the services that provided them with accommodation or support.

2.   Research Objective

The overall objective of the study is to gain a better understanding of the pathways out of homelessness for families who have been assisted by homeless services. The study also aims to investigate the association between exit outcomes for families and the achievement of long term outcomes of stable secure housing and family well being. To address these issues, the following research questions were developed:

- To what extent does a family's housing stabilise in the longer term after a period of homelessness and crisis assistance?

- What issues contribute to decisions about housing moves and location of housing?

- What is the association between housing moves and job opportunities?

- What are the barriers to accessing and retaining stable housing?

- How important is the development of support networks on stable housing?

- How much use of welfare services is made over time?

- What is the correlation between long-term housing outcomes and program exit outcomes?

- How is children's development and family well being affected in the long term after a housing crisis?

3.   Methodology

The study methodology was influenced by the exploratory aspects of the research objective, as well as acknowledging the practical difficulties in gaining participation of families who had invariably experienced significant and multiple crises in their lives. Thus, it was decided to seek a sample of families at the time of their *exit from homeless services.*

A critical consideration in developing the scope of the study was the definition of homelessness. Pathways into homelessness are often multi-faceted with a range of underlying factors co-occurring in many instances. The experience of homelessness can vary from a one-off brief housing crisis through episodic loss of accommodation to long-term transience or itinerance, characterised by an inability to obtain or maintain shelter. It was decided to include families with experiences spread over the homeless spectrum in this study.

These families were interviewed soon after exit, then followed up at six monthly intervals for a total of two years. This will result in a total of five interviews with each family. Two years was considered a sufficient period in which to assess 'long term' outcomes in relation to resolution of precipitating factors and stability of housing.

Apart from this operational definition of long term outcomes, the chosen period was based on consideration of overall sample size, funding resources and anticipated loss of families at each follow-up stage.

3.1   Sampling Framework

Families were accessed through homeless services. As a longitudinal study with a qualitative emphasis, it was acknowledged that the target sample would be limited to 50 families. The homeless service system in Victoria consists of a diverse range of small to large community based non-government agencies, each having particular service geographies, target groups and service delivery models (AIHW 2000, DHS 2001). The researchers decided to select agencies to approach with an invitation to participate in order to yield a cross-section of families in Victoria. The following factors influenced agency selection:

- Agencies targeting women with children escaping violence were not included in the study

- Inclusion of families across the homeless experience spectrum

- Inclusion of families from regional and rural communities

- Inclusion of families accessing inner city services

- Agency interest in and commitment to the research

In order to achieve the above requirements, two Hanover services were asked to participate: Hanover Family Service in South Melbourne (an inner city crisis and transitional support service funded through SAAP) and Hanover Housing Service (a Moorabbin based housing assistance service funded through the Transitional Housing Program). The latter provides short-term assistance to individuals and families in housing crisis as well as managing transitional housing stock in the southern region.

The researchers understood that the experience of homelessness was likely to be very different for families in regional or rural settings. Even though the total number of participating families would be small, it was decided to obtain the support of three non-metropolitan agencies. Advice from steering committee members resulted in the following agencies being approached and agreeing to take part:

> Lakes Entrance/Bairnsdale Community Health Centres
>
> Central Gippsland Accommodation and Support Services, Morwell
>
> Bethany Family Support, Geelong

A rural agency was interested in taking part but, at the time of the study's commencement, did not have a sufficiently large client base from which to recruit families who were supported or accommodated.

The inclusion of five agencies added significant workload to the study when considering the relatively small number of families that would be accessed through each agency. However, it was essential to include a broader cross-section of families in the study, as previous research and agency experience had shown significant variance in pathways into homelessness (McCaughey 1992, Thomson Goodall 1999).

Initial analysis of agency client profiles was undertaken to assist in developing a sampling frame that would provide a reasonable cross-section of families using homeless services (excluding domestic violence services) in Victoria. The selected characteristics of the family clients are shown in Table 1. These figures are compared to Victorian SAAP client data in order to establish the extent to which the five agencies client profile approximates that of Victoria overall. The data was collated from each agency's SAAP client data gathered from July 1999 to December 1999, with the exception of Hanover Housing Service data, which was based on the period July 1999 to June 2000.

Table 1: Agencies' client characteristics as compared to Victorian state data

	SAAP data (6 mths)					
	HFS	CGASS	Bethany	LE/Bairns	Vic data	HHS (12 mths)*
Number of families	76	33	51	29	2026	1909
% two parent family	65	15	13	20	5	33
%sole parent family	34	84	84	79	27	66
% accommodated	100	27	79	2	96	0
% supported	0	73	21	98	4	100
Exits/month	13	6	9	5		159

*   *HHS is a Transitional Housing Management (THM) Program − client data is collected separately to SAAP client data.*

The sample proportions depended upon the number of exiting families from each agency per month as determined via 1999 SAAP data (Table 1). The number of families sampled from each agency depended upon whether the agency was a SAAP (Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program) service or a THM (Transitional Housing Management) service.

The throughput of families was substantially higher at the chosen THM service averaging 159 per month compared to a total of 33 per month across the selected SAAP services. It was essential to differentially sample families exiting the two categories of service so as to avoid over representation of THM client families. The latter client group was more likely to be provided with assistance to meet their housing crisis, including for example financial help to retain or obtain independent accommodation. They are thought to have a lower level of need that is most often the result of financial crisis or the experience of other housing related stress. Inclusion of a THM client group within the study allowed a range of families to be sampled from those who were homeless to those who were at imminent risk of becoming homeless.

Table 2 shows the sample composition, as estimated from the number of clients exiting per month from each agency, drawn from both SAAP and THM client populations. Based on the expected throughput, a target of 60 families was set in order to allow for higher than anticipated loss of families either at the first or follow-up stages.

Table 2: Planned and actual study sample of families by
participating agency

Agency	Exits/month	Proposed sample	Final sample
HFS (South Melbourne)	10	16	5
CGASS (Morwell)	6	10	9
Bethany (Geelong)	9	15	7
LE/Bairnsdale CHC	5	9	6
HHS (Moorabbin)	159	10	15
TOTAL	189	60	42

Based on the anticipated exit rate of families leaving services, it was planned for the recruitment stage to take two months. A number of factors resulted in difficulties in recruiting families into the study (see below).

The final sample of 42 families was achieved over a seven-month period. The final sample composition shown in Table 2 indicates that families who were clients of the THM provider (HHS) in Moorabbin were slightly over represented comprising 36% of the sample. Families who had used non-metropolitan agencies represented half of the total sample, which was consistent with the aim for including regional and rural agencies in the study.

It should be noted that the number of exits per month included both planned and unplanned exits. These distinctions become important when attempting to understand the lengthened duration of the recruitment period, and the lower than anticipated number of families recruited into the study.

Actual exits of families from SAAP agencies during the recruitment period were broadly consistent with the data in Table 2 based on 1999 SAAP data. The four agencies were expected to average 30 exits per month and actually exited 39 families per month during August 2000 to March 2001. The exits of eligible families from the THM agency were significantly lower at 50 per month compared to the anticipated 159 per month. The main reason for this difference was due to the difficulty in judging eligibility of families using the THM based on the available service user data, specifically whether the families had experienced homelessness rather than being in housing stress.

Recruitment of families

Recruitment of families was planned to occur over August and September 2000. However, several difficulties were encountered when recruiting families to participate in the study. In collaboration with the participating agency workers, the researchers developed a recruitment process that relied on the efforts of support workers to inform families exiting their service about the study and to seek their agreement to take part. Subsequent feedback during the recruitment stage from both agency managers and support workers identified four factors contributing to the lower than expected recruitment of families:

1. An unexpectedly high proportion of unplanned exits from agencies.

2. A high proportion of families not asked to participate in the study as they were still in a state of crisis.

3. A high proportion of families refusing to participate as they thought the process would be too invasive.

4. A lower than normal rate of planned family throughput.

Unplanned exits from support or accommodation may occur for a range of reasons. Client families may wish to discontinue support or simply vacate the supported accommodation without notifying their agency support worker. This is the reality for homeless services providing assistance to families who may have a high level of personal issues resulting in unplanned life changes or chaotic lifestyles. Support workers were keen to meet their agency quota and therefore it was agreed to extend recruitment period.

The extended period has however added to the complexity of managing the subsequent six monthly follow-up stages as first stage interviews were spread over a much longer period than planned.

3.2   Sample Selection

In order to recruit a sample that had experienced homelessness, it was important that support workers followed eligibility guidelines. Only those families who were exiting the services, and who had received direct assistance to obtain either crisis, short-term, or long-term accommodation (THM) or were provided with ongoing support, with or without transitional accommodation (SAAP) were to be considered. The study therefore focused upon those families who had experienced some degree of homelessness.

In addition, support workers were asked not to approach families who they felt were still in crisis. Both agencies and researchers agreed that it would be inappropriate and insensitive to approach exiting families in such situations, due to the long-term commitment required by the study.

Support workers assessed their client families against the above criteria and once an exit plan had been agreed they introduced the study at an appropriate time. Full information was made available about the study to potential families, setting out the purpose of the research, the extent of their involvement, issues of confidentiality and the provision of compensation payments at each stage for their time.

Once agency support workers had gained the agreement of a family to participate in the study, a primary consent form with contact details was signed. This gave permission to the worker to forward their contact details to one of the three study interviewers. The interviewer then made contact as soon as possible to organise a time and place to meet in order to discuss the study further, obtain secondary consent and conduct the first interview. Some time interval was inevitable between the family agreeing to take part and first contact with the interviewer. Strategies for minimising this delay were put into place. However, a number of families (at least eight) were lost to the study during this period predominantly due to their change of mind. Whilst the loss of these families reduced the overall sample size, it may be surmised that they would have been less likely to continue through to the end of the two years in any case. The delay in interviewer contact may have acted as an unplanned screening aid to assess commitment to the study.

3.3   Research Ethics

Participation within the study was completely voluntary and subject to the provision of the client's informed consent. It was made clear to participants that any future provision of services by each of the recruiting agencies would not be affected by the family's decision regarding involvement in the study. No children in the family were interviewed for this study.

Interviewers received training and advice to assure participants of total confidentiality of information provided.

Participating agency staff vetted the study materials and procedures prior to approval to participate in the study.

Research materials relating to participating families are stored in locked cabinets at Hanover's administration office. Computer files are password protected and contain no information that would enable identification of participating families. Data for analysis is only identifiable by a unique code.

Interviewer training also included duty of care in situations where an individual may be perceived to be at risk of harm to themselves or other family member. Procedures were detailed for handling such situations. Interviewers were also advised of the possible risk to their safety and of strategies for minimising risk through aggressive behaviour of family members.

3.4   Data Collection

In most cases, interviews took place in the family's current home. At the commencement of the interview, participants were asked to read the secondary consent form which stated the aims and objectives of the research, explained confidentiality and duty of care issues before requesting signed consent. It was considered critical to the successful engagement and retention of families over the course of the study that their involvement be fully explained. Only if the participant agreed to sign the document, did the interview proceed.

Participants were asked to list three people who they agreed could be contacted by interviewers in the event that the family became uncontactable. Once this information had been collected, the questionnaires were administered. Interviews took approximately 45 minutes to one hour and were taped with the prior consent of the family. All questions were read aloud to study participants.

At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to make another appointment to meet in six months time. Participating families received $25 as a token of thanks for their time and contribution.

Interview Materials

Information relating to the family housing history, history of welfare use, support networks, employment history, and child development was collected by way of a semi-structured purpose designed questionnaire. In addition to this, the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory was used as a standardised means of assessing the self-esteem of adult respondents. Each of these assessment tools is described below in more detail.

The Purpose Designed Questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) was designed to assess family life across six main areas to enable data to be collected that would answer the research questions. The initial interview sought to provide baseline information to understand the backgrounds and pathways into housing crisis and homelessness. This data would enable subsequent comparison of key variables, such as housing stability and use of welfare services, with information gathered during the four planned follow-up interviews. The six areas covered by the interview questionnaire were:

- Housing history
- Use of welfare services
- Support networks
- Employment and housing
- Child development
- Demographic information

Each section was designed to address the main research questions. Both the main research questions and the associated items from the questionnaire are detailed below.

- To what extent does a family's housing stabilise in the longer term after a period of homelessness and crisis assistance?

  Related questions – assessing past 1-7,
  assessing present 8-18,
  assessing future 19-21

- What issues contribute to decisions about housing moves and location of housing?

  Related questions – 4, 6, 7, 14, 19, 21, 35-39, 45-48

- What is the association between housing moves and job opportunities?

    Related questions – 42-48

- What are the barriers to accessing and retaining stable housing?

    Related questions – 4, 6, 8, 19, 83-85

- How important is the development of support networks on stable housing?

    Related questions – 32-41

- How much use of welfare services is made over time?

    Related questions – 9, 22-31, 64

- What is the correlation between long-term housing outcomes and program exit outcomes?

    Related questions – 7, 22-26, 28

- How is children's development and family well being affected in the long term after a housing crisis?

    Related questions – 49-73

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory

This short questionnaire was originally developed as a measure of self-esteem in both children (8-15 years) and adults (16 years and up). It was decided to include a measure of self-esteem as it has been found to play an important role in people's ability to improve their own situations, as well as to develop the resources to tolerate and/or reduce the anxiety aroused by daily events and stress (Coopersmith, 1989). Experimental studies have shown that low levels of self-esteem reduce an individual's ability to perceive threatening stimuli (Janis, 1954, cited in Coopersmith, 1989). These issues are thought to be of importance to those who have undergone a period of crisis or homelessness.

In addition to the theoretical relevance of self-esteem to the well being of adults and children within the participating families, the Coopersmith was chosen as it is an extremely short assessment tool. It also is pre-coded, thereby further reducing the time required for its completion. A copy of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory is attached as Appendix 2.

3.5   Procedures for Retention of Families in the Study

A number of strategies were developed to maximise retention of families over the course of the study. It was considered important that the same interviewer conducted all the interviews over the study period. Previous longitudinal research has shown the importance of developing effective engagement between interviewer and participant. Showing an interest and empathy with the participant can assist in maintaining interest and commitment to the study. Through the development of a trusting relationship, experience has shown that participants are more likely to inform interviewers of changing circumstance, including housing moves.

The study adopted the following strategies for maximising retention:

- Careful recruitment of experienced interviewers committed to the duration of the study

- The same interviewer to conduct initial and follow-up interviews

- Collection of at least three sets of contact details of key informants from families who could be contacted to trace families

- Pro-active strategies for keeping families informed about and engaged in the study, including newsletters, reminders and Christmas cards and informal contacts

- Access to a 1800 number to contact the research officer

The effectiveness of these strategies will be evaluated at the end of the study. However, at this stage, interviewers are reasonably confident that the 42 families will continue to the end of the study barring unforeseen circumstances.

4. Results

4.1   Profile of the Families

A total of 42 families have participated in the first stage of the study. Table 3 provides a summary of the main demographic characteristics of the families.

Two-thirds of the families were single parent families with the remainder two parent families. Ninety per cent of single parent families were female headed. This profile is consistent with SAAP client data, which shows that, if families escaping domestic violence are excluded, 68% present at homeless services as single parent families, over 90% of whom are female headed (AIHW 2000).

The ages of the primary respondent ranged from 19 to 49 years, with an average of 32 years − also consistent with the average age of SAAP clients nationally (31 years).

Families of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background were over represented in the sample comprising 10% of primary respondents compared to 5% of SAAP clients across Victoria (AIHW 2000). Anglo-Australian respondents comprised 85% of all primary respondents and are probably over represented compared to SAAP clients. Other cultural backgrounds, including non-English speaking groups, accounted for the remaining 5% and are clearly under represented in the sample. In comparison, 15% of Victorian SAAP clients are of non-English speaking backgrounds (AIHW 2000). This cultural profile may be explained as a consequence of the selection of the five participating agencies, resulting in a final sample over half of whom had used rural or regional agencies.

Only 15% of primary respondents had completed year 12 and an additional 12% continued on to further education within the tertiary or TAFE sector. Nearly half had completed up to Year 10 schooling.

In summary, the typical family participating in the study was a female headed, single parent family at the time of the first interview. Most of the families were Anglo-Australian, with a low level of academic achievement compared to the general population.

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of the 42 participating families

Demographic variable	%
Family composition:	
Sole parent family	69
Two parent family	31
Sex of primary respondent in sole parent families:	
Male	10
Female	90
Age range (years):	19-49 ($\underline{M}$=31.7)
Cultural background:	
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	10
Anglo-Australian	85
Other	5
Level of education achieved by primary respondent:	
Tertiary degree	7
TAFE	5
Yr 12	15
Yr 11	20
Yr 10	35
Yr 9	7
Yr 8	5

4.2 Profile of the Children

All participants recruited had at least one child living at home. The average number of children living at home was 2.4 per family. The age profile of the 103 children is shown in Figure 1 compared with the profile of children using SAAP services in Victoria (1998-99). A higher proportion (53%) of participating children were in the primary school age group (5-12 years) compared to the SAAP client group (42%). A smaller proportion (36%) were in their early years (0-4 years) compared to 46% of SAAP client children.

Figure 1: Age profile of children in study, compared to Victorian SAAP data (1998-99)
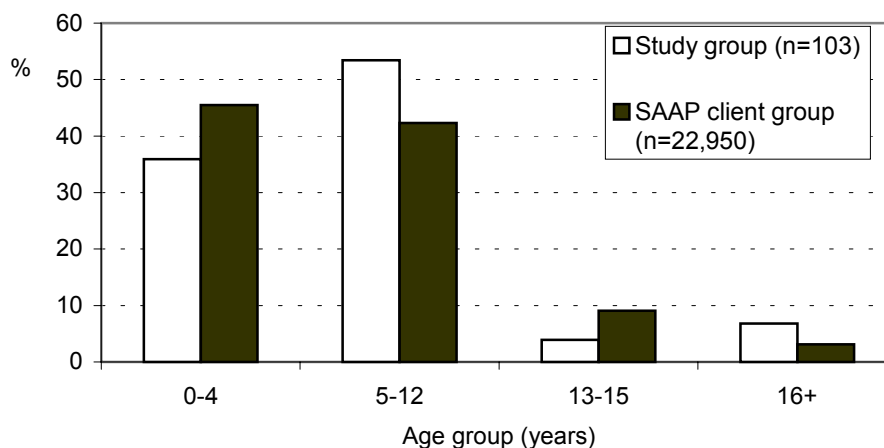
In order to complete the Child Development section of the questionnaire, parents were required to focus upon one child within the family. In most cases, the child upon whom the adult focused was the eldest child. The age and education level of this sub-sample are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Selected characteristics of the 42 children in the study sub-sample

Proportion of sub-sample falling in age groups	%
0-4 years	31.0
5-12 years	57.1
13-15 years	2.4
16+ years	9.5
Current school grade of sub-sample	
Not yet of kinder age	23.8
Kinder	14.3
Grade 1-3	28.6
Grade 4-6	16.7
Grade 7-9	9.6
Grade 10-12	4.8
Tertiary level	2.4

4.3 Housing Circumstances

Past Housing Situation

Data collected from each of the 42 families with respect to their housing history is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Housing history over past two years for participating families

Number of moves within the past two years	%
1-2 moves	42.8
3-5 moves	33.4
6-10 moves	23.8
Housing type lived in within the past two years (multiple responses possible)	
Private rental	83.3
Owner occupied	7.1
Public housing	23.8
SAAP crisis accommodation	35.7
Transitional housing	23.8
Hostel/Hotel/Motel	23.8
Rooming house	7.1
Refuge	11.9
Caravan	31.0
Car/Tent/Street/Park/Squat	26.2
Family/Friends houses	52.4

One quarter of the sample had moved house on average at least once every four months, whilst a third of the participating families had moved house between three and five times in the previous two years. Families had used an average of over three categories of housing over the period.

If we examine the group of 10 families who had reported 6-10 moves, they had stayed in an average of four different categories of housing over the two years. However, there appears to be two distinct subgroups: three families who had moved house between 8 and 10 times had only moved between family or friends and emergency accommodation. The other seven families had reported using a wide range of housing types, including sleeping rough, using supported accommodation, staying with friends or family, as well as in independent housing situations.

The data indicates that the majority of families (83%) had been accommodated within the private rental market at some time in the period. Over half (53%) had stayed temporarily at the homes of friends or family.

Caravan parks have been a source of accommodation for 31% of families, hostels, hotels or motels by 24%, whilst significantly, over one-quarter had been literally without shelter for a period of time.

A substantial proportion of families had stayed at SAAP crisis accommodation (35%), transitional housing (24%) or refuges (12%). These stays included the assistance provided by the recruiting agency.

Respondents were asked about the longest period of time they had spent in one home in the past. The majority (57%) had lived in one place for 18 months or less. Thirty-five per cent of families had lived in one home for between two and seven years, and 8% of families had lived in one home for between 10 and 22 years. This data suggests that many of the families had only begun to experience housing related difficulties within the past two years. Previous to this two-year period, participating families had been able to maintain a reasonable level of housing stability.

There seemed to be a complex range of reasons why families had experienced housing difficulties that resulted in them moving house. An average of 3.5 reasons were given for moving house by respondents (Table 6).

Table 6: Reasons for experiencing housing difficulties resulting in moving house given by participating families

Reasons (multiple responses possible)	% (n)
Eviction	33.3 (14)
Relationship/family breakdown	78.6 (33)
Physical/Emotional abuse	50.0 (21)
Domestic Violence	40.5 (17)
Sexual Abuse	11.9 (5)
Financial difficulty	61.9 (26)
Substance abuse	21.4 (9)
Gambling	9.5 (4)
Emergency accommodation ended	21.4 (9)
Employment difficulties	19.0 (8)

The above data suggests that relationship and family breakdown was the most commonly cited reason for moving house by over three-quarters of respondents. Such breakdowns referred both to marital/defacto conflict and inability to live with parents due to frequent arguments. Relationship/family breakdown was often associated with abuse or violence within the home.

Financial difficulty was also given as a reason for moving house by 62% of respondents. Financial difficulty seemed to be associated with loss of employment, gambling addiction, and in some cases, drug addiction. The most common issue relating to financial difficulty however, referred to families' inability to survive on their current income from government benefits.

The vast majority (89%) of those families reporting financial problems also reported relationship problems, including relationship breakdown, abuse or domestic violence. In comparison, 66% of those reporting relationship problems also reported financial difficulties resulting in loss of housing. There was clearly a strong association between these factors for participating families.

A substantial third of families had been evicted from their housing. Whilst reasons were not always provided, the typical scenario was to be evicted from private rental – in some cases for rent arrears, but in many cases for landlord reasons (for example owner occupation or renovations).

Housing Situation After Exit From Support Agencies

The largest proportion of families (48%) had moved into private rental at the time of exit from support agencies. This is slightly higher than the most recent Victorian SAAP client data (44%). Over one-third were living in public housing – a much higher rate of access to this tenure compared to SAAP clients across Victoria (14%). It can also be seen from these figures that at least 83% of families entered into independent housing circumstances after exiting support agencies. Three families had moved into transitional housing from SAAP crisis supported accommodation, whilst one family had returned to short term crisis accommodation.

Table 7: Housing situation of families after exit from support agencies, %

Housing type	SAAP	THM	All
Private rental	29.6	80.0	47.6
Public housing	51.9	6.7	35.7
Crisis accommodation (SAAP)	3.7	0.0	2.4
Transitional housing (THM)	11.1	0.0	7.1
Caravan	0.0	6.7	2.4
Family/friends	0.0	6.7	2.4
Other	3.7	0.0	2.4
TOTAL	27	15	52

Table 7 also shows that the majority of families exiting SAAP had moved into public housing. This compares with only 7% of families assisted by the THM. The latter reflects the recruitment process that focused on families seeking assistance at the HIR (shop-front) services of the THM.

Looking at the SAAP service, a higher percentage of families exiting the city-based services (ie in Geelong and Melbourne) moved into public housing. In contrast, over half the participating families exited the regional/rural services (Lakes Entrance, Morwell) into private rental. Although the sample of families may not be considered to be representative of housing outcomes over the longer-term, it is reasonable to assume an association with availability of the two categories of housing options across regions.

Participating families were asked how stable they felt in their current housing: three-quarters of families reported feeling stable in their current accommodation. In almost all cases stability was defined by respondents as having a sense of permanence as well as connection to their community. In practical terms, families defined stability as being able to stay in one house for more than one year and being close to family, friends, schools and shops.

Cost of Current Housing

The current cost of their housing ranged from nothing (for two families in short-term crisis accommodation) to $237.50 per week. If we exclude the families in crisis accommodation, the average cost of current housing was $117 per week, with a median of $120 per week. Nearly half (43%) were paying under $100 per week, 35% between $101-150, 18% between $151-200 and 5% over $200 each week. Those in public housing were paying substantially less than those in private rental as would be expected. The affordability of their current housing for families in independent tenures is examined below.

4.4   Employment and Income

Overall, 14% of respondents reported being currently employed. In all cases, they were employed on a part-time or casual basis. Of those respondents in two parent families, 14% of partners were currently employed, and again, the majority of this employment was of a part-time or casual nature.

The average length of time that respondents had been unemployed was four years. Twelve per cent of respondents had never been employed. When asked if they were looking for employment, 31% stated that they were, while 19% of partners were currently looking for stable employment.

Only four of the families had moved house in the past in order to gain or maintain employment. Two of these respondents had moved interstate in order to work casually on farms or in other agriculturally based industries. The remaining two families had moved in order to gain employment in the fishing industry and building industry.

When families were asked whether they would consider moving house in order to gain or maintain employment in the future, 19% said 'no, definitely not', 21% said 'possibly but unlikely'", 12% were unsure, 26% said 'probably', and 21% said 'yes, definitely'. Of those families who would definitely not move in order to gain or maintain employment, most felt that they had just found what they would classify as stable accommodation, and that they would not consider uprooting their lives and the lives of their children again, in order to get a job. Rather they preferred to look for employment in their current area. It should be noted that a third of families had moved into public housing. Most of the families had also experienced substantial levels of transience over the previous 2 years.

Most families received income via government benefits such as the Sole Parent Pension and Family Allowance. In some cases, families were receiving additional income from other sources such as Child Maintenance or from employment. One family had no income due to their visa status. Participating family incomes ranged from nothing (in the case of the family without a valid Visa to be in the country) to $920 per week. Excluding the family with no income, the average income per week of the participating families was $428, with a median of $405.

Affordability of Current Housing

Nineteen of the families were in private rental at the time of the first interview. A key factor in their chances of maintaining stable housing in the longer term is the affordability of their current housing. Using the data on current total net income and rent paid per week, we can assess the affordability of families housing against the accepted benchmark of 30% of income being spent on housing costs. Those families in supported or transitional housing or staying with family/friends have been excluded from this analysis.

For those in private rental, 13 (68%) were currently paying over 30% of their income on rent. Seven families (37%) were paying over 40% of their income on rent, with 3 of these families paying over 60%.

Sixty per cent of those in private rental were in metropolitan Melbourne. As might be expected, this group were in greater housing stress (based on the above affordability indicator) compared with those living in regional/rural Victoria. Three-quarters of metropolitan housed families in private rental were paying more than 30% of their income in rent compared with 50% of those families living in regional/rural Victoria.

The follow-up interviews will inform the study as to the sustainability of this level of housing costs in the long term. A substantial proportion of these families having re-entered private rental are experiencing housing stress based on their current circumstances.

4.5   Use of Welfare Services

Past Use of Welfare Services

Families were asked about their past use of welfare services: Sixty-nine per cent had approached other welfare agencies for help within the past two years, excluding the agency through which they had been recruited for this study. Just over one-quarter of these families (28%) were recruited through the Transitional Housing provider (Hanover Housing Service). Families recruited through this source represent 36% of participating families. This data indicates that those families accessed through the Transitional Housing Service had lower reported previous need for welfare assistance.

Families were also asked to list their three highest priority needs at the time they initially approached their referring support agency (Table 8).

Table 8:   Priority needs of families at contact with support service

Priority One		Priority Two		Priority Three	
	%		%		%
Housing	50.0	Housing	19	Stability	11.9
Money	21.4	Counselling	19	Advocacy with real estate agents and OoH	9.5
Counselling	11.9	Safety and stability	14.3	Safety	9.5
Safety	9.5	Support from family and/or community	14.3	Support from family and/or community	7.1
Advocacy with real estate agents and OoH	2.4	Money	9.5	Money	7.1
Other	4.8	To be free of the Department of Human Services	7.1	To be close to hospitals and schools	2.4
		No second priority	16.7	To gain employment	2.4
				No third priority	50.0
Total	100%	Total	100%	Total	100%

All the respondents provided their first priority need, 35 (83%) reported 2 priorities, whilst 50% reported 3 priorities. As might be expected, finding accommodation and obtaining money to meet basic needs were the highest priorities for these families. A significant proportion also listed the need for counselling or personal support and stated a need for safety.

When asked if their referring agency was of assistance in meeting these priority needs, the great majority (93%) stated that they were 'very helpful'. The remaining 7% (2 families) reported that the agency was not that helpful. The main reasons given for perceived lack of help were a shortage of emergency accommodation and the family's inability to meet eligibility criteria for housing or financial assistance. These two families did however report receiving other forms of support (counselling and emotional support) that they perceived as less useful or relevant to meeting their priority needs.

Service Provision by Support Agencies

Families were asked about the type of assistance provided by their support agencies. Nearly half (45%) were provided with crisis accommodation or transitional housing, whilst the other 55% were given housing related assistance, including financial and material aid (74%), counselling and support (52%) and advocacy/liaison with the Office of Housing or private rental agencies (43%).

Other services utilised included assistance to obtain government benefits (48%), financial counselling (19%), drug and alcohol support (12%), employment and training assistance (7%) and assistance with living skills and personal development (2%).

Only one of the 15 families who used the Transitional Housing Service had been provided with accommodation. In contrast, 18 out of 27 families recruited through the SAAP services had been provided with supported accommodation. A larger proportion of families using the inner Melbourne and Geelong services had been provided with accommodation.

The nature of assistance provided by recruiting agencies is reflected in respondent's reported duration of assistance. Families using the Transitional Housing Service reported receiving 'occasional' assistance. This is consistent with the above profile in that 93% were provided with assistance to obtain or retain accommodation.

For those families who were clients of the SAAP services, duration of support ranged from one to 36 months. One-third had been clients for 1-3 months, 31% for 4-6 months, 23% for 6-12 months and the remaining 15% (4 families) had been clients for one to three years.

Based on this data, we may group the families into three categories:

- 36% who had a one-off or short-term experience of homelessness and who had been assisted through their crisis by the metropolitan Transitional Housing Service and had moved into private rental.

- 40% who had been supported (mainly with accommodation) by SAAP services for up to six months and had moved into public housing or private rental.

- 24% who had received long-term support (with accommodation) by SAAP services for over six months and generally moved into other supported housing or public housing.

As might be expected, long-term clients reported higher levels of personal factors associated with their homelessness.

Current Use of Welfare Services

All families were recruited on the basis that they had exited the services of the referring agency. This means that they had moved into alternative housing and/or support had finished. The length of time between exit and the first interview ranged from one to two months. This period of time depended upon the speed with which their referral was made to the research team, and the families' availability for interview.

During the interval between service exit and interview, 48% of families had re-engaged with welfare and/or community agencies. The assistance they required included counselling, advocacy with real estate agents and help to gain government benefits. One family had re-entered crisis supported accommodation. In 90% of cases where families obtained further assistance, they had approached their recruiting agency, that is the same agency from which they had exited.

4.6   Support Networks

The level of support that families felt they were receiving from friends, family, their partner or from other sources is shown in Table 9. Overall, comparing sources of support, families of origin provide 28% of support, friends provide 28%, partner/spouse provide 21% and 'others' accounted for 23% of support to respondents. The 'others' category was most often the support worker from their referring agency. This is important to note as it demonstrates that agency support workers provide a significant support resource for many of these families. However, one-third considered that this category of support was not applicable in their situation.

Table 9:   Respondent ratings of level of support, %

	Family	Friends	Partner/Spouse	Others
No support	21.4	23.8	9.5	2.4
Minimal support	9.5	21.4	4.8	4.8
Moderate support	16.7	21.4	7.1	16.7
Regular support	9.5	26.2	19.0	23.8
Extensive support	38.1	4.8	26.2	16.7
Not applicable	4.8	2.4	33.3	35.7
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

Examining the extent of each category of support, a significant 31% of respondents reported no or minimal support from their family of origin (predominantly parents) and 45% no or minimal support from friends. For one-third of the families, support from partner or spouse was considered not applicable. Nearly half the respondents reported regular or extensive support from partner or spouse. Note that 69% of respondents were in single parent families, indicating that a significant proportion could obtain support from ex-partners.

The support received by study participants was further analysed according to the types of support obtained (Table 10).

Table 10: Types of support received by category of source of support

Type of Support (Multiple responses possible)	Family of Origin % (n)	Friends % (n)	Partner/ Spouse % (n)	Others % (n)
Friendship	64.3 (27)	78.6 (33)	57.1 (24)	40.5 (17)
Emotional support	64.3 27)	73.8 (31)	47.6 (20)	45.2 (19)
Good advice	61.9 26)	54.8 (23)	33.3 (14)	57.1 (24)
Companionship	45.2 (19)	61.9 (26)	45.2 (19)	26.2 (11)
Financial support	38.1 (16)	26.2 (11)	38.1 (16)	28.6 (12)
Housing support	35.7 (15)	23.8 (10)	23.8 (10)	26.2 (11)
Recreational support	31.0 (13)	42.9 (18)	38.1 (16)	16.7 (7)
Child minding	50.0 (21)	21.4 (9)	50.0 (21)	16.7 (7)
Employment	16.7 (7)	7.1 (3)	7.1 (3)	7.1 (3)
Other support	7.1 (3)	4.8 (2)	4.8 (2)	11.9 (5)

This data suggests that good advice, child minding, and housing support was most often received from their family of origin (parents). Financial assistance was most often received from either parents or partners. As might be expected, respondents seemed to rely more heavily on friends for friendship, emotional support and companionship.

In order to assess their perceptions of self-efficacy, respondents were asked to rate their own ability to cope in the absence of support, whether this absence was real or imagined. Forty-three per cent felt that they would cope very poorly, while only 19% felt that they would cope quite well or very well.

One-third of parent respondents were found to have low self-esteem and 36% had moderate self-esteem using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. When assessed against the measure of coping, it was found that there was a significant association between low self-esteem and their perceived ability to cope on their own. This profile suggests that many of the families are quite reliant on the broad range of support networks, including welfare services. We may surmise that when a particular adverse event occurs, in the absence of support it may be unresolved and lead to a more substantial crisis in their family's life.

In order to assess the importance of support networks in establishing stable housing, participants were asked whether their perceived sources of support had any influence on their current housing. Overall their support networks were clearly important in making a decision about their housing. Nearly half (43%) reported influences related to community support, for example, availability of schools, proximity to health services and shops. Thirty-one per cent reported that their family of origin had influenced their current choice of housing location, 29% reported partner influenced their decision and 24% their friends.

When asked about their needs to find new support groups when having moved in the past, a significant 43% reported that they needed to form new relationships as they had moved far away from their friends and family. Only 31% of respondents reported that they found it easy to form new support networks. Fifty-three per cent stated that they found it difficult to form new support networks. The reasons given were that they didn't want to establish new contacts as they most likely would have to move again, or that they were reluctant to start new friendships as they did not trust others. Of the total group, 17% felt that they did not need to form new support networks, as they were still close enough to friends and family.

4.7   Child Development

In order to answer the research question concerning the outcomes of homelessness on the development of children, selected measures were included in the interview to assess and monitor child development and progress over the study. The main indicators included were the child's height, weight, the quality of their relationships and their school attendance and performance. These indicators will be compared over time in order to assess child development and behavioural and familial stability in the context of their housing outcomes.

School Related Information

Of those children still at school, 85% were attending government schools and 15% independent religious schools. Parents report that children on average had missed nine days of school within the school year, with six of those being the result of illness. The remaining three days of school missed were the result of parents sleeping in too late to take their children to school, disruptions due to access visits to ex-partners and grandparents, and the confusion caused by moving house. It is likely that this data probably under states the level of non-attendance as it relies on accurate parental recall over the school year.

Parents were asked how many changes of school their child had experienced within the past two years, excluding progressions from pre-school to primary school, or primary school to high school. The number of changes ranged from none to ten within the period with an average of two changes. A third of the children had not changed school, but 24% changed once, 16% changed three times and 20% had changed 4 or more times. The reasons given for changing schools usually related to changes in housing location. None of the children had changed school as the result of a disciplinary action. This profile suggests that housing moves would have an impact on this group's educational achievement.

Parents with school age children were asked to rate teacher comments on their child's last report card. It was found that 17% received very poor to poor comments, 14% received average comments, 48% received good comments, and 21% received excellent feedback from their school teachers. It should be noted that interviewers did not view any child's report card, rather the information was solely collected through parental report.

Parents were asked to compare the performance of their child at school with their perceptions of other children of similar age. Only 4% felt their child was academically very far behind, 15% of parents felt their child was below the class average, 22% felt their child was performing at an average standard and 60% thought their child was performing better or much better than their peers.

Comparison of the above two sets of data suggests that most parents perceived their child's school performance to be better than reported by the school teachers. However, the proportion of parents reporting that their child was 'very far behind' or 'below average' (19%) is comparable to the proportion who received 'very poor' to 'poor' comments from their teachers (17%). In contrast, parents reported that a higher proportion (29%) of children were receiving special assistance at school. This usually related to reading recovery or, in some cases, counselling. This latter data indicates that this group of children were under achieving and at significant disadvantage compared to the general population.

Quality of Child Relationships

Eighty-two per cent of parents felt that their children made friends easily, whilst 18% felt their children had difficulty making friends. These difficulties related to shyness and introversion, and in some cases behavioural disorders such as ADHD (Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder).

Parents were also asked to rate the quality of relationship that the focus child had with the adults in the family, that is the respondent and their partner. The majority of parents reported that the children got along very well with the adults of the family (55%). Only two families felt that the focus child interacted poorly with the adults in the family, and another 2 families reported that it varied according to mood and circumstance. This data seems to relate to the parents' perceptions of their child's difficulty: 12% of children were rated as being much more difficult than average, 24% were rated as more difficult than average, 29% were of average difficulty, and 34% were rated as easier or much easier than average.

Again it should be noted that these ratings are parental self-report measures. No data was collected directly by interviewers, therefore it is difficult to confirm the accuracy of these findings. Informal interviewer observation however was found to often disagree with parental views. For example, some of the children with whom parents felt they interacted very well, and whose level of difficulty was rated as easier than average were observed to be extremely hyperactive and often disobedient of their parent's requests.

Child Anthropometric Measures and Health

According to anthropometric standard charts (Hammer, Kraemer, Wilson, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1991), most children were within the average height range for their age, while two were tall for their age (5%).

Parents reported that in most cases, children were of an average weight for their age (79%), while 5% were considered overweight and 17% were considered underweight.

More than 50% of parents reported that their child's health had been very good to excellent over the past year, while 24% of children were reported to be in average health and 24% in poor health. A large proportion of children (not necessarily the focus child) were taking medication relating to either ADHD or asthma. In most cases children had been diagnosed with ADHD by the families GP.

The above data provides a baseline for the follow up studies to assess the overall health and well being of the participating children in relation to housing stability over time.

5.   Discussion

This report provides the baseline findings of the study after the first interview with the 42 participating families. The main aim of the first interview was to collect information on the following key domains as a basis for assessing outcomes over the two-year period of the study:

- current housing

- current employment situation

- current need for and use of support networks

- child development assessment

- current utilisation of welfare services

- demographic information

- history of housing crisis

The demographic profile suggests that the typical family in the study comprised a thirty-one year old female head of household, who had completed Year 10 level of high school education and was currently living as a single parent family. On average, it was found that families had 2.5 children, ranging in age from two weeks to 19 years. We may conclude that the study sample of families can be considered as broadly representative of the population of families experiencing homelessness who access SAAP services.

The families are mainly Anglo-Australian, though a few families with Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and of European descent are included in the sample. Compared to the broader homeless service client population, families of Aboriginal background are over represented in this study due to the sampling framework that targeted rural and regional support agencies.

Most of the families were dependent on government benefits or pensions with only a small proportion currently receiving income through casual or part time employment. The majority were receiving government benefits through the Sole Parent Pension as two-thirds were single parent families.

Over 80% of the families had exited the support service to move into independent housing with the majority (19 families) living in private rental and 15 families in public housing at the time of interview. This is in contrast to their housing situation in the previous two years, which may be characterised by high levels of transience and use of unstable or inappropriate accommodation settings.

Instability of housing and loss of housing was most often attributed to relationship or family breakdown and conflict, invariably associated with financial difficulties. These issues often led families to require either emergency accommodation, or financial aid from welfare agencies. In the majority of cases, families reported that welfare agencies were extremely helpful in meeting their immediate needs. Some families, however, reported that the welfare agencies were unable to assist them as they did not meet the criteria necessary to qualify for assistance. Though this caused frustration for these families, they reported that the agencies did not completely turn them away. Rather, they were offered other forms of assistance such as counselling and support.

A key factor in their chances of maintaining stable housing in the longer term is the affordability of their current housing. The affordability of their current housing was assessed against the accepted benchmark of 30% of income being spent on housing costs. For those in private rental, 13 (68%) were currently paying over 30% of their income on rent. Seven families (37%) were paying over 40% of their income on rent, with three of these families paying over 60%. As expected, public housing affordability was far better: no family was paying more than 30% of their income on rent. A substantial proportion of these families having re-entered private rental are experiencing housing stress based on their current circumstances. The follow-up interviews will inform the study as to the sustainability of this level of housing costs in the long term.

Most families reported that they had a range support networks in place. These networks consisted of family, friends, partners, but interestingly included agency support workers. Many respondents felt that without the support they gained from these sources, they would cope very poorly on their own. Few respondents attributed themselves with the ability to cope in the absence of supports. These results were supported by the indicator of parental self-esteem with one-third of respondents having low self-esteem and 36% moderate self-esteem. Low self-esteem was found to be significantly associated with low self-efficacy. This may, in part, explain the high levels of transience and chaotic lifestyles experienced by families in the face of precipitating crises.

The first interviews provided baseline data on selected indicators for child development and well being. Whilst most children were within norms for weight and height for their age, their general health is considered poorer than that in the general population.

The academic achievement of the focus children ranged from very poor to excellent, though in many cases parents appear to over-estimate their child's academic performance. Nearly one-third of the children were receiving special reading recovery assistance and a further small proportion were receiving counselling at school.

Limitations of the Study

Undertaking robust research into homelessness involves significant challenges for researchers, including definitions of homelessness, difficulty in obtaining a representative sample of the defined population and ethical considerations in engaging people in often chaotic lifestyles. This study has the added challenges inherent in a longitudinal study, including how to maximise retention of participating families over the study period.

The chosen methodology for engagement of families into the study relied on the pro-active efforts of support workers in the participating agencies. Homeless services are working beyond capacity with high levels of turn away of households in crisis. This places limits on staff availability to effectively engage families into the study.

In addition, the level of unplanned exits of families from services was significantly higher than anticipated. Length of stay of clients, particularly in SAAP services, has increased over the past five years (AIHW 2000). The combination of these factors meant that the recruitment process took longer than expected with a final sample below that planned.

It should further be noted that despite assurances that interviewers were in no way associated with welfare services or other regulatory bodies, participants might still have felt obliged to respond in a 'desirable' way. A significant proportion of the families have accessed their support agencies after 'exit'. Indeed, the concept of an 'exit' from support services for high needs clients clearly has limitations in this context. The implications of this ongoing assistance will need to be considered in the context of understanding long term outcomes.

Another issue arising from the initial interviews concerns the reliance on parental recall and reporting of specific information. Consideration is being given to the collection of independent data on particular issues, for example the school performance and attendance of participating children. However, there are significant practical difficulties in obtaining such corroborating information.

The researchers have learnt significant lessons in completing the first stage of the study about effective methodologies for longitudinal studies of those who have experienced homelessness. Where appropriate, these insights will be applied in finalising the follow up stages of this study.

7.   Conclusions

The first stage of the two-year longitudinal study into long-term outcomes for families experiencing homelessness has been completed. A sample of 42 families have undertaken to fully participate in the study. Although the study is essentially designed as a qualitative assessment of outcomes, the sample of families can be considered as generally representative of the broader population of families using homeless services in Victoria.

The recent housing history of these families indicates two groups of experiences: those families with a relatively stable history but who have experienced recent crisis due to a combination of relationship breakdown or conflict and financial hardship. The second group may be characterised as having longer-term relatively chaotic lifestyles. Over the previous two years, the overall picture of crisis includes frequent changes of address, frequent involvement with welfare services and unstable family dynamics. These unstable dynamics relate to domestic violence, as well as other forms of relationship conflict and breakdown. A significant level of substance abuse and problem gambling is experienced within the families.

As few families have either graduated from high school or obtained employment, they are often dependent upon the social welfare system and the good will of family and friends. As a result of this, financial difficulties will often be experienced when government benefits are unable to pay for rent, food, bills, clothing, and recreational needs. Few of the families were able to plan their lives more than six months in advance. This meant their daily focus was inevitably on how to meet immediate basic needs.

What should be noted is that although these families may seem to have chaotic lifestyles relative to middle class Australia, this is a value judgement. Few of the families interviewed felt that their lives were unstable, rather, each hurdle they encountered with respect to housing, finances or relationships was dealt with using the resources that they felt were available to them. These resources included friends and family, but most importantly, support workers at welfare agencies. The finding that nearly half the families have reconnected with welfare agencies after exiting the recruiting service supports this assertion.

The great majority of families exited from support services into independent housing, with a higher than expected percentage obtaining public housing. This outcome may be explained through the segmented waiting list with priority placed on homeless households. It may also relate to the high proportion of families living in non-metropolitan regions with easier access to public housing for families.

The highest proportion of families are in private rental housing. A significant proportion of these are paying over the accepted 30% benchmark of affordability. The follow up interviews will enable an evaluation of the sustainability of this tenure for these families in the long term. We shall also be able to monitor the extent to which the families achieve employment and hence increase their income to make their housing more affordable.

The first follow up interviews are being completed and will provide the first assessment of how families have fared over the intervening six months. More detailed information on the occurrence of adverse life events and barriers to social participation encountered by the families will also be gathered. What remains to be seen is whether the frequency of these life hurdles will decrease as families gain more independence from social welfare. We also hope to assess what factors contribute to their ability to continue on the pathway out of homelessness.

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