

THE EMPTY LUNCHBOX

The experience of primary schools with
students who are homeless



Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

This exploratory study is the first time that the point of view of primary schools and their day-to-day experiences of dealing with student homelessness have been investigated. The findings make an important contribution to the broader evidence base on the detrimental impact of homelessness on children's education. Engagement and wellbeing are fundamental to learning¹. Given that homelessness can interfere with school engagement and wellbeing, it poses a major obstacle to learning.

The overall objectives of the project were to:

- Explore how schools currently identify and work with primary students who are homeless;
- Explore how schools respond and support students and what difficulties or barriers are encountered; and
- Identify the most effective ways to support the learning of students who are homeless.

Method

Two stages of data collection were involved. The first stage was an online survey and the second a telephone interview; participation in one or both was completely voluntary.

In the first stage, an email campaign was initially sent to 932 Victorian public primary schools inviting them to participate in an online survey. A total of 139 schools completed the online survey, yielding a response rate of 15%.

Of this group, 45 flagged that they had experience with students who were homeless. This group was invited to participate in the second stage of the project: a telephone interview. A total of 21 interviews were completed, which lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Findings reported here are informed by the survey and interviews.

Key findings

Diversity in school experiences

The findings highlighted a stark contrast between schools and their experiences of students who were homeless. Two distinct groups emerged: at one end of the spectrum, most (63%) of the schools that participated in the study reported that they 'never' or 'very rarely' encountered students experiencing homelessness. At the other end, a small number of the schools were dealing with the issue on a regular basis. For these schools, generally located in disadvantaged communities, homelessness was not an isolated feature, but part of a broader range of social and economic difficulties with which they had to deal.

Those schools where homelessness was common had to allocate a range of resources to dealing with that and related situations. Such schools usually had good relations with local agencies, which they accessed regularly. Other local community groups and businesses also provided valuable financial and in-kind support to these schools. Despite the assistance from local communities, providing transport, food, clothing and other supports cost money which had to be found from the school budget.

Schools as Welfare Agencies

Many of the schools acted as quasi welfare agencies for the community in which they were located. Schools were involved because they act in the best interests of the student. Some had comprehensive processes in place as part of a broader charter designed to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of *all* students, including students who were homeless. Some also employed strategies in direct response to young students who were homeless. Breakfast programs, uniform schemes, assistance with camps and excursions, were particularly common as was assistance with extra curricula

1 KPMG, *Re-engaging our kids: A framework for education provision to children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school*, 2010.

activities and accessing financial help. However, most of the schools experienced considerable strain in providing activities for which they were not funded.

The extent to which schools provided support to the parents was unexpected. It included helping parents to find accommodation and other support, sometimes accompanying them, or even transporting them, to interviews, making phone calls on their behalf, and acting as advocates for them with real estate agents.

Staffing

All the schools had welfare teams with responsibility for supporting both the learning and welfare needs of *all* students, including those experiencing homelessness. The composition of those teams varied and was dependent on local staffing decisions. Some schools also had a range of other professional services such as psychologists and speech therapists available, through the regional office. In one case, the school principal had taken on additional teaching duties so that a welfare worker could be appointed out of the saved salary. Another school used intern psychologists who worked free of charge.

Impact on young students

Students who were homeless were identified early by school staff; warning signs included empty lunchboxes, the lack of a uniform, lack of sleep, absenteeism and transience. But parents also informed the school, often as part of seeking help, and through agencies working together with schools.

Students' capacity to engage in learning and education was greatly affected by homelessness. The findings detailed the day-to-day impact, which included disrupted school attendance, frequent school changes, behavioural issues and social difficulties. For some, day-to-day school life was not easy to engage in the context of homelessness. For others, school was a needed haven from the chaos and disruption of homelessness.

The schools cared enormously about their students and had implemented a range of measures in an attempt to minimise the detrimental impact of homelessness on students' learning and education. Some schools went to considerable lengths to ensure attendance and continuity in the school through the provision of transport. In addition many provided food, clothing and other assistance. Provision for tired children to sleep was noted in several schools.

Despite their commitment and level of involvement, schools were concerned that students suffered academically as well as emotionally. Indeed, the full benefits of school, which include educational attainment, social skills and healthy self-esteem, cannot be achieved without regular school attendance². The longer term implications of this include unemployment, reduced wellbeing and life chances³.

Policy, practice and research implications

Policy

Access to education and continuity in learning – ensuring no-one misses out:

Given its far-reaching implications, continuity in learning and educational development is critical. The evidence from the project highlighted the difficulty of maintaining student learning. School funding decisions need to recognise the diversity of experience of schools regarding disadvantage. Funding based on per student enrolment, without consideration of the level or concentration of disadvantage, exposes schools to hardship and compromises educational outcomes for students⁴.

Despite the efforts of the Australian and Victorian Governments in recent years, this study showed that primary schools with a concentration of disadvantaged students and higher levels of homelessness among their students, had

² Children and young people, Chapter 4, Australia's Welfare 2013, p.157.

³ *Seen and Heard: putting children on the homelessness agenda, Snapshot 2011.*

⁴ <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf>

insufficient resources, financial and material, to adequately address the impact of homelessness on student learning and educational development, and to ensure their welfare needs were being addressed.

Learning and educational development is critical to immediate and long term outcomes. Intervening early is essential to breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage and primary schools are well placed to do this. But schools need to be supported and to receive the necessary resources required to respond to the welfare and education needs of young students. Education is, after all, fundamental to solving homelessness.

Practice

Expand school and community partnerships:

Supporting the needs of disadvantaged students, including those who were homeless, impacted heavily on a school's time and resources. The concentration of disadvantage in a small number of schools was a major issue. The schools most affected by homelessness and disadvantage generally struggled financially.

For these schools, connections in their local communities were critical. These links provided schools with enormous support in the form of food and financial assistance. Some of these links were informal while others occurred as part of a community hub, a common school-community partnership model. In either circumstance, these partnerships were highly valued by the schools.

Community hub is a common name for such school-community partnerships, which have in fact, been operating in Australia for the last fifteen years. Indeed, a national program aims to expand community hubs to 100 locations across Australia, which will primarily occur in areas where there are families from low socioeconomic, migrant or refugee backgrounds⁵. This national program is funded by the Australian Government in partnership with the Scanlon Foundation, the Migration Council Australia and Refuge of Hope.

Single point of reference:

For some schools, homelessness was not a common occurrence so there was difficulty in knowing how to respond and what resources and supports were available beyond the school. These schools would benefit from a single access point, possibly web-based, that could be accessed when they identified a student who is homeless.

Supporting children, young people and their families affected by homelessness: Guidelines for Victorian schools⁶ is an important resource first published by DEECD in 2009. The guidelines provide information about homelessness, tips on how to improve educational outcomes for students, examples of good practice, resources such as support services, how to access support and advice, relevant agencies to contact, and tools and templates.

This comprehensive document is an exceptional resource for schools. Unfortunately, this great resource is hidden on the DEECD website. In order to access the Guidelines, it is necessary to navigate a number of different menus. It would be beneficial to raise the profile of the Guidelines by relaunching them and also to feature them prominently on the homepage of the DEECD website.

Research

Questions raised by the findings include: how to prevent young students falling through the gaps; how to maintain continuity in learning in the context of frequent school changes; and what happens to education plans and support when students change schools?

These questions suggest that further research would be useful, especially if the method used was longitudinal; this would assist in exploring what keeps students who are homeless engaged and what strategies are needed to improve educational outcomes.

5 <http://www.communityhubs.org.au/about-community-hubs/the-program/>

6 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/participation/homelessnessstrategynov09.pdf>

In relation to community hubs, the evidence is limited but it does confirm their effectiveness. But more evidence is needed: specifically, research is needed to explore whether community hubs provide a sufficient means to stop young students falling through the gaps; or to identify what happens to a child whose family moves out of the community hub area, how is the continuity in their learning maintained?

1. Introduction

“The lunchbox is one of those things that teachers pick up on quickly because you get used to seeing what the lunch boxes look like...”

The purpose of this report is to present the findings from an exploratory study of primary schools and homelessness. Undertaken in 2012-2013, the project aimed to understand the impact of student homelessness on schools.

The focus of the project was to understand the ways in which Victorian public primary schools encountered and responded to student homelessness; to explore what worked in practice and what needed to be improved.

The themes explored included how students who were homeless were identified, what impact homelessness had on daily school life, what supports were put in place by schools and what difficulties schools experienced in the provision of support.

There is extensive research that has focused on the detrimental impact of homelessness on children and young people. Whilst there are guidelines and policies which are written with a focus on schools, there appears to be no substantive research which has focused on the issues from the perspective of schools. How schools become aware of, experience and react to homelessness amongst their students is a key factor in the educational response to homelessness.

The significance of this project is that it provides the schools' perspective in two important areas:

- How disruptive homelessness is for students and the continuity of their education; and,
- How schools respond to these challenges.

1.1. Homelessness defined

Informed by an understanding of homelessness as the absence of 'home', rather than the absence of a house (or rooflessness), the ABS defines a person as homeless if they do not have suitable accommodation options and their current living arrangement:

- Is in a dwelling that is inadequate, or
- Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable, or
- Does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations⁷.

The elements that form the foundation of this definition include:

- Adequacy of the dwelling,
- Security of tenure in the dwelling, and
- Control of and access to space for social relations.

Anyone can be considered homeless if their circumstances resemble any of the following six categories:

1. Living in improvised dwelling, tent or sleeping out,
2. Living in short-term supported accommodation for the homeless,
3. Staying temporarily with other households (eg. friends or relatives),
4. Living in boarding houses,
5. Living temporarily in other lodgings, or
6. Living in severely crowded dwellings.

1.2. Children experiencing homelessness

Homelessness among children is growing; since 2001, there has been a 22% increase in the percentage of children under 12 years who are homeless⁸. Based on the 2011 Census, of the 22,773 people homeless in Victoria on any given night, more than 3,500 (16%) are children under 12⁹. These early years are critical periods in children's development¹⁰.

Children, in general, experience homelessness when their family becomes homeless. The underlying causes of homelessness are complex and can include multiple forms of disadvantage such as poverty and financial difficulties, unemployment, the critical shortage of affordable housing, eviction, health problems, substance abuse, relationship breakdown and family/domestic violence.

1.3. Education and homelessness

Homelessness is detrimental to the behavioural, developmental, health and wellbeing of children. Education in particular is an area where the effect of homelessness is especially harmful. The mobility and instability that characterises homelessness disrupts engagement with schooling, absenteeism and capacity to learn¹¹. The long-term effects mean that children are vulnerable to ongoing cycles of homelessness¹². Yet education is critical to the prevention of homelessness and disadvantage¹³.

The imperative to focus and address the specific needs of children has been recognised in the 2008 White Paper on Homelessness¹⁴. The White Paper, in fact, has specific targets to increase the number of children experiencing homelessness provided with support and engaged in education by 50%¹⁵.

Additionally, the development and wellbeing of children is enshrined within five National Plans including:

- National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH),
- National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2010-2022),
- National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2009-2020),
- The National Early Childhood Development Strategy, and
- Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage.

Despite this commitment, the latest available evidence from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection 2012-2013¹⁶ suggests that children's educational needs were compromised by homelessness. For example, among children who presented to specialist homelessness services in 2012-13, 85% of those aged 5 to 14 years were enrolled in education. While this represents the vast majority of primary school aged children who presented at specialist services, it still means that 15% of this group were not enrolled in education; therefore, missing out on important learning and educational development.

8 ABS, 2012, Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, Australia, 2011, Cat. No. 2049.0

9 http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/images/publications/Infographics/Victoria_-_updated_Jan_2014.pdf accessed June 2014

10 AIHW, 2013, Australia's Welfare, Chapter 4, *Children and young people*

11 Noble-Carr, Debbie, (2006). *The experiences and effects of family homelessness for children*, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australia Catholic University.

12 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013. Specialist homelessness services:2012–2013. Cat. no. HOU 27. Canberra: AIHW.

13 AIHW, 2013, Australia's Welfare, Chapter 4, *Children and young people*

14 The Road Home: a national approach to reducing homelessness, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2008

15 The Road Home: a national approach to reducing homelessness, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.18.

16 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013. Specialist homelessness services: 2012–2013. Cat. no. HOU 27. Canberra: AIHW, p.16.

Several other studies¹⁷ have observed the effects of homelessness on schooling and considered ways in which the impact may be ameliorated. A Hanover project¹⁸ focussed explicitly on the intersection of school and homelessness. Its central hypothesis was that: *'any improvement in educational engagement for children...who are experiencing homelessness requires changes in current practices in the homelessness and educational sectors'* (p.ii). It emphasised the key role of schools in overcoming the negative impacts of homelessness on children.

The importance of school engagement and continuity of learning was recognised by the Victorian State Government, which in 2009, through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), published guidelines for Victorian schools to support students and their families experiencing homelessness¹⁹. The guidelines provide information about homelessness, tips on how to improve educational outcomes for students, examples of good practice, resources such as support services, how to access support and advice, relevant agencies to contact, and tools and templates. This comprehensive document is an exceptional resource for schools.

17 For example: Eddy, Gus (2003). *Caravan parks pilot: Family crisis child care program final report*, for the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, National Dissemination Program, Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle.

18 Hanover/ FYA/BSL (2009). *Education Development Project: Improving educational and housing outcomes for children experiencing homelessness*: Final Evaluation Report, Hanover.

19 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/participation/homelessnessstrategynov09.pdf>

2. About the project

This section details the objectives of the project including specific questions, the methods used in recruiting participants, response rates, how data was collected, analysis and interpretation, and the project's limitations. The section ends with an overview of how the report is structured.

2.1. Objectives

The overall objectives of the project were to:

- Explore how schools currently identify and work with primary students who are homeless;
- Explore how schools respond and support students and what difficulties or barriers are encountered; and
- Identify the most effective ways to support the learning of students who are homeless.

The project sought to answer a number of important questions:

- How students experiencing homelessness were identified and by whom?
- What services in school and outside the school are available and how do schools make use of them? How are government departments involved?
- Do schools encounter problems beyond the school which may hamper their effective response (e.g. the location of accommodation and school, issues of homework, school attendance)?
- To what extent is homelessness specific and unique as opposed to more a part of generic problems around disadvantage, and how does this affect the way it is reacted to?
- What practices work best and how might they be generalised?

2.2. Methodology

As an exploratory study, the project combined the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The following details the strategies employed to recruit eligible schools, response rates and data collection techniques.

Recruitment

The target group for recruiting to the study was all public primary schools in Victoria, which totalled 1,130 schools²⁰. Public schools that catered to both primary and secondary students were excluded from the study. This was based on the need to minimise any differences that would make analysis and interpretation difficult.

These exclusions resulted in an initial list of 986 eligible primary schools, which was compiled using information available on the MySchools website (www.myschool.edu.au). This was not a random sample; rather the goal was to recruit each of the 986 eligible schools.

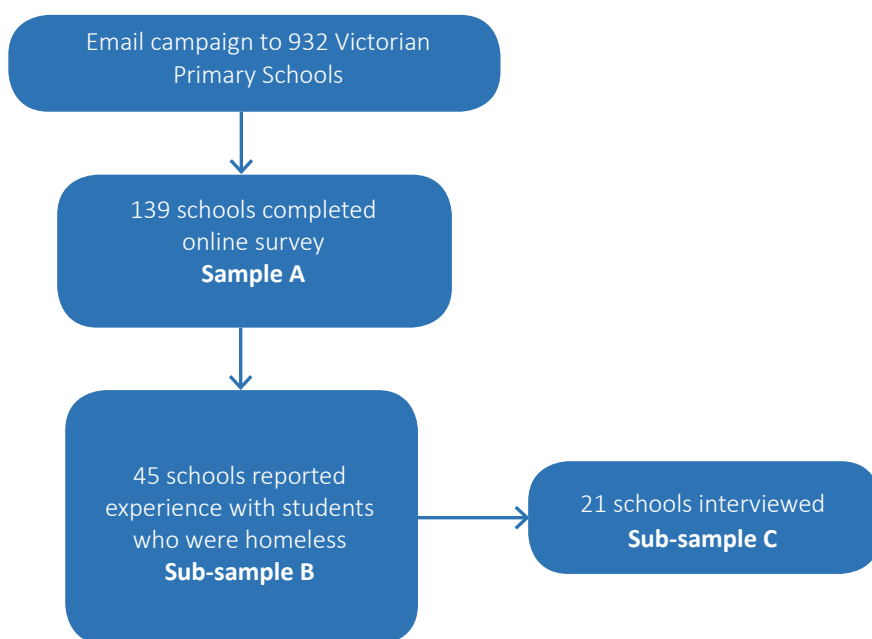
Permission to conduct the study in Victorian public primary schools was received from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). Recruitment to the study was conducted, via an email campaign, between October 2012 and August 2013.

20 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/statsvicschbrochure.pdf>

Response rates

As shown in Figure 1, the email campaign (Appendix 1) was directed to a revised total of 932 Victorian public primary schools, following deletions of invalid email contacts. Based on this figure, 139 schools completed the online survey, yielding a response rate of 15%. This sample is labelled as Sample A in Figure 1. Among the schools with reported experience with homelessness, most had below average scores for educational disadvantage. The profile of schools is presented in Section 3.

Figure 1. Overview of recruiting strategy



Data collection

Two stages of data collection were involved. The first stage was an online survey and the second a telephone interview; participation in one or both was completely voluntary.

Stage 1: Online survey

The online survey was completed by 139 schools, using SurveyMonkey. Of this group, 45 flagged that they had experience with students who were homeless, which represents around a third of the participating schools.

Stage 2: Telephone interview

Those 45 schools with experience of students who were homeless were invited to participate in a telephone interview to explore the issues in more detail. A total of 21 interviews were completed, which lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis and interpretation

This report presents data from both the online survey and the telephone interviews. To assist with clarity, the data source is included in each of the Figures presented in this report and are labelled according to the overview presented in Figure 1. Thus, Sample A represents all 139 participating schools; sub-sample B represents the 45 schools with students who were homeless, and sub-sample C is the 21 interviews.

Qualitative analysis of the 21 interviews enabled the data to be categorised into broad themes. Quotes from the 21 participant interviews are used extensively throughout the report to convey the day-to-day reality for schools of dealing with homelessness among young students. All the material in italics is taken directly from the interviews; this is given without attribution to protect confidentiality. Also included are four case studies.

2.3. Limitations of the study

The selection of the sample of schools represents the main limitation that affects the interpretation of the findings presented in this report. The sample was not randomly selected and therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the remaining Victorian public primary schools who did not respond to the email campaign. One can only speculate as to why the bulk of primary schools did not to participate.

Schools may have defined themselves as ineligible, thinking that homelessness among students did not apply to their particular school. The email campaign may not have reached the principal as we did not have principals' direct email addresses. Or, perhaps there was no capacity for the school to participate due to their work loads.

Perhaps a more fruitful strategy may have been to recruit a randomly selected sample and contact made by telephone directly to the principal. This strategy could have enabled a higher response rate, extrapolation to primary schools in general, and comparisons to be made (for example, between metropolitan and regional areas).

2.4. Structure of the report

Following the introduction and this section on the study methods, the findings begin with Section 3, which focuses on the profile of the schools participating in the study – their location, size, understanding of homelessness, level of advantage/disadvantage among students, and awareness of homelessness among the students in the school;

Section 4 focuses on how schools identified students who were experiencing homelessness – who within the school was most likely to identify them and observed indicators;

Section 5 focuses on the impact of homelessness on students' learning and educational development;

Section 6 focuses on the schools' responses to their educational and welfare needs;

Section 7 focuses on the availability and adequacy of resources that schools are able to draw on when responding to homelessness among their students;

Section 8 discusses the findings of the study, specifically focusing on the impact of homelessness on young students, the diversity in school experiences, the welfare role of schools and resourcing. The implications of the findings are also discussed.

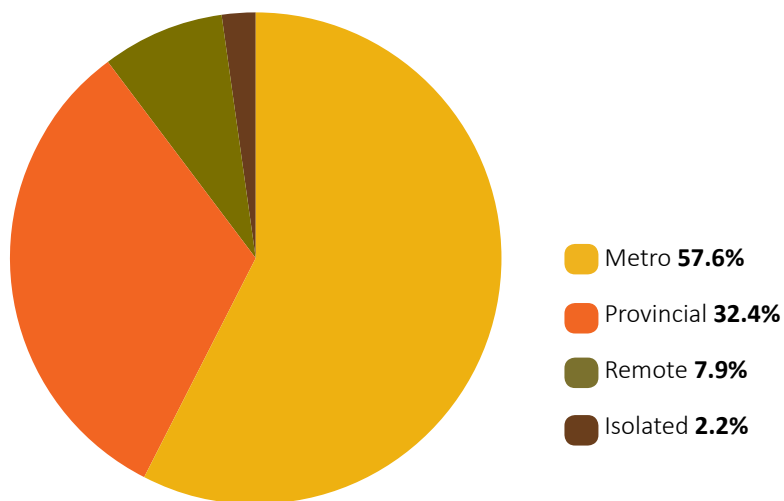
3. Profile of schools

This section provides a profile of the schools that participated in the study. It summarises how they rated their understanding of homelessness as well as how many schools had direct experience of homelessness.

A total of 139 Victorian state primary schools participated in the study (Sample A). As shown in Figure 2, the majority were located in metropolitan areas while a third were situated in provincial Victoria. Additionally, 14 schools identified that they were in remote (8%) or isolated (2%) areas of Victoria.

The vast majority of schools (89%) were specifically primary focused, reflecting the targeted recruitment strategy. Despite this targeted strategy, 8% of schools that participated in the study taught both primary and secondary years, while 3% were Special Schools.

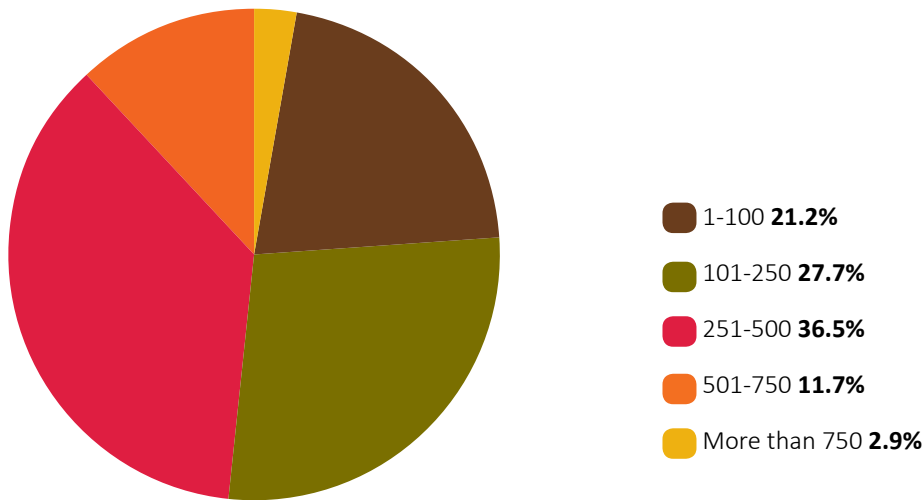
Figure 2: Location of Schools



Source: Sample A survey data

More than a third (37%) of the participating schools were medium sized with between 250 to 500 enrolled students; more than a quarter (28%) had between 101 to 250 enrolled students and 21% were small, with no more than 100 enrolled students (Figure 3).

Figure 3: School Enrolments



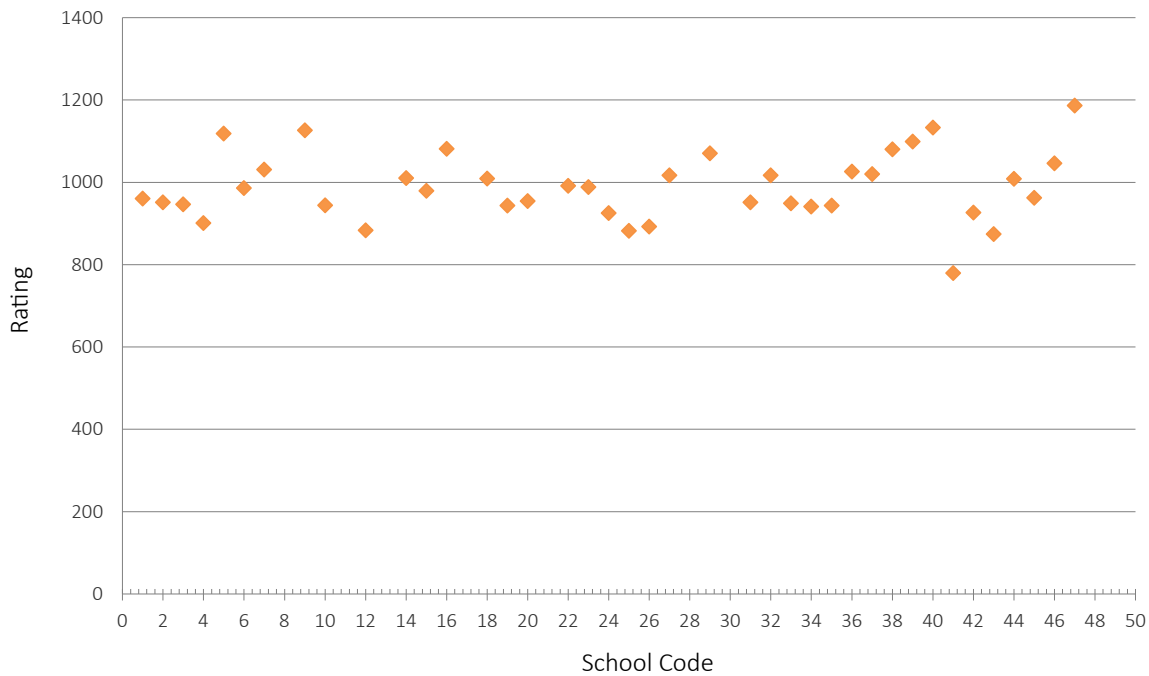
Source: Sample A survey data

Figure 4 shows the Index of Community Social and Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score for each school that had experience of homelessness among their students in the past three years (ie sub-sample B, 45 schools).

There was a slight bias to this sample; for example, a third (34%) of the schools in sub-sample B had an ICSEA score above the median (1000) indicating relative educational advantage; while almost half (48%) had an ICSEA score below, indicating relative educational disadvantage. The lowest score was 779, well below the average while the highest was 1186, well above the average.

Among the schools that were interviewed (ie. sub-sample C, 21 schools), most were below average (1000).

Figure 4: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (n=41)



Source: Sample B survey data

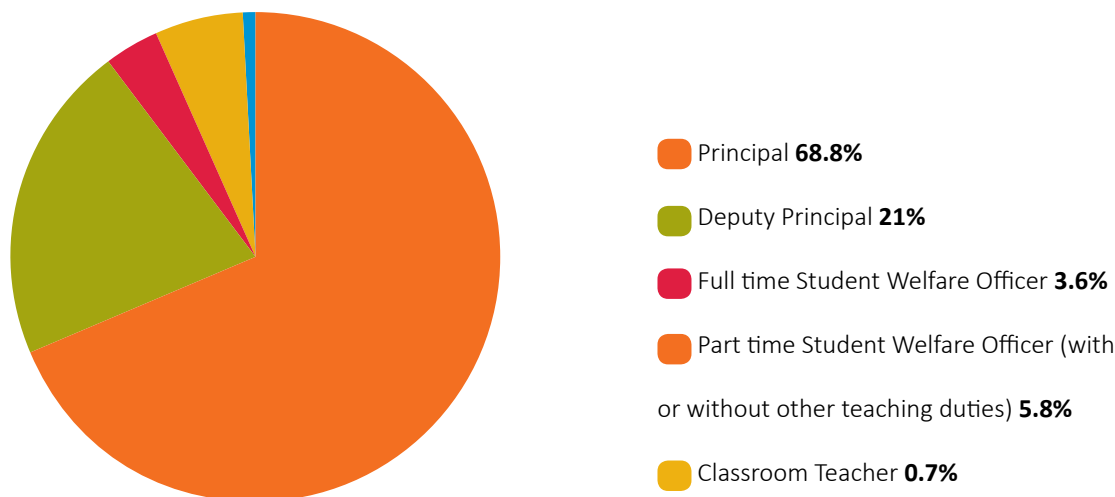
Who completed the survey?

Invitations to participate were sent to principals; they were invited to complete the survey themselves or to nominate an appropriate staff member. As highlighted in Figure 5, the majority of participants who completed the survey were the school principal (68%) or deputy principal (22%). In 10% of cases, principals delegated the task to the student welfare officer.

This does not mean that only 10% of the schools had a student welfare officer but simply that the principal or deputy principal were not able to commit time to complete the survey, or they felt that it more appropriate for the welfare officer to participate. In most cases, schools have a student welfare team that involves the principal and/or deputy principal, the student welfare officer (where one exists) and other staff members.

Nearly three-quarters of participants (72%) had been at that school for more than three years, while 6% were in their first year at the school.

Figure 5: What is your position in this school?



Source: Sample A survey data

Understanding of homelessness

Participants were asked to rate their understanding of homelessness in general, and that of the staff, and their understanding of its impact on a student’s education.

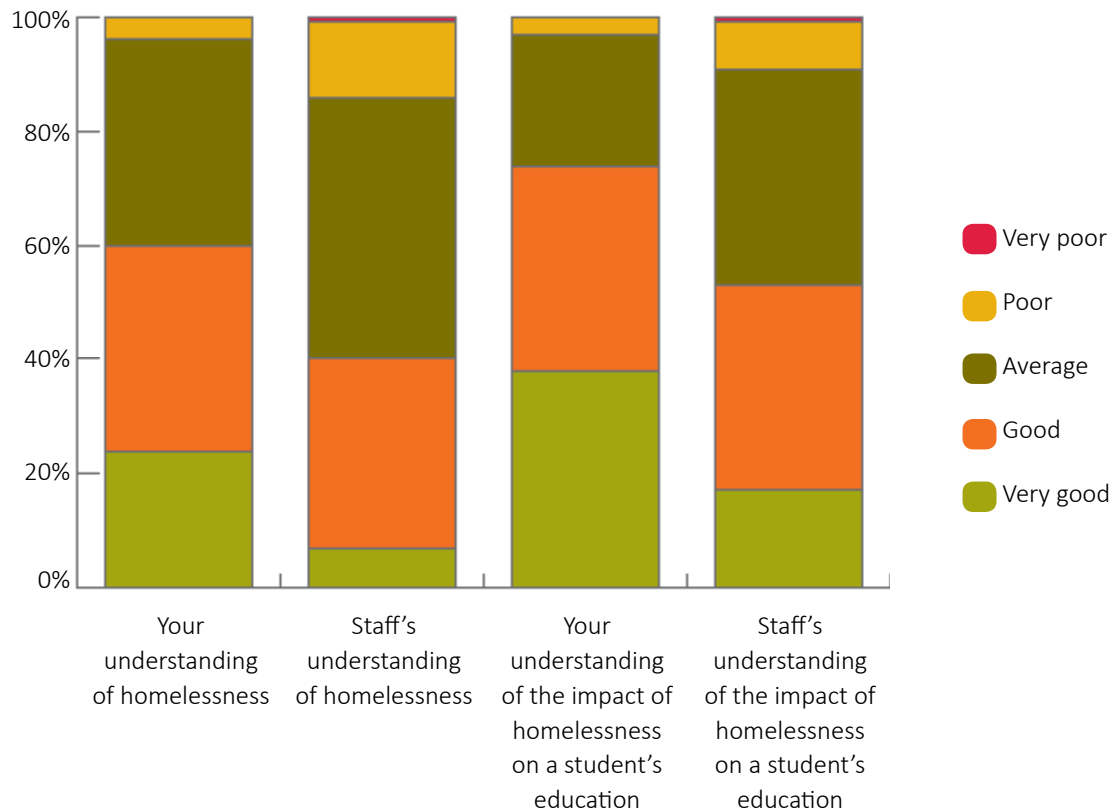
As shown in Figure 6, 60% rated their understanding of homelessness as ‘good’ or ‘very good’; only 4% rated it as ‘poor’. Nearly three quarters (74%) rated their understanding of the impact of homelessness on education as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, with 3% reporting it was ‘poor’.

In relation to the rest of the staff, 41% of participants rated their understanding of homelessness as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. More than half (53%) rated the staff understanding of the impact of homelessness on education as ‘good’ or ‘very good’.

In contrast, 13% of participants rated staff understanding of homelessness as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’; 9% rated it ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ in regard to its impact on a student’s education.

Further analysis also indicated that, as might be expected, among those schools that had direct experience of homelessness among their students, understanding of homelessness and its impact was rated comparatively higher.

Figure 6: Understanding Homelessness



Source: Sample A survey data

According to the understanding and experience of participants who were interviewed, those students who were homeless were predominantly from a low socio-economic background. These participants talked about homelessness and disadvantage as an interrelationship that tended to be ongoing:

I think there's a very clear link between the two, disadvantaged and homelessness. Definitely, I don't think you'd have the two in isolation. So I mean thinking about our school in particular there's many families that we come across, and that I deal with, that are disadvantaged. And sometimes as part of that it may be temporary homelessness or long term. But I would say yeah the two are very much linked.

Certainly the students that we've had have come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Domestic/family violence, however, also occurred in families that were not struggling financially:

The mother left due to violence. So that family would not be one of our most disadvantaged families because dad generally works, they've got an income, and generally they have a house to live in.

Participants talked about child protection orders or parents who were incarcerated or the sudden death of parents. Other unexpected circumstances also occurred, such as:

One family, the husband had gambled the house away, so the wife (and children) ended up in the car for some time.

[There was] one particular [family]...where homelessness occurred through natural weather [disaster], their home was taken away.

In a couple of cases, schools were located in areas that had experienced an economic downturn. According to these schools, the closure or downsizing of a major employer in the area caused a sudden decline in the fortunes of many of its residents. The effect of this flowed on to the local schools, which had to deal with multiple changes in the circumstances of their students. The schools observed that young students had to deal with a roller coaster of emotions that impacted on their capacity to learn.

Housing

In most cases, schools emphasised the need for more affordable housing and more emergency housing. In one case, a participant commented:

Yeah we often joke about when the houses come up for sale, maybe in our local street, if it's got four bedrooms, maybe we (the school) should buy it.

At the same time, however, there was recognition that other supports also needed to be in place to enable long-term solutions:

I think it may solve some of the homeless stuff but I think [if] they're always in danger of losing that placement or that accommodation...I think there needs to be a wraparound approach. It's not just well, here's a house, now you're going to be fine, I think there's a bigger picture and more work needs to be done about how to keep the house and make sure everything is functioning.

More housing, of course... but I think a service that's holistic with that, which is not just putting the house in but I think helping with the underlying issues, whether they be monetary or emotional or whatever they are.

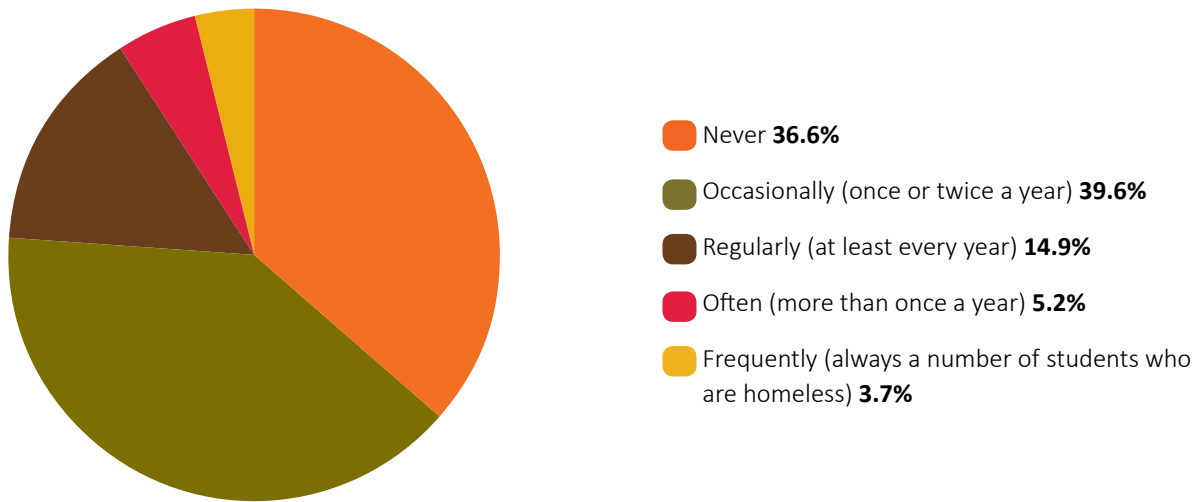
Awareness of students experiencing homelessness

Participants were asked how often, in the past three years, their schools had become aware that a student was experiencing homelessness. Of a total of 134 participants who responded, Figure 7 shows that 37% reported 'never' while 40% reported 'occasionally (once or twice)'.

Almost a quarter (24%), however, were aware that there were students in their schools who had experienced homelessness, including 15% who reported that this had occurred annually, 5% who reported often and 4% who reported that they always had a number of students who were homeless.

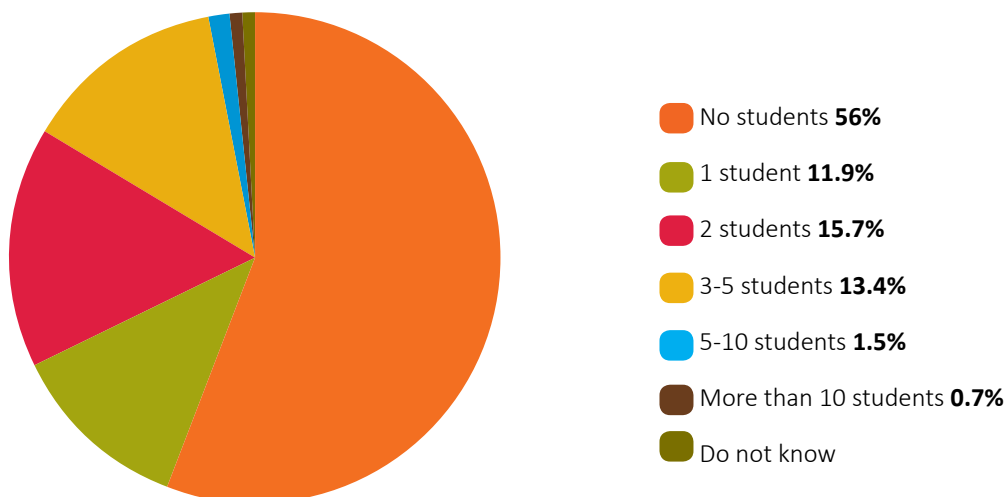
When asked about their current circumstances, Figure 8 shows that the majority (56%) of participants reported that no students were homeless at the time of the survey. Nevertheless, this means that a large proportion (43%) did have students in their school who were homeless. This included 28% who reported up to 2 students, 13% reported between 3 to 5, 2% reported between 5 to 10, and one school had more than 10 students who were homeless.

Figure 7: In the last three years how often has your school become aware that a student is experiencing homelessness?



Source: Sample A survey data

Figure 8: How many students in your school do you estimate might currently be experiencing homelessness?



Source: Sample A survey data

Case Study- School A

School profile

School A is in provincial Victoria. At the time of the study, it had an enrolment of about 100 students. Its Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score was in the low 900s, suggesting its students were from a socially and economically disadvantaged area. Of all the schools participating in the study, this school had the highest incidence of homelessness amongst its students.

The school has a highly transient student population with around 60% turnover per year. Many of the students have been at the school previously, but whether they have been to other schools in the meantime has been difficult to ascertain.

Experience with homelessness

The school frequently had students who were homeless. Due to the school's familiarity with homelessness, the principal felt it was comparatively easy to identify students experiencing homelessness, based on indicators such as tiredness, inadequate diet and clothing.

School response

The school provided an extensive range of measures, some open to all students including those experiencing homelessness, and others targeting students with a particular need:

- Food and nutrition – breakfast provided to around 60 students per day, lunches to around 25, and fruit in every classroom
- Space for rest- cushions and blankets provided for tired students in constant use with about 8 students using them at any one time
- Hygiene and appearance- a reserve of jumpers, socks, underwear, and singlets kept for students to use as needed
- Transport provided – to facilitate attendance of students who would otherwise be absent
- Assistance with camps, excursions, and extra curricula activities- to ensure no student was excluded from any school activity because of financial circumstances
- Tuition programs and a homework club
- Emphasis on literacy and numeracy programs
- Computers – provided for every student and kept at the school.

External links

The principal reported a lack of community organisations in the small country town. Except for the financial assistance for food and other needs provided by the local Lions and Rotary club, the principal had not found outside agencies very helpful due to their lack of follow through and difficulty in helping families with complex issues.

4. How schools identified children experiencing homelessness

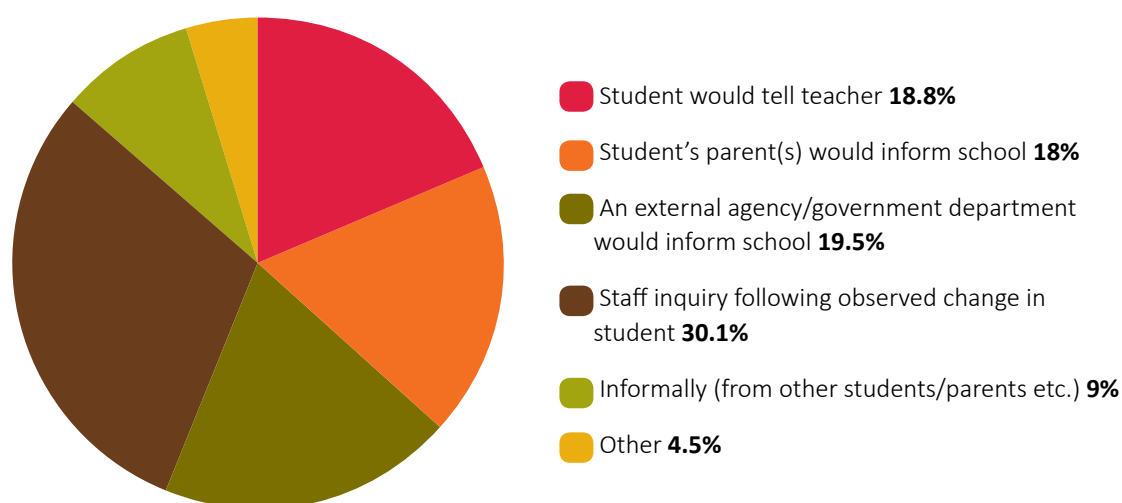
This section explores in more detail the experience of homelessness that schools had. For example, how common was the experience among the participating schools, how were schools made aware of it? Additionally, how common was homelessness among students; did it affect many or only a few?

The various ways participants became aware of students who were homeless is illustrated in Figure 9. As can be seen, a common way was through a staff inquiry after change had been observed in a student (30%); but it was also the case that the student had informed the teacher (19%). This means that in almost half the cases (49%), awareness was the result of student/teacher interactions.

In 18% of cases, the student's parents informed the school. This may have occurred as part of the enrolment process. Enrolling in a new school begins with a conversation between the parent(s) and the principal or deputy. During the conversation, certain information will be collected such as residential address and the circumstances that have led to the change of school. It is likely that homelessness would be revealed during this process. In these circumstances, families were already connected to an agency.

As one participant noted, *"They arrive with their own case worker"*. Indeed, as shown in Figure 9, in 20% of cases, the school was informed by an external agency/government department.

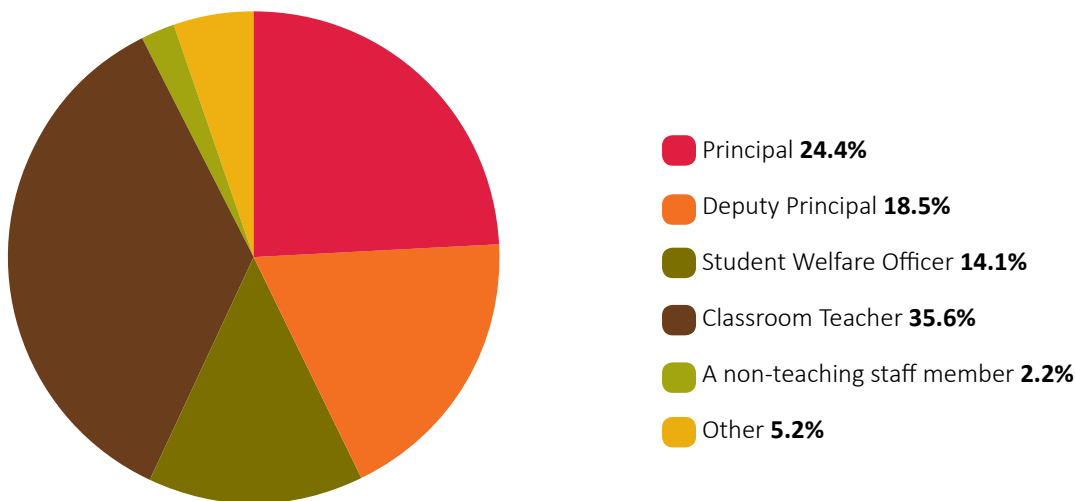
Figure 9: What is the most likely way that the school would become aware that a student was experiencing homelessness?



Source: Sample A survey data

Figure 10 focuses on a school's member of staff that is most likely to identify a student experiencing homelessness. Figure 9 shows that in most cases homelessness was identified by the principal (24%) or deputy principal (19%). The classroom teacher (36%) was also a key staff member; in some instances it was the student welfare officer (14%).

Figure 10: Which member of the school staff is most likely to identify a student experiencing homelessness?



Source: Sample A survey data

Observed changes in students

Identifying students experiencing homelessness was explored in more detail during the interviews. Participants highlighted four main areas that indicated changes to student circumstances: an empty lunchbox, a lack of sleep, clothing/uniform and hygiene. These issues are illustrated in the following comments:

The empty lunchbox

The lunchbox is one of those things that teachers pick up on quickly because you get used to seeing what the lunchboxes look like and then all of a sudden when things change or there's nothing in there, you know that something's ... you know a day or two is fine, but if you sort of see a consistent change, it's sometimes one of the signs...

The children have not said to my knowledge that they don't have anywhere to live but they have said they wouldn't have any food or wouldn't have any lunch or something like that.

Lack of sleep, clothing/uniform, food

There are three factors that will lead you to investigate the child's performance at school and that is lack of sleep, (they're sleep deprived), their diet and their clothing...You'll notice the sleep deprivation first because they just can't concentrate – they've got nothing to concentrate with. Then their clothes, they'll come to school on Monday with the same clothes that they had on Friday and when you just look at what they're eating they will only have packets of chips or they'll come to us at lunchtime and say "I haven't got any food" - very obvious.

Usually with homelessness, we really have our alarm bells going if uniforms aren't washed, the child's not washed, and there's no homemade type lunches - they're the three giveaways.

Absenteeism

We keep track of our absenteeism and touch base with the parents of those students who have absenteeism. And that's something where you'll find out what's going on in the home environment, what's happening and that can have an impact on...that can sometimes be the lines of communication.

Communication

Without the child saying it straight out there's little things suggested or said. It might be "Oh we're staying at Mum's friends place at present" and we will say "Oh are you? Are you just visiting?" and we will find out from there.

The kids tell their friends, and their friends tell their parents, and their parents tell us. The Chinese whispers get around fairly quickly.

Opening up to teachers

Around a quarter of the schools (24%) reported that students actively sought support from teachers (see Figure 10). When probed further in the interviews about whether the students 'opened up' to teachers and discussed their problems, interviewees explained:

Yeah I'd say so, I mean it's hard to answer because it depends on the kid and the kind of personality they have as well, I mean some kids talk to anyone and everyone about what's going on in their lives but then there also might be ones that don't say a thing because they've been told not to from home or they're too scared or they're embarrassed.

Generally with their own teacher, and often with myself, because that's my role, they would be protective against other teachers they don't know as well. They seek out the ones they trust.

Parents informed the school

In some cases, parents informed the school:

They say 'we've just come from xxx', or 'we haven't got a home' or we're staying with friends'...

Usually [we become aware of homelessness] because they come and tell us, they make contact with the school in some way. One of the great things about primary schools is we have a really good connection with families and the family may have been part of the school for quite some time and so they come to us, because they don't know what to do.

In such cases, the school has been able to assist the families involved as highlighted in the following:

For many of our families, I think we've been able to divert homelessness to be honest, because they have actually been able to come to us first of all and ask for assistance and help in being able to help them get something organised, and that's always the best case scenario.

But, sometimes parents were reluctant to disclose their circumstances:

The first category are the parents who tell us that they are homeless, that tell us that they are couch surfing, or we've actually found homes for and in that case we contact the shelter down the road, the Salvation Army Emergency Housing. So that is one category. The other category is the one we vicariously find out through other people, you know either that they're living in someone's garage or that they're living with them for a short amount of time, or, you know, that they've lost their homes through other people.

Parents in our experience are quite reluctant to disclose homelessness, and I think that for them there are risks around DHS and child protection. I think sometimes they're worried that because they can't provide for their child or they are in the car that perhaps their children might be removed.

Case Study- School B

School profile

School B is a metropolitan school located in an area of relative socio-economic advantage. At the time of the study, it had an enrolment of between 250 and 500 students, and an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score near 1200, the highest among the schools participating in the study. At the time of the study, the school did not have a primary welfare officer on staff.

Experience with homelessness

In the three years preceding the study, the school encountered two students affected by homelessness. The school has monitored families who have experienced financial disadvantage, so felt that they would become aware of any changes in the circumstances of their students.

School Response

General measures operating at the school to address disadvantage included:

- Food program
- Uniform scheme
- Assistance to attend camps, excursions and extra-curricular activities, and
- Assistance with Education Maintenance Allowance applications.

In response to the specific examples of student homelessness, the school had spent considerable time and effort liaising with agencies and support services. Specific support provided included:

- Counselling for the student
- Support to enable the students to catch up their learning through an Individual Learning Program
- Assistance in obtaining housing for a family.

The principal felt that the students' sense of security and stability had improved considerably due to the support provided to the students and especially securing accommodation for their families.

While the outcomes were considered worthwhile, the school was concerned that the time devoted to assisting the students who were homeless, including meetings with external agencies, had taken time away from other students.

External links

The school had experienced difficulty obtaining information about available services and accessing external support.

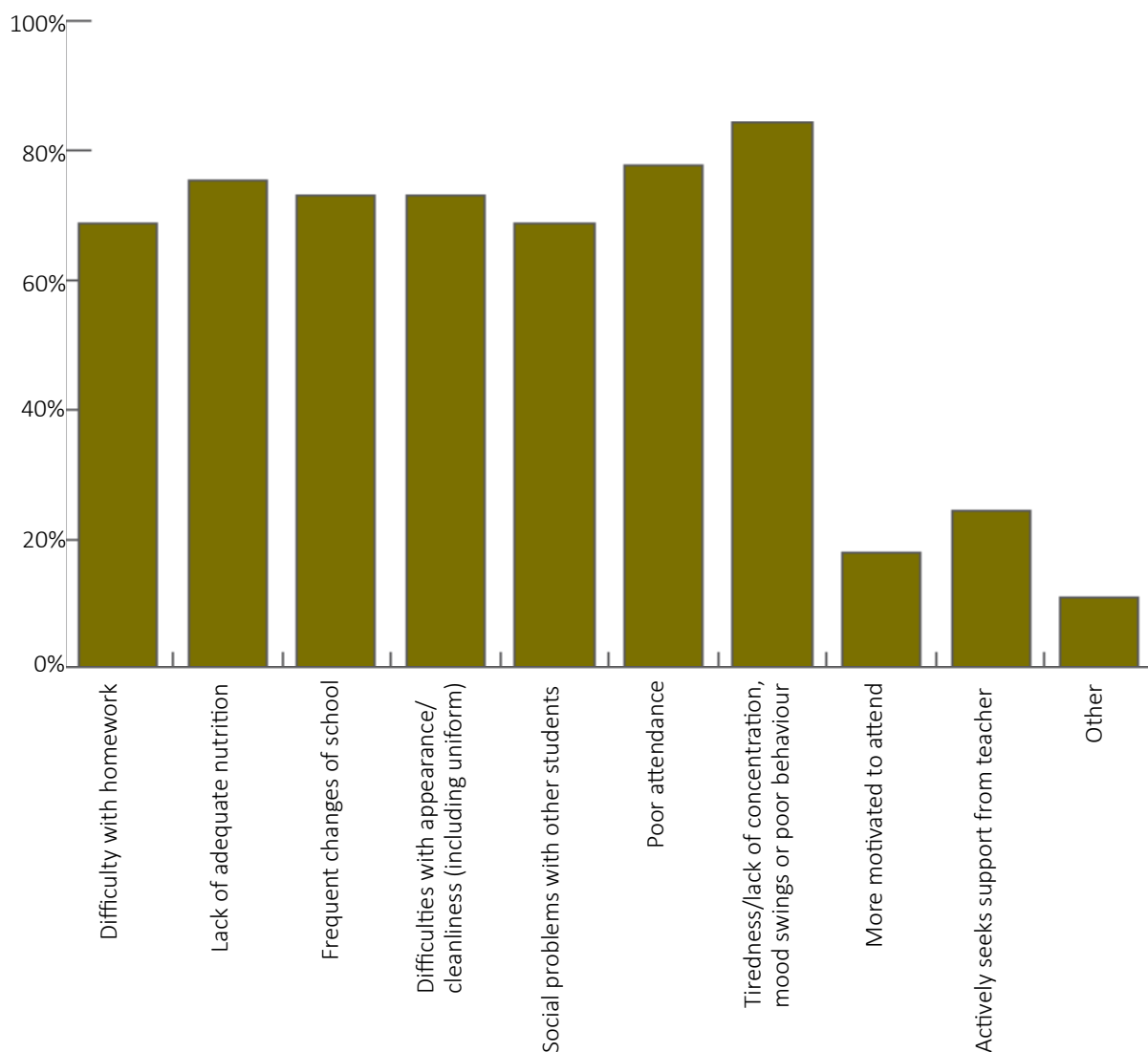
5. Impact on student learning and educational development

The impact that homelessness had on students' learning is the focus of this section. The findings are based on survey data from 45 schools and further illustrated with quotes from 21 interviews.

The 45 schools that had students who were homeless were asked to identify, from a list of several issues, what they had observed that may have affected the student given their homelessness.

The responses, presented in Figure 11, highlight the multiple negative effects that impacted on a student's academic, social and behavioural development. Common difficulties observed by the schools were: tiredness/lack of concentration, mood swings/poor behaviour (84%), poor attendance (78%), lack of adequate nutrition (76%), difficulties with appearance/cleanliness (73%) and frequent changes of school (73%). Difficulty with homework (69%) and social problems with other students (69%) were also common issues affecting the students.

Figure 11: In your school's experience what effects, if any, does the experience of homelessness have on students at school?



Source: Sample B survey data

Multiple effects

Homelessness made school life difficult for students in many ways:

Well as I said there's the absence. Tiredness because if they're surf couching [couch surfing] there's generally a lot of things happening in the house, there'll be another family who's got a routine, you know, there'll be a lot of anxiousness about a couple of families living together, there's generally tension in the house that they're staying, especially if it lasts for more than a month, you know, you can see that tension building in both the children and the parents. If they're in emergency accommodation, there's almost a guilt you know, that 'I can't look after my child' that 'I can't do' you know, and that child feels – as the length of the stays gets longer, you find the children withdraw more, there's an association with that guilt of not wanting everyone to know the circumstances that are happening. So there's definitely in the long term, of not having housing, an effect on the children. Certainly their academic ... All those sort of things.

They are lethargic. Sometimes they don't have enough to eat and they're disengaged, ...they don't perform very well, they don't have enough energy, they don't become involved in activities, particularly with friendship groups because they figure, "What's the point? I can't have that person over at my place, so I can't connect with that child or that group of children."

Tiredness/lack of concentration, mood swings or changes in behaviour

The quotes below highlight the extent of the behaviour difficulties experienced by students who were homeless. Interviewees talked about aggressive and violent behaviour, emotional distress and over compliance:

There's two ways they can change; one is that they can become naughtier so they act out; they can become aggressive and violent themselves. Another way is that they withdraw so that they become very quiet...So depending on the nature of the child they usually go to extremes.

Some of them become problematic in terms of their behaviour because they're frustrated, they're angry, they don't foresee that there's a positive light at the end of the tunnel. Some of them have become depressed and end up with mental health issues.

The child is more easily distressed so if something doesn't go their way or they're not coping with something they're much more prone to crying or having a tantrum-type behaviour.

They also develop an almost scary compliance because they want to please everybody. "Maybe if I please everybody then I'll get to stay where we are"...they become overly please-the-teacher-type students.

And there were occasions where the parent-child role was reversed:

In some instances you'll also find that they're quite mature because they've taken on a bit of an adult role in nurturing the parent when the parent becomes distressed.

Attendance

The issue of poor attendance was a common problem:

It greatly impacts on the student in terms of either their ability to even be at school in the first place, therefore missing developmental, social, academic goals.

One of the major issues that we find with our families in crisis and families that are homeless is attendance. And that can often be...the lack of routine, lack of bedtime routines and adequate sleep and/or lack of parent valuing the importance of school and being there on time or parents

who have drug and alcohol issues or mental health issues and just not being able to get up in the morning and assist their kids to get to school.

They very rarely stay. This particular family that had the two children, they were only here for a term, and attendance was a real issue, because they were living in cramped quarters, or sharing cramped quarters in an annex, and would go and stay at different places. There was a lot of family violence when they were together, her and her partner, so mum would often take off and take the kids and sleep in the car. Or they would end up in a shelter for the night.

Some families were always on the move; they moved to find accommodation and moved because it was not permanent:

There's another two families here, with a total of five children, that the parents have been homeless themselves and have been either living in a homeless shelter, or just constantly on the move staying with friends, and therefore they've only been with us for a short term, and then they move on because they can't stay in a caravan park just in the annex part of things with their friends, because it's just not a long term option.

In some cases, however, it was observed that students were more motivated to attend school (18%, Figure 5). Indeed, several interviewees commented that students perceived school as a haven and liked coming to school:

We find that they're very responsive to school and want to come to school because there's the routines, the predictability.

They're more concerned with school being a safe and happy and friendly place where they know that they can count on what's happening here in a non-judgemental way.

Frequent changes of school

The problems of attendance were compounded by the frequent changes of schools. As detailed below, frequent school changes had serious negative impacts on the students' education:

I think most research evidence shows that one change of school may not have a huge impact, but it will mean anywhere between three and six months loss of learning for the average student, but the more often you change schools, the more likely there is to be more impact and it can be six months for every change of school. So, if you changed school three times in a year, that student is at real risk of academically being disadvantaged.

The students who have moved around from school to school, many schools, are usually quite delayed with their learning. So they're quite at some severe educational disadvantage.

For the schools, this transience was particularly challenging:

We might get so far in some psychological assessments of some kids for learning difficulties or disabilities of some kind and then the family up and move and so there's no community of care for that child, you might get halfway through an assessment and they've disappeared.

So they might've gone to two or three schools by the time they get to you, even if they're only in year two. And when you track back and look at their attendance at those schools it's been really all over the show. So they've had lack of attendance, lack of punctuality. So their learning gaps, even if they actually have no learning difficulties nominated, they've got learning gaps because of the amount of time they have NOT been at school.

Physical appearance

Homelessness made it difficult for students to turn up to school clean and dressed in uniform:

It's more about disorganisation, so I suppose people are now living out of bags or sharing accommodation with other people, so just finding the appropriate shoes in the morning or a jacket or something is difficult, so they might come to school with ugg boots on or gumboots or slippers or thongs or something and that's just, life is chaotic, so Mum can't find the appropriate uniform for them to wear...

Their uniforms, often they don't have, because they're not here for a period of time, they're not planning on staying, they don't have the correct uniform.

With the (lack of) cleanliness comes illness. Always get the first cold that goes by, always have a snotty nose, always get chicken pox. They always...you know, if there's an illness going around, they have it... They might be hopping from one house to another. They don't have appropriate clothes on, or they're out roaming the town or sleeping on the floor, or sleeping in the lounge room, or sleeping in a room that's that flipping hot, so they come out without any jumpers on and they end up with a cold.

Peer relationships

In some cases, homelessness affected relationships with other students:

The major (problem) is socialisation and I think that's where the student really misses out if they're isolated because they get picked on for certain, you know, they're sort of unclean or there's some kind of - they're different, they're out of uniform...Yeah that can really impact on their social setting and their wellbeing and how they see themselves and all of those things.

Fragmented friendships, social isolation is really, really huge, because the kids often don't have access to sanitary facilities, they're smelly.

In other instances, however, the reaction of other students was positive and accepting:

Oh kids are very accepting. We're a very low socio-economic school so it's you know, many of our kids go through a certain level of hardship.

We've got a very caring community here. You often find that the students that know they're homeless, not all of them would know, but those that do protect them, there's a real protective community.

Our kids are really accepting of kids, all sorts of kids, I've got a lot of kids with special learning needs, a lot of kids on the spectrum with autism, I think our kids are very friendly and non-judgemental about kids, so that seems not an issue here.

Financial difficulties

Interviewees also observed that financial difficulties affected school life for those students who were homeless:

Particularly the people in crisis care they don't have a lot of spare finances, so even to afford to pay school fees which are , you know \$180 or more, is a huge ask, being

able to afford to pay for school uniforms, excursions, swimming program, camps – all of that is very difficult...

Effects on education

Experiencing homelessness is traumatising for students. It impacts significantly on their ability to learn and creates gaps that are detrimental to students' ongoing learning and educational development. To explore these issues further, interviewees were asked whether they saw the effects of homelessness impacting on students in the longer term. Likewise, was it the case that students were able to overcome the difficulties and make up for their disrupted learning once accommodation had stabilised?

Certainly their academic – because we almost associate it [homelessness] with trauma and you know, what happens when children are traumatised, there's very little academic work that happens because they're thinking about what's going to happen next, 'where will I be?'

Some of them can become, can get a home of some sort, but there's still that level of disadvantage that is constantly around them where they don't have the resources around them to have the things that other children are fortunate enough to have.

I don't think it's a blip and they get over it, I don't know, it just depends on the reason. It does ebb and flow a little bit but I think sometimes some people are in that cycle, cyclical for that family and maybe it was in the bigger picture of their family beforehand.

They still need structures and support, but I think for a lot, it depends on what the problem is that the parents are experiencing. I mean if it's substance abuse well obviously then that needs to be dealt with on a whole different level. But if it's in terms of housing and self then I think that really does make a difference that people feel valued and worthwhile and can work really hard to establish a steady home for the child.

You've got to catch them up. Those children have to catch up and while the other children are progressing, they haven't got the building blocks in place to take that next step. So, you've got to catch them up the things they've missed before you can bring them back to what the others are doing.

The participants identified a range of consequences for students experiencing homelessness such as changes in behaviour, attendance problems, and difficulty with physical appearance. There was also increased transitoriness and financial difficulties where school fees and extracurricular activities were concerned. Relations with other students were also affected. All of this had considerable impact on the student's learning, and in most cases it appears that homelessness has a long term impact on educational development. Given what is at stake, students' educational development and future wellbeing, concerted and considerable investment is required to ensure young students do not fall through the educational gap.

Case Study- School C

School profile

School C has an enrolment of 250 to 500 students. At the time of the study, it had an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score of over 1100 which suggested an educationally advantaged school. The school is located in an inner metropolitan area that reflects a range of socio-economic groups, including sole parent families and recently arrived migrant families.

Experience with homelessness

The school is located near a specialist agency so at any given time, it has around six families affected by homelessness. The school becomes aware of students' homelessness at enrolment. The students tend to be transient, staying for very short periods and with high needs. Generally, the students were at the school for less than twelve months, sometimes as little as three. This transience was a major issue for the school to deal with as the students often had learning gaps. Attendance was also an issue due to the breakdown of routines and the dominance of other problems.

The school observed that the students tended to experience anxiety and anger and the families had difficulty paying for uniforms and other school expenses.

School response

The school has developed a range of processes and programs as a response to its transient students including:

- Getting the family history to identify the issues and how to address them
- Referring the families and children to appropriate professionals and community agencies
- When children move on, the welfare officer provides assistance enrolling them in the new school and
- Attends meetings with the principal or student welfare coordinator of the new school to ensure continuity of support.
- The school's welfare team (comprising a DEECD psychologist and the relevant classroom teacher) meet weekly to identify the issues and create an action plan including obtaining outside assistance.

The school felt they needed more funding to be able to provide respite during holiday periods for students affected by homelessness. The school was keen to appoint an in-house Welfare Officer.

External links

The school is well connected with a wide range of agencies that assist with homelessness. But these connections involved considerable effort and were developed over a number of years.

6. The school response

This section explores the extent to which the schools were able to meet the educational and welfare needs of students who were homeless. Table 1 presents an overview of the types of programs and assistance that operate within schools that (at least partly) address the impact of homelessness on students.

Findings from both the survey and interviews are then used to illustrate, in detail, the difficulties experienced by the schools in their attempts to support students, and the extent to which they accessed external agencies and resources.

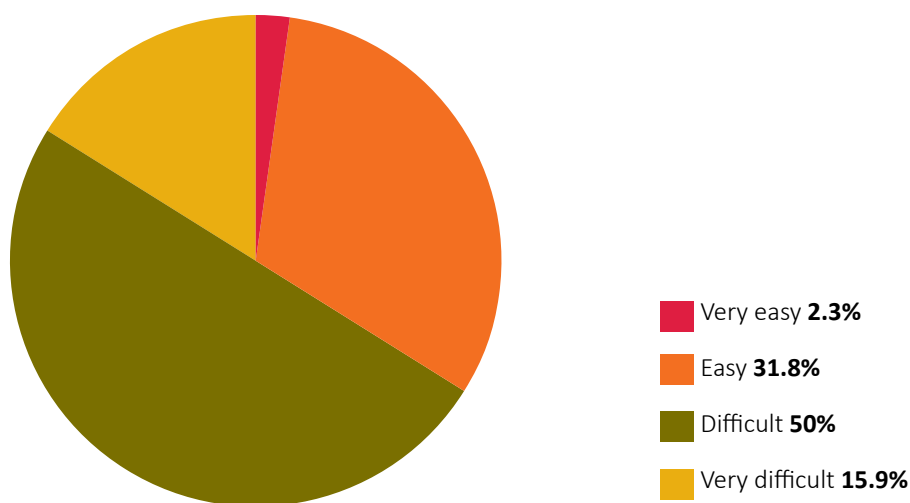
Table 1. Summary of impact of homelessness on students educational development and school response

Impact of homelessness on students	School response
Education-related impacts and responses	
Disrupted learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tuition programs • Book schemes • Teacher aides • Individual learning plans • Providing transport where student absenteeism observed or student has moved further away from school
Difficulty doing homework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework clubs
Welfare-related impacts and responses	
Lack of adequate nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakfast programs • Lunch boxes provided
Difficulties with physical appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uniform schemes • Shower facilities
Peer relationship difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance to access extra curricula activities
Financial difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance gaining Education Maintenance Allowance
Tiredness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing space for rest eg. blankets and cushions in classrooms
Poor concentration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Related to poor nutrition or tiredness</i> • Space provided for rest with blankets and cushions • Breakfast programs • Lunch boxes provided • <i>Related to worry and concerns</i> • Referral to community resources and assistance
Mood swings/behaviour change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral to community resources and assistance
Homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Helping with housing applications • Linking families to external agencies • Liaising with real estate agents • Phone calls and writing letters • Accompanying parents to appointments

6.1. Responding to educational needs

The 45 schools that had students who were homeless were asked how difficult it was to meet the educational needs of those students. Of the 44 schools that replied to the question, half said 'difficult' and 16% 'very difficult' (Figure 12). Surprisingly, however, more than 30% said 'easy' and 2% said 'very easy'.

Figure 12: Overall, how easy or difficult has it been for the school to meet the educational needs of students who are homeless?



Source: Sample B survey data

Schools put in place various strategies to address academic needs, from homework clubs, teacher aides to learning plans:

We are obliged by the whole of government agreement between DEECD and DHS to set up a support group meeting with a parent, teacher (myself) and perhaps a welfare officer, with any of the family support agencies who may be involved, and basically what ...we orchestrate here at school is an individual learning plan for that student so that their academic life is as successful as possible.

Sometimes we'll have one of our aides do some of the reading that they haven't been doing at home.

We've got a homework club on tonight where kids can come and do their homework because maybe there's not a space for them to do it at home so they would come here. They also like the idea of having a hot chocolate or a couple of bikkies after school too and just having that company...

Integral to continuity of learning is school attendance; schools, therefore, had processes in place to check on absent students and in some cases, staff provided transport:

We have had a family who have had seven moves in two years of different house...that family would not still be at our school if we weren't following them in a way with our school bus and they know that we will come and get them. Otherwise they just would have been at seven different schools.

Oh we have a very dedicated staff I have to tell you. Sometimes I worry about them going out to people's homes, I won't ever let one person go out and- there was a family out at xxx,...housing [authority] got them a house in xxx, their child goes to xxx [20 kms away]. How do you think they're going to get their child there?

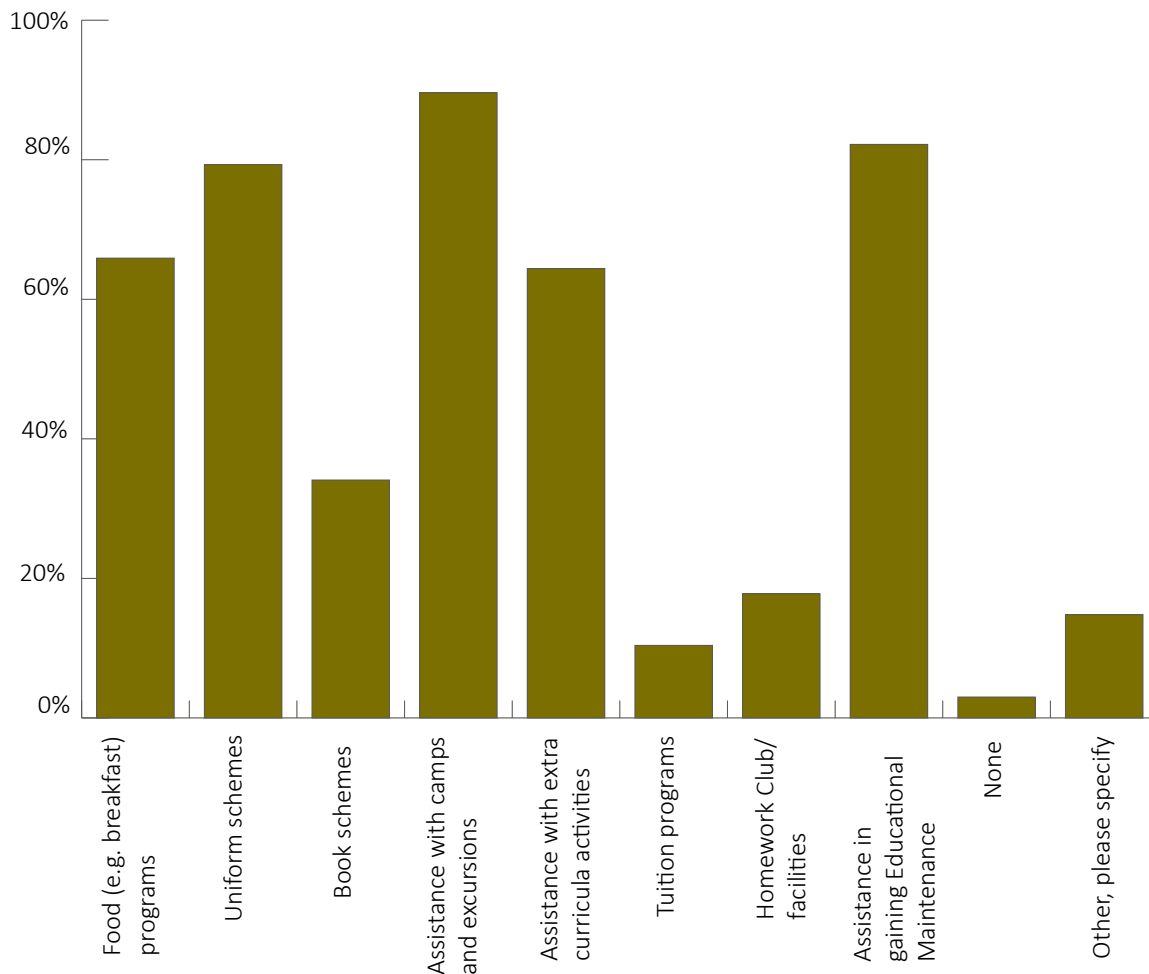
So what we try and do is really get the children to school. We have put in things like the school bus. I mean we will go and pick children up if we need to, if they're staying somewhere different.

We've got processes in place if kids are away two days in a row then somebody will ring to check that things are okay in that family, so not as a judgement sort of thing but that's part of the process...

6.2. Responding to welfare needs

Schools have in place several programs designed to ensure the welfare of *all* students; the programs include breakfast clubs, homework clubs, book clubs, and financial assistance. All schools (n=135) were asked if they provided such programs. As shown in Figure 13, the most common programs were financial help with camps, excursions (90%); access to the Educational Maintenance Allowance (82%); uniform schemes (79%); breakfast programs (66%); and assistance with extra curricula activities (64%).

Figure 13: Does the school have any special measures in place to assist students who might experience disadvantage or homelessness?



Breakfast programs

The interviews with schools highlighted the large numbers of students that benefitted from breakfast programs:

If we know that they require food or clothing we do that. We can feed up to 50 kids a day, not because they're homeless but for breakfast, and then we probably go through two or three loaves of bread in sandwiches per day that we feed the kids and then we give them fresh fruit as well, so we do feed a large number of children and clothe them as well.

Well we have breakfast- children never refuse food. We have fruit in each classroom. We have an enormous reserve of jumpers, shoes, socks, undies and singlets that we freely give out...and we feed 60 children for breakfast every morning (in a school of 100) and we can make up to 25 lunches at lunchtime.

We've only got 270 kids. We could have 80 or 100 kids in a breakfast club... 80 kids three mornings a week, that's a fair whack I reckon.

Uniform schemes

In most of the schools, uniforms were readily available and meant that students were not singled out or marginalised because of their appearance:

Generally they want to fit in. That's the gist. They want to feel part of it. And the one thing we ensure is that they have a uniform. So when they start, regardless of what their situation is outside the school, we'll ensure they have a uniform because that's part of feeling connected, feeling part of the community.

We're fairly conscious of it, because we know that a lot of children have – we don't want them being teased because maybe their hygiene is not at the best and they're wearing the same clothes for a period of time. So we have quite a substantial amount of uniform here that we manage to give them and just sort of keep them – I guess keeping up appearances for them. We have a shower here, we allow children to shower.

The provision of shower facilities was also reported by another school:

We also have a program where we...offer them showers, we have shampoo and for the older girls we have like a girl's talk type thing so we have lots of welfare programs that run at our school in terms of assisting these people with hygiene.

Tiredness

Tiredness and learning do not go together. In fact, sleep-deprived students was such an issue that schools provided blankets and cushions in classrooms, making it possible for tired students to catch up on much needed sleep:

If we can see that they're tired or whatever we will certainly give them the opportunity to have a sleep or whatever they need, if they need some time out from others just to get on top of things then we do that as well.

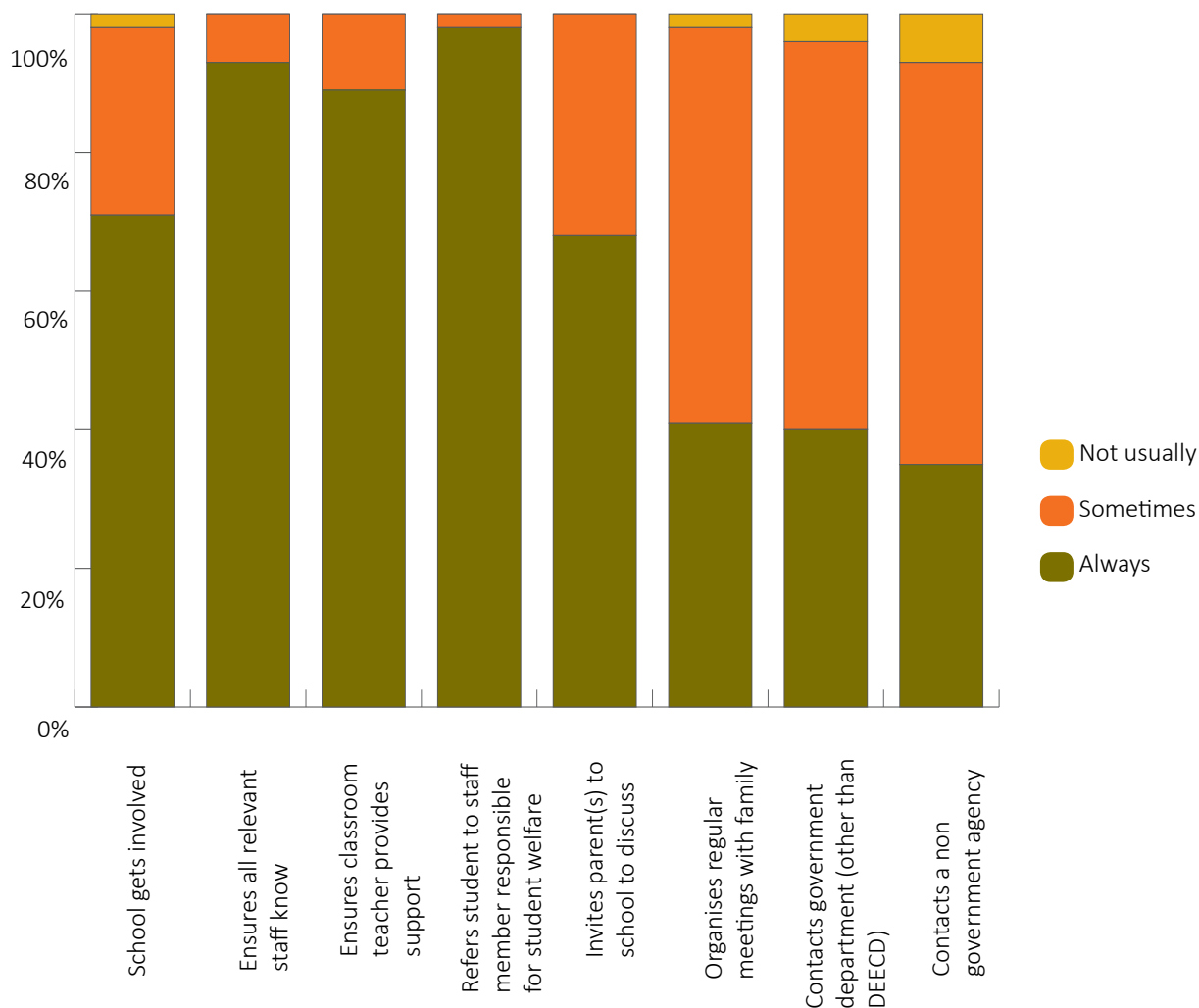
We have blankets and cushions in classrooms where children can go to sleep...We can have up to eight kids asleep on cushions, under blankets around the school.

School processes for addressing student welfare needs

When schools identified students who were homeless, they reacted immediately to address the welfare needs of those students. For example, Figure 14 shows that of the 45 schools who experienced student homelessness, 71% 'always' got

involved. Additionally, almost all of the 45 schools ‘always’ referred the student to the welfare officer (98%), and ‘always’ ensured that all relevant staff were aware (93%) and the classroom teacher provided support to the student (89%). Further, 68% ‘always’ invited the parents to the school to follow-up.

Figure 14: How often does the school’s response involve each of the following?



Source: Sample B survey data

The follow-up of schools in interviews highlighted the detailed arrangements that they had in place to ensure the wellbeing of students. Some schools were very well prepared and linked to the broader community as well as to government departments:

Well we have a welfare team here comprising of the principal and myself and a leading teacher and the school is assigned a psychologist from the Department of Education. We meet regularly. We meet weekly. So just to give you a picture of how we operate here – once a term we screen all our children and all our families and the teachers are given allocated classroom relief to come to a meeting which would last probably about an hour per teacher and we look at all the kids and identify any children or families at risk and that’s with learning, social and emotional issues or family issues and we continually update that. We identify the issues and then we create an action plan to look at how we are going to address those and who else we’re going to involve from the

broader community to assist us. So we've got a very clear idea of our identified families and what the issues are and how we're going to attempt to address them.

We have student wellbeing meetings every three weeks, with a social worker from the Department, and we have a list of students who we consider at risk, for one reason or another. So we identify those students early, and we monitor them.

Some schools could be responsive to the needs of their students by being flexible with staffing appointments:

Many schools have a line in their budgets for a welfare officer and I've employed a social worker to do that rather than have a teacher pick up that role and then I have used my staffing budget, if you like, because of the need in our school, we've used our staffing budget to support the needs of the students.

In some cases, schools had a wide range of expertise available:

There's a leading teacher that heads it up, but my welfare team is I've got two social workers on staff, I've got a youth worker, I've got a community engagement person. They all make up my welfare team and then there's psychologists, you know the department psychologist who comes once a week and I also have a psychologist from Medicare Local who comes once a week.

For some, their role as educators limited the extent of their involvement and it was about linking families to external agencies:

We have to be careful that we are not overstepping the mark. If the parents want us to then we will pass them on to that outside organisation, but for us to intervene at that level, it's putting us into a different category rather than us being educators, and we have to keep some sort of separation between the two because then it can be seen – the parents will come to us and expect us to manage a whole heap of stuff to do with their lives and we don't have the staffing to do that, nor do we have the expertise.

The thing is the school is powerless to intervene in family or home life situations or financial situations. Our sphere of responsibility is really the academic side of the child's life. But to ensure that they are happy and engaged with the schooling and that they are attending regularly, what the connection with our external agencies allows us to do is to allow the family...to connect with support agencies...

I get heavily involved for the first say a couple of weeks to a month, trying to find the housing and whether that is writing reference letters to real estate agents, driving them to inspections, taking them to the housing workers, filling out the paper work for the government housing, all of that stuff, that's what you have to do.

Assisting with phone calls and writing letters was not uncommon:

We try to engage the appropriate agencies who can help find homes. We write supporting letters around to support the child to say that it's in the child's best interest to have a regular place to live. However, we will not write references for the parents because that's not our place to do that. Our concern is with the children if that makes sense.

It can be quite daunting having to ring up an agency; sometimes if we have the parents up here, we'll say we're happy to make that phone call for you with you here. You know we can help you fill out the paperwork or we can help you, you know, if you want to sit with us while we ring the person and you can talk to them.

I make phone calls if needed, sort of as an advocate. I write letters to the Housing Commission and I ring if necessary. I have had some times where a parent doesn't feel they can make it to the [Housing Commission] office but they can come here. Sometimes we have used this as a meeting place so that they could meet the Housing Commission person so that we could explain the situation from the child's point of view but also advocate for the parents, at that stage.

Well often I've gone straight to calling Child First for DHS assistance even if it's just advice. But another, like we've got quite a good list of community services that I can get them in touch with such as Connection Family Services, there's Housing Services, although I would say that it's probably been one of my harder ones. Referring families to get in touch with [some] kind of emergency housing has been hard.

Responding to students who experienced homelessness meant engaging with their families. Figure 14 shows that most of the schools discussed with parents how the school could help ('always' 68% and 'sometimes' 32%), or organised regular meetings with the family ('always' 41% and sometimes 54%). Nevertheless, schools faced a dilemma about the level of involvement.

Involvement was dependent on the nature of the relationship with the school and the attitude of the parents:

Definitely interact with the parents if they're willing, if we can see that- because we would much rather have the kids here where we can monitor them and help, and keep the parents here, try and keep them in the community. If they're willing to have a go, or they've just had a run of bad luck, I'm just looking at the kids, we've had a couple that they've just really had a run of bad luck, which is why they end up losing their home and things like that. We've been able to assist, and get them into temporary accommodation, whilst they're on the list for housing. So that's been good to be able to work with the family, and we always say look we're not here to judge, it's just you guys can use us, we have the resources, we know the contacts, we can put you in touch with people who can help...So treat us like a phone book, tell us what you need help with, and we can help.

I've had a few cases and even picked up children from aggressive parents who you know, want more, so we have to look at it on a case-by-case basis and what we know about the child and how we can help the child. The long term relationships, we tend to be more involved with the parents because we know them, we know that they'll accept our help, there's that trusting relationship. We recently had a young girl, they were living in a caravan down at the race course and she (the mother) just hung up the phone on us every time we rang. We rang on different phones and had lovely conversations with her until she realised we were from the school, so really there's a case-by-case, you know, whether we're helping the parents as well, but always, we're focused on the child: how can we help the child, what can we put in place for the child, how can we support the child? If the parents are willing to engage, you know, then we'll involve them, but we enable parents, we don't disable parents...you need to be aware of dignity and respect of the person that you deal with...

In some cases, schools provided extensive support that included advocacy, guiding parents through the service system, helping with transport, filling in forms, organising interpreters, and dealing with real estate agents:

Well, certainly they would be referred to our welfare team and then in all likelihood my wellbeing officer would pick it up, because she has a background in dealing with housing issues and she would make applications to various places to support the family for housing and she might even attend the meeting. She might go to Centrelink with them. In the past we've had a family, they suffered from mental illness; the parents did. They were in constant difficulty with their rental. We actually liaised with the real estate agent on their behalf. We helped them make applications for housing, because they couldn't do those things on their own, so it would be referred to our welfare team and

then somebody in our welfare team would support that family if it was appropriate or they would refer them to where they could be going for help and it may be that if it's a family without any English, that we might get an interpreter, through our access to interpreters to go and assist that family at the appropriate place to get help or a member of my staff might actually go with them. It just depends on each individual case as to how we handle it, but certainly we would support them in some way.

I was determined that that child was not sleeping in his (the father's) car overnight and that something was going to be done but I went down with the family to St Vinnies to make sure that that occurred because they were in the situation where they couldn't express themselves well enough. The mum had had a nervous breakdown and the father was out of work so they were in a situation they couldn't even express themselves except they would go off at the officer in anger that something wasn't happening. They needed an advocate to go and do that on their behalf so I have done that sort of thing. At that stage, for that family, the school raised money to feed them, we gave them the leftovers from the school luncheon and this and that and that fed them for the night and then we fed them for nearly a week, I think. Yes, that was our most extreme one and that was the one where the father had been almost suicidal, he told us that later, he didn't tell us that at the time but we got the kids Christmas presents. We got \$500 from the Anglican Church to fix their car and a whole lot of different things that we shouldn't have done but he was one of our kids and we weren't going to see him left stranded and the whole lot of them left.

One school was enthusiastic about being a one-stop shop:

We'd love it if we had the resources and funding and space, we would love to be the one-stop shop for parents because in our community, schools are the first place these migrants and refugees know and trust and we're the first port of call for them when there's a crisis. If we had some support around that and some resources we could offer them a lot more.

Mandatory requirements

Schools are obligated to adhere to legal requirements, which have to be considered in relation to students who are homeless:

The first thing we do obviously is a mandatory report; we would make a report to DHS [Department of Human Services] because the child is at risk...

There was only one particular family that I was involved with where it was strongly recommended [that the family apply for housing]; that family refused and we had to call in the Department of Human Services who had to step in to make sure that the family became compliant. That was part of the court order that they had to adhere to and sign off on before they were allowed to have access to their children again because where they were was detrimental to the safety and wellbeing of the children.

Then it becomes a notification to child protection and a case consult with a member from the SOCIT [Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams] team as well, if there's child sexual abuse in there as well.

Case Study-School D

School Profile

School D is located in a small town in regional Victoria and has between 100 and 150 students. At the time of the study, its Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score was 1020, slightly above average in terms of the socio-economic background of the parents. It had reported 'often' having students who were homeless (more than once a year). The principal had taken on a teaching load in order to fund a student welfare coordinator position.

Experience with homelessness

The school regularly had students from families relocating to the area for short-term accommodation. These families often experienced a range of difficulties including homelessness. This was identified at the time of enrolment but the school was usually aware of any changes to the circumstances of families. Given that students attended the school for only a short period, transience was a major issue that impacted on their day-to-day learning and overall educational development.

School response

The school had a strong welfare team and a range of measures in place to address student disadvantage and homelessness:

- Regular meetings held with a social worker every three weeks to discuss student wellbeing; students considered at risk monitored on an ongoing basis and linked to relevant community organisations
- Assistance with uniforms, food and extra-curricular activities
- Innovative programs in which local parents work with students on joint construction projects at the school, which aimed to provide positive adult role models and to build trusting relationships with students
- The school felt the main barrier to meeting the needs of students experiencing homelessness and other disadvantage was the lack of resourcing.

External links

It had taken a number of years for the school to develop effective ongoing relationships with relevant community organisations. The school had also received some financial support for food and other items from the local Lions club; it also reported a good relationship with the local police.

7. Availability and adequacy of resources

This section focuses on the experience that schools had when seeking advice and support from external agencies. Were agencies accessible, how easy was it to get information or support and was the contact helpful?

Financial resources

Of the schools that had experience with students who were homeless (n=45), the majority (82%) experienced financial difficulty providing education and other supports for those students:

Well we don't get money for disadvantage. We get money, per bottom, in the school. So you compare us to any other school in the State, what used to happen is there was money for disadvantaged schools, you know, for schools that had high welfare issues, high needs, but now it's just bums on seats. So you could compare a school...[neighbouring school] which is in a very well-to-do area...everyone owns their own home, they're all middle class, so they get exactly the same bums on seat money as we do, and they have a Welfare Officer as well. Heaven knows what their welfare needs are.

We get money for students who are funded under disability. We get an extra bit of funding if they're Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, but besides that, our school budget is based on what our demographic is. But it's certainly nowhere near enough and sufficient to support them.

This funding problem was exacerbated by the fact that those schools tended to be located in disadvantaged communities, which made it harder to raise money:

They [a neighbouring school] have people donate money to them...they have a fete and they make \$30-\$40,000. We have a fete and we're lucky if we make \$3000 because of our demographics, they don't have that money to spend...

Another school had a breakfast program and provided food in the classroom but this program was financially vulnerable and faced an uncertain future; as the school put it:

Well, we have [managed financially] up until this year; God only knows what's going to happen next year.

Equity Issues

In some cases, schools expressed concern about the concentration of disadvantage they were dealing with. Indeed, in some cases, the interviewed schools felt they had gained a reputation for dealing well with students who were disadvantaged:

I think they come to our school because it does have a reputation, there's a student wellbeing officer here, so the kids get a little bit of nurturing I think whilst they're here.

So you go that extra mile... but then other community members will pick up that, "Oh yes, they do a great job". You know "They do a really good job looking after the families".

If schools become known and chosen by parents because they deal well with disadvantage, this would raise a dilemma for both the school and the system. To what extent would it be desirable to have concentrations of disadvantage in particular schools? It could be argued that, if properly resourced and appropriately staffed, those schools could better meet the needs of students with high welfare needs. However, educationalists may argue that this is undesirable and counterproductive in the long-run. One participant addressed the dilemma in the following way:

So you can give a school a huge funding grant, but if they don't have the people or the ethos and they don't believe in what they're doing and the commitment, it will fail no matter how much you give them. But I also understand that the more resources you put into schools that already have

those systems established are you creating more work because it just gets bigger and bigger. And then, like any system, if you overload it with one system, with one sort of intake of particular students, does that impact right across the school? I think it would.

Several participants referred to what they saw as inequities in the broader society:

It's that bigger picture, that whole generational poverty, and it's the whole package, it's health care for these kids...

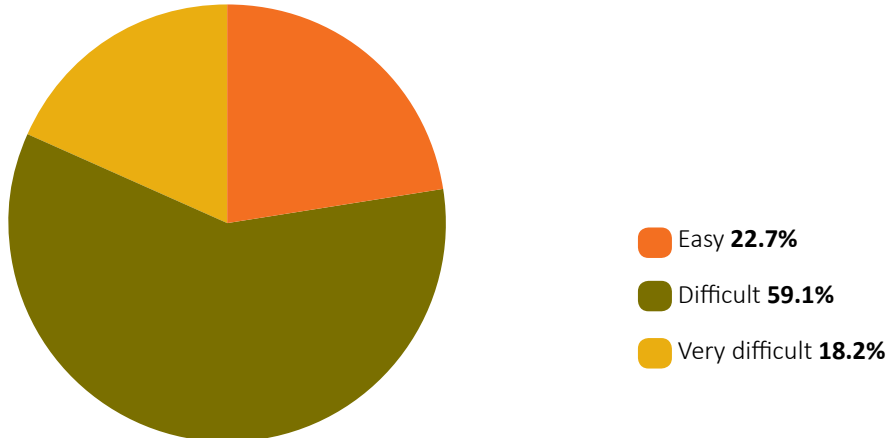
Others felt that the broader education system lacked understanding of the issues involved:

It is challenging and the system that we work in doesn't understand the journey these children go on cannot be measured by NAPLAN.

Access to and helpfulness of community resources

In the survey, those schools that had students who were homeless were asked a general question about how easy or difficult it had been to access external supports. As shown in Figure 15, more than three quarters (77%) reported that access had been difficult (59%) or very difficult (18%). Only a relatively small proportion reported that access was easy (23%).

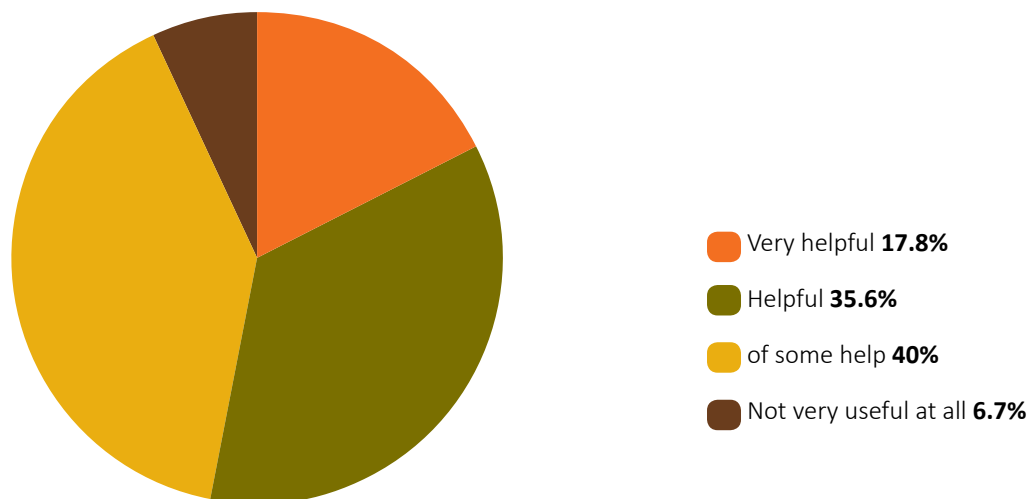
Figure 15: Overall how easy or difficult has it been for the school to access community resources and supports?



Source: Sample B survey data

Figure 16 shows that when asked how helpful the contact with external agencies was, the majority of the schools rated the experience as helpful or very helpful (36% helpful; 18% very helpful). However, 40% reported that it was 'of some help' and 7% said 'not very useful at all'.

Figure 16: Overall how helpful is such contacts?



Source: Sample B survey data

Schools were asked to list the agencies they dealt with. In some cases, schools referred to a whole range of services, not just those offering housing services, but also women’s shelters, mental health agencies, religious organisations and general welfare agencies. As one school stated:

I’ve got a whole list of them here: City of Port Phillip Family Support Services, Homeground, of course, and Hanover links into that; Inner South Community Health Service, Royal District Nursing Service, Homeless Peoples Program...Ozchild for counselling. We’ve just brought in the Alanna and Madeline Foundation. Alfred Child & Youth Mental Health Service, Salvation Army. Yeah, look, sometimes the New Hope Foundation come into it. The Department of Human Services, of course, we’re constantly in contact with.

Most of the schools that took part in the interviews had become familiar with the agencies they had contacted:

Now we can ring intake at child protection and say “hi, it’s (first name) from xxx Primary School, and they’re like “Hi (first name), what have you got for us?” So it’s like first name basis.

Over time, ongoing, collegial and productive relationships were built up:

I think some of them have been really good at providing strategies or support for those students. Some of them will ring us, and I know especially that DHS [Department of Human Services] do a lot of that, is they’ll ring up and touch base with us...they’ll ring up and say, “Oh so how’s such and such been going?” So we can give them a rundown on what we’ve been going on, how they’ve displayed at school, how they’ve been coping. So it’s a real partnership and then they’ll let us know what they’re doing with the family and the environment that they’re in at the moment. So it’s sort of that partnership between ensuring that we’re aware of what’s going on in their environment that’s impacting possibly on their schooling and then what we’re doing to support that to try and ensure that there’s some consistency and support there.

Yes, we usually stay in the loop and we’ll try where possible to always know who the case manager is or the person working directly with the family so that if we think things aren’t going the right way then we can contact them and just give them an update on how things are.

However, when asked about access to *specific information* about available services, or *accessing support from external agencies for students who were homeless*, the majority of the schools experienced difficulty, 66% and 77% respectively (Sample B survey data).

Indeed, in contrast to the experience noted above, some schools found it frustrating and difficult to establish ongoing relationships and partnerships, due to the turnover of agency staff:

There's not enough people and the people that are there, the ... turnover of staff and also the lack of staff. Some of them tell me how many cases they've got and I think no wonder you burn out and leave so quickly.

There's one family I've known and there have been twelve different workers involved with this person.

All of these agencies have a certain level of care that they can provide but we find that with these particular services, there's so many staff changes, so many people in and out that you're constantly having to say the same thing over and over to different people...you spend half your time updating them on things that they should already know because they should have the file. So that is a level of frustration for me in particular and I know from my colleagues that deal with these agencies and services that are around for these families. By the same token, you know, they do try their best but sometimes their best is not good enough and it's not enough for these families...Time, resources, money, human resources...in some cases, DHS for example, will be involved in a particular family for only a set period of time because they only have a certain amount of resources that they can give and then after that time is up, that family is dropped like a hot potato and that's what they feel. That's what they [the family] say. "They don't care anymore. They've done what they need to do and now they've left me." Some of these families can't make it on their own; they don't know how to.

When asked about what additional supports and services they thought were needed, schools with limited experience mentioned processes and resource materials:

To have a very clear process in place that puts schools in touch with the appropriate services within the area of the school, streamlined somehow.

Resource materials with information on how students can be affected or [how they] respond when facing homelessness.

These schools tend to have limited knowledge of the agencies to contact and the resources available. A common question asked by these schools was: "who do I turn to?" This limited knowledge meant that they were not always aware of the existing resources available.

Support from local organisations and businesses

In addition to the help received from specialist agencies, several participants also mentioned the valuable role played by local community organisations (eg. Rotary, Lion's Clubs, RSL), local charities and businesses, particularly with the provision of food and clothing:

We have people like Bakers Delight, they supply us with bread, we have a fruit market, they supply us with a bag of apples...and a fruit box every week.

We get a lot of stuff from Foodshare...we get a lot of food from them, so depending on what they've got at the time...we can get stuff to make like a food hamper and sometimes they have toothpaste and shampoo and stuff like that so we put that in as well.

The charities here are very good as well, Water Trust give us vouchers for clothing, if the kids just

need things like underwear and socks, we can assist the families in that way and give them \$50 Target vouchers to get their kids clothing.

In the main, those schools that had students who were homeless were the ones most likely to be familiar with local agencies. They also had systems and processes in place in order to respond to the circumstances of their students.

Departmental guidelines

A key resource for schools, *Supporting children, young people and their families affected by homelessness: Guidelines for Victoria schools*, was published by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)²¹ in 2009. It should be noted that there was no specific question in the study about these guidelines; but they were mentioned by one school that did find the resource useful:

Help is available but often they (other schools) don't know how to go about getting it so there is a DEECD guide that was put out [about] homeless[ness] and I have really followed the guidelines in that.

Community Hubs

Community hubs, a common name for school-community partnerships, were also mentioned. One of the participating schools that was part of a community hub talked about how that hub worked:

Some people are embarrassed to go to xxx...or embarrassed to ask for a food hamper so now xxx who runs the community hub might sense that by when parents are in the hub with her and organise for that food hamper to be dropped off at school...they're trying to do things so people can take advantage of the service and don't need to feel embarrassed about doing it...

Another school, which also had experience of a community hub, talked about the benefit of hubs, particularly for students:

They would have second hand or give away uniforms down there for those kids, they'd keep an eye on them at the breakfast program, at the homework club, getting some of those kids to come in and use the space in the homework club so that they had somewhere to go after school or in the morning before school for the breakfast program.

One of the schools, which had recently been successful in securing a grant for a hub at the school, explained:

We were fortunate to be one of them [selected] and so we'll have a project worker who'll be-- and that's what the Scanlon Foundation is funding is this project worker who will develop activities and programs for parents in our school and the wider community that will operate out of the school, because we know parents are already relatively comfortable in coming into the school and so that there will be services here that parents can access or we will say, "Well this week we're going to have some people come in and talk about all the different ways you can access housing and to give out information to parents." And then another week it might be about something else and there'll be ongoing programs as well.

This exploratory study is the first time that the point of view of primary schools and their day-to-day experiences of dealing with student homelessness have been investigated. The findings make an important contribution to the broader evidence base on the detrimental impact of homelessness on children's education. Engagement and wellbeing are fundamental to learning²². Given that homelessness can interfere with school engagement and wellbeing, it poses a major obstacle to learning.

21 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/participation/homelessnessstrategy09.pdf>

22 KPMG, Re-engaging our kids: A framework for education provision to children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school, 2010

8. Discussion

Evidence from this study emphasised the difficulty experienced by primary schools in ensuring continuity in learning and educational development. Schools that participated in the study provided support to the students affected by homelessness and, indeed, poverty more generally. For most of the schools, homelessness was part of a broader mix of social and economic problems that they faced.

Students were supported in a caring and understanding environment. Schools had a range of processes in place to respond to the welfare and education needs of students once homelessness was identified. Certainly, the welfare needs were great and needed to be addressed; students cannot learn when hungry, tired or worrying about their circumstances.

Diversity in school experiences

The findings highlighted a stark contrast between schools and their experience of students who were homeless. Two distinct groups emerged: at one end of the spectrum, most (63%) of the schools that participated in the study never or very rarely encountered students experiencing homelessness. At the other end, a small number of the schools were dealing with the issue on a regular basis. For these schools, generally located in disadvantaged communities, homelessness was not an isolated feature, but part of a broader range of social and economic difficulties with which they had to deal.

Students who were homeless were identified early by school staff; warning signs included empty lunchboxes, the lack of a uniform, lack of sleep, absenteeism and transience. But parents also informed the school, often as part of seeking help, and through agencies working together with schools.

In these circumstances, the schools were aware of the range of external services available, including locally, that could be accessed for support. In contrast, for those schools where homelessness was not a common occurrence, there was sometimes difficulty in knowing how to respond. It was these schools that needed a ready reference that they could turn to.

DEECD has, in fact, published Guidelines for Victorian schools focused on supporting student homelessness²³. The Guidelines present as a very valuable and comprehensive resource; for example, it includes references to tools and templates. However, there were no questions in the study that asked schools about their awareness, or use, of these guidelines²⁴ so it is difficult to state whether or not schools actually knew about the resource or found it to be useful.

Schools as Welfare Agencies

The analysis of the interviews demonstrated the extent to which many of the schools acted as quasi welfare agencies for the community in which they were located. Schools were involved because they act in the best interests of the student.

Some had comprehensive processes in place as part of a broader charter designed to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of *all* students, including students who were homeless. Some also employed strategies in direct response to young students who were homeless. Breakfast programs, uniform schemes, assistance with camps and excursions, were particularly common as was assistance with extra curricula activities and accessing financial help. However, most of the schools experienced considerable strain in providing activities for which they were not funded.

The extent to which schools provided support to the parents was unexpected. It included helping parents to find accommodation and other support, sometimes accompanying them, or even transporting them, to interviews, making phone calls on their behalf, and acting as advocates for them with real estate agents. Such support was time consuming and impacted not only on the principal and welfare staff, but also classroom teachers.

23 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/participation/homelessnessstrategy09.pdf>

24 Supporting children, young people and their families affected by homelessness: Guidelines for Victorian schools, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009, p.36.

At the same time, the schools were uniquely placed to be the first port of call for the parents with housing and other problems. In most circumstances, there was a relationship of trust between the school and the parents. They knew the principal and teachers so it was not unusual for parents to turn to the school for help.

Staffing

Victorian schools have considerable discretion around staffing. The way that staff are funded is complex. Apart from a basic grant, there are a range of ad hoc grants from state and federal governments, and sometimes community organisations, for which schools apply. This means that the way staff are funded varies from school to school, particularly in regard to welfare officers.

For the schools that participated in this study, all had welfare teams with responsibility for supporting both the learning and welfare needs of *all* students, including those experiencing homelessness. The composition of those teams varied and was dependent on local staffing decisions. Some schools also had a range of other professional services such as psychologists and speech therapists available, through the regional office. In one case, the school principal had taken on additional teaching duties so that a welfare worker could be appointed out of the saved salary. Another school used intern psychologists who worked free of charge. Others benefited from the community hub program.

The analysis of interviews indicated that those schools where homelessness was common had to allocate a range of resources to dealing with that and related situations. Such schools usually had good relations with local agencies, which they accessed regularly. They were generally supportive of the agencies that they dealt with, but noted that the agencies were stretched and had limited capacity to carry through on problems. Other local community groups and businesses also provided valuable financial and in-kind support to these schools. Despite the assistance from local communities, providing transport, food, clothing and other supports cost money which had to be found from the school budget.

These schools demonstrated enormous commitment and were able to provide the support and services they did due to the huge efforts and dedication of their staff. However, supporting the needs of disadvantaged students, including those who were homeless, impacted heavily on a school's time and resources. The schools were not adequately funded for the problems they had to deal with. The concentration of disadvantage in a small number of schools was a major issue. Not surprisingly, the need for additional resources was a common theme, particularly to provide more staff and welfare assistance. The schools most affected by homelessness and disadvantage generally struggled financially.

These resource challenges faced by schools may be addressed by community hubs. An example of school and community partnerships²⁵, community hubs have been operating in Australia for the last fifteen years. A national program has established community hubs, with funding from the Australian Government in partnership with the Scanlon Foundation, the Migration Council Australia and Refuge of Hope. The aim is to expand community hubs to 100 locations across Australia; this will primarily occur in areas where there are families from low socioeconomic, migrant or refugee backgrounds are located²⁶.

In the City of Hume, for example, such partnerships have been operating in six schools²⁷. While there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of school-community partnerships in the Australian context, the available evidence indicates a range of benefits including²⁸:

- improvements in young people's educational outcomes, self-confidence and wellbeing;
- greater family engagement in school and improved communication between schools and families;

25 ACER Policy Briefs, *Schools in their Communities*, 2011.

26 <http://www.communityhubs.org.au/about-community-hubs/the-program/>

27 Primary schools as community hubs: a review of the literature, 2012.

28 Primary schools as community hubs: a review of the literature, 2012.

- more positive school environments;
- greater community capacity;
- earlier identification of children and young people's needs and quicker access to services; and
- widening schools' external contacts, networks and partnerships.

Impact on young students

Students' capacity to engage in learning and education was greatly affected by homelessness. The findings detailed the day-to-day impact, which included disrupted school attendance, frequent school changes, behavioural issues and social difficulties. For some, day-to-day school life was not easy to engage in the context of homelessness. For others, school was a needed haven from the chaos and disruption of homelessness.

The schools cared enormously about their students and had implemented a range of measures in an attempt to minimise the detrimental impact of homelessness on students' learning and education. Some schools went to considerable lengths to ensure attendance and continuity in the school through the provision of transport. In addition many provided food, clothing and other assistance. Provision for tired children to sleep was noted in several schools.

Despite their commitment and level of involvement, schools were concerned that students suffered academically as well as emotionally. Indeed, the full benefits of school, which include educational attainment, social skills and healthy self-esteem, cannot be achieved without regular school attendance²⁹. The longer term implications of this include unemployment, reduced wellbeing and life chances³⁰.

8.1. Implications

The following policy, practice and research implications are based on the findings of the project.

Policy

Access to education and continuity in learning – ensuring no-one misses out:

Given its far-reaching implications, continuity in learning and educational development is critical. The evidence from the project highlighted the difficulty of maintaining student learning. School funding decisions need to recognise the diversity of experience of schools regarding disadvantage. Funding based on per student enrolment, without consideration of the level or concentration of disadvantage, exposes schools to hardship and compromises educational outcomes for students³¹.

Practice

School and community partnerships:

Findings highlighted the importance for schools to have connections to their local communities. Those schools that were connected to local businesses, agencies or community groups, received enormous support from those links in the form of food and financial assistance. Some of these links were informal while others occurred as part of a community hub, a common school-community partnership model. In either circumstance, these partnerships were highly valued by the schools.

29 Children and young people, Chapter 4, Australia's Welfare 2013, p.157.

30 Seen and Heard: putting children on the homelessness agenda, Snapshot 2011.

31 <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf>

Single point of reference:

For some schools, homelessness was not a common occurrence so there was difficulty in knowing how to respond and what resources and supports were available beyond the school. These schools would benefit from a single access point, possibly web-based, that could be accessed when they identified a student who is homeless.

*Supporting children, young people and their families affected by homelessness: Guidelines for Victorian schools*³² is an important resource first published by DEECD in 2009. The guidelines provide information about homelessness, tips on how to improve educational outcomes for students, examples of good practice, resources such as support services, how to access support and advice, relevant agencies to contact, and tools and templates.

This comprehensive document is an exceptional resource for schools. Unfortunately, this great resource is hidden on the DEECD website. In order to access the Guidelines, it is necessary to navigate a number of different menus. It would be beneficial to raise the profile of the Guidelines by relaunching them and also to feature them prominently on the homepage of the DEECD website.

Research

Questions raised by the findings include: how to prevent young students falling through the gaps; how to maintain continuity in learning in the context of frequent school changes; and what happens to education plans and support when students change schools?

These questions suggest that further research would be useful, especially if the method used was longitudinal; this would assist in exploring what keeps students who are homeless engaged and what strategies are needed to improve educational outcomes.

In relation to community hubs, the evidence is limited but it does confirm their effectiveness. But more evidence is needed: specifically, research is needed to explore whether community hubs provide a sufficient means to stop young students falling through the gaps; or to identify what happens to a child whose family moves out of the community hub area, how is the continuity in their learning maintained?

8.2. Conclusion

In 2008, the Australian Government indicated its commitment to reducing homelessness among children and addressing the impact of homelessness on child wellbeing and education through the introduction of targets³³. Australian and Victorian Government policies and programs directed towards addressing the education and welfare impacts of disadvantage among vulnerable children have also had the potential to benefit children experiencing homelessness, depending on how extensively they are rolled out and taken up by schools.

Despite the efforts of the Australian and Victorian Governments in recent years, this study showed that primary schools with a concentration of disadvantaged students and higher levels of homelessness among their students, had insufficient resources, financial and material, to adequately address the impact of homelessness on student learning and educational development, and to ensure their welfare needs were being addressed.

Learning and educational development is critical to immediate and long term outcomes. Intervening early is essential to breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage and primary schools are well placed to do this. But schools need to be supported and to receive the necessary resources required to respond to the welfare and education needs of young students. Education is, after all, fundamental to solving homelessness.

32 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/participation/homelessnessstrategy09.pdf>

33 Homeless Taskforce, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness (White Paper)*, Commonwealth of Australia.

Appendix 1 – Email campaign



School children are emerging as the new face of homelessness...

Hanover
HOUSING SUPPORT RESEARCH

With your help we can change the lives of these children.

ENDS FRIDAY 26th OCTOBER

Please don't miss this opportunity to help make a difference!

Complete online survey now

Dear *Principal*,

I write to request your school's participation in a study called 'Primary School Experiences of Children who are Homeless'. Approved by DEECD ([see attachment](#)) and being undertaken by Hanover Welfare Services (Hanover), the research examines the ways Victorian public primary schools experience and support children who are experiencing homelessness.

About Hanover

Established in 1984, Hanover is a not-for-profit agency that provides tailored support, accommodation and housing options for over 6000 people each year, including 2000 children who are homeless. Hanover also undertakes research and advocacy for those who are homeless.

About children and homelessness

Children, especially those under 12 years, are emerging as the new face of homelessness in Australia. Since 2001 the percentage of children who are homeless has increased by more than 22%. Most accompanied single parents, principally mothers, into homelessness; many of whom became homeless as a consequence of family violence.

While homelessness is known to have an impact on children's education, to date there has been no research on how primary schools experience and work with children who are homeless. This study addresses this knowledge gap by investigating how primary schools identify and react to students experiencing homelessness, what schools find useful, what is good practice, and what further supports schools may need.

What is involved?

In the first phase we are asking all Victorian government primary schools to complete a 10 minute online survey at www.surveymonkey.com

The second phase involves a 15 minute telephone interview with those schools that have experience of working with students who are homeless.

Participation is voluntary and all information provided is confidential. No information about your school will be identified or reported in any reports, conversations or presentations on this research.

Who should complete the survey?

You are welcome to complete the survey or, you may wish to nominate a staff member with responsibility for student welfare within the school.

Click here to complete our online survey

The information gathered from this survey will assist primary schools, like yours, to identify, react and support children who are experiencing homelessness.

For any queries contact Project Officers:

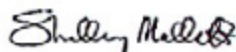
Roy Martin: Mobile

Violet Kolar: Phone (03) 9288 9802 | Email vkolar@hanover.org.au

I do hope that you are able to participate in this survey and share your experiences of working with this group of vulnerable students, and thank you for your time and valuable contribution.

Study findings will be presented in a report and used to produce a practice guide to assist Victorian primary schools to best identify and address the educational needs of primary school children who are homeless. The results will be made available in 2013 through the DEECD website and on request.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Shelley Mallott
General Manager
Research and Organisational Development
Hanover Welfare Services

Appendix 2 - Online Survey

Primary Schools and Homelessness

School experiences of students who are homeless: A survey by Hanover

ABOUT HANOVER:

Established in 1984, Hanover is a not for profit agency that provides direct, tailored support and accommodation and housing options for people experiencing homelessness. It also undertakes research and advocacy for those who are homeless.

WHAT IS THE SURVEY ABOUT?

Children, especially those under 12 years, are emerging as the new face of homelessness in Australia. Most of the research on children and homelessness has focused on the work of specialist homelessness agencies. There is little research on how Victorian Government primary schools respond to homelessness experienced by their students.

This project examines how schools identify and react to students experiencing homeless, what they find useful, what is good practice, and what further supports they feel are needed.

DEFINING HOMELESSNESS:

Homelessness and the risk of homelessness are experienced when an individual or family, including children, has inadequate access to safe and secure housing which meets community standards. It includes anyone living with relatives or friends, living in or moving frequently between temporary accommodation arrangements, living for a long time in a boarding house, caravan park or hotel and anyone without secure tenancy into the future.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

The survey is voluntary but we hope you will take part in this important survey; your school's experiences are vital to the success of the research.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information that you provide is confidential. No information about your school will be identified or reported in any reports, conversations or presentations on this research.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Please complete the survey by close of business on Friday 26 October.
Please answer ALL relevant questions; this will help to give an accurate insight into how primary schools respond to homeless students.

ANY QUESTIONS / NEED HELP?

Please contact the Project Officer, Roy Martin on 0427 229 148 or Violet Kolar on 9288 9802, email: vkolar@hanover.org.au.

Primary Schools and Homelessness 2012

***1. What is the name of your school? (For administrative purposes only. No school will be named or otherwise identified).**

***2. Postcode**

***3. Is the location of your school: (Please click one button)**

Metropolitan

Provincial

Remote

Isolated

***4. What is your school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage rating (ICSEA)?**

***5. What year ranges does your school provide? (Please click one button)**

Primary only (P-6)

Combined (P-12)

Other (please specify)

***6. How many students are enrolled at your school? (please click the relevant button)**

1-100

101-250

250-500

501-750

More than 750

7. Do you consider that your school has a higher than average number of students who are: (Please click any that apply)

Language background other than English (LBOTE)

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders

Recently arrived migrants or refugees (in last 12 months)

Families struggling financially

Single parent families

Other (please specify)

Primary Schools and Homelessness 2012

Your role within the school

This page asks for some background information on the person completing the survey.

8. How long have you been working at this school?

- Less than 1 year
- 2-3 years
- More than 3 years

9. What is your position in this school? (Please click one button)

- Deputy principal
- Full time student welfare officer
- Part time student welfare Officer (with or without other teaching duties)
- Year level coordinator
- Classroom teacher
- Other (please specify)

Identification, prevalence and understanding homelessness.

This section asks about how the school becomes aware and identifies students who may experience homelessness, how prevalent the issue is within the school and about the general understanding of homelessness.

10. How would you rate each of the following? (please click one button on each line)

	Very good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
Your understanding of homelessness?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The staff's understanding of homelessness?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your understanding of the impact of homelessness on a student's education?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The staff's understanding of the impact of homelessness on a student's education?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Primary Schools and Homelessness 2012

11. Which member of the school staff is most likely to identify a student experiencing homelessness? (Please click one button)

- Principal
- Deputy principal
- Student welfare officer
- Classroom teacher
- A non-teaching staff member
- Other (please specify)

12. What is the most likely way that the school would become aware that a student was experiencing homelessness? (Please click one button)

- Student would tell teacher
- Student's parent(s) would inform school
- An external agency/government department would inform school
- Staff inquiry following observed change in student
- Informally (from other students/parents etc.)
- Other (please specify)

13. Does the school have any special measures in place to assist students who might experience disadvantage or homelessness? (Please click all that apply)

- Food (e.g. breakfast) programs
- Uniform schemes
- Book schemes
- Assistance with camps and excursions
- Assistance with extra curricula activities
- Tuition programs
- Homework Club/facilities
- Assistance in gaining Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)
- None
- Other (please specify)

Primary Schools and Homelessness 2012

14. In the last three years how often has your school become aware that a student is experiencing homelessness? (please click one button)

- Never
- Occasionally (once or twice)
- Regularly (at least every year)
- Often (more than once a year)
- Frequently (always a number of students who are homeless)

15. How many students in your school do you estimate might currently be experiencing homelessness? (Please click one button)

- No students
- 1 student
- 2 students
- 3-5 students
- 5-10 students
- More than 10 students
- Do not know

16. Please choose the statement that best summarises your schools experience with students who are homeless or at risk

- This school has little or no experience with students who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (clicking this button will take you to the end of the survey).
- This school has experience with students who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (clicking this button will take you to questions about your experiences).

Experiences with students who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness

Primary Schools and Homelessness 2012

17. In your school's experience what effects, if any, does the experience of homelessness have on students at school? (Please click all that apply)

- Difficulty with homework
- Lack of adequate nutrition
- Frequent changes of school
- Difficulties with appearance/cleanliness (Including uniform)
- Social problems with other students
- Poor attendance
- Tiredness/lack of concentration, mood swings or poor behaviour
- More motivated to attend
- Actively seeks support from teach
- Other (please specify)

18. Once a student has been identified as experiencing homelessness, how often does the school's response involve each of the following? (Please click one button per line).

	Always	Sometimes	Not usually	Never
School gets involved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ensures all relevant teachers/staff know	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ensures classroom teacher provides additional support	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Refers student to staff member responsible for student welfare	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Invites parent(s) to school to discuss how school can help	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organises regular meetings with family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Contacts government department (other than DEECD)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Contacts a non government agency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other actions taken (please specify and indicate frequency)

19. If you indicated that you contact a non government agency or agencies please specify the agency or agencies.

Primary Schools and Homelessness 2012

20. Overall how easy or difficult has it been for the school to access community resources and supports for students who are homeless?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Difficult
- Very difficult

Comment (optional)

21. Overall, how helpful is such contact?

- Very helpful
- Helpful
- Of some help
- Not very useful at all

Comment (optional)

22. Overall, how easy or difficult has it been for the school to meet the educational needs of students who are homeless?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Difficult
- Very difficult

Comment (optional)

23. If you have experienced difficulty, in what ways has it been difficult/very difficult?

5

6

Primary Schools and Homelessness 2012

24. For each statement, please indicate how easy or difficult it has been. (Please click one button per line)

	Very easy	Easy	Difficult	Very difficult	Don't know
Engaging with students who are transitory	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Identifying students who are homeless or at risk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accessing information about available services for students who are homeless or at risk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accessing support from external agencies for students who are homeless or at risk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing students who are homeless or at risk with financial support for learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing students who are homeless or at risk with other support at school (e.g. place for homework, breakfast programs)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify)

25. Are there any additional measures, supports or resources that you think would be particularly useful in helping your school to better assist students experiencing homelessness?

26. Based on your experiences what advice would you give to other schools seeking help in assisting students experiencing homelessness?

Primary Schools and Homelessness 2012

27. In the next phase of this research Hanover will conduct confidential interviews (by phone) with up to 40 schools to further explore some of the issues raised in this survey. Would you be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview?

No

Yes

28. Please give the name of the person to contact.

29. Please give the contact's phone number

30. Please give the contact's email

Thank you

On behalf of Hanover, thank you for the time and consideration you have put into completing this survey. A copy of the research report will be made available to all participating primary schools in the next few months. You will also be able to access a copy from Hanover's website at www.hanover.org.au

Appendix 3 – Interview Questions

Questions		Prompts (E.g.)
1	Incidence/Identification	
1.1	Does your school respond differently to disadvantaged students who are homeless and disadvantaged students who are not homeless?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overlaps (e.g. finance) • Differences (e.g. lack of home affects dress, homework etc.)
1.2	In a typical year how often do you come across students who are experiencing homelessness at your school?	
1.3	How do you usually become aware that a student is experiencing homelessness?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial intake procedures • Having taught siblings • Difficulty in paying voluntary contribution • reluctance to participate in any activities involving a charge • Difficulty with uniforms or books • General in class/school observation • Other students/parents reporting • Reports from external agencies etc.
1.4	When do you learn that a child is homeless on average, how early in students homeless experience does the school become aware of this issue?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early in their homeless experience
1.5	Do you think it matters when you find out?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you generally find out fairly early in the piece? • Or is there sometimes a delay? • How long? • Is this important? • Do you think some slip under the radar all together?
1.6	What are the types of circumstances that normally trigger homelessness among the families at your school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenancy problems • Domestic problems etc
1.7	Do homeless students at your school share any common background characteristics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Migrant/refugee • Housing Commission • ATSI • LBOTE etc.
2	Effect on Student	
2.1	Are there observable effects on the student? What are these? How obvious are these? How do they impact on educational outcomes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with homework • Lack of adequate nutrition • Transitoriness (frequently changing schools) • Difficulties with appearance/cleanliness (including uniform) • Social problems with other students • Poor attendance, tiredness/lack of concentration • Family break up • Are there any positive effects?

2.2	How do the students respond?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviour in classroom, with teachers, with students • Positive effects?
2.3	Is there a typical homelessness cycle for homeless students? If so can you describe it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length of homelessness • Effects • Short and long term, impact on education
3	School Response	
3.1	Can you describe what steps you and the school would take when you do identify that a student is experiencing homelessness?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to the student and/or parent(s) • What resources, human and otherwise would you call on? • Which community organisations do you have contact with and how do you find them useful?
3.2	Which government and non-government agencies do you interact with?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you interact with them? • Do you find this useful? • Overall, is it easy or difficult for the school to access community resources and supports for students who are homeless? • What supports and agencies do you find most useful?
3.3	Is it easy or difficult for the school to meet the needs of students who are homeless?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent can you reduce or redress the effects and if so at what point? • What are the key interventions you and the school can make?
3.4	What impact do you think homelessness has on students' long term educational outcomes?	
3.5	In seeking to help students experiencing homelessness, what barriers or difficulties have you encountered?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors within and beyond the school impede or enable schools' capacity to provide an optimal response to students experiencing homelessness, e.g: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • school referral processes • family relationships • child characteristics • quality and accessibility of external support services • Does the school encounter problems beyond the school which may hamper their effective response e.g: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the relationship between accommodation and school location • issues of homework, school attendance and so on?
3.6	What additional support and/or resources do you think would be most helpful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department/regional office • Other government • Community agencies
3.7	What do you think would be the elements of a good or best practice model of supporting homeless children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In school factors • Department/regional office • Outside agencies • Factors beyond school (accommodation, finance etc).
4	Other - Is there anything else you wish to say on the topic?	

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