



Creating a framework for ending homelessness

Homelessness and Children



In contrast to common perceptions of homelessness, children are among Australia's homeless population. In fact, children in homeless families are the largest single group who seek support from the homeless service system. Tonight, approximately 105,000 people will be homeless across the country. Among them are 7,483 families with children. Twelve per cent (or 12,133 people) are children under 12. Another 21 per cent (or 21,940 people) are children and young people aged 12 to 18, most of them homeless as well as estranged from their families.

In 2009-10, the homeless service system supported 84,100 children. An additional 23,200 young people aged 18 or under, who approached a service without a parent or guardian were assisted. That's just under 50 per cent of all people who were assisted by homeless services. 1 in every 38 Australian children aged 0-4 accessed a homeless assistance service last year. Just over per cent (26.1%) of the children accessing homeless assistance services are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Every day, 2 in every 3 children who request immediate accommodation are turned away from homeless services.

Family and domestic violence

A large number of families who are homeless are women and children escaping domestic and family violence. Over 60 percent of children accommodated in homeless assistance services in Australia have witnessed or been victims of domestic or family violence. Children who experience or witness domestic violence may suffer severe psychological trauma, distress and depression. Children who experience or witness domestic violence are more likely to become victims or perpetrators of violence or abuse in their adult relationships later in life.

Homelessness affects kids

The early years of life are a crucial period of development for children. Safe and stable living environments ensure children's long-term well being, the fulfilment of their potential and strong, healthy communities. Poverty is a major contributing factor to children's homelessness. One in seven Australian children live in poverty.

Children's health and education are affected by homelessness. Homelessness inhibits the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioural development of children.

Children who experience repeat periods of homelessness often suffer developmental delays and emotional difficulties. Furthermore, homelessness for children means *missing out*, missing out on the things that other children take for granted, a safe place to sleep every night, school excursions, regular nutritious meals and the opportunity to bring friends *home* after school. Homelessness causes instability for children and their parents and can have a significant detrimental impact on families.

In addition children who have been homeless are more likely to have been victims of crime, and to have been involved in criminal activities. Many homeless children have experienced or witnessed domestic violence, have been victims of other crime, or have been involved in criminal activities themselves. Children who have been homeless are more likely than others to find themselves homeless as adults - homelessness can become a way of life.

Education

Children who are homeless:

- spend less time in school than other kids;
- may move schools up to 5 times per year; and
- are more likely to leave school altogether. Two thirds of young people who become homeless leave school within 12 months.

Health and well being

Children who are homeless:

- often experience lower levels of safety and security;
- may have lower self esteem and increased anxiety, behavioural issues and mental illness;
- more likely to exhibit signs of distress such as bed-wetting;
- suffer more frequent illnesses such as respiratory infections;
- have higher rates of asthma, recurrent ear infections, vision problems, eczema, and developmental delays;
- are often reliant on hospital emergency departments and outpatient clinics for health care;
- have lower immunisation rates.
- grief and loss due to having to suddenly leave the family pet, one parent, extended family, school or personal belongings behind;
- are more likely to become homeless later in life and raise families who, in turn, also become homeless.



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What needs to happen?

- Families need to be able to access affordable housing with some security of tenure.
- Some families will need access to support services to help them to sustain their tenancies.
- Homelessness Australia is urging the Australian Government to commit to adopting policies and implementing programs and strategies to deliver an additional 220,000 affordable homes by 2020.
- Now that children are counted as clients in their own right in the specialist homelessness services data collection system, services must be adequately funded to respond specifically to their needs.
- Parents need to be supported so that children can remain engaged with education.
- Families with higher support needs must be able to access services such as counsellors, financial counsellors, bulk billing health services, occupational therapists and tenancy support providers.
- Children in higher risk groups such as those in out of home care must be recognised as a priority group.

References:

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