



University of
South Australia

Australian Centre for Child Protection

**Investing in our future: Children's journeys through
homelessness and child protection.**

A Scan of the Literature, Policy and Practice.



Australian Research Alliance
for Children & Youth



Mission Australia



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Improving the lives of vulnerable children

“I think it was good because I had comfort. I could sleep better at night knowing my mum was there”.

Boy aged 10

Children in this study stressed the importance of family and felt that a house was only a home if it was shared with other family members.

(Moore, Noble-Carr & McArthur, 2006)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dr Tim Marchant, Senior Research and Projects Officer of Mission Australia and Professor Dorothy Scott, Director and Foundation Chair of the Australian Centre for Child Protection, are the convenors of an Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) collaboration. The project, “Investing in our future: Children’s journeys through homelessness and child protection”, is supported by a grant from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth ARC/NHMRC Research Network – Future Generation Program of Support for New Collaborations. The collaboration involves a distinguished group of people (see Appendix 5).

The purpose of this project is to foster cross-disciplinary discussion amongst researchers, policy makers and practitioners from which research directions and ultimately research questions can be formulated. To provide a basis for discussion, a scan of the literature examining the relationship between homelessness and child protection was undertaken. It was envisaged that the scan taken together with a range of other inputs, including the expert knowledge of the collaborators of the project, would help to identify the knowledge gaps and areas for future work. The scan was therefore conceived as a preliminary but necessary step in a longer journey. The defined task of the literature scan was to identify evidence of policies and programs that aim to support children’s wellbeing so as to reduce the risk or impact of child and/or family homelessness and associated factors such as parenting capacity.

This scan highlights both the scope and limitation of discussion around the relationship between homelessness and child protection. While it is acknowledged that as yet there is no robust Australian data to highlight children’s journeys or pathways between homelessness and child protection or vice versa, existing evidence points to the likelihood that some families, particularly those with multiple and complex needs, are both homeless and in contact with a child protection system.

The literature describes a number of ‘promising’ policies and practices that aim to support children’s wellbeing so as to reduce the risk or impact of child and/or family homelessness and associated factors such as parenting capacity particularly relating to family homelessness. However, this literature provides varying levels of evidence

of their effectiveness. This evidence ranges from descriptions of specific practice through to formal, independent evaluative research. However, the range of activities in Australia suggests there is a strong foundation for further enhancing children's wellbeing.

The recent policies '*National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*' and the '*Road Home: a national approach to reducing homelessness*', provide opportunities for fruitful collaboration between homelessness and child welfare sectors to build promising practice and for focused research.

PART 1 Definitions

Homelessness

For the purposes of this literature scan the Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992) cultural definition of homelessness¹ is used:

- primary homelessness (people without conventional accommodation, including improvised dwellings)
- secondary homelessness (people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another; includes people in SAAP accommodation) and
- tertiary homelessness (medium to long-term boarding house residents)

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is frequently mentioned in this literature scan given it is the largest national program providing accommodation assistance in Australia. The definition of homelessness used within SAAP is:

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

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

¹ It should be noted that there are also specific considerations when defining homelessness in an Indigenous context. One of the considerations pertinent to this paper is that of spiritual homelessness when an Indigenous person is separated from their family and / or land (Tilmouth, W 2005; Birdsall-Jones, C & Shaw, W 2008).

- or
- (b) threatens a person's safety;
- or
- (c) marginalises the person by failing to provide:
- (i) adequate personal amenities; or
 - (ii) economic and social support that a home normally affords; or
 - (iii) places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing'
(Commonwealth Government 1994)

The cultural definition is used for enumerating the homeless population, whereas the SAAP definition identifies who is eligible for services.

Child Welfare

The term 'child welfare' is broader than child protection and is used in this paper to mean a service system aimed at enhancing the lives of children where the presence of certain 'risk factors' (e.g. having a violent parent) or 'vulnerabilities' (e.g. having an intellectual disability) is thought to require intervention to prevent or to diminish any negative developmental or other effects. Child welfare is considered as more than a government's legal right to intervene in an attempt to protect children from abuse and neglect.

Child Protection

In this paper the term 'child protection' describes a system in which statutory intervention is the dominant service provided. Each state has discrete protective legislation that allows it to challenge parental rights in certain circumstances such as when allegations of child abuse or neglect have been made. Different terms are used to differentiate an allegation of abuse or neglect (i.e. a 'notification') from when the allegation of abuse or neglect has been found to be of substance (i.e. 'substantiation').

Other Terms Used

- An 'accompanying child' is 'a person who is under 18 years of age; receives support, accommodation or assistance from a Supported Accommodation

Assistance Program (SAAP) agency; and has a parent or guardian who is a client of a SAAP agency'. Note that at the age of 18 a person is no longer legally considered to be a child who may need the protection of the state. (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2008)

- An 'unaccompanied child' is a person under 18 years old who presents to a SAAP agency in their own right (independent of a parent or guardian).
- The terms 'young people' and 'youth' are frequently used when referring to both older children (teenagers) and young adults (mid twenties). The definition endorsed by the National Youth Commission (2008) states that young people are considered to be between 12 and 18 years old.
- Within this scan, the terms child/children are used to indicate those aged less than 18 years old.

PART 2 Introduction

Families with children are a growing homeless subpopulation making up 26% of all homeless people in 2006, a rise of 11% from 2001 (Chamberlain, C. and MacKenzie 2008). In 2007/08 there were 76 900 'accompanying children' in SAAP services; the 0-4 year old group made up 44% while the 5-9 year old group represented over a quarter (29%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009). Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented in SAAP when compared with the general Australian population i.e. 26% compared with around 5% (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009).

Child protection is the responsibility of Australian states and territories. Each jurisdiction handles and reports child protection issues differently. In 2007/08 the total number of children with a substantiation of a notification of abuse or neglect was 32,098. The highest rate was the 0-4 year olds (39.5%) and 5-9 year olds were the second highest age group (27.3%). In relation to these 32,098 children, 8,579 (26.7%) of the substantiations made were for neglect (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2009) (Appendix 1).

This scan found no published data to identify whether any of the children reported as homeless are also involved in the child protection system and vice versa. It is worth noting that homelessness may be considered a factor when a determination of 'neglect' is made by the various child protection agencies. The available data suggests that the number of homeless children coming to the attention of child protection systems may be sufficiently sizeable to warrant closer scrutiny.

Links between homelessness and child welfare are not well researched. However, it is acknowledged that families and children in crisis (such as those escaping domestic violence or experiencing homelessness) are often subject to considerable stress, violence and transience, all of which are likely to have a negative impact on children's physical and emotional health and wellbeing, and long term prospects. As a result, it is probable that some children assisted by SAAP agencies will have had contact with child protection and out-of-home care services, or may have been subject to a care and protection order (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2009). Delfabbro's (2008; Delfabbro, PH et al. 2009)

South Australian study of 500 case files examined factors contributing to children being first placed into care and found that less than 1% entered care only because of homelessness. The majority of children entering care (over two-thirds) were affected by five or more problems, including domestic violence, parental substance misuse, and parental mental health difficulties. Child or family homelessness therefore needs to be considered alongside other co-presenting factors as a cause of children being placed in care. The study also showed that homeless infants were more likely (than non-homeless infants) to experience domestic violence (65% vs. 43%), to have parents with financial problems (89% vs. 49%), to have parents who were imprisoned (17% vs. 9%), to have teenage parents (12% vs. 5%), and to be victims of neglect (77% vs. 61%). The presence of so many issues within these families indicates the difficulty inherent in attempts to isolate any relationship (causal or otherwise) between statutory child protection intervention and homelessness.

The scan found that there is extensive literature about the effects of homelessness on children's physical and mental health, community/social connections, behaviour and emotions, education and potential future. Many factors appear to contribute to family homelessness including domestic and family violence, mental illness, substance abuse, housing affordability and suitability, poverty and abuse. These same factors plus homelessness itself are also identified as reasons for a family coming into contact with the child protection system. This scan sought evidence of promising policies and practices that aim to promote the welfare of children.

When reviewing the initial broad body of literature the most commonly described groups were firstly sole mothers with children and secondly young people. There was some focus on sole fathers with children, and specifically young mothers with children, yet very little on couples with children, or young people with accompanying children (siblings). Indigenous children are overrepresented in Australian child protection and homelessness data yet this group did not feature strongly in the Australian material. There was also little attention paid to children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the Australian context. The scan was therefore unable to say whether this group is over or under represented.

Particular attention was focused on articles that reflected families' actual experiences of homelessness, especially children's voices, and any material relating to interactions between child protection/welfare and homelessness service systems. The findings provided some evidence of policies and practices that hold promise for

improving the welfare of homeless children and their families in Australia (Appendix 2).

PART 3 National Policy Context

The Federal Government policy directions that are particularly relevant to this paper include the “National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children”, the “Road Home: A National Approach to reducing homelessness” and the “Social Inclusion Agenda”.

“National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children”

A discussion paper about the “National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children” was circulated in May 2008 with the final framework released on 30 April 2009 (Australian Government 2008a). The major emphasis is on prevention, workforce development and the centrality of collaboration between sectors and agencies (especially with, and for, families with complex needs). Within the framework, ‘Outcome 3’ specifically addresses risk factors for child abuse and neglect. Strategy 3.4 is concerned with preventing children and family homelessness: ‘Expand housing and homelessness services for families and children at risk’. In the initial 3 year action plan there are targeted supports to assist families and children who are homeless including: additional services for up to 2250 families at risk of homelessness through the ‘*HOME Advice Program*’; additional specialist support to children who are homeless including closer links between homelessness and child protection services; and early intervention and prevention services for up to an additional 9000 young people aged 12-18 years at risk of homelessness to remain connected with families (where appropriate), education, training and employment (Appendix 4) . The framework supports the development of a national research agenda.

“The Road Home: A national approach to reducing homelessness”

The White Paper, “The Road Home”, was launched in December 2008. The Australian Government has set itself two broad targets: to halve homelessness by 2020 and to offer accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it by 2020

(Australian Government 2008b). The “Road Home” also supports a national research agenda.

There are three specific strategies outlined to drive towards the two 2020 targets (halve homelessness; offer accommodation to all who need it) set out in “The Road Home”:

1. **turning off the tap** (early intervention and prevention services)
2. **improving and expanding services** (mainstream and specialist services working together) and
3. **breaking the cycle** (moving through crisis to stability).

Additionally, there is a National Affordable Housing Agreement (Council of Australian Governments 2008), a commitment to social housing through the ‘Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan.

“The Australian Social Inclusion Agenda”

The “Australian Social Inclusion Agenda” is operationalised through the Council of Australian Governments and the Social Inclusion Board. There are a number of Federal Government initiatives across the Social Inclusion priority areas, most of which are relevant to this paper’s topic.

- Addressing the incidence of homelessness
- Closing the gap for Indigenous Australians
- Cultural diversity, migrants and humanitarian entrants
- Employment for people living with a disability or mental illness
- Addressing the incidence and needs of jobless families with children
- Focusing on particular locations, neighbourhoods and communities to ensure programs and services are getting to the right places
- Delivering effective support to children at greatest risk of long term disadvantage

<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Initiatives/Pages/default.aspx>

PART 4 Method

Background

Dr Tim Marchant, Senior Research and Projects Officer of Mission Australia, and Professor Dorothy Scott, Director and Foundation Chair of the Australian Centre for Child Protection, instigated the project, “Investing in our future: Children’s journeys through homelessness and child protection”.

“Australia’s homelessness and child protection systems work in silos with little intersection, despite often working with the same children. We will bring together researchers, policy makers and practitioners from these arenas to explore and understand the intersection of systems and gaps. Through cross disciplinary-cross sectoral dialogue, shared directions for research will be articulated laying foundations for future research, policy and service planning to improve outcomes for the children and families involved. Key results include a literature review, workshop and report outlining the central research questions, providing the basis for a research application which will give due consideration to children’s voices.”

(Excerpt from the application made to the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth).

A grant from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) ARC/NHMRC Research Network – Future Generation Program of Support for New Collaborations – was received in late 2008. Together the convenors gathered a distinguished group of people (see Appendix 5) from around Australia who have an interest in exploring issues relating to child and family homelessness.

On 26 November 2008 an initial meeting of the “Investing in our future: Children’s journeys through homelessness and child protection” collaborators was held in Adelaide. At this meeting the parameters for reviewing literature were discussed and **three draft** questions were framed:

What are the policies and practices that:

1. prevent families at risk of homelessness becoming homeless?
2. reduce the impact of family homelessness and related factors concerning parental capacity on children's wellbeing?
3. reduce the number of young people in and/or leaving state care becoming homeless?

A literature scan reference group consisting of Christine Gibson (scan writer); Tracy Johnstone (scan writer); Sean Lappin; Dorothy Scott and Tim Marchant then met on 2 December 2008 to consider these questions in the context of what was feasible in terms of the ARACY proposal. It was agreed that the primary focus would be on the second question because of a desire to keep children's wellbeing at the core.

Research Question

What policies and practices support children's wellbeing so as to reduce the risk or impact of child and/or family homelessness and associated factors such as parenting capacity?

With due attention given to:

- Children and families at risk of becoming homeless
- Children and families who are homeless
- The perspectives of children
- Young people leaving state care
- Young Indigenous people
- Young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

It was proposed that while the focus would be weighted towards children and families in the first instance, young people would remain in scope until a full search of the literature had been carried out as it was possible that this material would shed further light on the research question.

Search Methods

Searches of peer reviewed literature and grey literature were undertaken by staff of the Australian Centre for Child Protection and Mission Australia using the following process and key search terms detailed below. The Australian Centre for Child

Protection undertook the peer reviewed search and Mission Australia conducted the search of the grey material. The staff involved consulted throughout the process and worked jointly to write this report.

- The same keywords (see list on next page) were used for both searches and initial results recorded within a matrix.
- A search of the Medline, PsychInfo, Family and Society Plus and Academic Search Premier databases yielded 4944 possible titles for review (this excludes duplicates). Two staff of the Australian Centre for Child Protection applied agreed criteria to determine the pertinence of these papers and whether they would be reviewed in full. Where differences of opinion arose, the articles were scanned and discussed until agreement was reached regarding their appropriateness for full review. This process resulted in the review of 132 peer-reviewed articles.
- A search on 'Google' was undertaken using the key search terms and the first four pages of relevant documents were reviewed (multiple duplicates were discarded) to meet the additional criterion that the documentation be 'Australian and published within the last 10 years'. This process resulted in the review of 310 articles from the grey literature.
- The timeframes and volume of material necessitated the imposition of exclusionary criteria. These were, discard if:
 - purely descriptive;
 - solely problem-focused (rather than solution-orientated);
 - pertaining only to individual risk or protective factors (rather than multiple factors);
 - outside the date range (within the last decade);
 - adult focused; or
 - solely focused on 'street children'/refugees, violence or 'youth' (rather than children)

Key search terms

Who

- Child(ren), young people, youth, juveniles, parents, family/ies, Aboriginal/Indigenous, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Kelly, Buehlman and Caldwell 2000)

When

- risk/protective factors for family homelessness and child protection/child abuse/child neglect/child maltreatment/child abuse and neglect, parental capacity
- family/domestic violence
- children's wellbeing/welfare

What

- homelessness
- out of home care/ alternative care/ looked after children/ state care/kinship care/leaving care

How

- early intervention
- placement prevention
- casework
- practice models
- juvenile justice

PART 5 Domains

As the literature was drawn from both peer reviewed and 'grey' sources it was very diverse, comprising research articles, policy and other commentary and practitioner documentation. These different sources of knowledge, while valuable, varied widely in terms of both description and evidence base. The complexities resulting from attempts to synthesise these different sources of knowledge were heightened by the different geographic, legal, political and cultural contexts of much of the literature (US, UK, Australia etc). Therefore, caution was exercised when extrapolating from one context to another and some information, while useful in providing a baseline or point of reference, was inconclusive and did not lend itself to further analysis.

The material was conceptualised into the following broad domains to allow an overview of content that was common across both bodies of literature:

1. **Education** – this material focused on educational impacts/interventions in relation to homeless children. One US source, aiming to educate teachers, dominates the literature and contains suggested strategies for inclusive teaching, parent participation, professional support, reflective learning, teachers' visit shelters and the role of school counselors. The need for advocacy and some US state responses and particular projects were also described. The Australian literature is more descriptive with attention given in the main to education as an area in which the impacts of homelessness are most evident and which affords ample opportunity for early intervention (see Part 8).
2. **Health** – this material largely from the US and is focused on health impacts/interventions in relation to homeless children and/or their mothers. Much clinical evidence is presented regarding prevalence of disease, mental illness and poor nutrition, with mention of ways to improve health care for this population such as locating free clinics near shelters and changing attitudes of staff. Much of this research focuses on measuring 'deficits'. Given the different health system in the US it was felt that further exploration of the international material in this domain was not warranted. The Australian literature was more descriptive, outlining both the immediate and long term

consequences of homelessness for children's physical and emotional health in relation to different stages of development.

3. **Youth** – this material focused on those who are not independent adults and includes those 'ageing out of' or leaving care and those 'running away'. There were many articles from disparate sources (including Australian sources) which focused on youth spanning a broad range of ages from 12-25, with much attention given to those who had been 'failed' by their family and/or the child protection system. Prevention of and responding to youth homelessness is the focus of substantial attention in the UK. Papers documenting the effects of particular policy directions, such as Every Child Matters, provide a wealth of material about interventions with care leavers and other young people at risk of homelessness. Many authors make available précis of the findings from their studies online (see www.jrf.org.uk and www.everychildmatters.gov.uk). As the literature scan was intended to provide information about ways of preventing, or at least ameliorating, the negative effects of child and family homelessness, a decision was made to focus on younger children as there was less attention given to this population.
4. **Voices** – this material focused on the views of homeless children/parents in relation to their experiences/needs (see Part 6).
5. **Child protection and homelessness service systems** – this material focused on interactions between child protection and homelessness service systems as defined within the broader social ecology of a particular country. The material was varied and often critical of system interactions which tended to be perceived as lacking or non-existent (see Part 7).
6. **Policies, programs and practice** – this material focused on descriptions of or suggestions regarding policy, programs and practice. The international literature included historical and legislative material while much of the Australian material within the designated timeframe was framed within the development of a national agenda in relation to homelessness (see Part 8).
7. **Other** – a few international documents were unable to be classified into the domains identified above, and hence were classified as 'other'. The bulk of

the grey (Australian) literature consisted of material that ranged across many domains; this material was also categorised as 'other'.

Final output of search process

Number of articles from peer reviewed journals surveyed = 132

Number of articles from the grey (Australian) literature = 310

Total = 442

Peer Reviewed Literature		Grey Literature	
Education	11	Education	
Health	32	Health	
Youth	43	Youth	47
Voices	7	Voices	2
Policy/Practice	27	Policy/Practice	
Other	5	Other	261
Child protection and homelessness service systems	7	Child protection and homelessness service systems	
Total	132	Total	310

The review aimed to identify promising policies and practices and the evidence supporting them, and the conditions which facilitate and sustain child and family sensitive approaches. Particular attention was focused on articles that reflected actual experiences of homelessness, especially those of children, and material relating to interactions between child protection and homelessness service systems.

The bulk of the recent Australian material (grey literature) consisted of submissions made in response to the Federal Government's Green Paper, "Which Way Home?" The content of these submissions frequently included information and suggestions in relation to health, education and child protection and homelessness service systems. The way that the information on different topics was presented in the submissions prevented categorisation into separate domains.

PART 6 Voices

In the Australian homelessness sector there is growing recognition of the importance of listening to, acknowledging and keeping the child's perspective and experience at the forefront (Wright-Howie 2006; Thomas 2007). Despite this, there are few studies to date that focus on giving voice to or representing the experiences of homeless children and families. Only one recent Australian study asked children about their experiences of homelessness, while another gave voice to sole fathers. There was some international literature focused on the experiences of homeless mothers.

Children's Voices

In 2006 a unique Australian project explored how children perceive and experience homelessness and aimed to identify the critical issues – from a child's perspective – that service systems need to be aware of and take into account when responding to their situation and needs (Moore, T, McArthur and Noble-Carr 2008). Researchers from the Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, recognised the necessity of investing in relationship-building so as to engage with children. They used developmentally appropriate approaches such as interviews, art-making and group discussion. The tools used were first trialed with a children's reference group. Eighteen children aged between 6 and 14 years and seven young people between 15 and 21 years were recruited through services or other participants. Of the 25 adults interviewed there were five parents, eight care and protection workers, seven SAAP workers and five community-based workers.

Key findings from the research noted that in addition to experiences of violence, loss and grief, children shared some more positive aspects of homelessness, such as the strengthening of family relationships, having novel experiences and personal growth. Children saw homelessness as determined by their level of connectedness to family and community, the presence or absence of fear, and feelings of instability and insecurity rather than their housing status. Parents' capacity to protect and care for their children appeared to mitigate the effects of homelessness. Pets played a positive role in their lives. Being and feeling safe included not sharing space with potentially hostile or aggressive people. Having space and things of their own were important. Although these children moved a lot, they saw some positives, yet they ultimately wanted to settle so as to gain a sense of ownership and control over their environment and their lives through feeling connected to their communities and

having access to the opportunities arising from these connections. Although the children valued stable accommodation, they generally felt that having sound relationships with family members, feeling safe and secure, and being protected from violent and unsafe situations were more important.

Some earlier Australian research found that among things of importance to children in SAAP agencies were: having a place to play with toys, equipment, pets or computer games; access to supportive staff (particularly specific child support workers); organised recreational activities; and assistance with forming links to new communities and schools and in developing friendships (Brown 2006).

A US study (DeForge et al. 2001) recruited 14 children aged 7-12 years to understand the perspectives of children who live in shelters in order to improve physical care for the children and their families. Five themes were identified from their responses:

1. Children did not see themselves as homeless as they viewed homeless people as those without any resources. Stigma may also have affected their unwillingness to identify as homeless.
2. They liked it in the shelter sometimes as there were opportunities to develop friends.
3. Living in a shelter is hard because of rules, distance, feeling unsafe, lacking privacy etc.
4. They wanted the violence to stop as they felt surrounded by it; they also seemed unable to find alternate modes of expressing anger and frustration themselves.
5. They needed affirmation especially from teachers.

A study of 60 children aged from 6 to 16 years from 52 families in homeless shelters in one Midwestern state in the US looked at how children describe 'hope' and maintain and foster their hopes (Herth 1998). The researcher met with each child individually so that the child could draw their description of hope then tell the story of their drawing and respond to questions. All were able to identify what was hopeful. The findings of the research were that hope was essential and had two levels: an inner core (remains positive in face of setbacks) and an outer more flexible ring (changeable as related to having enough food etc). The researchers identified common themes in their conversations with children about hope: connectedness,

inner resources, cognitive strategies, energy and hope objects. The weight given to each theme differed according to age yet each child identified several themes.

Parent's Voices

Notably, in spite of mothers being the most common parent presenting with children to homeless services, studies that include their voices are not evident.

The stories of five fathers in one Australian study show some of the key triggers preceding homelessness; particularly a sudden change of role from non-resident parent to sole father (Moore, T., Noble-Carr and McArthur 2006). This added responsibility brings new demands: to find suitable accommodation, provide safety, manage the difficulties involved in finding and maintaining secure employment with flexible working hours, and the desire to be a good father. Issues around help-seeking in men often makes it difficult to approach services and often there are challenges with availability of suitable services. In spite of the changing nature of caring arrangements, having full time care of children may be an eligibility requirement for gaining access to some support services.

Choi and Synder (1999) describe the lives of homeless families in welfare hotels or in temporary shelters in large US cities. Of 49 mothers and one father in three shelters (each with different rules) only 31 had all their children with them. Of 11 partnered women, seven partners were not with them (either in jail, interstate or at relatives' homes). For two-thirds the experience of homelessness started by staying with friends/relatives which was a stressful experience and increased tensions within the families. For the parents in this study some of the challenges of shelter life included a fear of the unknown, grief, self-blaming plus a loss of freedom, privacy, peace and control over oneself and one's children. Several felt gratitude for having a roof over their heads. Also, some felt that certain staff were disrespectful towards them.

The parents in 34 families with 87 accompanying children were interviewed in an American study about how homelessness affected the children's academic achievement (Morris and Butt 2003). Of the 60 school-aged children, 3 were not enrolled, 9 had attended one school, 20 had attended two schools, 21 had been held back one or two grades, 22 had attended between three and six schools and 9 had attended between seven and nine schools.

The three major themes identified by Morris and Butt (2003) were:

1. **Unstable relationships** – relationships in both the parents' past experiences as children, and their current experiences as adults, were imbued with characteristics of abuse and addiction, poor parenting models and unstable home environments.
2. **Abdication of responsibility** - these parents saw school as a place for the children to be cared for by others.
3. **Perception of children's educational needs** - these parents were aware of, and able to identify, children's academic problems, however they all reported difficulty with transport to school. None of the children living in shelters attended school regularly. No parent was actively working with their children either at home or school to facilitate educational improvement. The parents felt inadequate to serve as advocates for their children with the schools. The children were perceived by their parents as socially competent.

PART 7 Child protection and homelessness systems

The factors leading to families' contact with both child protection and homeless systems are complex and interwoven. The terms 'child protection' and 'homelessness' are used within this body of literature to refer to the formal and mostly separate service systems of the States and Territories. These systems do not exist in isolation; responsibility for both is located within the same Government Department in most States. The circumstances that lead children and families into contact with child protection and/or homelessness systems often also involve interactions with other systems such as health and education. The limited material available is largely descriptive. Recognition that change is required to improve collaboration across a number of systems, through organisational and workforce development, is evident in the literature.

It is also evident that families fear the stigma of being associated with either system. Separating children from their families (via removal into care or the eligibility policies of a refuge/shelter) appears frequently to lead to negative consequences for the children involved and also, potentially, for their future children (Zlotnick, Kronstadt and Klee 1998; Cowal 2002; LenMac Consulting Inc 2005; LenMac Consulting Pty Ltd 2005; Noble-Carr 2006).

Australian

The Australian literature consistently reports that families fear the child protection system (Hyde 2005; St Lukes 2005; Mission Australia 2008; Research & Social Policy Unit 2008; Tually et al. 2008) and that this fear is especially true for Indigenous families (Noble-Carr 2006) due to the ongoing effects of past policy – in particular that which resulted in the stolen generation – and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in both the homelessness and protection systems (Bamblett 2004; Di Manno and Holst 2005; Hyde 2005; St Lukes 2005). In 2007 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were represented in out of home care at more than eight times the rate of other children (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2008). Children and young people require assistance to deal with loss and transitional issues if removed from their families so that they may continue to develop and improve relationships with their parents (Nesmith 2006).

The literature includes a number of apparent inconsistencies within the operation of specific systems. The report by St Lukes (2005) on homelessness and out of home care placements in Victoria found that some parents felt that child protection intervention was prompted by their homelessness rather than concerns about their parenting. This view is supported by US research which finds that maternal homelessness was a more important predictor of the removal of children from their families than parental drug dependence, domestic violence or institutionalisation (Research & Social Policy Unit 2008). The Noble-Carr (2006) review of 7 service evaluations and research studies on homeless children suggests that the rate of child protection involvement in homeless families is between 20-50%. Melbourne Citymission reports that a significant proportion of homelessness caseworkers' resources were spent addressing child protection issues while less support was given to the developmental and emotional needs of accompanying children (Horn and Jordan 2007).

In contrast, Jones (2008) states that children who live in Victoria in highly transient families and who are vulnerable to abuse and/or neglect, are frequently at risk of being overlooked by the child protection system. In one report, SAAP services reported that the child protection system had been reluctant to accept notifications relating to unaccompanied young people (aged less than 16) unless there is evidence of physical or sexual abuse (McAlorum and Forsyth 2007). The Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (2008) believes that there is a lack of follow-up on notifications of homeless children who are at risk of harm resulting from their exposure to domestic violence. The St Lukes report (2005) highlighted how studies had quite different findings: Kolar's (2005) longitudinal study of 30 homeless families did not find that child protection emerged as a noteworthy issue whereas Walsh's report on 62 homeless families found that over half had children who were not in their care (Walsh and Stevens 2007). Possible explanations for the apparent difference in findings may relate to the greater stability of the situation of those families involved in Kolar's study and require closer scrutiny.

Bartholomew (cited in Noble-Carr 2006) discussed 'systems abuse' as the inability of the Australian homelessness service system to provide safe and suitable housing for homeless children. This led to reporting cases to the child protection system in the hope of being able to find better housing and support outcomes for the family. Another tension is in the relationship between the housing worker and the family they

are supporting. Workers both individually and as a team face difficult decisions about the timing and extent to which they intervene to address certain parenting issues. On one hand, they support and encourage good parenting and ensure the family feels confident in continuing to engage with them, and on the other hand they need to address concerns about the safety, health and wellbeing of children (Noble-Carr 2006).

St Lukes (2005) believes that there is a substantial knowledge gap as there are no Australian studies that have focused specifically on the association between family homelessness and the child protection system. Problems with systemic processes identified include inadequate communication between service systems and programs, inadequate knowledge of procedures and resources, and inadequate reviewing of processes. Noble-Carr (2006) discusses the tensions between the sectors, with the homelessness sector perceiving an inactivity of child protection workers in assisting families to find appropriate housing. No national data exists to determine how many children from homeless families end up having some form of child protection intervention or how many children in contact with child protection authorities end up in homeless services. The feasibility report into linking child protection, SAAP and juvenile justice data states that such data linkage would enable analysis of movements between these sectors (AIHW 2008). Juvenile justice and SAAP data is suitable for linkage while the development of a national child protection dataset is currently at pilot stage.

In terms of the influence of the broad social ecology, structural issues include housing availability, the quality of stock and the relationships between child placements, parental income and homelessness. Fletcher and Bock (2008) outlined a number of system issues within the Australian housing sector. For example, some women with young children are sometimes offered unsafe and inappropriate housing. If they decline this housing they are then removed from the waiting list, thereby effectively placing them at greater risk of child protection involvement. SAAP services cannot always accommodate sole mothers with sons, as boys aged 8 years and older are not permitted in women's refuges (Forell, McCarron and Schetzer 2005; Noble-Carr 2006), and young mothers with children cannot stay at youth services (Tually et al. 2008). Many families decide to stay in unsafe or insecure housing rather than separate into different accommodation services and streams (LenMac Consulting Pty Ltd 2005).

The St Lukes report (2005) states that parents' reunification with children is dependent on accessing stable and suitable accommodation within a safe neighbourhood. The report notes that when parents do not have care of their children it can exacerbate their housing issues and therefore their chances of reunification due to a loss of income (i.e. parenting payment). As there is usually a time delay when transferring from a parenting payment to a Newstart Allowance this period without an income may be an additional factor that contributes to parents' homelessness. On the other hand some parents whose children have been removed will sometimes give up stable housing to move closer to their children. Such a move can result in the family becoming homeless (Hyde 2005; St Lukes 2005; Noble-Carr 2006).

Walsh (Walsh and Stevens 2007) believes that ending family homelessness requires: sustaining tenancies, reducing destabilising factors such as parental mental illness, substance abuse and violence, increasing social inclusion, supporting outcomes for parents (such as access to education, training and employment and reunification with children) and for children (such as access to childcare and school, linking to specialist supports, and the achievement of developmental milestones). Horn and Jordan (2007p.5) argue that 'the service system cannot reduce the number of families and children experiencing homelessness in the absence of preventative measures that address the root causes of homelessness'.

"The Road Home" the Australian Government's White Paper on homelessness (Commonwealth Government 2008) discusses the creation of more affordable housing and its critical importance for the best outcomes for children (Anooshian 2003; Kolar 2005; Noble-Carr 2006), given intervention is more effective after a family is housed (Walsh and Stevens 2007). The "Road Home" also emphasises the need to maintain people's tenancies (private and public) through intensive case management support. It indicates a commitment to expanding programs such as the "Household Organisational Management Expenses Advice Program" (HOME) to build the capacity of people at risk of becoming homeless.

To prevent homelessness the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2008) advocates for the amendment of residential tenancy laws across Australia. Requiring state housing authorities to advise the appropriate court/tribunal regarding the housing options available to a person facing homelessness may reduce the number of vulnerable people being evicted.

Across Australia efforts to prevent family homelessness have recently included 'stay safe at home' policies which are complemented by community education programs about family violence. Women's refuges in New South Wales reported that the responses to children living with domestic violence, by the Department of Community Services (DOCS) and the police, too often resulted in interventions that advised the mother to leave the violent situation or her children would be placed into care (Tually et al. 2008). Tually et al (2008) support the protective parent to achieve safe living arrangements and advocate for children's names to be included on Apprehended Violence Orders. The need to address domestic/family violence through integrated public awareness campaigns like the 'Australia says NO' campaign, renewal of the National Safe Schools policy framework, provision of income support and strategies to assist women to secure appropriate employment is discussed. The provision of brokerage funds and a sustainable funding stream for refuges and shelters are also recommended. Preventing and intervening early in relation to domestic/family violence is not an easy task because victims do not request assistance until they are forced to leave their home (MacKenzie and Chamberlain cited in Tually et al,(2008).

United States of America

A public health model categorises prevention activities as primary, secondary and tertiary. Interventions that promote ways to avoid homelessness are therefore conceptualized as operating at the primary level. Secondary level activities encompass early detection (of risk of homelessness) and intervention while activities at the tertiary level focus on relieving the situation of those already homeless. Homelessness is a complex issue that requires responses at all these levels of prevention.

An examination of applications for Continuum of Care funds, made to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, identified communities using a range of such activities (Burt, Pearson and Montgomery 2007). Five particular activities were identified which were either used alone (at all levels of prevention) or combined to form a community-wide strategy. These were: housing subsidies; supportive services with permanent housing; mediation in housing courts; money for rental or mortgage arrears; and rapid exits from shelters. The elements identified as successfully contributing to homelessness prevention in these communities were described as: an ability to target effectively, motivation, the ability to maximise

resources and leadership. However it was felt that governments should make necessary technical assistance available to communities e.g. for data collection and dissemination.

The “HOME Investment Partnership Program” and “Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere” are two US federally supported public housing programs involving partnerships with local government and private companies that aim to transform ‘estates of last resort’ into private/public efforts to create revitalised communities. This article found that an initial strategy of home ownership was not sustainable (Fogel, Smith and Williamson 2008).

A typology of housing and support commonly referred to as ‘Housing Plus Services’ has been developed in the US, along with 11 principles for their design and implementation. The authors identify two general characteristics of Housing Plus Services: enhancing quality of life and working as a team. Key differences in services are dictated by the needs of residents or the target population, the goals desired by the developer/owner and the requirements of the funding sources for the housing itself. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Family Unification Program provides subsidies to families for rental housing in the community so they can receive services to help reunify or stabilise families from which a child had been removed. The emerging ‘housing first’ approach involves agencies helping families moving quickly from the homeless service system into permanent affordable rental housing, often with a (Section 8) subsidy. Home based case management is provided for a defined period (6-12 months) while connections are made with community based resources for longer term support. The writers state that advocacy for a national housing trust fund is required (Cohen et al. 2004).

In the US, of 90 government plans to end homelessness by 2006, less than half included specific strategies for family or youth homelessness. Varney and Van Vliet (2008) note the extensive research on causes, consequences and cures for homelessness and recommend a focus on variations in experiences across contexts to account for stressors operating in different locations. They believe that acknowledgement of the strategies used is the key to developing interventions that work and that the resilience and positive potential of many homeless children and youth needs to be highlighted. Living in a shelter seems to affect younger children more negatively than older ones, which may be evidence of either an ‘inoculating’ effect of stressors or of developmental vulnerability. The ways that services are

provided may impact on children's capacity to cope with the stresses of insecure housing. These authors believe for supportive housing programs to be successful, interventions must be developmentally appropriate, tailored to the child's type and level of need and multi-component.

Liese, Anderson and Evans (2003) identify historical views of emergency shelters in the US: as a vital link in child protection and a key to adjustment (late 70s); as part of a continuum of group care facilities for abused and neglected children (mid 80s); and as an intense and significant experience for those in care (late 80s). It is difficult, they note, balancing the effects of disruption on children and the potential advantages of escaping abuse and neglect. The US Christmas Box House opened in 1999 to offer short term supportive residential services to children removed from their families. Assessments and observations of children are used to inform decisions about the best placement match. These authors suggest that such shelters are overlooked as sites that can support evaluation and outcome research to inform child protection practice.

Choca et al (2004) looked at youth outcomes after leaving care in the US, from the premise that as child protection services alone cannot produce desired outcomes, collaboration is required. A number of county based collaborations with bodies interested in improving housing services, employment, education and health outcomes for this cohort are outlined. It is argued that child protection workers need to become more proficient at involving non-traditional partners and the housing industry. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore the effect of interventions in care on homelessness and other indicators of adult economic status.

Neither from the grey nor the peer reviewed literature is there clear evidence of effective partnerships or collaborations between the different service systems involved in Australia or the US. Yet complex interactions between the child protection and the homelessness service systems are evident.

PART 8 Policy, Programs & Practice

*‘Children need policies that will promote stable housing and ensure access to a good education, preventive health care and adequate nutrition. Parents need the tools – education, job training, child care, income supports and affordable housing - that will lift them out of homelessness and provide greater stability and security for their children.’
(Nunez 2000)*

Much of the literature on programs and practice consists of discursive material about government policy and the structural limitations to the implementation of programs or details about programs and descriptions of practice. The approaches identified are aimed at a range of levels; from broad demands for change of the service systems to descriptions (and occasionally, evaluations) of small projects. The international literature also provided material at different levels (e.g. descriptions of interventions, analyses of results of psychometric tests) and about different systems (e.g. US, UK and Russia). However there was only limited concrete evidence upon which to assess the ‘promise’ of any specific approaches to child and family homelessness. An attempt to assess the ‘promise’ of the approaches mentioned in the literature is made in Appendix 2. Some of the more general suggestions are organised below under broad headings.

The Australian literature focused heavily on children being seen as clients in their own right with individual developmental needs, yet within the context of their family (Moore, T., Noble-Carr and McArthur 2006; Horn and Jordan 2007; Anglicare 2008; Glennen 2008; Moore, T, McArthur and Noble-Carr 2008; Nicholson 2008). ‘Good practice’ is described as a ‘child-friendly’/‘family-friendly’ approach that focuses on the cultural and physical environment, case management, brokerage, group work and flexible outreach. Particular attention is needed to understand this in a cultural context for Indigenous communities (Roberts 2004).

Child-focused and family-centred

Scott (2008) outlines that family-centred practice in adult specialist services needs to focus on parenting capacity, the needs of the child, parent-child participation and outcomes for parental competency. Thomas (2007) summarised six principles for

working in a child-centred way applicable to transitional supported accommodation.

They are:

- acting in the best interests of the child;
- engaging with children through the use of play techniques and by providing space;
- giving reassurance that the child is not alone, responsible or to blame;
- genuine empathy and respect for children;
- working at a level appropriate to the child's developmental capabilities;
- and checking children's understanding of events.

Geldard (cited in Thomas, 2007) identified that playing allows children to deal with anxiety through a practice that is established, safe and normal. Play provides an opportunity for de-stressing and debriefing without re-traumatising and allows children to tell their own stories, to be listened to and reassured that they are not to blame. Glennen (2008) suggests that children should be encouraged to talk and ask questions, that their strengths are identified and compliments given to them, as well as reinforcing the child's strengths to the primary care giver. The cultural and physical environment of the homeless service also needs to be welcoming (Geldard cited in Thomas 2007; Glennen 2008) and there needs to be physical and emotional space made for children to express themselves.

Workforce Capacity Building

Scott (2008) states that the factors that facilitate 'parent and child-sensitive practice' exist at different yet interrelated levels i.e. individual practitioner, organisational setting and the wider policy context. The development of audit tools for each of these levels could provide measures for assessing change. It is hypothesised that factors such as organisational history, professional boundaries, workforce skill limitations, narrow performance indicators and funding models constrain the ability of adult services to respond to the needs of parents and their children (Scott 2008).

McNamara (2008) states there is a reluctance amongst SAAP service providers to change practice to accommodate children's needs, resources are lacking and that some still believe that meeting the needs of care givers will meet the needs of children. SAAP services also highlight the dilemmas faced when working with the dynamics of a family unit with conflicting needs, as the worker's relationship with a parent can be strained if the worker is perceived by the parent to be supporting the

child's needs, but overlooking the needs of the parent. Scott (2008) identified several factors that influence an organisation's capacity to provide a family-centred practice: legal requirements (e.g. mandatory reporting); privacy constraints on information exchange; single input services based on categorical funding models and competition for resources.

A study of a Citymission family homelessness project found that all families had unmet needs. Overall, a total of 67 hours of support per family was required to address the family needs that could not be provided due to funding constraints over the eight week period of the study (Horn and Jordan 2007).

McNamara (2008) also reported that only 28% of 249 children in SAAP services actually received case planning even though the Victorian Department of Human Services says that case planning is 'good practice'. This suggests that most children in the SAAP sector are not included within case management processes. SAAP agencies face significant barriers when identifying needs of children such as limitations in the assessment of needs of children; children's needs being seen as a subset of the parents' needs; parents having the capacity to understand the needs of their children; hesitation by parents and children to work with SAAP services due to a confusion between SAAP workers and child protection workers; and limited resources (Resolve Community Consulting cited in (Brown 2006).

Some advocates feel that SAAP workers should be trained in observational skills and basic child and adolescent developmental stage indicators (Brown 2006; Glennen 2008), especially in view of the overwhelming evidence for the need for early intervention (Glennen 2008). Refuge/hostel workers need support and training from early childhood specialists and Child Adolescent Mental Health Services to feel confident in doing this work well (Bunston and Glennen 2008). In Victoria, McDonald and Campbell (2007) found that the development of pathways between referral and specialist agencies was patchy. Agencies saw the need for supported accommodation for children yet did not uniformly embrace the view that they should adapt existing case management practices to target children, or develop the resources, skills and capacity to do so. McDonald and Campbell (2007) argue that the needs of infants and young children have not yet been adequately reflected in the professional education of community service workers. Specialist children's workers are supported as a means of providing a quality service to children. Children's

support workers exist in women's refuges in Victoria, but not in all SAAP-funded services (McNamara, N. 2008).

The Australian Childhood Foundation (2005) delivered the 'Changing Places Program' to Early Years Service Providers which focused on children who experience homelessness. The program aimed to build confidence and develop understanding amongst staff so as to better respond to the needs of children who have suffered abuse and family violence.

The role of the Victorian Regional Children's Resource Program is to provide support to homelessness services as well as direct service delivery. The types of supports available include policy and practice development, case management support for children, training, tools (see Appendix 3), advocacy, networking, secondary consultation and direct delivery of group work and brokerage. A significant number of children in contact with the program have witnessed family violence and have had contact with the child protection system. Their support needs are identified as (in order of prevalence) accommodation, material aid, advocacy, counselling and emotional support, financial aid, health, education support, recreation, behaviour and cultural issues, care and protection (McNamara, N. 2003).

Pelton (2008) states that in the US, homeless parents are frequently referred to education and counselling yet are seldom offered concrete assistance. For example, arranging to have children remain with a parent who is receiving drug treatment and providing access to stable accommodation can be helpful in preventing relapses. The author argues that having housing specialists and child placement specialists within child protection systems may be useful if congregate shelters are closed and other services are contracted. Rather than remove their children it may be preferable to provide homeless families with money for housing. Some police and court procedures require modification to prevent the immediate incarceration of parents on matters unrelated to child abuse or neglect (Pelton 2008).

A survey of US shelter/child care directors (Hicks-Coolick, Burnside-Eaton and Peters 2003) found a lack of developmental assessment, medical screening and childcare available for homeless children. Space was lacking, as were shelters that accommodate families, assistance with education and transport, parent support groups, case management, advocacy and counselling. Training was missing regarding children's needs, special education, cultural competence and awareness of

indicators for early intervention. Respondents also lacked knowledge of the relevant legislation namely the McKinney-Vento Act. A critical gap is the lack of space and the dire lack of knowledge of the needs and rights of children.

Internationally, concern with supporting the marginalised workforce working with the homeless population is expressed as 'a need for integrated social and medical care' (van Laere and Withers 2008). Such integrated care requires organizational and systemic change which should include improved workforce support. Enhancing awareness of the housing concerns of homeless parents through child welfare worker training, changing organisational culture and developing inter-sectoral relationships is recommended. Accommodation issues could also be included in assessment and case planning activities (Courtney, McMurtry and Zinn 2004).

Education

The Australian literature particularly emphasised the benefits that education has for children experiencing homelessness. It was argued that school can provide a sense of stability for a homeless child during a period of insecurity and change (Brown 2006; Noble-Carr 2006), that regular attendance provides children with opportunities to learn the social skills needed to form relationships with their peers and that educational attainment may offer children a way out of a cycle of disadvantage and poverty (Keogh 2006 cited in (Brown 2006).

Education can be disrupted by homelessness. The transience of homeless families means that children can be forced to attend a number of schools (MacKenzie, Desmond and Steen 2007) and it can take up to 4-6 months to recover academically from a change of school (Noble-Carr 2006). In some cases, parents have had a negative experience with school and are reluctant to re-engage with the education system (Brown 2006). Keenan (2008) indicates that rates of early school leaving are much higher for children who are homeless: of those aged 12-13 years 17.6% are not in school; of those aged 14-15 years 39.4% are not in school; of those aged 15-16 years 50% are not in school. The Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (2008) states that within 12 months of becoming homeless two thirds of young people leave school and once having left find it hard to complete. Educational disengagement also has longer term effects such as decreased wages, financial insecurity, increased likelihood of unemployment and poorer mental and physical health. Brown (2006)

identifies barriers including children having problems getting to and from school, frequent changes, and inadequate facilities in their temporary accommodation to support study.

Schools are an important vehicle of prevention and early intervention for children experiencing homelessness because most young people have their first experience of homelessness while still at school (Chamberlain and MacKenzie cited in Norris et al (2005). Effective prevention programs include funding for community network meetings and national benchmarks for student welfare in secondary schools (Chamberlain and MacKenzie cited in Gronda 2009). Effective early intervention strategies include family mediation services such as 'Reconnect' and community residential placement schemes. An evaluation of 'Reconnect' (a program for young people at risk of homelessness) found that 32% of 8000 clients had been suspended from school and in 9% of cases, young people had been expelled from one or more schools (RPR, 2003).

The Victorian Government has developed a school-focused youth service which coordinates prevention and early intervention measures at the school and local community level (RSPU, 2008). Swick and Bailey (cited in Brown 2006) argue that school-based intervention can be used to identify and address issues facing homeless children. They argue that: school liaison staff can provide a point of contact for homeless families; schools could establish websites and online journals for parents to interact in a non-threatening way; teachers are in place to identify problems early; and computerised records of homeless students can be useful.

It is widely argued that close collaboration within and between service systems is needed and that children's education must be linked to service plans. As many children have entered care before they are five years old their participation in quality early childhood education may be useful in promoting the mastery of cognitive and social and emotional competencies necessary for educational success (Fantuzzo and Perlman 2007).

Results from a US summer program intervention for children living in shelters were compared to those of the other children in the program to improve their reading and writing. The intervention comprised an academic program held in the morning and recreational or mental health programming held in the afternoon (including a weekly trip). The programs were free and ran on weekdays for two months, and awards

were given to reinforce positive classroom behaviour. The research used a range of measures including assessments by mothers and teachers. Ratings indicated that the homeless children were exhibiting average or normal behavioural and emotional functioning. Nabors et al (2003) believe that this information should be disseminated to dispel ignorance and stigmatisation of homeless children. However it should be noted that the children who rated as 'poor' academically were more likely to drop out of the intervention. The findings support the idea that teacher perceptions, classroom behaviour and achievement are related. The researchers claim that behaviour management and mental health promotion were moderately successful in improving the classroom behaviour of those who attended for at least seven weeks (Nabors et al. 2003).

PART 9 Discussion

What has been learned?

Some tentative conclusions can be drawn from the literature:

Children’s voices (and that of their homeless mothers and fathers) are largely muted in this literature. The impacts of their experiences are most often filtered through research that amalgamates data to present a portrayal of ‘deficits’ relating to homelessness. There is room for hearing more direct evidence from children about what facilitates their wellbeing to inform the development of policy and practice as well as exploration as to how best this can be achieved.

The homelessness and child protection service systems are both responding to families – and potentially the same families – with complex needs. Despite the lack of data to support the notion that families are in contact with both service systems there is practice wisdom to suggest this is the case. Again lacking is any robust evidence-based data on collaboration or programs where the two service systems are working together to support these families. It should be noted that organisations which engage in advocacy work to improve the homelessness and child protection systems are the source of much of the Australian material reviewed in this paper.

The development and imminent implementation of two policy frameworks, “The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness” and the “National Framework for the Protection of Australia’s Children”, present opportunities to foster a more cohesive approach to advancing children’s wellbeing. Such an approach is recommended to be underpinned by the principles stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Joint Standing Committee on Treaties 1998).

The grey literature in particular points to a significant number of programs and practices currently in the field in Australia. An examination of material concerning these initiatives reveals a number of discrete programs operating in various parts of the country. However, the information available is frequently from such diverse sources that rigorous assessment of the merits of these programs is difficult. A brief outline of each of these interventions along with an assessment of the strength of

supporting evidence is provided in Appendix 2. References for some of the intervention tools mentioned are presented in Appendix 3.

Several overarching or key elements of policy/program/practice have emerged from the peer and grey literature considered as a whole, including:

- Taking a strengths-based approach which is child focused and family centred
- Using principles to guide case management, including a focus on the exit stage
- Provision of brokerage support
- Developing child wellbeing plans
- Provision of a suite of services
- Making therapeutic support available
- Making culturally specific programs available
- Supporting continuity of schooling
- Provision of a range of affordable accommodation types
- Creating a safe environment

Although the literature emphasises a particular focus on the importance of education, there is limited description of good practice and related workforce development for this arena.

What do we still need to know?

Whether homelessness is considered as a cause or a symptom of a host of other difficulties experienced by children and families, it indicates a period of family life when choices and both current and future opportunities are limited. Much is known about the effects of homelessness, as one of a number of circumstances, on present and future lives. There is a dominant view of homelessness as a state arising from a combination of multiple risk factors. The importance of both preventing homelessness and intervening as early as possible is also well established. The complexities of the Australian child protection and homelessness systems and the difficulties experienced by clients and those working within these systems are well known. The complexity of the diverse experiences of homeless families makes it difficult to solely focus attention through either a child protection or a homelessness lens, as this literature makes clear.

Given the national policy context is favourable to a prevention / early intervention approach there is room for investigation and research needed about how relationships between the child protection and homelessness sectors can enhance children's wellbeing at a policy and practice level; how the voices of children can be heard and inform the development of policy and practice; how the workforce for children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness can be better supported; and how the evidence of 'what works' can be further developed and leveraged.

PART 10 Relevant Current Research

A number of research projects are currently investigating relevant topics.

ARC Linkage Grants

- 'Consistency and continuity in childhood adversity: the nature and history of multiple disadvantage in families with young children'
Chief Investigator: Professor Bryan Rodgers
Australian Demographic and Social Research Institute
Australian National University
- 'Safety and resiliency at home: voices of children who live with fear'
Chief Investigator: A/Professor Kelsey Hegarty
Division of General Practice
University of Melbourne
Industry Partner: Berry Street
- 'Care matters: Capturing outcomes for children in foster care'
Chief Investigator: Dr Elizabeth Fernandez
School of Social Work
University of NSW
Industry Partner: Barnardos Australia
- 'A national comparison of reunification outcomes in Australian out of home care'
Chief Investigator: A/Professor Paul Delfabbro
School of Psychology
University of Adelaide
Partners:
Dr EO Fernandez, University of NSW
Dr LJ Kettler, University of Adelaide
Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia
Department for Families and Communities (SA)
Department for Child Safety (QLD)

Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (ACT)
Department of Community Services (NSW Commission for Children and
Young People & WA Child Commission)
Department for Human Services (VIC)
Department of Health and Human Services (TAS)
Department for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous
Affairs

- 'Families on the edge: Lived experience of citizenship of homeless families'
Chief Investigator: A/Professor Kath Hulse
Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
Swinburne University of Technology
Industry Partner: Hanover Welfare Services
- 'Challenges, Possibilities and Future Directions: A National Assessment of Australia's Children's Courts'
Chief Investigator: Professor Alan Borowski
School of Social Work and Social Policy
La Trobe University
Partners:
A/Prof RJ Sheehan,
Prof PJ Camilleri, Australian Catholic University
Asst Prof M McArthur, Australian Catholic University
Dr EO Fernandez, University of NSW
Dr JJ Bolitho, University of NSW
A/Prof D West,
Ms J Packham,
Dr C Tilbury, Griffith University
Prof P Mazerolle, Griffith University
A/Prof PH Delfabbro, University of Adelaide
Dr A Day,
Dr MH Travers, University of Tasmania
Prof RD White, University of Tasmania
A/Prof MW Clare, University of Western Australia
Dr JP Clare, University of Western Australia

Other Research Projects

- ‘Children’s experiences of homelessness’
Key Centre for Women’s Health in Society, Dr Deb Keys.
- ‘Children’s experiences of homelessness’
An action research project to inform the homelessness strategy of the City of Port Phillip
- ‘Child and Family Homelessness in CALD families’
Meredith Niuri’s post graduate study
(http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/post_gradu.htm)

PART 11 Conclusion

This scan found material that outlined the various and often negative impacts of homelessness on children and their families. For children these include poor physical, emotional and mental health and poor educational outcomes. For some, the impacts lead to further issues during adolescence and adulthood. The literature pointed to a number of factors that can lead to contact with both the homelessness and the child protection systems. These include domestic and family violence, parental misuse of alcohol and other drugs, parental mental illness and a lack of access to appropriate accommodation.

This scan found limited evidence of collaboration with a focus on describing barriers to working across the sectors. There was also some acknowledgement of the usefulness of collaboration (and workforce development) particularly in relation to families with complex needs.

A number of policies, programs, projects and styles of practice which aimed to address the impacts of homelessness on children and their families were identified. Varying levels of evidence was provided about the approaches described. Only a few Australian interventions (mostly federal government programs) were formally evaluated. It was challenging to formally assess the 'promising' nature of the range of policies, programs, projects and styles of practice mentioned.

The ARACY group of researchers, policy makers and practitioners has already begun to determine the scope of research needed to advance responses to vulnerable children and families.

The current national policy frameworks for homelessness and child welfare are conducive to fostering improved relationships between these systems.

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APPENDIX 1 Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and Child Protection Data

State/ Territory	Child Protection responsibility	SAAP responsibility	No. of accompanying children in SAAP 07/08 by age 0-4 years 44% (34000) 5-9 years 29.2% (21900) 10-14 years 20.7% (15800) 15-17 years 6.1% (5300)	No. of children with a substantiation of abuse or neglect 07/08	No. of children in substantiations of notifications of abuse or neglect 07/08 by age 0-4 years 39.5% (12682) 5-9 years 27.3% (8754) 10-14 years 26.1% (8393) 15-17 years 6.7% (2145) (unknown 0.4%)
			SAAP 'accompanying children' 07/08		No. of children with a substantiation of neglect* 07/08
ACT	Dept of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS)	DHCS	1500	545	193
NSW	Dept. of Community Services (DOCS)	DOCS	19000	13202	3912
NT	Dept of Health and Community Services (DHCS)	DHCS	2200	709	244
QLD	Dept. of Child Safety (DCS)	Dept of Communities (DOC)	13200	7331	2017
SA	Dept. for Families and Communities (DFC)	DFC	9900	1830	672
TAS	Dept. of Health and Human Services (DHHS)	DHHS	2400	924	351
VIC	Dept. of Human Services (DHS)	DHS	21400	6164	605
WA	Department for Child Protection (DCP)	DCP	8300	1393	585

- **Homelessness is most likely to be considered as relevant to 'neglect'. Source: AIHW (2009) Child Protection Australia 2007-08.*
- *'Accompanying child' is 'a person who is under 18 years of age; receives support, accommodation or assistance from a Supported Accommodation Assistance Program agency; and has a parent or guardian who is a client of a SAAP agency'.*

APPENDIX 2 Programs and Practice

The following measures have been drawn from the UK *Research in Practice* children and families research implementation project (<http://www.rip.org.uk>) and applied to the child and family homelessness and child protection interventions identified in the literature scan to gauge their effectiveness:

- Convincing:** Rigorous evaluations of models using a randomized controlled design.
- Promising:** Evidence obtained from a mix of evaluation designs including randomised controlled trials, non-randomised treatment and control groups and retrospective pre/post tests.
- Inconclusive:** Interventions have not been evaluated; different evaluation studies report a mixture of positive and negative findings.
- Not effective:** Evaluations indicate there is no evidence of benefit.

Applying this system of categorisation to the interventions described in the literature scan resulted in the classification of the majority as *Inconclusive*, with a couple satisfying the criteria for *Promising* (most notably the Home Advice Program) and none meeting the *Convincing* criteria.

It is worth noting that the US Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration's *National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices* (<http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov>) uses a yet more rigorous classification process.

The “**Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot**” (FHPP), is an Australian early intervention program that aimed to prevent families from drifting into homelessness by building their capacity. FHPP supported 874 adults and 1146 children, with 23% of families identifying as Indigenous. 66% of families had family conflict, violence or abuse issues and a small but significant percentage of children in FHPP-assisted families were currently removed (5%) or had been removed previously (6%) from their families, while 7% had current child protection issues. Child protection issues were more likely to be present in high-complexity cases. An evaluation by RPR Consulting (2005) found a reduction in the number of families paying a high proportion of their household income on housing, overall debt reduction, an increase in expectation of future stable housing and an increase in the number of families with buffer funds in case of emergency. The pilot was unsuccessful in linking parents to parenting programs. (FHPP was the precursor to the HOME (Household Organisational Management Expenses) Advice Program (described below).

MacKenzie, Desmond and Steen (2007) evaluated the “**HOME Advice Program**”, an Australian early intervention initiative that assisted families at risk of becoming homeless. It operated in eight sites (one in each state and territory) and between 2004-2007 assisted 1636 families including 3438 children (of which one in five had been subject to a previous child protection notification). The five core components of the model were: early intervention (reaching families before they became homeless); holistic approach (working with the whole family unit including extended family); strengths based, family-centred practice (working along the full continuum of issues for as long as support was needed); flexible brokerage (immediate financial assistance was provided on the assumption that this would lead to a sustainable outcome); creating and maintaining partnerships (for example, between community organisations, FAHCSIA and a Centrelink-allocated designated social worker) . For every 10 families passing through the program eight or nine avoided homelessness over the time they were in contact with the program. At least 72% of families maintained their housing and did not experience homelessness at any stage over approximately 12 months since leaving the program. Children in HOME Advice families showed some improvement in regular school attendance.

“Homeless and Parenting Program Initiative (HAPPI)”, is a mobile South Australian service of Centacare. Children, 0-12 years old who are homeless or at risk of family homelessness, are the primary focus with an emphasis on Indigenous families. An evaluation report (Toucan Consulting SA 2003) described the services provided as specialist counselling, parenting support and information, consultation services to non-government agencies, training and education of non-government workers about parenting and child development and assistance with the delivery of culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal families. HAPPI engaged with 130 parents (of which 22% were Aboriginal). Child Wellbeing Plans set out developmental milestones while maintaining a focus on assisting parents and children to learn and play together. HAPPI was well regarded by other service providers and the model was considered excellent, however a range of issues were identified: HAPPI found itself fulfilling a case management role in the absence of other service providers; the program was used as a last resort (rather than early intervention); the program targets families with complex needs, however high case loads for workers makes this challenging; and impact of the program for children could not be properly assessed without longitudinal data.

McDonald and Campbell (2007) evaluated the short term demonstration project **“Bright Futures”** delivered by Merri Outreach Support Services in Victoria. The objectives of the project were to increase support outcomes for children by a) decreasing the impact of trauma on immediate/long term emotional and physical wellbeing; b) enhancing the capacity of workers and services to meet children’s support needs within a systematic, family-oriented framework and c) contributing to systemic change in the homelessness and family violence sectors. (pg 10) It was found that Bright Futures led to positive immediate impacts for many individual children and their families, but up-skilling generalist agency staff was more difficult due to lack of time. Bright Futures developed a good practice service delivery model which included case management and group work. There were difficulties in implementing a co-case management approach with referring agencies, although the case planning documents developed were well received (Appendix 3). The most successful component was the group work as it did not duplicate existing services. Agencies appreciated the therapeutic value of the group work as noticeable changes in children’s behaviour were achieved.

An independent evaluation of the Victorian Government’s **“Strengthening Families Initiative”** found that: brokerage worked really as a way of engaging with the family

and addressing practical goals (SPICE Consulting cited in Wright-Howie 2006; Philanthropy Australia – Early Intervention Affinity Group 2008). Brokerage funds could be used for a range of goods and services e.g. utility bills, rent arrears, white goods, car repairs, child care, school camps, tutoring. Brokerage funds were also used in the “**Hanover Rebound program**” to help children to catch up with their learning and to promote their wellbeing and participation in social events and sport (Kolar cited in Noble-Carr (2006)).

UnitingCare Connections’ “Supporting Homeless Individuals and Families in Transition” (SHIFT) provides intensive and extended support for clients with multiple and complex needs in Victoria. SHIFT has a strong focus on meeting the needs of accompanying children. At 17 June 2008, 54 adults and 56 children (25 under 4 years old including 5 newborns) were being supported. The exit stage of case management is considered a particularly important phase in the support period. If permanent housing is in an unfamiliar area the need for extended support to assist the client link to services and integrate into the community is critical for sustaining housing (Joseph 2008).

Micah Projects Inc ran a demonstration project in Brisbane, “**Homelessness to Home,**” to look at a range and mix of interventions. The components were: housing first (rapid re-housing); outreach family support and advocacy; adult learning as well as co-ordination with property management. Of the 46 families who participated 76% reported contact with child protection services, 57% indicated a child had been removed from their care and 45% indicated that their children had experienced a period of non-enrolment at school for longer than two weeks in the previous two years. Of the 46 families, 42 sustained their housing. There was a reduction in breach notices and increased access to permanent, affordable housing (Walsh and Stevens 2007).

[Indigenous Approaches](#)

Tilmouth (2005) discussed the “**Safe Families Project**” which was developed in consultation with local Indigenous leaders, community groups and service providers in Alice Springs looking at short and long term issues in maintaining respect for the cultural integrity of family systems. Aboriginal family workers worked with children at risk of being removed. Collaborative case management identified issues facing children, young people and families (e.g. education, training, employment, health and

wellbeing, cultural identity, legal support, income and substance abuse). Many children routinely referred received little or no meaningful support from their immediate family. The focus is to connect children and young people to a safe living environment within their family structures by using family mapping procedures.

The South Australian HOME Advice Program, “**Wodlitinattoai**”, was a specifically targeted Indigenous program and the Northern Territory “**HOME Advice Program**” had just over 51% of Indigenous client families presenting. The evaluation showed that in South Australia 92% of the families achieved housing stability while in the Northern Territory 82% achieved housing stability. However, at least half of the Indigenous families experienced a period of homelessness in the 12 months after their engagement with the HOME Advice Program (MacKenzie, Desmond and Steen 2007).

Indigenous Homelessness within Australia (2006) stated that outreach and brokerage are both important when working with Indigenous families as they are flexible, more consistent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s help seeking patterns and culturally appropriate. Roberts’ (2004) longitudinal study of Aboriginal families identified outreach and relationship development as major requirements in addressing family homelessness.

Therapeutic and other support

“**Resilient Kids**” is a project that works with children accompanying parents in SAAP services in Victoria by using a range of therapeutic groups, recreational / social activities, camps and some short term counselling. Three core groups of children are provided support through different programs::

1. “Cool Kids”, a program for primary school age children using creative arts therapy;
2. A program similar to Cool Kids is provided to an “adolescent group”, with age-relevant content; and
3. Mothers and infants who have attachment difficulties resulting from an experience of family violence participate in the “Footstep Group” program.

A camps and holiday program is run for children, however encouraging them to attend camps is difficult as they feel anxious that they need to be there to care for their parents/siblings (Zammit 2008).

The Victorian North West Regional Children’s Resource Program “**Way of the Warrior**” (for males) and “**Wushu Way**” (for females) Martial Arts Program for Indigenous children experiencing homelessness has not been formally evaluated but feedback appears enthusiastic. A life-skill building model using instructors and peer educators to deliver a high energy, engaging active program, it targets a pre-adolescent group of children at risk of repeating negative patterns of behaviour. Children learn how to build relationships, deal with anger, anxiety, body image, boundary setting, age appropriate behaviour and connecting to culture in a healing capacity. An unexpected outcome was children in the child protection system had reconnected with family members (McAuley 2008).

Fletcher and Bock (2008) describe a collaborative project “**Northern Crisis Advocacy Response Service**” (NCARS) between Berry Street Family Violence Services, the Salvation Army, the Mary Anderson Family Violence Services, refuges, a domestic violence crisis service and police. NCARS uses a crisis intervention model based on trauma theory that allows women at a time of escalating crisis to make informed, considered, safe and valid decisions about their and their children’s future to restore capability and self determination. Preliminary findings from a formal evaluation indicate that the model supported a significant majority of the women and children clients to return safely to their own homes.

“**BuBs (Building up Bonds) on Board**” is an intervention program for infants and their mothers accessing crisis/emergency accommodation to escape family violence which was piloted in five women’s shelters in Tasmania during the first half of 2008. Findings from the ‘maternal postnatal attachment scale’ (a 19 item self report questionnaire) and the ‘parent-infant relationship global assessment scale’ were alarming, suggesting that these infants are presenting with significant and pressing relational difficulties and considerable developmental delays. Shelters/refuges offer opportunities to do urgent and important relational repair and rebuilding of bonds because of the need to intervene early with infants who have experienced trauma (Bunston and Glennen 2008).

Young Parents

“**Starting Out**”, established in 1992, offers SAAP-funded, integrated family services in the eastern metropolitan area of Melbourne to families with a parent under 25.

Priority is given to families with adolescent and/or isolated parents. Services include in-home support, counselling, antenatal and postnatal support, housing support, group work and a training program for peer workers. The “Starting Out” model provides a flexible, holistic service response offering individual, group, office based and outreach services and the ability to work with children and parents. A multidisciplinary staff team shares a common goal, works flexibly to stretch their traditional professional roles and maintains a commitment to giving and receiving support and expertise. Offering both housing support and family services within a team context is central to effectiveness. Observation of the interactions in a supported playgroup allows for interventions to complement individual casework to increase parents’ understanding of their children’s needs (Joseph 2008).

A UK study, commissioned by a local teenage pregnancy joint planning group, gathered the views of 25 homeless young parents (criteria excluded those with child protection concerns). Key themes were the importance of being near family and social networks, having access to comprehensive information about finances and being independent in a permanent tenancy with their own space and privacy (Martin, Sweeney and Cooke 2005).

Social Networks and Support

Some attention is given to social networks and support in the international literature. The “**Family Empowerment Club**” is a series of groups providing a support network in which parents develop resources, strategies and emotional armour to deal with challenges, improve parenting practices and prevent crises. It is an attempt to address the limited availability of the intensive case management necessary to deal effectively with acute situations and the lack of other resource inputs (Zlotnick, Kronstadt and Klee 1998).

When designing diverse interventions it is useful to focus on social relationships as social isolation and rejection are predictive of diverse negative outcomes (Anooshian 2003). Most help is available in social settings and school success appears to depend on success with social interactions. Homeless mothers (who were wary of someone talking to their children) and ‘target’ children (6-12) were interviewed using measures reflecting income and housing plus their level of functioning or quality of social support and relationships. The interviews found specific ways that homeless

children were impacted upon, independent of parental influences, e.g. loss (of particular things) shame and poor self perception, ostracism and labelling and hiding homelessness. Negative parent and family influences are more likely to reflect the stresses and strains of homelessness and poverty than lack of knowledge about how to parent. Programs designed to address the shame and stigma of poverty must be broad and diverse. Programs that provide clothing or items for personal hygiene must address children's need for social acceptance as well as health. Schools must provide alternatives to using aggression as an adaptive social strategy e.g. The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies curriculum.

APPENDIX 3 Tools currently in use

- Victorian Regional Children's Resource Program includes children's assessment and case planning tools www.homelesskidscount.org
The North West Regional Children's Resource Program was developed to assist the homelessness sector in identifying and addressing the specific needs of children experiencing homelessness and this website has a range of tools to assist.
- Family Violence/Child Welfare agreement
www.cyf.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/17289/towards_collaboration.pdf
Towards Collaboration: A Resource Guide for Child Protection and Family Violence Workers will provide support and information for, and enhance, cross-sector collaboration.
- Victorian Specialist Practice Guide Cumulative Harm
http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/office-for-children/cpmanual/Output%20files/Practice%20research/Output%20files/Execute/cumulative_harm_spg.pdf
The Best Interests Case Practice Model provides a foundation for working with children and families. The practice guides are designed to provide additional guidance on information gathering, analysis and planning, action, and review in cases where specific complex problems exist or with specific vulnerable sub-groups.
- Department of Human Services Best Interests Case Practice Model
www.dhs.vic.gov.au/office-for-children/cpmanual/Output%20files/practice%20functions/Output%20files/Execute/1481_best_interests_case_practice_model.pdf
The best interests case practice model operationalises the framework for vulnerable children and youth and draws together the phases of information gathering, analysis and judgement and decision making across the core functions of assessment, planning and action.

APPENDIX 4 National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children Outcome 3

Supporting Outcome 3 – Risk factors for child abuse and neglect are addressed

Strategies	Initial 3-year actions	Delivery	Indicators of change
3.4 Expand housing and homelessness services for families and children at-risk	Increase availability of affordable and social housing through the: - National Affordable Housing Agreement - investment in social housing under the <i>Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan</i>	By December 2010 Commonwealth in partnership with States & Territories	
	Targeted support to assist children and families who are homeless including: - additional services for up to 2,250 families at-risk of homelessness through the <i>HOME Advice Program</i> - additional specialist support to children who are homeless including closer links between homelessness and child protection services - early intervention and prevention services for up to an additional 9,000 young people aged 12 to 18 years at-risk of homelessness to remain connected with families (where appropriate), education, training and employment	Ongoing Through the National Partnership on Homelessness	
3.5 Increase capacity and capability of: - adult focused services to identify and respond to the needs of children at-risk - child-focused services to identify and respond to the needs of vulnerable families - the broader system to identify children at-risk	Establish professional development resources on the risk factors for, and impacts of, child abuse and neglect to be provided to child and adult focused services and professions (including joint training across professional groups and organisations)	Training resources to be developed by December 2010 Commonwealth to lead in partnership with States & Territories and NGOs	
	Convene an expert taskforce to develop options for shared tools and approaches for assessment and referral across services and professional groups to better identify children at-risk of harm: the <i>Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support Taskforce</i>	Establish Taskforce May 2009, with options by end of 2009 Commonwealth and ARACY in partnership with States & Territories and NGOs	
	Support the development and distribution of a resources guide to schools and early childhood services about responding to the needs of traumatised children	2009 Commonwealth with the Australian Childhood Foundation	
	Build on and extend initiatives to support the workforce, such as <i>WA's Foster Care Team Development</i> initiatives	Ongoing States & Territories	

APPENDIX 5 Members of collaboration

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