

Child and family sensitive practices within homelessness services: results from a preliminary study

Tony Eardley

Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

Acknowledgements

- ❑ Research seed-funded by the Australia Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), with additional funding for preliminary study from the Sidney Myer Foundation.
- ❑ ARACY network on *Children's Journeys through Homelessness and Child Protection* involves a large number of individuals and organisations, both academic, government and practitioner.
- ❑ Main group includes the following: joint authors of this paper.
 - Dr Tony Eardley, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW
 - Christine Gibson, Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia
 - Sean Lappin, Mission Australia
 - Dr Shelley Mallett, Hanover Welfare Services
 - Dr Tim Marchant, Mission Australia
 - Ass. Professor Morag McArthur, Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU
 - Kylie Morphett, Australian Centre for Child Protection
 - Professor Dorothy Scott, Australian Centre for Child Protection

Child and family homelessness

- ❑ Prevalence of family homelessness increasing (Chamberlain and McKenzie, 2006). In 2007-08, 77,000 children accompanied a parent or guardian to a SAAP service – 75% aged under 10 (AIHW, 2009)
- ❑ Numbers of children removed from parents or notified because of neglect or abuse also on the rise: 44 per cent increase in children in out of home care between 2005 and 2009
- ❑ Limited evidence on overlap between homelessness and child protection issues (Delfabbro *et al*, 2009), but widespread evidence on the damaging impact of homelessness on child wellbeing
- ❑ Specialist homelessness services often well aware of the needs of homeless children, but often lack resources and training to meet these needs fully (Norris *et al*. 2005)

Preliminary study

- ❑ *Aims:* to explore child-sensitive practices within specialist homelessness services and to identify the challenges faced in meeting needs of vulnerable children: intended as precursor to larger, longitudinal and place-based studies
- ❑ *Methods:*
 - Telephone survey of staff informants in specialist homelessness services: stratified random sample of 153 SAAP agencies providing accommodation, with primary target groups of women, women with children escaping DV, families, cross-target/multiple/general. Achieved sample: 96 informants covering 107 agencies
 - Focus groups: 4 groups with parents currently or recently accommodation in SAAP services, in Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney (total of 24 parents with 1-7 children aged four months to 18 years +)

Characteristics of sample services

- Nearly half had fewer than 5 staff
- Around half had women escaping DV as main client group
- More than 10% of clients were Indigenous in around half of services
- Many services accommodated more children than adults
- Only one-third of services had a Children's Worker

The needs of homeless children

- ❑ *Respondents identified the main needs of the children they saw as:*
 - physical – eg. safe environment, good nutrition, access to health services, recreation
 - emotional – eg. parental relations, access to counselling, social interactions with peers, stability, love and attention
 - material: eg. safe accommodation, food, clothing, baby equipment, toys, school uniforms etc.
 - educational – eg. school enrolment and attendance, childcare, structured play, help with learning difficulties

Identifying children's needs

- Services reported inconsistent means of identifying needs: parental/child reports, observation, information from other agencies (eg. schools), formal assessments using common or individually-developed tools.
- Services often reported lack of resources to conduct proper assessments and develop case plans.
- Needed more training in needs assessment and use of evaluated tools.
- Dilemma for services in focusing on parents or children, and on temporary versus longer-term housing needs

Addressing children's needs: assistance offered

- ❑ Wide range, including:
 - suitable accommodation
 - Material assistance
 - Transport: to school, recreational activities, doctors etc.
 - Children's groups/programs: recreational, social, sporting, 'normalising experience'
 - Support to parents
 - Children's Workers and other trained staff
 - Liaison with schools and childcare centres
 - Other links and referrals

Prevention; the role of ‘first to know’ agencies

- ❑ ‘First to know’ agencies important in preventing homelessness
- ❑ Respondent most often identified as ‘first to know’: own/other NGOs, Centrelink, Housing Department, health service/hospital, police/courts, education/school, child protection services, real estate agents, financial counsellors, and ‘other’ including churches, councils
- ❑ Capacity to address client needs enhanced by productive networks and relationships with other agencies, either formal or informal
- ❑ Barriers to effective prevention included lack of affordable housing, insufficient resources for early intervention, client reluctance to disclose complex needs, and lack of knowledge about homelessness by workers in other sectors

Professional development

- ❑ Respondents stressed need for more training, induction and supervision
- ❑ Having specialist Children's Worker was helpful for training and supporting other staff
- ❑ Areas of training reported as making the most difference included child protection, child development and safety, working with children, managing trauma arising from abuse and Triple P parenting
- ❑ Distance, cost and quality all factors in improving accessibility of professional development

Conclusions

“A lot more could be done, but we do what we can” (SAAP service worker)

- Growing awareness of needs of homeless children not matched by resources
- Recognition of children as clients in their own right plus shift towards prevention and ‘housing first’ all welcome
- But, in the meantime, need for more children’s workers, more access to appropriate training, greater consistency in needs assessment, development of effective links and networks with other preventive and supportive specialist agencies, more child-friendly temporary accommodation, more opportunity for dissemination of good practice and innovation
- Smaller services and those in regional and rural areas particularly need more resources to respond to children’s needs because of geographical distance
- More research needed to assess outcomes of models of child-sensitive practice

Reference

The paper draws on the report of the initial study, *Think Child, Think Family: Child and Family Sensitive Practices Within Specialist Homelessness Services*, Gibson, C and Morphett, K. (2101), Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia, Adelaide.

Other references

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009), *Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2007-08*, AIHW, Canberra.

Chamberlain. C. and McKenzie, D. (2006), *Counting the Homeless Australia*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

Delfabbro, P., Borgas, M., Rogers, N., Jeffries, H. and Wilson, R. (2009), 'The social and family backgrounds of infants in care and their capacity to predict subsequent abuse notifications: a study of South Australian out-of-home care 2000-2005', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31, 219-226.

Norris, K., Thompson, D., Eardley, T. and Hoffmann, S. (2005), *Children in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)*, National SAAP Coordination and Development Committee, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.