

Family Poverty, Family Homelessness and the Systems Abuse Cycle

TERRY BARTHOLOMEW

In early 1998, the Crossroads Housing Network and the Inner South Community Health Centre conducted a major study that explored the extent of family homelessness in Victoria. This project illustrated the plight of families who are unable to gain adequate assistance from a poorly resourced welfare system. On a more specific level, it also analysed the trend for welfare organisations to place homeless families in private hotels as a form of emergency accommodation.

As one component of this work, interviews were undertaken with 30 families who had recently stayed in private hotel accommodation. These interviews, and the subsequent focus groups with welfare practitioners, are drawn on in this article to highlight the limitations of current service provision in regards to family homelessness. Readers interested in the entire research project, and the subsequent recommendations that emerged from it are referred to Bartholomew (1998a).

Family Homelessness

Contemporary Australian research challenges the previously accepted demographic profile of those who experience residential instability. Consistent with overseas trends (McChesney 1990; Vostanis et al. 1996), recent local studies report that 'the family is now one of the fastest growing homeless groups appearing at welfare and homeless agencies' and that 'some statewide welfare agencies report an increase of over 400 per cent of homeless families presenting at their centres between 1993 and 1997' (Tierney 1997: 2).

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (1997a), in Victoria during the 1996–97 period, family groups made up approximately 30 per cent of those who received accommodation or support from agencies funded by the primary 'safety net' for homeless people in Australia, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). Nationally, families made up 22 per cent of those who received such assistance (AIHW

HOMELESSNESS AND THE PRIVATE HOTEL OPTION

"It's just not good for the children, it's just such an alien environment. This huge building with so many rooms . . . You're not really part of the place, you've got to protect yourself and the children. It puts you on edge, and you feel that disaster could strike at any time."

1997b). In 1992–93, families represented less than 5 per cent of this latter total.

These statistics could indicate that increases in funding have enabled a greater proportion of families to be helped in the last five years. However, the figures need to be considered alongside the fact that 53 per cent of people who requested housing assistance in the 1996–97 period were turned away (that is, approximately 32,500 potential clients who were unable to be supported). According to projections (AIHW 1997a), roughly 8 per cent of these potential contacts would have been family groups (2,470 families). Although this is a seemingly small proportion, families represent the third largest sub-group of those who were unable to be helped (only 'youth' and a collective 'miscellaneous' category are larger). In Victoria during the 1996–97 financial year, up to 11,161 families sought housing-related assistance from SAAP-funded agencies, and the majority of these were unable to be helped.

These figures highlight the current extent of homelessness among family groups, and the increased heterogeneity of this sub-population in recent times. Where

once the homeless were regarded as a relatively coherent group, comprised of either young or old single males, a more diverse picture is now emerging (Shinn and Gillespie 1994). Homeless people no longer represent 'the other', because their demographics now simply reflect those of the poor (Neil and Fopp 1994).

The Private Hotel Option

As the demand for emergency accommodation for families rises, evidence indicates that some are being placed in forms of crisis housing that are patently unsuitable, and in some cases potentially harmful. As well as being an unproductive long-term response to homelessness, placing families in accommodation such as hotels, motels, and caravan parks can actually further deplete their already minimal social and economic resources (Rossi 1994).

Private hotels are used by inner city welfare agencies to provide temporary accommodation for the homeless (most often families), only when all other SAAP sources of accommodation are exhausted. Unfortunately, SAAP-funded agencies are at capacity most of the time, so the number of families who experience hotel accommodation is significant (Council to Homeless Persons 1997).

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the funnelling effect of current service delivery in the area of family homelessness, and also highlights the sizeable proportion of homeless families who are housed in 'hotel-type' accommodation by welfare agencies. In the 1997 Victorian NDCA report, it was noted that 'a small but significant proportion of accommodated clients (10 per cent) stayed in accommodation arranged or paid for by SAAP-funded agencies, such as a hotel, motel or other non-SAAP accommodation service' (AIHW 1997a: 23). An analysis of relevant statistics reveals that this 'small' percentage amounts to 1,660 contacts during one year. Figure 1 provides an estimate of the number of *family* contacts that such figures may translate into.



Changing Families
Challenging Futures
CONFERENCE

This is an edited version of a paper presented during the Sixth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference in Melbourne, November 1998.

Although vouchering (paying for the accommodation for a short time) does move a family from 'the street' in the short term, most families are subsequently left with the option of either staying in the hotel or returning to the street. Data collected by the current project indicate that a significant proportion of families remain in the hotel for a significant period, despite the deplorable conditions and high tariffs, simply because of a lack of funds to finance a move, and a dearth of options to relocate to.

It is argued here that vouchering families to private hotels leads to a number of undesirable outcomes. The practice: (1) conceals the real extent of family homelessness, by removing families from the ranks of the officially 'homeless'; (2) conveys the misleading message of a 'desirable' outcome for the family in agency statistics; (3) places many of the families in an increasingly compromised position; (4) puts children in positions of risk that are often more extreme than that presented by other situations; (5) contributes to effectiveness problems in child welfare and protection services; and (6) continues the cycle of systems abuse that has characterised the families' experience to date.

The Family Interviews

The interviewed families, on average, comprised two 30-year-old adults with two children less than four years old. The majority reported an 'Australian' cultural identity, and 98 per cent of the adults had not been in the formal waged labour force for almost three years. The families had moved an average of five times each in the six months prior to the interview, and most had exhausted all possible extended family resources before contacting welfare services. On average, families had been in hotel accommodation for 76 days prior to the interview (the minimum being one night and the maximum two years).

As a general introduction, interviewers asked a broad impressionistic question about the family's hotel stay. Responses to this item were rarely positive, and tended



HOMELESSNESS AND THE

to cite features of the hotel that the family found problematic.

'When we first walked in we were really grateful to be there, to be off the street, to have a bed and be off the street. We didn't see the dirt . . . But the next day the kids got flea bites. I couldn't bath them there and even the baby had flea bites.'

'The violence is a huge problem, the police are there constantly. The noise level at night is phenomenal. The used syringes in the toilets . . . I could go on and on.'

'It's just not good for the children, it's just such an alien environment. This huge building with so many rooms, and with the toilets so far away, you just wouldn't go at night. You're not really part of the place, you've got to protect yourself and the children. It puts you on edge, and you feel that disaster could strike at any time.'

'It's just really, really run down. They said the place was nothing flash, I mean Jesus Christ, I didn't expect the Regent, but the walls have cobwebs, dirty marks, bed's a hundred and twenty years old, the carpet's real musty, the whole place has that musty smell.'

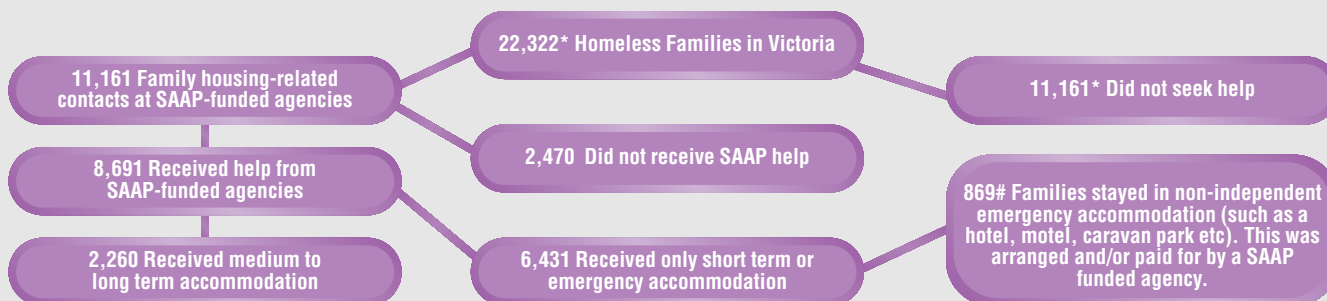
This small selection of quotations indicates that hotel accommodation often only

succeeds in changing the *form* of stress that the family is forced to cope with. Hotels place parents and children in an environment that is detrimental to their health, safety, and wellbeing.

The fact that most families reported negative changes for them since moving to the hotel raises concerns about the wellbeing of family members. The following negative changes were reported by families: access to adequate bathroom facilities; access to cooking and food storage areas; health or diets of adults; security of personal belongings; family financial situation; facilities for storage of possessions; feelings of personal safety; privacy; health or diets of children; levels of family conflict; children's friendships; access to child care and recreation facilities; children's behaviour; access to mail and telephone; access to support services; and contact with family or friends.

These concerns were further qualified by many families. Issues such as: the physical conditions of the hotels, fear of developmental delays and long-term changes in children's social skills, hygiene concerns, lapses in children's immunisations due to isolation from resources to maintain preventative care, respiratory disorders, skin ailments, malnutrition, fear of exposure to infectious diseases, and the presence of dangerous substances (such as drugs),

Figure 1. Homeless families in Victoria 1996–97: patterns of help seeking and service delivery



* Estimated figures using ideas outlined by Victor (1996) and Fantasia and Isserman (1994). In highlighting the disjuncture between official homelessness statistics and other measures of prevalence, these authors illustrate the likelihood that official statistics account for less than 50 per cent of the actual homeless. The estimated figures in this figure assume that each contact at a SAAP-funded agency represents a different family (ie, not a repeat client). All other figures are derived from data reported in the SAAP NDCA Victorian report (AIHW 1997a).

The fact that the Crossroads St Kilda Crisis Centre alone reports vouchering 336 families to private hotels during the 1996–97 period indicates the vast underestimation that this number most likely represents. Although NDCA SAAP data is the only coordinated data collection and reporting arrangement currently in place, evidence from numerous sources indicates that it is at best a general guide (see Cooper 1998).



The families themselves took these photographs and have given permission for them to be reproduced here.

PRIVATE HOTEL OPTION

objects (such as syringes), or people, were all commonly reported concerns of the families.

The following comments represent a small selection of the observations made.

'Once you're in there, that's it. Your money is gone, so you can't get the money together to get something else.'

'Once you get into a place like that, they are so bloody expensive that you can't get out again. It's not just a matter of the amount that you're putting out for rent, which is ridiculous anyway, but you've also got to remember that you and your family are going to have to live day to day.'

'I had to walk to the city and use the showers at Spencer Street [station] because that's how bad the hotel bathrooms were.'

'We've had TB scares, salmonella, cases of horrific flu ...'

'There's no kitchen. They sell sandwiches at night time. How do you even keep milk overnight with no fridge? Just get a bucket of ice, but that costs too. We can't even have a meal, can't even buy food because there's nowhere to put it. No cooking facilities.'

'I don't keep any possessions here now, the door got kicked in last night.'

'People don't have a goddamned idea about how bad that place is – so dangerous and so unhealthy. But there is nowhere else for us to go. I've had to educate my kids about needle awareness because you can't go into the bathroom without seeing them – there were 58 needles found in one day.'

It is apparent that hotels bring with them specific health, familial, economic, and social problems that other forms of emergency accommodation may not. These developments carry the potential to further hinder the family's bid to end their housing crisis, and also to place family members at imminent risk. Many of these issues are likely to remain long after the housing crisis has ended (Victor 1996).

The emerging picture is one of the hotel as a structure that directly or indirectly undermines many protective factors, while simultaneously increasing the prevalence of risk factors. In the process of impairing recovery efforts, hotel accommodation also often presents families to welfare services as 'unable to cope', and as a worthy focus of protective involvement.

Worker Perceptions

As an additional source of data, focus groups were conducted with welfare practitioners who work in the homelessness field. Focus group participants reported that hotel accommodation was being used more often in recent times, that the families presenting for help represented an increasingly heterogeneous group, and that once in hotels, families were remaining for longer periods of time.

Workers noted that the often held view that homeless families represent dysfunctional entities, or that they are made up of people who have personal characteristics that cause their housing crisis was decreasingly valid. Structural issues such as poverty, unemployment, the lack of affordable housing, and domestic violence were seen by participants as major contributors to the current family housing crisis.

'I think a lot more families, because of unemployment, have now got issues with homelessness. It's not so much the people who have been in the Ministry of Housing and have had a problem, it's just much more diverse.'

'People who years ago would have had a few more safety nets and options available to them are now at the bottom of the barrel more quickly, and there's no structures that enable them to get out of that situation themselves.'

'The homeless family population has changed so much in the last few years because of people losing jobs, losing mortgages, not being able to pay rent. It is all shifting. There's more of them I think, and there's more reasons as to why.'

Workers made much reference to the fine line between buoyancy and crisis, and the lack of facilities that enable families to recover from minor crises before they escalate into major long-term events.

Service Provision

A significant obstacle encountered by workers in their efforts to provide services to hotel residents was family suspicions about the role of the worker. Parents were often fearful that their homelessness, and the welfare system's failure to provide adequate emergency respite, may lead to Protective Services involvement. Workers made the following observations regarding this issue.

'The perception is often that if the family is in the hotel, they think that this means they are bad parents and are in danger of losing their children. Sometimes the worker may notify as a way of achieving something else.'

'Well, most of the families that I see are concerned about Protective Services and are always quizzing me about who I am, and what I'm doing, and what I plan to do. It impedes the little service that we can provide.'

'Families are ambivalent about workers like us. We are both a friend and the enemy. We can give support, we can tap them in, and that is the positive side. On the negative side, we are also the ones who have other powers, so there's a real ambivalence.'

Although workers reported that family suspicions often interfered with service provision, a number did acknowledge that: they had done notifications to Protective Services on families who were staying in hotels; the increased visibility and contact with the family contributed on some occasions to their decision to notify; and notifications were occasionally made as a way of accessing better supports for the family.

After making the difficult decision to notify, a number of outreach workers reported feeling less than satisfied with the results. Protective Services were perceived as withdrawing from situations where families were in hotels. In some of these cases, protective workers had encountered difficulties with accessing or maintaining contact with families in hotels and, as a result, follow-up had ceased. Workers in the focus groups found this situation to be sub-standard.

'Well, the family are told "the accommodation is not safe for you here", but where do they go – from the [hotel] to the [hotel].'

'I think Child Protection put it in the "too hard" basket. Which is just that. The idea is that they have to find somewhere else for those people to live and they can't.'

'Child Protection tend to say they are aware of the problem, that the family needs to be

housed elsewhere, and then there is this deafening silence because none of us can find anywhere.'

'Well we had a real Protective Services involvement a couple of weeks ago, and none of the children were removed. And there was sexual assault, and none of the children were taken – still living there in the dark corridors.'

The perceived inactivity of Protective Services was seen as a problem, but was understood in the context of an overloaded child welfare system and a lack of alternative forms of accommodation for these families. Protective workers were limited by the same lack of resources that others in the field encountered. They too have had to compromise (Bartholomew 1998b).

Workers observed that families in many ways were victims of 'systems abuse', whereby the same system that placed families in particular circumstances now required them to alleviate the situation. In some cases, workers who helped the family access the hotel were now either notifying Human Services agencies about them, or warning the family that the accommodation may be perceived as a problem by Protective Services.

Systems abuse has occurred because the welfare system has not only failed to improve the situation of its clients, but has actually contributed to their cumulative disadvantage. The referral of these families to private hotels has affected their health, safety, economic situation, access to services, familial stability, recovery efforts, and now parental role.

These pressures often led families to flee emergency accommodation arrangements and relocate. This further isolated the family from any help that social welfare services could provide, and simultaneously gave the family an 'outlaw' status. A number of families who were interviewed for this project reported such moves in their recent past.

From this brief outline of worker perspectives, a number of issues become apparent. First, families' fears about the implications of their hotel stay often hindered the outreach efforts of welfare/housing workers. Second, workers reported occasionally making notifications to Protective Services as a way of accessing other services for families. Third, workers who had made 'genuine' notifications reported dissatisfaction with the extent and nature of the Protective Services response. Fourth, it was highlighted that the structural issues that placed families at risk of long-term homelessness, also severely limited the nature of the social welfare response. This then placed families in a situation where they were being subject to further 'systems abuse'.

Conclusion

The current rationalist climate regarding welfare funding and housing provision has led to an increasing number of families

being without housing. A significant and increasing proportion of these are being placed in private hotels by inadequately resourced welfare services. The use of hotel accommodation in this way is merely an indicator of the severity of the current housing crisis. As a result of this trend, there are more families in hotels, and more children are subject to varying forms of risk.

Data collected for this project confirms that hotel accommodation has an array of negative consequences for the family. These include health, hygiene, safety, social, economic, familial, affective, and developmental concerns. Questions need to be asked about who should take the responsibility for families being in this situation.

The housing workers who participated in this study highlighted that placing families in hotels has additional ramifications for Protective Services' interventions. Workers acknowledged that, in some cases, issues occurring in the family had become apparent because of the visibility of the family in the hotel. In these cases, workers felt that Protective Services' responses were hindered by accommodation issues, and a general lack of resources in child welfare. As a result, appropriate action was not taken, and children remain at imminent risk.

In other instances, families were being scrutinised by the Child Protection system solely because of the hotel stay. This was seen as problematic by housing workers who, in lieu of any alternative accommodation, had referred the family to the hotel. In these cases, the risk is not created by the family per se, but is instead a product of structural issues that have led families to this type of accommodation. Focus group participants expressed concern that families, who were already in positions of extreme pressure, were having their situation worsened by a welfare response that offered no solutions, and contributed only to disadvantage.

Some housing workers conceded that they had done official notifications on families simply as a means of accessing better facilities for those families. These practices have implications for the families, as well as the effectiveness of Protective Services. In a situation where Child Protection mechanisms are prioritised by government over more preventative services, statutory protection will be hindered by an abundance of welfare cases that are directed at such a high profile entry point. The high incidence of welfare cases in the protection system helps to explain the 78 per cent of Victorian notifications that do not result in substantiation of risk (Victorian Government Department of Human Services 1997). Unfortunately, in a context where so many welfare cases are being referred to statutory protection, it is likely that a high percentage of 'worthy' protection cases will also be overlooked. Cases deserving of protective involvement are likely to be lost amongst the increasing number of 'peripheral

notifications' or 'false positives' that are reported. The current data confirms this likelihood.

The overall picture presented is one of cumulative disadvantage for the growing number of families currently experiencing residential instability in Australia. Although the social welfare system cannot be blamed for causing these problems, it is apparent that many of its responses to family homelessness result in an ongoing cycle of systems abuse for these families. Until changes occur at a more fundamental level, it is likely that this cycle will continue.

References

- AIHW (1997a), *SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 1996–97 Victoria*, SAAP NDCA Report Series 2, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.
- AIHW (1997b), *SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 1996–97 Australia*, SAAP NDCA Report Series 2, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.
- Bartholomew, T. (1998a), *A Long Way From Home: Family Homelessness in the Current Welfare Context*, Deakin University Press, Victoria.
- Bartholomew, T. (1998b), 'Family homelessness, the welfare response, and Protective Services involvement', Proceedings of the 1998 Australian Association Against Child Abuse, 'Kids First – An Agenda for Change' Conference. In press.
- Cooper, B. (1998), 'The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program data collection revisited', *Parity*, vol. 11, no. 1, p. 18.
- Council on Homeless Persons (1997), 'Homeless families rising and no respite', *Parity*, vol. 10, no. 6, pp. 3–4.
- Fantasia, R. & Isserman, M. (1994), *Homelessness: A Sourcebook*, Facts on File, New York.
- Neil, C. & Fopp, R. (1994), *Homelessness in Australia*, Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee on Homelessness and Housing, CSIRO, Melbourne.
- McChesney, K.Y. (1990), 'Family homelessness: a systemic problem', *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 191–205.
- Rossi, P.H. (1994), 'Troubling families: family homelessness in America', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 342–395.
- Shinn, M. & Gillespie, C. (1994), 'The roles of housing and poverty in the origins of homelessness', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 505–521.
- Tierney, P. (1997), Editorial, *Parity*, vol. 10, no. 6, p. 2.
- Victor, C.R. (1996), 'The health of the temporary homeless population', *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 257–266.
- Victorian Government Department of Human Services (1997), *The Redevelopment of Victoria's Youth and Family Services – Strategic Directions*, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Victoria.
- Vostanis, P., Cumella, S., Briscoe, J. & Oyeboode, F. (1996), 'A survey of psychosocial characteristics of homeless families', *European Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 108–117.

Terry Bartholomew is a researcher at the Crossroads Housing Network, St Kilda Crisis Centre, and the Criminology Department of the University of Melbourne. This article is based on a paper presented at the Sixth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, *Changing Families, Challenging Futures*, in Melbourne, 25–27 November 1998.