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'The Right To Belong'
Family Homelessness and Citizenship

Kath Hulse and Violet Kolar | July 2009
Swinburne University of Technology and Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne

Foreword

The title of the report
The Right to Belong is a
phrase used by one of
the women interviewed
(Lauren, 30s, with one
child) who said that
homeless people have

*'The right to belong.
To be treated as fairly
as everyone else.'*

I first became involved in the study of families with housing problems in 1990. Davis and I were coming close to the end of our years in Government House and thinking about retirement, when I had a telephone call from Don Edgar, the Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. He asked me if I would consider undertaking a very interesting job. My protest that I already had one after which we were planning to retire was swept aside. He said, 'Well, at least come and have a talk about it.'

He told me that he had had an approach from Tony Nicholson, then Director of Hanover Welfare Services. He was concerned about the changing face of homelessness and the growing needs of families with children. Before planning changes in services, he was looking for someone to follow up all the families with housing problems who had been on their books in two calendar months. He wanted the answers to three questions:

- Why did this family become homeless?
- Could any service have prevented them from becoming homeless?
- Could any service help them to make a new start and get them on their feet again?

Well, I found such an invitation irresistible, especially as he offered me the full support of the Institute which I knew from experience would be invaluable. It was a great place to work.

I have never regretted this decision and the opportunity it has given me to understand better the urgency and complexity of housing poor families, especially those headed by women. Now this excellent report produced by Hanover and the Swinburne University of Technology throws invaluable light on the problems which homeless families face – not just the physical problems of providing a roof over their heads, but the sense of alienation, of living as nomads in a settled world. Typically, they said they would just like to be 'normal' like other families.

This excellent report is well entitled *'The Right to Belong': Family Homelessness and Citizenship.*

I am happy to have this opportunity to congratulate Kath Hulse and Violet Kolar on the production of this report which combines the best of recent research and looks towards the future with guarded expectations.

Jean McCaughey, 16 June 2009

Dr Jean McCaughey AO is well known for her social research, advocacy, community involvement and many other contributions to Australian society. She is the author of Where Now? Homeless Families in the 1990s*, published in 1992, which brought to public attention homelessness amongst families with children.*

Contents

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1 Introduction

'I want to be able to do my own thing and not have to, you know, meet criteria for this and meet criteria for that. I just … I just want to live my own life and just be okay. I don't want the world, I don't, you know, I don't want someone to come and hand me a million dollars and say, here, fix your life. I want to work for it myself. If someone handed it to me I'd be the same as what I'm doing now. But yes, I don't, I don't like the way things are now. I like just, yes, I want it to … I want to be normal'

(Brooke, 20s, living in transitional housing with her two children).

This report presents the findings of research which investigated how homelessness affects the everyday experiences of women with children. It examines how homelessness affects citizenship: the ways in which women understand and negotiate rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation. The research was undertaken in a context in which homelessness amongst families is increasing, with most homeless families comprising women and children. It used an in-depth qualitative research method to give voice to the women and their perspectives on the differences that homelessness has made to their lives and those of their children. This approach differs from much research into homelessness which is framed in terms of public policy and sees families predominantly as current or potential clients of services.

The research on which this report is based is the first part of an ongoing collaboration between researchers from Swinburne University of Technology (Swinburne) and Hanover Welfare Services (Hanover). The project was funded independently through private donations from people attending Swinburne's Sir Rupert Hamer Lecture 2006, which was given by Mr Bill Shorten. The Lecture Series recognises the significant role that the late Sir Rupert played in the shaping of Victoria and his contribution to Swinburne through his membership of Council for over 20 years. Sir Rupert was the nephew of George Swinburne, the University's founder and after whom the University was named.[1] The authors would like to acknowledge the generous contributions of the donors which made this research possible.

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[1] Swinburne Alumni, Sir Rupert Hamer Lecture, <http://www.swinburne.edu.au/alumni/events/rhlecture.htm>

2   Family homelessness and citizenship

This research aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the effects of homelessness on families as: individuals, family members, neighbours and citizens. Whilst there has been much valuable research into what constitutes homelessness, how many homeless people there are, and the major pathways into homelessness, there is far less research about the effects of homelessness for families: on personal wellbeing, caring for children, family relationships, social and economic participation and connections to community.

2.1 Why family homelessness?

In recent years, welfare agencies in Australia have reported that homelessness amongst families with children is increasing,[2] a trend that has also been observed internationally. The best estimate is that 26,790 people were living in homeless families in Australia on Census night in 2006, including 16,182 children, a 17 percent increase compared to Census night in 2001. These estimates are based on a 'cultural definition' of homelessness which includes not only people sleeping rough but also people living various forms of crisis and transitional housing, sharing with family and friends, and living in housing which is below the community standard, such as long-term occupancy of boarding houses.[3] They are also likely to be underestimates as homeless people are not counted as families if parents and children have been separated as a result of their homelessness.[4] The recent White Paper issued by the Australian government acknowledges that 'homelessness amongst families and children is already rising' and likely to continue to be an important priority for homelessness services in Australia.[5]

Family homelessness is often less visible to the public than homelessness experienced by other groups. In Australia, families with children are less likely to be living in public places, such as on the streets or in cars, and more likely to be in crisis and transitional accommodation provided by welfare services, living with relatives or friends on a temporary basis, or in marginal and insecure accommodation such as caravans.[6] Media and other portrayals of homelessness often do not include these families and, as Homelessness Australia comments, 'many people find it difficult to believe that there are homeless families in our communities.'[7]

There are different types of homeless families: couples with children and men and women living alone with their children. However, most homeless families comprise women with children.[8] In Australia, where the primary emphasis in much homelessness research is on service delivery, women and children are viewed predominantly as the clients of welfare services. In contrast to other countries, there is only limited research which explores the views of women about the effects of homelessness more broadly: on their caring responsibilities, on their capacity to engage economically and to connect socially, on their lives as citizens. Children living in homeless families are a 'hidden group' and there is surprisingly little research on their experiences and perspectives.[9]

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[2] For example, St Vincent de Paul Society (2007) *Don't Dream It's Over: Housing Stress in Australia's Private Rental Market,* St Vincent de Paul Society, Canberra; Mission Australia (2000) *Family Homelessness in Australia: Snapshot*, Research and Social Policy Unit, Mission Australia, Sydney

[3] Chamberlain, C. and Mackenzie, D. (2008) *Counting the Homeless* Australia 2006, Australian Census Analytic Program, Cat. no. 2050.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra

[4] Chamberlain and Mackenzie, op. cit., pp. 23-4

[5] Australian Government (2008) *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, White Paper, Australian Government, Canberra

[6] Chamberlain and Mackenzie, op. cit., pp. 25-6

[7] Homelessness Australia (2008) *Homelessness and Families*, Canberra, <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/File/Homelessness%20&%20Families%20for%20web.pdf>

[8] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008a) *Homeless People in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 2006–07* Australia, AIHW, Canberra; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, op. cit., p. 25

[9] Noble-Carr, D. (2006) *The Experiences and Effects of Family Homelessness for Children,* Institute for Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, Canberra. See also *Parity,* (2008) 21(8), special edition on 'Homelessness and Children.'

The most detailed information on homelessness in Australia, including family homelessness, comes from data collected by services funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). These provide accommodation and/or support services to homeless people using a broader definition of homelessness to include those who are homeless 'at home,' such as women experiencing domestic violence or where housing is likely to damage the resident's health.[10] SAAP services provide data on how many Australian families are homeless over a year rather than a snapshot at one point in time. The data are intended to guide resource allocation and monitor service delivery. In 2006-07, some 69,100 children (aged 17 years or less) were with adults who received support from SAAP agencies, or one in every 71 children in this age group, and almost half of these were aged four years or under. In most cases (86 per cent), the children were with a woman, usually their mother. More than half of the women with children sought assistance primarily due to domestic or other family violence, and just under half give other reasons such as housing and financial problems.[11]

There is, however, much that we do not know about family homelessness. Families wanting immediate assistance with their housing are more likely to be turned away from SAAP services than single people due to lack of accommodation to meet the demand.[12] While SAAP services play a vital role in providing assistance to women and children who are escaping domestic violence, there is limited funding for services for homeless families where domestic violence is not a factor and hence there is little information about such families.[13] We also know little about homeless families who are reluctant to request assistance from SAAP agencies, for various reasons. The limited research available suggests some particular difficulties facing families with children. For example, they may not regard themselves as being homeless, seeing this as a stigmatised identity, and may actively resist being seen as homeless.[14] There are also particular problems for women (and some men) with children who are involved in custody disputes and/or fear involvement of child protection services if they request assistance which draws attention to their circumstances.

Importantly, family homelessness in Australia is viewed primarily through a public policy lens due largely to reliance on SAAP data which assists in the funding, planning, delivery and evaluation of services. People living in homeless families are seen primarily as clients of services who present with needs that must be assessed and services allocated. Surprisingly, and in contrast with countries like the US or the UK, there are only a few studies of family homelessness which explore experiences of homelessness from the perspective of people themselves.[15]

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[10] Chamberlain and Mackenzie, op. cit., pp. 1-5 for a discussion on the differences in definitions of homelessness as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for enumeration purposes and the SAAP Act for determining eligibility for services

[11] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008a) op. cit., pp. 9, 11, 22, 37

[12] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008b) *Demand for SAAP Accommodation by Homeless People 2006-07: A Report from the SAAP National Data Collection*, Cat. no. HOU 186, AIHW, Canberra

[13] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008a), op. cit, p. 3, Table 2.3

[14] Zufferey, C. and Kerr, L. (2004) 'Identity and everyday experiences of homelessness: Some implications for social work', *Australian Social Work*, 57(4), pp. 343-53

[15] McCaughey, J. (1992) *Where Now? Homeless Families in the 1990s*, prepared for Hanover Welfare Services, Policy Background Paper no. 8, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne; Bartholomew, T. (1999) *A Long Way from Home: Family Homelessness in the Current Welfare Context*, Salvation Army, Melbourne; Kolar, V. (2004) *Home First: A Longitudinal Study of Outcome for Families Who Have Experienced Homelessness*, Final Report, Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne; Parker, S. and Fopp, R. (2004) '"I'm the slice of pie that's ostracised … ": Foucault's technologies, and personal agency, in the voice of women who are homeless, Adelaide, South Australia,' *Housing, Theory and Society*, 21(4), pp. 145-54

From the limited in-depth research available come some interesting insights. For example, the only Australian study of lone fathers experiencing homelessness finds that, in addition to problems in combining paid work with parenting, they placed a high importance on being good fathers and role models for their children and were often reluctant to seek assistance.[16] A South Australian study of women with children who experienced homelessness found that the women blame themselves for their 'failure' to provide a secure and safe home for their children, which affects their mental and physical health. They also expressed a strong desire to be included, to have supportive relationships, to have time to rebuild their lives and to have access to affordable housing.[17]

2.2 Why citizenship?

The research framed its exploration of family homelessness through a lens of human rights and citizenship, rather than service delivery and public policy. Whilst human rights are usually considered to be universal, citizenship is understood as a national level, politico-legal concept. In this study, however, we refer to more recent understandings of citizenship as lived experience,[18] referring to 'the meaning that citizenship actually has in people's lives and the ways in which people's social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens.'[19] Viewed in this way, citizenship is about how people understand and negotiate three key elements: rights and responsibilities; belonging; and participation.[20] This approach enables consideration of the contexts in which citizenship is practised, including the effects of gender, caring responsibilities exercised within the sphere of family, and the importance of time and place,[21] rather than focusing on formal documentation, such as legalisation and policy documents. This approach is in line with recent developments in Australia, such as the adoption of a Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities by the Victorian state government.[22]

We were inspired by Jean McCaughey's pioneering 1992 study Where Now?: Homeless Families in the 1990s which sought to understand in a qualitative rather than a statistical sense the then newly apparent issue of family homelessness. The advantage of this approach was not only that it explored in detail why, and how, families became homeless, but also that it:

> 'provides a view of the experience of being homeless, and of the attitudes of society and of the "helping" services, through the voices of the families themselves. Many studies look from the top down, from the point of view of providers and planners of services; this one tries to look from the bottom up.'[23]

[16] McArthur, M., Zubrzycki, J., Rochester, A. and Thomson, L. (2007) '"Dad, where are we going to live now?": Exploring fathers' experiences of homelessness', *Australian Social Work*, 59(3), pp. 288-300

[17] Parker and Fopp, op. cit.

[18] For example, Lister, R. (1998) 'Vocabularies of citizenship and gender: The UK', *Critical Social Policy*, 18(3), pp. 309-31; Lister, R. (2003) *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*, 2nd edn, Palgrave, Basingstoke

[19] Hall, T. and Williamson, H. (1999), cited in Lister, R., Williams, F., Anttonen, A., Bussemaker, J., Gerhard, U., Heinen, J., Johansson, S., Leira, A., Sim, B. and Tobio, C. (2007) *Gendering Citizenship in Western Europe*, Policy Press, Bristol

[20] Lister, R. et al. (2007) op. cit., p. 168

[21] Lister, R. (2007) 'Inclusive citizenship: Realizing the potential', *Citizenship Studies*, 11(1), pp. 49-61

[22] Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, *The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities*, Melbourne, <http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/human%20rights/default.asp> (accessed 1 April 2009)

[23] McCaughey, op. cit.

We wanted to investigate the effects of homelessness on people's everyday lives from their perspective rather than the views of policy makers or service deliverers. The research was thus in-depth and qualitative. It explored the effects on women and children, their family and friendship networks, and connections with place and local community. We wanted to explore how people living in homeless families view their contact with a variety of agencies and organisations, whether people feel that they are treated with respect, and whether their experiences of homelessness affect their sense of belonging and their views on the fairness of Australian society. The research thus builds on, and extends, previous research conducted by Hanover on the experiences of homeless families.[24]

2.3 Aims of the research

The overall aim of the research was to explore whether, and how, homelessness affects lived experiences of citizenship for women with children. In particular, it investigated:

- Experiences whilst homeless and living in temporary accommodation, in particular, the support and compliance aspects;

- Perspectives on dealings with a range of organisations, including government departments and not-for-profit agencies;

- The effects on homelessness on children, family relationships and friendships, and social connectedness generally;

- Perception of self, family relationships and whether experiences of homelessness have affected views about Australian society.

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[24] Kolar, op. cit. There are also two other reports from this project: Horn, M. and Cooke, M. (2001) *Hanover Family Outcomes Study*, First Report, Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne; and Kolar, V. (2003) *'Kicking Into the Wind': Longitudinal Study of Outcomes for Families Who Have Experienced Homelessness*, Second Report, Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne

3   The research

The research involved in-depth interviews with women living with at least one of their children in transitional housing. The reasons for the selection of this group are as follows. Firstly, most homeless families comprise women and children, as indicated in the previous chapter. Whilst homelessness is also experienced by couple families and by a small number of men living alone with their children, the scale of interviewing did not enable us to include sufficient people in these two groups to provide a useful analysis. A specific focus on women also enabled a detailed investigation of complexities of gender and caring responsibilities which were likely to be important in exploring the issues outlined in the previous chapter. Secondly, we decided to interview adult women only, although we were very aware that 'children within homeless families are a hidden group' and there is little relevant research on their experiences and perspectives.[25] Research involving children, even teenage children, is difficult and there are additional ethical and practical issues to be addressed which were beyond the resources available for our project. Thirdly, we decided to recruit only women living with their children in transitional housing[26] to avoid placing additional stress on people in very short-term crisis accommodation.

3.1 Recruitment of participants

We were able to recruit women with children in a similar way to the McCaughey study via Hanover Welfare Services. Hanover's research unit sought assistance from the service delivery staff to recruit participants as the areas operate at arms length from each other. Service delivery staff provided information about the project to prospective participants, advising them that participation was completely voluntary and that any decision would not affect the services they were receiving. Women who were interested in taking part gave permission to pass on their contact details to the researcher in Hanover's research unit who rang the women to arrange an interview.

The researcher decided after a phone conversation with the women whether they were eligible to participate, using three criteria: they were sole parent families headed by mothers or grandmothers; they had care of at least one child living with them; and they were living in transitional accommodation (temporary medium-term housing).

The initial target was 24 interviews, and recruitment of families began in June 2007 following approval of the conduct of the research by Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee and Hanover's Research Ethics Committee which also met the requirements of Hanover's ethics process. The success, or otherwise, of a recruitment strategy is usually difficult to anticipate, particularly when working with a vulnerable group. It was originally envisaged that interviews would be completed quite quickly; however, it took almost three months to complete the first 12 interviews.

A second stage of recruitment occurred between the beginning of March and the end of May 2008, which provided another eight eligible families. Overall, it took more than five months to engage and interview a final total of 20 families. There are many possible explanations for difficulty in recruiting, including the tight selection criteria and the necessity for homeless families to deal with a myriad of practical issues which meant that they were unable to participate.

This method of recruitment from SAAP clients receiving support services from Hanover has its limitations. Like most Australian research into homelessness which is based on SAAP clients, it reflects in part the intake criteria of SAAP services, including experience of domestic violence. In a subsequent piece of research we are employing other strategies to try and recruit homeless families who are not SAAP clients.

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[25] Noble-Carr, op cit. See also Parity, 21(8), special edition on 'Homelessness and Children.'
[26] Transitional housing in Victoria refers to 'the provision of accommodation for transition towards independent living or towards returning home. The accommodation is generally more stable and provided for longer than crisis accommodation (that is, six months to two years)' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008) *Victorian Homelessness Data Collection (Incorporating SAAP National Data Collection): Collectors' Manual*, AIHW, Canberra).

3.2 The interviews

The exploratory nature of the project required face-to-face interviews, usually where the woman was currently living. Questions were open-ended with the intention of understanding the lived experience of citizenship from the perspective of the eligible families, and are included as Appendix 1.

In all cases, the participant gave informed consent based on written material and the opportunity to discuss the research and ask questions. Most interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes. With the permission of the woman interviewed, they were digitally recorded and later transcribed. No-one objected to the interview being recorded and most were prepared to answer all the questions. Each participant received a $45 gift voucher in acknowledgement of their valuable time and contribution. Overall, participants were positive about the project. Most enjoyed the interview and were pleasantly surprised, thinking that the questions would be more intrusive than they were. All participants were interested in receiving a copy of the findings.

All the women lived in transitional housing except two who paid rent to Hanover for crisis accommodation and one who had just moved into public housing from transitional housing a few days earlier. The final sample of 20 families included 18 mothers and two grandmothers. Living in transitional accommodation with them were 40 children ranging from babies to older children. The women were aged between 19 and late 50s.

Thirteen of the women were born in Australia, three in New Zealand, and four elsewhere. Some of the women born overseas had lived in Australia for a long time. Nine women had at least one parent born in Australia but, reflecting the cultural diversity of the population and prior patterns of migration, the women's parents were born in a variety of places including New Zealand, Europe (Italy, Serbia, Macedonia, Germany, Netherlands), the Middle East (Egypt) and South-East Asia (Singapore). Sixteen identified themselves as Australians and three as New Zealanders.

The recruitment process did not attract women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. In follow up research, we are employing more diverse and targeted strategies to recruit CALD women.

3.3 Analysis and reporting

The value of interpretive research such as this is in the depth of analysis which generates a more holistic, rich and textured understanding of the ways in which experiences of homelessness affect the lives of women with children than is possible with other research methods. Everyone interviewed told their own story: each faced a unique set of circumstances and attempted to deal with their homelessness in their own way in the face of considerable constraints of everyday life. However, analysis also reveals some common patterns which emerge.[27]

The interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim for analysis. They were analysed in depth according to key questions and themes. The coding and analysis of all interviews was conducted by one of the researchers and validated by the other.

The patterns that we discuss in the rest of this report are as follows:

- Being homeless: invisibility, uncertainty and conditionality (chapter 4);

- The job of being homeless: everyday life as a client of multiple services (chapter 5);

- Children, caring and a double bind (chapter 6);

- Perceptions of self, family relationships and community attitudes (chapter 7).

We illustrate the findings with the words used by the women, as transcribed verbatim, with any explanation of content given in square brackets. All the women and children are given pseudonyms and identifying information has been removed.

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[27] Liamputtong, P. and Ezzy, D. (2005) *Qualitative Research Methods*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne

4 Being homeless: invisibility, uncertainty and conditionality

A key concept used in research into homelessness is that of 'pathways' which highlights not only the ways in which people move between dwellings but also the meanings that they attach to house and home as a result of their contacts with other people, such as family members, tenancy managers, agency staff and neighbours.[28] All the women interviewed were living with their children in transitional housing (one had moved into public housing a few days earlier) which is intended to provide a more stable base after a period of crisis and time to prepare for 'independent living,' usually in the private or social rental sectors. Their experience of homelessness, however, began some time prior to this. In this chapter, we examine the families' experiences prior to living in transitional housing and then outline how the women negotiate the rights and responsibilities associated with living in transitional housing.

4.1 Experiences prior to living in transitional housing: moving around and moving on

The research suggests that homelessness is not a single event but cumulative experiences, sometimes over quite a long period of time. Each family experienced a unique set of circumstances; however, there are some patterns in the their experiences which we outline next.

4.1.1 Relationship breakdown and experience of violence

In almost all cases, initial homelessness was associated either directly or indirectly with a breakdown of a relationship between a woman and her ex-partner. Eight of the 20 women specifically said that this was directly associated with domestic violence. For example, Dianne, who had been living with her ex-partner and three children, said:

> 'There was a violent situation back where I lived, so I left and, but also having a priority of other things as well, sort of made up my mind. But the most important thing was that there was a very violent situation and I couldn't stay where I was.'

Violence, or the threat of violence, was often ongoing after the relationship had broken down. Some who had left their partner due to domestic violence continued to experience harassment, such as Sharon who had been living in public housing but had to leave with her daughter:

> 'I've had some problems with my ex, with him intruding in, you know, bothering us at my place where I was living and, you know, he sort of comes two or three times a day, every day.'

Three women reported death threats against them or members of their families which necessitated changes to where and how they lived; including moving to Melbourne from elsewhere. The threats came from associates of members of two of the families and were in the context of a bitterly contested custody dispute in the other. Lauren put it like this:

> 'So there were threats made to my life, and I overheard things that they were going to do to me which made me panic … Like I was too frightened to go anywhere, because everywhere I went in the shops they followed me. Like they had four members of this biker club follow me everywhere. Like even to the toilet. I couldn't go anywhere.'

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[28] Clapham, D. (2005), *The Meaning of Housing: A Pathways Approach*, Policy Press, Bristol, pp. 27-9. For Australian research using a pathways approach, see Johnson, G., Gronda, H. and Coutts, S. (2008) *On the Outside: Pathways in and out of Homelessness*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne.

The two grandmothers interviewed were in this situation with threats against their daughters who now lived elsewhere. They took over caring for their grandchildren in difficult circumstances and had become homeless themselves in doing so.

Thus most of the women in one way or another were deeply concerned about the safety of themselves and their children. As Kelly put it, coming from a situation of domestic violence with her two children, her priority was 'Safety, concern for my safety and the children's safety.' Once homeless initially, most of the women had tried to resolve their situation by themselves, drawing on family and friends and/or attempting to rent privately.

4.1.2   Living with family and friends

Three-quarters of the women had turned first to family members or friends for accommodation and support after initially becoming homeless. The most common pattern was to move in with a family member, usually their mother or sister, but these arrangements had broken down for one reason or another.

Karen had been living interstate when her marriage broke down:

> 'I was living with my mum at the time and me and my mum weren't getting on very well and I wanted to move further away as possible and this is as far away as you get and my ex-husband was giving me a hard time. He started hounding me again and that and then I couldn't take it any more. So yes, that sort of led to everything.'

These arrangements were often far from ideal in other ways as well. For example, Kate and her four children had lived with two of her sisters. In one case, she lived in a garage for a month at her sister's place which was rented from the Office of Housing. Her sister was reluctant to take her:

> 'She explained to me, "You can't live here. This house is given to me from [the] Commission to house me and my kids only".'

Kate could not read and, while she wanted to stand on her own two feet, found it difficult to get the assistance she needed. While she appreciated getting help, she felt too dependent upon her sister and resented the lack of control over her own circumstances.

Sometimes, the women moved between several family members, unable to stay for long with anyone. Nicole was living in transitional housing with two of her daughters but had an older daughter who was living at her mother's place:

> 'So I was out on the street not knowing what I was doing, going from my mum's to my brother's to my sister's to friends, back to my mother's. I moved several times because I've left my marriage because of domestic violence.'

A quarter of the women had lived for varying periods with friends although this often was unstable and they had to leave again. Staying with friends proved difficult when there were children and sometimes friendships were fractured as a result. For example, Rebecca had left her husband and stayed with friends:

> 'Because, after staying with family and friends and that, you know, me and my four kids, I just couldn't stay with them any more. And I had nowhere else to go and I didn't know what to do, so I turned to [welfare agency].'

Sometimes, the friend's circumstances had changed, necessitating another move. For example, Kylie had been renting through a friend in a sharer situation but the woman she was living with got a divorce and she had to

move. Moving between friends or family and friends could go on for long periods, such as Nicole who had been 'couch surfing' on and off since leaving her ex-partner due to domestic violence more than three years earlier. Another had been squatting with friends in a private rental place.

4.1.3   Renting privately

Whilst many women did not consider private rental as an option, five had been in private rental at some stage since separating from their ex-partner. Difficulties in finding, and remaining in, affordable private rental contributed to, and compounded, homelessness for many of the women.

In all cases, private rental did not provide hoped-for stability for a variety of reasons including eviction due to inability to pay rent and accumulation of debt, sharing arrangements which broke down, and being discovered by a violent ex-partner and having to move. Periods in private rental varied from a few weeks up to almost a year.

Finding rental housing was difficult and ongoing affordability was also a problem due to high rents relative to income. Typical was Brooke, in her 20s with two young children:

> 'I couldn't afford to pay the rent that I was paying privately and I got evicted and I had nowhere else to go so I rang [welfare agency].'

There were, however, other reasons why the women could not get affordable housing. A common pattern was moving to Melbourne from regional Victoria and interstate or overseas as a consequence of relationship break-up and/or violence. This posed particular difficulties, in addition to higher than anticipated rents in Melbourne. Some of the women did not have references and other documentation required by real estate agents because they had not rented before in their own right or had moved to Melbourne from elsewhere. For example, Christine had moved from interstate:

> 'I mean, I was aware that time I could get help with the bond money and the four weeks in advance but, yeah, the actual things that they need as far as like, references, other things that they ask for, I didn't have. So I knew, even if I did apply, it wasn't going to get me anywhere because there's someone there with what they require, and they're going to get it before me.'

In consequence, some had tried private landlords rather than real estate agents. This created additional problems either in terms of landlord practices or the quality of the accommodation. One of these was Nicole:

> 'I was looking and looking and looking for private rental, but I kept getting rejected wherever I went. But I found a man in the local paper who wanted to let without the real estate agent, so private landlord. It was an old house and you could put your fingers through the windows, you know. It was $180 a week. So rather than going and sleep out in the street.'

Difficulties in finding or sustaining rental housing meant that some women had put themselves in vulnerable and potentially unsafe situations, either by trying to reconcile with an ex-partner or sharing with a male friend. For example, Kelly's family was interstate and she had nowhere else to go and lived with her ex-partner for three weeks before she was allocated her current transitional housing. She said that this accommodation was neither safe nor stable because of domestic violence but she had find somewhere for herself and her two sons to live. Shelley nearly slept in a toilet block with her children but contacted a welfare agency and was given assistance. She thinks that she got priority because she was a young single mother with two small children.

Up to this point, homelessness is hidden and not captured in any official data. Only after these attempts to resolve their situation failed did the women approach welfare agencies with their children. Cumulatively, this meant that

many had moved a lot, trying a number of living arrangements in an attempt to resolve their situation, over a period of months and sometimes years. Five women, however, did not stay with family and friends first, contacting welfare agencies directly. Three of these had received support from welfare agencies before and knew where to go and who to contact.

4.1.4   Motels/hotels and crisis accommodation

Once the women contacted a welfare agency, their homelessness became more visible. However, they often had to move again into different types of short-term accommodation. Nine women and their children spent some time in a motel or hotel. This was typically for a few days or weeks. Motel or hotel accommodation was a stopgap when immediate accommodation was required but no crisis or transitional accommodation was available. It was often arranged, and paid for, by a welfare agency. Leanne and her two daughters lived in a motel for two months, the longest period, and described the conditions as 'disgusting':

> 'And there was a lot of women there too with kids and I just thought, "My God, what are they doing sending them there?" And it was just like that and the rooms all ran down like that and in the middle was just a car park, no play areas, no … just nothing there, nothing for kids of anything, nothing.'

The risks for homeless families in living in private hotel accommodation in the inner city were raised in an earlier Australian study.[29] In our study, the women were more likely to have been placed in suburban motels than inner city hotels. However, the issues identified more than a decade ago remain: the effects on both women and children of living in this type of accommodation and the potential consequences in terms of child welfare and protection, which we discuss further in chapter 6.

Twelve women said that they had spent some time in other types of crisis or emergency accommodation, often in addition to spending time in hotels or motels, before being offered transitional housing. Time spent in this type of accommodation, which included purpose-built crisis accommodation, varied from a week to three or four months. For example, Rebecca had left her husband, taking her four children with her. Initially she stayed with friends but she was unable to live with these any longer and went to seek assistance from a welfare agency who put her in emergency accommodation in the city. She was there for two months before being allocated their current transitional housing. Helen, a grandmother, outlined how she had initially been provided with accommodation by the Children's Hospital when she moved from regional Victoria with her daughter to get treatment for her grandchildren. When they could no longer stay in this accommodation, the hospital put her on to a welfare agency who found emergency housing, first in one suburb and then another bigger unit in another suburb, before she and her grandchildren were able to get transitional housing.

4.2   Living in transitional housing: support, conditionality and uncertainty

As we have seen, most of the women had moved several times, sometimes over a considerable period, before being offered transitional housing. This is intended to enable greater stability but is still temporary housing pending a move to more permanent arrangements. The women had been living in transitional housing for periods varying from a week to more than three years. The average length of stay was nine and a half months. Three had been in two transitional houses, having moved because of threats to their safety or that of their children.

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[29] Bartholomew, T. (1998) 'Family poverty, family homelessness and the systems abuse cycle', *Family Matters*, 51, pp. 37-40

4.2.1   Conditionality

Living in transitional housing has conditions attached. These are usually a requirement to sign a three month lease, to search for private rental accommodation and to apply for 'early' public housing. While most of the families paid rent to Hanover for their transitional accommodation, some were in properties by other agencies. In total, there were five transitional housing managers, including Hanover. Given the various agencies involved, it is not surprising that the way in which the conditions were implemented varied. These were in addition to usual tenancy conditions, such as regular payment of rent, keeping the property clean and not damaging it, and not creating undue noise.

Most of the women had signed an initial lease for three months. In some cases, subsequent leases were automatically renewed and women were advised by letter or personal contact, as explained by Karen:

> 'I can stay here until I get my offer [of public housing] because they review it every three months, which she [support worker] does it automatically. She doesn't get in contact with me. What I do is I always get it in the mail that she's just renewed it every three months.'

Not all the women were in this situation. Maria had to visit the offices of the transitional housing manager to get her lease renewed. This involved hiring a car because of the time it took by public transport after which 'it is a 10 minute interview for all that trouble.' For others the process was even more formal and involved notification of the end of the three month lease, an 'eviction letter,' which seemed to act as a trigger for a more formal renewal process. Melissa recounted:

> 'But everyone that lives in transitional houses has to go to court to renew, it's like to renew the lease type thing, just to ask the judge for more time to stay in the house.'

Whilst some of the women were confident that their lease would be renewed if they had not found other accommodation, others found the three month leases very stressful and worried a lot about what would happen to them.

Many of the women had to look for private rental, with assistance from their support worker, typically in the form of access to a computer or lists of possible properties. However, as women often had to move to another area to obtain transitional housing, they were not familiar with what was available. Some had difficulty in meeting this condition as they had no-one to look after their younger children and no car to search for, and inspect, properties, even if they were able to find something affordable. We discuss difficulties in getting around for appointments in more detail in the next chapter.

The main requirement for families living in transitional housing was that they lodge an application for 'early' public housing. Almost all the women had done this, which required a considerable amount of supporting documentation. Support workers helped them to complete the application and find necessary supporting material, although the degree of worker involvement varied greatly. Many of the women had contact with the Victorian Office of Housing about their public housing applications, particularly applications for early housing, although in some situations the support workers did this on their behalf as was the case with Kylie, a young mother:

> 'Oh, we did a Segment 1 … This was through [welfare agency], she did a report, she just asked me a whole heap of questions and wrote up a report and just sent it in and that was about it, I didn't have to do anything else.'

Most women reported that they knew and understood the process. In some cases, they were very active in their attempts to secure public housing. For example, Dianne made regular enquiries into the status of her housing application:

'You try your best to be in touch with the Ministry of Housing, you try your best to get into different organisations where there's help around … You can't expect them to help you with everything, so you've got to get on your own two feet and do stuff yourself. I ring the Ministry once a week. I have my social worker doing, we're getting together and trying to work out what we can do and stuff like that.'

The women were able to nominate three areas in which they would live, which posed some difficulties for those who wanted their children to remain at their current schools. In a few cases, women said that they had been advised to change their areas of preference to increase their chance of early housing. Others had changed their areas for other reasons and had not found this to be a problem. Nevertheless, as Julie noted, nominating an area was no guarantee:

'Well, I put down the areas but I've pretty much been told that it's not going to happen … I just have to wait and see where I'll end up.'

In a few cases, women who had applied for early housing on the basis of recurrent homelessness (Segment 1) had been rejected. One had been rejected on more than one occasion on the grounds that she had the option of finding private rental housing. This woman had experienced recurring homelessness since leaving her ex-partner in 2004 due to domestic violence and had applied for private rental, and been rejected, many times. Another had applied two years ago for early housing but was not able to live above ground level due to vertigo and had not yet received an offer. Another woman was on the waiting list for early housing Segment 3 (special housing needs) rather than Segment 1 because she would only accept a house for her family that included a son who could not use stairs because of a significant medical condition.

The system could be unsympathetic and unresponsive to women who exercised their agency and choice. Two had previously been evicted from other transitional housing for refusing offers of public housing that they thought unsuitable for their families. Leanne had also been evicted from her crisis accommodation for failing to accept an offer of early housing which she considered to be quite unsuitable:

'I went there with some friends and my kids and we nearly died when we opened the door and walked in there … The whole carpet was covered in burns, cigarette burns just everywhere, and it was just disgusting and they wanted me to move in there. I told them I wouldn't move my dog in there.'

Sharon had been through transitional housing before entering public housing which she had left due to domestic violence. This was her second experience of living in transitional housing and applying for public housing. She wanted the Office of Housing to be more responsive and sensitive:

'They're not really too concerned with [families in my situation] and they still treat you as, you know, as not being a priority case. [With] emergency housing you have to leave and you've got no other place to go so basically … you're out on the street … Public housing is supposed to be for helping people in my situation with no income. They haven't been really sensitive of the situation … I've suffered through them a lot because of what they've delayed.'

Other conditions of living in transitional housing included a commitment to regular meetings with the support worker and working towards certain goals, some restriction on having friends stay over, and a requirement to see a counsellor or social worker regularly.

4.2.2 Perceptions about living in transitional housing: uncertainty and lack of control

Three-quarters of the women made some positive comments when asked what it was like living in transitional housing. Some found living in their current place comfortable or peaceful and quiet and/or were able to make a home and be more settled than before. Others just liked living there, particularly the area, while some liked having non-intrusive neighbours who left them alone. For some, it was simply that it was better than where they had been living before.

The quality of the accommodation was often better than in crisis accommodation which brought benefits for both the women and their children, as Brooke found:

> 'I'm a lot calmer in this house because it's a lot nicer than the last place, which was a dump … My younger son stopped wetting himself since we've been in this house so that's a huge thing for him. So yes, [my children] seem quite settled and quite happy.'

Almost all the women (18) also had some negative comments about their current transitional housing. Some talked about it as too dirty, infested with pests and giving allergies to the children. Accommodation was too small for some families, while for others being in multi-level housing meant they were worried about their children being too noisy; or being on a busy main road that was noisy and caused safety problems for the children.

Although some women said that they were comfortable and had made a home, all faced uncertainty about how long they would be there, where they would live next, and when they and their children would have to move again. As Karen said:

> 'We like living here but it's always the uncertainty of when the offer [of public housing] is going to be and if it's going to be close to her [school] … it's always an uncertainty when you live in transitional [housing].'

This uncertainty had practical considerations and meant that the routines of day-to-day life were disrupted. Not knowing the timing of a next move created some practical problems such as keeping some belongings and furniture in storage, which was expensive. It also affected whether the women went to the effort of making the transitional housing into a home, as expressed by Maria:

> 'Well, I feel uncomfortable here, that's why everything is not even on the walls yet, because I know I am not going to stay here so I feel uncomfortable because I know one day I'm going to get a letter in the mail to move, and I just don't feel stable here knowing that I am not going to be here permanently.'

Twelve of the 20 women had already exceeded the three month limit and their leases had been renewed, sometimes several times. This process of renewal sometimes added to insecurity and was stressful for some of the women as they were never certain whether they could continue to live in transitional housing.

The women were particularly conscious of the impact on their children. As Leanne stated:

> 'I would've liked her to probably be in kinder but because I know [we're not going to be here forever] … I don't want to put her in there and then [say to her] "Sorry, you've got to leave [kinder], we're going".'

A further difficulty associated with living in transitional housing was moving to an unfamiliar area, which made day-to-day living more challenging, for example, in working out transport routes and times. For some, it posed difficulties in terms of maintaining their children at school or having to move them to a school nearer to the transitional housing with the prospect of them having to move again in the future, which we discuss further in chapter 6.

Other manifestations of uncertainty were psycho-social, on a continuum from 'lack of comfort' through anxiety to depression. We discuss the emotional impact of experiences of homelessness further in chapter 7.

4.3 Summary

All the women had experienced a relationship breakdown, compounded for some by their experiences of domestic violence. Their inability to access affordable and appropriate accommodation in the private or social rental sectors was also a major reason for becoming and remaining homeless, confirming previous research findings.[30] This is not in itself surprising as the interviewees were recruited from those who had received SAAP assistance.

What this research has added is an understanding that family homelessness is rarely a single event; the women and children had been homeless for periods ranging from a few weeks to more than three years, and in some cases had experienced recurrent homelessness. This included initial arrangements with family and friends and short periods in private rental, in which their homelessness was largely invisible. Subsequently most lived in hotels/motels and/or various types of crisis accommodation before moving into transitional accommodation. Homelessness for these women is a series of experiences over time, the cumulative effects of which can undermine their ability to exercise their agency and rebuild their lives and those of their children. It also affects their participation in social and economic life and their feelings of belonging, which we discuss in later chapters of this report.

Most of the women were pleased to be in transitional housing after the experiences they had been through, although some were not satisfied with its quality and/or location. However, living in this type of housing did not mean an end to homelessness. The women had very little control over their next move, either its timing or where they would live. This created uncertainty in the present, such as whether it was worth making a home in the transitional housing, and some difficulty in making decisions about their own and their children's futures, including kinder and school education.

A key aspect of family homelessness is its geography; the women often had to move with their children, sometimes several times. For most, this meant moving to unfamiliar areas within the city or moving to Melbourne from regional centres, interstate or overseas, for a variety of reasons. The places where homelessness is experienced thus often differ from the outer suburban and regional areas in which family homelessness is created, confirming some international research findings.[31] Many women and children found themselves living in unfamiliar places as a consequence of their homelessness, which made the re-establishing the practical routines of everyday life and dealing with multiple agencies more difficult, as we discuss in the next chapter.

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[30] For example, Kolar (2004), op. cit.
[31] For example, in Canada; see Whitzman, C. (2006) 'At the intersection of invisibilities: Canadian women, homelessness and health outside the "big city"', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 13(4), pp. 383-99

5   The job of being homeless

Families who are homeless have a range of services and supports that they can access. Once they do so, they are subject to a number of requirements as a consequence of their role as clients, in addition to fulfilling the conditions of living in transitional housing discussed in chapter 4. In this chapter we examine the day-to-day impact on the lives of families who are in contact with a number of agencies and organisations. We examine whether they get the type of assistance they require, the ways in which they negotiate the conditions and requirements attached to receipt of services, and the overall effect of dealing with multiple agencies in terms of involvement, trust and respect.

5.1   Becoming a client of multiple agencies

All the women interviewed were in contact with a wide range of organisations involving government and non-government agencies, both on their own behalf and for their children. In addition to their current status as a client of transitional housing, the families were clients of personal health and support services, and Centrelink and financial assistance agencies. Many were also involved with schools and educational institutions, local government services and legal services, as indicated in Box 1.

Box 1: Organisations and agencies supporting homeless families

Housing

All of the women were living in transitional housing which had conditions attached to it, other than meeting normal tenancy conditions such as payment of rent and keeping the premises clean. These included applying for 'early' public housing, actively seeking private rental accommodation, and requirements for regular contact with workers.

Personal support and health

Most of the women had a support worker from Hanover Families, which is not surprising given the selection of the sample. Some of the children also had their own support worker either from Hanover, the Department of Human Services (DHS) or local community centres.

The families were in contact with a range of agencies about their own and their children's health, including GPs, medical specialists, hospitals, public dentistry services, adult and child psychologists, drug and alcohol counsellors, community health centres, community mental health services, baby/child health nurses and the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service. Other personal support programs included a sibling mentoring program. A few women were also in contact with groups providing specific support, for example, mothers' support program, and programs for people with disability and victims of domestic violence.

Financial assistance

Most families had some contact with Centrelink although this tended to be by letter and sometimes by phone, often if something had gone wrong in the calculation of benefit payments. In addition, the women were in contact with a number of other agencies including emergency relief centres and charities providing in-kind assistance, such as food vouchers.

Education and training

Among the 20 families who participated, there were 22 school-aged children. Thus, it is not surprising that a number of women had contact with primary and secondary schools: principals and vice-principals, teachers and welfare coordinators. A few had contact with Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges as they were studying or planning on studying, and one young woman was in contact with a Job Placement, Employment and Training (JPET) scheme.

Local government services

At a local government level, the following services were mentioned: home help and respite care, family day care, before and after school care, and kindergartens.

Legal issues

Several women had contact with DHS about child protection and guardianship issues; some were involved in legal matters concerning child custody and care arrangements.

Contacting various organisations, organising and attending appointments and seeking referrals for both themselves and their children constituted the 'job of being homeless' for many of the women interviewed. When asked how much time they had spent in contact with such organisations per week, the most common response was 'not much.' However, when questioned in more detail, estimates of the amount of time taken up varied from 'an hour or so' a week to most of the woman's time. Several factors seemed to underlie these differences.

Firstly, the number and type of problems being experienced affected the time spent in contact with agencies. For example, one woman spent about three days a week making and keeping appointments in relation to one of her children with special needs and various medical problems. Another spent a lot of time making and keeping appointments for her grandsons who lived with her and had significant medical issues. In another case, a woman was involved in an inter-country custody dispute on behalf of her daughter, which meant that at times she had spent 'most of the week' in contact with agencies. The number of children can also make a difference, for example, one woman with four children estimated that she spent almost half of her time contacting agencies, including her children's schools.

Secondly, more time was taken with these contacts when families were in the 'set-up' period after moving into crisis and transitional housing. For example, one woman who had moved into transitional housing only four days earlier said that contacting agencies had taken up most of her week. Another who had just moved from transitional housing and into public housing said that having contact with agencies had taken a day or two in that intervening week-long period.

Thirdly, moving into transitional housing often meant moving to an unfamiliar area, which meant that it took a while for the families to get to know the area and feel comfortable in both carrying out their daily routines of shopping, getting to kinder and school, and finding out about services and facilities such as community health centres and GPs. Thus, the amount of time taken for contact with agencies was affected by whether the woman and her children had to go somewhere new for an appointment.

Finally, there was a big difference between women who had a car and those who relied on public transport. Those with a car found it quite easy to get to appointments, even if they had many to attend. However, many practical problems faced those who did not drive, particularly as some did not have anyone to look after their children and they had to take their children everywhere with them on public transport. For example, Shelley had to walk around with a double pram which she could not get on to the tram:

> 'Well, it was difficult. Like I remember like it was really hot and I had to go to [welfare agency] and I had no idea where it was and I spent like nearly two hours trying to find it and going up that massive hill, I think it's in Bourke Street or something.'

Attempting to get her youngest child to school took one mother and her child two hours by public transport. It was clearly unsustainable and within a week the child was enrolled in a school within walking distance. Dianne said that prior to having a car she and her children:

> 'walked everywhere and god it was hectic. We'd have to get up earlier and leave earlier and stuff like that, yeah, and we just went from A to B … do the shopping and come back by taxi. I didn't know my way around, I didn't know Melbourne at all, so it was very hard but we got by … You've got to do it … Now I've got my licence it's a lot easier.'

The women who did not have a car were particularly worried about the location of where they would eventually be offered public housing, especially whether it would be close to public transport. As indicated in the previous

chapter, looking for private rental without a car made this process particularly difficult; again if they had to take their children with them. There were also other reasons why the women needed to travel. In one case, a woman had to take her grandchild on court-ordered access visits to an outer metropolitan area. To make this possible she had taken out a loan to buy a car and was 'ripped off' in the process.

About half of the women had back-up from family or friends to mind their other children if they needed to attend an appointment for themselves or one of their children. In a couple of cases, an ex-partner was available in an emergency to help out. Where women had no-one to look after the children they developed a number of strategies including taking the children with them, trying to pay for babysitting or arranging plays at their children's friends' homes. In two cases women used libraries as safe public spaces where their children could stay until they were able to pick them up. Christine described how she relied on the public library as a safe place for her children when she had to go out looking for private rental with her social worker:

> 'If the time sort of goes later than school and it's usually on a day that the public library's open, the girls meet me at the library. If at all, at any stage, I'm late from anywhere … I will organise it with my girls beforehand or I'll contact the school and I'll get them to meet me at the library … It's not very far from the school and it's, to walk from the school to there it's safe. In the mornings I wouldn't let them do it but being after school, there's a whole lot of other children also going to the library as well so I know it's a safe place.'

5.2 Ability to get information and practical assistance

Despite difficulties in getting around, most of the women had been able to get the information and practical assistance that they needed. They were aware that agencies had many competing demands; indeed, a common response was one of appreciation and gratitude as highlighted in the following comments by Christine:

> 'I've never really had so much help. I've never needed so much help … You do notice just how much you get when you do get it and I have had an abundance of help, you know, it's just been great.'

Positive comments were made by many women, who talked about the financial and emotional support that was provided. As expressed by Melissa:

> 'Oh, yes, [welfare agency] is fantastic. Even like I just have to make a phone call, like they help me out just from a phone call or if I needed to make a list they help me out with it … or if I need a social worker or … I've got problems with money or anything they'd find a person to help me out. They are very helpful with trying to help me out if I have a problem with anything.'

In addition to services, the women were pleased to get assistance with practical things such as being driven to look at private rental properties, help with utilities, a double pram, assistance with storage costs and furniture, and food and petrol vouchers.

Other agencies that the women found helpful included counsellors, GPs and psychologists, public dental services and specific programs such as 'Big Brother Big Sister' and the Tweedle Program for mothers whose babies have trouble sleeping. One young mother appreciated courses organised via JPET. This program is aimed at young people aged between 15 and 21 who face various barriers to employment, education or community participation.

Sometimes it took women a while to find people and organisations that they felt understood their situation and were able to provide the assistance they required, for example, the right social worker, psychologist, counsellor or GP. According to Julie:

> 'Yeah, over the time I've been with [welfare agency] it's taken me a while to get my social worker and a psychologist, like I've been through quite a few to find someone that works. Doctors too, I went through quite a lot of different doctors … It's taken nearly a year for me to find someone, which I've got and she's really good.'

There were also circumstances where the women felt that they had not received the assistance they needed. For example, Nicole said that she was not offered counselling for the domestic violence that she had experienced and Shelley struggled to pay storage costs, although she did receive other assistance. However, the main reason was because some things took too long. For example, one woman had lost all her teeth and required public dental services which had a long waiting list whilst another was waiting for someone to see her son who had behavioural problems.

Some women were critical of the Office of Housing for not providing adequate information and where, despite being listed for early housing, they still had to wait for a long time. As Nicole put it:

> '[I'm not getting what I need] because I haven't got a roof over my head. I've got a roof over my head but not secure … I don't feel it's a secure roof over my head for my children and myself.'

Being a client or potential client of a number of agencies entailed varying amounts of time and effort on the part of the women. It also entailed having to retell their story a number of times to get assistance, which involved reliving events that the women would have preferred not to talk about. Lauren thought that the agencies had been very helpful but, since she had had threats to her life, reliving the experiences that led to her homelessness resulted in nightmares and feeling on edge:

> 'They've been a great help. [But] I've had to go over what 's happened a lot … I was having a lot of nightmares over what happened, which was making it harder for me to leave the house, and any noise I hear, I'm up and I'm running around the house [checking] that everything's alright … so going over everything on a constant basis, I felt like it was driving me crackers.'

Living in transitional housing came with conditions attached, as we saw in chapter 4. Increasingly, there are also conditions attached to receipt of Centrelink payments which are intended to increase participation in paid work, which we examine next.

5.3   Financial support and Centrelink requirements

All of the women were on Centrelink payments: 15 received the Parenting Payment Single, two the Disability Support Pension, and one each Carer's Allowance, Newstart and a special benefit/guardian's allowance. Only four got some child support payments from an ex-partner. In July 2006, Centrelink introduced major changes to the eligibility criteria for income support, specifically to Parenting Payment and the Disability Support Pension. Most of the women interviewed had been granted Parenting Payment prior to July 2006; therefore, they would remain eligible for the Payment until their youngest child turned 16. From 1 July 2007, however, once their youngest child turned 7, they would be required to look for at least 15 hours of part-time work per week.

Many were not required by Centrelink to undertake study/training or to look for work. For the most part, this was because their youngest child was under 7 and there were no participation requirements. Three women were doing some studying or training, including a young woman with two young children who had dropped out of school when 15 who was undertaking courses through JPET with financial assistance from Centrelink to complete her education, although there was no requirement to do. Three other women had been working recently but had to give up due to stress, and in one case to look after a grandchild when her daughter was unable to do this.

Nevertheless, there were some instances in which the women had been faced with Centrelink requirements. In some situations, these requirements had subsequently been reassessed. For example, Dianne has three dependent children, one of whom has a disability; she also has cancer and was required to look for work until she explained her circumstances to Centrelink:

> 'At first [Centrelink] did [ask me to look for work] … I was riding my bike to [suburb] once a week at one stage and then I told them everything about my illness and I was in and out of hospital, I couldn't cope with [looking for work] all the time. They understood and then I went on disability carer's payment for [my son], I wasn't on carer's before … [Centrelink] said you don't have to look for work, but if you can that'll be great, but you don't have to, so the pressure is off.'

Sonia, who was involved in a custody dispute related to her 11-year-old child living with a family member and who had a young child living with her, said:

> 'I was given the job capacity assessment last year and [Centrelink] said no, I wasn't ready for work.'

Some women were affected by current participation requirements, although in one case, a woman was already enrolled in a TAFE course. She had almost completed her first year of a two-year advanced diploma, which she could only do with some financial assistance provided through Centrelink. A woman with an 11-year-old said that she had received a phone call from Centrelink explaining that she had to contact a job network provider, while another was placed on Newstart Allowance and also required to register with a job network provider after her child turned 16.

Five women said that they had been 'breached' by Centrelink, that is, their payments had been suspended or reduced for non-compliance with Centrelink requirements. Three of these situations were resolved relatively quickly. In the first, a woman was breached whilst on Youth Allowance a while ago but this was rectified when she went on a Personal Support Program, which meant that she did not have to hand in a form about her job search activities. In the second, a woman received a letter saying that payment for her granddaughter had been cancelled because she did not have a tax file number. When she rang and complained, Centrelink staff advised that it had been reinstated. In the third, a woman went in early for a regular review because of her study commitments but subsequently had her payment cancelled for non-attendance at a review. This was corrected quickly when she went in to complain that she had already had the review.

Two other cases were more complex. One woman had been contacted by Centrelink to say that she had been substantially overpaid as her ex-partner had claimed to have greater access/care of the children than was actually the case. As a consequence, her payments were reduced and it was some time before the situation was resolved. Another put her children into voluntary foster care for a few days while she was ill, but Centrelink cancelled her Parenting Payment because the children were not in her care. She was instead put on Newstart Allowance, which is paid at a lower rate, but was still paying for clothes and other essentials whilst the children were in foster care. Eventually, her Parenting Payment was reinstated and she got some back payments. However, at one stage she had to survive on $320 for four weeks.

Although the new conditions attached to Centrelink payments had the capacity to affect their financial circumstances in the future, half of the women were unaware of the July 2006 changes at the time of they were interviewed. There was some support for the general thrust of the changes, as expressed by Michelle who thought 'there is a lot of lazy people' and Kylie who said:

> 'No, I think it's a good idea actually because at least you're not sitting around doing nothing all day.'

Of those who were aware, four thought the changes would be positive for them and their families, primarily because they planned to look for work once their children started school. One was studying and then intended to get a job and develop a business using her qualification, and one already had a part-time job. Three women thought that they would be worse off. One talked about the payments being stopped by Centrelink when you failed to look for work and how difficult that would make things. A woman who had come from interstate and did not know the area at all thought that it would be difficult to look for work. Another felt that there would be more pressure on her, and she was concerned about how she would cope if one of her children was sick. Others were aware of the changes but uncertain about how they would affect their family.

Whilst most of the women were positive about working in the future, at least in general terms, they had a low level of education and had not worked for a number of years, finding the prospect of work very daunting. It was striking that all had a low level of formal education. Fourteen had completed Year 10 or lower, including six who had left school at or below Year 9. Of the remaining six, two had left during or at the end of Year 11, three had left during or at the end of Year 12, and one had a TAFE certificate. As a result, the women expected that any work would be low skill and low paid. As explained by Christine:

> 'Going back to work? It would be a benefit [laughs]. It would be a benefit because you're not relying on the government and I mean, someone like me wouldn't get a highly paid job because I'm not qualified. I'm a qualified dressmaker but I couldn't see myself going into that area because I just haven't had the practice over the last few years. But I haven't got the qualifications that's required for high paid jobs.'

Some women also talked about whether it was realistic to expect people who were living in transitional housing to look for work when the future remained so uncertain: not knowing where they would be living, possibly in another area, and when they would have to move. For example, Sharon expressed the view that:

> '[Centrelink] should be a bit more considerate with [people in transitional housing] … take that into consideration … I'm going through these circumstances, you know, at least they could give me a bit of time to know where I'm going or [when] I have a permanent place and then I would look for a permanent job, before actually cutting my payments, anything like that.'

The primary concern for the women in thinking about doing paid work either now or in the future was the safety of their children going to school, and before and after school. The women highlighted the need to be available to support their school age children, particularly since there was only one parent to do this. Typical was Karen who was worried about the work hours:

> 'It would have to be while Madison's in school. It can't be before the hours of school or after the hours of school. There's no way. I mean, they've got to be logical as well, Centrelink. If there's not another partner in the situation, I don't care if she's 12, 13 or 14, I still need to be at home, it just makes common sense. They've got to be understandable to that.'

The strong views expressed about potential conflicts between caring for children and engaging in paid work confirm other research on this topic.[32] They also indicate something of a double bind facing the women: conflicting and irreconcilable messages about what constitutes a good parent and citizen.

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[32] Hulse, K. and Saugeres, L. (2008) *Home Life, Work and Housing Decisions*, National Research Venture 1, Research Paper no. 7, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne

5.4 Involvement in decision making by agencies

Observations on degree of involvement in decision making by agencies varied considerably. Some women reported that, with most agencies, they felt involved in decisions and that nothing happened unless they had considered it and agreed. Others distinguished between types of agencies. In general, when dealing with support workers such as social workers, psychologists, GPs and counsellors, the women felt involved.

Sometimes, the women felt that they had been too dependent on individual workers and faced difficulties when there was a change. As Karen said:

> 'You know, it was hard [when the worker changed] and I was angry for a little bit … but it's all good. Nothing's changed, just a different worker, because they move on. I mean, you can't stop people from moving on.'

Others wanted to become more involved in decisions but there were barriers, such as a low level of literacy for one woman and lack of self-confidence for several. Christine said that her level of involvement had increased as her confidence had improved:

> 'At the beginning, it was a lot of [the agency's] input … It took me a long time to get enough confidence to say "Hey, this is how maybe we should [do it]".'

Issues associated with the women's lack of self-confidence are discussed further in chapter 7.

However, the women reported a lack of involvement in decisions when dealing with agencies such as transitional housing managers, Centrelink and the Office of Housing, which applied rules and had their own processes, which the women were not a part of. For example, Julie expressed her feelings about dealing with Centrelink:

> 'I suppose I can only have so much say because pretty much there's always criteria you have to go to by or there's an outline of pretty much how things are going to go in paperwork, Centrelink-wise … There's a certain path that you can't really do anything about.'

The women said that they had very little choice in terms of their housing, even if they thought that it was unsuitable. They were desperate and had to take crisis accommodation in a motel because no other housing was available, even though this was often not a desirable environment for their children. They had to take transitional housing even if it was on a main road and they had concerns about the safety of their children. For most, where they lived was important because they wanted their children to remain in school which the only stable element in their lives. As Kelly put it:

> 'Well, if you're desperate and in a position where you're homeless, you don't really get to choose what area you want. So say your kid goes to school … and you try to keep one thing in his life stable, which is school, [agency] put you out in the middle of nowhere, you have to catch transport, like it could be an hour away just to get to that school to keep … some stability going where there's routine.'

5.5 Treatment by agencies: respect and trust

Two-thirds of the women (13) felt that being homeless had not affected the ways in which agencies had ltreated them or their children. They had positive comments about their dealings with most of the agencies. They attributed this to the agencies being set up to assist people who experience homelessness and had met people whom they found helpful and supportive, especially since they had children. For example, Christine said:

> 'I think it's affected it in a good way. They're more helpful towards me. I think maybe if I didn't have children, I don't know, but I think having children [helped] … I know people in general look upon you in a different way, if you're going through hardship, especially with children.'

In several cases, the women expressed more qualified views or felt that they had been treated with a lack of respect. The reasons for this varied. One had negative experiences with two welfare agencies who had not helped her with an application for early housing. Despite this, she generally felt that agencies had treated her well and with respect. Another woman said that agencies expected her to be more 'down and out' than she was; she felt that agencies generally had little experience in dealing with mental health issues. Another said that she had been treated differently by people such as chemists because she had a health care card. Shelley felt that she was treated with a lack of respect because she was young and in foster care when she went into hospital to have her baby:

> 'Like I remember I was giving a bath to my daughter and there was two ways of doing it. There was like one way where you hold her and you put her in the sink and the water's this deep and there's one way where the water's that deep. I didn't like to wash her in water that deep and on one nurse I said, "No, I don't want to wash her like that," and she's like, "Oh, well, I want you to do it this way," and this was like a completely different nurse that – and she treated me like absolutely shit because she was in the Department of Human Services and I didn't have parents I could complain to – for them to complain, I used to cop a lot of shit.'

Negative encounters with Centrelink were raised in a few cases. For example, Michelle explained that agencies had been 'fairly polite' with the exception of problems that she had had, at one stage, with Centrelink staff being rude, but 'they are very sweet and polite now.' Brooke was frustrated because she was constantly being told to fill in forms whenever she raised problems.

While most of the women felt that they had been treated respectfully, there were circumstances where there had been a lack of respect and interaction had been especially difficult. A few talked about negative attitudes that they had encountered when they contacted agencies for help with food vouchers, as Sharon recalled:

> 'They make you sad and they make you feel really bad … Even some places where they refer you for food vouchers, they've got it very limited and the way that they actually give it to you is like … you feel like you want to leave it and just go … The way they speak to you, they think that they're giving it out of their pocket … You really don't need this even though you need that stuff [food voucher] but you really don't need these people. Anyone wouldn't really go there unless they're really, really desperate, like they don't have the money and they've got kids to feed … I promised myself that for whatever reason, I would never go in one of these places again, even if I was dying from hunger, I would never go again.'

Half of the women (10) felt that they had trust in the agency workers they dealt with. For some, a high level of trust was necessary to open up and talk about deeply personal matters. For others, trust had to do with the way they were treated by the agencies and organisations, as reflected in the remarks made by Kelly:

> 'I've got complete trust in them … being friendly, being polite and not judging you on what situation you were in and stuff like that.'

The other half had mixed views, and the level of trust varied according to the agencies/organisations and sometimes from worker to worker within an agency. For example, Kate had bad experiences in her initial contacts with a welfare agency such as messages not passed on, dealing with different people, a lack of urgency, and 'being given the run around'. However, now she has developed more trust. In general, a higher level of trust was reflected in contact with family support agencies, but to a lesser extent with other organisations such as Office of Housing, transitional housing managers or Centrelink which, as we have seen, were associated with lack of choice and conditionality.

Overall, the women were positive about their experiences with agencies, tempered by frustration at not being able to be independent. They got support but had to place themselves in a position of dependence to obtain it. For example, Helen said:

> 'What has been my experience? Just great – it's just been good and a pleasant one … There's nothing that I can say … wherever I've been or whoever I've spoken to that I have been treated unfairly or, you know, sort of shrugged off … Every time I've needed somebody they've been there.'

Julie, on the other hand, described her overall experience as frustrating and had experienced anxiety because she did not feel as though she was in control of things and had to depend on agencies for assistance:

> '[It's been] probably frustrating at times … I've experienced anxiety and things because it's out of your hands really. Because of the situation that I don't have enough money and I haven't got the control to choose what I really want in life so I have to depend on these agencies to do that for me.'

A few of the women thought that trust worked both ways and that some workers had become wary of believing those who sought their assistance. For example, Kate thought that sometimes workers reached the point where they do not believe people anymore because sometimes people lie about their circumstances:

> 'And then I said "But do you think, I don't know, you know me, I don't know you." I said "Do you think if you meet me and we talk, you coming to know me, that I am that type?" All I'm interested in is my kids to be in a house.'

5.6   Summary

Being clients of multiple agencies constituted the job of being homeless; it took time and effort to access to information and services. This was greatest during periods of crisis and early settlement in transitional housing but subsequently declined, except for women who had a need for more intensive support for themselves and/or their children. Visiting various agencies was often more difficult when women were unfamiliar with the area and, in particular, when they did not have a car that they could use. It also meant telling and retelling the story of their homelessness, which proved traumatic for some. Most of the women thought that they were able to get the information and practical assistance that they needed in most cases. They were more positive about agencies that provided personal help and support than about those where assistance was conditional on meeting specific requirements and where they had to wait for the assistance they wanted, in particular, stable housing.

The women had mixed views about whether being a client of agencies entailed involvement in making decisions that affected their families. Most felt that they had been involved in decisions made in conjunction with workers providing professional support, such as social workers, psychologists, GPs and counsellors, although sometimes it took a while to find the right person for them. However, they felt less involved in decisions made in their dealings with transitional housing managers, Centrelink and the Office of Housing.

Two-thirds of the women felt that they were treated with respect by the agencies that they were dealing with; a third were more qualified in their views, feeling looked down upon in some of their encounters. Half of the women trusted the workers that they dealt with; indeed, they had to have trust to be able to talk about their circumstances. The other half were less positive, particularly where they were uncertain whether meeting requirements would result in the assistance they required. In chapter 7, we explore further some of the emotional effects of being a client of multiple agencies. Next, however, we look at some of the implications of homelessness on children and caring responsibilities.

6   CHILDREN, CARING AND A DOUBLE BIND

All of the women had children living with them for at least part of the time. As indicated in chapter 3, the 20 women had 40 children living in transitional housing with them, half boys and half girls. All of their children had been involved in a relationship break-up between their parents, with some experiencing or witnessing violence. Some were part of disputes between their parents about custody and/or had been the subject of investigation and action by child protection services. Some of the children also had physical or mental health problems. The children had often lived with their families in several places for short periods of time prior to moving into transitional housing, as discussed in chapter 4. In this chapter, we examine the women's perspectives on the cumulative effects of homelessness for their children, their interactions with a range of agencies on behalf of their children, and the risk to women of their care being judged as inadequate as a result of their homelessness.

6.1   Children and support agencies

The women had a lot to say about the ways in which experiences of homelessness affected their children in one way or another, unless the children were too young for it to have any obvious effect. They talked about varied reactions of individual children within their family, as well as different issues facing boys and girls.

For boys, the concern was often behavioural problems. Some women said that their sons were struggling at school and a major factor was behavioural problems related to their anger. These ranged from getting into occasional fights to more serious problems, as illustrated by three of the women. Dianne's son wants to go back to the regional centre where they were living before. He will not invite friends back to their current transitional housing because it is too noisy, too small and there is nowhere to play. Lauren said that her son has had various behavioural problems such that she had him assessed by a counselling service. Michelle said that her son has a lot of problems:

> 'He's just very angry a lot of the time and it's very hard to calm him down and so I just … It's getting to a point where I can't handle it anymore and I just want to get him some help.'

Many of the women said that their experiences had made their daughters 'clingy' and anxious, reluctant to let their mothers or grandmothers out of their sight. Christine said that her girls were coping as well as could be expected but:

> 'You know, I can't move from one room to the next without one of the girls following me, you know, and I don't get any free time. Once they come home, I don't have any free time and it's like, just one night I would like for someone else to put them to bed or something because it takes me hours to get them to bed and to relax and sleep.'

For other women, this type of anxiety was more pronounced and they had sought professional help. For example, Nicole's daughter was seeing a child psychologist for 'separation anxiety' as she had been separated from her mother for a while due to Nicole's illness.

As noted in chapter 5, a number of children were receiving support as clients of various professionals. Social workers, GPs and other workers assisted children with issues that ranged from the relatively mild, such as bedwetting, to serious behavioural problems such as violence towards other children and self-harm. Some of the children were seeing psychologists to try and address their issues. A number of the women said that one or more of their children was experiencing problems at school which meant involvement with teachers, school welfare officers, child psychologists and social workers for the child(ren). Sometimes, the women were also able to use their own resources to get assistance. For example, Maria's son was struggling at school and she got some financial assistance from a friend to help with tutoring her son in a scheme similar to Kumon.

Not all children had problems requiring this type of support. Some women said that their children had adapted well to the changes in their lives, were settled into school or kinder and did not require any specific help. In some cases, relative stability of transitional housing had a positive effect after what they had been through, for example, bedwetting had reduced or stopped. For example, Melissa said of her four children:

> 'We didn't really need anything for the children, like we didn't need a doctor or social worker or anything.'

In general, women were able to access support that their children needed from a range of agencies. Nevertheless, there were circumstances where this had been difficult. For example, Sonia asked for help from both DHS and her son's school because he was stressed and wetting his bed. DHS told her about Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) but would not make a referral, and the school psychologist said that they would need to get to know the family better before providing assistance. However, the family moved on before any help was obtained:

> 'It was very hard [to get help]. I mean, even now he still needs counselling of some sort.'

Brooke also talked about her concern for her son's behaviour, which put a big strain on the family, and her attempt to access support for him through CAMHS:

> '[He] kicks and screams and slams doors and … hurts his brother a lot of the time, which I'm sick of, and just seeing him upset, or upset me, and that just puts a really bad mood in the house … I'm not very happy with CAMHS … because it's taken a week to get back to me and I have explained that it's something that needs to be dealt with and, you know, I did my bit straight-away, they asked for the phone number of the kid's father, I gave it to them straight-away.'

Half of the women did not think that the organisations could have done more to help their children, mainly because they had 'done plenty' or they could not expect any more help. The other half did think that agencies, including schools, could have done more to help their children.

Many of the types of support which the women wanted for their children traditionally come from extended family as well as professional workers, including support for their parenting, support with managing children's behaviour like having a male figure as a role model, or being able to participate in sport. Others wanted the children to have someone to talk to, particularly when they were in the middle of custody disputes, as highlighted by Maria:

> 'Basically, I think the bottom line is the counselling. I think his mind is a bit disturbed, his father arguing with him, he is very confused and he is depressed and I tell the solicitors and counsellors and everyone … and there's nothing we can do because [he] is at an age where he can say, no, I don't want to [talk to anyone].'

Other ways in which agencies could have helped more were in providing practical support for sole parents without family back-up. For example, one woman would like a crèche so that sole parents could attend appointments if they had no family support, which was a problem for some women as discussed in chapter 4.

A few of the women commented on the importance of providing support to their children in the context of their families. One said that she felt 'pushed away' at times by the psychologist who was seeing her child. Another commented:

> 'Every time I talk to somebody they just end up saying that we're not here for you, we're not here for you, we're here for the children. So how can you be here for the children if their mum is not OK?'

6.2 A stable base: the role of kinder and school

All the women gave top priority to providing some stability for their children, in view of their experiences of homelessness. A second and related priority was that the children make, and retain, good friends. The women placed great emphasis on the role of kinder and schools in providing both stability and a circle of friends for their children.

Women with pre-school children tried to keep them at the same kinder or child care, even though the family had had to move. For example, Helen's grandson has been able to keep going to the same kinder but she hopes that she will get public housing before he starts at a special school next year so that they can be more settled. In some cases, the women had put off enrolling their children in kinder until they had more certainty about where they would be living, so children were missing out on valuable pre-school experience. It was not always possible to keep children in the same day care and kinder as moving into transitional housing involved moving to another area. Sonia found that she could not keep her child in the same crèche because they moved out of the catchment area. Subsequently she found family day care for him which is cheaper.

A total of 22 children living in transitional housing were school-aged. Whilst circumstances varied, ensuring that school remained unchanged for their children was a paramount issue, as summed up by Brooke:

> 'No, I wouldn't do that to them. Even if I lived an hour away, I'd still [keep them at the same school], that's the only stable thing they've had in their life.'

Keeping their children at the same school was also an imperative if they were completing an important year, for example, final year of primary school or in Year 11 or 12. For others, their children had finally been able to make friends and were happy and settled at school, which mothers were loathe to disrupt, as explained by Lauren:

> 'It's good now because Jason is settled and he's in the one school and he's got friends, whereas because we moved a lot he was never able to keep friends for a period of time, and he's quite a shy child … I'm grateful that he's got friends because he seems to be a lot happier.'

A commitment to maintaining stability meant that some mothers had to travel long distances to get their children to school, which was not conveniently located in relation to their transitional housing. This could take up a considerable amount of the day. Sharon travelled across the city to keep her daughter at the same school until the end of the year:

> 'She's in a very sensitive year, Year 11 … [I do] all the travelling for her, just to get her there to where she's used to, until the end of the year and … by the end of the year I'll know where [we're] going to [live permanently] so then I'll relocate her … Sometimes I have to go back and forth four times … because it's the other side of [the city] … It takes 45 minutes to travel there … and then if there's a traffic jam, it goes over the hour.'

One woman said that she was denied access to a local school for her child because their accommodation was temporary and she was not able to tell the school how long they'd be in the area. Sonia told how this meant that she had to drive long distances to get her child to school:

> 'Because I couldn't give them an answer [how long we'd be here], they'd just be like, well, sorry, [the school doesn't] have room … I'd have to leave home at eight to have him [at another school] by quarter to nine. And then I'd go back through it to go home and it's nearly 100 kilometres, that's without me doing what I have to do or having my appointments during the day.'

Where women did not drive or have a car, the task of maintaining their children at the school was even harder. In some cases, the consequence was that children missed some school. One mother said that her children had missed a whole term as she had moved from a regional centre to Melbourne and found the task of getting them to school in the traffic too difficult. Where public transport was used to get to school, there was a strong concern about children's safety, especially if travelling long distances by themselves as highlighted by Melissa:

> 'They had to catch buses. I was just very stressed for when they had to catch the bus early in the morning, like six o'clock, and they get home at six o'clock at night and I had no car to get them so I was just always worried how they're going. They always had a mobile so I could see how they're going, like after school and before school. But that was a bit stressful that they were going so far on buses and I couldn't even get them there or bring them home, or if it rained I couldn't take them to the bus-stop.'

Concern about children's safety added considerably to the stress of being homeless and living in transitional housing, affecting emotional wellbeing.

6.3 Schools' awareness of, and response to, homelessness

Half of the women said that their children's schools were aware of the families' circumstances and, in consequence, they were able to ask for assistance for their children. Most were able to get support they requested such as consideration with the cost of school excursions, books or school uniforms, as illustrated by Andrea, one of the grandmothers:

> 'Well, the school knows our circumstance, like not every teacher does but the principal, we went and saw the deputy principal because I was unable to pay for uniforms … they were good and helped us out.'

Schools also provided access to additional support from specialist teachers, school welfare officers, psychologists and social workers. In some cases, children were having learning difficulties and schools were able to provide additional assistance, for example, through reading recovery programs or remedial maths. Julie's son had experienced a lot of violence in his life and she reported that:

> 'If anything, [teachers] treat [my son] at school more sensitive[ly] than probably a lot of other kids because they know he's been through a lot of trauma … [He] sees only [the school psychologist] … In the last week I had a meeting with her … He hits himself … We're probably going to have to go to CAMHS.'

Not all contacts with teachers were positive and some teachers were more supportive than others. Karen had found some variation in approach:

> 'Last year I wasn't too wrapped on her other teacher and we were going through a really hard time, last year, and he wasn't that great [to talk to] but this one this year, I can actually say I'm really impressed with him … I can go and talk to him if there's a problem with payment … if I need longer [time to pay] for a camp or something.'

For Lauren, the contact with teachers was particularly negative:

> 'When I first went in for parent-teacher interviews, [teachers'] reaction to [my distinguishing characteristics] was obvious in the way they spoke to me, I was absolutely disgusted. They spoke to me like I was a dickhead and I brought this matter up with the vice-principal. I won't be spoken to like I'm an idiot.'

In general, women were guarded about how much information they disclosed and who they disclosed it to. Some had not talked to schools about their family's circumstances because they 'don't like to advertise it' or

would feel 'too embarrassed.' Asking for assistance, therefore, was not something that was easy to do. As explained by Julie:

> 'There are certain people I'd tell and wouldn't tell for good reason, and that's because people just don't understand if they haven't experienced it and they live at home and have got all the nice things. They expect someone [who is] homeless would be the bum on the bench with alcohol or whatever, that sort of thing. Trust issues too, there are certain people I trust, like the principal knows, the psychologist knows and the welfare worker knows, but other parents and staff don't know.'

In a couple of situations, it was the school that initiated contact and offered support. Julie described how her child's behaviour and reading difficulties prompted the school to contact her initially:

> '[The school] actually came to me because I'm the type of person, I suppose, I make out everything is fine and nothing is wrong … so they came to me because of his behaviour … and his reading. He's doing a reading recovery program … and he sees a school psychologist … because he talks about killing himself and things like that at school, so there's a lot of stuff … [The school's] just been amazing, I just can't even explain … I've got lots of support [from the school].'

The research highlighted the central role played by kinders and schools not only in the children's development and learning but in providing stability and a chance to connect socially with a group of friends.

6.4 Caring and custody issues

Family homelessness differs from other types of homelessness due to the complexities of caring and the separate and distinguishable rights of women, children and ex-partners who are the fathers of the children. In acknowledging homelessness and seeking assistance from agencies, women risk being judged as not able to provide adequate care for their children, which may have consequences in applications for custody and care by ex-partners or may prompt action by child protection agencies. We refer to this as a double bind where there are conflicting and contradictory messages about being a good parent and caring for children.

This is a very difficult area as in all cases the women had been through a relationship break-up with an ex-partner. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that many faced issues about custody of, and access to, their children. As noted in chapter 4, almost half the women had experienced some sort of domestic or other violence and were concerned about their safety and that of their children. Many of the women thus had contact with the courts about child protection, intervention orders and custody disputes. In the rest of this chapter, we explore some of the complex issues that arise in respect of homelessness and judgements about the adequacy of care arrangements.

Seven women had children of various ages who were not currently living with them. Three had children aged 16 or less who were living with the children's father. Four had daughters aged over 16 who normally lived with them. In two cases the adult daughters were temporarily with the woman's mother whilst two grandparents had adult daughters (the mothers of their grandchildren) who were currently living elsewhere. In addition, several of the women said that they had adult children who were living independently and were not normally part of their household.

In three cases, there were bitter disputes about custody involving court orders. For two women, DHS had also been involved in terms of child protection which is discussed in the next section. In the other case, the woman had only been able to take one of her children (the daughter) when she left due to domestic violence, leaving the other children with her ex-partner.

One woman's child had been living with her ex-partner for three or four years while she had alcohol and drug issues. She voluntarily placed the child with him whilst she was dealing with her issues and he went to court and got custody. She is now clean and has some access via a court order but is concerned that her ex-partner is abusive and an alcoholic and she is seeking to regain custody of the child. Another woman took the father of her child to court because he was doing drugs in front of the child and was violent to him; the court subsequently denied him access. Another woman said that she had to go to court and charge her husband after experiencing domestic violence but it is not clear whether this refers to a restraining order and/or custody arrangements. One woman came to Australia when her daughter was ordered by a court to return from overseas with her grandchild under the Hague Convention to a court hearing about child abduction.

Even where the women had custody of all their dependent children, their actions were sometimes subject to agreement by their ex-partners and there could be competing views about the best interests of the child. For example, one woman wanted to get assistance for her child's anger and behavioural problems but the agency involved said that they had to speak to the child's father first. This ex-partner had access to the children at weekends but did not know where they lived.

6.5 Child protection issues

Several of the women spoke about contact with DHS about child protection issues. For them, homelessness was associated with loss, or fear of loss, of their children in a very real sense.

Christine, who had moved to Melbourne from interstate, was in a park with her children and their belongings waiting for a friend who had gone into the city. Someone called the police who picked them up and put them in a motel overnight. She describes her feelings:

> 'My friend had contacted me, going "Where are you?" and I told him and he goes "Well, what's happening?" and I said "Well, I've got to be here in the morning because DHS is contacting me" and he says "No, just get out of there. You don't want the girls taken off you." And I thought, well, that scared me. I thought I'm not having my girls taken off me so I used the last $50 that I had in my pocket to get a taxi over here again back to [area of Melbourne] and that's when we ended up in the second flat of course. And yeah, so, I mean, I didn't want my girls taken from me.'

Christine contacted a support worker who encouraged her to contact DHS. After investigation, she got 'a letter of clearance' as the DHS worker was satisfied that she was looking after the children. By this time they were living in transitional housing.

Karen lived with one of her children but the others were with her ex-partner. She was having counselling about her feelings about the ex-partner and her relationships with the children living with him. The ex-partner rang DHS and complained about her parenting of the child living with her. Karen believes this was an attempt to get this child to live with him also. Nothing came of this as DHS did not believe his assertions. However, her daughter is scared that she will be taken away from the mother:

> 'When we were homeless I suppose it would have been good if probably [my daughter] had someone to talk to … I think she was scared that, she thought because of the situation we were in, that maybe she's going to get taken off me. That frightens her a lot.'

Helen is the legal guardian of two grandchildren due to issues with their mother. She has taken over to try and keep the family together. Given the circumstances, she has to deal with a worker at DHS about the children.

Shelley was already in the care of DHS when she had her first child as a teenager. She and her baby were placed with a foster mother but had many problems with this person. She became homeless and her baby was taken into care by DHS although she had some visitation rights. Shelley subsequently went to court to regain custody of her daughter, which was successful, although there were some conditions:

> 'Yeah, yeah. And that's the only way I got my daughter back. So – and there was a supervision order, right? But the thing is for someone who only wanted me to see my daughter twice a week, two hours, they'd only ever see me – when I had custody, they were lucky if they'd see me once a fortnight. The only – the only real thing that they pushed on us was the health nurse, which was awesome, that was fine, once a week. Make sure she's gaining weight, make sure she's healthy, make sure her bones are working or if she's got no bruises on her, which is normal, that was good.'

No similar issues applied when Shelley had another baby as an adult.

Sonia put her children in voluntary foster care when she couldn't look after them for medical reasons. She subsequently had to go into hospital following a suicide attempt, leaving the children in voluntary foster care. Just after she came out, DHS obtained a protection order and the children were placed in involuntary foster care. Sonia is fighting to get them back through the courts but is finding this difficult:

> 'Yes. Everything I did they turned around. It's like I'm the one that put myself in hospital, because I knew I wasn't coping. And I was the one that put my hand up and said can somebody help me with the kids. But then they turned that all around as me being uncaring and unsympathetic towards the children.'

She now has an interim order which enables her to care for the younger child but the older child has to stay with other family members interstate.

Two of the women had themselves been wards of the state as children. Leanne had become a ward of the state during her primary school years in a Victorian regional centre and had strong views about the sufferings this had caused her. She does have family support from her grandparents. Shelley also grew up in care in a Victorian regional centre and has no family support.

Whilst several women spoke of their direct contact with DHS operating in its child protection capacity, others spoke of the pressures of caring responsibilities and fear of the consequences of not providing suitable housing and living environment for their children. Other women referred to 'court orders' about their children but did not want to elaborate. It is unclear whether these involved protection orders with the involvement of DHS or whether they referred to disputes between ex-partners about custody about which courts had made rulings.

6.6 Summary

The women talked a lot about the ways in which homelessness affected their children; it was their primary concern. Whilst some appeared to cope well, others experienced a number of problems ranging from the relatively minor, such as being clingy or bedwetting, to the more serious such as violence towards other children and self-harm. Although individual responses varied, some of the boys had behavioural issues related to anger whilst the girls were more likely to be seen as anxious about separation from their mothers. For the most part, the women were able to access personal support for their children through professional workers attached to various agencies.

Almost all of the women had the same priorities for their children until they could reach their goal of more secure housing: stability in kinder or school, and for their children to be loved and be able to live a normal life, in particular being able to make friends and keep them without more dislocation. Kinder and school had a critical role in achieving stability and social connectedness for the children. Despite efforts to keep children in the same kinder or school, this was not always possible as transitional housing was sometimes a considerable distance away. Teachers, school welfare officers and psychologists often played a key role in identifying issues and providing a conduit to additional practical, financial and specialist support. Half of the women told the schools about their circumstances and were often pleased with the assistance that was offered. The others did not want to confide in the kinder or school, for various reasons, and sometimes felt that not enough assistance was offered.

Family homelessness differs from other types of homelessness in the tension between women's role in caring for their children, the rights of dependent children to care and protection, and the rights and responsibilities of ex-partners. We refer to this as a 'double bind': conflicting messages that to be a good mother involves approaching services to get support to resolve homelessness, but requesting this support can be seen as evidence that they are unable to care for their children. In acknowledging their homelessness and seeking assistance, women face two kinds of risk. The first is that the state via DHS operating in its child protection capacity will consider that inadequate care is being provided and take action. Second, since all the women had been through a relationship breakdown, acknowledging homelessness and seeking support carried the risk of ex-partners using homelessness in support of applications for custody and care of the children. Most of the women spoke in one way or another about the pressures of caring as a result of their homelessness and their fear of the consequences of not providing suitable housing and living environment for their children. Several were waiting for the result of a court case so that they and their children could get on with their lives.

7 Perceptions of self, family relationships and community attitudes

In previous chapters, we outlined the families' experiences of homelessness, the practicalities of the job of being homeless, and the challenges and risks in caring for children in circumstances where homelessness can be judged as evidence of failure to carry out caring responsibilities. It is perhaps not surprising that the cumulative experiences of homelessness have an emotional impact on the women, which we consider next. This chapter examines the effects on emotional wellbeing, relationships with family and friends, and perceptions of community attitudes towards them as a result of their homelessness.

7.1 Lack of confidence and anxiety

Most of the women talked in one way or another about lack of confidence and self-esteem associated with their homelessness and repeated attempts to provide greater safety and stability for their families. This revolved around feelings of failure and weariness in attempting to resolve their homelessness, and powerlessness and lack of autonomy in being unable to resolve their situation by themselves without a lot of help. Difficulties were exacerbated for women with depression and specific conditions such as agoraphobia and vertigo who found it hard even to get out of the house.

Several women said that their circumstances seemed overwhelming, while others were relieved when the 'floodgates opened' and they were able to release their feelings, which had positive results. As Karen explained:

> 'I've learned if you don't open up about things … which I have done, it does pile up … you know you can make mistakes when you don't open up to someone, you can say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing and I think it's great because you can sort of sit down and it's like the weight [has been lifted].'

Lack of confidence was compounded by living in an unfamiliar area away from family, friends and other sources of support. In these circumstances, even establishing routines such as shopping was challenging. Some of the women felt quite isolated and lacked contact with other people. For example, Andrea said that she had no contact with people in the neighbourhood:

> 'It gets lonely not knowing anyone. I've met a couple of the girls that were at [welfare agency] and we're going to keep in contact.'

This was particularly the case for women with pre-school children or who had no-one to confide in and provide support.

As highlighted in chapter 4, the uncertainty associated with living in transitional housing was a common theme. The women had no control over how long they and their children would be able to stay or where they would move to. This uncertainty and lack of control affected their emotional health and wellbeing. For example, Helen said:

> 'The only thing I find … I can't relax and be comfortable because I know some day again, soon, I'm going to have to be moving again and that gets to you after a while.'

Dianne described it in the following way:

> 'I feel sort of on the edge of my seat all the time. I don't know what's going to happen next.'

For Sonia, the stress was overwhelming:

> 'I suffer from really bad anxiety … It wasn't until you know that I ended up in the psychiatric ward at the hospital that they said, OK, housing is affecting everything.'

Three women had had a nervous breakdown since becoming homeless. For one, this had been associated with a suicide attempt for which she had been hospitalised, as indicated above. One of the grandmothers talked about her adult daughter having a breakdown due to the strain of an inter-country custody dispute which led to her returning home, leaving the grandmother to look after her grandchild. Another woman said that she was suffering from depression and related problems which were associated with very bad skin problems, which compounded her lack of self-confidence. Maria talked about her breakdown in this way:

> 'Only about a couple of months but it was … I booked appointments so I might have forgot two or three and it was getting busier and then I couldn't cope with all the stress and people wanting me and cancelling me. And then it was just too much on my plate and I had a little breakdown and I got the [work assistance service] people to email and say I'm unable to be working until further notice due to family issues and left it at that, so it is open there because I'm still not working.'

Five women referred to specific mental health issues. Only one, however, talked about mental health issues which preceded her homelessness, and these were associated with drug and alcohol abuse issues. Four women talked about their drug and/or alcohol abuse problems, which were long-standing, one of whom, as indicated above, also talked about her mental health problems. Three said that they were now clean but one wanted to stop drinking as much as she did to gain more control over her life.

A few of the women said that they had gained in self-confidence because of their experiences of homelessness. For example, Christine said:

> 'No, I think at the moment, I think it's given me more confidence in myself because I've had to go and do things for myself too. You know, I haven't, certain things, because I don't want to bother people. Like, I know my social workers are there for me but they've got to come all the way out from the city and it's like if I can do it myself, why not do it? Like, I mean, why should I sit back and say "Hey, you're my social worker, you're meant to be doing this for me, could you do it for me." Well, why? I've got two legs, you know, I've got a heartbeat. Do it myself. I've made myself do it because I'm sick of having little confidence, you know, and it has made me a stronger person and I think the girls have learned also from the experience.'

7.2 Dependence and guilt

Some of the women felt upset about choices they had made that had led to them being homeless while others were concerned by a lack of autonomy and dependence on decisions that were made by others. Several were angry with people and organisations which contributed to their difficulties, including ex-partners, government agencies and sometimes even support workers.

While the overall experience of using agencies or organisations had been positive for the women, and they appreciated the support offered, as discussed in chapter 5, needing to rely on such support had emotional consequences. Receipt of support involves dependence which some women, whilst appreciating the assistance given, found difficult to take. For example, Andrea said:

> 'I just feel like I've lost my independence, it's not nice having to go and ask for charity, and in saying that I really appreciate all the help that we've had because I don't know how I would have coped in these circumstances.'

Others felt more strongly about being in a position where they were desperate for help and dependent on others. Living independently was very important to Nicole:

> 'I hate it because you have to rely, because you're a single mother, you have to rely on these organisations to put a roof over your kids' heads, to live off financially, and I hate it. I'd rather be out working and providing for my own family and put in my own house, paying off my own mortgage, than living off the government. I hate it, I hate it.'

There were also specific reasons why some of the women felt dependent on others, For example, a young woman said she was not able to get a licence and had to depend on other, older, people to be guarantors for her.

Some women disliked having to ask for things because they were struggling and found it a hard and embarrassing thing to do. For example, Christine talked about how she was the one who usually helped others, but now needed help herself:

> 'I'm the person who normally gives the help, is there for other people always, and it's come around on me big time and it's been hard for me to accept help … I've accepted it a little bit easier just lately because I have to … I've got no other choice.'

Other women, however, felt so embarrassed that they had not been able to care for their children properly that they did not want anyone to know of this, as with Melissa:

> 'No-one really knows my housing problem. I don't really let anyone know unless they need to know because I'm just embarrassed about it, not being able to provide properly for the kids … I just don't talk about it to anyone.'

Some of the women not only resented their dependency, or were embarrassed at their situation, but also blamed themselves for 'bad choices' they had made and felt guilty that they were unable to provide the stable environment that they wanted for their children. As we have seen, many did not want to have to move their children again, disrupting education and friendships. For Sonia, worry about moving her child was associated with guilt about her ability to provide for him:

> 'It was really hard on my eldest [son] because he wanted to come into the same school, but because it was an hour round trip I couldn't afford it, the petrol. And yeah, that's when I started just feeling really guilty about life and stuff like that, like I couldn't provide for him, things that he needed I couldn't do.'

Others considered that they had made some bad decisions but that they had moved on from this, such as Karen:

> 'I've learned, made some bad choices, but I've learned. This is what I want. I want to be able to pay my bills and have her in school and be happy and, you know, so yeah, I think that's the fear.'

7.3 Family and friendship relationships

Informal support networks were an important source of help for the women and their children. Many of the women turned to these when they first became homeless, as discussed in chapter 4. However, such relationships were not always able to be sustained, given some very difficult circumstances.

Half of the women reported that there had been no change in their relationship with family during the period of their homelessness. In some cases their families were supportive while in other cases they were not, but the women did not see any noticeable change to those relationships due to their homelessness.

For the other half, homelessness had bought about a change in their relationship with their family. For example, Karen had difficulties with her family for a long time:

> 'The sad thing is your parents are your parents but when you've – I've not been the perfect child growing up and made a lot of bad choices, bad mistakes, and they've taken the brunt of it and they've always been there, and when you think of support you think of support, but even if they supported me I was always the black sheep. I was not the perfect one and my sister, my brother always did better and wasn't forgotten and you know I married him and had these kids, did the wrong thing, moved back and I don't want to hear it anymore and if I've got to tell them a lie to make them think differently, then I would rather have no contact at all.'

However, Karen's relationship with her mother has improved and she has resumed phone contact. For others, the experience of homelessness had led to deterioration in those relationships. For example, Sonia felt that her family did not understand what had led to her circumstances:

> 'Oh, my family are just like "How can you let yourself get into debt like that" and all that sort of stuff … I couldn't get them to understand it was my ex-husband's fault.'

The women were more likely to talk about the importance of family rather than friends. Nevertheless, they had similar experiences with friends as they had had with family. For example, when they were first homeless, Rebecca and her four children initially stayed with her sister and her sister's children and then with friends, but the pressure had become too great and the relationships were lost:

> 'I don't even talk to my sister anymore. We went and stayed with her for three months and I don't talk to her anymore. I stayed with my friends and it just ruined all the relationships we ever had.'

Some women like Brooke had found that homelessness had sorted out who their real friends were:

> 'I don't go and advertise it so to everyone else in the world I'm just a normal person … Besides family, no … I don't have a lot of friends but the ones I've got I wouldn't trade for anything and they've been completely supportive … Other than them, nobody really has any clue of what's going on.'

7.4 Being judged by others

In the main, most women felt that they were judged or looked down upon because of their circumstances, at least by some people. Some of the women thought that people looked down on them because of their appearance. Shelley, for example, felt judged because she was young and because she carried her belongings in a garbage bag in a pram:

> 'Because I'm young, there's like a lot of criticism anyways and on top of being homeless, like, there's a lot of … some people look at you funny, like especially when I was living in refuges I couldn't afford a suitcase, I was running around with garbage [bags] that used to always tip out of the pram.'

In several cases, women felt judged or looked down upon because the accommodation they lived in was known to be transitional or emergency accommodation. This could occur when the unit was in an area where there was little social housing or because the unit was a in a complex with an owners corporation where resident owners knew that a welfare or community agency owned the transitional housing unit. Julie explained in the following way:

> 'I think people look at you, not probably as worthy … I know in the block of flats that I'm in that everyone knows that it's an [agency] home, and yeah, people definitely look at you different and like one particular lady will say hi to one person and not hello to us.'

The women had differing responses to being confronted with negative and judgemental comments. For example, Dianne said that:

'You pull your head in and don't say a word and get on with it, you don't let them get to you, because if they do, you'll end up nowhere.'

Others were also guarded in what they revealed about themselves and their circumstances, as highlighted by Kelly:

'Not many people knew about it, I pretty much kept it to myself, only myself and the agency knew about it.'

Not everyone had had such negative experiences. Sonia thought that 10 percent of people thought 'it's your own doing and you deserve to have nothing.' Some had either not noticed any difference, or said that people had treated them pretty well when homeless. Kate considered that:

'People around me was alright, they understand what it's like to have no home.'

7.5 Rights and responsibilities

When asked about the rights and responsibilities of people who have experienced homelessness, some women found it difficult to respond because this issue was far removed from many of their day-to-day concerns. For those who did have an opinion, not surprisingly, a right to housing was a common response. In Sonia's words:

'I just don't think that there should be homelessness. You know there's places out there that are sitting there doing nothing, so I don't believe that anybody should ever be homeless.'

The women acknowledged that the right to housing involved a corresponding responsibility to 'do the right thing' and pay the rent, as expressed by Kylie, one of the young women interviewed:

'Oh, well, everyone has a right to have a roof over their head, but at the same time we all should try and stick to the law.'

Unfortunately, even when this was done, it did not mean that rights remained intact. Karen felt that her rights had been breached when she and her daughter had been evicted from transitional housing for not accepting an offer of public housing. Thinking that she had a choice, Karen chose not to accept the offer, hopeful that a more appropriate property would come up. This decision set off a chain of events that resulted in the family being evicted after spending three years in the transitional property. During this time, Karen had never fallen behind in her rent. Her response was as follows:

'Well, what rights? Well, my rights were I got evicted for something that I really didn't do. So my right to still keep living there, and be happy for what period of time it was, was taken away from me because of one person that didn't specify exactly what I needed to do when the offer came about … I mean, if you do the wrong thing like you don't pay your rent or whatever, you've got no right.'

Others saw rights and responsibilities more generally in terms of reciprocity. That is, people who experienced homelessness should be given assistance without being judged but in return they had responsibility to help themselves, and that included accessing help when it was available. For example, Kelly explained:

'For me to take actions when I've got the help out there for me and not just let it go in one ear and out the other. I've been advised from numerous people if you want help you only have to ask, and I've never in my life asked for help until I've come down here because I've never needed it. And when the time came when I needed it, I was too ashamed to ask.'

Christine expressed similar sentiments and also highlighted the interdependence among all members of a community:

> 'I think that is a right for the community to … help because if you're homeless, you've got nothing, you've got no-one, you need support for not only your housing but your mental stability … You go through a lot mentally … It's hard for everybody, I reckon, but harder for some than others. Responsibility is … for yourself as well. Don't expect other people to do it all for you. Accept the help. Accept help … but if you can do something for yourself, do it … If someone needs a hand, you know, hold it out for them, give it to them, because you never know when you're going to need it yourself … We're all society's backbone, each person is a link, so I mean if we support each other, the society itself will stand strong.'

Others felt strongly that people experiencing homelessness should not be treated any differently from anyone else. That is, they had the same rights and responsibilities as the rest of the community.

Views on whether Australia was a fair society varied. Most women felt that some people were treated differently and were seen as less equal members of society than others. Some had strong views about why this was the case, their perception being that it was related to how much money a person had. Rebecca said:

> 'The more money you've got, the better you're treated.'

While in Maria's opinion:

> 'I think in this day and age if you haven't got money and a car and a career they treat you like you're a loser.'

Some talked about other grounds for people being treated less equally such as being homeless, being young or a single mother, appearance or status. As Lauren explained:

> 'I don't think people are treated equally. It depends on your status … All different walks of life, like the upper class, a lot of upper class people they will treat you with no respect if they think you come from a bad background or you don't live in the type of housing that they approve of … I don't feel sort of less equal but it makes you feel bad inside when people look at you, look down at you because of your appearance or where you come from.'

For some, 'unfair' or 'unequal' treatment was reflected in the interactions or relationships they had with government such as being a ward of the state or when dealing with Centrelink and the Office of Housing. According to two women, Australia was not a fair society because some groups got favourable treatment, notably refugees, migrants and Aborigines.

There were instances where women felt that everyone was treated equally in Australia, at least when compared to other countries. For example, Kelly reflected that:

> 'Oh, compared to other countries, I don't know, there's other countries that are worse than us so … we seem to be able to get more help than other countries can.'

7.6 Homelessness and feelings of belonging

A striking finding of the research was that most of the women said that experiencing homelessness had lessened their feelings of belonging. Three-quarters did not feel that they belonged anywhere anymore. For example, some talked about feeling less confident when interacting with people whose circumstances were relatively more comfortable. As Julie said:

'Where [my son] goes to school and the parents and what they drive and where they live … I don't feel like I belong there at all.'

Others talked about feeling 'out of place' or that they did not belong anywhere, as was the case for Kelly:

'I went through a stage where I didn't belong anywhere, like I didn't belong up in Sydney, I didn't belong down here … It's like I don't know if I'm Arthur or Martha, don't even know where I'm going, especially not knowing where you're going to live.'

Some also referred to very personal reactions such as their drinking, feeling desperate and only keeping going for the children. Five women said being homeless had not changed their feelings of belonging. Nevertheless, the experience had had an impact.

When asked what would improve their sense of belonging, it was not surprising that the most common response was to have a permanent home. For Kate this was the key to being 'normal':

'To get me in a home where I can put my kids, normal, you know, normal again, to have that life normal again, like it used to be. You know, right now I think it's not functioning … because I don't feel comfortable, this is not my own place … I want to put my kids inside and carry on [with] our lives and know I am home.'

The significance of the associated stability that a permanent home would bring was linked to the day-to-day rhythm and routine of life as underscored by Karen:

'It's amazing what being stable can do for someone. It's amazing when you know at the end of the day, when you go and pick up [your child], you're coming home to your home. There's no "Oh my god, where am I going to be tonight?" … At least [my child] knows that she's got a home to come to and her belongings are here, and of course she's going to have a shower … She doesn't have to worry about it and there's going to be a cooked meal done for her and things like that. That all comes into it, you know, because people take that for granted. People that aren't so lucky and are homeless [that all] means more than anything.'

A few of the women saw studying or work as central to improving a sense of belonging. For example, Maria wanted to finish a course that would set her on the path to a good job. For others, a sense of belonging was about specific changes in their material circumstances, such as getting their belongings back from where they were stored, or getting a car. One woman felt that her life was on hold until a custody court case involving her grandchild was determined.

There were three women for whom an improved sense of belonging meant being accepted for who they were. They needed to be themselves, which meant having more confidence and not being as worried about what people thought about them. Their lack of confidence and self-esteem presented huge hurdles that would take time and courage to address. Lauren, for example, was especially self-conscious because of distinguishing physical characteristics and had had completely limited her movements:

'I just don't walk down the street. I'll park as close as where I have to go and I'll come straight home, or I go to school, I come straight home. I don't make stops on the way unless I have to get petrol … I feel very limited in what I can do, but I think a lot of it … I limit myself with fear of going places.'

Karen's transitional housing was located in a relatively affluent area 'where you don't get a lot of Ministry places or people without money.' She felt that people looked down on her with an expression that said: 'What the hell are you doing here, move on.' It made Karen feel uncomfortable and out of place. She used to have her 'head down,

but now I just put it up.' What helped Karen to start to feel better about herself was the encouragement she received from a parent at her daughter's school:

> 'She said if you let people like that [other parents] win then you're never going to be happy, you're going to be too scared to walk out the door, you're going to be too scared to even speak to anyone. You know, you've got to be happy with who you are … She's lovely … We talk to each other and she doesn't look down on me and she actually talks [to me].'

Karen, like many of the women, was also conscious about nurturing confidence in her daughter:

> 'My daughter, I've tried to give her "tools" I suppose is the word to make her understand that it doesn't matter if we don't have something that they have. It doesn't make you less as a person … You're not better than them, they're not better than you, and I think, it's taken a couple of years for her to actually imprint that into her mind and I think it's paid off this year. I see a bit more confidence, she's involved with different things after school, which is the best thing … but yes, it can take a while because people don't realise even just a look [can make you feel uncomfortable].'

7.7 Summary

The cumulative experiences that constitute homelessness affect the emotional wellbeing of women caring for children. For many, repeated attempts to provide a safe and stable home for their children eroded their self-confidence and self-esteem. Some blamed themselves and expressed guilt and shame about their failure to provide such a home, supporting some previous research which suggests that 'day-to-day stresses were exacerbated by feelings of self-blaming.'[33] Several felt angry with the people and organisations providing support as, even though they appreciated the support they were given, they were in a position of dependency. Most talked about the stress and anxiety of constant setbacks and having to put their lives on hold while other people made decisions. A few felt that they had eventually become stronger through unburdening themselves and seeing a way forward.

Some of the women were quite isolated and had little informal support. This was exacerbated by moving to unfamiliar areas away from people who might have been able to offer support or friendship. Generally, it was family rather than friendship relationships that made a difference to the women's lives, in particular, mothers and sisters, and on occasion grandmothers.

Most women felt judged and looked down upon by some people at least some of the time. In some cases, they felt judged because the home that they were living in was known to neighbours as transitional housing. The women were reluctant to talk about their homelessness except to the workers they had learned to trust. Many felt a responsibility to help themselves as well as to accept the support given by others, seeing rights and responsibilities as reciprocal. Some just wanted to be treated like everyone else, to be able to live a 'normal' life. Some also questioned whether Australia was a fair society, suggesting that some people were judged unfairly on the basis of attributes such as lack of money, age and appearance.

Most of the women felt that homelessness had affected their feelings of belonging and three-quarters now felt that they did not belong anywhere. They wanted to have stable housing for themselves and their children so that they could make a home, re-establish the routines of daily life and connect with other people safe in the knowledge that these relationships would not be disrupted by having to move again.

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[33] This point is made in the Australian study by Parker and Fopp, op. cit., and the Canadian study by Whitzman, op. cit.

8   CONCLUSION

The aim of the research was to explore whether, and how, family homelessness affects lived experiences of citizenship, focusing on women with children who comprise the majority of homeless families. Unlike much other research into family homelessness, we did not start from a public policy perspective in which homeless families are primarily clients, or prospective clients, but rather investigated reflections on the experiences of citizens living in families who were also experiencing homelessness. We drew on recent scholarship about citizenship, which centres on the meaning that citizenship has in people's daily lives and the ways in which material circumstances and social and cultural context affects their lives as citizens. The research investigated the contexts in which citizenship is practised by the women in homeless families participating in this research, including the effects of gender, caring responsibilities exercised within the sphere of family, and the importance of time and place.

A key feature of citizenship understood in this way is that people are active agents who have to negotiate the essence of being a citizen. The research enabled women who had experienced family homelessness to talk about their day-to-day negotiation of rights and responsibilities, participation in economic and social life, and being recognised as and having a sense of belonging as an equal in civic life.

The findings that we discuss in this report are based on in-depth interviews in which 20 women talked about the effects of homelessness – as carers, as family and community members, as citizens. The research was exploratory and provides rich insights into the many ways in which homelessness affects the lives of women with children. In some cases, we found quite strong patterns emerging from analysis of the interviews, whilst in others there was more variety in the views expressed. In all cases, we illustrated these with the words of the women themselves.

The main findings of the research were as follows.

Exercising agency in conditions of uncertainty and lack of control

Many of the women had not had stability in their lives for some time, in relationships, in material circumstances, in housing and in the area in which they lived. For many, their lives were on hold; waiting to know where they would be living, waiting for assistance that they required, waiting to know where their children could attend kinder and school, and waiting for court cases to be resolved. Nonetheless, many women tried to exercise their agency as citizens in such an uncertain environment. For instance, the primary concern of the women was providing a safe and stable home for their children; and despite such uncertainty and a lack of control, the women in this study still endeavoured to exercise choice and agency where they could do so. This, however, came at a high emotional cost, with the lack of control associated with uncertainty affecting many of the women deeply.

The status of client rather than citizen

Active agency was also difficult to exercise when the women were treated as a client. They were in contact with many different types of agencies as a client, each of which had its own set of criteria and conditions which had to be met. Whilst many appreciated the support and assistance that they and their children received, dealing with multiple agencies took time and effort, particularly for those dependent on public transport. Most talked in one way or another about the stress involved in meeting different sets of criteria as a condition of getting assistance from agencies. They expressed a strong desire to re-establish a 'normal life' in which they were more independent and better able to be treated and recognised as an equal citizen rather than as a client who, by definition, is always in an unequal position of power and influence.

Gendered rights and responsibilities: caring and its risks

The primary concern of all the women was the effect of homelessness on their children and on their capacity to exercise their rights and responsibilities as a primary carer. While most accounts of citizenship privilege active involvement in the public domain of politics, and through economic participation, recent scholarship reminds us that such accounts are inherently gendered and that the caring of children and others is an equally legitimate expression of citizenship, with its own associated rights and responsibilities. This was well understood by the women in this study. They all expressed the same priorities: to have children living with them, to secure stable housing, and for their children to develop and make friends. For many, kinder and school provided the primary means of ensuring stability and enabling their children to connect socially; for some, they were also a conduit to additional assistance. The women are aware of the risk of losing their children as a result of their homelessness. This is particularly the case for those who are involved in disputes about custody and access arrangements and who have had contact with child protection workers.

Seeking a sense of belonging

A key aspect of citizenship is a sense of belonging in civic life and feeling an equal member of different communities. This includes the respect and recognition accorded by others as well as having the capacity, materially and emotionally, to participate in the everyday activities of a community. However, this study shows that the cumulative experience of homelessness adversely affected the emotional wellbeing of the women. This was expressed in different ways but some common feelings were lack of self-confidence, embarrassment in revealing homelessness to others, guilt at putting children through such circumstances and some self-blame for bad choices. Notwithstanding differences in other people's reactions to homelessness, most of the women felt that it had diminished their sense of belonging; they did not feel that they belonged anywhere any more.

Finally there were some areas in which women expressed a variety of views. These include: whether being homeless means that women are treated with less respect; the attitudes of family, friends, neighbours and members of school communities to family homelessness; long-term effect on trust in people and institutions; and perceptions of whether Australia is a 'fair society'.

In the next stage of our research into family homelessness and citizenship, funded by the Australian Research Council, we will be exploring further the issues discussed above for which strong patterns did not emerge in this study, as well as addressing some limitations of this small-scale project. These include exploring the views of adolescent children as well as their parents, recruiting homeless families to include those who are not currently clients of SAAP services, and examining the effects of homelessness on the citizenship of family members in different areas, including non-metropolitan areas.

Appendix 1 : Interview schedule: Homelessness: its impact on day-to-day life

Introductory statement

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today.

You received a copy of the Information Sheet talking about the study? You've had a chance to go through it? Did you have any questions?

Swinburne University and Hanover are working on a project looking at families who have been through periods of homelessness or unstable housing and how this affects the participation of adults, young people and children in day-to-day life, both now and in the future.

We are interested in your experiences of dealing with a range of agencies and your own support networks during your period of homelessness, including up to this point in time.

Before we start the interview, I have a consent form for you to sign. I'll just go through what it says.

If any questions come up during the interview, please ask me.

1. Housing and homelessness history

I'd like to start by asking you about your current circumstances.

1.1 Can you tell me about where you are living at the moment (homelessness shelter, refuge, emergency housing, transitional housing, private rental, caravan, friend/relative's place)?

1.2 Which organisation manages this place (who do you pay rent to)?

1.3 Are there any conditions attached to living in your current place (such as how long you can live here)? What are these?

1.4 Have you applied for public housing? How involved have you been in the application process, what about choice of area?

1.5 What led to you living in transitional housing? How did you come to be living there/here? What were your main reasons for taking your current place?

1.6 How long have you been living in this place?

1.7 Who is living in this place with you?

1.8 What is it like for you and your child/ren living here?

1.9 What type of contact, if any, do you have with people in the neighbourhood? How do you feel about that?

2. Participation in social and economic life

2a Formal institutions

2.1 Can you tell me which organisations and agencies you are dealing with at the moment or in the last few weeks (i.e. Centrelink, Job Network provider, homeless person agencies, Office of Housing, community health centre, welfare agencies)?

2.2 How much of your time would you spend in having contact with these organisations/ agencies?

2.3 What sort of information or practical assistance did you get from each of these organisations/agencies? Was it what you wanted?

2.4 How do you feel that you were treated by each of these organisations/agencies? Did they treat you in a respectful way?

2.5 Do you think that having experienced homelessness affects how organisations/ agencies treat you? If so, in which ways?

2.6 What level of trust would you say that you have in each of these organisations/ agencies as a result of your dealings with them?

2.7 How do you feel about needing to use these agencies/organisations?

2.8 How would you describe the level of your involvement in decisions made by these agencies about you and your child/ren?

2.9 Overall, what was your experience of using these agencies?

2b Economic participation

2.10 Are you currently on a Centrelink payment? Which one? Do you get income from any other source such as child support payments?

2.11 On 1 July 2006 Centrelink brought in changes to do with work and training for parents on benefit. How do you think the changes will affect you and your family?

2.12 What is your view of these changes?

2.13 Has Centrelink required you to do some work or study/training as a condition of getting a payment – now?

2.14 If yes, what work/study/training do you have to do – hours, duration, type of work, amount of travel, etc?

2.15 Have Centrelink requirements for work/study/training affected your ability to resolve your housing situation in any way? What are these?

2.16 Have you been 'breached' or had your payments suspended by Centrelink? What were the circumstances of this occurring? What effect did this have on you and your child/ren?

2.17 What sort of work/study or training would you like to do, either now or in the future?

3. Child(ren)

Now I have some questions about your child/ren.

3.1 How many children are living with you here?

3.2 For each child can you tell me their age and their relationship to you (i.e. your daughter, son, stepdaughter, stepson etc.).

3.3 Do you have any other children who are living elsewhere?

3.4 From what you have told me about your living situation, what impact has this had on your child/ren's contact with organisations/agencies (such as kindergartens/preschools, primary/secondary schools, support agencies, health services etc)?

3.5 Were any of these organisations aware of your living situation? If so, how did this affect education/services/support for your child/ren?

3.6 Do you think that these organisations treated you or your child/ren differently in any way because of your living situation – how?

3.7 Did you ask for any assistance for your child/ren from any of these organisations – how did they respond?

3.8 Do you think that any of these organisations could have done more to help you – and your child/ren – in what ways?

3.9 Do you have anyone who can look after your child/ren if you have to keep an appointment, or if there is an emergency?

3.10 Do you have support from family and friends?

3.11 Has anything changed in terms of your relationship with family and friends, or their support whilst you were homeless or living here?

3.12 Looking back, what type of assistance (if any) would you like your child/ren to have had?

3.13 Looking ahead, what do you think might help your child/ren to be healthy and happy and reach their full potential?

4. Social participation, civic engagement and understanding of citizenship

These next few questions are more general and relate to the broader community.

4.1 How do you feel you are treated/viewed by other people generally whilst you have experienced unstable housing or homelessness?

4.2 Do you feel that other people have judged you in any way because of your current circumstances? If yes, in what ways?

4.3 Has your experience of unstable housing or homelessness changed the way in which you feel that you belong in any way?

4.4 What would improve your sense of belonging at this time?

4.5 What do you think should be the rights and responsibilities of people who experience homelessness?

4.6 In your view, would you say that Australia is a place where people are treated equally, or is it that some people are treated as less equal members of society because of their circumstances such as, for example, being unemployed, or because of where they live? What makes you say that?

4.7 Do you feel that you have been treated as a less equal member of society because of your experience of homelessness? What makes you say that?

5. Future aspirations

Now I'd like to ask you about the future.

5.1 If everything went well, what situation do you hope that your family will be in a year's time – housing, work/training, caring, other?

5.2 What would need to happen for you to achieve this, in your view?

5.3 Thinking even further ahead, where would you like to see yourself and your child/ren in five years time – housing, work/training, caring, other?

6. Demographic details

I'd like to finish up by asking a few background questions.

6.1 What year were you born?

6.2 What is your highest level of completed education?

School Certificate (Year 10 or equivalent) 1

Higher School Certificate (Year 12 or equivalent) 2

TAFE certificate 3

TAFE diploma or similar 4

University diploma or similar 5

University undergraduate degree 6

University postgraduate degree or diploma 7

Other 8

6.3 In what country were you born?

6.4 And your parents?

6.5 What would you say is your cultural identity (e.g. Australian, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, other)?

6.6 And finally, would you be interested in a summary of the study findings?

That's all the questions I have; is there anything else that you'd like to add in relation to what we've been talking about?

Thank you very much for talking to me today. We really appreciate your time.

The title of the report
The Right to Belong is
a phrase used by one of
the women interviewed
(Lauren, 30s, with one
child) who said that
homeless people have

*'The right to belong.
To be treated as fairly
as everyone else.'*