



Homelessness and Families



One third of the people using homeless assistance services in Australia are families – parents and their children experiencing homelessness. Family homelessness is not visible or widely recognised in Australia; many people find it difficult to believe that there are homeless families in our communities. In fact, families with children are the fastest growing group of people experiencing homelessness in Australia. More than 16 per cent of Australia's 105,000 homeless are homeless with other family members. Almost 7500 family units were counted as homeless on Census night 2006.

Why are families homeless?

There are three primary reasons for family homelessness in Australia. Women escaping domestic and family violence with children are frequent users of specialist homelessness services. Families in financial crisis triggered by the loss of a job often find themselves needing support from homelessness services. The shortage of affordable housing and appropriate housing support services in Australia means that families can struggle to access housing that they can afford, may have difficulty sustaining tenancies in the private rental market. In addition, families find it difficult to exit homelessness quickly because there is an undersupply of housing that is affordable and appropriate. Larger families may find it even more difficult and may be forced into overcrowded accommodation.

Family homelessness and affordable housing

Couples with children report eviction or their previous accommodation ending, followed by financial difficulty as their main reasons for seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services. The most common reason for men and their children accessing support is financial difficulty. More than 1 million Australians are in housing stress. More than one third of people who receive Commonwealth Rent Assistance still spend more than 30 per cent of their weekly income on rent, which puts them in housing stress. Ten per cent of Rent Assistance recipients are still in extreme housing stress, paying more than 50 per cent of their income on rent. Housing stress means people cannot financially cover their full living costs or maintain their house in good repair. They are at immediate risk of losing their housing.

Family homelessness and domestic and family violence

In 2009/10, almost half of the women with children who sought assistance from specialist homelessness services cited escaping domestic and family violence as their main reason for seeking assistance. Indigenous women are much more likely to be victims of family violence than non-Indigenous women.

What is the impact of homelessness on families?

Homelessness has a devastating impact on families, causing instability and insecurity. Homeless families may lose their possessions and jobs. They may lose their relationships with friends and family, links to their community - their relationships with GPs, teachers, sporting clubs. Most of the children in homelessness services are under 12 years old and therefore in a crucial period of their development. The experience of homelessness and domestic violence has a serious impact on their health, education and wellbeing. These impacts include higher rates of anxiety, emotional and behavioural issues and mental illness. Parents in homeless families can experience emotional and physical health issues, poor nutrition, isolation, and relationship difficulties. Homelessness affects parents' ability to provide appropriate support to their children. The longer homelessness lasts, the more difficult it is for families to regain their stability.

Are services available for homeless families?

There are more people who are homeless than the homeless service system in Australia can accommodate. There are not enough services that can accommodate families and, on average, these services are funded at lower levels than other agencies. Families are the most likely of any population group to be turned away from the homeless service system. Two in every 3 children accompanying one parent are turned away from homeless assistance services every day. Couples and their children are even less likely to be accommodated – 79% or nearly 4 in every 5 couples with children were turned away daily over the course of 2009/10. Family groups also tend to stay longer once they have obtained accommodation in a homeless assistance service which makes it more difficult for other families to access support. This situation is aggravated by a chronic lack of affordable housing.

The number of homeless families in Australia is growing. Between 2001 and 2006, their number jumped by almost 17%. On Census Night 2006, the Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded 26,790 members of family units without a home to call their own.



Creating a framework for ending homelessness

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What needs to happen?

1. All Australian families need adequate and affordable housing options available to them to prevent homelessness. Homelessness Australia is urging Government to commit to the adoption of policies, programs and strategies that will deliver an additional 220,000 affordable homes including social housing dwellings by 2020.
2. Australians must take action to address social inequality and alleviate child poverty.
3. Women and children must be supported to live in home environments that are free from the threat of violence and abuse.
4. Families must be provided with improved access to tenancy support programs. These programs have been shown to be effective in assisting families to sustain tenancies in both social housing and the private rental market and should be expanded.

References

The Use of Government Funded Specialist Homelessness Services 2009/10, AIHW
Australian Council of Social Service- Poverty Fact Sheet
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