

Homelessness and Families

Half 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.

Why are families homeless?

The two primary reasons for family homeless are domestic and family violence and the shortage of affordable housing and appropriate housing support in Australia.



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 homelessness assistance services. The most common reason for men and their children accessing support is financial difficulty. 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.

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 homeless assistance 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 – 78% or 4 in every 5 couples with children are turned away daily. 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 families without a home to call their own.

What needs to happen?

1. Realistic and sustainable funding models for homeless assistance services.
2. Children need to be recognised as users of homeless assistance services in their own right so services are funded to offer specific support to children in a planned and co-ordinated way.
3. All Australian families need adequate and affordable options to prevent homelessness

Family homelessness and domestic and family violence

Almost half of the women with children seeking assistance from homelessness assistance services are homeless because of domestic violence. Indigenous women are much more likely to be victims of domestic violence than non Indigenous women. Women with children require more court support and domestic violence counselling than any other group of people using homeless assistance services.



Homelessness
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Homelessness Australia
Contact: Aileen Solowiej

T 02 6247 7744
E media@homelessnessaustralia.org.au
MB 0405 385 431
W www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au