



Homelessness and Children

In contrast to common perceptions of homelessness, children are among Australia's homeless population. In fact, children in homeless families are the largest single group who seek support from the homeless service system. Tonight, approximately 105,000 people will be homeless across the country. Among them are 7,483 families with children. Twelve per cent (or 12,133 people) are children under 12. Another 21 per cent (or 21,940 people) are children and young people aged 12 to 18, most of them homeless as well as estranged from their families.

In 2007-08, the homeless service system supported 76,900 children and their families. An additional 24,900 people aged 18 or under, who approached a service without a parent or guardian were assisted. That's 21 per cent of all people who were assisted by homeless services. 1 in every 39 Australian children under 5 accessed a homeless assistance service last year. Nearly 30 per cent (27.2%) of the children accessing homeless assistance services are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Every day, 2 in every 3 children who request immediate accommodation are turned away from homeless services.

Family and domestic violence

Most families who are homeless are women and children escaping domestic and family violence. Two thirds of children accommodated in homeless assistance services in Australia have witnessed or been victims of domestic or family violence. Children who experience or witness domestic violence may suffer severe psychological trauma, distress and depression. Children who experience or witness domestic violence are more likely to become victims or perpetrators of violence or abuse in their adult relationships later in life.

Health

Children who are homeless:

- have higher rates of asthma, recurrent ear infections, vision problems, eczema, and developmental delays;
- are often reliant on hospital emergency departments and outpatient clinics for health care; and
- have lower immunisation rates.



Education

Children who are homeless:

- spend less time in school than other kids;
- may move schools up to 5 times per year and
- are more likely to leave school altogether. Two thirds of young people who become homeless leave school within 12 months.

Homelessness affects kids

The early years of life are a crucial period of development for children. Safe and stable living environments ensure children's long-term well being, the fulfilment of their potential and strong, healthy communities. Children's health and education are affected by homelessness. In addition children who have been homeless are more likely to have been victims of crime, and to have been involved in criminal activities. Many homeless children have experienced or witnessed domestic violence, have been victims of other crime, or have been involved in criminal activities themselves. Children who have been homeless are more likely than others to find themselves homeless as adults - homelessness can become a way of life.

Emotional health and well being

Children who are homeless:

- often experience lower levels of safety and security;
- may have lower self esteem and increased anxiety, behavioural issues and mental illness; and
- are more likely to become homeless later in life and raise families who, in turn, also become homeless.



What needs to happen?

The Federal Government must recognise children who accompany their parents to homeless assistance services as "service users" in their own right. Despite the fact that they represent 1 in 3 people using homeless assistance services, this is not currently the case, and encourages a situation where services are not funded to provide appropriate care to children.

When children are recognised as service users, services will be able to collect accurate data about children's needs and offer co-ordinated and specialist support to children. Homeless assistance services report the services they are least likely to provide children are sexual and physical abuse counselling and health services.



Creating a framework for ending homelessness



networking



Dedicated team



events



diversity



policy



large audience



issues



services

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