**Reframing Family Homelessness: A Citizenship Approach**

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This article discusses the initial results from *Families on the Edge*, a longitudinal Australian Research Council funded study on the experiences of homeless families, which is being conducted by researchers at Swinburne University and Hanover Welfare Services.

Welfare agencies in Australia report that families constitute an increasing proportion of those accessing support services, compared to single people, who have been their traditional client group (e.g., St Vincent de Paul Society 2007).

Families who are homeless, comprise predominantly, but not only, women and children, and are one of the most overlooked and marginalised groups in Australian society. Families in such circumstances are more likely to stay with friends and relatives, or to have put themselves (or been placed by welfare agencies), in marginal and insecure accommodation such as boarding houses, motels and caravans, rather than be living in cars, or on the street like some other groups of homeless persons (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008).

Families living in all these circumstances fall within the Australian cultural definition of homelessness. This acknowledges that those accommodated in less than the minimum community standard (i.e., what people have the right to expect in order to live according to the conventions and expectations of Australia) are homeless.

Official data indicates that in 2005/6 almost 40,000 women with children had periods of supported accommodation and assistance provided by welfare agencies, whilst 55,000 children with a median age of five years received support during the same period (AIHW, 2007).

The limited Australian empirical evidence suggests that, whilst changes in family relationships and domestic violence (DV) can be a trigger for homelessness, structural issues of housing affordability and inability to access appropriate accommodation in the rental sectors are important reasons why Australian families become and remain homeless.

These issues can be compounded by more individual factors such as financial difficulties and health problems (Hulse and Kolar, 2009, Kolar, 2004). In particular, the difficulties in accessing and remaining in private rental accommodation contribute to low-income families with children experiencing considerable housing instability, often living in marginal housing such as caravan parks or various types of transitional accommodation (Hulse and Saugeres 2007).

There is much that we still do not know about how this affects families who are homeless (Hulse and Kolar, 2009). What is known is that children who have been homeless are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems such as distress, depression anger and aggression (Spinney, 2008, Moore et al 2007, Walsh 2003). They are also more likely to have lower intellectual functioning and decreased academic achievement than domiciled children. (Kirkman et al 2009).

Furthermore, experiencing homelessness as a child makes adult homelessness more likely (AIHW, 2007).

The *Families on the Edge* study is innovative in that it draws on recent scholarship about citizenship as practice rather than a service delivery perspective which views people with children who experience homelessness predominantly as clients of services, either individually or as a family. The project seeks to understand the ways in which people understand and negotiate rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation on a day to day basis, and the cumulative effects over time of these experiences. This view of citizenship includes the impact of becoming homeless on caring responsibilities, family relationships, identity and belonging, social connectedness and economic participation.

The project is currently one year into a three year study. Recruitment of couple, male or female single headed families, who are, or have recently been homeless, has taken place through a poster campaign in doctors surgeries, libraries, legal aid centres, tenants union offices, and through homelessness services and other types of welfare agencies throughout Victoria.

It was our aim to include families who are not clients of welfare agencies, reflecting the high turn away rate of families from supported accommodation services.

As at August 2010 the first wave of interviews and analysis were almost complete, and the second wave of interviews had started. In all, three waves of in-depth interviews will be conducted with approximately 50 parents and, where possible, with their older children (13+).

So far, 46 families have been recruited. The interviews with adults investigates changes in circumstances and daily life as a result of homelessness, and the nature and type of contacts with family and friends, neighbours and a variety of institutions. They also explore perspectives on identity as clients and citizens during their periods of homelessness and the extent to which homelessness affects capacity to participate in all areas of their lives.

The interviews with young people focus on their experiences at school and home, their relationship with parents and other family members as well as other children and friends, and their hopes and aspirations. Varied reasons were identified by the participants as the root cause of their homelessness: including, broken relationships, youth homelessness, substance abuse, illness, loss of public housing, and an inability to afford or access private rented accommodation.

At the time of the first interview participants were, or had recently been staying in: motels, rooming houses, caravan parks, DV refuges, backpackers’ hostels, cars, short-term transitional self-contained accommodation or were with inappropriate partners, or staying with relatives and friends.

Some of these facilities had been found and accessed by the families themselves, and they had had little or no support from welfare agencies. Others had become the clients of services and been placed in rooming houses, caravan parks and motels as crisis accommodation. In some cases this was funded by the agency, in others the research participants had to find all or some of the costs of their temporary accommodation.

The level of services provided to the families by agencies was discretionary, and varied enormously depending of how much funding the agency still had available, how much prior assistance the client had received and how much accommodation the agency had access to.

The initial findings of the research have revealed that families who experience homelessness can find themselves in inappropriate and insecure situations whether or not they seek assistance from welfare agencies, and that the assistance often offered by welfare agencies does little to alleviate, in the short to medium term, the family’s stress or to make them feel any greater sense of control.

Furthermore, such assistance does not enable their participation in society, as the carers of children, friends, neighbours or friends, or participants in the workforce.

For all those staying in motels the reality of...
a family living in one room with limited cooking facilities meant that it was extremely difficult for the family to function effectively, or for the parents to care for their children as they would have liked, and had done before they were homeless.

The aspect of the adult participants’ citizenship relating to their caring responsibilities for their children was fundamentally compromised by their homeless situation:

Q: So how are you managing to feed the kids? Is it just sandwiches and toast and things?
A: Yes, toasties, the toastie maker (Family 23)

Both for those families that had accepted help from agencies, and those who had found their own temporary accommodation, there were sacrifices and compromises that had had to be made in terms of how the family could live their lives. These included the permanent loss of pets, their belongings and their temporary lack of privacy. As a result of their homeless situation the participants had lost (or had had removed from them) their entitlement to live their lives in the way they thought best for themselves and their children:

We lost our cats, we had four cats and I asked the pound to put them in and look them after them until I got a house and I’d pay to get them back or whatever, but not to adopt them, we lost our cats. Because I think the worst thing for my girls, their pets went. (Family 12)

These families’ rights had been fundamentally altered by their homeless situation and by the compromises they had to accept to their entitlements in order to access temporary accommodation. The inability to have any choice in where they stayed, and the moving around from crisis, to transitional, and then, if lucky, to permanent housing caused enormous uncertainty for the families and a loss of feeling that they could exert any control over what happened to them.

By accepting support, they had had to give up control over their lives: to have a say in where they lived, with whom, and when. A condition of their accepting assistance was to give up these rights:

Q: Have you got any idea where you’re going to go next?
A: No no idea at all, it’s just what they choose to give me and that’s it I’ve got to take it. (Family 19)

The impact of this constant state of uncertainty and transition made it impossible for parents to plan childcare and working arrangements, which are normal features of bringing children up. They were now unable to have much influence about where they were accommodated and for how long:

Yeah and even in this place if I was to go and put him somewhere in care and go and get a job down the street I don’t know how long I’m going to be here, they could move me out tomorrow they could move me out in six months or it could be another two years, it could be another two weeks, so you just can’t establish anything. (Family 19)

Homelessness for families in the first wave of interviews for this study often meant frequent moves between different types of temporary accommodation and an inability to exercise the rights and responsibilities that other citizens in Australian society have.

The trauma of homelessness and a diminished capacity to participate as citizens continued even (and sometimes, especially) if they sought the assistance of agencies. In some cases there was little immediate difference in the discomfort, lack of security, and stress after being accepted for assistance rather than before. In all situations there was a loss of control and influence in the way in which parents could parent, and children could live. They had lost the right to have their pets and belongings around them, could not prepare the food they wished their children to eat, and were sometimes accommodated alongside those they felt uncomfortable with.

The families faced uncertainty about how long they could stay for, and where they would go next, which affected their ability to find and keep work.

These factors, coupled with the huge expense of such accommodation meant that they could not live their lives as before, but rather were constrained by the enormous compromises and loss of right and entitlement they had had to accept in order to have some form of roof over their heads.

This is a shortened version of a paper given to the European Network of Housing Researchers Conference in Istanbul Turkey 3–7 July 2010, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference 2010 Melbourne July 2010. For an expanded version of this paper and a full bibliography please contact Angela Spinney at aspinney@swin.edu.au or access the European Network of Housing Researchers 2010 Conference website.