

Children and families experiencing homelessness

Hanover believes that every child deserves a stable home and the chance to go to school.

Key statistics:

- In Australia, 105,000 people experience homelessness every nightⁱ
 - Of this total, 26% are parents/guardians and their childrenⁱⁱ
 - About 60% of families who are homeless are single parents with childrenⁱⁱⁱ
 - Homelessness experienced by families is increasing; it rose by 17% between 2001 and 2006
 - 1 in every three people accessing homelessness support services is a child
-

What are the reasons?

The three main reasons that parents and children experience homelessness are; family violence, the shortage of affordable housing and financial difficulty^{iv}:

“The most important thing was that there was a very violent situation and I couldn’t stay where I was” (Dianne, late 30s, 3 children)^v.

“I couldn’t afford to pay the rent that I was paying privately and I got evicted and I had nowhere else to go” (Kate, early 20s, with 2 young children)^{vi}.

For some families, the tragic loss of a loved one can cause even the strongest person to become vulnerable, making simple and mundane tasks suddenly seem difficult.

“When [my son] was younger, I lost my husband. I couldn’t cope with a bill, I couldn’t even comprehend what I had to do or whether I had money or where I had to pay...I just couldn’t cope with anything” (Sue, young son)^{vii}.

What are the consequences?

Homelessness separates families. Parents often try to maintain some stability for children by leaving them with family or friends while they seek help. In other cases, parents lose their children to foster care until they can secure accommodation. The critical housing shortage means that families can still struggle to find affordable and suitable accommodation even after receiving help from a specialist homeless service^{viii}

Once homeless, families find it difficult to get work or to continue or complete study; they feel isolated from the wider community and have little sense of belonging. Many suffer from depression and anxiety^{ix}:

For children, the experience of homelessness can be particularly tough and traumatising. They can lose their friends, belongings, pets; their health is affected and their learning interrupted. A child simply cannot be expected to thrive if that child is homeless.

“[My eldest son] 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”
(Sonia, 2 children)^x.

The impact of homelessness on children’s connection to school is enormous. A recent project at Hanover found students had attended four or more different schools by the time they reached year 8. Many of the parents in the project worked extremely hard, despite their circumstances, to keep their children in the same school. They saw it as important not only for their children’s education but as the only stable element in their young lives. For children, not completing school puts them at an even greater risk of unstable employment and likely homelessness in adult life.

A 2009 Hanover/Swinburne study also highlighted the central place of stable schooling for families experiencing homelessness. When stable housing has been lost, a stable school becomes especially paramount. As Brooke, a mother of 2 young children, explained:

“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” (Brooke, 31, (2 young children)^{xi}.

Pets are also members of the family and when people lose their housing, most accommodation options open to them mean they have to leave their pets behind.

I asked the pound to...look after [our cats] until I got a house and I’d pay to get them back or whatever but not to adopt them. We lost our cats. I think the worst thing for my girls; their pets went (Sarah, 2 children)^{xii}.

What are the solutions?

The best solution to homelessness is to address the causes and prevent people becoming homeless in the first place. This involves ensuring sufficient affordable housing, providing people with access to education, training and employment, preventing ill health and ensuring everyone has someone they can turn to at times of need.

For families, minimising the number of housing moves they experience is critical to regaining a sense of stability and belonging. Parents and children who become homeless need timely assistance to maintain or find stable accommodation.

Hanover provides support and housing for families experiencing homelessness. To assist in maintaining children and young people’s connection to school we also provide tutors and learning support programs, children specialist services and financial assistance for items like uniforms and books. However more can be done. Hanover would like to be able to provide:

- more long term housing to minimise the number of moves families experience
- increased support for school aged children and their families to help ensure they finish high school
- temporary accommodation for pets to enable them to be reunited with their families once they have a new home

“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...”

(Karen, one child)^{xiii}.

ⁱ The Road Home

ⁱⁱ Australia’s Welfare 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ ABS Counting the Homeless 2006, 2050.0

^{iv} Chamberlain & MacKenzie in Australia’s Welfare 2009

^v The Right to Belong 2009

^{vi} The Right to Belong 2009

^{vii} Home First 2004

^{viii} SAAP NDCA 2008-09

^{ix} Australia’s Welfare 2009 and The Right to Belong 2009

^x The Right to Belong 2009

^{xi} The Right to Belong 2009

^{xii} Swinburne/Hanover ARC Linkage project

^{xiii} The Right to Belong 2009