

Using the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to strengthen children and young people's wellbeing

Policy brief - March 2015

Housing and homelessness: the impact on the wellbeing of WA children and young people

A snapshot

- Homelessness and overcrowding can have negative effects on children's physical and mental health, education and social relationships, which can impact their wellbeing now and into adulthood.
- Child homelessness can be a pathway to youth homelessness and later to adult homelessness.
- In WA in 2011 approximately 2,425 people aged 18 years and under were classed as homeless, with another 2,290 living in marginal housing such as caravan parks, overcrowded situations or improvised dwellings.
- Aboriginal children and young people are considerably more likely (between six and 13 times) to be clients of homelessness services than non-Aboriginal children and young people.
- Around 6.7 per cent of WA children and young people live in homes that are defined as overcrowded.

What is the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework?

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia developed the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to monitor and report on the wellbeing of Western Australia's children and young people.

The Framework comprises two reports, the second editions of which were tabled in the Western Australian Parliament on 14 July 2014:

- *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People* provides a picture of how children and young people in WA are faring according to 40 key measures of wellbeing.
- *Building Blocks* lists and describes best practice and promising programs from around Australia which have been shown to be effective in improving the wellbeing of children and young people.

This policy brief explores key information from the two Wellbeing Monitoring Framework reports related to housing and homelessness.



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Why this issue is important?

Homelessness can have a **detrimental effect on children's health and wellbeing**, which can persist beyond the period of homelessness.¹ Child homelessness has also been identified as a **pathway to youth homelessness** and later to adult homelessness.^{2 3}

Overcrowded housing is also associated with **negative impacts on children's wellbeing and development**. Possible impacts of overcrowding include increased risks of illness, irregular sleep, poor school performance and increased parent-child conflict.^{4 5 6}

What we know already

The term homelessness as now used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics is not confined to the traditional notion of living on the street. A person is considered homeless if their current living arrangement is in a dwelling that is inadequate, has no tenure or a short and non-extendable initial tenure, or does not allow them to have control of and access to space for social relations.⁷

In addition, some people's living arrangements are considered close to the statistical definition of homelessness, that is, they are not homeless but are housed in overcrowded dwellings, in caravan parks or in certain kinds of improvised dwellings.⁸

Homelessness – In 2011 the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that around 2,425 people aged 18 years and under were homeless in WA. Another 2,290 people aged 18 years and under were considered to be close to the statistical boundary of homelessness.⁹ People aged 18 years and under represented 25.3 per cent of all homeless people estimated in WA in 2011.¹⁰

The number of children and young people in WA who had accessed specialist homelessness services, either by themselves or as part of a family, was 7,372 in 2011–12 and 6,244 in 2012–13. A significant proportion of these were Aboriginal children and young people. Nearly half (49.0%) of the 0 to nine years age group were Aboriginal, as were over 40 per cent (42.7%) of 10 to 14 year olds, and around one third (31.3%) of 15 to 17 year olds.¹¹

Overcrowding – The majority of children and young people in WA live in adequate housing that is not overcrowded.¹² The most recent figures show that 6.7 per cent of children and young people live in housing that would be defined as overcrowded.¹³

The incidence of overcrowding is significantly higher for Aboriginal households. The 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that over one-quarter (26.0%) of 0 to three year-old Aboriginal children and more than one-third (34.8%) of Aboriginal children and young people aged four to 14 were living in overcrowded conditions. The incidence of overcrowding increases in regional and remote areas.¹⁴



Programs that have been evaluated as effective in this area

The Commissioner for Children and Young People WA's *Building Blocks* edition one and two reports showcase 126 programs that have been shown to be effective in improving the wellbeing of children and young people or that demonstrate promise in this regard.

Common themes of programs which have been shown to be successful include meaningful community engagement, local design, reciprocity and strong and engaged leadership.

Five programs from editions one and two of *Building Blocks* have been shown to have a positive impact on homelessness, overcrowding and housing:

- **Step Ahead** – Edition 2, pages 79–80. A supported housing program for young people at risk of homelessness or who are dislocated from mainstream supports. This program allows young people to engage with support services using a 'foyer model' of accommodation.
- **Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program (formerly Family Homelessness Prevention Pilots (FHPP))** – Edition 1, page 38. A program that assists families who experience difficulty in maintaining tenancies or home ownership due to personal or financial circumstances.
- **Homelessness and Parenting Program Initiative (HAPPI)** – Edition 1, page 39. This mobile service works with families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It provides an early intervention program, which provides resources and support for children.
- **Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSY)** – Edition 1, page 40. A program providing health care for homeless and vulnerable young people. It also aims to address the complex health needs of at-risk young people.
- **Reconnect** – Edition 1, page 41. A community-based early intervention program for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The program uses early intervention strategies to help stabilise the young person's living situation, achieve family reconciliation and improve engagement.

In addition, there are several Safe at Home programs which focus on supporting women and children who would otherwise be homeless as a result of family and domestic violence to stay in the home while the perpetrator of the violence leaves. These programs were not showcased in *Building Blocks* but remain important to addressing homelessness resulting from family and domestic violence.^{15 16}



Policy implications

Studies have identified that homelessness can have wide-ranging impacts on children and young people. Some have indicated elevated stress levels and mental health problems, as well as physical health issues. Family relationships are often affected, and the lack of community connectedness as a result of frequent moves or instability of housing can have detrimental effects on wellbeing. Disrupted education may have ongoing impacts through life.¹⁷

The nature of homelessness can make it difficult to maintain or even establish contact with a person and **people may move in and out of being 'homeless' at different times.**

While more Australian research into the effects on children is required, possible impacts of overcrowding cited in the literature here and abroad include an increased risk of infection-based illness, irregular sleep, poor school performance, increased parental stress resulting in punitive parenting and parent-child conflict, greater vulnerability to abuse and poor mental health.^{18 19 20}

The causes of homelessness are complex. Factors that increase a person's risk of homelessness include structural factors such as poverty and lack of affordable housing and personal circumstances such as poor mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, and family breakdown.²¹

Family and domestic violence and relationship breakdown are the major reasons women with children are homeless.²² In some communities, overcrowding and poor housing conditions are also factors.²³

One critical factor for the increased likelihood of overcrowding in Aboriginal households is the lack of appropriate housing for larger families or grouped families, where several generations or broad family groups may live in the same household.²⁴

Strategies that have been shown to improve children's wellbeing include keeping women and children in the home while removing perpetrators of domestic violence,²⁵ using schools and health services to identify and provide support to vulnerable families and providing children with continuity of schooling.²⁶

There have been efforts to improve the delivery of services to families and to join-up the homelessness and domestic and family violence service sectors, however some challenges remain.^{27 28}



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- ¹ Eldridge D, Macdonald M and Edwards S 2012, *A Picture of Australia's Children*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
- ² Flatau P, Conroy E, Eardley T, Spooner C and Forbes C 2012, *Lifetime and intergenerational experiences of homelessness in Australia*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- ³ Swick KJ 2008, 'The dynamics of violence and homelessness among young families', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol 38 (4), pp.299–304.
- ⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010, *Shelter: development of a Children's Headline Indicator*, Cat. No PHE 132, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p. 17.
- ⁵ Dockery A, Kendall G, Li J, Manhedran A, Ong R and Strazdins L 2010, *Housing and children's development and wellbeing: a scoping study*, AHURI Final Report No. 149, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- ⁶ Solari C and Mare R 2007, *The effects of crowded housing on children's wellbeing*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- ⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, *Information Paper – A Statistical Definition of Homelessness*, Australian Bureau of Statistics information paper 4922.0, p.7.
- ⁸ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.226, note 382.
- ⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.218.
- ¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, 2011*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2049.0.
- ¹¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, pp.218–9.
- ¹² The measure of 'overcrowding' is based on the Canadian National Occupancy Standard for Housing Appropriateness, adopted by Australia in 2010. According to this standard, no more than two people can occupy a bedroom, parents or couples may share a bedroom, children under five can share bedrooms with another child of either sex, children five to 17 can share bedrooms only with members of the same sex, adults over 18 and unpaired children require a separate bedroom. If these conditions are not met, the house is considered to be overcrowded.
- ¹³ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.211.

¹⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.213.

¹⁵ Barrett Meyering I and Edwards R 2012, *Safe at Home Programs*, Fast Facts 8, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse.

¹⁶ Spinney A 2012, *Home and safe? Policy and practice innovations to prevent women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence from becoming homeless*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, AHURI Final Report no. 196.

¹⁷ Mission Australia 2011, *Seen and Heard: Putting children on the homelessness agenda*, Mission Australia, pp.2–3.

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010, *Shelter: development of a Children's Headline Indicator*, Cat. No, PHE 132, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p.17.

¹⁹ Dockery A, Kendall G, Li J, Mahandran A, Ong R and Strazdins L 2010, *Housing and children's development and wellbeing: a scoping study*, AHURI Final Report No. 149, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

²⁰ Solari C and Mare R 2007, *The effects of crowded housing on children's wellbeing*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

²¹ *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – Homelessness* [website], viewed 20 February 2015, <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/>

²² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, *Government-funded specialist homelessness services*, SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2010–22, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p.12.

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, *Fact Sheet: Overcrowding*, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

²⁴ Birdsall-Jones C, Corunna V, Turner N, Smart G and Shaw W 2010, *Indigenous Homelessness: Final Report*, Report No. 143, Australian Housing and Urban Research Centre, pp. 8, 52–54, 61–62.

²⁵ Spinney A 2012, *Home and safe? Policy and practice innovations to prevent women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence from becoming homeless*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, AHURI Final Report no. 196.

²⁶ Gibson C and Johnstone T 2010, *Investing in our future: Children's journeys through homelessness and child protection: A scan of the literature, policy and practice*, South Australian Centre for Child Protection.

²⁷ Barker J, Kolar V, Mallett S and McArthur M 2013, *What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family/domestic violence? Part 1: Literature synthesis*, Hanover Welfare Services.

²⁸ Birdsall-Jones C, Corunna V, Turner N, Smart G and Shaw W 2010, *Indigenous Homelessness: Final Report*, Report No. 143, Australian Housing and Urban Research Centre.