

# More than just me: Supporting fathers who are homeless

Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic  
University

Hanover Welfare Services  
Melbourne Citymission

National Homelessness Research Agenda 2009-2013

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Ms Violet Kolar  
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Professor Morag McArthur  
Ms Vicky Saunders

**Date of report:** August 2011



**Australian Government**

**Department of Families, Housing,  
Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

More than just me: Supporting fathers who are homeless

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## Glossary

AOD	Alcohol and other drugs
CanFaCS	Canberra Fathers and Children Service Inc.
FaHCSIA	Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
NAHA	National Affordable Housing Agreement
OoH	Office of Housing, Victoria
Active Parenting Role	Fathers maintaining contact with their children, either through face to face contact or via telephone, internet or mail, at least once every month
Inactive Parenting Role	No contact or infrequent or irregular contact with their children.

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**2011 MORE THAN JUST ME: SUPPORTING FATHERS WHO ARE HOMELESS**

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**KEYWORDS:** homelessness; fathers; parenthood; family; homeless services.

**OBJECTIVES:**

The specific objectives of this research project are to:

1. identify what is currently known about homeless single fathers through a review of the international and national literature.
2. obtain the views of single fathers about:
  - their experiences of homelessness and its impact on them and their parenting; and
  - the types of interventions that would either prevent or limit their time in homelessness and identify practices that facilitate their capacity to parent; and
3. develop policy and service delivery options that:
  - effectively address homelessness and the risk of homelessness amongst single fathers with or without an active parenting role;
  - enhance the capacity of homeless single fathers to parent during and beyond their homeless experience; and
  - communicate the results to the policy service sectors and the wider community.

## **Non-Technical Executive Summary**

Currently little is known about the experience of single fathers who are homeless and their families. Even less is known about their experience of homelessness services and how these services respond to their needs, particularly their needs in relation to their parenting role.

This mixed method study begins to address this research and knowledge gap by exploring the experiences of homeless fathers, with or without an active parenting role. It identifies the social, emotional and material consequences of their homeless experience for them and their relationship with their children. The study also examines how their identity and role as fathers impacts on their lives in general and their experience of homelessness. Finally it examines how homelessness services currently support single fathers and identifies policy and service delivery changes that could result in improved outcomes for this largely invisible population.

Findings from the study demonstrate the urgent need to better support fathers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with their role as a father. Children are really important in the lives of these fathers: when a lack of contact with their children is combined with a lack of recognition of their role or identity as fathers these men experience adverse effects on their health and wellbeing. The meaning that fathers make from their relationship with their children can be a motivating factor to improve the conditions of their lives, especially when provided with support. However, structural barriers, a lack of acknowledgement of their father role and identity and the absence of support, add to a sense of futility for these fathers. Denying them an important aspect of their identity leads to further despair and anguish, creating a feedback loop that diminishes their capacity to parent and prolongs their period of homelessness.

The study also found that:

- Homelessness affected fathers' ability to parent and be involved with their children.



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- Factors such as the nature of the inter-parental relationship and the characteristics and life histories of both the father and the mother also affected their involvement. Indeed, it was by having a working relationship with the children's mothers that enabled some single fathers to maintain contact with their children.
- Accommodation for single fathers who were homeless and had children in their care was grossly inadequate.
- Services are generally not set up in a way that can support the involvement and contact of single fathers with their children.

### From the perspective of single fathers:

- There was an overall lack of recognition by services of the father identity and its significance for homeless fathers, although services present a different view. The findings suggest that acknowledging and supporting father identity and involvement can have positive outcomes.

### From the perspective of specialist homelessness services:

- Services were aware of the circumstances of single fathers and attempted to support them but were unable to adequately respond to their needs. Those that were aware of the issues fathers experienced highlighted the need for new or modified service provision in order to meet their needs better. A number of agencies provided examples of how they had changed their service delivery in order to meet the growing demands.
- They identified that single fathers experienced a considerable range of barriers to accessing support, especially in relation to appropriate accommodation as well as safe and appropriate places to meet for contact.
- Some agencies were aware of and sensitive to the impact of homelessness on the relationship between children and their fathers. Without somewhere safe to stay overnight or visit, contact between fathers and their children was limited resulting in fractured relationships, heartbreak and sadness.

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- Services also identified a considerable need for homeless fathers to access parenting support programs, but these were generally targeted at single mothers

### **OUTCOMES ACHIEVED TO DATE**

This research fills a gap in knowledge about fathers and homelessness. It contributes new knowledge about homelessness that will enhance policy makers and practitioners' understanding of the lives of fathers who are homeless.

This study increases what is known about the impact of homelessness on fathers and how their experiences of homelessness affects their parenting and relationship with their children.

The findings of this study can inform policy, service and community organisations who work with homeless fathers; build service capacity to respond better to their needs; and lead to better outcomes for homeless fathers, their children and the community.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are very grateful to the fathers who made time to talk with us about their lives. Their experiences will better inform policy and services so as to meet more appropriately the needs of fathers who are homeless.

We would also like to acknowledge the services that assisted in the recruitment of the participants. We thank our colleagues Anthony Rochester from CanFaCS and Sally Fitzmaurice and Sharon Barry from Catholicare who were critical to the project in a range of ways. This included sharing their practice wisdom and experience in working with fathers who are homeless and helping with the recruitment of fathers. Thanks also to FaHCSIA staff who supported the project through the reference group.

This project is supported by the Australian Government through the National Homelessness Research Agenda of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

## **Background**

Currently there is limited research on the needs of homeless single father families or on men who are homeless and also fathers and even less about how services may best respond to their needs. Most of the research on programs that contribute to housing stability have examined programs that target homeless individuals—not families. As the National Homelessness Research Agenda indicates, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of how best to prevent or intervene effectively in the homelessness cycle for different groups of the homeless population. It is critical that we acknowledge the increasing number of homeless single father families and develop effective responses to ensure better outcomes for all family members.

From the limited Australian studies we do know that the pathways to homelessness for single father families involve a complex interplay of structural conditions, social factors and personal events (McArthur, Zubrzycki et al. 2006). Poverty, separation and divorce, domestic violence, substance abuse and the effects of mental illness are all reasons highlighted in the literature as to why individuals become homeless. But men with accompanying children nominate relationship or family breakdown, followed by eviction or being asked to leave their home (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009) as the main reasons they become homeless and/or seek assistance from homeless services. These reasons differ from those reported by female headed families who cite domestic violence as the most common reason for seeking assistance (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009).

Once homeless, single father families often experience unique and complex issues compared to other family structures (Bui and Graham 2006), including losing contact with their children. Australian data suggest single fathers and their children remain homeless for longer periods of time (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009), while research from the United States reports that single father families are less likely to receive support and resources than single mother families (Schindler and Coley 2007). Recent Australian data also indicate that children of single father

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families had higher proportions of unmet need (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009) than children in single female headed families.

### ***Literature Review (summary)***

The rate of homelessness within Australia has remained more or less constant over the past decade (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008), however current data highlight that there have been some important changes within the composition of this population (Chamberlain and McKenzie 2008).

Between the 2001 and the 2006 census, the number of families experiencing homelessness increased by 17% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). This growth has also been reflected in the number of families presenting at homelessness assistance services increasing over the past five years by 33% (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008). Most of these are couple or female headed families. However, there has also been an increase in the number of single male headed families from 1.3 per cent in 2006 to 1.6 percent in 2009-10 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2011).

The number of fathers who present at homelessness services as single parents with children or as part of a couple with children, varies across Australia. Table 1 below shows the variation in numbers across the country across the two financial years - 2007-08 and 2008-09.

Client group	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total (%)	Total number
Couples with children 07-08	3.4	4.3	8.6	5.2	7.0	5.0	14.0	3.9	5.2	6,350
Couples with children 08-09	3.8	5.2	9.8	5.9	7.3	5.9	13.5	4.1	5.9	7,300
Male with children 07-08	1.0	1.6	2.4	1.0	2.3	3.1	2.8	1.9	1.7	2,000
Male with children 08-09	1.1	1.8	2.3	1.0	2.3	2.9	3.7	1.4	1.7	2,150

**Table 1: SAAP clients: client group by state (weighted), Australia,**

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In 2008–09, males with children and other family groups accounted for around 1% of support periods each. Their reasons for seeking assistance included relationship issues (28.8%), financial difficulties (19.9%), and accommodation problems (34.9%). These reasons differed considerably in frequency from single female headed families whose reasons for seeking assistance included relationship issues (66%) financial difficulties (8.2%) and accommodation problems (17.6%). Single female headed families were also more likely to cite domestic violence as the issue (49%) compared to males (5.6%).

The most common broad types of support provided to children accompanying their mother or a female guardian were 'SAAP/CAP accommodation' (55%) followed by basic support (53%). For children accompanying a father or a male guardian, it was general support or advocacy services (51%) followed by 'SAAP/CAP accommodation' (43%).

Family groups, including single male families, had longer periods of support and were generally accommodated for longer periods than those who presented alone or with unrelated people (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010).

### **Invisible fathers**

It is important to note that single fathers do not only present at homelessness services as single parents, or part of couples with children. Many 'single' men who are homeless and present at homeless services are also fathers. Barrow & Laborde (2008) and Eardley and Griffiths (2009) state that, due to the presumptive nature of most services, those fathers presenting to homeless services without children are often identified as 'single' and subsequently their 'parental' status and any children that they may have go unaccounted for. This presumption is reinforced by the failure, to date, to count single or unaccompanied fathers accessing homelessness services in either the previous Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) or the current Specialist Homelessness Service Collection (SHSC) data. Therefore we know little about the size and profile of this population. The homelessness literature suggests, however, that there is an underestimation of the number of single fathers who have experienced homelessness (Bui and Graham 2006; McArthur, Zubrzycki et al. 2006; Chamberlain and McKenzie 2008). While the homeless status of these

so called 'single' men is clearly visible, their identity and role as fathers remains largely invisible or overlooked in relevant services, policy and research.

### **Fathers and Parenting**

Recognition of the importance of fatherhood and men's involvement in caring for their children is a fairly recent development in social policy. Interest in fatherhood began to emerge in the 1970's and 1980's at a time when feminism heralded widespread social and political change. During this period the role of men as fathers (O'Hagan 1997) and their participation in domestic life (Featherstone 2003) was examined. Conventional assumptions about family structures and the roles available to men and women (Silverstein and Rashbaum 1995) were challenged, leading to greater diversity in family forms (Kinnear 2002). The interrelationships between fatherhood, masculinity and identity (Williams 1998) also received critical attention.

More recently, the focus on men as fathers and their fathering role has been reflected in reforms to the family law system. These reforms promoted greater involvement of both parents in children's lives after separation, provided that the children were protected from family violence or child abuse (Kaspiew, Gray et al. 2009). This presumption of equal, shared parental responsibility was especially reflected in revised child residency arrangements and child support payments. Fathers as well as mothers now have a recognised right to be involved in the care of their children, whether through regular contact or parental decision-making. This has been a particularly important development for non-resident parents, especially fathers, who before these policy changes, had not always been included or recognised in the life of their child.

Increasingly, the role of fathers has also been recognised in other areas of public policy. Fletcher (2008) reports that the growing recognition of the importance of fathers for child development has led to an increasing number of initiatives to include fathers in health, early education and welfare services for families.<sup>1</sup> However, while the range of policies and programs for fathers has increased, many of the 'father-

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<sup>1</sup> For example a number of organisations such as Relationships Australia, Marymead Child and Family Centre, Mensline, UnitingCare Burnside and Newcastle University Family Action Centre have been influential in promoting the benefits of father-child relationships and father inclusive practice.

inclusive' service initiatives have been unsustainable and often not evaluated (Fletcher 2008). There remains a pressing need for *policy to be developed across all human services sector to acknowledge the father's role in children's lives after family break-ups and provide father friendly services that actively encourage father engagement and participation in support services* (Bui and Graham 2006).

### **Research and Responses to Homeless Fathers**

Over the past decade, the growing community interest in fathers and fathering has been reflected in the research field, particularly studies examining father-child relationships (Eardley and Griffiths 2009). Early work has provided evidence of the important role that fathers play in children's health and well-being (Fletcher 2008; Malm and Zielewski 2009).

Yet despite the growing evidence base in relation to fathers and fatherhood, there is a significant gap in our knowledge about the lives and experiences of homeless fathers. Homeless fathers are rarely included in homelessness studies. For example, most research on homeless families has focused on couples or single mother families (for example see Cosgrove and Flynn 2005; Tischler, Rademeyer et al. 2007; Barrow and Laborde 2008; Swick and Williams 2008). For the small number of Australian studies on homeless fathers, only fathers with an active parenting role have been included (Bui and Graham 2006; McArthur, Zubrzycki et al. 2006). As such, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the experiences of homeless fathers, particularly non-resident homeless fathers (McArthur, Zubrzycki et al. 2004; Bui and Graham 2006) - a point recently underlined in an Australian study about non-resident parents. The authors note *that there has been little systematic research on the housing situation of non-resident fathers or about homelessness amongst this group* (Eardley and Griffiths 2009).

### **Father Identity and Role**

Father identity and role has been the focus of some international and national research on homeless fathers with accompanying children. This research reveals that some homeless single fathers are particularly vulnerable to a reduced sense of competence and to changes in their perceptions of fatherhood. A US study reported



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that *the contextual stressors faced by homeless fathers appear to converge with pressures from social constructs of masculinity and cultural expectations of fathering* (Schindler and Coley 2007) and, as a consequence, men often reported struggling to maintain their sense of masculinity as well as assume a fathering role.

Dyer (2005) describes that becoming homeless can be seen as an 'interruption' in the formation of a father's identity. However, Schindler & Coley (2007) report that the men in their study met the challenge of homelessness and parenting with a renewed vigour, developing a greater satisfaction with their parenting and father role identity.

In Australia, McArthur et al (2006) highlighted that homeless single fathers with accompanying children placed a great importance on their fathering role, wishing to be 'a good father' and a 'good role model' to their children. However, Bui & Graham (2006) noted that fathers often reported the struggle to develop confidence in their parenting and the necessary skills and knowledge. Workers in this study also reported that parenting skills were often an issue for single fathers and that fathers would often become defensive if they were challenged.

Lindsey and McGuinness (1998) note that for those parents living in refuges or in supported accommodation, parenting may be even more of a challenge. Some fathers felt scrutinised by staff members on a daily basis, as well as affected by the constraints of living in shared accommodation (Lindsey and McGuinness 1998). The longer parents remained in this type of housing, the more challenges they reported in parenting autonomously.

### ***Accessing Accommodation***

For all individuals at risk of homelessness or who are homeless, their immediate need is often to find safe and affordable housing. However, with a lack of low cost public housing and a lack of specific services for single fathers with accompanying children, many fathers are forced into homelessness (Bui and Graham 2006) and end up requiring considerable support.

Single fathers who are full time parents experience particular challenges in trying to access accommodation with their children. The majority of refuges are focused on

the needs of women and there are very few services that can accommodate single fathers with children. This puts significant pressure on fathers to access accommodation quickly. Fathers in the ACT report '*secure and affordable accommodation as an essential building block to their children's emotional well-being and their capacity to be a successful father*' (McArthur, Zubrzycki et al. 2004).

### **Service Use by Homeless Fathers**

Men continue to face considerable barriers in accessing services. Many homeless support services continue to operate on negative and biased assumptions or stereotyped images of men. Bui & Graham (2006) found that the fathers in their study articulated great frustration at services such as police, child protection services, family courts and Centrelink because of those services' lack of understanding and acknowledgement of fathers' needs and issues. Such negative experiences have considerable impact upon father's emotional well-being and often result in them feeling disempowered and isolated.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to generate a body of evidence that will enhance the policy, service and community sectors understanding of the experiences of homeless fathers; identify strategies to prevent or limit their time in homelessness and, where appropriate, identify practices that facilitate their capacity to parent their children.

### **Objectives**

The specific objectives of this research project are to:

1. identify what is currently known about homeless single fathers through a review of the international and national literature.
2. obtain the views of single fathers about:
  - their experiences of homelessness and its impact on them and their parenting; and
  - the types of interventions that would either prevent or limit their time in homelessness and identify practices that facilitate their capacity to parent; and

3. develop policy and service delivery options that:
  - effectively address homelessness and the risk of homelessness amongst single fathers with or without an active parenting role; and
  - enhance homeless single fathers capacity to parent during and beyond their homeless experience; and
4. communicate the results to the policy and service sectors and the wider community.

This research project addresses directly the National Homelessness Research Agenda 2009-13 by increasing our understanding of the changing homeless population and improving service responses to their emerging needs. This project provides an evidence base to further enhance workers' skills and knowledge to improve the outcomes for homeless fathers and their children.

## **Research Design**

### ***Project Governance***

This research was carried out as a partnership between the Institute of Child Protection Studies (the Institute), and researchers from Melbourne based organisations Hanover Welfare Services (Hanover) and Melbourne Citymission (MCM). All partners have a commitment to the active engagement of individuals in the research on issues affecting them and have an approach that carries out research 'with', rather than 'on' homeless fathers. Two reference groups guided the implementation of the study.

### **Fathers' reference group**

Prior to the commencement of the research, a fathers' reference group was convened at CanFaCS, a specialist agency for homeless fathers in Canberra, to provide initial advice to the research team. This group advised on the research design and participant recruitment strategies. They also identified some of the key issues that could emerge for participating fathers, such as anger and distress.

### **Project steering committee**

The project steering committee was established to guide the project and comprised representatives from the three partners (Institute of Child Protection Studies, Hanover, Melbourne Citymission), service providers from two further specialist agencies (CatholicCare, CanFaCS), and representatives from FaHCSIA. This group also provided advice and assistance in the development and implementation of the project.

The research was framed by the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of single fathers who are or have been homeless?
2. How do single fathers' experiences of homelessness and their engagement with services affect their parenting?
3. What do single fathers' experiences suggest about the ways in which services can best support them to reduce homelessness and maintain their parenting role?
4. How do services work with fathers who are homeless?

### ***Ethics Approval***

The project was designed to safeguard the rights of all who were involved and was conducted with the approval of Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Clearly established protocols were used in this study to ensure that participants were adequately supported should they feel distressed following interviews. Researchers explained the voluntary nature of the project and fathers were assured that no identifying information would be used in the report. All participants were provided with information on the ethics process and confidentiality to ensure informed consent.

### ***Method***

This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to address the research questions.

### **Qualitative data collection**

The qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews and focus groups with homeless single fathers with or without an active parenting role. Consistent with qualitative research, this approach focused on how fathers who were homeless made sense of their homelessness, parenting and related service experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005).

### ***Recruitment***

Two contrasting sites - Melbourne and Canberra - were selected to investigate the experience of single fathers and homelessness. These sites have distinct service environments. Canberra has the only dedicated service for homeless single fathers in Australia. In contrast, Melbourne has no dedicated homelessness services for this population.

There were two phases to the qualitative research component: phase 1 comprised focus groups and phase 2 comprised in-depth interviews.

Service providers in homelessness service agencies in Melbourne and Canberra were contacted by the researchers and informed of the project. These service providers then informed potentially eligible clients about the study and assisted those who were interested in participating to make contact with the researchers. The same recruitment method was used for both the focus groups and in-depth interviews.

### ***Focus groups***

Early in the study, two focus groups (Melbourne and Canberra), were conducted with homeless single fathers. Participants were provided with a \$25 gift voucher to compensate for their time.

In Melbourne, the focus group participants were recruited through service providers from Hanover Welfare Services and Melbourne Citymission. The Canberra focus group participants were recruited through CanFaCS.

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The focus groups explored the issues experienced by single fathers who were homeless. The discussion also assisted in the development of the interview schedule.

### ***In depth Interviews***

The in-depth interview guides were developed in consultation with the fathers' reference group, the steering committee and informed by the focus groups. The interview schedule focused on the four key research questions and explored the fathers' experiences with fatherhood, contact and relationships with their children, and the role of services.

### ***Focus group and interview sample***

A total of 40 interviews were carried out with single fathers who were homeless. Given the greater population, 30 interviews were completed in Melbourne, while 10 were completed in Canberra. The interviews took between 60 and 90 minutes and were fully transcribed.

Participants were eligible to participate in the study if they were:

- a single father who had been homeless in the last 12 months, aged 18 years or over; and
- single fathers with or without active involvement with their children.

### ***Focus group and interview data***

Data analysis was assisted by the use of NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis program. Categorical and emergent themes were developed by two researchers; both read several transcripts and developed codes for the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Ongoing discussion with the wider research team occurred to ensure clarity and consistency of emerging themes and concepts.

### **Quantitative data collection**

Data on service supports for homeless single fathers across Australia is non-existent. For this reason, we surveyed specialist homelessness services to explore how services currently support single fathers who are homeless.

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The online survey application Lime Survey was used to develop and collect responses. The survey instrument was framed by research questions and informed by the results from the focus groups and interviews held with homeless single fathers. The survey included a mixture of open ended questions and structured questions, including Likert scales. The survey was completed by workers on-line from participating services assisting men who accessed services.

### ***Survey sample***

Email invitations were sent out to 859 service providers. FaHCSIA facilitated contact with state and territory government departments responsible for the provision of specialised homeless funded services. These departments then provided contact details for the services funded in their state or territory relevant to this study. Each of these services was invited by email to participate in the study. Of these emails, 114 were undeliverable, 7 replied to say they did not work with men, 28 were out of office for the duration of the survey and one person refused.

In total, 182 agencies responded to the online survey. Of these, 15 were excluded from the analysis due to multiple responses from agencies or missing data. A further 78 agencies were excluded because they provided services to women only.

The final analysis was based on the responses received from 89 agencies. SPSS data analysis program was used to analyse the quantitative data; most of the analysis comprised descriptive statistics such as frequencies and crosstabs.

### ***Agency characteristics***

All states and territories were represented but the majority of responses came from New South Wales (37%), Queensland (24%) and from Victoria (13%). Those remaining were from Western Australia (9%), South Australia (7%), Australian Capital Territory (4%), Tasmania (3%) and the Northern Territory (1%).

Over half of the participating agencies operated in metropolitan areas (58%), 38% in rural areas and 3% in remote areas. The survey was completed by program managers (32%) coordinators (27%), those specifying 'other' roles (19%), support workers (13%) and team leaders (9%). Agencies were generally small, as indicated

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by the number of staff employed; 42% employed 10 staff members or less, 23% 11-20 staff and 15% 21-50 staff. The remaining agencies employed between 50 and over 200 staff.

### Service provision and target groups

More than half the participating agencies provided transitional accommodation (53%) and/or crisis accommodation (49%). Just under half (43%) provided outreach. Some provided shared accommodation (11%) and respite (2%).

In terms of target groups, 36% worked with families, 44% with young people, and 16% with single men only. Remaining agencies worked with a mixture of different client groups that included men and women, young parents, the elderly and migrants.

## Findings

To date, the limited number of Australian studies of homeless men has not focused on their identity and role as fathers. Little is known about who these men are and how they became homeless. The following sections reflect the four key research questions. Section one provides a profile of the fathers in the study, highlighting a range of factors that contributed to their homelessness and the current conditions of their lives. These included: the length of time homeless, personal histories, jail and crime, alcohol and other drugs (AOD), unemployment and poverty, current accommodation, the number of children, contact with their children and relationship and family breakdown.

Section two provides an analysis of the impact of their experience of homelessness on their role and identity as fathers. It also identifies the determinants of father involvement. Section three outlines the men's experiences of the service system and the impact of these experiences on their parenting. In addition it reports how fathers would like to be supported by services.

The final section reports the results from an online survey undertaken with specialist homelessness services across Australia. This was done to gain a service



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perspective on how single fathers are supported by the service system, what the obstacles are and how services can be improved.

### ***Section 1: Single fathers in the homelessness service system – a profile of participants***

#### **Ethnicity**

Of the 40 single fathers in the study, four identified as Aboriginal and a further two said that their children were Aboriginal. Three identified as coming from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Ages ranged from 20 to 46 years, with the average age around 35.

#### **Length of time homeless**

Most participants reported long periods of homelessness. Some described this as a continuous experience but most reported that they had been homeless 'on and off' for a given period of time. While time homeless varied from 1 month to 38 years, the average reported time was just under 11 years, and the median was 9 years. These time frames provide some insight into the level of disadvantage of participants and the extended period that their lives and relationships have been affected by homelessness.

#### **Number of children**

While more than half (n=25) had only one (n=11) or two biological children (n=14), over a third of the sample had three or more biological children (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These figures do not include step-children nor do they reflect the complex relationships and family structures of some of the participants.

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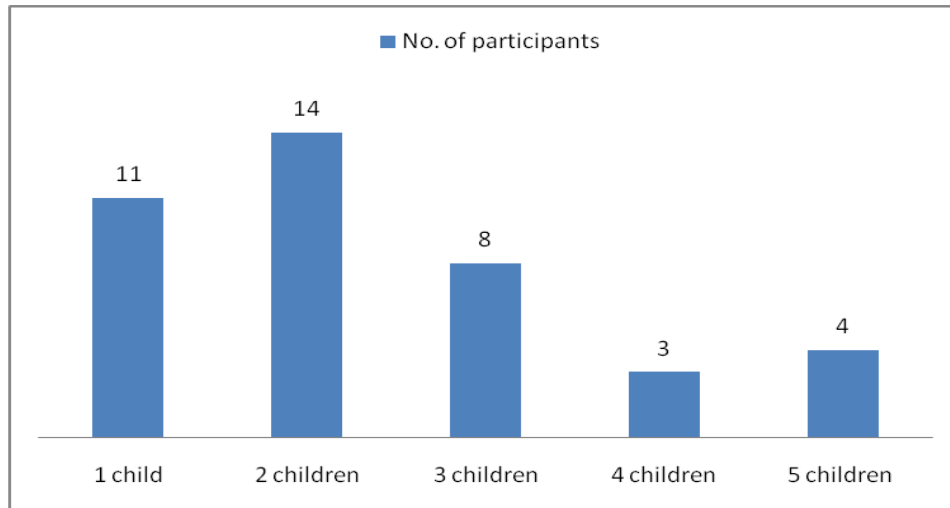


Figure 1: No. of children

### Contact with children

Among these fathers, contact with their children varied. While less than a quarter were primary carers for their children, at least half had regular contact. Over a third had little or no contact (Figure 2).

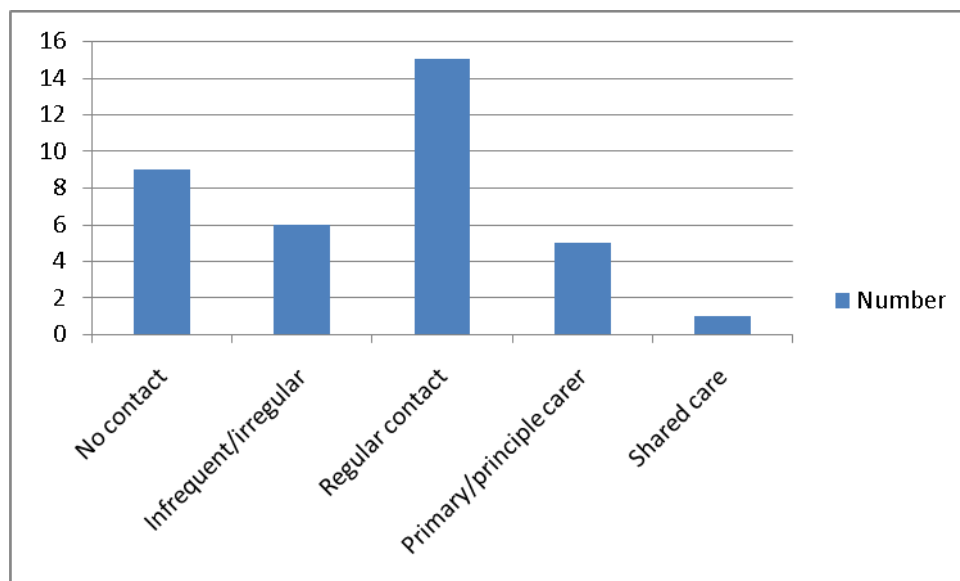


Figure 2: Type of contact with children

A further three participants only had contact with their children via Facebook and/or phone contact. For many of the fathers phone contact was important not only as a means to facilitate further contact but as form of contact in itself.

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## Unemployment and poverty

Thirty-four participants (85%) were unemployed, not in the labour force, or recipients of the Disability Support Pension. Four participants (10%) were in part-time or full-time employment (See Figure 3).

For some, homelessness was the result of unemployment and high housing costs.

*Before that I was working, I had my own house and that. When I've lost my job, I couldn't afford to pay the rent, because the rent was four hundred a week. (Canberra focus group)*

For others, unemployment was the result of the distress of relationship breakdown:

*I was just about to start full time work a couple of days after we broke up and in the end I just wasn't in the right head space to be working... I just couldn't do it...I was a mess. (M5)*

*I lost my work because of the break up...they gave me a couple of days off to sort it out, but I couldn't sort it out so I ended up leaving and I'd been working there for seven years. (M3)*

This father went on to talk about how the conditions of homelessness made it hard to seek employment:

*I've tried to work that many times when I was on the street but the thing is after work you've got nowhere to go and have nowhere to have a shower or just to relax and you're skipping all your meals ... I had to live under a bridge in Airport West because I had to get to work and the first tram would leave at quarter past six, and you have to be there by 6.30, seven, [so] you're knackered and then you've got a half an hour's walk from there from the tram stop in the industrial area. So I had to stay under a bridge. (M3)*

For one Dad with a young family, the loss of paid work was devastating, resulting in a downward spiral of depression and drug use:

*And my ex partner got pregnant and we had the baby and stuff and then I lost my job and I got really depressed and I started using drugs again and then everything fell apart again from there and it all went pear shaped again; and that's been the cycle since my late teens. (H8)*

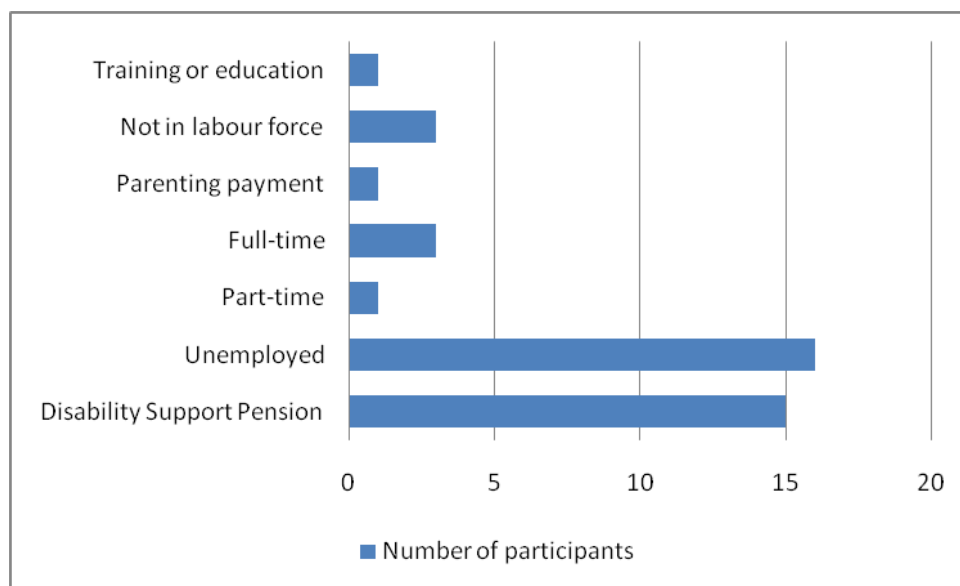


Figure 3: Employment Status

### Personal histories of abuse, neglect and separation from family

Many of the participants had difficult and painful histories. Some had personal histories marked by abuse or neglect and some had been separated from family, having grown up in foster care.

For some, the conditions of their family life directly led to their homelessness:

*I had a pretty bad relationship with my Dad at the time. Dad was a pretty angry man and it wasn't just physical abuse it was mental, the whole mental abuse and I just basically went couch surfing. (H15)*

For others, it led them into foster care:

*Like the reason why I become a ward of the state and was put in a foster home is because my stepdad basically said to me Mum, it's either me or the kids. So my sister went to live with her boyfriend and I got put in a foster home and me Mum's boyfriend, he was never physically abusive, but he was very emotionally abusive so like that was pretty hard but now we get along really good. (H4)*

One participant experienced abuse at a very early age:

*I was going from place to place, from the step families, from the step siblings. I was abused when I was a child, I was abused for seven years when I was a child... So I hardly went to school, I was lucky to get to school one or two days a week. (M2)*

Others said:

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*I was just at high school, and came home a little bit late one day and the stepfather picked me up by the throat and wasn't happy, and he kicked me out. So it just went from there, basically I've been on the streets. (M4)*

*It's full of abuse and sexual abuse, and violence and drug abuse and just all the shit, it isn't viable in any survey or any background. They're wondering why I became a drug addict... Yeah. It was actually more my Mum. My Mum was the sexual abuser. And more violent. My Dad would just refuse to acknowledge it. And then he'd beat me up as well. (H5)*

The traumatic and distressing experiences of their childhoods often led to alcohol and drugs:

*Yeah, my whole life's been a mess really, to be honest with you. I was on my own from 11, through Juvenile Justice and DoCS and stuff like that, and was sexually abused and mentally abused and physically abused and... you know, like you could just keep on going on about it, but I just covered it all with alcohol and drugs.(C7)*

### Jail and crime

Seventeen Dads, representing nearly half of the sample (43%) mentioned that they had been to jail. Some were released without any support:

*And they just say to me, "See you next week." I said to them, you know, like I've got nowhere to move, and they say, "Don't worry about it, [name], we'll just see you next week," you know, like I'm just going to get arrested again and get thrown back in jail. That was their attitude. (H6)*

*Yeah. So I didn't really know anything apart from jail and being out here and going back into jail. Supposedly in jail they're supposed to help you find suitable accommodation and so forth, but they don't. (M4)*

*Like, every time you get locked up, normally they don't want to release you back to where you were, so you've got to move all over again. Just makes it a bit difficult. (C6)*

Others ended up in the service system:

*[W]hen I was released from jail I was put into a refuge and then kept breaking curfew all the time so then they kicked me out and I moved in here (service). Now I'm just kicking on and then in June I'll be relocating to Sydney so yeah I'll move in with my family and that up there. (C8)*

One father talked about when he was released from prison into poverty and how the only way he knew to get money was to commit more crime. Others also found it difficult to exit jail and try to make ends meet on a Centrelink payment:

*When you get out basically you get out and back into the world like a garbage bag full of the clothes you came in with, you get a Centrelink payment, and that's it pretty much. It's basically what we get. (M4)*

Crime and jail were often linked to AOD use:

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*That's when I started to use heroin a lot. Yeah, that was basically when I really started to lose it and then after a few years and I went to jail and that I got out and I thought I can't - I'm not going back to jail, this is ridiculous, I'm not letting those things happen again. (H16)*

*Crime and drugs and selling drugs and using drugs. No respect for myself let alone anything else or anyone else. Just continued on, went to jail, stopped using drugs in jail, got out, back on them again straight away. (C9)*

*I was drinking a lot, using a lot of crack too. How I ended up getting arrested was I was in a stolen car, I crashed it and then they arrested me and then that was a blessing in disguise so that gave me time to go through the processes of grieving but without drugs and alcohol.(C8)*

### **Alcohol and other drugs (AOD)**

Alcohol and other drug issues were also common among the participants. Thirty one participants (78%) explicitly noted that AOD played a significant role in their lives. The role of AOD is complex, both a cause and effect of homelessness and often intertwined with mental health issues, notably post traumatic stress disorder. Many of the participants have been subject to abuse, neglect and trauma throughout their lives and turned to AOD for solace and escape.

Some of the participants noted that AOD use caused their homelessness, often in their youth:

*For me it was mainly drugs and alcohol and just using that and just that sort of destroyed the relationship with my family, and just got to the point where they couldn't; they didn't want me around anymore. (H17)*

One man noted how he was to blame for his homelessness due to addiction to heroin:

*See I'm in a different situation to these guys. I'm in a situation I'm in because of my own doing. I mean like using heroin since I was 17 years old, so my problem is my addiction, you know what I mean...(Melbourne focus group)*

He also noted that addiction is the reason that he does not have contact with his daughter and family more broadly.

*Mine's my addiction. Not because I'm homeless, or because of this, or because of that. And my addiction is because I feel if I'm homeless, and that's the reason why I don't see my daughter, and that's the reason why my Mum doesn't speak to me, and that's the reason why none of my family are in contact with me, and yeah. So yeah. (Melbourne focus group)*

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Others noted that AOD use amongst their family whilst growing up contributed to their homelessness:

*The people around me, the drug affected people around me. My mother is a drug addict, My father decided he wants absolutely nothing to do with this just before my son was born. My brother's been in and out of jail all his life. My Nan's on breathing apparatuses because of drugs. My cousins all do drugs and they're in and out of jail. I'm the only one that doesn't. So, drugs. (C2)*

For those men that already had AOD issues in their lives the conditions and demands of homelessness exacerbated their AOD problems.

*Well, the thing is see, when you're homeless, you slip into things. You slip into fucking drugs or alcohol or gambling or whatever. Because you're so stressed, you just want a little escape to the fucking situation that you're faced with. I know that myself that I've got a bit of a drug problem at the moment, and because I can't get the right answers from people mate... Where I live there probably [isn't] a fucking resident who isn't on drugs, mate. (Canberra focus group)*

### **Current accommodation and living conditions**

As fathers in this study were recruited from a variety of homelessness services, including crisis services, transitional support service, community centres, outreach services and by word of mouth, their current living circumstances were diverse.

To capture these diverse circumstances, the participants' living arrangements were categorised into four types. For the purposes of this study the following types were used:

- **'Squatting/rough sleeping'** refers to people without conventional accommodation, otherwise referred to as literal homelessness including rooflessness, living on the streets, in cars, parks, under bridges, squatting and temporary shelter.

*Three (7.5%) of the participants were currently squatting or sleeping rough.*

- **'Crisis accommodation'** refers to people moving between different accommodation options, including refuges, hostels, boarding houses, emergency accommodation, and staying with friends (otherwise referred to as couch surfing).

*Eighteen (45%) of the participants were currently living in crisis accommodation*

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- **‘Transitional/boarding housing’** includes people living in medium to long-term boarding houses and transitional housing, without security of tenure.

*Eleven (27.5%) of the participants were currently living in transitional accommodation or in a boarding house.*

- **‘Private/public housing’** or ‘the housed’ refers to people who have moved into accommodation with their name on the lease either in public or private rental.

*Eight (20%) of the participants were currently renting in public housing (7) and one was in private rental*

The increasing cost of housing meant that nearly all the fathers were locked out of the private rental market:

*Three bedroom unit, three bedroom house, \$350 a week, any paper you look at. I’m on the disability support pension \$780 a fortnight. If I take out \$700 a fortnight for a three bedroom unit, or house, 80 bucks it leaves me to feed myself, feed my kids when they come over, furnish my house, pay my bills, you can’t live like that. You really can’t. (Melbourne focus group)*

Only one father, in fact, was in private rental; he had just moved into his place following a six week period in a crisis service. Unfortunately, things were not as straightforward for many of the fathers who struggled to find any accommodation or were placed in unsuitable housing. One father described his experience of being in a boarding/rooming house:

*Well, if you can get into a place like that, well, you’re lucky to get into one anyway because the waiting lists are so long, and it’s just so hard to find one that will accept you in the first place. Yeah, it’s just a battle to get there, and when you do get there, you think is it really worth it because of the way they treat you. Yeah. I don’t know how to explain it in a different way than that. It’s, you know, you’re chewing your arm off while you wait to get into the place, and then you’re chewing your other arm off to get away from it while you’re there, so it’s a catch 22 situation; you’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Sometimes I reckon it would be better just to find a building and set up camp there for as long as you can, you know. It’s probably better for you. (H3)*

### **Factors contributing to homelessness**

The factors that contributed to homelessness for participants in this study are similar to those that contribute to homelessness generally. As seen in previous research, trajectories into homelessness involve a complex interplay of factors. For the



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homeless fathers, significant factors include; alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues, jail and crime, unemployment and poverty. However of particular significance to the men in this study was the contribution of family and relationship breakdown to their homelessness.

### **Family and relationship breakdown**

Family breakdown is the second most commonly reported reason for homelessness and/or seeking homelessness assistance across Australia. It is the primary reason sole-father families seek assistance from specialist homelessness services (AIHW 2010).

Several fathers reported that the breakdown of their relationship led directly to homelessness, to problems in finding accommodation and eventually homelessness, and/or to the use of alcohol and other drugs which in turn led to homelessness.

*But over the last three years or so with the turmoil of the breakdown in relationship and stuff like that I've just distanced myself from everyone, I feel a failure and I feel like I'm going down the same track as my mother with all the dysfunctional stuff. (M8)*

*[I]t's only been the last couple of years that I've come good; we've been separated and my daughter is 11 – she turns 12 this year and we broke up when she was six months. It took me a good six, seven years to actually just kind of be normal again. I was in a real bad way because I lost my family and I lost everything and stuff like that. I did use drugs and that on and off. (C10)*

For some participants, the relationship breakdown that led to homelessness seemed to come from nowhere. These men reported that they were unaware that their partner was going to leave them:

*You see this is the thing when it first happened, when I found out she was seeing somebody else I came home from work one night and went to walk in the door and she told me she was seeing somebody else and she handed me a restraining order there and then so I couldn't even go inside and get my clothes or get anything. (H14)*

### **Section Two: The impact of homelessness on identity and role as a father**

This section examines the impact homelessness has had on the role and identity of the participants as fathers. It also describes how homelessness affected their parenting and how being a homeless *father* affected their wellbeing. There was not a simple relationship between the type of homelessness and the amount of

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contact/involvement with children. Although the conditions of their homelessness did present a barrier, other lifestyle and personal factors had a significant impact on their father role and involvement.

### **Father identity**

Research based on identity theory has drawn links between father identity and father involvement that suggests the more a father identifies with the father role, the more involved he will be with his children (Minton and Pasley 1996; DeGarmo 2010). The men involved in this research strongly identified as fathers. Some felt plagued by this identity due to their inability to parent in the way they wanted. This caused ongoing distress, frustration and a sense of disempowerment:

*That's the most hurtful part about being homeless and not working, and not being able to see them, and not being able to provide for them, because you've got those father's instincts that are constantly inside you, but can never [be acted on it]. [Melbourne focus group]*

Their identity as a father stayed with some of the men despite not being able to have contact with their children, as illustrated by this participant:

*Pretty much all I ever thought about. Being in prison and all that, I couldn't really do much so I pretty much thought about them and thought about what type of father I would have wanted when I was a kid. So while I was there I made my decision that as soon as I got out I'd go into detox and get off the alcohol and just change my life, for myself and to show my kids that what I was isn't a father figure, I was doing the wrong thing. [M18]*

For the general population the degree to which a father identifies with his role as a father may have a direct relationship with his father involvement (Minton and Pasley 1996; Henley and Pasley 2005; DeGarmo 2010). For some participants, despite their father identity, the constraints and barriers they face restricted their ability to have a relationship with their children. Nonetheless, many of the men actively pursue father involvement and, despite the barriers and impediments, have an active role in their children's lives.

This study suggests that there was no simple relationship between experiences of being parented or the presence of role models and father identity. Some of the participants had come from positive family experiences and mentioned constructive role models. Others had negative experiences and had an absence of positive role models.

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## **Coping with fatherhood and homelessness**

### ***Motivation and despair***

For some, their identity and role as a father motivated them to improve their lives. Becoming a father had shifted the focus of their lives beyond their own interests and needs, and they recognised the need to 'step up' and make changes and improvements that would be a benefit to their children:

*I'm more motivated to get to where I need to be, to be comfortable with my kids, simply because I haven't really had them. I haven't had a lot to do with their upbringing, I haven't had a lot to do with them, so I don't know their likes and dislikes, and I need to be at a point in my life where they're happy to share all that with me. (C5)*

*Makes me feel good being a father. Looking after my own son. It's a killer job, what I mean, it's a big responsibility looking after your only child, but it makes me feel good too because it's my son and it's my own blood and flesh. (C10)*

*I decided to get some support because I thought I don't want to do this anymore. I need my life to be going in the right path. My son needs me. And by me being living in my car and not willing to be able to help myself, then I can't help him. So I decided to seek support. (C6)*

The young man quoted below came to realise that he needed to sort out his life because there was no one else to look after his children:

*They're my rock. Before their mother fell pregnant with my daughter, she's the oldest, I was out of control, I just didn't care, I had no value of life sort of thing and I just did whatever I want whenever I want and that was it. Then after I split up with her and I'd ring her all the time wanting to see the kids and she'd be like no, no, no and I sort of got to a point where I thought fuck it sort of thing so I just went out of control again...Then once my son was assaulted I realised then that I've got to stick around because well not so much I've got to live, I wasn't on a suicidal path or anything like that, I was just I have to stop doing what I'm doing because no one else is going to protect my kids. So if I don't do it who else? No one. (C8)*

Others felt more despair. These men coped by trying not to think about their children but for many the distress and anguish was too overwhelming and they turned to alcohol and other drugs to cope, as described above. The emotional distress that fathers experienced is vividly illustrated below:

*The more you think about it, the harder it hurts. Seriously. The more you think about your children, like for me, the more I think about my younger children, the more I want to cry. The more it hurts me. So I try and forget about it, and some people deal with it with drugs, or alcohol, or whatever, I deal with it by just not talking to anyone, clamming up. You know I won't talk to my partner. I often go for a walk, and just not do anything. Not talk to anyone, or just sit there. (Melbourne focus group)*

*Well I was drinking then so I was just a fuckwit really, just selfish and couldn't get over what was hurting me. I don't know from there it goes you're sort of masking a hurt, and*

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*then it becomes habitual, and then it's a constant battle between knowing what you're doing is completely wrong, but how do I change it? It's become such a part of my life from probably bloody 14. (C1)*

The lack of contact was especially distressing for some of the fathers:

*I have avenues of numbing that sort of feeling. But realistically all I dream about is - and I just think I just wish that we were back together again [weeps]. (H16)*

There appeared to be a tipping point where the men were relatively happy with the contact they had and it motivated them rather than adversely affecting their wellbeing. This tipping point occurred at a subjective minimum standard of contact. It might not be ideal but having some level of contact with their child, as well as some degree of housing stability, created a sense of contentment or satisfaction. As one man explained:

*The minimum standard what I need to have in my life is a stable home; a stable home that I can take my son there. Because once I do that, then I can say proudly that I've achieved what I've had to achieve. I've got my own home where I can take my son anytime I feel like. Once I've done that, then I can achieve other goals...When I don't have a home, or my own home, I feel very low, low self esteem. So, I believe that if I do get a home, which is my most priority at this point of time, then I can achieve other things. (C6)*

### ***Lack of contact and the cycle of self destructive behaviour and despair.***

Contact with children was a vital need for many of the fathers. Without it, fathers struggled and they found themselves in a vicious cycle: being unable to see their children caused them to despair and engage in self destructive coping behaviours that further prevented them from resolving their homelessness. This in turn exacerbated the conditions that then made it difficult for them to see their children. Figure 4 provides an example of the vicious cycle that affected many participants.

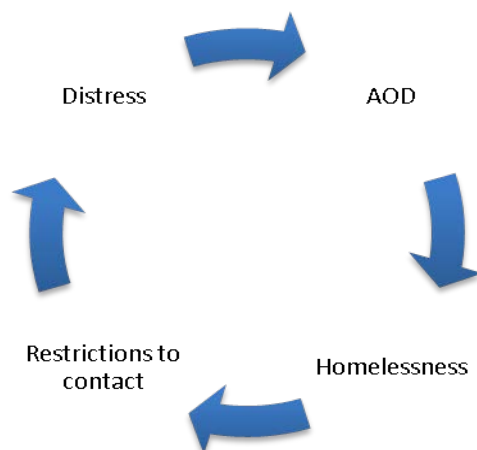


Figure 4: The cumulative cycle of disadvantage

People can enter this cycle at any point, whether it is with the use of alcohol and drugs, restrictions to contact, distress or any other factor pertinent to their lives. However, increased contact with children can be a key factor to assist single fathers to break out of the cycle.

### ***Lack of stability and minimising contact to protect children***

*I've had times where out of my own free will I've decided not to see him because of the state I was in. (M8)*

Some of the fathers minimised the contact they had with their children for what they perceived as their children's benefit. This was linked to those men who did not want their children to see them while they were struggling. This was often tied to a low sense of self worth, but also to the sheer demands and impact of homelessness on their wellbeing, appearance and lack of a suitable place to meet with their children.

When one young Dad was asked why he did not see his son despite having a 'working relationship' with his ex-partner, he admitted that he did not think he was worthy and his son was better off without him. Similarly some participants did not want to disrupt the lives of their children.

*So I've got to get my life in order before I can interfere in their lives, because otherwise I'm going to confuse them, and that's not good, and I could say to you, "Yes. I will talk to them, and in six weeks time I'm going to be in a house." How do I know where I'm going to be in six weeks? I could be out in my car. And then for a week, and then the next three weeks try and get back into a place like this. You know you've got to have stable accommodation, in my opinion, I will not contact my children until I've got a stable accommodation, and I don't call this a stable accommodation, because I don't want to wreck with their heads anymore than – I mean it's hard for me, because they don't see –*

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*I don't see them, but it's hard for them because they don't see me too. All right. And I don't want to go in and out of their life, because that's not a fair thing for them. It's just not good to put them through that emotion. (Melbourne focus group)*

Another father echoed these same sentiments. When asked about whether he wanted more contact with his daughter he replied:

*Yeah. Well, it's not fair on her. No matter what I do, what happens to me, it goes back on her. So say I was to go 'look I can't make it tomorrow', it's going to hurt her and that's not fair. (M9)*

### **Homelessness status and father involvement**

Many of the fathers who took part in this research had some role in their children's lives but one of the major barriers to contact and involvement was the lack of suitable accommodation:

*Well mainly a big part of it is the accommodation, whereas if I had suitable obviously accommodation, I can have her over stay two or three days of the week, where I don't have to worry too much about what's going to happen, and if there is going to be a roof over our head and so forth, is she going to have food to eat and so forth. It does take away a very big part of the worries. [M21]*

*I can ring up and say can I see [my son] and she's like yeah no worries. But the problem is I've got nowhere to take him so it's just a day thing. Over the last three years since the break up I haven't had a steady place to call home. [M26]*

*I haven't got a steady house where my kids can live with me basically. That's what the problem is. I can't tell the kids to live with me if I haven't got nowhere, I haven't got a place of my own and I can't say come over and stay with me when I'm sharing a house. Basically I just want a place of my own, two bedroom where my kids can come and live with me because they actually want to live with me you know but I can't because I haven't got a place, what can I do? So it's a bit stressed and that at times, a bit sad but I'll get there. [H9]*

When father involvement was examined in relation to homelessness status, it was evident that across all of the types of accommodation there was variation in the amount and quality of contact and involvement with their children (see Figure 5).

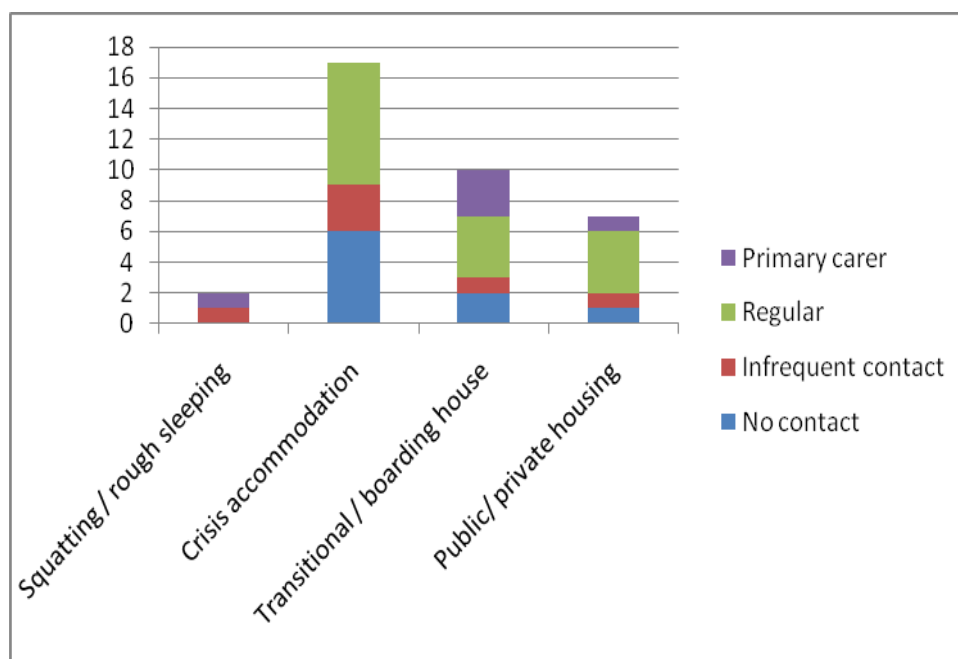


Figure 5: Type of contact and accommodation

### ***Squatting / rough sleeping***

Of the three men who were squatting, one had his teenage son with him, another saw his son during school holidays and also kept in contact via facebook. Regular facebook and phone calls helped the third father maintain contact with four of his children.

### ***Crisis accommodation***

Fathers who were staying in specialist homelessness services, particularly crisis services, tended to have little or no contact with their children. Part of the reason was linked to the restrictions placed on residents regarding children visiting or staying overnight.

### ***Transitional / boarding house***

A higher proportion of participants living in transitional housing were the 'primary carer' for their children. Unsurprisingly those living in these relatively more stable forms of accommodation were more likely to have 'regular contact' with their children.

### **Public / private housing**

Of the men who were 'housed' there was an even spread across 'no contact', 'infrequent contact,' 'primary carer,' 'shared care' and 'phone contact.' However, a large proportion of fathers had 'regular contact.' The conditions and suitability of the housing and other determinants of father involvement had a strong influence on the quality and quantity of contact with children for these fathers.

### **The conditions of homelessness**

Uncertainty and insecurity can pervade all of the accommodation options including what can appear to be stable housing. Homelessness often entails a lack of a safe place to store belongings, to shower, wash clothes, and store cook and prepare food. One father described the daily trials of homelessness that he and his teenage son faced and the simple pleasures that they missed:

*[My son] just faces the everyday battle that we have. If it is not one thing it is another. One day we might be battling as to how we might have a shower, how to wash our clothes so that is the main thing of the day and even though these are little things that is the main thing. Then the next day it might be we will have to get somewhere to work or tram tickets or train tickets, whatever. There is always something, you won't have one day or two days when it is laid back. We used to have roast and I miss that. We don't watch TV at all now. I miss a few of my favourite shows, same with [my son]. We miss watching the footy every Friday night which we used to do when we were back in [another town] and it was a thing every Friday night or maybe Sunday we would watch the football together and have a barbeque or roast or something. So yes, missing just the little things. (H14)*

Participants' living conditions impacted on the ability and willingness to have contact with their children; many were reluctant to let their children know about the hardships they faced or expose them to reality of their lives:

*No I haven't I mean I can't have my kids anyway, I am living on the street you know and they are not used to my type of lifestyle. They would be probably shocked and want to have nothing to do with me again. (H14)*

Having an alternative location to meet with their children was a significant enabler in maintaining contact with children. For example, seeing children at the (ex)partner's place or at the grandparents' place. However, this was contingent on having a 'working relationship' with the primary carer and/or the (ex)partner, or other forms of support.



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## **Determinants of father involvement**

Aside from homelessness status and the conditions of homelessness, other factors affected the amount of contact and role of the participants as a father, these included: father characteristics; interparental relationship; mother characteristics; lack of social support; and, experiences of being parented.

### ***Father characteristics:***

Characteristics of the fathers and the context of their lives were important determinants of father involvement. The range of issues that had an impacted on our fathers' involvement with their children included financial circumstances, employment status, engagement in illegal activity and jail, psychological distress, and alcohol and drug use.

### **Financial circumstances**

Some men who had infrequent or no contact with their children gave a lack of income as a major reason for this. Lack of income directly impacted on their ability to provide for children; to buy food or gifts or to take them to the movies and other activities. Many felt ashamed at their inability to provide for their children preventing them from contacting their children:

*But it is hard for me too you know if I have got them to even spend money on them. I am not working. I haven't got a house and so it is hard for me when I haven't actually enjoyed myself with them and then to be able to have a good time so that is why I just thought I don't want to see them and them seeing me the way I am. I will just try and sort myself out you know for in the future, they will catch up with them a bit more and I will have something in place that is stable. (H14)*

For those men who had regular contact with their children or were primary carers, the lack of financial support was also noted as a significant barrier to improving their living conditions and/or contact with their children:

*I get \$20 a week. I'm on NewStart because only one parent can be on the single parent pension. So I'm on NewStart, expected to look for a job. I've got 50% custody of my daughter, and I get \$20 a week on the family tax A and B to look after my daughter a fortnight, to feed her and clothe her and pay for, you know. (H5)*

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### Employment stability

Those who were the primary carer for their children found it difficult to find employment that suited the demands of their parenting:

*It's just too hard to work when you can't stop thinking about your kids. That's what I've found. Like, I can't concentrate, you know, there's so much going on. And because of it affects your employment, and employment affects your housing, doesn't it, so it's a vicious circle. (H3)*

The costs of childcare, afterschool care and holiday care needed to be accounted for if the fathers were going to be employed:

*There would have been money coming in whereas now I'm – I don't have that option because I don't get the Family Tax Benefit. I can't pay for the childcare 'cos I don't get the rebate. I don't get the \$6 day of it. I pay \$56 to pay for before and after school care five days a week, that's \$250 bucks. It cuts the salary in half. It's pointless going to work. (H7)*

### Engagement in illegal activity and jail

Crime and jail were frequent themes in the individual interviews and focus groups. Being incarcerated resulted in the obvious separation from family whilst in prison, but also led to relationship breakdown, homelessness, and a critical break in the relationship with their children. In the main, illegal activity was used as a means to provide for their families and help them survive.

*[M]y boy's seven years old, I've been trying to get a place in NSW for seven years. And the best they can do is pay your bond and move into somewhere where you struggle to pay the rent every week. And it's like over that seven year period, I'm struggling to pay the rent, I've resorted to crimes and selling drugs and stuff like that, just to get by. (Canberra focus group)*

*I use every support service there is possible. The food banks, Salvos, the Citizen Advice Bureaus. I'm just constantly – I steal a lot...Fucking oath I do. I steal petrol. I steal food. That's the only way I can do it. 'Cos I've got my own issues as well. I've got legal issues. (H7)*

### Psychological distress and mental health

Distress and mental health issues were common amongst this group of fathers. Twelve of the participants (30%) talked about how mental health issues affected their lives.

*..when I do go off my medication or whatever else, or my bipolar goes the other way and I hit depression mode, like all you want to do is just crawl up into a ball. You just want to*

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*make yourself as small as possible. You just don't want to be any part of the world. The amount of times I spent two, three days in my room, I just don't want to leave the room, I just don't want to go anywhere, I just don't want to see anyone. That's why I don't have my mobile. I just want to be left alone. And then when you get sick of that, that's when you go out and you start getting sociable and yes. [H12]*

One Father coped by avoiding going to support services for help; it meant that he avoided having to talk about his circumstances. It was certainly not easy for him to talk about his life as part of this research however, he reasoned that he *wanted* to do it - it was *his choice*, not something that he *had* to do:

*When I go to one of these organisations you have actually got to sit down and explain the whole story to every different one that you go to. After a while it can get you down and get you depressed. It could just wreck your whole week, you know, your whole day or whatever so I kind of just stay away from them because of the fact that you have got to bring the past up. Some people don't like talking about the past. Especially just to strangers or the people who you think is not worthwhile. I know today's good because I needed help so I wanted to come here...it is something that I wanted to do not that I had to do or been pushed to do otherwise I wouldn't talk at all. [H14]*

### Alcohol and other drugs (AOD)

AOD not only contributed to the participants' homelessness, but also affected their parenting and involvement with children. For some participants they did not want their children to know about the AOD use and this prevented them from contacting their children.

*It affected my relationship because I couldn't be near me kids or with me kids, that's the only reason(H11)*

*It's a huge secret. Well, because for one, if she went home and told her mother about it, I'd lose my daughter [clicks fingers] that night. I'd lose my daughter that night.(H5)*

One participant described how his addiction to Oxycodone prevented him for seeing his children:

*I need to fix my medication and then I can be a Dad. Until then, I'm relying far too much on pain relief. And it's just not good enough. It's not good enough for my kids to be around. So I'm not pushing at the moment to have them around me. I don't want them to hate me before they even really know me. (JDB5)*

Other participants were so profoundly affected by their AOD use that it restricted their ability to engage with anything else in their life.

*I didn't care. Literally – you know, I wouldn't say I didn't care, but it was like you just – I was numb to the situation. You know what I mean? I was using five times a day.(H6)*

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AOD use was often referred to as a way of dealing with the distress and trauma affecting the participants, including the malaise and anguish felt as a result of not being able to have the relationship with their children that they longed for.

***Interparental Relations:***

*It's not about one or the other, it's about us both. Getting over each other's differences and coming together and making a solution for the child, not a solution for her, not a solution for me. A solution for the child. (M7)*

The amount of contact and involvement that fathers had with their children was closely linked to the relationship they had with the children's carer. In most cases, the carer was the child's mother but some children were in the care of their grandparents or, in a couple of instances, foster care.

The relationship the fathers had with their (ex)partners emerged as a key aspect regarding the level of contact they had with their children. Typically, it was mothers who regulated the nature of the contact between fathers and their child. For example, one father who had sporadic contact with his child explained:

*I know I'm a good Dad but no-one else knows I'm a good Dad because they can't see it because I don't get a chance to see her. My partner won't let me have her by myself. That's what gets to me. (M7)*

Only three fathers said they had a 'good relationship' with their (ex)partner, two of whom had regular contact with their children. One participant noted how lucky he was to have a good relationship with his ex-partner:

*I'm very lucky, the Mum is, she still respects that I'm the father and wants me to be there for them... I know heaps of people who don't, and they are going through court, they don't even see their kids. A lot of them are pretty messed up and that. It's a big part for them. And I don't like even mentioning my kids around them, because I can tell it upsets them. (H17)*

Having a good relationship with the mother of the children, or their primary carer, also meant that there would be a place where fathers could meet with their children:

*Yeah, this weekend I'll go to my partner's place and stay there for the weekend and be with her and the kids. If it doesn't...like sometimes I can't stay there, we usually organise something else. (M1)*

Several fathers had 'on-again, off-again' relationships with their ex-partners, which were mostly amicable; some even hoped to one day reconcile with their ex-partners.

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They generally had a 'working relationship' with their (ex)partners and had regular or infrequent contact with their children. As one Dad explained:

*I've got to stay on the straight and narrow. And last year I went into rehab for four months and then with that I went back to work full-time and I had nine months up and I was actually living back with my ex partner but just helping her out with the rent and stuff, I had my own room and everything. But part of the agreement was that I didn't drink and in February this year I drank and so I was out again, I was homeless again. I lost the job, everything went pear shaped. Then for nearly two months I've been just living anywhere and I've never been that bad, it's never been this bad ever. I ended up in hospital with a hernia, I was sleeping in the park, it's never got that bad because I've always had someone to turn to but this time I've burnt so many bridges over the past that people have just washed their hands. So I'm back in crisis accommodation again now, I've got 14 days up without a drink but I know something has changed this time. I thought it had last time but this time there's just no bullshit anymore. [M26]*

There were also fathers (n=15) who were in conflict with their (ex)partner and most of them had little or no contact with their children. Only one of the fathers had regular contact and two were the primary carer.

### **Mother Characteristics:**

Most of the fathers, despite the nature of their relationship with their (ex)partner, referred to them in a positive way and believed that the children were in safe hands. Some participants even felt that their children were better off with their mothers:

*Just general I guess, for them. I'm lucky because their mother is a good person and she's clean and doesn't use drugs, and the partner she remarried has got a fulltime job, business and stuff, so they've got stability. It is hard though that I've been in and out and not always been able to be there for them. (H17)*

Knowing that their children were safe and well cared for meant they could concentrate on improving their circumstances. For others, however, there was deep-seated concern for their children's wellbeing.

Some ex-partners also grappled with issues such as alcohol and drug use, mental health and psychological factors. It meant that the mother was not always able or suitable to care for children. For example, for one young father, his children were put into foster care when their mother relapsed and started using heroin and amphetamines again; he actively pursued obtaining custody of his children. Similarly, another father also pursued custody when his two-year old was attacked by the mother's new partner.

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### **Lack of family and friends:**

Many fathers had no family or friends to turn to for support:

*I've got no family at all, so I can't say, "I can have them at my Aunty's house during the day, on the Saturday. My Aunty said it's all right." Blah, blah, blah. You can get a police check done, you know what I mean, because I don't have an Aunty. (Melbourne focus group)*

*I don't have that family network where a lot of people might have uncles, aunties, cousins, yeah you can have a room no worries; I don't have that. (M8)*

Some removed themselves from past social networks in order to preserve their own well-being and not expose their children to a particular lifestyle or culture. However, these social networks were not replaced with any other support, which left them isolated and parenting alone.

For others, however, extended family and friends played a key role in helping them with both their homelessness and parenting needs.

*My Mum and Dad – they drive to pick [my children] them up on the holidays. They take them home. At Christmas time, they took them all up [north] and all that. So really, none of these obligations fall upon me. It's my Mum. And like I said, [my ex-partner] was 15 when she first became pregnant, and she didn't exactly come from a perfect home and we moved into my Mum and Dad's house and yeah, my family's a very unique family, but very beautiful. And they sort of adopted [my ex-partner]. And looked after her while she was pregnant. She'd never been away from her Mum. And again, when [my son] was born, my whole family, we were living at home. And my whole family was involved in the first six, eight months of [his] life. [H12]*

*Since I've given up the drugs and I'm trying to better myself, my aunty has come onside a lot more because her place is so close to the school I will drop him there of an afternoon and she'll be like "Stay for dinner". I'm lucky if I cook a meal three, maybe four nights a week because I stop at my step-grandfather's place... and he cooks for us at least once a week...I've got a lot more support and stuff in my life. [C9]*

### **Experiences of being parented**

For this sample of fathers, experiences of being parented - or not - informed their ideas of what it means to be a father. Some spoke positively about their upbringings others, however, endured a difficult time growing up. For one Dad, that experience left him feeling lost:

*Yeah. I've got no idea how to be a Dad. Literally, I've got no idea. Because if I had to be a Dad, like I said, of the way I was raised, you can't get away with that stuff like my Dad when I was a kid. (H5)*

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Despite the absence of positive role models in their lives, a few fathers knew that they did not want to tread the same path as their own parents:

*Yeah we planned it all out so that's why I thought I've got to stick to the plan and be a proper father because I grew up in foster care, well I was a ward of the state from the age of two because my parents, both the same thing, alcoholics, drug addicts and that and I thought to myself, I was pretty much following their footsteps after I had kids and I couldn't do it. I could not let my kids go through the same type of life that I had. (M1)*

### ***Section Three: Father's experiences with services and the impact on parenting.***

This section begins by first providing a brief overview of housing and specialist services in Melbourne and Canberra. Canberra is unique since it is the only state or territory that has a dedicated service for single fathers and their children. As such, the experiences of single fathers in the service system and the impact on their parenting are presented separately for the two locations.

#### **Private Rental in Victoria**

For low-income, disadvantaged and vulnerable Victorians, private rental has increasingly become too expensive to obtain and/or sustain. Rental figures for the March Quarter 2011 (OoH 2011) show that only 17 per cent of all new rental properties across the state were affordable for low income households.

Additionally, the vacancy rate was 1.9 per cent for metropolitan areas and 1.0 per cent for regional locations. High costs of renting and low vacancy rates reflect strong levels of demand for accommodation (OoH 2011). Thus, people on low incomes have very little chance of competing with other renters for the small number of suitable and available properties.

#### **Public Housing in Victoria**

Public and social housing is provided to those most in need by the Office of Housing (OoH), the Division of Housing and Community Building, in the Department of Human Services.

All public housing applications are assigned to one of two categories: *early housing* or *wait turn*. *Early housing* prioritises those who are especially vulnerable and is further categorised into three levels: those who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness (Segment 1), people with a disability who have major support needs (Segment 2), or others with special housing needs (for example, in crisis accommodation or transitional housing, in unsafe or overcrowded dwellings – Segment 3). *Wait turn* (Segment 4) is a general waiting list for all eligible people on low incomes (OoH 2011). As at March 2011, a total of 37,430 applicants were on the public housing waiting list. Of these, 26 per cent were awaiting *early housing* (OoH



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2011). Waiting times for public housing can take several years; even with a priority Segment 1 early housing, indicating greatest need, the waiting time can be between 12 to 18 months (personal communication homelessness support worker, 8 July 2011).

### **Public housing and bedrooms for child access**

Non-custodial parents who do not have full-time care of their children, can, in their application for public housing, request the relevant number of bedrooms if they have regular access to their child or children. Regular access is defined by OoH as a minimum of 21 per cent contact over the year; this translates to contact with children every second weekend as well as half of the school and public holidays (OoH 2011).

### **Victoria's 'Opening Doors'**

The Opening Doors model, which has been operating in Victoria since 2008, comprises several access points into the homelessness service system. It was designed to provide people seeking assistance with a more effective and streamlined access to homelessness and social housing services in Victoria. Homelessness and social housing agencies were grouped into eight regions known as Local Area Service Networks (or catchments); each catchment comprises two to six local government areas (OoH 2011).

The Specialist Homelessness Support Program (formerly known as the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program), delivered by community service agencies, provides support to people in crisis through the Crisis Supported Accommodation program and the Transitional Housing Management program. In 2009-10 in Victoria, the Transitional Housing stock was 3,703 while for Crisis Supported Accommodation it was 235; the stock was specifically targeted to homeless young people, singles, families, and women and children escaping family violence (OoH 2011).

### **Services Melbourne fathers used**

Melbourne fathers in the study accessed a wide range of services and had a range of positive and less helpful service experiences. Services used include the following categories:

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- Homelessness and housing services
- Legal services
- AOD services
- Aboriginal legal and welfare services
- Other (hospital, counselling, chemist)

### **Critical role of services**

Many of the single fathers in Melbourne highlighted the critical role of services in their experiences of homelessness. Typically reluctant to ask for help, many attempted to resolve their difficulties without contacting services. However, because of a general lack of resources and income, all eventually sought help.

One father, for example, explained how his family first became homeless when they were given 60 days to vacate their private rental property because the owner wanted to sell. Unable to get another rental property they used their savings to pay for motels and caravan parks. Desperate once the money ran out, he contacted services. Although the family unit was able to remain together in the short term through the intervention of the Department of Human Services, by the time of the interview the difficulties and struggles had taken their toll on the couple's relationship and they had separated. The father was left to find a place on his own.

*So how long...[did you] use your own money for? Probably about eight months...we saved up the money for a new house but we just couldn't find nothing on the market in our price range. So the money we had saved basically went towards caravan park for a week or a motel for a few nights or at one stage, we were sleeping in the car and then it come to the point like where after a few months, we ended up ringing the Department of Human Services and asking them if they can put the kids somewhere because we didn't want them sleeping in the car or anything. They said no they won't take the kids off us but they'll put the whole family somewhere. So they paid for a motel for us for a month or so and then [service]...helped us out with one of their crisis properties. So since then we've sort of got back on our feet. [H4]*

Another participant explained about using services:

*Well really I didn't use any at the start and then it wasn't until over the last two years, that's when I started to kind of use services and stuff to kind of try and get somewhere and trying to get it so I can see my children and my daughter all the time...[I used] the [agency], the community health centre down where I was living down there and then I*

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*talked to a lot of social workers there and kind of tell them my story and then try and work it out. That's how I ended up in this house [public housing] today. [M28]*

A father who was recently out of jail was determined to be self-reliant and to acquire some basic necessities without seeking support:

*I got out and I wanted to make a go of it for myself. Usually when I get out, I get my paperwork and I'll hit up every service, get all those things and that will pay for my toiletries and it will get me a kettle, toaster, and set myself up and that. No. And I thought this time 'no, bugger it, I'll do it myself'. And yeah, there's things like this that just get us through. I don't think you realise – a lot of people don't realise how much these things get us through. And this time, like I said, I didn't hit up any of the services; I wanted to do it on my own. In hindsight now, I shouldn't have done it that way. Because now I've stuffed myself up. I'm left with no options now [H12].*

### **Positive experiences of using services**

For most Melbourne fathers (n=21), their use of services was a positive experience. Importantly, it was the capacity of services to provide help in times of personal crisis that was especially appreciated. Fathers were also realistic about what services can do to help. One participant explained:

*[Service 1] and [service 2] have services better than most other places to get your life on track, no matter what it is. If you need assistance with drugs... they try to do their best with housing. Anything you need any help with, they will do their best to help you. Parenting, they can point you in the right direction. They can't wave a magic wand and fix everything but they point you in the right direction if you need help. Services, there's always information or numbers or something [H3].*

Several fathers felt their service experiences were critical to their wellbeing:

*They've helped me a lot...Just without them, when I was going through that rough time in my life, I don't know where I'd be at the moment, so, very grateful [H4].*

*I wouldn't be sitting here if I didn't have them, that's for sure. I don't know where I'd be; I'd either be dead or in jail, for sure [H18].*

Help came in different forms and included:

- **Practical / material help**

*They've got just about everything there. They've got computers, they've got the telephones, washing machines, they've got dryers, they've got showers. [H15]*

*They got me a suit when it was time for me to go to court. They got me a job to work at. [H16]*

- **Advice or someone to talk to was highly regarded:**

*Just the fact that they can take you off into an office and have this one on one discussion and see what's wrong with you. They actually listen to what you feel and how you feel and then what you need to have done...even if they are busy they make the time to sit there and listen. [H15]*

*[Agency 1] – they helped with medical and I play footy for them, so they give me physical activity, that's pretty good. There's always someone there to talk to you and they remember your name, which is always a good thing. So [Agency 1] are pretty good. [Agency 2] is just grouse. I'd be dead if it wasn't for them probably. [M27]*

### **Accommodation and the impact on parenting**

Not surprisingly assistance with access to accommodation was regarded as particularly essential.

*They've done me a place and that and I've tapped into who I should have been and what I should do, it's opened me life that I'm in a happier place than I've ever been in my life, if you know what I mean. To have that actual home and everything's paid and you pay your bills, it's grouse. [H11]*

However, accessing accommodation was regarded as especially important for fathers because it affected their ability to parent and have a relationship with their children. For example this father who finally got into public housing, explained:

*Oh yeah, I know. I was just very lucky but they don't make it easy for you but I finally got it, so now I can probably have the relationship I want with my daughter, what I've always wanted because I've been without a house and that was the biggest thing ever (M28).*

### **No place for fathers**

In general, the accommodation that was available was targeted at single men. Many found that trying to access accommodation, as a parent, was extremely difficult:

*There's nowhere in Melbourne where you can take kids as a bloke anyway...so that sort of put my relationship on hold with them [my children] at the moment until something eventually gets sorted out, and I can get private rental. [Melb focus group]*

*The problem is I find it doesn't matter what agency you go to in Melbourne, they will always put you in a boarding house. A single male, even if you've got a child, straight there, there's no other option. [M26]*

One father managed to get a place but was still not able to have his children stay. This caused difficulties with his relationship with his children as well as with his ex-partner. Despite having children, his identity as a father was discounted; as he explained:

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*Yeah it's been difficult. Because I don't have them fulltime, when I've applied for emergency housing...I say I have kids and I'd like somewhere, but they just say you don't have them fulltime, so it's just classed as a single man...and it's a real struggle, and my relationship with the Mum has really been affected as well, because she wants me to have them as well, for her own reasons and the kids, she wants me to be around them. And now I've got this place, at least they can come over, but they can't spend the night. And that's a problem again because it puts pressure on the relationship with her (expartner), and I can't have them like I want to be, because just spending, yeah got to rush and drop them off, and when you have them at night you can enjoy the time, you don't have to worry about rushing. So you can just have quality time and wake up, have breakfast together, and just the normal things that families do. [H17]*

Even with full-time custody of four young children, one father experienced considerable difficulty accessing help. The family spent 12 months in one room in a hostel because appropriate accommodation could not be found:

*We contacted every single agency in Melbourne...they basically told us straight out "there is nothing for men with children...I just couldn't believe it took us a little over 12 months, to get into transitional housing. [H10]*

In contrast, one father found himself in a much more positive situation when he told a service about his child and his need for a place. It took three months to secure temporary housing:

*it just happened so quick. I met this lady, told her my scenario and then she just rang me up one day and picked me up, took me out to look at it and I moved in the next day. I couldn't believe how quickly it happened...I suppose less than three months. It must have just been perfect timing because someone had moved out of a place and she knew of one and just phenomenally got me in there; because I know heaps of people since that I've told about going there and they've gone there and they've gotten help to get them like a boarding house or whatnot or living in a share house somewhere, but not the same thing as I got. Maybe it was just sheer, pure luck. [H18]*

This father was in temporary shared housing; when the co-tenant moved out, the service decided not to move in another person so that this he could have his son stay over.

### **Access issues**

In addition to accommodation difficulties, there were additional obstacles fathers experienced while trying to access services. This included problems with entitlements, catchment areas and the rationing of services. Many encountered discrimination, suspicion and a gender biased service system; others cycled in and out of crisis services without any real opportunity to improve their circumstances or to reconnect with their children. Some were too overcome with grief and despair to be in a position to respond to the demands of the service system.

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### **Entitlement barriers**

The reality of care or custody arrangements, for some fathers, differed from court ordered arrangements. This had implications for financial assistance as well as the type of housing fathers were eligible for. The following father had a legal agreement in which he had 21% access to his two children. In reality, however, the children were living with him full-time:

*So there's three of us in a one bedroom place 'cos their mother won't sign any paperwork, even stating I've got 21% access let alone full custody, I don't qualify for a segment one which – so I can't get a two bedroom house. In my public housing application, it states that I am entitled to a one bedroom place so the system's very flawed... 'Cos she won't sign any paperwork. I don't get any Family Tax Benefit... I did have a family law agreement saying that I've got 21% access, not custody just access which is every second weekend and the school holidays which is 21%. [H7]*

In order to make ends meet, he accessed every single support service that he could and, as he put it, “*I steal a lot... I steal petrol. I steal food. That's the only way I can do it*”.

Another father explained:

*My eldest boy who's seven now was three months old [when] his mother took off... And so I've gone into housing and it took me six months to even get the pension changed over [to] Single Parent Pension. So I'm on Newstart, being told to look for jobs every week, and every time I go to Centrelink and say 'look, she's getting the money, but she hasn't had him, I've had him'. And Centrelink will go 'every time we ring her, she says that you've only got him for the day'. And it's like I'm sitting there with everything on my knee, and they go 'no, you're taking him back this afternoon'. And I'm like 'she hasn't seen him in four, five months'. [Canberra focus group]*

### **Catchment areas and rationed services**

The rigidity of catchment areas and the rationing of services excluded many from accessing essential support:

*I think if it had been a bit more streamlined. And I think the regionalisation of things makes things very tough on people that are already really pretty angry at services anyway, not providing them with anything. And then to be kind of told 'sorry, you're in the wrong area' really is kind of a pain in the arse for a lot of people that are just starving and have nothing over their roof. The red tape could be cut in half I believe, and the paperwork could be cut in half. (H5)*

One father was shocked to learn that he had to find another worker, on his own, simply because his temporary accommodation was “across the creek”:

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*When I moved into the hostel here, and...when my three months was up, I rang up the worker there who placed us there and she goes "Well actually, I forgot to tell you, now that you're across the creek, you're actually out of our area so I'm no longer involved with you". I said "What? I've got one day before I move out and you tell me that you're not my worker no more", so I had to go and find another worker. [H10]*

Another found it difficult to get clothes because his health care card was not issued in the area where he had sought assistance. He tried to explain that the address on his health care card was irrelevant; but he had no luck. He ended up going to another agency where he was told:

*You get one set of clothes, one jumper, one pair of jocks, one pair of socks, one tee shirt and one [pair of] jeans, that's all we're giving you. [H13]*

### **Discrimination, suspicion and gender bias**

A number of fathers described the various service systems (housing and legal) as unfair and biased towards mothers. They experienced difficulty accessing support and generally felt that they were seen as the problem:

*My word should be good enough...I have got the children. That should be good enough. If it was the female with children going in, it's just bang, there you go, 'cos they've got the children and they can see the children whereas I walk in and they go, oh no, he's just trying to pull a swifty. I don't know. They just – I don't get the same recognition and it's unbiased. That's how I feel. I feel that my word is not good enough whereas the mother's word's find. (H7)*

*They're (services) too entrenched in the assumption that Mums in most instances are a stabilising influence, and fathers are irresponsible and dysfunctional. So I mean I don't know how you challenge that. [Canberra focus group]*

*And they think if you're living on the street you are a druggie, or an alchy, or something like that. It's just a bad perception in mind. Seriously people have just got the wrong perception out there. If you are a male you're in the bad books. It doesn't matter, you are judged before your trial. You know what I mean. If you are a female, you win. I've seen it. [Melbourne focus group]*

Due to the suspicion that he was regularly greeted with, one man carried the court papers with him as proof of that his children were living with him:

*Because I wasn't a woman I could get no help and I was always the bad person for some reason. Why? I couldn't work that out? Why am I the bad person?. Every place I went to the first thing they do is sneak in the back room and ring up DHS to make sure that I had access to the kids...Yeah. They wouldn't take it on face value. [Services would say] "Hey, you've got the four kids, show me your pension card". In the end, in every place, I had to bring out the court papers and say "Look here, I've got the children legally" because they wouldn't believe me. [They'd say] "We've still got to ring up DHS and make sure". [H10]*

### ***Grief, loss and despair***

Many fathers, particularly those with little or no contact with their children, experienced ongoing grief and despair. They typically cycled through emergency accommodation, describing the experience as “going around in circles”. A revolving door of 6 weeks crisis accommodation presented only obstacles to the role of fathering and offered little or no hope and only limited engagement with services.

The grief and loss and the other issues some men experienced meant they found it difficult to respond to the demands of various service systems; it was just too hard to fill in forms and go from one place to another:

*Yes what they [legal aid] have given me to do was just too hard. Just the things that you have to do like the paperwork that they wanted and you know...I would have to go to all of these organisations to get it filled out and I just thought it was just too much...Too hard...so I just gave up. Yeah but hopefully you know things might change for me in the future. [H14]*

*They [hospital & telephone counselling service] wanted to be helpful but couldn't be helpful...They just couldn't help. They had a lot of stuff that it seemed like...what they told me to do and how to do it sounded like climbing a big mountain and sort of was worn out totally already and I couldn't go through that. [H16]*

### **Homeless fathers in Canberra, ACT**

The experiences reported by the research participants in Canberra are very similar to those in Melbourne. Like Melbourne, the private rental market has a significant impact on the ability of the participants to exit homeless into any option aside from public or community housing. Similarly, the waiting lists for public housing are very long and, as a result, the medium to long-term accommodation for homeless people is blocked up due to the lack of exit points. Some of the conditions that affect the experiences of homeless fathers in Canberra and a brief overview of housing allocation policy in the ACT are described below.

### ***Housing ACT***

Housing ACT is the main provider of community housing in the ACT for people who are disadvantaged or experiencing a crisis. On the 3 June 2011, Housing ACT estimated that priority housing waiting times were, on average, 84 days and, for those with high needs, 547 days (DHCS 2011). However, these averages do not represent the length of time needed to wait for a house of an appropriate size for a



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father with a child or children, nor does it provide an indication of the suitability of the accommodation.

Applicants to Housing ACT with child contact can request an extra bedroom. A property with an extra bedroom can be allocated where the applicant has a minimum of 50% contact, supported by appropriate documented evidence (DHCS ACT 2010). Housing ACT may approve the allocation for an extra bedroom for parents with child contact of a minimum of 27% of the year, which amounts to approximately two overnight visits a fortnight and half of the school and public holidays. This is again contingent on appropriate documented evidence. Housing ACT has also decided not to allocate families with children under the age of five to multi-unit complexes.

Even if a property of an appropriate size has been allocated that does not ensure that the location is necessarily appropriate for children. The more specific the needs of the housing to be allocated can result in longer waiting times. All of this is contingent on the applicant having the appropriate documentation to be on the list in the first place, which is not necessarily easy for people who are experiencing homelessness.

### ***Using services in Canberra***

Several research participants who had been homeless in different cities across Australia discussed how Canberra was different. Apart from the presence of CanFaCS, which is discussed below, the participants mentioned how the size of Canberra allowed for easier access to services.

*What I've really found in Canberra is... because it's the ACT, right, it's one sort of state, and it's all within distance of everything else. So all the services know all the other services, you haven't got sort of north side Sydney versus west side – you know what I mean? (C7)*

Another participant noted that he found it easier to get support in Canberra than in NSW. However, both these participants' positive experiences could in part be attributed to their involvement with CanFaCS.

### ***First Point: centralised intake service for homelessness services***

Recently the ACT has introduced a centralised intake for homelessness services, called First Point. This service provides a single access point to services and aims to

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facilitate connection to relevant services. This means homeless fathers are not reliant on accessing the appropriate service for their needs, but are able to use the expertise of First Point. This does not ensure appropriate services are available nor whether they have the capacity to deal with the demand and specific needs of each individual.

First Point is in its infancy and its efficacy and impact are yet to be evaluated.

### **CanFaCS**

*Surely it's about getting solutions for families. Dads and kids. Before that relationship drifts off into something that can't be gotten back. There's unnecessary pain being felt by the bureaucracy that stands in the way of you getting to where you're trying to go to and CanFaCS are much better at seeing that, understanding it and dealing with it from a father's perspective than housing will ever be. (Canberra focus group)*

Canberra Fathers and Children Service (CanFaCS) is unique to Canberra. This service is operated by Connections ACT Inc. and is Australia's only homelessness crisis accommodation service funded specifically for single father families. This service began in 2002 and was developed in response to the needs of sole fathers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. CanFaCS program delivers:

- crisis accommodation and support to homeless sole father families;
- medium-term supported accommodation to families in head-leased properties located around Inner Canberra;
- temporary supportive accommodation at 'Dad's Place' for fathers who do not have suitable accommodation to care overnight for their children;
- outreach support to single father families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness; and
- group work, community development and education courses to fathers and their children more generally.

The presence of CanFaCS in Canberra had a significant impact on several participants in the individual interviews and focus groups. What follows is not an extensive outline of the service model of CanFaCS; rather, it aims to provide an overview of the experiences of the research participants who had been supported by CanFaCS. Several participants spoke of how CanFaCS helped them find accommodation:

*CanFaCS managed to get me a place, I went and seen them out there, and I said to them realistically how long? What's the minimum that I'm looking at, just be honest with me. So I'll find something else. And they said absolutely minimum of two months,*

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*probably more like three, maybe even four, before they can give me any sort of help. So I started looking at share accommodation. Two and a half weeks later, (the worker) rang me up and said 'look I've got a place ready to move in. Something's come up'. And I was amazed. (Canberra focus group)*

CanFaCS have a service called 'Dad's Place' which is a residence that is available to their clients to have overnight contact with their children. Dad's Place provided a safe, stable and suitable location for some participants to have contact with their children.

*I've only seen my kids, had my kids over twice now in two years – in the last month. CanFaCS has like a Dad's house for the weekend. And having all the kids together all the one time, it's a good feeling for a Dad like myself. (Canberra focus group)*

For some of the men, CanFaCS offered hope and a break from what had felt like futile attempts to be with their children, confronted with services and structures that do not encourage or seem to value father involvement.

*The main thing I found was CanFaCS was the one that got me back on my feet. They're unbelievable with their support. (Canberra focus group)*

## How fathers would like to be supported by services

This section explores the ways in which fathers wanted to be better supported by services. Several vital measures were highlighted, including: accommodation options for single Fathers (as opposed to single men); services recognising and understanding the significance of the fathering role; treating them with respect and dignity; and providing consistent information, advice and counselling and practical and financial responses.

- Priority accommodation, refuges, and dedicated spaces for single fathers and children:

One of the important things fathers wanted was a safe place where they could spend some time with their children; often contact was the main issue, not necessarily custody. Many simply wanted to be able to see their children:

*If there'd been a men's refuge that men can go to with their children I would never have had to take the children out of the state, away from their school they started from. Had there been a refuge in Melbourne we wouldn't have had to go to all of these different rooms. [H10]*

*When I left my partner, if there had been somewhere for me to keep seeing the kids every second weekend, or whatever, I probably wouldn't have got as depressed, and as deep into my situation that I'm in now, because I would be regularly seeing them. [Melbourne focus group]*

Importantly, the 'safe place' had to be a space that the courts and others would approve of:

*It just needs to be like a safe and happy place that's recognised by the government, that's recognised by the courts as being set up to be safe, a legitimate place to have your children...Life wouldn't need to feel that bad if you knew that you could sort of clean yourself up once a fortnight, or once a month, or whatever, and have somewhere that the government recognises is a safe place to have children. [Melbourne focus group]*

- Services that provide support to single fathers with compassion, dignity and respect:

*Putting your application in and you don't hear from them [worker] in seven months, and in those seven months, each day, there's big decisions - where am I going to park my car and sleep tonight? Whose couch do you want to crash on tonight? How the hell am I going to feed my child...each day is just a trauma. And just the very basic respect of maybe a weekly call, letting you know what the progress is, rather than just leaving you hanging in limbo. That's a very basic bit of respect. But there are also staff who work in that department, I've come across two of them in about the 12 I've dealt with, who do have a bit of respect and compassion left in them. [Canberra focus group]*

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*Treat the father with common dignity. Dignity and kid's safety when they're thinking about housing the fathers. [Canberra focus group]*

- Acknowledgment of the emotional distress and grief experienced by fathers following relationship breakdown, and especially the loss of children. This is especially significant at the first point of contact; otherwise fathers may not engage:

*Well the Dads that don't see their kids or the mothers that don't see their kids, it's just very hard for them, it's just very, very hard. A lot of people don't realise how hard it is, only the people who realise how hard it is, are the people that are in that situation. [M19]*

*By letting them see their kids, maybe you can give their lives back after all that devastation. It's a lot of loss to handle, and then not being able to see your kids on top of that. [Melbourne focus group]*

- Services recognise and acknowledge the importance of the fathering role. A key issue is to understand that many men who access services may be single fathers; it requires recognition of the father status and a capacity to respond accordingly.

*There is no service for Dads. There is not. There is service for homeless women. There's service for homeless men. There's service for homeless children. There is no service for homeless Dads. [Melbourne focus group]*

- Coordinated assistance is crucial. It is apparent that men with interlinked, serious problems and feelings of loss and grief may need active coordinated support. Many felt that they would benefit from dedicated assistance to help them broker services, complete forms and provide active follow up. If this doesn't happen men may disengage from services that could assist them.

*A case worker, someone that can actually help and go through, write letters that would be one big help. [M10]*

*I just think that maybe you have to have like a case manager so you don't have to explain a lot of things to every different organisation that you go to. Have one person who can deal with everything so therefore you don't have to go to every different place for an answer you can kind of go to that one person. [H14]*

- Crisis services be available to provide counselling for fathers, or someone to talk to about their circumstances:

*It's like everywhere you go to knock on the door, it's just like doors don't open, they just get slammed in your face because no-one's willing to listen to you...they're not in the situation, they don't care. [Melbourne focus group]*

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*So there's just no support. Seriously. After your four weeks, and then your two weeks extension, "See you later. Out the door. "We'll kick you into a hotel for a couple of days and then you're on your own." It's not the way it should be. Seriously. They should get into – I don't know, there should be a government department that just looks after men, or something, just so you've got somewhere. Even if you don't end up getting a place, you've got somewhere to go and talk to someone, because really there is no-one to talk to. Who are you going to go and talk to? [Melbourne focus group]*

- The initial point of service contact is vital in assisting fathers and timely, practical help is essential. If fathers are not engaged at this point, alcohol and drugs may take over as a coping strategy:

*The longer you go without seeing your children, the more depressed you get. Honestly. And it turns you to alcohol, it turns you to drugs. [Melbourne focus group]*

- Service support needs to encompass a holistic approach that focuses on both their homelessness issues as well as their contact and relationship with their children:

*Most social workers, and that, and I've spoken to hundreds of them over the years, as soon as you mention children, they just say, "That's a legal matter."... there's nothing we can advise you. So the conversation is shut down? Dead there and then... You need someone that's got a legal background, social work background, that can sort of put things into perspective a bit more. [Melbourne focus group]*

- Services should provide fathers with a range of information particularly on parenting, as well as father's groups:

*Even like a group where you can sit down and say one father has got a problem with one of his children or something like that and he doesn't know what to do about it, he can talk to the group if he feels comfortable and we can all help him out or help each other out. [M18]*

*I know there's a bloke here that's a single father and as he said, he was having trouble just managing to get the kids to school and working out what to do. He asked me what age do kids go to school; even that sort of stuff, just general help. [M2]*

- Provide relationship information around working together to care for children after separation:

*I think there needs to be more mediation between parents. Because it's a really hard thing to establish a co-parenting, or any type of relationship after two or three tops mediation sessions and a conference before a court case, where it's just rubber stamped, these are the orders. There's a lot more to establishing a relationship – we're just thrown out there and just said 'now these are the orders, now get on with your lives'. It's a very hard thing for both male and the female to adapt to, so there needs to be more post care. More post case management even.[H5]*

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- Provide material and financial support and ideas and suggestions about where to take children:

*Yeah you see your kids for a day and maybe just having something that can help you do things with them and spend good quality time with them in that day. Not just have the kids dropped off to you. The excitement for me is to see the kids dropped off but I wouldn't know what to do, I wouldn't know where to go, I would be lost...just little things like that you know maybe to the football...but whatever the kids are interested in and especially the little girls too and...the boys are okay as you can take them to the football or take them down the skate park but the girls are a bit different. [H14]*

*We need more tools, more communication skills. And maybe like access – like services, like I said, they'll give us tickets to this, that...there's sort of nobody who's designated to organise something like that. Holiday packages...because we can't afford it. And even if we could, we haven't got the ability to go and a lot of us lack the cognitive skills to be able to go out and to buy a ticket, come home, get your kids dressed, get them on the train...a lot of people don't know how to access information about things like that. [H12]*

- Services work together, especially courts and human services, in ways that do not have a negative impact on fathers and their children, particularly when it comes to custody and access issues:

*She went to court and the court made an order to get the children removed from me, without checking with Human Services first who had actually given me the children. In the first court case the magistrate said "Had I known that Human Services actually gave you the children I wouldn't have even made the recovery order". Of course this mucked us up again and because we lost our house because of that... The mother got them back and within a week and a half they were in foster care. They took them off her and put them back in foster care. But because of all the outrageous allegations she made against me, they were in foster care for six weeks until the court decided what was best which was no good for my kids whatsoever. My children have never been away from me apart from them six weeks now; that's the only time they've ever...Were the four kept together? No they weren't. That's the worst thing of all. They were split up. [H10]*

- Provide appropriate financial assistance to fathers who have care of their children so that they can adequately care for their children. Even where fathers had children in their full-time care, they were often not in receipt of the correct income support or allowances. Centrelink payments are structured so that only one parent can receive the Parenting Payment even if there is a 50:50 shared care arrangement.

One parent noted the importance of assessing needs on an individual basis, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach:

*It really is on an individual basis, you can't get your stuff...you can't blanket fund this stuff; it needs to be on an individual basis. You can't just say 'oh look I'm sorry, we can only give your family \$70'; if they need \$120, they need \$120, not \$70 because that's the*

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*blanket funding for that amount of kids or that situation. It should be proper assessors, people who are able to assess the situation for what it is and make that call. [H5]*



#### ***Section 4: The service perspective - how do services work with homeless fathers and their children?***

This section reports the results from an online survey undertaken with specialist homelessness services across Australia. This was done to gain a service perspective on how single fathers are supported by the service system, what the obstacles are and how services can be improved.

The findings presented in this section are based on the responses received from 89 agencies: 32 who targeted families, 39 young peoples' services and 14 services who worked with single men. The remaining 4 had a mixed target group.<sup>3</sup>

#### **When men presented alone at a service, were they asked if they were a parent?**

Of the participating agencies whose client groups included single men, young people and families, the majority (88%) reported that they asked men about their parental status during the intake and assessment process. However, it was more likely that the question would be asked of families and young people rather than single men.

#### **Did services provide a suitable space where fathers could visit with their children?**

Of the participating agencies that targeted young people and families, nearly half provided a suitable space where children could visit their fathers. Only 8 agencies targeting single men had a suitable space for father and child visits.

Of those agencies targeted at single men (n=14), most agreed that the environment was unsuitable (n=11) for family visits. This may be due to lack of room and/or the possibility of other clients being alcohol or drug affected, which also presented a safety concern.

Agencies who worked with families, young people and single men indicated funding constraints and lack of resources as reasons for not providing these spaces. None of the agencies chose "don't think about it" as a reason, which may imply that workers are aware of the issue.

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<sup>3</sup> See discussion in Research Design section for an overview on the sample of services.

### ***Did services provide support for parenting?***

Across the participating agencies (n=89), the most common types of support provided were advocacy and emotional support. Nearly two thirds (63%) of participating agencies indicated that they specifically provided services that supported men and their parenting.

Services targeted at single men most commonly provided assistance with: accommodation, financial assistance and material aid. Parenting support was rated sixth. In contrast, among services targeted at families and young people, parenting support rated third.

Service providers were asked to rank the top three areas of parenting support required by homeless fathers. Not surprisingly, accommodation was rated first, parenting skills second and legal aid/information was third.

### **Supporting fathers who have lost contact with children**

In contrast to the experiences of some fathers, the majority of the survey respondents indicated they did try to support fathers to re-engage with their children. Nine of the 14 agencies who provided services to single men, 14 of those targeted at young people and 15 of those who worked with families stated they provided support for fathers who had lost contact with their children.

### **Barriers to service provision for fathers who are homeless**

#### ***Accommodation***

Responses to the open-ended questions identified a general lack of affordable housing for fathers with shared care of their children. Emergency accommodation was rarely provided, or suitable, for fathers with children. Moreover, there was a view that such environments were not always appropriate for children. This was particularly problematic for men who had sole care of their children and who were unable to find other sources of care when accessing services.

The lack of accommodation presented a key barrier for fathers' ability to maintain contact with their children and was particularly significant where courts were involved. According to service providers, courts do not order contact between fathers

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and children where there is no residence for children to stay. Hence a number of service providers highlighted the need for support and adequate accommodation to prevent a breakdown in the father-child relationship.

Several agencies stated that programs for parents experiencing homelessness were often age and gender specific. Generally, parenting programs, for example, were geared towards women and, as a result, unintentionally excluded fathers. There were limited resources to encourage inclusion of both men and women.

Some services also reported that young fathers in particular have specific developmental needs that were often not addressed by services. Other services stated there was a general lack of awareness of men's needs and the need for improved training for agency staff. Making appropriate referrals is also problematic for service providers when there were few or no appropriate services available.

### ***Service delivery issues***

Service providers were asked to identify programmatic or service delivery issues that they had encountered when trying to support men with their parenting. Funding constraints was the main barrier, identified by almost half of the agencies (47%).

Nearly half the agencies (45%) reported that the services they provided did not match the needs of their clients. Interestingly, 37% of agencies also highlighted that the services they offered were not family oriented; however, only 19% of agencies reported that their services were not child oriented.

Organisational constraints were considered a problem across the sample (26%), but more evident for single men's services (41%). When asked specifically what training workers' required, 58% of respondents indicated that they needed additional skills to support homeless fathers with an active parenting role. Knowledge and skills to develop positive relationships, followed by training on legal information, were ranked the most needed by participants (see Table 2 below).

Training required	Participating agencies (N=89)
	%
Positive relationship building	30
Legal information	29
Anger management	24
Emotional support	23
Parental skills	22
Social support	21
Drug and alcohol support	20
Mental health	20
Financial information	19
Healthy living skills	19
Practical support	18
Substance abuse support	14
Cultural awareness	11
Inter-organisational communication	11
Other	2

**Table 2: Type of training identified by agencies as required for staff working with fathers who are homeless**

### **Access to services**

Participants reported that personal and structural issues prevented fathers who experienced homelessness from accessing services. They identified personal issues such as mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse, feelings of inadequacy and low self esteem, lack of knowledge about services and the shame of being homeless.

They were also asked to identify structural barriers to accessing services. The following table (Table 3) details the responses from participants by client group. In the respondent' views the biggest structural barriers across all types of organisations were: a lack of services for fathers to access and services not meeting fathers'

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needs. Interestingly respondents identified a reluctance to use services as a structural barrier. This response may reflect the gendered nature of the service environment.

<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Single men only (n=14) Frequency</b>	<b>Young People (n=39) Frequency</b>	<b>Families (n=32) Frequency</b>
<b>Lack of services</b>	14	26	29
<b>Reluctance to use services</b>	14	23	28
<b>Services available do not match needs</b>	12	21	17
<b>Ineffective government policy</b>	7	9	8
<b>Inaccessibility of services</b>	3	11	10
<b>Inadequate service provision</b>	2	10	6
<b>Ineffective organisational policy</b>	0	2	2

Table 3: Barriers to services

### Dismantling barriers

Participants highlighted a range of methods they used to address some of the barriers experienced by fathers, including: raising community awareness, new and modified service delivery, and focussing on advocacy.

### ***Raising community awareness of services available to fathers experiencing homelessness***

Service providers attempted to raise awareness of their services among both other agencies and homeless fathers through community education programs, presentations, running community stalls, general advertising, using various media options and networking with other agencies. They also reported that they spent considerable time connecting and collaborating with other services to ensure that these fathers had access to appropriate services.

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### ***New and modified service delivery***

Participants reported that they had adopted new models of service delivery for fathers, provided groups specific to men's needs, tailored current programs to attract fathers, employed practitioners to work specifically with men and sought alternate funding to provide a greater range of services such as outreach.

### ***Advocacy and lobbying***

Service providers highlighted that much of their time was spent advocating for fathers to either have easier access to services or to develop services that met their needs by, for example, providing safer accommodation and prioritising housing for single men with children. Agencies also lobbied local and federal politicians about the service difficulties experienced by homeless fathers.

### **Growing trends**

More than a quarter (29%) reported that they had noticed an increase in the number of fathers presenting at services. Agencies working with 'single' men reported an increase in both the number of fathers with accompanying children and the number of fathers presenting to services without their children. Agencies working with young people (13%) and families (32%) also reported an increase in the number of fathers presenting with their children to their service.

## Discussion

Over the past decade, the importance of fatherhood and men's involvement in caring for their children has led to a number of significant and important changes in social policy. This growing recognition of the importance of fathers in healthy child development has led to an increasing number of initiatives to include fathers in health, early education and welfare services for families. Whilst such initiatives are promising for both fathers and their children, these reforms have failed to reach some of the most vulnerable men and children in our society – those who are homeless. To date, service delivery and policy reforms concerning homelessness have largely excluded single fathers and their children. Whilst more single fathers are accessing services with their children, it remains unknown how many men access homeless services without their children and the resulting impact of this on them and their family.

In Australia, social policy has shifted towards an increase in shared parental responsibility. Australian family law has introduced a presumption of equal shared parental responsibility. This has ensured that both fathers and mothers have the right to be involved in the care of their children, whether that is through regular contact or parental decision making. Becoming homeless has the potential to negatively affect this. This has implications for how government and service providers can support homeless fathers to establish and maintain meaningful contact with their children.

There is a notable absence in the literature about homeless fathers and the challenges they face or how homelessness affects their parenting and family relationships. Very little is known about homeless men and their children, let alone their needs or ways to work with them to respond to their needs. This research contributes to the knowledge gap regarding father identity and how this can be both a positive and negative factor in a father's journey out of homelessness. The findings from this research can inform policy and practice to improve outcomes for homeless fathers and their families.

### ***Supporting fathers***

The findings of this study show that there is a demonstrated need to more effectively support fathers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This research highlights the importance of children in a father's life and how lack of contact with children (a denial of their father identity and role) is an unacknowledged contributing factor to the wellbeing of homeless men. The presence of children in men's lives and the meaning that men make from this can be a motivating factor to improve the conditions of their lives, especially when provided with support. However, the structural barriers and the lack of acknowledgement of their father role and identity and the absence of support, all add to a sense of futility and denies them an important aspect of their identity which can lead to further despair and anguish.

The factors that lead to homelessness for fathers are similar to those that contribute to homelessness generally. Many homeless men in this study can be described as chronically homeless, their lives embedded in a culture of homelessness and intertwined with a number of accompanying issues, such as; alcohol and other drugs; mental health issues; crime; poverty; and unemployment. However, for these homeless fathers, some of the most significant factors that contributed to their homelessness included family and relationship breakdown and couple conflict and alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues. These issues do not just lead to homelessness but continue to impact on their relationship with their children. Services need to acknowledge and respond to homelessness holistically and identify the range of barriers that contribute to homelessness, validating and legitimising the subjective and complex nature of this issue.

Prison and alcohol and other drug (AOD) services were identified as critical sites for engaging homeless men regarding parenting. Prison is often a time for re-evaluating their father role; similarly, addressing AOD issues was seen as an important step in maintaining or improving relationships with children. Going to AOD rehabilitation was often motivated by desire to maintain or improve contact with children, but also a trigger or cue to address these issues.



## ***Maintaining relationships with children***

### **Unsuitable environments**

Across all types of homelessness some participants had contact with their children, varying in amount and quality of involvement. However, our findings suggest that men are unable to be the primary carer for their children when in single men's crisis and short-term accommodation services. This is due to the often inappropriate and unsafe environments for children and restrictions placed on residents regarding children visiting or staying overnight. The lack of homelessness services where men could take their children requires fathers with the care of their children need to move into a different accommodation options or type of homelessness. The absence of services that permit visits from children can result in men being confronted with the choice of staying with children and remaining in primary homelessness or being accommodated alone. There is a conspicuous lack of services that specifically accommodate men with their children.<sup>4</sup>

Many homeless men have contact with their children and others long to have contact but are constrained by the absence of a safe place to meet them. The data from this study indicates that some services are aware that without somewhere safe to stay overnight contact between fathers and their children is limited resulting in sometimes less meaningful engagement and relationship difficulties. Providing a safe place for these men to be with their children could have the potential to provide respite to mothers, help restore a sense of pride and competence to fathers and benefit the wellbeing of children.

### **Interparental relationships**

Although the conditions of homelessness do present a barrier to father involvement, other factors have a significant impact on involvement with children, notably the interparental relationship and the characteristics of the father and mother. Relationship breakdown is often intimately linked to couple conflict and the personal characteristics and life histories of the father and mother. The breakdown in the relationship between the parents is not only a key factor in leading these men into homelessness, but continues to affect the contact they have with their children.

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<sup>4</sup> Fathers can stay at some services for homeless families however they rarely access these services.

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Improving interparental relationships by negotiating and learning to work together is pivotal to improving child contact. The services and supports that are available to other members of the community to mediate couple conflict, and even when there is violence, need to be afforded to these vulnerable groups to improve relationships with (ex)partners. This can lead to better outcomes for everyone involved particularly children. Excluding people with complex needs from family relationship support services, either knowingly or unwittingly, exacerbates social disadvantage.

### **Poverty traps**

Homeless fathers are often caught in a poverty trap where there appears to be no advantages or incentives to get employment due to the forgone income support, the costs of childcare and the adverse impact on father role/involvement. Lack of income for homeless fathers presents a barrier to maintaining or improving contact with children. The cultural norms and expectations around the primacy of mothers as principal carers can create impediments for fathers. It is often difficult for homeless people, including homeless fathers, to provide the appropriate documentation to access support. This may become more complex when there are legal issues around family breakdown or where men wish to change shared care arrangements.

### **Structural barriers**

The structures and policies of homeless services can mean that homeless fathers are not recognised and acknowledged. This, in turn, can be a barrier to accessing services or even acknowledging their identity as fathers. This can result in a lack of data about the extent of the issue. Moreover, the lack of services that can accommodate men with their children means that some remain homeless, unable to present at services for fear of being separated from their children. Service providers highlighted that there is a need for homeless fathers to access programs for parenting support but most parenting programs are geared towards mothers. As the literature suggests, this presents a potential barrier for fathers who wish to access parenting support.

### ***Homelessness and fatherhood***

Homelessness has a profound impact on the lives of those that experience it. However, this research shows how the adverse impact of homelessness is exacerbated for fathers. Whether with children or unable to be with them, the conditions of homelessness restrict the ability of fathers to provide for and nurture their children. This struggle adds further strain to already pressured lives. The fathering role of homeless men is a factor that cannot be ignored. The despair faced by parents who are unable to support or be with their children adds to the accumulation of difficulties and can contribute to further homelessness and disadvantage. However, this research suggests that fatherhood is a powerful motivator to improve the conditions of peoples' lives, potentially benefitting their families and the broader community.

## **Policy/Program implications**

### ***Differentiating responses to fathers who are homeless***

The study shows that fathers have diverse experiences of parenting while homeless and that services may need to respond to fathers differently, depending on what they need to support their parenting. For example

- Fathers who have no contact with their children. The study found that the desire to reconnect with their children may be an important motivator for men to access support to get their lives in order. Services could support men to reconnect with their children eg assist in writing a letter to children, actively link fathers to family relationship services to explore the possibilities for re-engagement.
- Fathers who have contact may require a safe place to see their children. Services could support fathers by advocating for men with Centrelink and Housing to ensure they are responded to as a parent. There is a serious need for more family-friendly places such as Dad's Place (CanFaCS model). Children's Contacts services could potentially provide a model to support relationships where safety issues are present.

Services need to think more actively and creatively of how to provide more child friendly spaces to support fathers to see their children. Communities for Children sites may provide another mechanism for providing supports for families to encourage contact between parents and children in a safe and child friendly space, which is cost-free. This type of arrangement could be tailored to include fathers.

- Fathers who are primary carers may require support for their parenting, active linking to child care and schools, advocate when other services 'don't believe' men are the main carer.

### ***More services for fathers and children***

We need to understand better the extent to which more holistic service delivery models lead to better outcomes for fathers and their children. An example of this

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approach is the CanFaCS model that provides accommodation and support to fathers and their children and focuses on the range of issues facing fathers, including developing and supporting parenting skills.

### ***Need for stronger links to Family Relationship Services.***

Men have variable relationships with their ex partners and may need specialised assistance to develop skills to negotiate satisfactory contact arrangement, particularly in situations of high conflict or even violence.

Stronger links between homelessness services (and other sectors such as drug and alcohol services, justice services) with the Family Support Program, including the Family Law Service could support homeless fathers in their parenting role. These services have the potential to be important resources which homeless fathers seem not to be using. Access to specialised family relationship services could lead to improved, relationships with (ex) partners and better support for children and provide assistance to their parenting.

The Family Support Program now has a stronger focus on working with vulnerable and disadvantaged families and working more collaboratively with other sectors – it is timely that homelessness services and others who come in contact with homeless fathers take up the opportunities in this service sector. One good example of how this might occur is currently being provided by Berry Street at Shepparton through the Post Separation Cooperative Parenting (PSCP) program.

*Berry Street Shepparton identified that there is a significant group of separated parents in prison. The local low security prison has a population of separated fathers who are transitioning back into the community. Berry Street are currently developing a program to work with these fathers to enable them to reconnect with their children. The program will focus on self-care, re-establishing relationships and maintaining cooperative parenting relationships in the context of separation. It will be modified to cater for very low levels of literacy and to be father focused (McArthur, Thomson, Woodward et al, 2011, p 46).*

There is an apparent need for the development and evaluation of specific fathering programs in institutions such as prisons and substance abuse treatment facilities. There is evidence from this study that fathers feel they may benefit from parenting support in these contexts. However there is also the need to develop and expand fathers' parenting programs as many fathers felt these types of services are focused on mothers.

### ***Complex lives – more partnership working***

The men in this study have very complex lives and face multiple disadvantages including poverty, AOD and mental health issues. Specialised homelessness services need to build the links with other services to meet these needs better. The more complex people's lives, the greater the need for effective partnerships between services. The study also indicates that fathers with multiple complex issues frequently do not take up the offer of services because they have had previous negative experiences, feel ashamed about asking for help, have insufficient information about services to access them or because they are too overwhelmed to do so. The men in this study require coordinated service responses which are supportive, respectful, and proactive and where there is a level of worker continuity. The collaboration literature is clear: as the level of vulnerability and complexity of issues increases, so too does the need for services to work more closely together (McArthur and Winkworth 2010; Winkworth and White 2010). Homeless fathers who experience interlinked, serious problems would benefit from dedicated assistance to help them broker services over a longer period of time.

### ***Review income security arrangements – entitlements burden of proof***

The study showed there continue to be poverty traps for fathers engaging in work who also have caring responsibility. A review is required of the implications of the extra burden of proof fathers are required to give when they are the main carer of children or have shared care arrangements. For fathers who are homeless, their ability to always furnish the 'proof' about their children's' care is problematic.

## **Further Development**

The research team has significant experience in presenting research to funding bodies, at international and national conferences, to practitioner groups and as academics teaching in Universities. The FaHCSIA homelessness agenda has a primary aim to develop new evidence with which to underpin policy and service delivery initiatives to prevent and reduce homelessness. In the development and implementation of this project, it was essential that the research questions and findings were relevant and contextualised to policy and service delivery. Effective dissemination is critical to influence change and to inform practice.

### ***Possible communication and dissemination strategies***

Our dissemination strategy will be underpinned by evidence based research utilisation strategies to increase the impact on policy and practice (Holzer, Lewig et al. 2007). One of the benefits of including service providers such as Hanover Welfare Services and Melbourne City Mission in the research partnership is that research findings will be more likely to be transferred directly into practice. However with a diversity of other potential research consumers research must be ‘packaged’ in different forms.

Some suggestions include:

- developing specific short “Implications for Practice” publications for a range of different practitioners e.g. youth workers, homelessness services and child protection practitioners, drug and alcohol workers, mental health, justice;
- developing training materials that can be used in professional education across youth work, social work, drug and alcohol, justice studies and in in-service education;
- convening a roundtable of policy makers and key agencies and practitioners to discuss the implications of the findings for policy and practice;
- informing specific curricula in postgraduate and undergraduate programs in Human Services provided by Australian universities;
- disseminating findings at State, national and international academic and practitioner conferences;

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- publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals (e.g. Child and Family Social Work, Journal of Social Policy, Journal of Youth Studies, Australian Journal of Social Issues); and
- working with the Homelessness, Child Protection and Family Relationships Clearinghouses to facilitate the dissemination of research findings.

### ***Future research***

This section identifies some continuing gaps in what is still known about fathers who are homeless and areas that have emerged through this research that require further attention. These include:

- the differences in parenting and homeless experiences of older and younger fathers. In the current project there appeared to be differences between age and life stage and the perceptions and identity of fathering;
- the development and evaluation of specific fathering programs in institutions such as prisons and substance abuse treatment facilities. There is evidence from this study that fathers feel they may benefit from parenting support in these contexts. However the way knowledge and skills around parenting are presented requires different forms and media from that of more traditional parenting programs;
- an examination of the effectiveness of more holistic service delivery models to see whether this approach leads to better outcomes for fathers and their children. An example of this approach is the CanFaCS model that provides accommodation and support to fathers and their children and focuses on the range of issues facing fathers including developing and support parenting skills;
- improved data collection to quantify the number of men who are fathers and who are homeless and their level of contact with children; and
- exploring the threshold or minimum standard that constitutes a ‘tipping point’ of service provision and access to resources for fathers to be motivated or driven to improve the conditions of their lives.



## **Conclusion**

The role and identity of homeless men as fathers has been a largely ignored aspect of homelessness. This research set out to address the lack of knowledge about the experiences of homeless fathers living in modern Australian society. This study provides important insights into the significance of father identity and role for men who have experienced homelessness and provides knowledge that can influence policy and service delivery to improve outcomes for this population.

Father identity and role is an important contributing factor to the wellbeing of homeless fathers, who face significant cultural, structural and personal barriers to having an active father involvement. Lack of contact with children is an unacknowledged contributing factor to homelessness, often causing despair and anguish and haunting these men, driving them to find alternative means to cope with their hurt. However, for other homeless men fatherhood motivates them. Despite the barriers to engage with their children, many homeless men are actively involved with their children. This motivation and the significance of father identity and role are not adequately tapped into or supported by the service sector.

Homelessness impacts on the ability of fathers to parent and be involved with their children. Unsuitable accommodation and unsafe environments are tangible barriers that restrict contact with children. However, aside from the conditions directly attributable to homelessness, there are other significant factors that affect father involvement, such as interparental relationships, and the characteristics and life history of the father and the mother. Family relationship support and holistic service provision need to be made available to this vulnerable and disadvantaged population.

Becoming a parent can indirectly contribute to homelessness through increased economic and emotional strain on relationships. People who are at risk of homelessness need to be provided with the relationship support that is available to the broader community. The family relationship sector needs to actively engage with this population group to prevent homelessness due to interparental conflict and family strain.

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Targeted services need to be created to address the needs of homeless fathers. The conspicuous absence of services for homeless fathers is symbolic of how little value is attributed to the role of these men as fathers. Creating a safe place to meet with children and accommodation and support could be the tipping point that changes fatherhood from a factor that contributes to homelessness to a motivating factor that leads to positive outcomes.

At a broad level, this research highlights how children are important to the wellbeing of fathers, just as fathers are important to children's wellbeing. This research identifies how acknowledging and supporting father identity and involvement for homeless men can have positive ramifications. The unacknowledged issue of homeless fathers is also an untapped potential, an opportunity, for service delivery and a means to improve the living conditions of these men and their families. The potential upshot of supporting these fathers who long to provide their children with lives better than theirs is a positive impact on the intergenerational effects of homelessness and social disadvantage.

## **What we know about single fathers who are homeless**

### ***Research is limited:***

- Single fathers are rarely included in studies about homelessness and parenting.
- The most detailed Australian data specific to fathers who are homeless *and* accompanied by their children is available from the Homelessness Support Program (formerly SAAP), which provides a picture of homelessness based on the use of specialist homelessness services.

### **Single fathers *without* accompanying children are often invisible in specialist homelessness services:**

- Those fathers presenting to specialist homelessness services without children are classified as 'single,' so their 'parental' status and needs tend to be disregarded.
- This means that data on single fathers who have experienced homelessness is a gross under-estimation.

### **Specialist homelessness services struggle to meet the needs of single fathers *with* accompanying children:**

- There are few services that can accommodate single fathers with children.
- In 2008-09, children who accompanied their father/guardian (65%) were more likely to have had their accommodation needs *unmet* than children who accompanied their mother/guardian (37%).
- Single fathers with children commonly sought assistance due to accommodation difficulties (35%), followed by relationship issues (29%), and financial problems (20%).

## **What we don't know about single fathers who are homeless**

We do not know

- How many single fathers without accompanying children access specialist homelessness services.
- What happens to single fathers with accompanying children when they are turned away from specialist services – where do they go?
- How children are affected by these experiences. This would include children who accompany their fathers and are being turned away by services, and those children who have little or no contact with their fathers.
- What interventions are helpful for fathers dealing with grief, despair, loss and trauma, and which therapeutic responses are most effective.
- Whether more holistic service delivery models lead to better outcomes for fathers and their children
- How effective parenting support in institutions such as prisons and treatment facilities are in developing skills in parenting and maintaining relationships with children.
- What threshold of support and access to resources constitutes the minimum threshold or 'tipping point' to motivate and fathers to engage more proactively in improving the conditions of their life.

## **How does this study contribute to better understanding single fathers who are homeless?**

This research is the first to provide insights into fathers and their experiences of homelessness in Australia. It has found that:

- Contact with children was at the core of fathers' emotional and psychological wellbeing
  - The grief, loss and despair experienced as a result of losing contact with children was unbearable
  - Coping strategies used in response to this loss often led to a downward spiral of self-destructive behaviour and a vicious cycle of substance abuse, hopelessness, withdrawal, depression and chronic homelessness
  - Relationships with children can provide motivation for fathers to engage with services and attend to issues in their lives.
- Homelessness affected fathers' ability to parent and be involved with their children
- Factors such as the nature of the inter-parental relationship and the characteristics and life histories of both the father and the mother also affected their involvement. Indeed, it was by having a working relationship with the children's mothers that enabled some single fathers to maintain contact with their children
- Accommodation for single fathers who were homeless and had children in their care was grossly inadequate.
- Services are generally not set up in a way that can support the involvement and contact of single fathers with their children.

From the perspective of single fathers,

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- There was an overall lack of recognition by services of the father identity and its significance for homeless fathers. The findings suggest that acknowledging and supporting father identity and involvement can have positive ramifications.

From the perspective of specialist homelessness services:

- Services were aware of the circumstances of single fathers and attempted to support them but were unable to adequately respond to their needs. Those that were aware of the issues fathers experienced highlighted the need for new or modified service provision in order to meet their needs better. A number of agencies provided examples of how they had changed their service delivery in order to meet the growing demands appropriately.
- They identified that single fathers experienced a considerable range of barriers to accessing support, especially in relation to appropriate accommodation as well as safe and appropriate places to meet for contact
- Some agencies were aware and sensitive to the impact of homelessness on the relationship between children and their fathers. Without somewhere safe to stay overnight or visit, contact between fathers and their children was limited resulting in fractured relationships, heartbreak and sadness.
- Services also identified a considerable need for homeless fathers to access parenting support programs, but these were generally targeted at single mothers

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## Appendix 1: Focus group questions

*Purpose of Focus Group:*

***To explore the relationship between male homelessness, fatherhood and male identity by inviting homeless men who have an active or inactive parenting role to reflect on:***

- ***Their experiences of becoming homeless and how they perceive the relationship, If any, between parenting and their pathways into homelessness.***
- ***The effects, if any, of their homeless experience on their parenting capacity specifically***
  - ***their ability to maintain contact with their children through periods of homeless***
  - ***the type of relationship they have with their child***
  - ***The quality of the relationship between themselves and their child and with other family members during a period of homelessness and when housed***
- ***To consider how services may better assist men and their children when they are homeless and beyond.***

**Semi-structured question on the following themes:**

### **1. Pathways into Homelessness**

- What would you say are the main reasons that you became homeless?
- Has the reason for homelessness ( e.g D&A, Violence, MH, unemployment housing crisis)affected the relationship with their children? If so how?
- Thinking about those reasons have the reasons themselves that you became homeless in the first place affected your relationship with your children?

### **2. Relationships**

- How has the experience of homelessness itself affected your relationship with your children? (eg having nowhere to live, having unsuitable accommodation, mix of people etc, sense of uncertainty , sense of personal instability)
- Before you became homeless how would you describe the contact/ relationship etc with your children?
- Type of contact between father and child – how was this decided? Does this level of type of contact suit you?

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- What is the impact of the different types of contact on the relationship with fathers and their children?
- What enables them to maintain a relationship? What do you do to maintain the relationship? What if anything has helped you to do this or stopped you from doing this
- What are some of the barriers?

### **3. Father Identity**

- How has homelessness impacted upon their identity as a father? What does it mean to be a father when you are homeless?
- Does this 'new or different' sense of self impact upon other areas of your life? Does this affect your life in general?
- If it hasn't changed what has helped it to stay the same as it was before being homeless?
- How does this way of seeing yourself influence your continuing relationship with your child?

### **4. Service Responses**

- What services have you used to assist them in finding housing? Have they been helpful? If so how?
- What do services ask or provide that assist men to maintain relationships with their children?
- What could services provide to better assist men with their parenting prior to, during and post homelessness?

## Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

### 1. Background

#### [Theme 1. Experiences of sole-fathers who are or have been homeless.]

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself, your family?
  - Who is/are the family, contact/responsibilities for child/ren

-number of children;

- how much contact with children (little or none);

- how long experiencing homelessness;

### 2. Pathways into Homelessness

- What was happening in your life before you first became homeless?
- How long homeless, how did it happen, what were the life events/pressures
- Have any of those reasons (e.g D&A, Violence, MH, unemployment housing crisis) affected the relationship with your kids? If so how? In the past?/now?
- Do you think the situation with your children has had any impact on your well-being or your housing or employment?

### 3. Relationships

- When you're homeless, going from one place to another, it must be really hard to have any sort of contact (or relationship) with your kids?
- How are you coping with that?
- What about before you became homeless, what sort of contact/ relationship did you have with your kids then?
- What keeps you from being the dad you want to be: barriers? What sort of contact or relationships do you think would be best for your kids now?
- Have your views about contact and relationships with your kids changed over time?
- What would be the ideal arrangement in the future?
- Would having more contact/different arrangements change your life in any way?

### 4. Father Identity

- How would you describe your role as a father?
- Who were the male role models that you looked up to?

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- What was your own experience like when you were growing up of being parented?
- How would you describe your relationship with your Dad at that time?
- Let's talk a bit about what it means to be a Dad when you have no home?
- How has your sense of what a Dad is changed as a result of not having a home?

### 5. Service Responses

#### **[Theme 2. The experience of sole-father's homelessness and their engagement with services and the impact on their parenting]**

- Can you tell me about your experiences of accessing accommodation for you/your family?
- How has your use of services affected your ability to parent/be in contact with your children?
- **If in contact**, what has helped you keep contact with your children?
  - What issues have arisen, how were they overcome?
- **If lost contact**, how would you feel about reconnecting with their children?
  - What would assist this process if possible
- What are the hardest things you face?
- What are the hardest things that your children face?

#### **[Theme 3. What do sole-fathers experiences suggest about the ways in which services can best support them to reduce homelessness and maintain their parenting role?]**

- Can you tell me about your experiences as a father using services?
- What services have you used?
- What services have been helpful?
  - Who have they helped (you, your children, both)?
  - What made them good?
  - What would have made them better?
- What things have made accessing services difficult?
- Have there been times when you needed help/assistance but couldn't get it? What were the circumstances?

#### **[Theme 4. How do services work with families?]**

- What could have prevented you/your family from becoming homeless?
- How would you like services to work with families?

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- What other things can services improve on to help Dads with their parenting role while they are homeless?

## Appendix 3: Online Survey

### Background

1. Name of your agency? \_\_\_\_\_
2. In which state or territory is the agency where you work based?  
 ACT       NSW       QLD       WA  
 VIC       NT       SA       TAS
3. Please describe the kind of area your agency operates.
  - Metro       Rural       Remote
4. What homeless programs does your service provide?
  - Crisis Accommodation       Transitional Accommodation
  - Outreach       Respite
  - Shared Accommodation       Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. What client groups do you work with? (You may select more than one)
  - Young People (up to 25yrs)       Single Men Only
  - Single Women Only       Families
  - Women escaping domestic/family violence
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
6. What would best describe your role at the agency where you work?  
 Support Worker       Coordinator       Team Leader  
 Program Manager       Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. How many staff are employed at this agency?  
 Less than 10       11 - 20       21 - 50  
 51 - 100       101 - 200       200+
8. At your agency do you provide any services that support men and their parenting?
  - Yes       No
- 8.a Which of the following does your agency provide to support men and their parenting?  
 Accommodation       Advocacy/liasing with other services  
 Transport       Emotional support



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- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drug and alcohol Support                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting support                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Childcare assistance                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial/material aid               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support for victims of violence             | <input type="checkbox"/> Support for perpetrators of violence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social support                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health support                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family violence support                     |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Immigration/Culturally Appropriate Services |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____                                 |   |

8b. From your experience which of the following areas of parenting support do homeless fathers require? (Please rank the top three most pressing issues. 1 being the most significant and 3 being the least)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accommodation                | <input type="checkbox"/> Legal aid/information     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting skills             | <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy living skills     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial aid/information    | <input type="checkbox"/> Parental confidence       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger management development | <input type="checkbox"/> Education about childhood |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Problem solving skills       | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____               |

9. Does the agency in which you work provide space that is suitable for children to visit their fathers?

- Yes                       No                       Unsure

9a. What are some of the reasons why your agency does not provide a suitable space for children to visit their fathers?

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Funding Constraints  | <input type="checkbox"/> Safety Issues          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of resources    | <input type="checkbox"/> Unsuitable environment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Don't think about it | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____            |

10. As part of the intake or assessment process at this agency, are male service users asked if they have children?

- Yes                       No

11. In the last 12 months, have you noticed any change in the number of clients presenting at your agency who are fathers?

- Yes                       No

11a. Please specify these changes.

- An increase in men who present with accompanying children

## More than just me: Supporting fathers who are homeless

An increase in men who are fathers but present without their children

Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Barriers

12. What kinds of service delivery or programmatic issues have you encountered when working with homeless fathers that are responsible for the care of their children? (you may select more than one)

- Services provided do not match needs       Lack of family oriented services
- Funding constraints       Inadequate child oriented services
- Organisational constraints       Insufficient staff training
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

13. What do you think are barriers that may prevent homeless fathers, with or without an active parenting role, from accessing services? (you may select more than one)

- Reluctance to access services       Inaccessibility of services
- Inadequate service positions       Services available do not match needs
- Lack of services for men       Ineffective organisational policy
- Ineffective government policy
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

14. Is your agency trying to address any of the following barriers? (you may select more than one)

- Reluctance to use services       Inaccessibility of services
- Inadequate service positions       Services available do not match needs
- Inadequate services for male parents       Lack of early intervention
- Lack of awareness of services       Ineffective organisational policy
- Ineffective government policy
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

14a. How is your agency trying to address these barriers?

\_\_\_\_\_

### Demand

## More than just me: Supporting fathers who are homeless

15. Which of the following services do you think there is most demand for, from homeless fathers, with or without an active parenting role? (Please rank the top three most pressing issues. 1 being the most significant and 3 being the least)

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crisis accommodation                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Short term accommodation              | <input type="checkbox"/> Medium term accommodation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Long term accommodation                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Advocacy/liaising with other services | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional support         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Transport                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health support                 |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drug and alcohol Support                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting support                     |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Childcare assistance                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial/material aid                |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support for victims of abuse                | <input type="checkbox"/> Support for perpetrators of abuse     |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social support                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Community engagement                  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger management                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Positive relationship building        |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Immigration/Culturally Appropriate Services |  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____                                 |  |  |

15a. Which of the following areas for homeless fathers support do you think there is most demand for? (Please rank the top three most pressing issues. 1 being the most significant and 3 being the least)

- |   |  |                          |
|---|--|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Legal aid/information        | <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting skills                |                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy living skills        | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial aid/information       |                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger management             | <input type="checkbox"/> Childhood development education |                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education around adolescents | <input type="checkbox"/> Problem solving skills          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parental confidence          | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____                     |                          |

### Staff Training

16. Do you think that workers within your agency require additional skills or training to support homeless fathers that have an active parenting role?

- Yes
- No

16a. What training do you feel would be most beneficial, in order to work more effectively with homeless fathers that have an active parenting role? (you may select more than one)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Legal information                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Parental skills          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy living skills              | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial information    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger management                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional support        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inter-organisational communication | <input type="checkbox"/> Drug and alcohol support |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural awareness                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Social support           |

## More than just me: Supporting fathers who are homeless

- Mental health
- Positive relationship building
- Substance abuse support
- Practical support
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

17. Do you think that workers within your agency require additional skills or training to support homeless fathers that do not have an active parenting role, but would like to?

- Yes  No

17a. What training do you feel would be most beneficial, in order to work more effectively with homeless fathers that have an active parenting role? (you may select more than one)

- Legal information
- Parental skills
- Healthy living skills
- Financial information
- Anger management
- Emotional support
- Inter-organisational communication
- Drug and alcohol support
- Cultural awareness
- Social support
- Mental health
- Positive relationship building
- Substance abuse support
- Practical support
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

18. Do you provide support for fathers who have lost contact with their children? (e.g. Assistance in contacting children)

- Yes  No

18a. Which of the following does your agency provide to assist fathers that have lost contact with their children? (you may select more than one)

- Assistance in contacting children
- Mental health services
- Interpersonal communication education
- Substance rehabilitation
- Employment/financial services
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Fathers who have lost contact with their children

19. In the last 12 months, have you provided support to a homeless father with their parenting?

- Yes  No

19a. What kind of support did you provide to a homeless father with their parenting?

## More than just me: Supporting fathers who are homeless

- Family Accommodation
- Maintaining regular contact with children
- Parenting Support
- Restabilising Contact with children
- Provided resources for contact with children
- Supported contact with children for special occasions (e.g. holidays, birthdays, father's day)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

19b. Please describe the situation and what was your role? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Thank you for participating in our survey.**

If you would like a summary of this report, please provide your email address.