

Editorial Introduction

The current housing and homelessness crisis throughout Australia reflects the failure of decades of neoliberal governance and widening social and economic inequalities. Families at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness are presenting to front-line housing and homelessness agencies in unprecedented numbers. Many families are experiencing homelessness for the first time as well as prolonged durations of homelessness due to an inadequate supply of social and affordable housing. This paper explores the perspectives of participants from specialist homelessness services, housing providers and QUT academics. Their insights and reflections have been analysed within the thematic categories: (1) the personal and structural effects of neoliberal housing and social policy, (2) the complexity of family homelessness, and (3) an under-resourced and ageing housing and homelessness service system under immense strain. This paper explores the research, policy and practice nexus arising from these themes and identifies family homelessness research priorities.

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‘I’ve never seen it as bad as this’: Community sector family homelessness research priorities in the current housing and homelessness crisis

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The housing and homelessness crisis gripping Australian cities and regions is having a major impact on an under-resourced and strained community of non-government organisations delivering Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) and universal housing, health and welfare services. Decades of neoliberal housing and welfare policy (Flanagan, 2020) punctuated by the COVID19 Pandemic (Parsell et al., 2022), multiple natural disasters impacting urban, regional and rural communities and the shadow pandemic of violence against women (Morley et al., 2021) have all contributed to the current housing and homelessness crisis (referred to as “the crisis”). The crisis has become a major media and political issue notably leading to Queensland Premier, the Honourable Anastacia Palaszczuk calling an emergency Queensland Housing Summit in October 2022 to identify immediate and longer-term solutions. The inequality and social and economic disadvantage that housing stress and homelessness generates is weighing heavily on the public consciousness. This paper reports on the outcomes of two focus groups with representatives of SHS, Housing and Homelessness Sector Peak Agencies and QUT Academics engaged in housing and homelessness research about their research priorities.

The realities of “the crisis” for families

Family homelessness has been making headlines in Queensland in 2022. Media and social narratives of family homelessness show a range of interacting forces that have combined to lead to greater numbers of families experiencing homelessness. The number of Queensland families who are experiencing poverty is rising. Wages have not kept up with the cost of living and these costs are substantial. Life altering implications result for low-income families. News articles illustrating family life in tents, cars and couch surfing call for light to be shed on family’s experience, a space that has been unlit for far too long (The Guardian, 5 Dec, 2022).

Demand for suitable housing is another critical factor influencing family homelessness. The demand for multiple bedroom dwellings has increased and more and more families have been priced out of the market. In Brisbane, rents increased by 15.2% with rents for houses rising by up to 21.2% in the last twelve months (The Guardian, 14 April, 2022). The reality for a single parent household on jobseeker, is they are paying 78% of their income on rent in Brisbane in 2022, this with incredible competition for available rentals, evidenced by a 0.9% vacancy rate in March 2022 (Anglicare, 2022).

The supposed social housing and homelessness service safety nets are beyond overwhelmed. There is a projected shortfall of 79,200 social housing dwellings in the greater Brisbane area (Queensland Shelter, 2022). Alarming 25, 853 applications are recorded on the Queensland social housing register with 80.6% of these assessed as very high or high need (Qld Government Statistician’s Office, 2023).

Although financial difficulties, housing crisis and housing affordability are cited as the three lead reasons that people seek homelessness assistance in Queensland in 2021-22 (AIHW, 2022), domestic and family violence is the main reason that women and their children leave their home (AHURI, 2022). In 2021-22, 107,700 people (almost 39% of SHS clients) across Australia reported they were escaping DFV when presenting to a SHS. One in three clients accessing homelessness services in 2020–2021 were single parents with children (AIHW, 2021). These figures give some indication of the challenge but don't tell the stories experienced by Queensland families. Their experience needs to be better understood, to appreciate the reality and the unique challenges that families face. Families experience housing instability and homelessness differently to individuals with different levels of complexity.

Australian family homelessness research

Despite families presenting to SHS in large service user numbers (valentine et al., 2020), family homelessness research has not been a major focus of research and scholarship. It is critically important that the role of gender is central to analysis of all forms of homelessness, especially family homelessness. Women headed single parent families are overwhelmingly over-represented in families experiencing, or at risk of homelessness (AIHW, 2021). This is complicated by the fact DFV is a major driver of women's and family homelessness in Australia (AIHW, 2021; AHURI, 2022; Warren & McAuliffe, 2021). There are added contextual and service delivery challenges for families experiencing homelessness in rural and regional Australia (Zufferey & Parkes, 2019).

Family homelessness research has identified that children within families are a "hidden" form of homelessness, with their needs overlooked throughout the service system (Parry, Grant & Burke, 2016). valentine et al. (2020) make strong recommendations for the improvement of housing and homelessness services for families through more investment in contemporary initiatives that predicated on the Housing First principle and more broadly supportive housing approaches. In taking into account the acute pressures currently experienced by SHS and housing providers, this paper aims to highlight the specific research needs of the community sector regarding family homelessness that can critically influence policy and program development and contemporary practice.

Engaging the community sector

The primary research question underpinning this research is "In light of the current crisis, what are the community sector's priorities for family homelessness research?" A qualitative methodology involving focus groups that used a semi-structured interview guide was designed (Padgett, 2008; Rubin & Babbie, 2011). This research received QUT Human Research Ethics Committee Approval in October 2022. Participants were recruited using a purposive, snowball sample. The research recruited 14 participants from eight non-government organisations that deliver SHS in Queensland, one Sector Peak Agency and Academic staff from QUT engaged in homelessness related research. Policy professionals from Queensland Government departments were invited to participate in this research, but declined this invitation. The participants represented metropolitan, regional and rural service providers and were organised into two concurrent groups to ensure a mixture of service provider, advocacy and academic perspectives. One focus group was conducted as a hybrid with participants participants in a face to face setting.

The research adopted the ABS statistical definition of homelessness which states that a person is homeless:

when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives, they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement is (1) in a dwelling that is inadequate (2) has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable (3) does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations. (ABS, 2012, p. 7)

The researchers acknowledge there were limitations in adopting a standard definition or approach to measuring homelessness but believed the ABS Statistical definition offered the greatest utility due to its common usage across the national Census, policy, program and service delivery contexts. The term "risk of homelessness" is also used in this research to denote families who may be in circumstances that are very close to meeting the definition (D'Souza et al., 2014).

The researchers adopted the Queensland Government's Homelessness Program definition of family. This definition asserts a family is a group of two or more people who usually live in the same household and who are related to each other biologically or through another family relationship such as adoption or fostering. This includes one or more carers accompanied by one or more child/ren, couples (same sex or heterosexual), multi-generational families and can also include pregnant women. (Queensland Government, 2021: p.33)

This definition was selected because of its broad nature of a family and its widespread use across SHS. The two researchers individually coded the focus group interview transcripts and then validated each other's coding.

Community Sector Family Homelessness Research Priorities

The qualitative analysis was subject both inductive and deductive coding. The thematic analysis arrived at four overarching themes regarding family homelessness research. These are:

- The personal and structural effects of neoliberal housing and social policy
- The complexity of family homelessness
- An under-resourced and ageing housing and homelessness service system under immense strain
- Reimagining policy and practice responses to prevent and end family homelessness.

This paper explores the first three themes in relation to family homelessness as they are about the factors leading to the current crisis and its impact on families and service providers. The fourth relates to the urgent need for policy change and will be the subject of a subsequent briefing paper.

The personal and structural effects of neoliberal housing and social policy

Participants were vocal about the extent to which the crisis was impacting families and the tremendous stress this was having across the community sector. Participants, many of whom have worked in the community sector for many years, described the current situation as being the most challenging they have ever experienced. These quotes convey the nature of the challenge and the demand placed upon their services.

Participants also described the full range of structural drivers of family homelessness. It is not possible in this paper to list all the identified drivers of homelessness and for the purpose of this paper we include some of the dominant responses, that include:

- Domestic and family violence (DFV) and family breakdown
- Poverty, inadequate income support and rising costs of living pressures
- Lack of supply of affordable housing (social, affordable and private)
- Large population increases in metropolitan Brisbane and regional Queensland since the pandemic. The ABS reports population growth in Queensland increased by more than 500,000 people from the 2016 to 2021 Census (ABS, 2021)
- Inadequate Property and Tenancy legislation – zoning, classification, tenancy rights
- Natural disasters, especially flood events in Queensland
- Availability of suitable housing stock for families
- Specific cohort related issues for groups including First Nations peoples, people with a disability, people exiting statutory out of home care and prisons, Refugees and migrant communities, people experiencing mental health concerns or alcohol or other drug related issues.

These drivers of homelessness have had severe housing outcomes for families. Although these drivers align with other homelessness research (Parsell et al., 2022), there continues to be relatively scarce literature available about how these drivers affect families experiencing homelessness. Critical research needs to be undertaken to identify the policy, programs and practice that needs to be more family focused.

The complexity of family homelessness

Participants emphasised the complexity of family homelessness and how it requires a very different approach to working with individuals experiencing, or at risk of homelessness. The needs and impacts for children within families experiencing homelessness needs to be recognised (Parry et al., 2016). Participants also conveyed their disdain for the lack of a 'whole of government' policy approach to preventing and ending homelessness, especially in the context of child safety, domestic and family violence and housing and homelessness service systems. In line with recommendations from other research (Valentine et al., 2020), there is an urgent need for research to influence innovative policy and practice responses to preventing and ending family homelessness across the service systems.

"We're seeing families move from inter-state and within the state to find a home. This is something I have never seen in 30 years working in the sector, that is single women loading up the car with children and heading to another town to find housing"

SHS North Queensland

"Looking after toddlers in a motel room for six months, that's torture"

SHS in Brisbane

"There's at least 40 people in our wait room every afternoon. It's packed. Every day."

Metropolitan SHS providing access and support services to families

"It's the hardest I've ever seen it to get families housed"

SHS focusing on young families

"The complexity is that family homelessness is multi-dimensional."

SHS focusing on early intervention

"What's unique for families is the impacts on child development, the risk of child safety involvement. We see families that otherwise, apart from their homelessness, would not have child safety involvement"

SHS inner Brisbane

An under-resourced and ageing housing and homelessness service system under immense strain

The population movement into Queensland since the beginning of the pandemic and continuing in 2023 has placed enormous pressure on the community sector (ABS, 2021). Although historically under-resourced, these population pressures have exposed the stressors on organisations that deliver these vital services.

Recognition of these pressures and a commitment to new and enhanced funding of SHS is required as part of the new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement that is expected in July 2023. Research needs to be undertaken to profile the immediate and long term impacts the resourcing stressors and constraints upon SHS are having in their work to prevent and end homelessness with families.

Future research opportunities and policy development

This paper has reported on the findings from two focus groups held in Brisbane in November 2022 about family homelessness across Queensland. It reports on three thematic areas about family homelessness that are identified as priorities for future scholarly work. In light of the nature of the severe housing and homelessness crisis impacting Australia, and the severe impact it is having for Australian families, there is an urgent need for this research to be undertaken to drive major housing and homelessness policy reform.

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