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### Reframing family homelessness: A citizenship approach

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#### Abstract

This is the first paper from a project which draws on recent scholarship about citizenship, emphasising gender, culture and place (e.g. Lister, 2007), to develop a richer understanding of homelessness experienced by families with children, predominantly women with children. This scholarship suggests that citizenship is not confined to formal relations between citizens and the state but also includes other types of relationships between citizens, some of which occur in the private rather than the public sphere. According to this work, citizenship is more than a formal statement of rights and responsibilities; it is practised on a day-to-day basis through a series of individual and cumulative interactions between people. The research frames the experiences of the homeless families in terms of 'citizenship as practice' (Desforges, Jones & Woods, 2005) and seeks to understand the everyday lived experience of homelessness. This paper presents the early findings from the first wave of a qualitative, longitudinal research project which enables families to detail and interpret their lived experiences as they deal with homelessness and attempt to improve their lives. The research findings suggest that homeless families have to make many compromises in daily practices in order to access crisis and transitional housing and that these compromises, as well as their material circumstances, affect their sense of control and agency in critical ways.

**Keywords:** Homelessness; family; citizenship; Australia

## Introduction

In Australia, a high political priority has been given in recent years to preventing and addressing homelessness, as evidenced by the White Paper on Homelessness, *The Road Home* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). In this context, there is considerable concern about homelessness experienced by families, defined as one or more adult living with dependent children although, in practice, many homeless families comprise women and children. Despite the current policy context, there is surprisingly little research on family homelessness in Australia unlike countries such as the UK and the US. The available research is primarily about enumerating the extent of family homelessness (Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 2008), and the entry, 'flow through' and exit of families in respect of support services for homeless people (AIHW, 2007). This work understands adults and children living in homeless families predominantly as potential and actual clients of support services.

This paper reports on a project which not only addresses a considerable gap in the research into family homelessness in Australia but one which takes a different approach both theoretically and empirically. It draws on recent scholarship about citizenship (e.g. Kabeer, 2005; Desforges et al., 2005; Lister, 2007) to explore how families experience homelessness, its effects on daily life including caring for their children, and the ways in which adults in these families attempt to secure the type of assistance they need to improve their circumstances

The paper presents and discusses some of the results from the first wave of a qualitative longitudinal study, *Families on the Edge*, on the experiences of homeless families in the state of Victoria, Australia, funded by the Australian Research Council. The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, it considers existing research into family homelessness in Australia including the theoretical and methodological approaches taken. Secondly, it argues that an alternative approach, which frames the experiences of homeless families more broadly in terms of their citizenship, has the potential to enhance understanding of family homelessness. We outline the interpretive and qualitative approach employed in order to do so. Thirdly, we present some of the findings of the first of three waves of research using a household panel. These reveal the experiences and perspectives of homeless families staying in temporary accommodation, and their feelings about the changes they have had to make in order to access such accommodation. They also indicate that the research participants have had to compromise some of their rights and responsibilities as citizens in order to be able to access, and remain in, temporary accommodation, whether this is provided by support agencies or they have made their own arrangements.

## Homeless families in Australia

One of the main groups experiencing homelessness in Australia is families with children, and it appears from a number of sources that family homelessness is increasing (e.g. St Vincent de Paul Society, 2007; Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 2008). Homeless families, comprising predominantly, but not only, women and children, are one of the most overlooked and marginalised groups in Australian society. Official data indicates that in 2005-06 almost 40,000 women with children had periods of supported accommodation and assistance provided by welfare agencies, whilst 55,000 children with a median age of five years received support during the same period (AIHW, 2007).

There are many definitions of homelessness but the one which is most widely used in Australia is a 'cultural definition' which contends that homelessness and inadequate housing are socially constructed cultural concepts that only make sense in a particular community at a given time (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2001). This definition has been used to enumerate the homelessness population in conjunction with the national Census of Population and Housing since 1996 (Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 2008). It identifies the 'shared community standard' about the minimum housing that people have the right to expect. In Australia this is deemed to be a small rented flat with a living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom and an element of security of tenure.

Using this cultural definition, three descriptive segments of the homeless population are identifiable. These are the primary homeless defined as people who are living on the streets, in deserted buildings, cars or improvised dwellings; secondary homeless referring to people who move between various forms of temporary shelter, including friends, relatives, emergency accommodation and boarding

houses; and the tertiary homeless who live in single rooms in private boarding houses on a long-term basis (usually three months or more) and are without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure.

Families who experience homelessness are rarely found sleeping rough. They are more likely to stay with friends and relatives, or to have put themselves (or to have been placed by welfare agencies) in marginal and insecure accommodation such as boarding houses, motels and caravans, rather than be living in cars or on the street (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2008). Using the cultural definition, they are secondary and tertiary homeless.

Research into homelessness in Australia is a small and distinct field, focusing primarily on young people not living with their families. There has been surprisingly little research into families with children, a field described in one review as 'sorely neglected' (Noble-Carr, 2006, p. 3). It appears from the limited research available that family homelessness is associated with different factors to those which are linked with youth homelessness, including domestic and family violence, relationship breakdown and problems in remaining in the private rental sector and/or accessing social housing (Kolar, 2004; Hulse and Kolar, 2009; Kirkman, Keys, Turner & Bodzak, 2009).

In the Australian literature, homeless people are conceptualised predominantly as clients of services and there is a focus on professional interventions (e.g. Zufferey and Kerr, 2004), with relatively little consideration of broader factors precipitating homelessness, such as problems of housing affordability. This type of research can be traced back to the Burdekin Report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989), which 'discovered' homelessness amongst young people not living with their families, in addition to the older single men who had traditionally been seen as constituting the homeless population. The policy response to the report was a focus on government-funded support services. A concern with the effectiveness or otherwise of these services has shaped almost two decades of Australian research into homeless young people, particularly where there are allied issues such as substance abuse and mental illness (e.g. Mallett, Rosenthal & Keys, 2005; Rosenthal, Mallett, Gurrin, Milburn & Rotheram-Borus, 2007).

In contrast to Australia, there is a burgeoning international literature on family homelessness, in particular in the US and the UK (reviewed in Fitzpatrick & Christian, 2006). This research finds that homeless families differ from homeless single people in that they have much lower levels of substance abuse and mental health problems, are homeless for shorter periods, engage in strategies to empower themselves, are more likely to be in employment and are less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour. In the US, these findings have led to a greater emphasis on structural factors contributing to family homelessness, particularly the ways in which housing markets operate to exclude some groups (Burt, Aron, Lee & Valente, 2001). In the UK, the 'new orthodoxy' (Pleace, 2000) in homelessness research is that, whilst acknowledging the continuing importance of factors such as housing markets and housing affordability problems, increasing attention is being paid to why some families appear to be more at risk than others (Anderson, 2003).

The limited Australian empirical evidence suggests that, whilst changes in family relationships and domestic violence can be a trigger for homelessness, structural issues of housing affordability and inability to access appropriate accommodation in the private or social rental sectors are important reasons why Australian families become and remain homeless. These issues can be compounded by coexisting more individual factors such as financial difficulties, health problems and substance abuse (Hulse & Kolar, 2009; Kolar, 2004). In particular, the difficulties in accessing and remaining in private rented accommodation contribute to low-income families with children experiencing considerable housing instability, often living in marginal housing such as caravan parks or various types of transitional accommodation (Hulse & Saugeres, 2007). There is much however that we still do not know about how this affects homeless families (Hulse & Kolar, 2009). What is known is that this is a topic worthy of study, because children who have been homeless are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems such as distress, depression, anger and aggression (Spinney, 2008; Moore, Noble-Carr & McArthur, 2007). They are also more likely to have lower intellectual functioning and decreased academic achievement than domiciled children (Kirkman et al., 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, experiencing homelessness as a child makes adult homelessness more likely

(AIHW, 2007). The *Families on the Edge* research uses a methodology that frames family homelessness through a lens of human rights and citizenship. In Australia there has been a very limited amount of such research, which aims to reveal the impact of becoming homeless on the caring responsibilities of parenthood and on families' capacity to engage economically and to connect with society. The following section discusses the rationale for looking at family homelessness in this way. This is followed by a more detailed account of the research design and methodology.

## **Looking at family homelessness through the lens of citizenship and rights**

Whilst a few housing/homelessness researchers have explored ideas about rights in Europe (Bengtsson, 2001), the UK (King, 2003) and the US (Bratt, Stone & Hartman, 2007), the focus has been largely on formal rights and obligations in the Marshallian tradition (Marshall, 1950). The *Families on the Edge* study is innovative in that it draws on recent scholarship about citizenship that emphasises gender, culture and place (Lister, 2007). This view of citizenship is not confined to relations between citizens and the state but also other types of relationships between citizens that contribute to social solidarity (Kabeer, 2005). In particular, the project frames experiences of family homelessness in terms of 'citizenship as practice' (Desforges et al., 2005), focusing on everyday lived experience and the ways in which ways people understand and negotiate rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation. This recent scholarship about citizenship as practice provides a framework for considering issues of identity, social positioning, cultural assumptions, institutional practices and a sense of belonging (Werbnner & Yuval-Davis, 1999), gender and citizenship (Watson, 2000) and the different spatial and interrelated scales in which citizenship is practised (Desforges et al., 2005).

This research furthers previous studies into the effects of homelessness on families in terms of their personal wellbeing, caring for children, family relationships, social and economic participation and connections to community (Hulse & Kolar, 2009). In this approach, caring responsibilities are regarded as an active form of citizenship. There is a focus on their everyday lived experience and the ways in which they have understood and negotiated their rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation. In doing so, the *Families on the Edge* project generates a more holistic understanding of the dilemmas and paradoxes of family homelessness than is possible within a service delivery paradigm. This enhances understanding of a wider group of homelessness families, rather than just those who are recipients of services, and contributes a theoretically informed understanding about how parents and children experiencing homelessness understand and negotiate their rights and responsibilities, and how they engage in economic, social, political and cultural life. The following section discusses the methodology, research methods and progress of this three-year qualitative study, which started in May 2009.

## **Methodology**

The approach for *Families on the Edge* explicitly builds on the cumulative insights of prior research into family homelessness conducted by Hanover Welfare Services and Swinburne University (McCaughey, 1992; Kolar, 2004; Hulse & Kolar, 2009). The project involves a 'bottom-up' approach, giving voice to homeless parents and their older children, unfettered by bureaucratic categories such as those who are the recipients of services. It uses primarily qualitative research methods which, whilst quite common in the international literature on homelessness, remain underdeveloped in Australia (Parker & Fopp, 2004). The research design involved in-depth qualitative research that investigates the lived experiences of parents with children who have experienced homelessness either currently or in the recent past, using a longitudinal research design (three waves). The research was funded by the Australian Research Council and Hanover Welfare Services, a large, Melbourne-based welfare agency that provides services to homeless people as well as engaging in research.

In all, three waves of in-depth interviews exploring key themes will be conducted with approximately 50 parents and, where possible, with their children aged 13 and over, such that each family will be interviewed three times. A total of 54 families were recruited to participate in the project. The first interviews with adults investigated changes in circumstances and daily life as a result of homelessness, and the nature and type of contacts with family and friends, neighbours and a variety of

institutions. They also explored perspectives on identity as clients and citizens during their periods of homelessness, and the extent to which homelessness affects capacity to participate in all areas of their lives. The interviews with young people focus on their experiences at school and home, their relationships with parents and other family members as well as other children and teachers, and their hopes and aspirations. In Australia, young people have rarely been active participants in such research, (Kirkman et al., 2009, p. 8) and this intergenerational approach is beginning to provide an innovative insight into different family members' experiences.

Recruitment of couple, male single, and female single headed families who are or have recently been homeless took place through a poster campaign in doctors surgeries, libraries, legal aid centres, tenants union offices, and through specific homelessness services and other types of welfare agencies in inner city, suburban and rural Victoria, one of the eight states and territories of Australia, with a population of approximately 5.5 million people. Each adult participant was given a supermarket voucher in appreciation of their time, to the value of \$40 (wave 1), \$60 (wave 2) and \$80 (wave 3). Young people were given movie vouchers for themselves and a friend. The following section discusses some of the first major findings from the analysis of the first wave (42 interviews).

## **Early findings**

Homeless families in Australia can find themselves in inappropriate and insecure situations whether or not they seek assistance from welfare agencies. The discretionary assistance offered often by welfare agencies does little to alleviate, in the short to medium term, the family's stress or to make them feel any greater sense of agency or control. Furthermore, it does not enable their participation in society, as the carers of children, participants in the workforce, neighbours or friends.

The initial analysis of the first wave data sought to understand what the lived experiences of citizenship has been for families living in different forms of temporary accommodation in different locations. We have investigated what the impact of being homeless has been on the ways in which families live their lives, and how that affects their ability to maintain relationships between themselves and other citizens, and what that feels like for them. The particular findings in this paper centre on their experiences in temporary accommodation, either provided through welfare agencies or which they have accessed themselves.

Discussion of pathways into homelessness will be the topic of future work. Sufficient here to state that varied reasons were identified by the participants as the root cause of their homelessness, including domestic and family violence, gambling, broken relationships, youth homelessness, substance abuse, illness, loss of public housing, and inability to afford or access private rented accommodation. At the time of the first interview participants were, or had recently been, staying in motels, rooming houses, caravan parks, domestic violence refuges, backpackers' accommodation, cars, short-term transitional private rented self-contained accommodation or were with inappropriate partners, or staying with relatives and friends. Some of these facilities had been found and accessed by the families themselves, with little or no support from welfare agencies. Others had become the clients of services and been placed in rooming houses, caravan parks and motels as crisis accommodation. In some cases this was funded by the agency, in others they had to meet all or some of the costs of their temporary accommodation.

The level of services provided to the families by agencies was discretionary, and varied enormously depending of how much funding the agency still had available, how much prior assistance the client had received and how much accommodation the agency had access to. In some cases this had an impact on the participants' relationship with their friends, relying on them to provide the help that the state could and would not provide:

They [the welfare agency] said, 'Look we could probably put you up for a couple of nights, see how we go there, come back in a couple of days.' We come back in a couple of days, 'Look, we haven't got funding. Have you got friends you can stay with?' And we'd pretty much almost exhausted our friends through that period. (Transcript 18)

So they found me a crisis accommodation through [welfare agency] for 12 days the first time and then during the school holidays I went and stayed with a friend of mine in [northern

suburb], then when I came back they put me back in a motel for the night and then into the crisis accommodation. (Transcript 10)

For all those staying in motels, whether placed there by a welfare agency or having found it themselves, whether they were helped with the costs or were totally self-financing, the reality living in one room with no cooking facilities meant that it was extremely difficult for the family to function effectively, or for the parents to care for their children as they would have liked and had done before they were homeless. The aspect of the adult participants' citizenship relating to their caring responsibilities for their children was fundamentally compromised by their homeless situation:

I used to take them out to dinner because you couldn't, you can't cook there was no cooking facilities. (Transcript 1)

There's the microwave and a kettle, but I just got that kettle about four days ago because my kettle didn't work. I had to heat water up and make my kids cereal in the microwave, if I wanted hot water and they wanted hot weetbix or something, I had to heat it up in the microwave.

Q: So how are you managing to feed the kids? Is it just sandwiches and toast and things?

A: Yes, toasties, the toastie maker. (Transcript 23)

The cost of living in such circumstances was prohibitive to families, which had an impact on how they could live their lives and how they could fulfil their responsibilities as parents:

It was like \$110 a night as a family room. And then we had to pay for our food, we had to pay for the kids cost of school and everything. (Transcript 10)

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

Like when I put my stuff in storage I thought it would be about a month, a month tops. We lost our cats, we had four cats and I asked the pound to put them in and look them after them until I got a house and I'd pay to get them back or whatever, but not to adopt them, we lost our cats. Because I think the worst thing for my girls, their pets went. (Transcript 12)

And there was no sit down in your own lounge room for a minute and collect your thoughts, because there was no place to sit down and relax or anything. You just slept in a single bed with both kids in it for six months. (Transcript 24)

These families were constrained in how they could now conduct their 'citizenship as practice', their rights had been fundamentally altered by their homeless situation and by the compromises they had to accept to their entitlements in order to access temporary accommodation. Even more fundamental compromise was required of a two parent headed family who were able to be offered help by an agency only if they were accommodated apart:

At that stage [wife] was at the refuge. I got put into a rooming house.

Q: Right, so you were separated.

A1: We were separated, yeah.

A2: It was horrid. [Child] crying every night, 'I want my Daddy.'

A1: It was very hard for us to be together. If we wanted to be together we would have to either stay in the car, stay under a bridge or a tent. (Transcript 18)

The inability to have any choice or agency in where they stayed, and the moving around insisted upon by the welfare agencies, from crisis to transitional, and then if lucky, to permanent housing (Hulse & Kolar, 2009) caused enormous uncertainty for the families and a loss of feeling that they could exert

any control over what happened to them. They had had removed from them any sense of right and entitlement to have a say in where they lived, with whom and when. A condition of their accepting assistance was to give up these rights:

Like I say if I could stay here I'd be happy here, but unfortunately I'm here now day by day I don't know when I've got to go.

Q: How does that feel, not knowing what's happening?

A: It's hard because you don't know, like I feel sometimes I should start packing all my stuff up otherwise I'm going to lose it again if they tell me you've only got a few days to get out. But then what do you do, you pack your stuff up and you live like a pauper with nothing and then it takes away his little pleasures. So it's six of one and half a dozen of the other, you don't know what to do.

Q: Have you got any idea where you're going to go next?

A: No, no idea at all, it's just what they choose to give me and that's it I've got to take it. (Transcript 19)

The impact of this constant state of uncertainty and transition made it impossible for parents to plan childcare and working arrangements, which are normal features of bringing children up in Australia. These were facets of their previous lived experiences that were removed from them by becoming homeless and the transitory nature of the accommodation provided to them. They were now unable to have much influence on where they were accommodated and for how long:

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

These feelings of insecurity and inability to settle caused by the loss of their entitlement to have a say in their situation were reflected by a 13-year-old son of a single father:

I found it a bit annoying because you have got to pack then three weeks later you have got to pack again, pack again.

Q: Did it feel like having a home?

A: Yes and no, because the yes being that your mind thinks that you are going to stay there for a while, so you want to act like it's home, but then you move straight away, so it's like, it's not home. (Transcript 1)

Families had also found accommodation in boarding houses (insecure shared houses with communal kitchen and bathroom facilities), either through a welfare agency or privately. As with the motel accommodation these were prohibitively expensive for low-income households and meant that there was little money for other facets of life and participating in society, including eating correctly. This accords with the findings of Kirkman (2009):

And I said 'How much is it?' and they said 'It's \$260 for one bedroom, but because you need two bedrooms, you need to pay \$560 per fortnight, every fortnight'. That was only leaving me with \$180 a fortnight for two kids and myself, and I stayed there six months. (Transcript 10)

\$145 a week to share a room, so it's \$300 a fortnight, and I'm sharing with her, so she's pregnant with her kid and when she has bub [baby] and when I have bub back, it's going to be like, I don't think we could manage with two screaming [in one room]. (Transcript 15)

The boarding houses are run by private landlords and companies. Most of their customers are either placed there by agencies or are in receipt of rental assistance, and so are largely funded via the Australian benefit system by taxpayers. Many of those staying in this insecure and inadequate accommodation have very little choice about where they can live. Families who have been evicted from previous private rented accommodation for rent arrears or other reasons are blacklisted by landlords and find it almost impossible to access self-contained private rented accommodation in Victoria, especially Melbourne, which has an acute housing shortage. A mother graphically explained

the difficulty in living with strangers in a shared house while trying to bring up a child:

Yeah, I stayed in one of them for three months and had problems with other people that were living in that house.

Q: So you were sharing your kitchen and all that?

A: Yeah, and nobody would ever clean up after themselves and it was very stressful, I was cleaning a lot so the little bubba was only crawling ... Alcohol and drugs came into the property with new tenants. (Transcript 13)

The difficulties of sharing with those that have a different lifestyle, and in expensive but wholly inadequate boarding house accommodation was further expanded on by one father:

There was about 10 to 15 guys there, real deros [derelicts] sort of. There were a few guys sitting out the back smoking. I don't know what they were smoking. It could have been bloody weed for all I know. I went in the place and there was a guy who manages the place while the actual owner is not there and he met with me and he pointed out the room and the room looked like a leftover from a crime scene. There was no carpet, or the carpet that was in there had been ripped up, so it was just floorboards basically, terrible curtains and the place was paper peeling off the walls and dirt everywhere. So it wasn't a really very nice sort of thing and the guy was wanting nearly \$200, \$220 a week for the place. (Transcript 18)

The accommodating of families in motels and boarding houses, either by agencies or by making their own arrangement, is a research theme that will be expanded on during the next stages of the research. What can be said now is that for the research participants there was sometimes little difference in their temporary living arrangements, or their ability to live their lives in the way they wished, whether or not they were being assisted by a welfare agency. Homelessness for families in this study often meant frequent moves between different types of inadequate and temporary accommodation and an inability to exercise the rights and responsibilities that other citizens in Australian society have. The trauma of homelessness and a lessening of ability to participate as citizens continues even (and sometimes, especially) if they seek the assistance of agencies. In some cases there is little immediate difference in the discomfort, lack of security, and stress after being accepted for assistance rather than before, or if they had not sought assistance at all. In all situations there was a loss of control and influence over the way in which parents could parent, and children could live. They had lost the right to have their pets and belongings around them, could not prepare the food they wished their children to eat, and were sometimes accommodated alongside those they felt uncomfortable being around. The families faced uncertainty about how long they could stay, and where they would go next, which affected their ability to find and keep work. These factors, coupled with the huge expense of such accommodation, meant that they could not live their lives as before, but rather were constrained by the enormous compromises and loss of right and entitlement they had had to accept in order to have some form of roof over their heads.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed the first wave of findings from the *Families on the Edge* study on the experiences of homeless families in Australia. An explanation of how homelessness is defined in Australia was followed by a discussion of the rationale of framing the experiences of the participating families in this study in a citizen based approach, and the methodology and research methods used in order to do so. The experiences of homeless families staying in temporary accommodation, and their feelings about the compromises they have had to make to their rights and entitlement in order to access such accommodation, were revealed. These findings have been made by viewing the participants as social citizens, rather than as merely clients of a welfare service.

As the study progresses, the significance of this three year longitudinal project will be in developing further new insights into how this important issue affects the health, welfare, prospects and wellbeing of some of the most disadvantaged Australian families. The project aims to apply and extend recent scholarship on citizenship to generate a deeper and more holistic understanding of the experiences of family homelessness than has been available in Australia up to now. In doing so, the approach used

differs from much existing homelessness research which has been recognised as theoretically underdeveloped (Fitzpatrick, 2005), gendered (Watson, 2000), using policy concepts and definitions in a 'taken for granted' way (Jacobs, Kemeny & Manzi, 1999), and seeing homeless people as clients of services rather than citizens (Rowe, Kloos, Chinman, Davidson & Cross, 2000).

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