



Melbourne Citymission
Building Inclusive Communities

Putting Children First

Improving responses to
family homelessness



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Melbourne Citymission

Melbourne Citymission is widely recognised as a leader and innovator in the provision of services to the community. Established in 1854, Melbourne Citymission is a non-denominational organisation that assists Victorians who are marginalised, at risk, disadvantaged, frail or denied access to services. Melbourne Citymission's aim is to build an inclusive community through personal and social transformation. We work towards this by providing a range of support services to people across all life stages from early childhood to aged care. This work reflects the organization's interest in life transitions and the ways in which people can best be supported to achieve sustainable transformation in their lives.

Melbourne Citymission assists over 4,000 Victorians on average each week through programs in the following areas:

- Aged Care
- Children, Youth, Adult and Family Services
- Disability Services
- Palliative Care
- Youth Homelessness
- Employment, Education and Training

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Executive Summary

Melbourne Citymission supports large numbers of families with children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Our workers have expressed concern that they do not currently have the time or resources to provide the amount of intensive support required for families experiencing housing crisis. Many families have complex needs, which require a long-term commitment of support. This project sought to explore their concerns through research, to document the extent of family homelessness and the capacity of SAAP services to meet the current needs of children and their families.

The research involved three types of data collection and analysis: analysis of Melbourne Citymission's SAAP and program data for three of its programs in the Western Region; monitoring by caseworkers of the support provided to families over an 8-week period; and interviews with families accessing Melbourne Citymission's Western Region programs.

Our findings show that almost one thousand children were assisted over the 2004-05 period by the three programs that participated in this project. The majority of accompanying children were of preschool or primary school age. Almost a quarter of all families had been in unsafe, insecure or inadequate housing for over 6 months prior to accessing support. **Program data also revealed that families were waiting on average 13 months for long-term housing, once Melbourne Citymission was supporting them.**

Our analysis illustrates the complexity of issues experienced by families in housing crisis. Most support that was provided focussed on stabilising housing, with the other main area of support being the provision of emotional support for a variety of issues including domestic violence, child protection issues, drug and alcohol use, and the current housing crisis. **All families had unmet needs. Overall, there was a total of 67 hours of support that was required to address family needs that could not be provided over the 8-week period, representing an average of almost 7 hours per family. In addition, across the ten families there was 43.5 hours of support that was required to address child specific needs that could not be provided over the 8-week period.** Consequently, very few goals were set that addressed the developmental needs of children. Discussions with caseworkers highlighted the importance and priority that was placed on resolving housing issues first. Stabilising housing was also seen to be a key way of addressing some of the issues facing children, including continuity of education and emotional wellbeing.

All families that were interviewed as part of this study had lived in insecure housing for over 6 months. All interviewees listed financial difficulties as their main barrier to accessing secure housing. All families reported that homelessness had impacted in some way on their children's development, in particular on their education and development of social networks.

There is a clear trend of a continuing and growing need across the community for homelessness services. **We argue that the service system cannot reduce the number of families and children experiencing homelessness, in the absence of preventative measures that address the root causes of homelessness such as poverty and the lack of affordable and secure long-term housing options.**

The private housing market is unable to meet the community's need for low cost homes for households on low incomes. Yet Governments are unwilling to step in through policy reforms and substantial investment that will ensure no Victorian family has to endure homelessness. There is clear evidence of the significant adverse consequences for the development and well-being of children experiencing periods without a stable home. Both the Victorian and

Commonwealth Government have acknowledged the critical importance of the early years to the development and wellbeing of all children. **Yet both refuse to prioritise investment either directly in public housing or through policy reforms to stimulate the supply of affordable private rental accommodation.**

We argue that it is time for governments to listen to the community and urgently act to implement across the board policy reforms through the development of a national affordable housing plan. Tinkering with one or two housing policy instruments in isolation, such as Commonwealth Rent Assistance or planning controls, will not be sufficient to redress the long term impacts of the array of policy settings over the past decades.

The evidence from our research shows that homelessness and housing crisis are stubborn social ills facing our community and are a manifestation of ineffective and outdated housing policies. It is also evident that homeless services continue to struggle to achieve optimum outcomes for families in crisis because of the lack of affordable or safe housing options.

Most families accessing Melbourne Citymission's SAAP services have significant and complex needs, which require a high level of skill to address, and which requires the provision of long-term support to ensure sustainable transitions from homelessness. Workers spend considerable time developing relationships and trust with the families they work with, in order to begin addressing the key underlying issues at the root of their housing crisis. **A significant proportion of caseworkers' resources were spent addressing child protection issues.** In contrast, a smaller proportion of support was provided that addressed the developmental and emotional needs of accompanying children.

We argue that homelessness support services funded through SAAP are inadequately resourced to respond effectively to the ongoing needs of families in Melbourne. **More integrated and intentional approaches to working with families experiencing housing crisis are required, that address the significant developmental and emotional needs of accompanying children, to ensure more long-term and sustainable transitions for families, and their children in the future.** Far greater investment by governments is required to enable the development and evaluation of best practice responses for working with all children accompanying their parents to homeless services. It is crucial that the needs of children experiencing homelessness are systematically identified and addressed through casework support to significantly reduce the trauma of homelessness experienced by children, and to assist in breaking the long-term inter-generational cycle of homelessness.

We urge both Victorian and Federal Governments to collaborate with the community sector to consider our findings and give urgent priority to implementation of reforms that will both prevent and respond to family homelessness to ensure the development and well being of children in disadvantaged circumstances. In particular we recommend that the State and Federal Governments:

- 1. Prioritise the needs of children accessing SAAP services with their families**

The Victorian Government reviews the model of assistance for children in families accessing SAAP to develop a targeted investment of resources aimed at improving outcomes for children. Greater priority needs to be placed within SAAP family services on identifying and addressing children's specific needs. This requires increased resourcing of the core support role to enable more direct and substantial work with accompanying children as well as increasing the capacity for long-term support to address the complexity of issues that families in housing crisis experience:

- 1.1 Invest in the development and implementation of best practice models for working with children accessing homeless services with their families;
 - 1.2 Increase the average support hours through a reduction in caseloads to 1:5.5 for transition support and 1:4.5 for crisis-supported accommodation offered by SAAP family services; and
 - 1.3 Create a Brokerage Fund to enable support workers to address the educational, developmental and emotional needs of children experiencing homelessness in a timely manner.
2. **Develop a well-coordinated and integrated long term outreach support model to enable follow-up for SAAP client families exiting crisis and transitional housing who are assessed as being at risk of recurring homelessness.**
 3. **Reduce waiting times for affordable and secure housing for families experiencing homelessness and in the longer term reduce the incidence of housing crisis.**

The Federal and Victorian Governments develop a comprehensive National Affordable Housing Plan to replace the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement that leads to increased supply of low cost public, community and private rental housing through a well integrated set of policy reforms and investment addressing supply and demand side factors, including:

- 3.1 Public & community housing: Federal & State Government to invest through budget allocations to increase social housing stock in Victoria to 6% of all housing by 2017;
 - 3.2 Private sector housing: a national affordable rental incentive scheme to stimulate supply targeted at low income households;
 - 3.3 Governance & regulation: new housing developments to include 15% quota of affordable housing as an inclusionary zoning strategy;
 - 3.4 Housing standards & quality: Federal & State Governments to increase maintenance/upgrade budgets for public housing to ensure equitable quality against minimum standards;
 - 3.5 Housing finance: consideration by Federal and State Governments of initiatives to shared equity schemes or low cost loans for home purchase, to enable households on low incomes to access accrued superannuation for home purchase; and a savings bonds scheme to provide investment opportunities with a competitive yield;
 - 3.6 Taxation: Federal Government to review current taxation measures (negative gearing, capital gains tax) to ensure a more equitable incentive to low cost housing supply; and
 - 3.7 Housing assistance: Federal Government to review Rent Assistance with the goal of ensuring the 30% affordability benchmark is not exceeded for eligible households.
4. **Undertake additional research to more fully understand and strengthen the effectiveness of SAAP for accompanying children.**
 - 4.1 Increase funding by both State and Federal governments for research and evaluation to a benchmark of 2% of total recurrent expenditure on SAAP, with increased focus on children proportional to their current demand on the program.

1. Introduction

In a recent speech to the Menzies Research Centre, the Prime Minister John Howard declared: “strengthening the family – helping them with the costs of raising children – is the best way any government can reinforce social cohesion and stability in a changing world” (Howard, 2006). Despite the rhetoric, it has been estimated that nationally 55% of people living below the poverty line are families with children (ACOSS, 2003a) and at present, no agenda for addressing poverty exists at either a National or State level.

The latest release of data on Australian’s use of homeless services shows that 54,700 accompanying children were supported in 2005-06. This equates to 114 children per 10,000 population aged 0-17 years (AIHW 2007a). In addition to this count of accompanying children, we estimate that an additional 13,400 unaccompanied under 10 years old are supported as clients annually.

In Victoria during 2005-06, 18,500 accompanying children under 18 years received assistance through SAAP programs for homeless people, representing a total of 29,700 support periods (AIHW 2007b). These figures do not however include the number of people requesting accommodation that were turned away due to a lack of accommodation and services. During the 2004-05 data collection period, on any given day approximately 255 accompanying children were turned away from SAAP services across Australia, which includes an average of 52 per day in Victoria. Over the past few years, families with children were the most common group to be turned away from SAAP services that were required within 24 hours (AIHW, 2006).

Families that are able to access support endure long waiting periods for long-term public housing or experience significant barriers to accessing the private rental market including poverty, poor credit ratings and rental histories. Furthermore, due to increasing prices and the complex needs that many clients experience, the rental market does not always provide the secure tenure and consequently stable home, that all children require for healthy development.

The impact of homelessness on children is significant, often leading to behaviour problems, learning difficulties, developmental delay, health problems, social difficulties and isolation (Efron et al, 1996). Frequent moves due to difficulty maintaining tenure can also significantly impact on children’s educational participation, performance and social networks. More specifically, the trauma associated with housing crisis affects children throughout the various stages of their development: babies may experience delays in growth, have difficulty eating and sleeping, and not display appropriate emotional responses such as smiling and laughter; toddlers may experience excessive anxiety and irritability and have difficulty eating and sleeping; preschoolers may exhibit speech difficulties and regress to younger behaviours including bed wetting, thumb sucking and rocking; and primary schoolers may experience difficulty concentrating and learning at school, have difficulty relating to other children, display inappropriate behaviours and also have difficulty sleeping and eating (Wright-Howie, 2007).

In addition, children in housing crisis may experience significant feelings of loss and grief associated with family break up, loss of their home, loss of privacy and loss of friendships (Bryant, 2003). Conversely, stable housing contributes to positive developmental outcomes

for children including improvements in health, family relationships, school performance and reductions in school absenteeism (Kolar, 2004).

The Federal Government's National Agenda for Early Childhood provides a broad policy framework in which prevention and early intervention are viewed as important strategies for improving the life chances of all children and for tackling the root cause of complex social problems. The Agenda emphasises the importance of intervening in the early years (0-5 years) to reduce risks and increase protective factors.

Early childhood is seen as providing a window of opportunity where interventions are more likely to be effective and influence a wider range of outcomes than interventions later in life. The Agenda prioritises addressing the disadvantage experienced by particular groups, for example, children from indigenous or CALD communities and children living in poverty.

In Victoria, the state government has committed through "A Fairer Victoria" \$101.8 million over four years (12% of the total funding allocation) to improve child and family support services; create a new Office for Children; make kindergarten programs more available in childcare centres; better protect children from abuse; and boost support for families most in need of additional assistance. In addition, \$35million has been allocated to ensure faster responses to incidents, improve case management, and provide new emergency and longer-term accommodation options for women and children to help stabilise families. The State Government's "Best Start" initiatives also aim to improve the wellbeing of all Victorian children 0-8 years old, by supporting communities, parents and service providers to improve early years services so that they are responsive to the needs of their community.

Notwithstanding these welcome initiatives, focus remains on the service system and crisis led responses. More attention needs to be paid to preventative initiatives, with a greater focus on developing policy that will address the structural factors that impact on the wellbeing of children, such as poverty and homelessness.

Melbourne Citymission supports large numbers of families with children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness through a range of programs including: the Young and Pregnant Parenting program (YAPP), which provides young single people and families aged 15-20 with housing assistance and support during pregnancy and parenting; Adult & Family Services (AFS), which provides assistance to adults or families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness through the 'daily duty service' as well as on going case management to approximately 80 single adults and families; and the Family Crisis Accommodation Service (FCAS) which provides short term intervention and short term supported housing at one of six residential properties for families who are homeless. In total, these three programs receive funding from SAAP for 14 EFTs for service to the Western Region of Melbourne, an area that includes seven local government areas: Maribyrnong, Moonee Valley, City of Melbourne, Melton, Brimbank, Hobson's Bay and Wyndham. Other Melbourne Citymission SAAP programs including the Western Region Accommodation Program (WRAP) and the Young Women's Crisis Service also support children and their families living in Melbourne's west.

Melbourne Citymission workers have expressed concern that they do not currently have the time or resources to provide the amount of intensive support required for families experiencing housing crisis. Many families have complex needs, which require a long-term commitment of support. This project has sought to explore their concerns through research, to document the extent of family homelessness and the capacity of SAAP services to meet the current needs of families.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research questions

The overall aim of this project is to better understand family homelessness in the Western Region of Melbourne and to explore:

- the number of children experiencing housing crisis that Melbourne Citymission currently assists from its Western Region office;
- the length of time families are waiting for assistance and what effect these waiting times have on families and children experiencing housing crisis;
- what needs are not currently being met by programs providing assistance to families and children in housing crisis.

2.2. Methodology

The project involved three types of data collection and analysis: analysis of Melbourne Citymission's SAAP and program data for the AFS program, YAPP and FCAS; monitoring by caseworkers in the AFS team of the support provided to families over an 8-week period; and interviews with families accessing Melbourne Citymission's Western Region programs.

Analysis of Melbourne Citymission's Western Region SAAP & Program data

Melbourne Citymission SAAP data, which is collected by the National Data Collection Agency, was analysed using SPSS software, to explore the profile of families accessing the programs, and types of support provided.

Further analysis of AFS program data was conducted, to examine the length of time families accessing the program waited for long-term housing.

Monitoring by caseworkers of the support provided to families over an 8-week period

Caseworkers from the AFS program were asked to record the amount of time they spent supporting ten families and the kind of support they provided over an 8-week period from the beginning of July 2006, using a Fortnightly Review Form (see Appendix 2). Caseworkers were also asked to record any issues that could not be addressed, due to lack of time or resources. This information was recorded for both family related issues, and child related issue.

The researchers met with the AFS team to explain the process for completing the review form, and to answer any questions. Caseworkers were also provided with an information sheet that explained the process (see Appendix 1).

Interviews with families accessing the Western Region programs

Five families that were receiving assistance from the AFS program were interviewed to further explore the issues they as a family were experiencing. Prior to the interview, each family was provided with an information sheet regarding the project and written consent was obtained (see Appendix 3). A structured survey was used to guide the interview (see Appendix 4). Interviews took on average 20-30 minutes to complete. On completion of the interview, all families were provided with \$25 as reimbursement for their time and travel costs.

2.3. Ethics

Confidentiality:

All interviews of service users were conducted in the strictest confidence, in a quiet and private space. No identifying information was recorded on the survey form. It was explained to all participants that the answers they gave would have no effect on the assistance they received at Melbourne Citymission at that time or in the future.

Research materials relating to participants are stored in accordance with Privacy legislation provisions. Computer files are password protected and contain no identifying information. Copies of the findings will be available to service users.

Consent:

Consent to participate was obtained prior to conducting the interview, once the interview had been carefully explained verbally and an information sheet provided. Participants were asked to sign a receipt of payment following the interview for internal accounting purposes.

Debriefing:

It was acknowledged that the interview might have raised issues of a personal nature for some clients. Interviewers were instructed to be sensitive to the client's attitude and state of mind during the interview. Interviewers were available to answer any questions participants might have had during or at the completion of the survey. When necessary, interviewers were to ensure that the participant was able to talk to someone after completing the survey if they needed to discuss any concerns from the survey. No instances of follow-up were reported by the interviewers.

3. Findings

3.1 Melbourne Citymission Western SAAP Data 2004-05

Profile of families accessing MCM Western SAAP programs

A total of 752 individual clients (excluding children) were seen at the Western Region SAAP programs (Adult and Family Services (AFS), the Family Crisis Accommodation Service (FCAS) and the Young And Pregnant Parenting Program (YAPP)) over the 2004-05 period, representing a total number of 878 support periods for the year. Of the 878 support periods, 25 were provided by YAPP, 590 were provided by AFS and 263 were provided by FCAS.

Of the 752 individual clients seen by these programs, 467 were clients with accompanying children. Of these, the majority were single parents (79%), of which most (84%) were female. Over half had been born in Australia (55%), with the second most common region of birth being Africa (10%). A small proportion reported being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin (1.3%).

Over a third of all parents were over 35 years of age (34%), a similar proportion were in the 25-34 years age category (35%), and 15% were aged 18-24 years.

At the time of accessing support, the majority of adults with accompanying children were not in the labour force (73%), with only 3% in any type (part-time, casual or full-time) of employment. Most adults were receiving Parenting Payment as their main form of income (61%), with a smaller proportion on Newstart (11%) and Disability Support Pension (4%). A small proportion were currently on no income (4%).

A conservative estimate based on two children per family indicates that almost one thousand (n=934) individual children were assisted over the year (based on individuals seen not support periods).

Overall, the number of individual families with one or more children aged 0-4 years was 194, 188 families had children aged 5-12 years, 65 families had children aged 13-15 years and 38 families had children aged 16-17 years. The majority of accompanying children were of preschool or primary school age.

Of the 878 support periods provided by AFS, FCAS and YAPP, 64% (n=565) involved supporting clients with accompanying children. The most common reasons families sought assistance included financial difficulty (43%), eviction/ current accommodation ending (30%) and family or relationship breakdown (24%) (see Table 1).

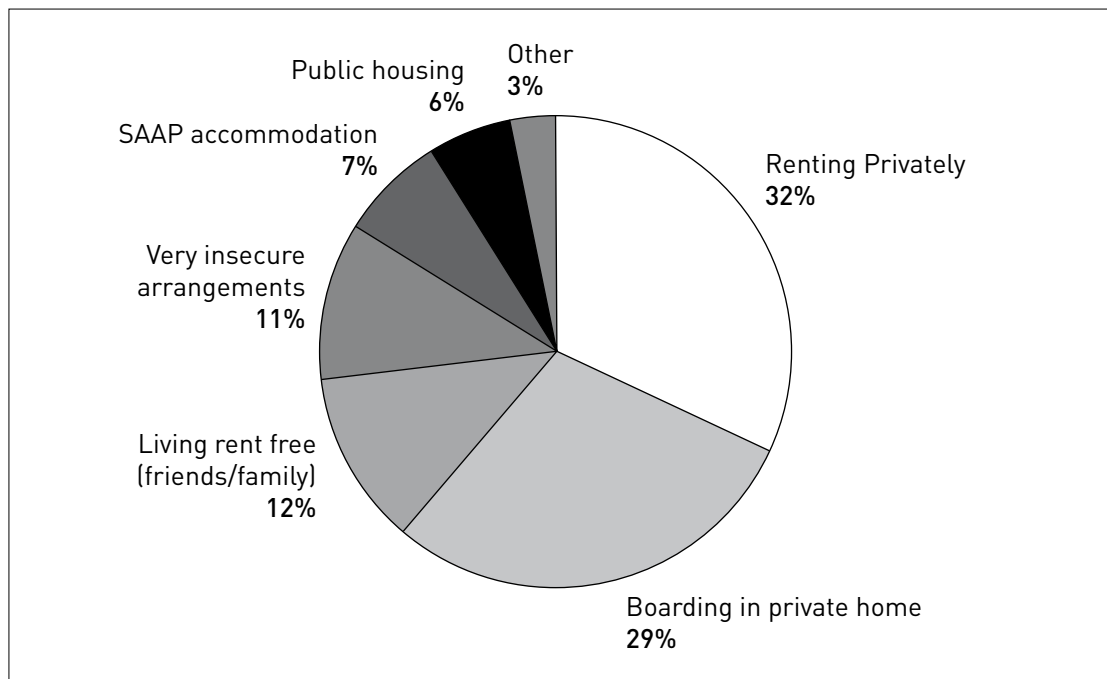
Table 1. Reasons families sought assistance (%)

Reason Seeking Assistance	Percent*
Financial difficulty	43
Eviction/accommodation ended	30
Family/ relationship breakdown	24
Usual accommodation unavailable	12
Domestic violence	8
Interpersonal conflict	7
Physical/ emotional abuse	6
Itinerant	6
Recent arrival to area	4
Substance abuse	4
Emergency accommodation ended	4
Require time out from family/situation	2
Psychiatric illness	2
Sexual abuse	1
Recently left institution	1

*Note: multiple responses may be reported

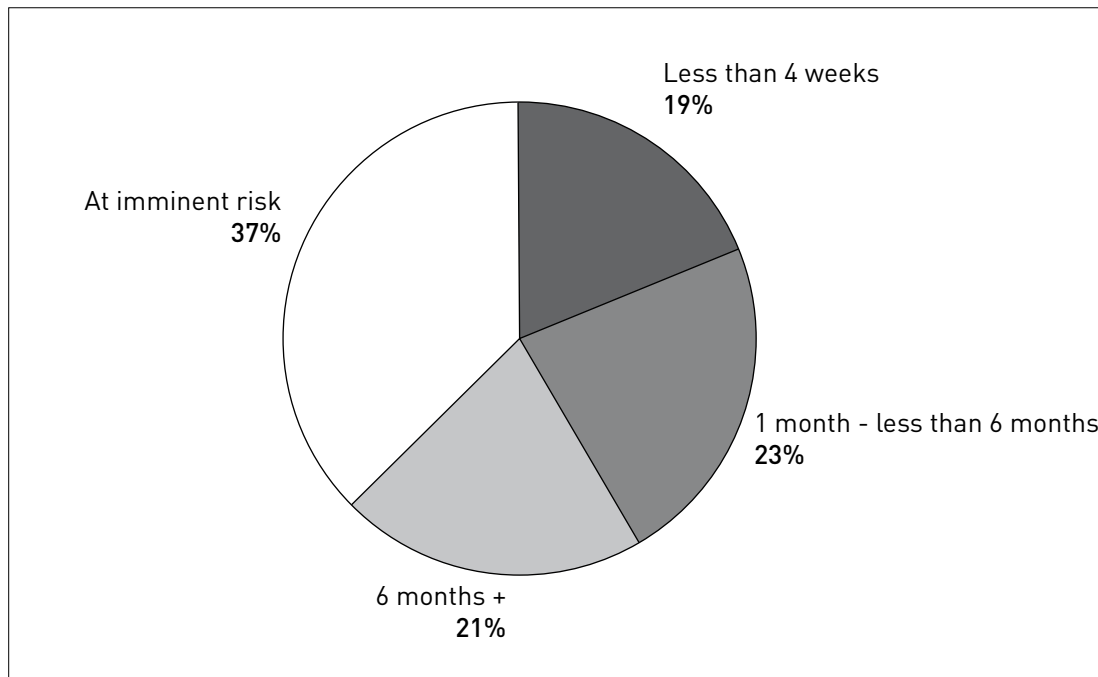
At the time of seeking assistance (out of 489 support periods with families with adequate data recorded), a third of families were renting private accommodation and a similar proportion were boarding in a private home. A further 11% were living in very insecure arrangements (including a caravan, street, squat, car, tent, hostel or rooming house) and 7% were in SAAP accommodation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Type of accommodation at time of assistance



For those support periods involving families where adequate data was recorded for the current period of unsafe or insecure housing (n=442), a significant proportion was at imminent risk of becoming homeless (37%). Almost a quarter (21%) of all families had been in unsafe, insecure or inadequate housing for over 6 months (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Period of unsafe, insecure or inadequate housing



Support provided to families accessing MCM Western SAAP programs

General support and advocacy was provided in almost all support periods involving families (82%) and housing was provided in almost half of all support periods (45%). Counselling was provided to the parents in almost a third of all cases (27%) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Assistance provided to families (%)

Assistance Provided	Percent*
General support/ advocacy	82
Housing/ accommodation	45
Counselling	27
Financial/ employment support	21
Specialist services	9

*Note: multiple responses may be reported

In comparison, very little was recorded regarding the direct support provided to accompanying children. Out of the 214 support periods that involved families that were being supported for longer than one month, the need for counselling was only identified in 2% of cases, provided in 1% of cases and referred in 1% of cases. Exceptionally low levels of need were also identified across the other four general categories of children's support: provision of specialist services (culturally sensitive, health & medical services), general support (access arrangements, advice, brokerage, advocacy), basic support (meals, showers, recreation, transport) and school liaison (see Table 3).

Table 3. Support identified, provided and referred for accompanying children, for families receiving assistance for over 1 month (%)

Assistance	Identified Need	Support Provided	Support Referred
Counselling	2	1	1
Specialist Services	1	1	0
General Support	6	6	1
Basic/ Other Support	3	3	0.5
School Liaison/ Child Care	1	-	1

Data on services provided to accompanying children across Victoria gathered by the NDCA is poor, with 61% of all data on support periods with accompanying children excluded from analysis due to errors and omissions. It is therefore not possible to make any meaningful comparisons between Melbourne Citymission's data and general Victorian SAAP data on these variables.

Waiting times for long-term housing

Waiting times for long-term housing was also analysed for a total of 73 families that were housed in transitional housing and exited the AFS program from the beginning of 2004 to June 2006, using AFS program data.

Of these families, most families (41%) had only one child, approximately one third (29%) had two children, and one third (30%) had three or more children.

From the time families entered transitional housing, to the time they exited the program after finding long-term housing (in almost all cases public housing), families were waiting on average 13 months (median = 11 months) for long-term housing.

These average wait times do not take into account the likelihood that most families would have been living in insecure arrangements for sometime prior to accessing support at Melbourne Citymission.

Summary

- A conservative estimate indicates that almost a thousand children were assisted over the 2004-05 period.
- The majority of accompanying children were of preschool or primary school age.
- 565 support periods were provided to families with accompanying children over the 2004-05 period. Families mainly sought assistance due to financial difficulty (43%), eviction/ current accommodation ending (30%) and family or relationship breakdown (24%)
- Almost a quarter of all families had been in unsafe, insecure or inadequate housing for over 6 months
- Low levels of need were identified and addressed across all five general categories of support provided to accompanying children: counselling, specialist services, general support, basic/other support and school liaison.
- Melbourne Citymission program data revealed that families were waiting on average 13 months for long-term housing, while in the AFS program. This average does not take into account the likelihood that most families would have been living in insecure arrangements for sometime prior to accessing the service.

Case Study 1 - Joanne

Joanne lives in transitional housing in Melbourne's outer western suburbs, and has part-time custody of her 11 year old boy and 12 year old girl. She sees unemployment and financial problems as the main barriers preventing her from providing a stable home for her children. "Its all linked together. My housing circumstance, my debt and having no work."

Since separating from her children's father five years ago, Joanne has moved countless times between temporary accommodation, and sees the impact on her children as significant. "The impact on their schooling, their social life and their life has been big. Every time I move, they have to make new friends. It has made them grow up too quickly. It makes them feel responsible when they are not. They are only 11 and 12, and already they know about being broke, and having to go for help for food or housing." Joanne is particularly concerned that her children need counselling, however is having difficulty finding an appropriate service, as her partner has custody during the week and will not take them. "Even a group for children would be good. Somewhere where they could meet with other kids that have gone through the same thing, something that was just about them. That would be great."

3.2 Monitoring the time spent by caseworkers working with families

Caseworkers recorded the amount of time they spent supporting ten families and the kind of support they provided over an 8-week period. Caseworkers were also asked to record any issues that could not be addressed, due to a lack of time or resources. This information was recorded for both family related issues, and specific child related issues (see Appendix 2).

Overall, the ten families were a representative sample of families the AFS team work with, representing all levels of need from low to high. Half of the families were single parent families. Families ranged in size from just one child to eleven children. The ten families had been living in insecure housing for varying periods of time, from 5 months to 15 years (see Table 4).

Table 4. Profile of families monitored by caseworkers over 8-week period

Family	Family Type	Number of children	Age of children	Current housing	Income type	Current period of insecure housing
Family 1	Single Parent	6	11, 9, 6, 5, 4 years, 10 months	THM	Parenting Payment	1 year
Family 2	Couple	11	17, 15, 13, 11, 10, 8, 6, 5, 4, 2, 1 years	THM	Parenting Payment & Family Payment	1 year
Family 3	Couple	1	3 years	THM	Parenting Payment	15 years
Family 4	Single parent	2	4, 1 years	Public Housing	Parenting Payment	-
Family 5	Single parent	3	11, 5 years, 6 months	THM	Parenting Payment	10 years
Family 6	Single parent	4	9, 7, 5, 3 years	THM	Parenting Payment & Family Payment	5 months
Family 7	Couple	2	15, 11 years	THM	DSP, Family Payment, Carers Payment	4 years
Family 8	Single Parent	2	7, 12 years	THM	Parenting Payment & Family Payment	1 year
Family 9	Couple	4	16, 13, 11, 2 years	THM	Parenting Payment, Family Payment, Newstart	9 months
Family 10	Couple	3	15, 13 years, 3 months	THM	Parenting Payment, DSP	1 year

Data gathered by caseworkers illustrates the complexity of issues experienced by families in housing crisis (see Tables 5 & 6). Time spent with each family over the two-month period ranged from 6.5 hours to 39.5 hours. As to be expected, most support that was provided focussed on stabilising housing, often involving housing applications, advocacy regarding evictions and rental arrears and liaison with housing providers. The other main area of support was the provision of emotional support for a variety of issues, which impacted on the families' ability to find and maintain stable housing. Such issues included domestic violence, anxiety related to child protection issues, drug and alcohol use, and anxiety associated with the current housing crisis.

All families had unmet needs, which most often involved the need for more in depth discussion and support for issues experienced by the family. There was however significant variance in the levels of unmet need for each family, with one family only requiring a further 15 minutes of support, yet in contrast, another family required a further 16 hours of support. Overall, there was a total of 67 hours of support that was required to address family needs that could not be provided over the 8-week period, representing an average of almost 7 hours per family.

In regard to child specific issues, child protection processes involved a significant amount of caseworker time for half of the families (see Table 6). In the case of two families (see Family 6 & 8), over 80% of the time the caseworker spent working with the family was dedicated to addressing these issues. Discussions with caseworkers supported this, with a number reporting spending significant amounts of time on these issues. In particular, caseworkers reported that clients would often have difficulty understanding the case plans set by child protection workers and consequently workers would spend considerable amounts of time explaining the process.

Table 5. Time spent/ required per week for family issues for the 2 month period

Family	Family Goals	Time spent on task (hours)	Time needed on task (hours)
Family 1	Stabilise Housing	Begin housing application, write support letter, private rental search: 4.0	Take out client to actively search for private rental: 16.0
Family 2	Stabilise Housing	Segment 1 application, discuss exemption process, support re property maintenance, advocacy re pending eviction, liaison with housing provider: 7.25	Discuss exemption process in greater depth, more support re property maintenance, assist with move: 6.25
	Emotional Support	Support regarding drug use, eviction, family violence, children: 7.25	More in depth follow up on issues: 3.5
	Health	Attend optometrist appointments & obtain glasses: 5.5	
	Engage Client		Engage husband: 2.0
	Practical Support	Provision of material aid: 2.75	
Family 3	Stabilise Housing	Discussions with client around housing issues including rent arrears, OoH support letter: 4.0	Contact OoH properties & ascertain shorter waiting list, home visit to assist with housing issues: 2.5
	Emotional support	Support regarding anxiety re child protection issues, suspected cancer & other issues of concern: 6.25	More intense support re anxiety & health issues support: 6.5
Family 4	Emotional support	Support re DV issues & underlying issues: 21.25	Further home visits and phone contact to discuss issues: 4.5
	Mental health	Support re mental health issues, liaise with mental health workers: 5.75	
	Address legal issues	Liaise with police, solicitor, attend court: 9.5	

Family	Family Goals	Time spent on task (hours)	Time needed on task (hours)
Family 5	Stabilise Housing	Address housing issues including discussion of TH entry, rental issues, complete TH re-entry forms, address utility bills: 6.5	More discussion around TH process, complete forms, assist access TH, discuss bill paying methods, transfer bills to new property: 6.0
	Emotional support	Emotional support re issues client experiencing: 3.0	Further support re anxiety and housing: 4.25
Family 6	Stabilise Housing	Address rental arrears, housing maintenance issues, home safety issues due to abusive neighbours, explore possibility of transfer: 4.0	Liaise with other supports to advocate for reduction in arrears, liaise with police & client re home safety issues: 8.0
Family 7	Stabilise Housing	Discuss housing options with client, begin application process: 1.5	More time to clarify options & processes: 1.25
	Emotional Support	Emotional support for drug & alcohol issues, sexual abuse of children, children's health: 5.0	More intensive support regarding issues: 1.5
	Engage Client	Attempts to engage client: 1.25	More time to engage client: 0.5
	Practical Support	Organise single bed & sheets for family, assist with car reg payment: 1.75	
Family 8	Stabilise Housing	Liaise with housing provider Regarding maintenance: 0.25	Housing application paperwork: 1.0
	Mental Health	Arrange counselling for client: 1.0	
Family 9	Stabilise Housing	Discuss housing issues, liaison with OoH regarding rent repayment plan, liaison with housing provider: 6.75	Address maintenance issues with housing provider: 0.25
	Health	Attend doctors appointment: 3.0	
Family 10	Engage Client	Attempts to engage client: 4.0	
	Emotional Support	Relationship/DV support including basic safety plan, support around newborn child, link with parenting support program: 5.0	In depth safety plan and full risk exploration, link in with anger management service: 1.5
	Health		Seek options for dental care, make appointments: 1.0
	Drug & Alcohol	Consult with D&A service: 0.5	Further liaise with D&A service: 0.5
	Legal Issues	Support at Magistrates Court: 4.0	

Table 6. Time spent/ required per week for child specific issues for the 2 month period

Family	Children's Goals	Time spent on task (hours)	Time needed on task (hours)
Family 1	Health	Research child health services & speech therapy, discuss options with client: 2.5	Directly link family with child health nurse, contact speech therapy services for availability: 5.0
Family 2	Education	Assistance to obtain uniforms, enrol child into Kinder, liaise with JPET worker on behalf of young person, write support letter for holiday program: 6.5	
	Child Protection Issues	Attend Children's Courtheating with family, advocacy to DHS, attend case meeting at DHS & liaise with worker: 8.0	Further advocacy with DHS: 1.0
Family 3	Education	Enrol child in Kindergarten: 0.5	
	Child Protection Issues	Attend Children's Court hearings & support family: 7.75	
Family 4	Education		Enrol child into kindergarten: 1.0
	Child Protection Issues	Phone contact with DHS, liaise with child protection worker, discuss with client: 3.0	
	Respite care		Arrange respite care for children: 2.0
Family 5	Health	Phone contact to see how child isfeeling: 0.75	Drive family to hospital: 3.0
Family 6	Child Protection Issues	Provide evidence at Children's Court, support client, liaise with DHS worker: 19.25	Home visit to discuss courtprocess, facilitate case plan meeting prior to court, attend drug testing with client: 9.25
Family 7	Education	Support regarding issues atdaughter's school: 1.0	
	Health	Discussion & support regarding son's health: 1.0	Research rehabilitation options on behalf of family: 2.0
Family 8	Child Protection Issues	Liaison & advocacy with DHSWorker & lawyers, discussions with client, court attendance: 16.25	Attend DHS appointment with Client & legal service Appointment, arrange drug & alcohol assessment, attend drug screenings, attend doctors appointment: 13.25
Family 9	Income support		Liaise with Centrelink regarding Children's income entitlements &discuss with client: 6.0
Family 10	Health		Link with health service for newborn: 0.5
			Link with teenage supportgroup: 0.5

Child protection court hearings were also seen to involve significant amounts of time. One caseworker explained how working with child protection could have implications on their own work with the family and their housing outcomes:

“It puts us in a difficult position where we are meant to be supporting the child and family, but are also put into a situation of having to report on families in a punitive way, which has implications on our relationship with the client. It causes reluctance on my part to tackle that sort of stuff...considering we are put in a role which can jeopardise our relationship with the very client we are trying to work with, it’s not very productive.”

Other areas of child specific support that were provided related to the children’s education and health. Education support mainly involved enrolling children into kindergarten and providing assistance to obtain uniforms. Support for health issues involved sourcing referrals for child health services and providing emotional support to the parents around a child’s health issues.

Discussions with caseworkers revealed the difficulties experienced sourcing financial assistance to meet children’s education needs. As one caseworker reported:

“Children starting new schools can be difficult financially. We will sometimes try to provide financial assistance, other times we will negotiate with the school. One instance we bought a generic school uniform from Big W (a cheaper option) it was the right colour and style but didn’t have the school logo on it. The school didn’t like it, we had to advocate strongly on behalf of the child. This can then bring up other issues, for example the child felt stigmatised and unwelcome, which led to absenteeism.”

All but one family had child specific issues that could not be addressed over the 8-week period, due to lack of caseworker time. As with the family specific issues, there was considerable variance in unmet need for child specific issues, with one family only requiring a further hour of support, however another family required a further 13 hours of support. Overall, across the ten families there was 43.5 hours of support that was required to address child specific needs that could not be provided over the 8-week period.

No other goals were set that addressed the developmental needs of children. This may indicate that the level of unmet need around child specific issues may be under-reported in the above data.

Discussions with caseworkers highlighted the importance and priority that was placed on resolving housing issues first. Stabilising housing was also seen to be a key way of addressing some of the issues facing children, including continuity of education and emotional wellbeing.

Caseworkers also reported working from a family centred approach, in which service provision was voluntary, and any goal to be addressed on the case plan needed to be identified and agreed upon by the client. Due to previous experiences with welfare services and a perception that they were being judged as parents, families could be reluctant to set goals around child related issues.

In addition, some caseworkers reported finding it difficult to actually identify the development and emotional needs of the children they work with. This was mainly perceived to be due to a lack of training and knowledge in the area, as well as difficulty accessing children that were of school age, due to hours of service delivery.

Furthermore, caseworkers reported that other services were often involved with families, who were more able to provide direct assistance to the children. However, despite this, many caseworkers were still spending a considerable proportion of their time on issues unrelated directly to their clients' housing circumstance, such as addressing child protection issues.

Summary

- Data gathered by caseworkers illustrates the complexity of issues experienced by families in housing crisis. Most support that was provided focussed on stabilising housing, with the other main area of support being the provision of emotional support for a variety of issues including domestic violence, child protection issues, drug and alcohol use, and the current housing crisis.
- All families had unmet needs. Overall, there was a total of 67 hours of support that was required to address family needs that could not be provided over the 8-week period, representing an average of almost 7 hours per family
- Child protection processes involved a significant amount of caseworker time for half of the families.
- Across the ten families there was 43.5 hours of support that was required to address child specific needs that could not be provided over the 8-week period.
- Very few goals were set that addressed the developmental needs of children. Discussions with caseworkers highlighted the importance and priority that was placed on resolving housing issues first. Stabilising housing was also seen to be a key way of addressing some of the issues facing children, including continuity of education and emotional wellbeing.

Case Study 2 - David

David has been living with his wife and two children (11 and 16 years) in transitional housing in Melbourne's western suburbs for the past two months. The family last had stable housing four years ago, but were forced to leave their home due to the children being sexual abused by a neighbour. Since then, the family has moved approximately 6-7 times, between friends' houses and substandard rental properties. "Even though where we live now is only temporary, at least it doesn't rain in the lounge room anymore."

The family's sole income is a disability support pension and carers payment. David sees the main barriers to his family's ability to find and maintain housing as poverty, which is exacerbated by the significant health issues of each family member. David's 11 year old son has a developmental hip joint disease, his wife has a congenital heart condition and depression, his daughter suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, and David has a serious respiratory condition. As a result of these health issues, the family has considerable medical expenses to contend with.

The greatest impact homelessness has had on David's children, has been on their social networks and education. "Moving around has meant they couldn't keep in contact with friends. It's been difficult to be able to get to school too. Have tried to keep them at the same school, but that is hard when you are moving. My daughter has always been a straight A student, but her marks have definitely slipped." The lack of stable housing has also made his daughter's recovery from PTSD and his son's hip rehabilitation more difficult.

"I lived on the streets from the age of 8. I never wanted myself or my kids to be in this situation ever again. Having a stable home would make a big difference for us. The kids could settle themselves and have friends in the area. It would just make such a big difference for us all."

3.3 Interviews with families

Five families that were receiving assistance from Melbourne Citymission’s Adult and Family Services program, were interviewed to further explore the issues they as a family were experiencing, and in particular, the impact of homelessness on their children. Table 7 shows the basic profile of each of these families including family type, number of children and current period of insecure housing.

Table 7. Profile of families interviewed

	Family Type	Number of children	Age of children	Current housing	Income type	Current period of insecure housing
Family 1	Couple with children	4	2-16 years	Transitional	Newstart & Parenting Payment	9 months
Family 2	Couple with children	2	11 & 16 years	Transitional	DSP & Carers Payment	4 years
Family 3	Couple with children	9	5-19 years	Transitional	None – newly arrived	1 year
Family 4	Single parent	2	13 & 15 years	Transitional	Parenting Payment	10 years
Family 5	Single parent	2	11 & 12 years	Transitional	Newstart Allowance	10+ years

All families had been living in insecure housing for over 6 months. Perceptions of what constituted ‘insecure housing’ differed between families. For example, one woman who reported being in insecure housing for the past 10 years, had been in private rental at least once during this period, but did not classify this as secure housing due to financial issues which resulted in the continued possibility of eviction. Another single parent could not remember the last time she felt she had stable accommodation, and thought it was possibly last when she was a child. All families were currently living in transitional housing in Melbourne’s outer western suburbs.

All interviewees, except for one family who had recently arrived in Australia from Somalia, reported first experiencing homelessness as children.

*“I was brought up in an orphanage...
pretty much since childhood I’ve been living like a gypsy”*

Each family reported experiencing a number of barriers to finding and maintaining secure housing. All interviewees listed financial problems, which included debts and a low income, as their main barrier to accessing stable housing for their family. Other barriers included the long waiting times to access public housing, significant medical issues that exacerbated the family’s financial issues and unemployment.

The families listed a number of ways in which their current housing situation was impacting on the wellbeing of their children. All families spoke about the impact homelessness had on their children’s education. One interviewee discussed how his daughter’s marks had slipped, when previously she had always been a high achieving student. A number of families discussed how important it had been for them to try to keep their children at the same school. One family lived in a motel near the children’s school for a month, to enable them to continue

attending the same school. Another family was living in transitional housing in a suburb that is a considerable distance to the children's schools and TAFE. As a result, their children were living with various family members across the inner-western suburbs, in order to attend school.

Most families also discussed the impact moving schools and homes had on their children's social networks, with many children finding it difficult to leave friends and make new friendships each time the family moved.

A couple of families also discussed the emotional impact homelessness had on their children. One mother reported that her children had felt stigmatised and hadn't wanted to discuss their experiences with teachers, workers or friends. Her son in particular had been bullied because of being homeless and because of the clothes he had to wear. Another mother discussed how she was concerned her children had experienced situations that had made them grow up too fast, including knowing what it was like to live in poverty and having to ask services for food. Emotionally, they had taken on a certain level of responsibility for their family's situation, which she felt was preventing them from "just being kids".

Families were asked about what support they had found useful when they were experiencing homelessness. Most families talked about the practical support they had received, in particular assistance obtaining transitional housing and material aid. Four of the families also discussed how helpful the emotional support had been, and how important it had been to them to have someone to talk to and know they were not being judged.

Families were also asked about what support they still required, to help their family cope with the experience of homelessness, in addition to long term stable housing. A number of the families found this difficult to articulate, as they were grateful for all of the support they had already received. A couple of families reported needing further financial assistance for items including household bills, the children's education costs and medical bills. One family discussed the need for further supports for their son who had a disability; another mother was concerned her children needed counselling after their experience of homelessness.

Summary

- All five families that were interviewed as part of the study had lived in insecure housing for over 6 months.
- Four out of the five interviewees disclosed first experiencing homelessness as a child
- All interviewees listed financial difficulties as their main barrier to accessing secure housing
- All families reported that homelessness had impacted in some way on their children's development. The experience of homelessness had in particular impacted on their education and development of social networks. A couple of families also reported that homelessness had a significant emotional impact on their children.

Case Study 3 - Michelle

Michelle currently lives in transitional housing in Melbourne's West, with her partner and four children (16 years, 13 years, 11 years and 2 years).

Prior to finding their current transitional property, the family had been homeless for four months, after leaving a private rental property due to violence from a neighbour. They briefly stayed with extended family in the far south-eastern suburbs, then stayed in motels closer to the children's schools in the western suburbs.

"We tried to stay out of refuges. It was awful trying to get our heads around where to go. We went around and around trying to get a support worker so we could just get into transitional housing. We were just this normal family; we didn't fit into the drug basket or the domestic violence basket. It was so hard to get help; we were seen to be coping enough. But we were a family that just had nowhere to go it was scary. Finally we got accepted here. Getting a transitional property has meant everything."

The emotional impact of homelessness for the family has been the greatest hurdle to overcome. Michelle's children thought they would be stigmatised, so would not talk to teachers, social workers or friends about their experience. The experience was particularly difficult for her eldest son Scott, who eventually left home. "Scott shut down quite a lot emotionally. He was being called a hobo...looking scruffy the poor kid. He took it very sensitively".

Michelle was particularly concerned about the impact moving around would have on the children's schooling. "Homelessness can be so overwhelming, you lose your self-esteem. But really for me, all I needed was their education to stay stable. I really believe in them being in just one school. We were homeless in that motel for weeks, just to keep them at the same school."

Although the current property is only temporary, having more stable housing has had a significant impact on her family. The children are able to continue at the same school and are close to their friends.

"Now that I know we can stay for a bit, I've settled in. It's been hard on the psyche, but at least now I've unpacked some boxes! The kids are also getting back to being themselves again. They are feeling human again". Having a home has also enabled Michelle to begin re-establishing a relationship with her son, who has now moved back home with the family.

Michelle sees the greatest threat to her family's housing as poverty. The family lives on a combined Centrelink income of Newstart and Parenting Payment. However this income has been reduced due to a debt they are repaying to Centrelink from when they were last in financial difficulty. They have difficulty saving on their current income, so there are no savings in the event of future crisis.

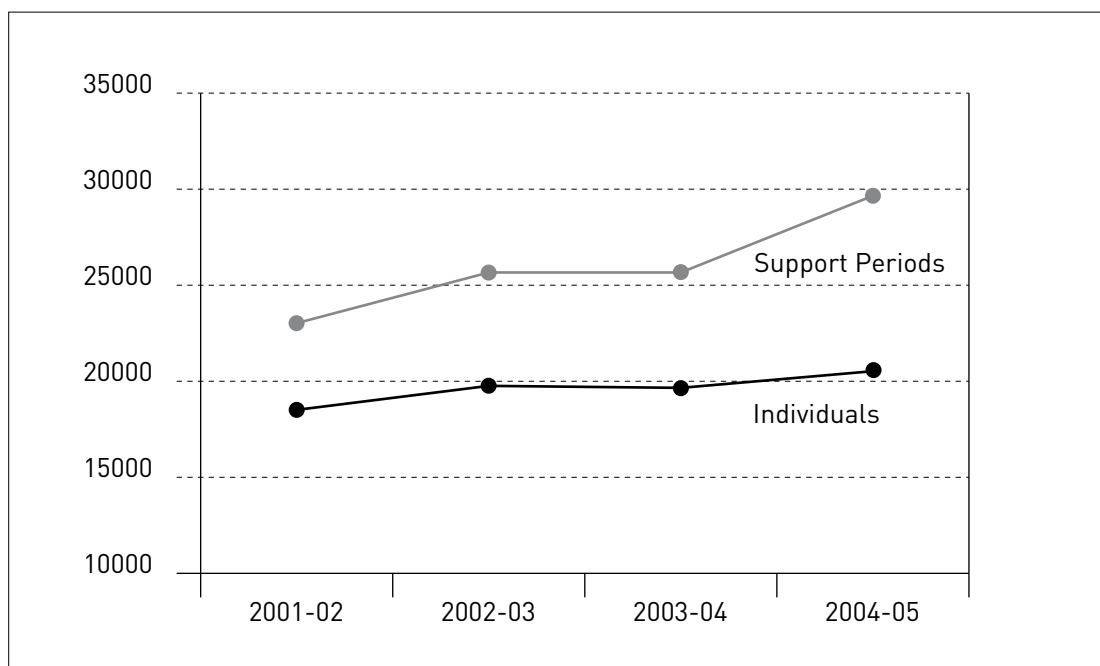
4. Discussion

4.1 The continuing demand for homeless services and lack of affordable housing options for families

Melbourne Citymission SAAP programs support a significant number of accompanying children. Of the 878 support periods provided by the AFS, FCAS and YAPP programs in 2004-05, 64% involved supporting clients with accompanying children. A conservative estimate based on two children per family indicates that almost a thousand children were assisted over the year. The majority of accompanying children were of preschool or primary school age.

Across Victoria, the number of children accessing SAAP services with their families has steadily grown over the past 5 years to 20,450 in 2005 (see Figure 3). It should be acknowledged that SAAP funding to provider organisations has increased over this period. However, despite the resources through SAAP and the Victorian Homelessness Strategy (DHS, 2002) that respond to the crisis of homelessness, this clear trend indicates a continuing and growing need across the community.

Figure 3. Number of support periods with accompanying children, and number of individual accompanying children, Victoria 2001-05



The service system cannot reduce the number of families and children experiencing homelessness, in the absence of preventative measures that address the root causes of homelessness such as poverty and the lack of affordable and secure long-term housing options. It is self-evident that low household income is a major barrier for families trying to access secure housing. Our analysis revealed that only 3% of the adults in families accessing our Western Region SAAP services were in any type of employment (part-time, casual or full-time): almost all families were solely reliant on government benefits as their main source of income. Furthermore, each family interviewed as part of the project listed financial difficulties as their main barrier to obtaining secure housing.

There are two fundamental requirements for the prevention of family homelessness:

- i) Adequate household income to afford both a minimum standard of housing (private or public) and to meet the basic costs of living that enables the development and wellbeing of the children, and
- ii) Sufficient supply of low cost, good quality housing that enables meaningful economic and social participation.

The majority of families using SAAP services are female headed, single parent households with very young children in pre-school or early primary school age cohorts. The inadequacy of the Commonwealth Government's Rent Assistance to assist those on low incomes or income support to afford private rental housing has been well documented (see for example ACOSS, 2003b; Productivity Commission, 2004; Wood et al, 2005). The low level of income support payments (Newstart Allowance, DSP, SPP) plus Rent Assistance at the maximum level do not ensure affordability of housing to an acceptable level (less than 30% of income).

This is compounded by the absence of policy drivers to stimulate the supply of low cost private rental housing at either a federal or state level. Currently, secure and affordable housing options for families in crisis are limited. With median rental prices in Victoria having increased 10% in real terms over the past five years (Office of Housing, 2006a) and rental vacancy rates at their lowest in over eight years (REIV, 2006), private rental remains unattainable for many families.

Melbourne Citymission's program data reveals that families who were housed in transitional accommodation were waiting on average a period of 13 months for secure long-term housing. The total duration of insecure housing is substantially longer when the period of housing crisis prior to accessing support is taken into account. As analysis of our SAAP data revealed almost a quarter of all families accessing Melbourne Citymission's western programs during the 2004-05 data collection period had been in unsafe, insecure or inadequate housing for at least six months prior to accessing assistance. **A significant proportion of families in the West are therefore enduring periods of approximately 19 months without a stable home environment for their children.**

The lack of investment over the past decade by State and Commonwealth Governments has resulted in a negligible increase in public and community housing stock (VCOSS 2006). Increased resources are having to be spent by State Governments on replacing or upgrading existing ageing properties. Prioritisation of the growing waiting lists has been introduced to allocate housing vacancies to those assessed as in greatest need. As a result, many households endure lengthy waiting periods for public housing. In the North West Metropolitan area of Melbourne, 3,109 households are currently on the 'early housing' waiting list (Office of Housing, 2007).

In summary, the private housing market is unable to meet the community's need for low cost homes for households on low incomes. Yet Governments are unwilling to step in through policy reforms and substantial investment that will ensure no Victorian family has to endure homelessness. There is clear evidence of the significant adverse consequences for the development and well-being of children experiencing periods without a stable home. Both the Victorian and Commonwealth Government have acknowledged the critical importance of the early years to the development and wellbeing of all children. **Yet both refuse to prioritise investment either directly in public housing or through policy reforms to stimulate the supply of affordable private rental accommodation.**

Substantial policy analysis has been undertaken over the past few years to propose solutions to the increasing affordability crisis (for example Powall and Withers 2004, Berry 2005). Most if not all stakeholders in the housing market have acknowledged the extent of the crisis across home purchase and rental sectors. Particular sector interests focus on policy solutions targeted at their own constituencies and interests, for example building industry bodies call for planning reforms to free up land for development, reduction in housing development costs and simplified approval processes.

It is time for governments to listen to the community and urgently act to implement across the board policy reforms through the development of a national affordable housing plan. Tinkering with one or two housing policy instruments in isolation, such as Commonwealth Rent Assistance or planning controls, will not be sufficient to redress the long term impacts of the array of policy settings over the past decades.

Judith Yates has shown that the current housing system, including taxation instruments, does not ameliorate the failings of the overall economic system evident in the growing level of inequality and wealth in Australia. The fragmented and uncoordinated range of policy instruments actually *weakens* the capacity of the housing market to meet the needs of all Australians to the fundamental right to a safe and secure home. Yates correctly draws our attention to the benefits gained by affluent households through speculative wealth accumulation and unearned income from housing via the current beneficial taxation instruments (Yates 2007).

A national affordable housing plan therefore needs to include wide-ranging reforms across *both the supply and demand sides* of housing policy, including taxation settings. It is beyond the scope of this study to detail these policy reforms. In broad terms, an *integrated* suite of reforms are needed in the following areas:

- i) **Public & community housing:** Federal & State Government to invest through budget allocation to increase social housing stock in Victoria to 6% by 2015
- ii) **Private sector housing:** a national affordable rental incentive scheme to stimulate supply targeted at low income households
- iii) **Governance & regulation:** new housing developments to include 15% quota of affordable housing as an inclusionary zoning strategy
- iv) **Housing standards & quality:** Federal & State Governments to increase maintenance/upgrade budgets for public housing to ensure equitable quality against minimum standards
- v) **Housing finance:** consideration by Federal and State Governments of initiatives to shared equity schemes or low cost loans for home purchase; to enable households on low incomes to access accrued superannuation for home purchase; and a savings bonds scheme to provide investment opportunities with a competitive yield
- vi) **Taxation:** Federal Government to review current taxation measures (negative gearing, capital gains tax) to ensure a more equitable incentive to low cost housing supply
- vii) **Housing assistance:** Federal Government to review Rent Assistance with the goal of ensuring the 30% affordability benchmark is not exceeded for eligible households.

The evidence from this research shows that homelessness and housing crisis are stubborn social ills facing our community and are a manifestation of ineffective and outdated housing policies. It is also evident that homeless services continue to struggle to achieve optimum outcomes for families in crisis because of the lack of affordable or safe housing options.

Substantive investment in supply side measures (eg. greater investment in social housing and considered planning quotas for affordable housing), and a redistribution of the current outlays through demand side instruments (eg. government grants, housing finance and taxation instruments) are required to implement a more effective, efficient and better integrated housing plan to deliver housing affordability for low income households and reduce the level of homelessness experienced across Australia.

4.2 The complex needs of families experiencing homelessness

Most families accessing Melbourne Citymission's SAAP services have significant and complex needs, which require a high level of skill to address, and which requires the provision of long-term support to ensure sustainable transitions from homelessness. Workers spend considerable time developing relationships and trust with the families they work with, in order to begin addressing the key underlying issues at the root of their housing crisis. Data gathered by our caseworkers illustrated the complexity of issues experienced by families accessing Melbourne Citymission's western SAAP programs. Although most support that was provided focussed on stabilising housing, a significant level of support was provided for the range of issues that were impacting on the families' ability to access and maintain housing. In particular, emotional support was frequently provided for issues involving domestic violence, child protection issues, drug and alcohol use, and anxiety caused by the current housing crisis.

SAAP services working with families are currently resourced for staff client ratios of 1:7.5 for average needs families (transitional support), and 1:5 for complex needs families (crisis accommodation support). In reality, this ratio is often exceeded as SAAP services struggle to cope with the high demand for services. In our study, all families had unmet needs, which most often involved the need for more in depth discussion and support for issues experienced by the family. Overall, there was a total of 67 hours of further support that was required to address family issues and 43.5 hours of support that was required to address child specific needs that could not be provided over the 8-week period across the 10 families. The level of unmet needs for accompanying children may however be greater than documented as worker feedback reported very few goals set to address their developmental needs.

A significant proportion of caseworkers' resources were spent addressing child protection issues. In contrast, a smaller proportion of support was provided that addressed the developmental and emotional needs of accompanying children. This was also reflected in the SAAP data analysis on services provided to accompanying children, which revealed a low level of need being identified and addressed by workers. Unfortunately, data on services provided to accompanying children across Victoria gathered by the NDCA is poor, with 61% of all data on support periods with accompanying children excluded from analysis due to errors and omissions. Consequently it is not possible to make any meaningful comparisons between Melbourne Citymission's data and general Victorian SAAP data on these variables.

The high proportion of missing data on children's issues indicates a lack of emphasis on the needs of accompanying children across Victorian SAAP services. MCM support workers reported a lack of resources and time to focus specifically on accompanying child issues, as well as a lack of resources to adequately contribute to the national data collection on their needs. A number of workers in our study also reported difficulties identifying the development and emotional needs of the children they work with due to a lack of knowledge and experience in the area. In addition, the voluntary nature of SAAP services can make it difficult for workers to actually access children. Parents are under no obligation to allow

access and can be reluctant to disclose issues that their children may be experiencing. Workers also risk undermining the trust they have developed with families if they pursue these issues.

Our analysis of this evidence leads us to conclude that homelessness support services funded through SAAP are inadequately resourced to respond effectively to the ongoing needs of families in Melbourne. This is due mainly to the interaction of the following factors:

- i) The shortage of affordable housing (public and private) lengthens the period of crisis for families; exacerbates their needs and issues; and therefore increases the support (intensity and duration) required from support workers
- ii) Higher demand for help presenting at services with consequent increased pressure to provide even limited assistance, rather than turn families away with nothing
- iii) Increasing obligation placed on generalist support workers to assist families to address child protection issues
- iv) Lack of disposable income for families on income support limits their capacity to meet their basic costs of living, including the needs of their children (for example health, education costs)
- v) Increased expectations on support workers to meet the range of obligations of their organisation and funding bodies

We therefore recommend that the Victorian Government undertake a review of the current worker to client family caseload ratios leading to an adequate resourcing model that acknowledges the practice experience of service providers exemplified through our study.

Whilst SAAP recurrent funding has increased by a modest 28% over the past decade to \$78.5m (constant 04-05\$), it should be noted that average funding per client has decreased from \$2370 to \$2090 annually (AIHW 2006b: Table 9.1).

Based on our caseload review, family support services are under resourced by an average of 1.4 hours per family per week. We recommend that extra resources be allocated to increase the average support hours offered by SAAP family services (Table 8) that acknowledges the increased workload and especially the imperative to provide more intentional assessment and long term support to accompanying children.

Table 8. Current and Proposed Family Support Caseloads

Indicator	Family Type	Current DHS Guidelines *		Proposed Changes	
		Worker: client Ratio	Hrs/wk per Family	Worker: client Ratio	Hrs/wk per Family
Transition Support	Average needs	7.5	4.0	5.5	5.5
Crisis Supported Accommodation	Complex needs	5.0	6.0	4.5	6.5

* taken from DHS SAAP Guidelines

The lower worker to client ratios suggested in Table 8 would require increased recurrent funding to maintain current service delivery outputs. However, we believe that the higher level of support proposed would improve *longer term client outcomes* as well as increase the *efficiency of SAAP* to families through:

- Reductions in the currently high multiple use or return rates to homelessness and SAAP by families, and
- Improved likelihood that children in families will not suffer long term disadvantage from their experience of homelessness (inter-generational homelessness)

As SAAP moves to a stronger unit cost funding model, an increased emphasis on sustainable outcomes should support higher levels of resourcing to the Program that will realistically meet the needs of all family members affected by the trauma of homelessness and transience.

Continuation of Support

Ample evidence is available to support the argument for a level of ongoing outreach support to be offered to individuals and families with complex issues beyond the current limitations of transitional support available through SAAP. SAAP was developed over 20 years ago as a program of last resort responding to the crisis of homelessness. The circumstances and needs of service users have changed substantially over this period.

An array of relatively small scale programs have evolved across Melbourne initiated through differing jurisdictions to follow up or respond to crises experienced by former SAAP clients. SHASP is one program developed by the Office of Housing aimed at public housing tenants who get into difficulties that put their tenancy at risk mainly through rent arrears.

A more realistic understanding of the *long-term needs* of a significant proportion of SAAP client families – arguably 10-15% - should be used to develop a better coordinated, seamless outreach model of support that follows up families after they leave the supported accommodation program. It can be argued that families develop a trusting relationship with their service provider through the strength-based approach to casework support in SAAP.

Under current arrangements there is no continuity of support for client families with high and complex issues despite the assessed risk of recurrent homelessness. Programs such as SHASP provide a reactive response to a recurring crisis experienced by public housing tenants only when a trigger event such as rent arrears or anti-social behaviour is brought to the attention of the Office of Housing.

A more efficient and effective preventative approach to ensure long term housing stability would be to offer low level outreach follow up to at risk families. The most appropriate provider of such a support model would be the pre-existing SAAP caseworker who has a developed relationship with the family. This low level outreach would require an average of only 1 hour per family per month for at least one year after exit from crisis or transitional accommodation. By integrating this response into existing infrastructure, it would provide a very cost effective preventative strategy to assist families to sustain their home and social connections in their local community.

4.3 The need for more integrated and intentional approaches for working with accompanying children

Time and resource constraints have required a focus by support workers on the more urgent and critical issues faced by families experiencing homelessness. SAAP workers are first and foremost housing workers and, as such, their primary role is to assist clients to access and sustain stable housing. However, given the established link between homelessness and childhood development, and given the trusted place many workers have in the lives of their clients, there is a vital role for SAAP providers working with families in relation to identifying and addressing the developmental and emotional needs of children experiencing homelessness. Support workers can provide a critical engagement function with families who have in many cases burnt their bridges with other community services.

The needs of children currently accessing SAAP services are only identified and addressed in an ad hoc way - depending on scarce resource availability, limited access to accompanying children, and the level of understanding of child development issues held by individual workers. This conclusion is supported by earlier research undertaken in Victoria (Resolve Community Consulting 2004). It is also of considerable concern that key government strategies such as the *Victorian Homelessness Strategy* (DHS 2002) have made very little mention of the specific needs of homeless children, apart from those in out of home care, and women and children escaping domestic violence. As stated earlier, this is despite broad government and community acceptance of the critical importance of the early years for the longer-term development and well-being of children.

In 2001 the Department of Human Services did introduce the Regional Children's Resource Program to support and resource SAAP services working with accompanying children across the State. This however has been a very limited and piecemeal response in that it does not increase the capacity of service providers to meaningfully engage with families to assess their children's needs or put in place practical forms of assistance or support for the children. Whilst children's support workers were introduced in women's refuges, there has been no equivalent resource introduced in generalist family support services.

More integrated and intentional approaches to working with families experiencing housing crisis are required, that address the significant developmental and emotional needs of accompanying children, to ensure more long-term and sustainable transitions for families, and their children in the future. It is encouraging that FaCSIA, through the National Homelessness Strategy, funded the Bright Futures Demonstration Project, which has endeavoured to work alongside referring SAAP agencies, to provide comprehensive assessment and holistic responses to children with complex needs. This Demonstration Project (funded for one year through Merri Outreach Support Service in Melbourne's North) also aimed to significantly contribute to the evidence base regarding the best configuration of children's resources within the SAAP sector to improve the long-term outcomes for children experiencing homelessness (Merri Outreach Support Service, 2007).

More recently, FaCSIA (also through its National Homelessness Strategy) has funded Hanover Welfare Services and the Brotherhood of St Laurence to trial the co-location of education development workers to improve access to school and learning for children in homeless families (Hanover Welfare Services, 2007, unpublished).

These are very welcome demonstration pilots. However, far greater investment by governments is required to enable the development and evaluation of best practice responses for working with all children accompanying their parents to homeless services. It is crucial that the needs of children experiencing homelessness are systematically identified and addressed through casework support to significantly reduce the trauma of homelessness experienced by children, and to assist in breaking the long-term inter-generational cycle of homelessness.

This requires additional resources to enable all SAAP funded support workers assisting families to more intentionally assess the specific needs of children and then respond to these issues through strengths based casework support. Many of the children in SAAP services have become socially isolated after extended periods of transience. They may have missed schooling, have suffered poor health and lost friendship networks. A brokerage fund available to support workers would enable a timely response to children in such circumstances to redress the impact of their homelessness through practical help, including:

- Education and learning: tutoring, learning materials, school clothing
- Social and recreational activities: memberships of sports clubs, specialist clothing and equipment
- Health: baby safety equipment, child counselling, occasional child care

A brokerage fund would make it easier for support workers to engage with parents to specifically discuss children's issues and well-being as an integral part of their casework. We suggest that such a fund should be limited to families who have agreed to become clients committing to case plans, rather than be available to all families accessing homeless services including those seeking on-off assistance.

Analysis of SAAP client data (2004-05) suggests that approximately half of all children assisted annually, that is 10,000 children, are in families either accommodated by homeless services or have an agreed casework support plan in place. Assuming a ceiling figure per eligible child of \$200, the total estimated budget outlay would be \$2.1m per annum, including provision for 5% for administration of the brokerage fund.

Children in families using SAAP services comprise 36.2% of all the individuals assisted annually in Victoria (AIHW, 2006a). The projected brokerage budget therefore represents an extremely small proportion of the current resources – less than 3% of the total recurrent funding based on 2004-05 period (\$78.5m).

4. 4 Inadequacy of research evidence and program analysis on accompanying children in SAAP

A range of one-off projects focussed on children using SAAP services and the impact of homelessness on child and family outcomes have been undertaken over the past decade (for example, Efron et al 1996, Kolar 2003, Norris et al 2005, Resolve Community Consulting 2004). The Commonwealth Government have also responded to the increasing levels of family homelessness in this period by implementing significant new initiatives (the *Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot*, subsequently rebadged as the HOME Program) and developmental projects (for example, *Needs of Children in SAAP Services* by Thomson Goodall 1994; *Case Management with Children in SAAP Services* by Strategic Partners 1997).

FaCSIA have also supported a number of one-off demonstration projects over the past 7 years through the National Homelessness Strategy. In the 2005-06 budget, \$10m was provided over 4 years to resource demonstration projects, some of which focus on families.

As mentioned previously, the Victorian Government largely ignored the specific needs of accompanying children through its Homelessness Strategy with the exception of Action Plan strategies within the Family Violence sector. Subsequent initiatives through the common assessment and referral project and integrated data collection strategy will improve baseline data on the demographics and service utilisation of the homeless service system by families.

However, the evidence presented through this study indicates that a targeted approach is still needed to strengthen both the collection of information on accompanying children and subsequent analysis to ensure a more responsive and effective program that is consistent with the broader policy commitment of the Victorian Government to the development and well being of children.

In particular, the evidence base needs to be strengthened in the following areas:

- Evaluation of the current child-centred approaches to develop best practice across SAAP
- Monitoring the impact of the new Children's and Young Person's legislation on demand and utilisation of SAAP family services
- Identification of the skills and training needed by generalist SAAP workers to more effectively engage and support accompanying children
- Measurement of long-term outcomes for accompanying children, including multiple use of SAAP by families

Historically, the resources devoted to research and evaluation by SAAP both nationally and within Victoria have been inadequate, especially in comparison to health-focussed programs. A significant injection of resources is required to ensure that SAAP is fulfilling its goals and continues to implement best practice reforms.

5. Recommendations

The following set of recommendations is drawn from the previous discussion on the implications of our study's main findings. We urge both Victorian and Federal Governments to collaborate with the community sector to consider our findings and give urgent priority to implementation of reforms that will both prevent and respond to family homelessness to ensure the development and well being of children in disadvantaged circumstances.

1. **Prioritise the needs of children accessing SAAP services with their families**

The Victorian Government reviews the model of assistance for children in families accessing SAAP to develop a targeted investment of resources aimed at improving outcomes for children. Greater priority needs to be placed within SAAP family services on identifying and addressing children's specific needs. This requires increased resourcing of the core support role to enable more direct and substantial work with accompanying children as well as increasing the capacity for long-term support to address the complexity of issues that families in housing crisis experience:

- 1.1 Invest in the development and implementation of best practice models for working with children accessing homeless services with their families;
- 1.2 Increase the average support hours through a reduction in caseloads to 1:5.5 for transition support and 1:4.5 for crisis-supported accommodation offered by SAAP family services; and
- 1.3 Create a Brokerage Fund to enable support workers to address the educational, developmental and emotional needs of children experiencing homelessness in a timely manner.

2. **Develop a well-coordinated and integrated long term outreach support model to enable follow-up for SAAP client families exiting crisis and transitional housing who are assessed as being at risk of recurring homelessness.**

3. **Reduce waiting times for affordable and secure housing for families experiencing homelessness and in the longer term reduce the incidence of housing crisis.**

The Federal and Victorian Governments develop a comprehensive National Affordable Housing Plan to replace the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement that leads to increased supply of low cost public, community and private rental housing through a well integrated set of policy reforms and investment addressing supply and demand side factors, including:

- 3.1 Public & community housing: Federal & State Government to invest through budget allocation to increase social housing stock in Victoria to 6% of all housing by 2017;
- 3.2 Private sector housing: a national affordable rental incentive scheme to stimulate supply targeted at low income households;
- 3.3 Governance & regulation: new housing developments to include 15% quota of affordable housing as an inclusionary zoning strategy;
- 3.4 Housing standards & quality: Federal & State Governments to increase maintenance/upgrade budgets for public housing to ensure equitable quality against minimum standards;

- 3.5 Housing finance: consideration by Federal and State Governments of initiatives to shared equity schemes or low cost loans for home purchase, to enable households on low incomes to access accrued superannuation for home purchase; and a savings bonds scheme to provide investment opportunities with a competitive yield;
 - 3.6 Taxation: Federal Government to review current taxation measures (negative gearing, capital gains tax) to ensure a more equitable incentive to low cost housing supply; and
 - 3.7 Housing assistance: Federal Government to review Rent Assistance with the goal of ensuring the 30% affordability benchmark is not exceeded for eligible households.
4. **Undertake additional research to more fully understand and strengthen the effectiveness of SAAP for accompanying children.**
- 4.1 Increase funding by both State and Federal governments for research and evaluation to a benchmark of 2% of total recurrent expenditure on SAAP, with increased focus on children proportional to their current demand on the program.

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7. Appendices

Appendix 1

Guidelines for completing the Western Family Homelessness Project Fortnightly Review Form

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project that will be exploring the experience of family homelessness in the western region, with a particular focus on monitoring the unmet needs of children and families in housing crisis. The findings from this project will enable Melbourne Citymission to advocate for better resources to enable more sustainable outcomes for our most vulnerable clients, in particular children.

We are asking you to monitor the amount of time you spend assisting selected families (1 or 2) in housing crisis each fortnight, and the amount of time (based on your professional opinion) that would have been required to address unmet needs through casework support. Completing the form will mainly just involve cutting and pasting information from the review goal plan that you complete for each of your clients each fortnight.

Procedure:

The fortnightly review form is to be filled out for each fortnight (ongoing or at the end of each fortnight) for each selected family for two months starting 3rd July 2006.

1. Please ensure that you record at the top of the form the SAAP alpha code that has been assigned to the family, your name** and the fortnight period.
2. In the left column please list the goals that you are currently working on with your client, ensuring you specify any goals that relate to any children in the family that you are assisting. Please also specify any goals that you believe should be addressed if there were sufficient resources, that would enable **more sustainable housing outcomes** for your client and their family.
3. In the second column, please list any actions/ assistance you provided during the fortnight, relating to each goal, and/or any actions/ assistance you believe should have been provided had there been adequate resources.
4. In the third column, please provide an estimate of the amount of time (to the nearest quarter of an hour, e.g. 0.25 hrs, 0.5 hrs, 0.75 hrs, 1 hr, 1.25 hrs etc) you spent on the actions/ assistance specified in column 2.
5. In the fourth column, please provide a best estimate, based on your professional opinion, on the amount of time (to the nearest quarter of an hour) that would have been required to undertake any actions/ assistance you believe should have been provided had there been adequate resources, as specified in column 2.
6. Please return completed forms to RSPU.

**** Please note your name is only necessary to enable us to easily contact you if we need to clarify completed information.**

Appendix 3

Melbourne Citymission Family Homelessness in the West Project Information for Participants & Consent Form

This project is being conducted by Melbourne Citymission to raise awareness of family homelessness in the Western Region of Melbourne. Your views are really important and they will help Melbourne Citymission to advocate for better services for families experiencing homelessness.

If you choose to take part, you will be asked some general background questions (for example your age, how many children you have etc), some questions about your current housing situation, the impact of your current housing situation on your family, the support you are currently receiving and what additional support would be helpful to you and your family at the moment.

The interview is **completely confidential** and we will not record your name or any other identifying information. Taking part in this study is voluntary - whether you choose to take part or not is completely up to you. The answers you give will have no effect on the assistance you get from Melbourne Citymission now or in the future.

If you have any concerns about this study, please discuss them with the interviewer. If at any stage during the interview you decide you no longer wish to participate, please tell the interviewer and the interview will end.

If you agree to take part, it is very important that you think about each question carefully and answer as accurately and fully as you can. Please answer every question – if you are unsure about a question, please ask.

The interview will only take about 20 minutes. On completion you will be compensated with a payment of \$25 for your time and travel costs.

If you have any further questions regarding this research or how the findings will be used please contact Michael Horn, Manager Melbourne Citymission Research Unit on 8625 4468.

I agree to participate in the project and give my consent freely to be interviewed. I understand that the project will be carried out as described in the information statement, a copy of which I have kept. I realise that whether or not I decide to participate is my decision and will not have any effect on the services I receive from Melbourne Citymission. I also realise that I can withdraw from the study at any time and that I do not have to give any reasons for withdrawing. I have asked the interviewer any questions that I have regarding the study, and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

..... Date:

Participant

..... Date:

Investigator

Appendix 4

Melbourne Citymission Family Homelessness in the West Project Interview Questions

Staff use only

Date:

Location:

Has the client's informed **written consent** been obtained? Yes No

Q.1 Thinking about where you are living at the moment:

(i) What type of accommodation are you currently living in/ who is the landlord?

.....

(ii) Where is it? (suburb)

.....

(iii) How long have you been there?

.....

(iv) How much is the rent per week?

.....

(v) Who are you living with?

.....

(vi) How would you rate the quality of your current accommodation? (eg. suitable for needs, condition of property etc)

Really Bad Bad OK Good Really Good

Why?

.....

.....

Q.2 How long ago did you and your family last have stable and affordable housing?

.....

How long were you there?

.....

Where was it? (suburb)

.....

Q.3 What circumstances led to you leaving this home?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.4 How many times have you moved since then? (include where and type of accommodation)

.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.5 What barriers do you and your family currently face, in trying to access stable and affordable housing?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.6 What difference would it make to you and your family if you had stable and affordable housing?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.7 Thinking about the assistance you are currently receiving from Melbourne Citymission:

(i) What in particular has been helpful?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

(ii) What additional help/ support do you need?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.8 In what way has your current housing situation impacted on your children? (Prompt: socially, emotionally, school)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.9 What additional help/ support is needed for your children?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Q.10 Thinking back to the very first time you ever experienced homelessness – when was this? How old were you?

.....
.....
.....

And finally.... Just a few background questions:

Q.11 What is your age?(years)

Q.12 Gender:

Female o Male o

Q.13 Cultural Background:

.....

Q.14 What is your family status?

Single parent

Couple

Intergenerational

How many children do you have currently living with you?

.....

How old is each child?

Child 1: (years)

Child 2: (years)

Child 3: (years)

Child 4: (years)

Child 5: (years)

Q.15 What is your main form of income?

- No income
- Newstart allowance
- Youth allowance
- Austudy/ABSTUDY
- Disability support pension
- Parenting payment
- Other type of allowance or benefit
- Workcover/ compensation
- Maintenance/ Child support
- Wages/ Salary/ Own business
- Partner's income
- Other (please specify).....

Q.16 What is your total household income per week (after tax etc)?

.....

Thank you for completing this interview! It will really help us to improve our services for people seeking assistance in the future.



Melbourne Citymission
Building Inclusive Communities