Beyond the Homelessness, Crisis Accommodation, Poverty and Child Protection Cycle: Supportive housing for families with children and young people

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The social work and human services literature overwhelmingly emphasise the importance of safe, secure and affordable housing and adequate income support for families at risk of homelessness, domestic and family violence (DFV) or entering the statutory child protection system. Traditional residualist social welfare approaches to families experiencing these challenges, based on formulations of deserving and undeserving, including shelter accommodation, old or congregate public housing and statutory intervention, continue to fail children, young people and their families and be costly for governments. In contrast, Supportive Housing refers to all service delivery approaches based on the Housing First principle, whereby people at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness are assisted through access to a secure, affordable tenancy and the offer of flexible support services that are non-conditional to the tenancy. This paper explores the national and international evidence for good practice in housing and support responses to families at risk of or experiencing homelessness, DFV and statutory child protection intervention using a critical literature review methodology and critical social work frameworks. This paper highlights the evidence regarding supportive housing for families as a contemporary model that respects the agency and dignity of families to achieve their goals and aspirations.

KEYWORDS: Families at risk of homelessness, family homelessness, domestic and family violence, child protection, supportive housing

Introduction

Increasing social and economic inequality across Australian society combined with the corrosive effects of successive governments’ commitment to neoliberalism has greatly impacted the design and delivery of social welfare policies and systems for marginalised groups and communities (Ife 2012). This is particularly evident in the dominant housing policy formulations and approaches to the challenges facing families at risk of or experiencing homelessness, domestic and family violence (DFV) and/or statutory child protection intervention (Flanagan et al. 2019). Researchers and family homelessness and housing service providers have identified the drivers of family homelessness and the complex and often inadequate service system responses (valentine et al. 2020a). Many of these families have interactions with interrelated specialist service systems, including DFV and child protection. Despite numerous high-profile commissions of inquiry into child and family welfare, the current rates of children and young people in out-of-home care, especially First Nations children and young people, continue to reflect a system failing in its most basic mandate to keep families together.

Providing safe, appropriate and affordable housing has long been viewed as a critical foundation for human development and wellbeing (McLaren 2013; Tsemberis 2004). Access to such housing is critical for families at risk of or experiencing homelessness and is widely accepted as the main indicator by which to mark an individual or family as having exited homelessness (ABS 2012; Chamberlain and Mackenzie 1992). The housing also needs to be sustainable. The substantial lack of affordable, safe and appropriate housing across Australian cities and regions has meant this goal has been elusive for many families at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This observation is shared across many Western liberal democracies, including Canada, the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom.

This positioning paper is based on the findings of a critical literature review of international research and literature on housing and support responses to families at risk of homelessness, DFV and/or child protection intervention. The research question posed for this critical literature
review was: ‘what does the evidence indicate about housing and support interventions that work best for families at risk of, or experiencing homelessness, and/or DFV or risk of statutory child protection intervention?’ The particular focus is on families with children, young people and families that have experienced DFV or associated child protection intervention. From here on, the paper refers periodically to ‘families’ with this target group in mind.

**Methodology**

*Author positionality*

The authors position themselves as cisgender, white, male, social work and human service practitioners with considerable experience working with individuals and families at risk of homelessness or who are experiencing homelessness across different contexts and domains of practice. Due to the authors’ significant housing and homelessness practice and policy experience, an ‘insider’ analysis is applied to strengthen the critical analysis in this paper (Ganga and Scott 2006). In taking this approach, the authors can draw on their own significant and relevant professional experiences to improve the quality of critical analysis of the housing and homelessness service system.

*The lens of critical social work*

Critical social work is the theoretical framework through which this critical literature review has been undertaken because of its commitment to addressing structural inequalities, power differentials and social exclusion in practice and broader society (Laing and Humphries 2013; Morley 2019). Gender, race, class, disability and housing inequality are important dimensions of analysis when considering the oppression of families at risk of or experiencing homelessness and DFV and statutory child protection interventions. The lens of critical social work also provides a way of analysing structural factors contributing to the oppression of vulnerable families (Allen 2009; Morley et al. 2020). Specifically, anti-oppressive (Fraser 2017; Ife 2012), anti-racist (Duthie 2019) and pro-feminist (Morley and Dunstan 2016; Pease 2005, 2020) theories have been applied in this critical literature review.

Paulo Freire’s concepts of critical consciousness and dialogue with oppressed communities are central to this analysis that prioritises the voices of marginalised families (Cowden et al. 2020). Critical consciousness is useful in considering how internal influences (such as past experiences, values, etc.) and external forces (including social and economic structure) influence an individual or family’s ability to achieve change, as opposed to adopting a more fatalist, resigned and passive approach to their situation. Housing and support services that specifically target families experiencing multiple levels of disadvantage and oppression need to recognise the importance of meaningful and emancipatory dialogue with families that focuses on families (Westoby and Dowling 2013). In the context of the modern neoliberal welfare state, governments’ very nature in which housing systems have been established serve to stigmatise and oppress those seeking assistance.

*Engagement with the literature and data analysis*

This critical literature review commenced with praxis-related conversations between authors, followed by some general searches for literature using the Proquest database through the QUT Library. General search terms including ‘family homelessness’, ‘families at risk of homelessness’ and ‘supportive housing for families’ were used. More recent literature was prioritised: the search scope was limited to literature published in the last five years (i.e. commencing 1 January 2016). Older literature has not been excluded from analysis but is included if it is deemed to be making enduring contributions to the critical discussion about housing and support service responses to families. These searches furnished a range of national and international literature results exceeding 4,000 articles. This level of peer-reviewed article data was considerable. The authors applied the following inclusion criteria to prioritise literature in this analysis:

- articles that prioritise the voices of families at risk of or experiencing homelessness
- articles that consider structural drivers of homelessness and oppression of families
- articles that identify the multi-systemic challenges families experience in accessing and receiving services
- articles that highlight a range of housing and support interventions for families at risk of or experiencing homelessness, including supportive housing.

As this is a positioning paper for further analysis, this critical literature review reports on early analysis of 21 peer-reviewed research reports and publications using the above inclusion criteria, supplemented by critical social work theory.

*Limitations*

Early analysis indicates literature is prevalent in Australia, the USA, Canada and some parts of the United Kingdom. There is scope to explore the topic further in other countries and regions and explore more deeply the frameworks, policy and models of intervention that
work best for families. Given the scope of this paper, government policy and grey literature have not been examined; however, these will be a focus in the next phase of this research.

**Initial Thematic Findings**

*Critical reflections on the causes and consequences of family homelessness*

Families at risk of, or who are experiencing homelessness, and who may also be experiencing DFV or statutory child protection are characterised across all jurisdictions as having the least amount of power or agency about exercising decisions that affect their lives (Bai et al. 2020; valentine et al. 2020a). Their experience of homelessness fundamentally erodes their dignity, agency and self-esteem (Gibson 2010; Spinney 2014). Coupled with heavily bureaucratic and punitive welfare systems, homelessness stifles the ability of families to achieve the social work ethic of self-determination (AASW 2020). Homelessness is not a unidimensional phenomenon nor impacts families in homogenous ways.

The literature examined in this analysis shows the incredible range of structural factors impacting the wellbeing and functioning of families. Lack of affordable housing and tight housing markets, poverty, unemployment, DFV and racism are examples of structural factors that influence the risk of homelessness and the actual rates of homelessness (Micah Projects Inc. 2016; Rog et al. 2021). Some literature explores the confluence of individual life events, personal factors and structural factors associated with family homelessness (valentine et al. 2020a). Individual life events and personal factors such as illness, hospitalisation, caring for a family member with a disability or substance misuse, involvement of statutory child protection agencies and previous negative experiences for families when trying to access the formal housing and homelessness service system all impact families in different ways. These factors interact with structural causes of homelessness in a different way for each family.

Bassuk et al.’s (2014) meta-data analysis of housing interventions with families highlights a range of competing methodological issues such as consistency in the definition of homelessness and regard for outcome measures across studies. Their findings reinforce the importance of comparing research and literature on family homelessness carefully due to these differences in epistemology and methodology. Clarity of concepts and consistency are important elements of rigorous data analysis.

The severe social exclusion of families at the heart of this research is a striking observation. The forms of oppression experienced by families are multidimensional. DFV is one of the main causes of family homelessness (Micah Projects Inc. 2016; valentine et al. 2020b; Warburton et al. 2018). Poverty is also a major driver of family homelessness (Parry et al. 2016). For many families who become homeless, the possibility of involvement with statutory child protection systems increases. The state’s surveillance over families experiencing social exclusion, homelessness, and poverty serve to further oppress families. This is especially relevant to First Nations families and communities.

**Families’ experiences of the traditional housing pathway**

The traditional housing pathway for families experiencing homelessness has typically involved the family experiencing a critical event (e.g. eviction from housing, DFV) and, at some point, the provision of crisis accommodation delivered by Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in Australia. This is followed by transitional housing characterised by greater tenancy rights and autonomy than crisis accommodation but is still not long-term housing. There is a future possibility of permanent housing through private or social housing systems, represented in Diagram 1.

While this process is represented linearly, the authors recognise this is often not the experience of families. The

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*Diagram 1: Traditional Housing Pathway*

Adapted from Chamberlain and Mackenzie (2006) and Keast et al. (2011).
traditional housing pathway has been and continues to be the dominant approach to housing to individuals and families in need throughout Australia. Families need to experience a ‘crisis’ before being considered eligible for housing or support services. The housing and support services are constructed as crisis responses intended to be short term. Crisis accommodation in the form of emergency shelters has been a major feature of the homelessness services system in Australia since the 1970s.

Transitional housing is a term that has been used to describe the next phase in a process for families on the road to obtaining safe and affordable housing (valentine et al. 2020a; Keast et al. 2011). Transitional housing is intended to be a medium-term response for people awaiting a longer term housing option. Rents, tenancy rights and responsibilities are also applied according to standard housing rental requirements. Although transitional housing intends to be an interim and medium-term response, for many families, it is an undefined timeline that creates further uncertainty. This affects families’ sense of establishing personal and family goals, including employment, education and childcare. For many families experiencing these structural disadvantages, the goal of safe, secure and affordable housing remains elusive.

The literature shows that structural factors can hasten or mitigate families at risk of or who go on to experience homelessness (Bay 2009; Johnson et al. 2015). A significant theme in the housing pathways literature is the challenge many women and families face accessing housing as an exit from crisis accommodation in the form of DFV shelter due to a lack of affordable and appropriate housing (McLaren 2013). This can have many implications for women and their families, including deciding to return to a perpetrator or face homelessness.

**Deconstructing the notion of ‘housing readiness’**

A major issue arising in linear housing systems predicated on multiple stages of eligibility and prioritisation is that arbitrary judgements are sometimes made by housing and homelessness policymakers and service delivery officers about whether a prospective tenant is ‘ready’ to manage the obligations associated with a housing tenancy. Keast et al. (2011: 5) contend that housing readiness is equated to a:

- set of skills, attributes and aptitudes that a person who has experienced homelessness needs to acquire before they can successfully live independently and manage a tenancy. A different type of model that has been found to be applicable for understanding the resolution of homelessness has been the ‘Staircase for Transitions’, and it has found that through successfully addressing problems and demonstrating abilities to cope with day-to-day activities, individuals move through the continuum/pathway, up the ‘stairs’ to better housing options.

This concept has been embedded in housing policy, procedure and practice throughout Australia and other countries. The concept is linked to a ‘Treatment First’ approach to working with people experiencing homelessness: people who are experiencing concurrent issues such as substance misuse or mental health need to have these issues addressed before they are ready for housing (Keast et al. 2011). The conceptualisation of ‘housing readiness’ emphasises the drivers of homelessness at an individual rather than structural level, and the existing state of the housing service system tends to support a traditional housing response (valentine et al. 2020a; Keast et al. 2011).

Housing readiness can also be misused to explain why housing is not provided to people with housing needs. In typical neoliberal fashion, individuals or families are blamed or scapegoated for their situation rather than recognising the chronic undersupply of social and affordable housing throughout Australia. In April 2021, the *Brisbane Times* reported that over 47,000 people were listed on Queensland’s housing register (Caldwell 2021). The housing crisis is further compounded at a national level; the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported that on 30 June 2020, more than 155,100 households in Australia were on a waiting list for social housing. The experiences of families experiencing homelessness seeking housing assistance confront this reality of a lack of appropriate and affordable housing every day. The housing crisis throughout Australia is real and remains one of the major public policy challenges of the 2020s.

**The opportunity with Housing First and Supportive Housing**

There are real opportunities to improve homeless families’ experiences in the Australian context by aligning the service system with Housing First and Supportive Housing models that respond to social injustice and regard housing as a human right (valentine et al. 2020b). Importantly, the particular needs of families must be recognised. As Milaney et al. (2019) suggest, a housing and support framework needs to acknowledge, respond and not further contribute to the violence experienced by women and their children. Warburton et al. (2018) interviewed 14 mothers regarding their experience of pathways in and out of homelessness. They found that permanent housing provided increased experience of safety, happiness and
Diagram 2 Housing First Pathway describes an alternate way of conceptualising support for families at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness based on the Housing First principle. This principle seeks to provide rapid housing and support responses for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness (Tsemberis 2004). Housing first also underpins the group of service delivery models referred to as supportive housing (Culhane and Byrne 2010; Micah Projects Inc. 2016).

Adapted from Keast et al. (2011) and Micah Projects Inc. (2016).

Children are often hidden in homelessness statistics and data. Parry et al. (2016) addressed the structural barriers affecting outcomes for children of homeless families in Australia. They suggested that housing support must be child aware and responsive to families experiencing complexity. Assertive outreach, flexible and intensive support with families whose tenancies are at risk are considered strengths in the current homelessness support landscape (valentine et al. 2020b). Theobald et al., (2021) shone a light on the practice of Aboriginal Women’s refuges that demonstrate responsiveness and flexibility to challenge intersecting oppressions. These services, often delivered by community-controlled organisations, are uniquely placed within the service system and are important sites of anti-oppressive practice with First Nations women and families.

valentine et al. (2020a) identify strengths in the capacity of SHS to provide effective relational supports in the crisis accommodation space, such as women’s refuges. However, the authors note the negative effects on families due to bottlenecks at exit points from crisis (including DFV) and transitional housing. They argue that integration between SHS and permanent housing provision is key to achieving a continuum of care and reducing destabilisation. There should be increased flexibility in transitional housing program duration and improved access to safe, affordable, long-term housing to improve housing outcomes, reduce service gaps and avoid re-entry to homelessness (Warburton et al. 2018). Milaney et al. (2019) called for a gendered response to the gender-based violence experienced by women and families. They discussed the importance of trauma-informed care at a structural and service delivery level — care that does not further oppress by destabilising housing or by fear of eviction but, rather, where women’s stories contribute to policy and program design and women experience self-determination in service delivery.

Pease (2016) argued that good intentions are not enough to avoid perpetuating injustice and that we are all complicit in this. He contended that practitioners are responsible for challenging the systems that oppress and privilege our position, a key feature of critical social work practice with families. Theobald et al. (2021) pointed to the inherent resource limitations and neoliberal fabric of the service systems that perpetuate disadvantage. Their research also highlighted service provider innovation and commitment to identify structural inequality to better meet the needs and uphold the rights of women and children with whom they work. Access to permanent, affordable housing is a fundamental component of the integration between housing and support, challenged by a neoliberal context where demand outstrips supply (Theobald et al. 2021). Families need advocacy and support to obtain housing quickly. As a young mother suggests, ‘someone who will stand up for you so that you don’t feel left out, let down would be good’ (Warburton et al. 2018). Indigenous women and children endure more barriers to sustained housing outcomes than other groups and, as a result, experience increased housing instability and homelessness (valentine et al. 2020b).

Thomas and So (2016) documented the experience of families living in Emergency Assistance Hotels. They point to the impact of instability and unknowns of families ‘in limbo’ without permanent and supportive housing. They argue the importance for families to experience more control and certainty in their lives and for long-term housing solutions. Housing stability for families will continue to be a challenge as they continue to be excluded by poverty (Bai et al. 2020). Collins et al. (2016) talked about the economic instability faced by families, particularly those with multiple children. They referred to the effects of poverty on families being amplified by variable support, including material support over time. These effects include inappropriate dwellings, lack of choice for families regarding housing allocation and ongoing experience of crisis. Funding is required to supplement the family income and assist families
in meeting basic needs (Collins et al. 2016). Housing subsidies should be widely available to support families in sustaining long-term housing (Bai et al. 2020).

Housing and support underpinned by a Housing First approach should be actively inclusive of families regardless of presentation or perceived ‘housing readiness’. Warburton et al. (2018) explained that mothers experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience longer periods of instability, exacerbating the likelihood of domestic violence, mental health and drug or alcohol use. Women and children continue to be evicted from tenancies because of violence against them (valentine et al. 2020b). Theobald et al. (2021) provided a valuable contribution to understanding the social context at play in exclusionary practice. Their examination of women’s refuges in Victoria is important because these services are commonly considered at the forefront of anti-oppressive practice. However, these services are also still susceptible to exclusionary or disempowering practices, including discrimination based on drug and alcohol use or presenting mental health (Theobald et al. 2021). This commentary provides valuable insight into the challenges for broader service system capacity to overcome structural injustice and include families who experience multiple disadvantages.

Much work is still to be done for services, especially social housing, to acknowledge and overcome the gendered nature of women and their children being marginalised by DFV (valentine et al. 2020a). Supportive housing demands further exploration. It is more than improving access to housing and reducing evictions. Supportive housing requires the service system to understand the intersection of challenges that families face and acknowledge its role in exacerbating the challenges (Milaney et al. 2019). Investment in policy and services that partner with families help to strengthen their experience of safety, self-determination and stable, affordable housing.

**Discussion**

**Global perspectives and analysis**

The literature reviewed as part of this research has highlighted the contribution of contemporary approaches to the housing and support needs of families based on the Housing First principle. This approach seeks to provide rapid housing and support responses to families at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, who may also be experiencing DFV and involvement with child protection agencies. Critically, support is non-mandatory and client focused, as the client–worker relationship is paramount (Micah Projects Inc. 2016). These approaches contrast to the traditional methods of delivering housing and support services in that the Housing First approach recognises the importance of the agency and voice of families. This approach to assisting families continues to be an emerging area of focus in scholarly literature.

The literature reviewed in this analysis was taken from the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. The authors are particularly interested in reviewing more literature from European and South American countries as part of their ongoing inquiries. A major theme that emerged from the articles reviewed as part of this study was good practice in housing and support requiring a contemporary and anti-oppressive policy and service delivery approach in working with families. The analysis confirms that the levels of oppression experienced by families are severe and often lead to what Freire would describe as silencing or passivity about oppressed people affecting change (Cowden et al. 2020). The existing housing and support systems structures serve to reinforce the structural oppression and domination that families experience. The literature also shows the disproportionate effects for women and mothers in accessing safe and affordable housing, particularly after episodes of DFV (Warburton et al. 2018; Milaney et al. 2019). Homelessness, poverty, DFV and social exclusion affect women and families in multidimensional ways. More thought is needed about how the housing system can be reformed to avoid contributing further to these systemic oppressions.

**Status Quo or reimagining a new service system? The case for change to housing and homelessness policy settings in Queensland and Australia**

Like other jurisdictions and countries, Queensland and Australia are beginning to realise the potential opportunities of contemporary approaches to supporting families. In Queensland, Micah Projects Inc. have committed to expanding supportive housing services to include families, starting in metropolitan Brisbane in 2020, a crucially important first step in improving the housing service system for families. However, despite some new, innovative initiatives in some jurisdictions, most families continue to experience the traditional housing pathway. This is particularly concerning when data about the housing needs of families in Queensland and Australia is extremely high and lacks social and affordable housing across the country. Similar data relating to the prevalence of DFV and child protection matters, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, also shows the need for alternatives to traditional statutory welfare responses (Carrington et al. 2020; Lenz-Rashid 2017). The voices and experiences of First Nations peoples and communities are also noticeably absent from the literature in Australia. Policymakers and program designers need to overcome the inherent challenges of working effectively across sectors.
This analysis has highlighted the value of critical social work as a theoretical framework to evaluate and redesign the housing service system to be more responsive and supportive to families. New approaches to providing housing and support to families are an emerging area of focus in national and international literature. Although research must continue to show the considerable failure of the existing housing service system to meet the needs of families, research is also needed to identify and compare traditional housing and support approaches with more contemporary approaches such as Housing First and Supportive Housing. This critical literature review has noted that the latter is a fairly recent and emerging focus. More research is required to help recognise that broader housing policy needs to change.

This critical literature review identifies particular challenges for women-headed families at risk of or experiencing homelessness and also DFV and statutory child protection interventions. The paper argues that more analysis and evidence is needed to help shift the housing service system to be more client centric. There are opportunities to consider how cultural safety for First Nations peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse communities could be developed as part of a suite of new housing and support interventions. Finally, there is growing evidence about the economics and cost-effectiveness of governments and agencies in adopting Housing First approaches to supporting people experiencing homelessness. Although this paper did not focus on the economics or cost-effectiveness of reforming the housing system to improve outcomes for families, this is undoubtedly a major consideration and worthy of further analysis and debate.

Conclusion

This positioning paper has highlighted a range of national and international research about housing and support interventions for families. This literature has been analysed through the lens of critical social work theory and argues for a fundamental change in housing provision for families at risk of or experiencing homelessness, noting these families often have contact with related service systems, including DFV and child protection. The traditional housing response to families diminishes the agency and ability for self-determination of families and reflects a neoliberal hostility towards families in need of housing and support. By contrast, the relatively recent literature on Housing First and Supportive Housing approaches shows a way forward for how more effective, family focused responses can be delivered. There continue to be opportunities for critical social workers to influence policy development and program design to achieve meaningful outcomes for families.

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