

Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia



Barnardos
Australia

To:	Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs House of Representatives
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Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) thanks the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs for the opportunity to provide a submission to its Inquiry into homelessness in Australia.

Background: Barnardos knowledge of this area

Barnardos is a not for profit children's social care organisation, providing family support and out-of-home care (OOHC) to approximately 15,000 children and their families in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and New South Wales (NSW) each year. In our family support work, we aim to reach vulnerable children at risk of separation from their families, and homelessness is a strong feature of this work. For close to 100 years, we have been working together with children, young people and families to break the cycle of disadvantage, creating safe, nurturing and stable homes, connected to family and community.

Barnardos' suite of Safety & Prevention programs includes tailored support for children and their families who are at particular risk of homelessness (see Appendix A for a summary of our homelessness programs).

We note the very high level of vulnerability of the children and families who use our services. For example:

- In Western NSW, homelessness or risk of homelessness is a presenting issue in approximately 80% of our intensive family preservation referrals and 30% of Brighter Futures referrals.
- In Penrith, for families accessing the transitional housing program over the last 12 months:
 - 100% of parents had a child protection history with the statutory authority (Department of Community and Justice).
 - 80% of residents (parents) were aged under the age of 25 years
 - 75% of parents had resided in OOHC as a child
 - 60% are Aboriginal families
 - The main reason for referral was parental mental health (often diagnosed with depression and typically co-occurring with PTSD), followed by domestic violence.

Factors affecting the incidence of homelessness, including housing-market factors (*Terms of Reference 2*)

In our experience, families living in metropolitan Sydney and Canberra are impacted by precarious home ownership and mortgage stress. Many families are by necessity two parent working parent households to sustain paying a mortgage. The cost of utilities is often an unsustainable drain on household budgets. At our Penrith Children's Family Centre (which is a service provider through the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance or EAPA scheme) many of these families are accessing support with EAPA (bill payment) or food assistance – with most of their wages being paid into their mortgage.

The often insurmountable barrier of high rental prices exacerbates the risk of vulnerable children and their families living in metropolitan Sydney and Canberra experiencing

homelessness. Likewise, in rural and regional areas (Western NSW), financial stress due to unaffordability of rental accommodation and difficulty in finding work increases the incidence of homelessness.

Very few of our client families have parent/s with stable employment or travel for work opportunities. Frequently, their lack of access to safe and secure housing is further compounded by the experience of domestic violence and consequent anxiety and depression.

In our experience, young people are the most disadvantaged in the private rental market as they have no rental history, no experience of independent living, and are typically seen as a risk by private landlords.

In terms of housing market factors impacting on the incidence of homelessness, we note that:

- The medium rental price in Penrith is \$400 per week. For a single mother with two children, income per fortnight would be \$1,100. This would mean after rent, there is \$300 left to pay for groceries, nappies, electricity and phone. Thereby rendering housing prices unaffordable for many single income families.
- Canberra is the tenth most expensive property market in Australia. Canberra has the highest median rental market in the country with the median weekly rent for houses of \$550. The transient nature of the workforce in Canberra is another factor in the high rents demanded.
- Canberra also has the second highest homelessness rate in the country.
- Further, there is insufficient social housing for those who are eligible, and the system is complex to navigate. For example:
 - DCJ does not have a streamlined process for assisting families – for example, a family maybe residing in a car and a ROSH report is received by DCJ in regard to the family being homeless. However, DCJ close as the concerns aren't around child protection, they are about homelessness and they refer the family to housing.
 - DCJ will expect a family to view up to 3 rental properties a day to access temporary accommodation. This can be difficult and costly without leading to the family securing accommodation.
- From our homelessness programs in Auburn NSW, whose population is very culturally diverse, we know that the system is difficult to navigate especially for those who have English as a second language and come from a very different culture.
- Those who are not eligible for social housing, including families on visas or are New Zealand citizens and students, are reliant on assistance from their own community and churches and a small number of non-government community organisations, such as Barnardos.
- Offenders leaving a correctional facility are at amongst those at greatest risk of homelessness and in turn re-offending.
- Up to 80% of Aboriginal women leaving prison have previously experienced domestic and family violence and returning “home” means returning to violence, drug use and

poverty due to their limited alternate network of safe contacts who have safe and secure housing.

- Timing of release can often immediately affect housing and homelessness outcomes. For example, late Friday afternoon when services and other supports are closed. This coupled with transport disadvantage or options can mean clients are immediately returned into a cycle of unsafe housing or accommodation options.

The causes of, and contributing factors to, housing overcrowding (*Terms of Reference 3*)

We note that the lack of affordability of rent is such that often families are having to co-habitat to afford to pay for rent and utilities. This results in overcrowding of a household. Finding affordable accommodation typically means being located in areas of isolation for families – this means limited access to transport; services can be challenging and costly for a sole parent having to get groceries home on a bus with a pram and 3 children.

For example, at our Penrith Children’s Family Centre, our intensive family support, family support and disability support services have previously worked across an extended family that all resided together - 21 people residing in a 3 bedroom home – 15 children and 6 adults. DCJ had provided a case work service to the family after receiving a ROSH due to household overcrowding. DCJ were unsuccessful with obtaining accommodation for members of the family. The housing assessment was that each family could afford market rent (based on their calculations) when the reality for the family (taking into account medical expenses and additional support needs where 10 out of the 15 children having moderate disabilities) market rent was unaffordable. For one of these families (single mum with 5 children – 4 with disabilities) she has for 3 years attempted to get private housing – with to date not one application approved.

Opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness (*Terms of Reference 4*)

Case Studies 2 and 3 in Appendix B exemplifies the need for early intervention to prevent homelessness.

There is a pressing need for effective early intervention and prevention of homelessness for people leaving prison, notably women with children. For mothers leaving prison, securing stable accommodation is key to avoiding the risk of reoffending and to keeping them and their children safe. While incarcerated our Beyond Barbed Wire Program (BBW) in Western NSW can provide an educational program - Rent It Keep It - so that women better understand their obligation and rights under a residential lease agreement. For women with children leaving prison BBW has been able to provide safe and secure housing via head leasing of 7 rental properties - Barnardos sublets the properties to women so that the mother may stay in the property for up to 3 months while we actively work to secure longer term safe housing and provide wrap around support to get her back on her feet, keep her children in her care or have her children return to her care and avoid re-offending.

However, demand for BBW properties consistently outstrips the number of properties available, so many women (with children) being released from prison are relying on TA and refuges and require transitional short stay housing options to address previous unsatisfactory tenancies.

Services to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including housing assistance, social Housing, and specialist homelessness services (Terms of Reference 5)

Case Study 1 in Appendix B illustrates the role of services to and support for people at particular risk of homeless, notably young care leavers.

Support and services for people at particular risk of homelessness (Terms of Reference 6a & 6b)

Women and children affected by family and domestic violence

In metropolitan Sydney, 28% of our referrals for families to homelessness programs are due to domestic violence. In rural NSW, domestic and family violence and continues to be the number one referral reason to our homelessness services, mostly for women with children.

Domestic abuse frequently has ongoing impacts on both risk of homelessness and financial security. For example, at our Auburn Children's Family Centre, one African mother was forced to pay back her "bride price" so that her partner would stop his family from threatening her blind mother who was still in Africa. He repeatedly stalked her via the children (asking them about where they are living) and she had to move three times during the 2 years we supported the family. Thus, her partner continues to impact her housing and financial security, even though they are separated.

We note also the gaps in availability of accommodation in refuges. In our experience is that refuges will not take boys over the age of 12 years and often numbers of children are capped at 4, meaning older siblings are separated from their mother and younger siblings due to refuge capacity.

Children and young people

There is a major service gap for young people leaving care at the age of 18. Often the pre-planning is inadequate, and the system fails to provide an adequate handing over from care to supported accommodation. The current system is geared for immediate crisis intake – and does not allow for planning ahead to "keep" a vacancy for a young person. While they are in residential care or with foster parents they are not considered to be at risk of homelessness.

For example, many of the parents who access transitional housing at Auburn and Penrith have a history of OOHC. Young pregnant mothers from neglected backgrounds need a lot of support around recognising the needs of their babies and moving from the living skills required to be independent in a "street wise" sense, as compared with the living skills required to maintain a household and tenancy and be a good parent. Often, they tell us that they don't want to repeat their own experience and want something different for their children, but don't know what different looks like.

Many of these parents have not received after care support or accessed additional funding (such as victims compensation claims or after care funding). We find that many of these parents are not aware of their capacity to access this type of funding support and as such much of our casework support is centred on accessing these supports for the parent.

We note that:

- A major service gap is for care leavers who are either pregnant or have children. We often get referrals for young people 16-18 years who fit this category. However, many are ineligible for supported independent living programs due to:
 - Having a child
 - Being assessed as having basic independence skills
 - Refusing to leave a partner to access a SILP program (i.e partner may be ineligible for service provision)
 - Nil service provider capacity.
- The complicating factor for our homelessness programs is given the young person's age (under 18) they are unable to sign a lease – which often means we cannot provide a service.
- For those young people who are over the age of 18, we often find they have no living skills, so no skills around: cooking, cleaning, budgeting – so our casework for the first 3-6 months is addressing this need rather than housing.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspect of our submission. Please feel free to contact Dr Robert Urquhart, Head of Knowledge, Outcomes and Research on (02) 9218 2392 or rurquhart@barnardos.org.au.

Appendix A – Barnardos homelessness programs

Auburn Children’s Family Centre (Sydney NSW)

Auburn provides two homelessness programs:

- *Transitional Accommodation Program (TAP)*
 - Barnardos TAP provides “family support-style” casework to families living in 4 bedsit units owned by Barnardos and 6 properties in the community managed by Evolve Community Housing.
 - Target clients are young pregnant women and young parents 16-24 years, and families with dependent children who homeless or at risk of homelessness; for 3-18 months.
 - Clients are predominantly from the Cumberland Local Government Area and then Western Sydney.
- *No Wrong Door clients*
 - Brief crisis support to anyone homeless or at risk of homelessness to link them to other accommodation and services for on-going support and/or advocate for them to be rapidly rehoused.

Canberra Children’s Family Centre (ACT)

Canberra Centre delivers three youth homelessness programs:

- *Friendly Landlord Service*
 - Dispersed accommodation
 - 60 places
 - Target clients are young persons aged 16-25 years old.
- *Our Place*
 - In congregate locations
 - 24 places
 - Target clients are young persons aged 16-21 years old.
- *Couch Surfing*
 - Self-identified Barnardos supported placements
 - 20-30 places
 - Target clients are young persons aged 15-19 years old.

Penrith Children’s Family Centre (Sydney NSW)

Penrith delivers two homelessness programs:

- *Universal Screening and Supports (also known as Mt Druitt Project)*
 - An early intervention program based on the COSS model (Geelong Project).
 - Is currently in Pilot stage at 4 high schools in Mt Druitt.
 - This model uses a screening tool to identify young people at risk of homelessness and early school leaving.
 - Service provision is guided by screening of young people and is for young people aged 11 to 18 years who are enrolled in a Chifley college within Mt Druitt.

- *Penrith Transitional Housing Program*
 - Currently not receiving external funding.
 - 6 one bedroom units which can accommodate 4 people.
 - Accommodation is provided to families who have children.
 - All families must be allocated to a program at Penrith to access accommodation.
 - Assessment of eligibility is regards to risk – Drug and alcohol use; domestic violence and mental health. Assessment is based around units not being staffed 24/7 – so families must be low to moderate need and risk.
 - Numbers per year vary – average stay for a family is 9 months.

Western NSW (rural and remote NSW)

Western NSW delivers a range of homelessness services including:

- *Reconnect Cobar, Warren, Nyngan* – 12-18 year olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- *Reconnect Wellington, Narromine, Gilgandra* – 12-18 year olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- *Reconnect Mid-Western Regional and Warrumbungles* – 12-18 year olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- *Mudgee SHS* - homeless or at risk of homelessness and domestic violence enhancement.
- *SHS Western NSW Domestic Violence Response Enhancement* – LINKER service-women with or with children who are homeless due to domestic or family violence.
- *Beyond Barbed Wire* – for women with children leaving correctional facility and returning to live in Western NSW.
- All Barnardos Western NSW safety and prevention services support families with children in relation to Housing and homelessness as needed.

Appendix B - Case Studies

All names have been changed and pseudonyms used.

Services to and support for people at particular risk of homeless

Young Aboriginal care leaver with three children, one of whom was in statutory care

Barnardos Penrith Children's Family Centre homelessness programs – Transitional Housing Program

Sarah is an Aboriginal woman aged 25 years who had been placed in OOHC since the age of 4 years. She had fled accommodation in Orange – she had been staying with extended family – due to family violence.

Sarah was brought to the Centre by another parent who accesses Penrith supported playgroup. Sarah informed Barnardos workers that she was currently residing in her car with her newborn Charlie, and Lyndall, a 4-year-old.

Sarah disclosed to Barnardos workers that DCJ had worked with her in Orange and had provided accommodation in a hotel for 5 nights, after she had disclosed family violence to a midwife at the hospital during her stay after giving birth to Charlie, her newborn.

Further information obtained from DCJ confirmed that:

- Sarah had been in care and left a residential care placement after the birth of Xavier.
- Sarah had an extensive history of sexual and physical harm.
- DCJ had removed her six-year-old child Xavier and he was in PRM to 18 due to Sarah's drug use and homelessness.
- Sarah had attended a residential drug and alcohol treatment program prior to the birth of Lyndall.
- Sarah had returned to Western NSW prior to the birth of Lyndall, however had never had her own accommodation – relying on friends and family.
- Concerns were raised at Charlie's birth around family violence, homelessness, and mental health. There were concerns about Sarah's ability to provide basic care to the children, notably routines and provision of healthy food.
- DCJ had provided accommodation for 5 nights, however had closed the family plan due to Sarah not keeping an appointment

Sarah had no housing history for herself – which impacted on her capacity to obtain private rental. DCJ had not referred Sarah to supports on her turning 18 (aging out of care) – so no referrals to Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) or after care supports/ victims compensation had been made. DCJ recommended that Sarah “*go to housing*” as her “*issues*” were about housing, not child protection.

Following assessment and support provided by Barnardos Penrith homelessness programs, Sarah has resided in Barnardos accommodation for a period of 9 months.

The first three months of service provision to Sarah and her children centred on:

- Provision of coaching and modelling of basic skills (cleaning, cooking, routines for children)

- Assessment and treatment plan pertaining to Sarah's mental health
- Linking children into childcare and addressing their health needs (e.g. immunisation).
- Payment of rent – “demonstrating capacity to pay” for housing applications.

Having established these goals, the following 6 months of service provision to Sarah and her children have centred on:

- Accessing Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) and victims compensation funding.
- Provision of coaching and modelling of parenting skills (emotional coaching, play).
- Developing and submitting housing applications.

The need for early intervention to prevent homelessness

Sole parent who had experienced trauma, with baby at risk of removal into statutory care

Barnardos Canberra homelessness programs

Laura is a single mother of Tod (aged 8 months). Laura contacted Barnardos seeking support with housing and issues around the care of Tod in August. Laura was offered an ACT Housing property, soon after we assisted her with a priority application. Laura had experienced a very traumatic year and Child Youth Protection Services (CYPS) had become involved after Laura's partner suicided and Laura was not coping. Tod had been living with his paternal grandparents, which was not ideal as they were both heavy drinkers. Laura was homeless and would spend her days with Tod but nights couch surfing between friends.

Laura is now doing much better and has received a Mental Health plan to assist her in her grieving and recovery process. Her housing is stable, and Barnardos were able to seek adequate donations to set her up with white goods and basic furniture and household items to make the situation suitable. Tod is doing well and appears happy and meeting appropriate milestones. It has taken a lot of persistence for Laura to see Barnardos as a source of support and assistance as she has had her own experiences with services in the past, and a short period of time in OOHC which has made her fearful. Barnardos has seen significant progress in her engagement and felt confident she was feeling comfortable with us when she referred another young parent (friend of hers) who was also experiencing difficulties recently. Laura has expressed an interest in participating in the Circles of Security which will give us an opportunity to work with her on her parenting Tod and exploring attachment and play opportunities.

Family with five children and incarcerated father, experiencing overcrowding, hoarding & squalor

Barnardos Canberra homelessness programs

The family were initially referred into the family support program as the children had been placed into kinship care due to neglect, hoarding and squalor. The initial referral was to assist Liz to clear and tidy the home, parenting support and housing issues as Liz's partner was in prison (the Alexander Maconochie Centre) at the time and they were looking to restore the children to the home.

Liz has been involved with the program on and off over the past 5 years with a range of issues and concerns and as the family grows. The main issues requiring support are mental health, lack of finances, housing issues, and intermittent Child Youth Protection Services (CYPS) involvement.

Liz's has 5 children, her oldest son has now two children (which the oldest child is in Liz's care full time), and her oldest daughter has a baby also. The family are all currently living in the one 4-bedroom house, which has created an overcrowding issue. The home accommodates 7 children and 4 Adults.

CYPS are concerned about the overcrowding of the house, but Housing ACT is not able to provide them with a bigger house. Request of a caravan to be placed at the house for the older daughter and her partner has be submitted to housing ACT for approval.

Liz receives support around parenting, setting boundaries and guidelines, funding for the kid's sports, food, transport to meetings, donations of clothes, school supplies, advocacy with housing and CYPS.