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Emerging Minds response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs: Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia

June 2020

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About Emerging Minds

Emerging Minds is a non-profit organisation which has been dedicated to advancing the mental health and social and emotional wellbeing of Australian infants, children, adolescents and their families for over 20 years. Emerging Minds develops mental health policy, services, interventions, training, programs and resources in response to the needs of professionals, children and their families. We partner with family members, national and international organisations to implement evidence-based practice in the Australian context. Emerging Minds is currently responsible for leading the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

Emerging Minds conceptualises child mental health in 10 Guiding Principles (next page). These are key elements which consider the child as a whole and underpin the work we do.

We recognise that the best way to support child mental health is through early intervention and prevention. We apply a public health approach to infant and child mental health through increasing child mental health literacy and workforce capacity building, which supports early intervention and prevention. The importance of a focus on the mental health of infants and children has been reinforced by contemporary research and there has been a gradual recognition that services need to better address mental health in the early years (Mental Health Australia & KPMG, 2018).

Emerging Minds has a focus on supporting workforces in both child- and adult-focused services in health, social and community sectors. We recognise the importance of the parenting role for adults experiencing vulnerabilities, and the impact of adult vulnerabilities on children's social and emotional wellbeing. Emerging Minds' training and resources are freely available to help workers increase their skills, knowledge and confidence around supporting child mental health.

Relevance of this inquiry to Emerging Minds:

Children living in families that are homeless or at risk of homelessness, are also at an increased risk of mental health difficulties. Evidence indicates that factors often associated with homelessness such as lack of resources due to poverty, instability and family violence (Housing Australia, 2016; CHP; AHRC 2016, Spinney, 2012; Spinney & Blandy, 2011; David et al, 2012), impact on children's development, mental health and wellbeing. (Stronger Foundations Collaboration, 2019; AFRC 2008, David et al, 2012, AIHW, 2019a).

Within the homelessness sector, the visibility of children seems to be limited, despite efforts to capture their presence in the data. Sadly, it seems that the category of overcrowding, where children are most prominent (Parkinson et al, 2019), fails to be acknowledged as a homelessness issue within this Inquiry.

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Guiding Principles

1 **Children and their local ecology**
The wellbeing of infants and children depends on their social and environmental contexts, more so than with any other age group. Infant and child mental health is best understood within a framework that accounts for individual child characteristics, family strengths and vulnerabilities, and broader social and economic factors.

2 **Relationships matter**
Relationships play a central role in children's social and emotional development and mental health. From the time of birth, children need stable and responsive relationships with caring adults.

3 **Prevention and early intervention**
A focus on preventing or intervening early in the progression of mental health difficulties not only benefits infants and children but also creates a solid foundation for health outcomes later in life, making it a long-term investment in the future of Australian society.

4 **Strengths and vulnerabilities**
At any point in time, children's mental health is influenced by a mix of strengths and vulnerabilities. Effective practice focuses on enhancing and promoting strengths, while accounting for vulnerabilities.

5 **Resilience**
Resilience is the ability to recover, adjust to, or grow after an adverse event or period of adversity. The single most important factor for developing resilience in children is the presence of at least one committed and supportive relationship with a parent, caregiver or other adult.

6 **Trauma informed**
Trauma involves experiences that overwhelm a person's ability to cope. Trauma-informed care is a framework for service delivery based on an understanding of the effect of trauma on individuals, their coping skills and service needs.

7 **Developmental perspective**
Children are not small adults; they have particular emotional, social and physical capacities and needs. To be effective, service delivery must be designed around infant and child developmental stages.

8 **Cultural and spiritual identity**
For some children and families, cultural and spiritual identity is central to health and wellbeing. Service provision is more effective if it respects and incorporates service users' cultural and spiritual understandings.

9 **Children's rights**
Upholding and protecting children's rights is essential to promoting their mental health. It is every adult's responsibility to uphold and fulfil the rights of children.

10 **Child, family and practitioner voice**
Services designed collaboratively with children, families and practitioners tend to be more effective, more acceptable to the individuals and families using the service, and more relevant to their local context.

10 Guiding Principles of Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing taken from Keeping child mental health in mind: A workforce development framework for supporting infants, children and parents.

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Summary of recommendations

A **Workforce Development Strategy** inclusive of knowledge and skills for early intervention (identification, assessment, support and/or referral) for disadvantaged and vulnerable families and children, to improve mental health outcomes in children later in life. The strategy for the homelessness sector should include knowledge and skills around impact of adult adversities on parenting and the flow-on effect to children, and specifically of family and domestic violence and its impact on children.

Develop **child mental health literacy** amongst professionals in the homelessness sector and the general public. As above, this would include literacy about the interaction between homelessness and child mental health outcomes.

Collaborative and integrated **multidisciplinary care models** between the homelessness sector and other service sectors, that keep children and families in mind.

Data collection within homelessness, housing and other services that enables the experiences and needs of children and their families to be identified, so that it can inform policy planning and service delivery.

Recognise the importance of child safe and inclusive environments and future **planning of housing supply, design and grants which considers the needs of children** and families.

Further **research, understanding and collaboration** with communities.

Policy as a driver for practice change and public awareness. Policy and data systems that require early identification, assessment, support and/or referral of vulnerable children and their families, experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness

Early Intervention and Prevention should include the impact of homelessness on the social and emotional wellbeing of children and families is critical across health and community sectors, including homelessness.

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Response to selected Terms of Reference

We have responded below to items of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference which are relevant to Emerging Minds. Our responses are framed with a focus on child mental health.

2. factors affecting the incidence of homelessness, including housing-market factors;

- 'The causes of homelessness are a complex mix of individual circumstances and policy directions (AIHW, 2019). Yet, it is widely accepted that poverty is a significant contributor to homelessness, and domestic and violence is generally the main reason women and children become homeless (AIHW, 2019a). When considering children under 12 years of age and their experiences of homelessness, the data attributes cause to family breakdown (often due to family violence), leaving care and overcrowded living arrangements (Parkinson et al, 2019; AIHW, 2019, AHRC, 2016).

- Domestic and Family Violence is the most common factor that contributes to women with children seeking housing services assistance (AIHW 2019a, p.35, Perkins 2018). In 2017-2019, 42% of people assisted by specialist homelessness services had experienced family and domestic violence. The majority (78%) were female and this has been a 32% increase since 2013-2014, (AIHW 2019 a,). A skilled workforce can respond early and appropriately according to the needs of families, parents and children (Kilmer et al, 2012).

- Homelessness assistance due to family and domestic violence was provided to 1 in 5 (22%) children under 9 years of age (AIHW, 2019a). However, data is only collected when a service is directly provided to the child and may not account for all children of a family presenting to homelessness services. There are notable gaps in data collection (Parkinson et al, 2019; AIHW 2017, 2019, 2019a) that impacts on policy planning and delivery of services and programs, particularly for children (AIHW, 2019a)

- Poor housing affordability is a key characteristic of housing stress and contributes to disadvantage and poverty. It is most acute in single parent families compared to coupled families (Strong Foundations Collaboration, 2019, Wilkins et al, 2019). Behavioural difficulties in younger children (under age 5) are more prominent where there is housing instability. Psychological difficulties are observed from middle childhood (after age 7) where there has been housing instability in the early years.

- Intergenerational disadvantage that can be transmitted through long-term homelessness impacts on children's health, wellbeing and development (AIHW, 2018a). Therefore, the lack of access to resources that contributes to healthy wellbeing, development and learning is compromised and adults pass on their disadvantage to their children and so on, which has implications on child mental health as well as opportunities throughout the lifespan (AIHW 2018a)

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Implications for child mental health:

Housing stress impacts housing stability and parenting capacity which has an impact on children's social and emotional wellbeing and development. Frequent moves impact on social connection (educational and community) which impacts on the support network of the family and can have cascading impacts on children's mental health as they grow and develop.

Inconsistencies in data collection impact on understanding the issues and challenges people experience which in turn influences policies, programs and services. In the homelessness sector, this is particularly evident with families experiencing family and domestic violence where only one third of families accessed housing services (AIHW, 2019a) and also amongst severely overcrowded households where only a fraction access housing services (Parkinson et al, 2019). Data collection which does not adequately capture the experience of children in homeless families mean the services delivered are less likely to consider the needs of children as individuals when providing services to families or to take into account to their context when providing services directly to children.

Recommendations:

o   A wrap-around or holistic response that extends beyond the Homelessness sector is required to capture accurate data that may help inform support for children and families experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness.

o   Services, programs and policies should be integrated to provide a streamlined and connected approach which considers the social and emotional needs of children, regardless of whether they provide a direct service to the adult or child (Stronger Foundations Collaborative, 2019, p.38).

o   Workforce development among homelessness and housing workforce to improve understanding and delivery of services that address the impacts of homelessness, and co-occurring issues such as family and domestic violence, on children's health, mental health and development

o   The system as a whole should adopt a holistic approach that considers the whole child in policies, programs and services, with universal system of support for children, parents and families, with a more targeted system that is tailored according to the complexity of need. (Stronger Foundations Collaborative, 2019, p.38-39, Kilmer et al, 2012).

o   Development of initiatives that support the establishment and strengthening of community relationships and safe and nurturing environments for children, their families and communities (Stronger Foundations Collaborative, 2019, p.39).

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3. **the causes of, and contributing factors to, housing overcrowding;**

- Lack of affordable housing contributes to housing stress and mobility/transience. (Parkinson et al, 2019; Strong Foundations Collaboration, 2019). Recent data shows that low income households are experiencing housing stress (AIHW, 2019) and that although this has decreased from 26% in 2011 to 22% in 2016, (AIHW, 2018), it implies that more than 1 in 5 children continue to live in households experiencing housing stress. Housing stress impacts on adult mental and emotional wellbeing which in turn affects parenting capacity and family functioning. Evidence has shown that adult stresses impact on children's social and emotional wellbeing and development and has long lasting consequences, particularly in the early years (Strong Foundations Collaboration, 2019; Taylor & Edwards,2012; Robinson & Adams, 2008)

- There has been a significant increase in households experiencing severe overcrowding. This is most prominent in households with children under 14 years. (AIHW, AHURI). There are a range of reasons for this, most prominently unaffordable housing, lack of appropriate housing and population mobility from rural to urban (Parkinson et al, 2019). Living in multi-family households or cheaper but smaller dwellings (that contribute to overcrowding) may reduce the financial stress of unaffordable housing and may even provide social support in multi-family households. However, living in overcrowded housing may also impact negatively on the functioning of the family unit, affect parenting, the parent-child relationship and/or their social support network, that is critical to children's development and wellbeing (Stronger Foundations Collaboration, 2019).

- Service response is mismatched and only a small fraction of families in overcrowded dwellings are accessing housing services (Parkinson et al, 2019).

- Children under 14 years living in overcrowded housing are identified as one of the 'at risk' population groups (Parkinson et al 2019).

Implications for child mental health:

Recent reports (Stronger Foundations Collaboration, 2019; Warren 2018) highlight the impact of homelessness on emotional and behavioural development in the early years and social and emotional development throughout childhood.

Housing stress on parents/caregivers has implications for children's mental health/social and emotional wellbeing which can have implications across the lifespan. However, early intervention and appropriate timely support can mitigate some of the negative impacts (Strong Foundations Collaboration, 2019, AIHW, 2019, Kilmer eta al, 2012). Continued conditions which lead to overcrowding represent a risk to the development and mental wellbeing of children.

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Recommendations:

- To reduce the impact of housing stress on families and improve mental health, wellbeing and learning outcomes for children, the homelessness workforce must have knowledge and skills in child mental health and trauma which support prevention and early intervention practices, to identify, assess, support and/or refer vulnerable children and their families.

- Housing stock that provides the minimum standard of living for healthy growth and development, located within the family's support communities, is an important consideration. Accordingly, suggestions by Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (2019) and Stronger Foundations Collaborative (2019) reports should be considered. These include:

  - Services and policy makers need to plan for and respond to the spatial dynamics of different types of homelessness, and especially those emerging within the more suburban areas of capital cities, which appear to be most vulnerable to severe crowding (Parkinson et al, 2019, p.36)

  - There is a need to gain more detailed insight into the service needs of those who are living in overcrowded dwellings (Parkinson et al, 2019, p.5)

  - Thoughtful planning in both the allocation and supply of affordable housing, as well as grants and approval for new supply, is required to ensure that new dwellings and housing assistance packages enable families and children to remain within their communities and close to support, including the exploration of more innovative responses to address issues of overcrowding—particularly among those with young children and extended kinship groups. (Parkinson et al, 2019, p.4, p.66)

  - The supply of affordable housing needs to match areas of population growth among lower income individuals and households in a way that also provides access to broader services, employment and amenities. (Parkinson et al, 2019, p.4)

  - New housing stock needs to cater better to a range of household sizes, including options for multiple-bedroom as well as single-bedroom dwellings. Innovative solutions that include additional living space for families in existing properties could also alleviate crowding. (Parkinson et al, 2019, p.66)

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4. **opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness;**
and
6. **support and services for people at particular risk of homelessness, including:**
    a. **women and children affected by family and domestic violence;**
    b. **children and young people;**

- Effective policies, service provision and practices at all levels take into account the needs of all members of the family unit including children, and this highlights the need to make children visible regardless of whether policies, service provision and practices are provided directly to them or not. The national child safety standards and framework for protecting Australia's children, workforce development strategies and Victoria's Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework have the potential to facilitate an approach which will consider the whole child in context of their family and situation (Stronger Foundations Collaborative, 2019, Kilmer et al, 2012). This must be at the heart of not only practice but also the social and organisational policies, systems and frameworks.

- Supporting families (parents and children) experiencing homelessness, requires a skilled and knowledgeable workforce about homelessness and its impact on parenting and children. This poses challenges as the homelessness sector has been predominantly adult focused, that does not routinely acknowledge the importance of the parenting role amongst parents/caregivers when providing a service, nor does it include children in their data, unless a service has been directly provided to the child.

- A workforce development strategy for homelessness sector, that keeps children and families in mind, such as those that currently exist in both NSW and Tasmania (ShelterTAS, 2015; DVN et al, 2016).

- Families, labour markets, public policy and the broader national context shape the extent to which children's opportunities and outcomes depend on their family background and circumstances (Parkinson et al, 2019, p.36)

- Data collection across sectors informs policy, program and service planning to ensure it is accessible and responsive to those most in need which should include children age and vulnerabilities (Parkinson et al 2019, AIHW 2017, 2019, 2019a; Stronger Foundations Collaboration, 2019)

Implications for child mental health:

Children's mental health cannot be separated from the broader contexts of their lives and environment, and the importance of effective policies, service provision and practices beyond those focused on mental health is critical for prevention and early intervention for a child. These policies, service provision and practices should not only be in health, family and community services, but also housing and homelessness sectors.

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Recommendations:

o Develop policies and data systems at all levels that take into account the early identification, assessment, support and referral of vulnerable children and their families, experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

o Implement a workforce development strategy that includes a focus on child, parent and family mental health to strengthen service provision and workforce practices within the homelessness sector that addresses the consequences of homelessness on children's mental health

o That early intervention and prevention is better understood, as more than the supply of housing stock, and also includes the social and emotional wellbeing of children and families, with a particular focus on intergenerational homelessness.

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Concluding comments

Factors that contribute to homelessness are varied and complex and require a broad range of programs and services to address the issues experienced by this very vulnerable group. The impacts of homelessness on children highlight the importance of proactive strategies to integrate support for mental health into routine responses. This includes:

- ensure data on children and children's wellbeing is collected and used to inform policy
- policy considerations of where and how housing supply is planned and allocated needs to consider the factors that contribute to environments that encourage children and families to thrive. a child and families focused workforce within the homelessness service system that is skilled and knowledgeable in child mental health, and in the identification, assessment, support and referral of children and families at risk of adverse or negative mental health outcomes.
- a whole of government approach that acknowledges the impact of adult issues on parenting and how this in turn impacts on the health and development of children, and throughout their lifespan.

The range of difficulties which may be experienced by a child living in a family effected by homelessness, is intrinsically linked with their mental health and wellbeing. These physical, emotional and cognitive difficulties can make it harder for a child to successfully negotiate their learning and social environments, negatively impacting their development.

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Additional Material

Online Course:

The impact of family and domestic violence on children: an introduction is available, free to access, on the Emerging Minds website

Short Article:

The role of neighbourhoods in young children's mental health: What does the evidence tell us? By Amanda Alderton and colleagues, 2019

Child mental health literacy: What is it and why is it important? By Lucy Tully and colleagues, 2019

Webinar:

Engaging mothers and children affected by family and domestic violence webinar by Emerging Minds and Mental Health Professionals Network

Engaging with children and parents with complex needs – a systems approach webinar by Emerging Minds and Mental Health Professionals Network