



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

## Myths and misunderstandings about family homelessness

### Definitions

We know that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' includes the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child. We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

### Money, housing and health

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through homelessness to give you new ideas for how to get through as a family – and spark some hope.

We know that homelessness, and especially family homelessness, is largely misunderstood by those who haven't experienced it. This lack of understanding impacts the policies and

services designed to change homelessness. It also often results in experiencing unhelpful and harmful responses from family, friends, community members and the media.

### Take a moment to think about...



- If you're from a family that's experienced homelessness, what would you like others to understand?
- If you have not experienced homelessness, take a minute to think about the assumptions and stories you have about:
  - why families become homeless
  - what it looks like when they are without a home; and
  - what you expect those experiencing homelessness should do about it.

Notice as you continue reading which of your ideas are challenged.

## What homelessness is really like

We asked two single parents, Emi and Kirsty, about a few of the many misunderstandings surrounding family homelessness.

Their stories are followed by [tips for families experiencing homelessness](#) and [how to talk to children about homelessness and sticking together](#).

## Common myths and misunderstandings about homelessness

**‘Children aren’t fully aware of the situation and so they’re not deeply affected beyond the material impacts’**

*Children’s wellbeing is connected to what’s around them.*

‘My children were deeply impacted – their sense of worth, their community connections, loss and distance created between longtime friends, and their stability interrupted. It’s not only the initial impact during the experience, but long term and lasting impacts on their mental health, sense of security, causing anxiety, bouts of depression, interrupting their ability to learn, settle into new schools and make new friends.’ – Kirsty

‘Sometimes it depends on how much preparation time you have for being homeless. For our first experience, we knew it was going to happen and were able to prepare to some degree. I was able to frame it to the kids as a long-term camping trip, and it only lasted three months. The second time, it happened without warning and it happened through a traumatic experience, so that was a very different experience and I wasn’t able to shelter the kids from the experience. My stress levels were so high that I couldn’t parent as well as I wanted to.’ – Emi

**‘Homelessness means sleeping on the street’**

*In fact, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics only 6% of people experiencing homelessness sleep rough on the street.<sup>1</sup>*

‘Homelessness can include couch surfing or staying with friends, staying in shelters, escaping domestic violence, sleeping rough (perhaps with a tent or some kind of shelter or without any shelter), squatting and staying in

motels or emergency accommodation. Parents experiencing homelessness may be employed or unemployed. It’s often not a one-off experience. If you’ve been homeless once, it’s actually easier to experience it again.’ – Emi

‘People would think that you’re poor, your kids needed clothes or you needed food. It’s like, we just need shelter, we just need a home. And I don’t want to live in a shed with my four children when they’ve had a lovely home before. People really have a misunderstanding about how many people it’s affecting these days.’ – Kirsty

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**It was helpful to have a stable place to stay instead of moving around every night or week. The motel was OK; it was like a mini house and it was the most stable place we got to stay. And it was OK because it was just our own family we didn’t have to deal with other people or move every day mostly.**

ELLA, 16 YEARS OLD, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY, REFLECTING ON BEING HOMELESS AT AGE 13

**‘Why don’t you reach out to services that can help?’**

*For homeless families, lots of things make accessing services really hard. These things include long waiting times, inflexible scheduling, inadequate service options and complicated admission requirements.<sup>2</sup>*

‘When you don’t have stable access to housing, it’s very hard to connect in with the services that want to help you because you don’t know where you’re gonna be from one moment to the next. We actually criss-crossed NSW and SA in the process of finding somewhere to live. And even: Where do you get your mail sent? Stuff like that.’ – Emi

‘I started to have my mail forwarded and I started to just tell people my old address because it was easier at appointments to do that than have all the questions and misunderstandings. It’s harder to claim Centrelink payments if you don’t have a fixed address, you can’t enrol your children in high school if you don’t have a fixed address ...’ – Kirsty

'Any mum or family that engages with the homelessness service can get mandatory reported. And knowing that you're doing everything you can under the circumstances that you have no control over ... it's just devastating to think that you are being reported as a bad parent. It's like, "I'm feeding them, clothing them, trying to keep my kids safe, but there's nothing in this world right now to support me in doing so." It stops a lot of families seeking that support because they're worried they're gonna lose their children.

'I'd be very careful about who I told. A lot of times when we were camping, we would just camp in free places. But if we could manage it, we'd go to an actual a caravan park and put the tent up there. And I'd be really careful about not letting people around us know that we're homeless. I would only tell people if I really needed to access the service.' – Emi

### 'You just need to try harder to find a rental property'

*Australia is experiencing a housing crisis. This means there are fewer houses available for rent, competition is tough and most of the available housing is unaffordable to low income and even middle-income families. We also have inadequate legal protections to prevent landlords from increasing rents or discriminating against those applying for rentals.*

'The second time we experienced homelessness, it happened really rapidly. We had secure private rental for a number of years, like 11 years, and then all of a sudden we had to vacate a property in the middle of a rental crisis. I quickly discovered that something was wrong when I started looking and I wasn't getting to view properties, and then when I was rocking up, there were 200 other people there and it just went on and on and I wasn't securing a home. I never took my kids to opens because I was advised not to. Being a single parent is one of the biggest discriminations [by the rental market]. I even got told by one organisation to take my children off of the rental application. If only landlords knew that single mums with kids are probably one of the best tenants they'll ever have. 'Cause they're stable. We look after stuff.

'I dressed like a professional. I went with my rental application. I was always on the ball, always in first and nothing was changing. I just was like a machine: I was at opens and opens and opens

and opens, and on the phone to real estate agents, and checking every day. Um, to the point that it was almost sending me mad like, "Why are we not getting one?!"

'When we became homeless, it was couch surfing, squatting in a vacant home which didn't have electricity ... People helped where they could, but people didn't understand why I couldn't secure a rental. They weren't in those queues experiencing what I was experiencing with hundreds of other people going through the same thing.' – Kirsty

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**We are getting kicked out of our house so the owner can bring her family from Melbourne to live in the house. It's not fair, we will be homeless as Auntie can't find a house for us.**

10-YEAR-OLD CHILD, VICTORIA, IN CHECKING IN WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE<sup>3</sup>

### 'If you're a single mum, the government will give you a house'

*In Australia, around 175,000 people are on waiting lists for public housing. This number doesn't include those on waitlists for community housing options. Even people on priority waiting lists, such as single parents, can wait a very long time. There is no housing stock specifically for single mothers.<sup>4,5</sup>*

'A lot of people have this misconception that if you're a single parent on a single income with children, that someone's gonna hand you a house. There's no way you'll be homeless.' – Kirsty

'There was a calculation the [homelessness] gateway gave us ... We'd have to sleep rough for about three or four days until essentially that money had gone. Then maybe one or two days out of a fortnight, they put us in a cabin in the caravan park so we could say goodbye to the tent. And those days were genuinely fantastic. We walked in there like it was the Hilton. We'd say, "Oh look, there's a table! Look at this microwave." I mean, we'd literally get so excited to be sleeping in a cabin. But the rest of the time we'd be back in the tent.' – Emi



LILY, 10 YEARS OLD

'I went to the housing authority. I had advocacy letters from specialists that deal with my children to try and get us up the list. And I got refused any help because I had been a private renter for so long and I didn't have complex needs, so I didn't fit into the category of people that they help. I pretty much got told that there is no way in my lifetime that I would ever be housed by them. We got refused emergency accommodation unless I paid upfront for it, which was \$1,200 a week. And I don't earn that, which led me to doing the couch surfing and staying with friends for a period of time. It made us move around a lot more.

Eventually we got funding for part of our emergency accommodation, but we would get kicked out most weekends so people could have their holidays. So we would have to find our own accommodation on top of paying \$500 a week for five days. Sometimes we would sleep in the car or sometimes I would find a friend that was going away for the weekend and we would house sit and pet sit for them so that we would have somewhere comfortable to stay. It was a constant worry every single week wondering: where do we go on the weekend?' – Kirsty

**'You might be homeless, but you should be able to keep your kids in school'**

*Attending school is difficult for children who are homeless for many reasons, including difficulties enrolling, attending regularly, and feeling supported by teachers and accepted by peers.<sup>6</sup>*

'There's this idea that when you've got children and you're homeless, that you'll be able to, no matter where you are, get your kids into school and that's not the case at all. When we were in the refuges – we were shuttled through a few different refuges – we'd go to a new area and I'd wanna put the kids into school, but then there'd be this big wait. You'd have to have an interview, so you'd wait for the interview time and then you'd do the paperwork and you'd wait for that to be processed. And then you'd have to wait for the new school term to start. One time we'd done all that and we were gone two days before the first day of school was meant to start. You couldn't just go to an area and walk up to the school and say, "Here's my kid. I want them to learn something." When we were homeless in South Australia and sleeping rough, they didn't go to school at all. They would've missed at least half a year of their schooling, maybe more.

'But the thing is I now know that that's OK. It sounds a cliché, but they are very "life-schooled". They're very wise and compassionate; they're good human beings; and they've got options and ideas open to them that they wouldn't have done. At the end of the day, the fact that they missed all this school isn't terrible.' – Emi

'My daughter was actually starting high school at the time [we became homeless] and we couldn't get her into a high school. We had to lie about where we lived. I had to provide a bill from a friend's address so that we could get her into the high school that she needed. She missed 12 months, the whole of year eight because when we finally got her into school, her anxiety was so bad she couldn't go to school. And then we moved like a month or two into that first year and I couldn't get her into a school for a really long time.

And she couldn't get on a bus [to travel to the old school]; it was too hard for her. There's a lot of school refusal that comes, because they don't wanna be there without their friends. There's new teachers, new rules, new environments, and they've been unsettled, so it's really impactful. And schools have no understanding or supports put in place for kids that are experiencing this.'

– Kirsty

## The impact of homelessness on children

Families also told us about the impacts on their children. Have you and your family faced similar challenges?

Being homeless can impact children in lots of ways. It can feel like a loss of control. There is often:

- loss of routines
- loss of possessions
- less friends visiting
- loss of privacy
- more sickness
- disturbed sleep
- school challenges
- loss of support systems; and
- (possible) loss of safety.

Children might feel confused, shame, embarrassed, guilty, angry or worried. They may experience grief and loss. And this can vary across children's ages as well.

### Babies

We don't always think of it, but babies have emotions too. And they have relationships with the people who care for them. When a family is homeless with a baby, it's really hard for parents to be tuned in to their babies' emotions. And babies might pick up on the worries of their parents. It's often harder to access medical care. There might also be fewer social opportunities.

### Children

Children's worlds are a bit bigger than those of babies, and include school and community, along with family. When they get disconnected from these places because of homelessness they might feel guilt or shame, think badly of themselves, or have difficulty concentrating. These things can show up in their behaviour and are not always understood in relation to the difficulties they're experiencing so they can get labelled as 'naughty' or 'lazy'. They may also experience bullying if their homelessness or poverty is more visible, or isolation if they feel unsafe about sharing their experience with others.

### Young people

As children become teenagers, they begin to explore their independence. Being homeless can make it harder for them to assess risks and make decisions. Access to medical treatment, laundry, bathrooms and privacy can be issues for this age group. They can feel alienated, like they don't belong, self-conscious, really tired, and have a hard time with study and concentration. They may feel responsible for their family or younger siblings. Their emotional wellbeing might suffer and this can come out in their behaviours too.

## How homelessness impacted our children

We asked Emi and Kirsty about some of the impacts that experiencing homelessness had on their children – here's what they told us...

## Emotional impacts

'Trying to get services to understand the impact [of homelessness] on two autistic children, one with a mild intellectual disability, the impacts that was having on them ... Like, they're waking at night with panic attacks and I'm not sleeping because I'm having to support them through breathing exercises all night long.'

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**It was unhelpful to have to move around all the time. People not understanding what we were going through, and people asking lots of questions, was also unhelpful.**

SOPHIE AND MATILDA, SISTERS, 13 AND 14 YEARS OLD, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY, REFLECTING ON BEING HOMELESS AT AGES 10 AND 11 YEARS

## Disconnection

'When you've had a stable place to live and you've got connections within the community, and you have to move away from that, it's almost another traumatic layer. I found that still impacts my family today, even 18 months later, settling into new schools: they miss their old friends. They miss all the things that we used to do with our community. They didn't wanna leave where we lived. They had come from a domestic violence situation where we had had to move a number of times before that, and this was the place that they felt was home. This was the first place in their lives for six years where they felt safe and could sleep at night.'

'The other thing they missed was our dog, who's a big part of the family. She had to stay with my brother for six months and that was one of the hardest things for the kids. And we didn't visit the dog much; we did a couple of times, but then that became traumatic having to leave her behind again. So I kind of had to keep a routine and adapt to the daily things that we were dealing with and monitor each and every step along the way of what they were feeling, and how to shield them a little bit from what was happening.'

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**The most helpful thing for homeless kids would be if they could keep their pets with them, because they help keep you happy and calm.**

LIAM, 11 YEARS OLD, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY, REFLECTING ON BEING HOMELESS AT AGE 9

## Feeling like no one cares

'We drove around a lot of days wondering where we were gonna sleep at night. And it's just an awful feeling to think, you know, nobody actually cares. My kids would say, "Does anybody care about what's happening to us?" And I would just be like, "I care." There was lots of times I would cry myself to sleep and my kids would cry themselves to sleep – they wanted it to end. I had no answers. I felt very lost and alone often throughout the experience.'

## Negotiating living and sleeping

'You are trying to manage cooking, washing your kids' clothes, trying to keep a budget, because you don't have a lot. There was no way to cook. The four of us were in a one-bedroom motel room. We had problems when we moved into a house where everybody wanted to sleep in the same room because it'd been so long that we'd been doing that. It was the only way that everybody felt safe.'

'There's no emergency accommodation for families of more than two children and a mum or a dad. They said they wouldn't be able to house us because I had a larger family. And I was like willing to take anything. But there's rules around that, you know: families that have four children need four bedrooms. Who made up these silly rules to keep us out of houses that there are available, like a two-bedroom or a three-bedroom home?'

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**I have nothing good to say about it. It was absolutely s\*\*\*. And even though I'm past it, it's actually better now, and I understand that it's better, but it's changed my life forever.**

ELLA, 16 YEARS OLD, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY, REFLECTING ON BEING HOMELESS AT AGE 13

### Worrying about long-term impacts

'The first time we were homeless as a family, the kids were young enough – I was able to present it as a big camping trip. And that worked. They didn't really realise until later they were actually homeless ... The second time, they were older and we'd already been through a lot of really traumatic stuff. We were really in the process of a lot of healing, and we needed a lot of help and we weren't getting it cause we were homeless. I remember we were setting up the tent and the kids were throwing things at each other, like throwing sticks and rocks at each other. And I just realised that this experience was damaging them. You know, I could see that it was damaging them badly and there was nothing I could do about it. That was devastating. I thought, "This suffering is impacting them, it's creating marks in their psyche. And I can't do anything." That was really hard.'

'I [had to have] confidence that we would eventually get through this. I thought it was more important for me to be there as their parent than the alternative; for me to just disappear from the picture. I had to accept that yes, you know, potentially the kids were being impacted long-term by this in a bad way. But I also had to then accept that even if that is the case, they can work through that too. I had a damaging childhood and I'm still here.'



'One time we were homeless for like two months, but it was disguised as a camping trip. In reality it was 'cause we had no house and we had to live outta tents and a car. But even though for Mum it must have been stressful as heck – it would've been a horrible experience – as a child it is like a really, really core childhood memory, that I only realised as an adult was actually a really stressful time.'

Elliot, young person, Kurna Land, reflecting on being homeless as a child

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**I used to look forward to the places that had free meals. It was like a family event. Everyone would always be really nice and it was a regular outing. I have really good family memories from those places.**

ELLIOT, 25 YEARS OLD, KAURNA COUNTRY, REFLECTING BACK ON CHILDHOOD HOMELESSNESS

### Take a moment to think about...



If you've experienced homelessness as part of a family:

- What stands out to you from reading these stories?
- What impacts have these myths and misunderstandings about homelessness had on you and your family?
- How do you remind yourself that homelessness is not your fault? What are the ways you remind each other in your family?

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The homelessness experience did push me to glimpse that moment of: “Yes, I just want this to end. I can’t see a way out.” But the love for my kids was the absolute turning point of “That isn’t an option at all. I need to be there for them for as long as I can be.”

KIRSTY, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY

Any family experiencing homelessness is always responding and working hard to reclaim safety, agency and dignity. Read more about what’s helped get other families get through homelessness in the following resources.

- [Tips for families experiencing homelessness](#)
- [Talking to children about homelessness](#)

### Dive deeper into Emerging Minds podcasts

In [How to talk to your children about experiencing family homelessness](#), we interview Susie Lukis and Savannah West from Statewide Children’s Resource Program to get an understanding of how living without a home impacts babies, children and young people.

Susie and Sav share some tips for parents on how to talk to children of different ages about homelessness. They also chat about the needs of neurodivergent children, children with disabilities, families who experience racism, and how this can add to the load of people in an already tough situation.

### More homelessness myth busters

- Mission Australia lists [7 myths about homelessness in Australia, which explain how homelessness can also affect families](#).
- The Big Issue explains how [homelessness is not a choice, and that there is no single image of a homeless person](#).

- Kids Under Cover address [myths about youth homelessness](#).
- RMIT University also [busts myths about who is affected by homelessness](#).

### Services to contact if you’re homeless or at risk of homelessness

- If you require support in your local area, you may wish to visit AskIzzy. This website aims to [connect people in need with housing, a meal, help with money, family violence support, counselling and more](#).
- If you are in urgent need of accommodation, you may wish to contact one of the following services in your state or territory:
- ACT [Onelink](#) 1800 176 468
- NSW [Link2Home](#) 1800 152 152
- NT [ShelterMe](#) (08) 8985 4389
- QLD [Homeless Hotline](#) 1800 474 753
- SA [Homeless Connect](#) 1800 003 308
- TAS [Housing Connect](#) 1800 800 588
- VIC [Crisis and Emergency Accommodation](#) 1800 825 955 or (03) 9536 7777
- WA [Entrypoint Perth](#) 1800 124 684

If this is the first time you’ve experienced homelessness or being at risk of homelessness and are new to using services, you may also wish to read [Skills for navigating services](#).



AMELIE, 12 YEARS OLD



## More money, housing and health resources

Have a look at the following options and choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Talking to children about family homelessness](#)
- [Tips for families experiencing homelessness](#)

AVAILABLE HERE

**View all Money, housing and health resources**



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family? [First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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## References

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