

# Institute of Child Protection Studies



# 5

## Research to Practice Series Supporting fathers who are homeless

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

### About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families.

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### Supporting fathers who are homeless

Issue 5 of this series discusses the issues experienced by homeless fathers, the impact of their identity and role as fathers on their experiences of homelessness, and implications for policy and programs to better support fathers who are homeless. It is based upon the findings of a qualitative and quantitative research project implemented by the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS), Hanover Welfare Services (Hanover) and Melbourne Citymission (MCM) which interviewed 40 single fathers who were homeless. The project report was published in 2011: *More than just me: Supporting fathers who are homeless*. More information about the project is provided at the end of the issue.

The role and identity of homeless men as fathers has been a largely ignored aspect of homelessness. This is in part due to our assumptions about homelessness and homeless men in particular.

Even within services that work with homeless men, we rarely think of these people as being concerned with anything else aside from their own needs. Homeless men are often thought of as free-floating individuals, almost dysfunctional in their autonomy and separation from family and the community. Rarely do people think of homeless men as being fathers intimately connected to their children, even when they're unable to be with them.

To date, service delivery and policy reforms concerning homelessness have largely excluded single fathers and their children. There is a notable absence in the literature about homeless fathers, the challenges they face and how services may best respond to their needs.

### Impact of homelessness on fatherhood and the impact of fatherhood on homelessness

This study demonstrated the need to better support fathers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with their role as a father. It highlighted children's importance to the wellbeing of fathers, just as fathers are important to children's wellbeing. When a lack of contact with their children is combined with a lack of recognition of their role or identity as fathers, these men experience adverse effects on their health and wellbeing. The meaning that fathers make from their relationship with their children can be a motivating factor to improve the conditions of their lives, especially when provided with support. However, structural barriers, a lack of acknowledgement of their father role and the absence of support, add a sense of futility for these fathers. Denying them an important aspect of their identity leads to further despair and anguish, creating a feedback loop that diminishes their capacity to parent and prolongs their period of homelessness.

For the fathers in the study, homelessness impacted their ability to be fathers while at the same time their role and identity as a father affected their experiences of homelessness.

- **Father Identity**

The men involved in this research strongly identified as fathers. Some felt plagued by this identity due to their inability to parent in the way they wanted. This caused ongoing distress, frustration and a sense of disempowerment:

***That's the most hurtful part about being homeless and not working, and not being able to see them, and not being able to provide for them, because you've got those father's instincts that are constantly inside you, but can never [be acted on].***

*Pretty much all I ever thought about. Being in prison and all that, I couldn't really do much so I pretty much thought about them and thought about what type of father I would have wanted when I was a kid. So while I was there I made my decision that as soon as I got out I'd go into detox and get off the alcohol and just*

For the general population the degree to which a father identifies with the father role the more involved he will be with his children. For some participants, despite their father identity, the constraints and barriers they face restricted their ability to have a relationship with their children. Nonetheless, many of the men actively pursued father involvement and, despite the barriers and impediments, have an active role in their children's lives.

*change my life, for myself and to show my kids that what I was isn't a father figure, I was doing the wrong thing.*



- **Coping with fatherhood and homelessness**

For some, their identity and role as a father motivated them to improve their lives. Becoming a father had shifted the focus of their lives beyond their own interests and needs, and they recognised the need to 'step up' and make changes and improvements that would be a benefit to their children.

***And by me being living in my car and not willing to be able to help myself, then I can't help him. So I decided to seek support.***

Others felt more despair. These men coped by trying not to think about their children but for many the distress and anguish was too overwhelming and they turned to alcohol and other drugs to cope. The lack of contact was especially distressing for some of the fathers and further contributed to their homelessness.

There appeared to be a tipping point where the men were relatively happy with the contact they had and it motivated them rather than adversely affecting their wellbeing. This tipping point occurred at a subjective minimum standard of contact. It might not be ideal but having some level of contact with their child, as well as some degree of housing stability, created a sense of contentment or satisfaction.

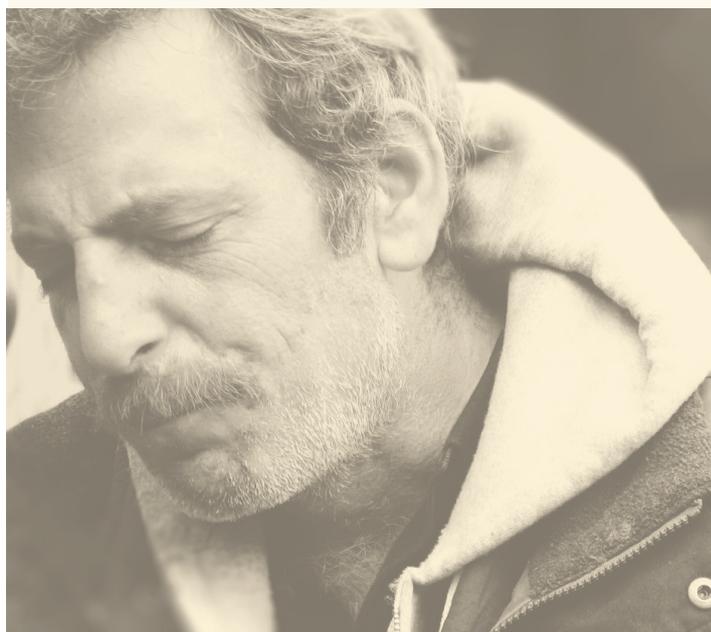
Some of the fathers minimised contact they had with their children for what they perceived as their children's benefit. These men did not want their children to see them while they were struggling. This was often tied to a low sense of self-worth, but also to the impact of homelessness on their wellbeing, appearance and lack of a suitable place to meet with their children.

***I've had times where out of my own free will I've decided not to see him because of the state I was in.***



***I decided to get some support because I thought I don't want to do this anymore. I need my life to be going in the right path. My son needs me.***

*The more you think about it, the harder it hurts. Seriously. The more you think about your children, like for me, the more I think about my younger children, the more I want to cry. The more it hurts me. So I try and forget about it, and some people deal with it with drugs, or alcohol, or whatever, I deal with it by just not talking to anyone, clamming up.*



***Yeah. Well, it's not fair on her. No matter what I do, what happens to me, it goes back on her. So say I was to go 'look I can't make it tomorrow', it's going to hurt her and that's not fair.***

- **Homelessness status and father involvement**

Many of the fathers who took part in this research had some role in their children's lives but one of the major barriers to contact and involvement was the lack of suitable accommodation.

*I haven't got a steady house where my kids can live with me basically. That's what the problem is. I can't tell the kids to live with me if I haven't got nowhere. I*

*haven't got a place of my own and I can't say come over and stay with me when I'm sharing a house. Basically I just want a place of my own, two bedroom where my kids can come and live with me because they actually want to live with me you know but I can't because I haven't got a place, what can I do? So it's a bit stressed and that at times, a bit sad but I'll get there.*

***I can ring up and say can I see [my son] and she's like yeah no worries. But the problem is I've got nowhere to take him so it's just a day thing. Over the last three years since the break up I haven't had a steady place to call home.***

Participant's living conditions impacted on the ability and willingness to have contact with their children. Having an alternative location to meet with their children was a significant enabler in maintaining contact with children.

- **Determinants of father involvement**

Other factors affected the amount of contact and role of the participants as a father, these included: father characteristics; mother characteristics; interparental relationship; lack of social support; and experiences of being parented.

**Father Characteristics:**

The range of issues that had an impact on fathers' involvement with their children included financial circumstances, employment status, engagement in illegal activity and jail, alcohol and drug use, psychological distress and mental health issues.

**Mother characteristics**

Most of the fathers, despite the nature of their relationship with their (ex)partner, referred to them in a positive way and believed that the children were in safe hands. Others had a deep-seated concern for their children's wellbeing. Some (ex)partners grappled with issues such as alcohol and drug use, mental health and psychological issues. This often meant that the mother was not always able or suitable to care for children.

**Interparental relationship**

The amount of contact and involvement that fathers had with their children was closely linked to the relationship they had with the children's carer. Typically, it was mothers who regulated the nature of the contact between father and their child. Having a good relationship with the mother of the children, or their primary carer, also meant that there would be a place where fathers could meet with their children.

***Yeah, this weekend I'll go to my partner's place and stay there for the weekend and be with her and the kids. If it doesn't...like sometimes I can't stay there, we usually organise something else.***

*I know I'm a good Dad but no-one else knows I'm a good Dad because they can't see it because I don't get a chance to see her. My partner won't let me have her by myself. That's what gets to me.*

### Lack of family and friends

Many fathers had no family or friends to turn to for support. Some removed themselves from past social networks, however, these networks were often not replaced with any other support, which left those fathers isolated and parenting alone.

***I've got no family at all, so I can't say, "I can have them at my Aunty's house during the day, on the Saturday. My Aunty said it's all right." Blah, blah, blah. . . you know what I mean, because I don't have an Aunty.***

For others, extended family and friends played a key role in helping them with both their homelessness and parenting needs.

*Since I've given up the drugs and I'm trying to better myself, my aunty has come onside a lot more because her place is so close to the school I will drop him there of an afternoon and she'll be like "Stay for dinner". I'm lucky if I cook a meal three, maybe four nights a week because I stop at my step-grandfather's place. . . and he cooks for us at least once a week. . . I've got a lot more support and stuff in my life.*

### Experiences of being parented

For this sample of fathers, experiences of being parented – or not – informed their ideas of what it means to be a father. Some spoke positively about their upbringings. Others, however, endured a difficult time growing up.

***Yeah. I've got no idea how to be a Dad. Literally, I've got no idea. Because if I had to be a Dad, like I said, of the way I was raised, you can't get away with that stuff like my Dad when I was a kid.***



### Implications for Policy and Programs

The major implications for support that emerged in the research include:

- **Establish and acknowledge parental status:**  
Services should ensure that all men are asked about their parental status during their intake and assessment process. The majority of services in the study reported that they did ask about parental status, however, it was more likely that the question would be asked of families and young people than single men. Services that recognise the importance of the father role can potentially use that identity as a motivating factor for change for homeless fathers.
- **Differentiating responses to fathers who are homeless:**  
The study showed that fathers have diverse experiences of parenting while homeless and that services may need to respond to fathers differently depending on what they need to support their parenting. For example:
  - o Fathers who have no contact with the children may need support to reconnect. This may include services assisting in the writing of a letter to children or actively linking fathers to family relationship services.
  - o Fathers who have contact may require a safe place to see their children. There is a serious need for more family–friendly places such as Dad’s Place at CanFaCS. Children’s Contact Services could provide a model to support relationships where safety issues are present.
  - o Fathers who are primary carers may require support for their parenting, active linking to child care and schools, and advocating with other services.
- **Create safe environments and spaces for children:**  
There is a lack of appropriate housing options for fathers with shared care or contact arrangements. Emergency accommodation is rarely provided, or suitable, for fathers with children. There is a need for more priority accommodation, refuges and dedicated spaces for single fathers and children. At the same time, all accommodation services need to think more actively and creatively of how to provide safe, child friendly spaces to support fathers to see their children.
- **More services for fathers and children:**  
A better understanding of the extent to which more holistic service delivery models lead to better outcomes for fathers and children needs to be developed. A holistic approach would focus on both fathers’ homelessness issues as well as their relationship and contact with their children. An example of this approach is the CanFaCS model that provides accommodation and support to fathers and their children and focuses on the range of issues facing fathers, including developing and supporting parenting skills.
- **Stronger links to Family Relationship Services:**  
Men have variable relationships with their (ex)partners and may need specialised assistance to develop skills to negotiate satisfactory contact arrangements, particularly in situations of high-conflict or even violence. Access to specialised family relationship services could lead to improved relationships with (ex)partners, better support for children and provide assistance to their parenting.

- **Parenting programs for fathers:**

The research found that both fathers and agencies considered programs for parents experiencing homelessness were often age and gender specific. Parenting programs were generally geared towards women, unintentionally excluding fathers. There is a need to develop and expand fathers' parenting programs.

- **Information for fathers:**

Fathers in the research requested that services provide them with a range of information particularly on parenting, fathers groups, and relationships around working with (ex)partners to care for children after separation.

- **Building partnerships:**

The men in this study have complex lives and face multiple disadvantages including poverty, AOD and mental health issues. Specialised homelessness services need to build links with other services to meet these needs better. Fathers in the research also identified services needing to work together, especially courts and human services, to ensure there are no negative impacts on fathers and children, particularly when it comes to custody and access issues.

- **Review income security arrangements:**

There continue to be poverty traps for fathers engaging in work who also have a caring responsibility. The extra burden of proof fathers are required to give when they are the main carer of children or have shared care arrangements is problematic for fathers who are homeless.

The wellbeing and safety of children is paramount. This sentiment was shared by the fathers in the research. There is also growing recognition of the importance of fathers in healthy child development. This research highlights how contact with children is important to the wellbeing of these fathers too. Therefore, where safe and appropriate, we need to support homeless fathers to have contact with and support their children. Their role and identity as a father is an untapped motivator for these men to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

## Section 3

### CanFaCS

Canberra Fathers and Children Service (CanFaCS) is Australia's only homelessness crisis accommodation service funded specifically for single father families.

CanFaCS programs deliver: crisis accommodation and support to homeless sole father families; medium-term supported accommodation to families in head-leased properties located around Inner Canberra; temporary supportive accommodation at 'Dad's Place' for fathers who do not have suitable accommodation to care overnight for their children; outreach support to single father families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness; and group work, community development and education courses to fathers and their children more generally.

For more information about CanFaCS, visit <http://www.canfacs.org.au>

### About the Supporting Homeless Fathers Project

This research project was commissioned by the former Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. It identifies the social, emotional and material consequences of the homeless experience for fathers, and their relationship with their children; and examines how their identity and role as fathers impacts on their lives in general and their experience of homelessness. The report also examines how homelessness services currently support single fathers, and identifies policy and service delivery changes that could result in improved outcomes for this largely invisible population.

More information and the full report is available at [www.acu.edu.au/icps](http://www.acu.edu.au/icps)

### References

Barker, J., Kolar, V., Mallett, S., McArthur, M., Saunders, V. (2011). *More Than Just Me: Supporting Fathers who are Homeless*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU.

Available at: [www.acu.edu.au/icps](http://www.acu.edu.au/icps)

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