

NAPCAN PREVENT
CHILD ABUSE
& NEGLECT



NAPCAN

**National Association for Prevention of Child
Abuse & Neglect**

**Housing and Homelessness
Agreement Review**

<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/housing-homelessness/issues>

March 2022

Background

As the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, NAPCAN is interested in the effects of unstable housing on:

- Children themselves (directly and indirectly)
- Parents and carers (including how the added stress impacts their capacity to provide nurturing environments)
- Creation of community connection & social capital.

Child abuse and neglect is a complex issue with a range of known risk and protective factors. Risk factors of relevance to this topic include:

- housing stress
- social isolation
- neighbourhood disadvantage or violence

Source:

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/risk-and-protective-factors-child-abuse-and-neglect>

KEY POINTS AND EVIDENCE:

NAPCAN commends the thoroughness of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Issues Paper and, in particular, the **inclusion of children and children and young people as priority cohorts**: “State and Territory homelessness strategies must address the national priority cohorts identified in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement. They include:

- women and children affected by family and domestic violence
- children and young people
- Indigenous Australians
- people experiencing repeat homelessness
- people exiting institutions and care into homelessness
- older people.”

In reiterating the importance of children and families in the Agreement, NAPCAN would like to highlight the following key points:

Access to safe, stable and adequate housing is important for the health and wellbeing of children:

Supporting evidence:

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) [Australia's Children Report](#):

- “**Homeless children** can experience schooling disruptions, food insecurity and an increased risk of being homeless as adolescents and adults (Crawford et al. 2015; Fantuzzo et al. 2012; Flatau et al. 2012).”
- “Children living in **overcrowded housing** have an increased risk of emotional and behavioural problems and reduced school performance as overcrowded living arrangements may disrupt their sleep, ability to concentrate, and reduce space for study (Solari et al. 2012).”
- “Children in **families experiencing housing stress** (spending more than 30% of their income on housing costs, such as mortgage repayments or rent) are also at risk of adverse health and wellbeing outcomes.”
- “Increased housing stress may compromise **parental mental health and reduce the money available to spend on children's food, healthcare and education** (Robinson & Adams 2008; Taylor & Edwards 2012). In contrast, better housing affordability is often associated with better health, academic achievement and school engagement for children (Clair 2018).”

[The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children](#):

- “Many international studies have shown associations between housing circumstances and a range of child outcomes. Research has shown that there is a significant relationship between aspects of **housing conditions and specific health outcomes**; for example, cold, damp and mould were significantly associated with childhood asthma and respiratory conditions (Dockery et. al., 2010).”
- “A study of the association between **housing conditions and children's developmental outcomes**, using the LSAC data, found that while there was a statistically significant relationship between some housing-related factors and a child's physical health, socio-emotional wellbeing and learning outcomes, the role of housing in shaping children's wellbeing in Australia was quite modest overall (Dockery, Ong, Colquhoun, Li, & Kendall, 2013). While **overcrowding had the largest negative impact for learning outcomes; frequent moves, renting rather than owning and being in financial stress were the aspects of housing that were shown to be negatively associated with children's social and emotional wellbeing.**”

Housing impacts on children are both direct and indirect:

Supporting evidence:

[Housing: an Under-Explored Influence on Children's Well-Being and Becoming](#) - US Research

- “Research on housing has tended to focus on adult outcomes, establishing relationships between housing and a number of aspects of health and well-being. Research exploring the influence of housing on children has been more limited, and has tended to focus on adult concerns around risk behaviours, behavioural problems and educational attainment. While these outcomes are important, they neglect the impact of housing on children’s lives beyond these concerns.”
- “Children’s homes are a key component of their environment. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological approach to human development posits that children develop alongside their environments, and emphasises the significance of children’s experiences and perceptions of their environments to their well-being. It is argued that these environments consist of a collection of nested settings, where the microsystem is the collection of settings with the greatest influence on children, of which the home is a key component. Individual environments are important, but so too are the connections between environments. Evidence of this role for housing can be found in research demonstrating the important role of housing in accessing other important public services, such as its gatekeeping role in accessing schools, health care and public transport (e.g. Gingrich and Ansell 2014). Beyond this developmental role, the causal pathways for direct influences of housing, such as the impact of poor quality housing on health, are likely to be similar for children and adults. The impact of damp on respiratory conditions, for example, has been found to affect children and adults (Beasley et al. 2015). Similarly, high housing costs will crowd out spending on other essentials, including food and educational resources, with implications for children as well as adults. Children are aware of and affected by family financial difficulties (Ridge 2002).”
- “Indirectly, housing may impact children through several processes. Housing problems have been found to cause stress and impaired functioning among adults (Sandel and Wright 2006). This may go on to affect children through emotional contagion (Larson and Almeida 1999), where the stress is transferred from parents to children through proximity and shared environment. Negative emotions are thought to transmit more readily between people than positive ones (Larson and Almeida 1999; Larson and Gillman 1999), and there is evidence of parental depression and mental health problems affecting children’s outcomes (Downey and Coyne 1990; Mensah and Kiernan 2010). Similar to theories of emotional contagion, family stress/process models emphasise the impact of (particularly economic) difficulties on family relations and child development, which also supports the hypothesis of an important role for housing on children’s well-being (Kull and Coley 2014). Researchers have argued that stresses can have negative impacts on parental relationships and parenting behaviour, with impacts for

children (Conger et al. 1992, 1993). While this approach has found support in research (e.g. Conger et al. 1992, 1993; Solantaus et al. 2004), other work has highlighted the conflict between the benefits of high housing spending, which enables families to access better quality housing and neighbourhoods, and the stress and strain caused by expensive housing (Kull and Coley 2014)."

Key risk factors for housing instability for children need to be considered. In addition to domestic and family violence, this includes single-parent families, and where there is known intergenerational disadvantage:

Supporting evidence:

[Emerging Minds response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs: Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia](#) June 2020

- "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 family 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).”

Attention needs to be given to the way that the Agreement (and its implementation) upholds national obligations:

Supporting evidence:

As a signatory to the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCROC\)](#), Australia needs to ensure that the Agreement upholds the rights of children and young people, in particular relating to Article 27

1. States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.
2. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.
3. States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.
4. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to secure the recovery of maintenance for the child from the parents or other persons having financial responsibility for the child, both within the State Party and from abroad. In particular, where the person having financial responsibility for the child lives in a State different from that of the child, States Parties shall promote the accession to international agreements or the conclusion of such agreements, as well as the making of other appropriate arrangements.

The [National Principles for Child Safe Organisations](#) need to guide the development of the Agreement and its strategies. Importantly, organisations involved in the implementation of the Agreement need to follow the child safe principles that:

1. Child safety and wellbeing is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture.
2. Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.

3. Families and communities are informed and involved in promoting child safety and wellbeing.
4. Equity is upheld and diverse needs respected in policy and practice.
5. People working with children and young people are suitable and supported to reflect child safety and wellbeing values in practice.
6. Processes to respond to complaints and concerns are child focused.
7. Staff and volunteers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children and young people safe through ongoing education and training.
8. Physical and online environments promote safety and wellbeing while minimising the opportunity for children and young people to be harmed.
9. Implementation of the national child safe principles is regularly reviewed and improved.
10. Policies and procedures document how the organisation is safe for children and young people.

How we talk about housing is important in gaining policy and community support:

NAPCAN suggests that **framing and language** need to underpin all aspects of the Agreement in order to best engage all sectors and communities in implementation.

Relevant existing research includes:

- [Reframing Parenting](#) (Australian research relevant to all conversations about children and parenting, and the challenges of navigating challenges such as housing during the journey of raising children)
- [Core Story of Early Childhood Learning and Development](#) (Australian research relevant to all conversations about impacts on children, including importance of context and fairness)
- [Passing the Message Stick](#) (Australian research relevant to all messaging related to wellbeing and justice for First Nations people)
- [Reframing Homelessness in the United Kingdom](#) (UK research including suggestions for how best to talk about homelessness in order to garner policy support)
- [Communicating about housing in the UK: obstacles, openings and emerging recommendations](#) (UK recommendations for a new conversation about housing in the UK, to build greater public support and action to deliver quality homes for all).