

Youth homelessness and its relationship with family conflict: Models for policy and practice.

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ABOUT MELBOURNE CITY MISSION

Melbourne City Mission is one of Victoria's oldest and largest community service organisations. Working with people in the city and across the state to reduce risk, disrupt disadvantage and break down barriers, Melbourne City Mission does this across the full cycle of life, from early years to palliative care and through disability, homelessness, education and justice. Melbourne City Mission's vision is to create a fair and just community where people have equal access to resources and opportunities.

Melbourne City Mission uses service expertise and knowledge, combined with specialist research, to better understand the root causes of disadvantage and exclusion. This informs innovative service responses and effective social policy advocacy that leads to sustainable solutions to disadvantage and exclusion.

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Executive summary

Family conflict remains a significant factor in young people becoming homeless, a result of a range of related complex influences, forces and behaviours. Research identifies both in Australia and internationally, that family conflict and breakdown is a major element of young people becoming homeless (Rosenthal, et al, 2006; Johnson, et al, 2008; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998). However, understandings of how family conflict influences youth homelessness is limited. What family conflict involves, particularly from the perspective of young people, is under-researched and conceptualised. In addition, there are limited insights from research into family conflict relating to youth homelessness on which to formulate programs and interventions with families and young people.

For these reasons, in 2016, Melbourne City Mission engaged the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University to conduct research on the relationship between family conflict and youth homelessness. The project's research questions were:

1. What are the contemporary social and cultural factors that contribute to family conflict and breakdown that may lead to young people experiencing homelessness?
2. What are the factors of family conflict and breakdown?
3. How can an understanding of the contemporary causes of family conflict improve practice in youth homelessness programs?

In answering these research questions this report aims to improve approaches to working with young people and their families to resolve family conflict and prevent homelessness. To do so, it investigates how family conflict relates to, and impacts on, youth homelessness. It first provides an overview of the general literature on youth homelessness in Australia, including its main correlates, conceptualisations and their relationship to family conflict, as well as the links between family conflict and youth homelessness. Then, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the contemporary nature and experiences of family conflict and youth homelessness, a structured review of international literature is conducted, providing insights into the impact of family conflict, causation, enablers for exiting homelessness, as well as the efficacy of interventions with homeless youth.

Following this, the research team undertook qualitative research with young people, parents and carers, as well as practitioners who work with young people and families. This research conducted seven focus groups, including three groups of young people who've experienced (or are at risk of) homelessness, three groups of parents of young people with experience of family conflict; and one group of Melbourne City Mission staff working with young people and families experiencing conflict or homelessness. Participants included 21 young people aged 16 to 24 years, eight parent/guardians, and ten staff from Melbourne City Mission, including managers, case workers, social workers and youth workers. The findings focus on three areas; how family conflict is understood and experienced, the sources of family conflict, and the circumstances in which family conflict turns into homelessness.

How is family conflict experienced and understood?

The research found two types of inter-related family conflict common to experiences for families with young people who had been, or were at risk of, homelessness. These are: 'overt and situational' and 'latent and ongoing' forms of family conflict.

'Overt and situational' family conflict refers to expressive and evident actions and behaviours that are antagonistic in nature. They are 'overt' in that they are explicit forms of conflict, largely identifiable as conflict, have an immediate impact on participants, and are often based on the situational context in which they occur.

"When I have conflicts with my family... they'd rise up to violence. My mum would start yelling and then my brother and sister would get involved. Then because I didn't fight, they'd beat up on me until I fought back" (YP FG-A).

'Latent and ongoing' family conflict is accumulated and unresolved conflict underscoring family life. Experiences of 'latent' conflict occur beyond the instance or incident of 'overt and situational' conflict, and is typically ongoing in nature. It is frequently experienced in discreet and implicit forms of family functioning, feelings and generalised atmosphere of family life, often not yet manifested into 'overt and situational' forms of conflict.

"So that's what conflict is, pretty much; just not being able to escape that constant atmospheric negativity that just has an impact on how you feel as a person. [It] just drives you mental because it just makes you think that the world is just nothing but a place of crap, pretty much" (YP FG-A).

What are the sources of family conflict?

The study also identified three sources of family conflict occurring at the 1) micro (individual), 2) meso (familial) and 3) macro (socio-cultural) levels. These findings detail the range of influences on family conflict, and show how each source of family conflict is interlinked and relates to family conflict. *Micro (individual) sources of family conflict* refer to the types and experiences of conflict involving incidents, events and behaviours that lead to 'overt and situational' conflict. These sources mostly pertain to the actions and behaviours of individuals who are directly involved in the conflict itself.

"Yeah, you feel like you're talking to a brick wall, it just gets you frustrated and it's going to start an argument" (YP FG-A).

Meso (familial) sources of family conflict refer to underlying family functioning and the home environment that can lead to family conflict. These sources of family conflict have an indirect relationship to family conflict, yet have a strong influence over the environment and conditions in which conflict manifests. This category draws attention to how problematic family relationships can be an organising principle of the family. These sources of conflict typically pertain to pervasive and ongoing behaviours and functioning of a family, which can be understood more broadly as family cultures.

"It's about trust I reckon. Sometimes when your family loses trust in you they don't want to support you because they've lost that trust. You just spin-out" (YP FG-A).

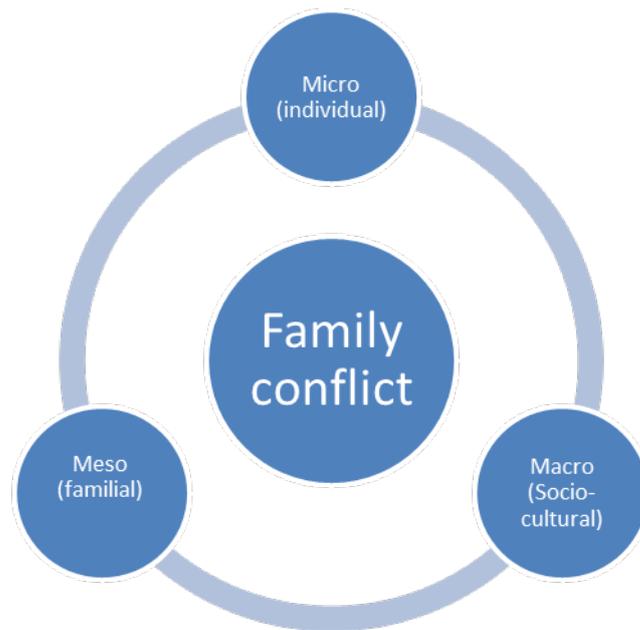
Macro (socio-cultural) sources of conflict are the structural stresses on families, the social conditions in which conflict manifests, and the impact of intergenerational trauma and family dysfunction.

"...all this social disadvantage and poverty and social media, they are all there but... what is missing [is] the real connection, which stems from the early attachment and it goes through later on." (FG - S).

The following table details the three levels of family and the source of conflict for participants.

| CATEGORY OF CONFLICT | SOURCE OF CONFLICT |
|---|--|
| Micro (individual) Incidents, events and behaviours that cause family conflict. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Routine conflict and general disagreement - Conflict and tension over behaviours such as; chores, or the use of internet/social media - Verbal aggression and conflict including arguments and criticism - Violence |
| Meso (familial) Family functioning and home environments that cause family conflict. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Conflict as an organising principle of family life -Disintegration of trust in family -Absence of love in family -Strong feelings of abandonment |
| Macro (socio-cultural) Structural and historical stresses, social conditions and community level influences on family conflict. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Poverty and financial marginalisation -Unemployment -Unstable housing -Family histories and experiences of dysfunction and trauma -Contexts of mental illness and substance abuse |

The following model conceptualises the sources of family conflict for the purposes policy and practice. It highlights the multidimensional factors of family conflict and can be utilised for practice and policy purposes. It demonstrates the range of influences on family conflict, and the relationship between multiple sources of family conflict. It also highlights the varied iterations of family conflict and the multiple points in which interventions with families might be possible.



What are the circumstances in which family conflict turns into homelessness?

The report explores the scenarios in which family conflict turns into homelessness. Young people largely reported feeling pushed into experiences of homelessness, based on a range of factors. Young people detailed that leaving home was a highly considered decision, typically in response to ongoing family conflict, and observations of other families. One of the most significant factors was if family conflict was ongoing and without a foreseeable conclusion.

“...you kind of just get to that point where you're like... I need to put myself in a [different] situation - I'm not happy. I'm not safe. You just see yourself slipping into this really awful, really dark routine that you don't want to be in anymore....It's like it's been years and months of constant awfulness and conflict. You just get to that point where you're like, I need to leave. This needs to happen... If something doesn't change, then it's just all going to get worse” (YP FG-A).

Another factor relating to significant and ongoing experiences of violence, abuse and neglect relates to experiences of violence and substance dependence in the family home.

“...my parents did drugs, alcohol, all that crap, physical abuse, so I grew up in and out of different foster homes and I was living with some pretty shady people. So that's what got me doing stupid shit and illegal stuff, because the people that lived, that's how I grew up. I grew up around that stuff” (YP FG-C).

In addition, for young people, observing other families enjoying each other's company, spending time with each other and communicating effectively provoked a realisation of their own family's dysfunction and poor relationships. These observations allowed young people to reflect on and assess their own family's dysfunction and conflict.

“For me one time I went to an ex-girlfriend's house over the weekend and then this one day I just kind of like broke down because seeing how her family interacts, you know, they look like a real family... it kind of gave me the feeling of warmth...” (YP FG-C).

Young people described their decisions to leave home as a highly considered one, taken over a long time. For participants, their experiences of family conflict reached a ‘tipping point’ in which homelessness became a more attractive living scenario.

“You kind of think - I remember doing this; I was just weighing it in my mind. Like is the warmth of my bed at night worth all of this? Or is a roof over my head worth all of this? It’s weighing the options, in a way” (YP FG-A).

These findings are intended to provide insights that are generalisable to wider policy and practice settings that relate to youth homelessness and family conflict resolution and reduce the impact of youth homelessness in Australian society. They also help to inform the development of new approaches to reducing risks of youth homelessness that originate in family settings.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Experiences of youth homelessness are a result of combination of complex influences, forces and behaviours. Both in Australia and internationally, family conflict and breakdown remains the most significant factor in young people becoming homeless (Rosenthal, et al, 2006; Johnson, et al, 2008; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998). However, what constitutes family conflict is poorly researched, defined and conceptualised. This leaves programs, policy makers and practitioners with limited information and evidence to formulate effective family conflict interventions with this population group. Investigations of young people's relationships with family and the contexts of family conflict are crucial to deepening knowledge on family conflict and its relationship with youth homelessness. These insights can have important implications for policy and practice with families and young people to intervene and respond to family conflict, and in turn reduce youth homelessness. This introduction now provides an overview of the general literature on youth homelessness in Australia, including its main correlates, conceptualisations and their relationship to family conflict, as well as the links between family conflict and youth homelessness.

1.1 YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, young people are some of the most vulnerable people in our society and experience significant rates of homelessness. According to the 2011 Census, young people account for about one quarter of the total homeless population. Between 2006 and 2011 there was a 20 percent increase in homelessness among youth aged 12-24 years. In the 2006 Census, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported 89,728 people were homeless, of whom 21,943 (25 per cent) were aged 12-24 years, while in the 2011 Census, the ABS estimated 105,237 Australians were homeless, with 26,238 (25 per cent) aged between 12-24 years.

In 2011, the proportion of homeless males and females aged 12-24 years were relatively even (51 per cent male; 49 per cent female). Most of the homeless youth aged 12-24 years in 2011 were in 'severely' crowded dwellings (52%) or in supported accommodation (20%). While 8% of homeless people aged 12-18 years were staying temporarily with other households, this proportion increases to 14% for youth aged 19-24 years (ABS, 2012). In 2015-16, the Specialist Homelessness Services report found 41,165 young people aged 15 to 24 approached a specialist homelessness service alone, and that 25 per cent were Indigenous (AIHW, 2016).

1.2 CORRELATES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

What is clear, and has been established in scholarship on youth homelessness for some time, is that homelessness and its causes are complex and multi-faceted (Barker, 2016), relating to the structural, familial and personal impediments that contribute to young people's marginalisation (Mallett, et al, 2009). Research has identified a range of correlates to experiences of youth homelessness, which traverse both individual and structural level factors.

Individualistic explanations of youth homelessness focus on individual pathologies, personal behaviours and deficits. These explanations can include young people's inability to achieve employment or financial independence, find stable accommodation, deviant or reckless behaviour (Barker, 2016), or behaviours that act as a barrier to achieving housing and financial independence. This perspective often places blame on young people themselves.

Research has located a range of individual-level explanations of youth homelessness such as high incidence of mental illness (Rosenthal, et al, 2006) and substance abuse (Rice, et al, 2005). For example, for many young people, personal or familial drug use is a critical factor in leaving home (Mallett, Rosenthal and Keys, 2005). It is well understood that family breakdown, parental drug and alcohol use, domestic violence, parental mental health issues are some of the factors that may lead to homelessness (Moore and McArthur, 2011). Research has also found that youth who experience home relationships characterised by abuse, neglect and conflict are at increased risk of homelessness (Heinze, Jozefowicz, and Toro, 2010). Youth who experience neglect or abuse at home are more likely to enter homelessness at a younger age than those who have not (Kim, et al, 2009). Family conflict itself is linked to a range of individual-level issues; parent re-partnering, domestic and family violence, alcohol and drug use, relationship breakdown, as well as systematic abuse and neglect (Barker, 2016). Significantly for this study, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) (2013) data collection of specialist homelessness services found that approximately 1 in 5 service users cited relationship or family breakdown as a reason for seeking assistance.

1.2.1 STRUCTURAL-LEVEL CORRELATES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Structural factors impact on the conditions in which youth homelessness is likely to occur (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2013) which can be thought of as external factors that place significant stress on individuals, family units and in turn impact on the likelihood of conflict. In Australia structural factors can impact on family conflict and include high costs of rent, high youth unemployment, low income, low levels of unemployment and disability support benefits from government, demographic and cultural change that places pressure on families (Barker, 2016), as well as high levels of young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria who often become homeless (Mendes, Snow and Baidawi, 2016).

Johnson, Cook and Sesa (2016) cite youth unemployment and housing accessibility and affordability as typical structural influences on youth homelessness in Australian settings. In June 2017, the ABS estimated an unemployment rate of 13 percent for 15-24 year olds (ABS, 2017, p21), while it is estimated that Australia is currently seeing the highest underemployment of young people in the last 40 years (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2017). These difficulties are enhanced by reduced 'housing affordability', the relationship between expenditure on housing (mortgage payments or rents) and household incomes. Housing affordability in Australia has declined since the early 1980s and renter households are experiencing housing stress, particularly young single people with a low income or on a government payment. In 2013–14, the ABS found 50.1% of low-income renter households had housing costs greater than 30% of gross household income (Thomas and Hall, 2016).

In addition, affordable rental options are severely limited for single people on government payments. The 2017 Anglicare survey of 67,000 rental properties across Australia found a single person on Youth Allowance and Newstart would find it almost impossible to find an affordable home anywhere in Australia (regional or metropolitan) (Anglicare, 2017). Housing affordability has also deteriorated for single people living on the minimum wage, with the number of suitable houses falling from 5.3% to 2.8% (Anglicare, 2017).

1.3 TYPOLOGIES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AND FAMILY CONFLICT

There are multiple ways of conceptualising youth homelessness which occupy an increasingly detailed and complex space in homelessness scholarship. The most popular conceptual approaches to youth homelessness increasingly utilise typology or pathway approaches in both scholarship and in policy and practice contexts. This is due to their potential in understanding and summarising the influences and causes of youth homelessness and their ability to confront the complexity and diversity of young people who experience homelessness, particularly over periods of time (Johnson, Cook and Sesa, 2016). Pathways concepts also aim to highlight breakdown within contextual support systems involving homeless youth (Heinze, Jozefowicz and Toro, 2010). 'Causation' is also a common theme of pathway explanations aiming to identify a range of multifaceted causal pathways into homelessness for homeless youth, and the multiple factors and characteristics that impact on experiences of homelessness (Barker, 2016). These approaches emphasise the multiple categories of experiences of homelessness, as well as its temporal dimensions, and the factors that lead to an experience of homelessness.

For example, Johnson, Gronda and Coutts (2008) utilise typologies by organising young people experiencing homelessness into two categories; 'dissenters' and 'escapers'. 'Dissenters' incorporate young people living with their family prior to becoming homeless, contending with issues around family values and rules (Johnson, Gronda and Coutts, 2008). 'Escapers' refers to young people managing different forms of abuse, managing the stigma that comes from a dysfunctional family, as well as the economic marginalisation of the family (Johnson, Gronda and Coutts, 2008). In other research by Mallet, Rosenthal and Keys (2005) that investigated the role of drug and alcohol use by young people and their family in relation to youth homelessness, family conflict was identified across all four pathways.

More recent research into youth homelessness pathways finds four pathways into homelessness for homeless youth, these are; 'independent pathway', 'dissenter pathway', 'cultural clash pathway', and 'escaper pathway' (Johnson, Cook and Sesa, 2016, p.32). Family conflict is apparent in three of the four of these pathways. It is most prevalent in the 'dissenter' pathway which describes conflict at home arising out of disputes relating to differences in parent's values and rules, or the lifestyles and choices that parents make (Johnson, Cook and Sesa, 2016). The 'cultural clash' pathway focusses on cultural clashes emerging out of conflict between young people and their parents or guardians cultural expectations (Johnson, Cook and Sesa, 2016). The 'escaper' pathway describes young people who have become homeless due to experiences of physical and/or psychological abuse from an early age, in which it would you expect various forms of conflict (Johnson, Cook and Sesa, 2016). In the less frequent 'independent pathway', when young

people leave home choosing to live independently, young people face difficulties that precipitate an entry into homelessness, conflict is less apparent.

Of the various pathways identified in these studies, family conflict, in its varied iterations, is a common experience. Across three of the four pathways described by Johnson, Cook and Sesa (2016), family conflict occurs in various iterations, while family conflict is also likely in circumstances for both 'escapers' and 'dissenters' (Johnson, Gronda and Coutts, 2008). These highlight the influence of family conflict in young people entering homelessness, and show the relevance of family relationships and dynamics, as well as the variation of young people's experiences of family and familial support (Johnson, Cook and Sesa, 2016). In part pathway typologies are reductive, particularly relating to family conflict, and provide little space for the overlap of multiple pathway experiences. Pathways do not explain the in-depth processes, experiences and dynamics of family conflict and how these dynamics relate to experiences of youth homelessness. Underlying these pathways to homelessness are the complex dynamics of young people's families, which are frequently overlooked in these approaches to youth homelessness.

1.4 THE LINK BETWEEN FAMILY CONFLICT AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Research has clearly established that family conflict directly influences experiences of youth homelessness. Safer, et al (2005) identifies that high levels of family conflict and poor family cohesion are frequently found among homeless youth, while research by Hill, et al (2016) found that the majority of children and young people who run away from home cite family relationship problems as a key factor. Further, Rees, et al (2011) found that family environment was a significant factor in patterns of running away for 14-16 year olds, and almost a quarter (23%) of children living in low-warmth, high conflict family environments had run away overnight in the last 12 months prior to the study. Similarly Ferguson's (2009) research describes how adolescents often enter a homeless shelter due to high levels of family conflict, limited family support, or low family cohesion. Multiple studies have found that both homeless youth and parents of homeless youth experience low levels of warmth and supportiveness, and high levels of rejection, conflict, and family violence, in relation to those who are not homeless (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997; Wolfe, Toro, & McCaskill, 1999; Heinze, et al, 2010). To summarise, youth homelessness is frequently a site in which normative bonds to family are absent and family is not a major form of social support (Barker, 2012).

1.5 WHY IS FAMILY CONFLICT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IMPORTANT TO INVESTIGATE?

While the relationship between family conflict and youth homelessness is strong, it is clear that home and family situations and relationships are crucial to understanding how and why young people enter homelessness, and how policy and practice can respond to these scenarios. The experiences of family conflict in the lives of young people experiencing homelessness is poorly researched, defined and conceptualised (Johnson, Cook and Sesa, 2016), and little is known about how family ties and relationships can be re-established between young people and parents following a period of limited contact with home (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2013).

The experiences of family conflict and its relationship to homelessness are also important to investigate in relation to the impact on young people themselves, as the implications of homelessness for young people are diverse and involve numerous adverse outcomes across multiple domains. These can include detrimental effects on cognitive functioning and academic achievement, financial stability, and mental and physical health (Edidin, et al, 2012). Experiences of homelessness can also impact on young people's future opportunities relating to education and housing stability as well as their capacity to make a positive transition into adulthood (Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999). Also of note, is that parenting practices and parental bonds with children and young people have an enormous impact on their socialisation and development (Rohner, et al, 2005).

1.6 FURTHERING UNDERSTANDINGS OF FAMILY CONFLICT AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Absent in the literature reviewed so far are detailed understandings of the dynamics, experiences and influences on family conflict for young people who also experience homelessness. As such, this review now takes a structured approach to investigate recent literature that investigates youth homelessness and family conflict. It is intended that this can further illuminate the diverse experiences of family conflict for young people in relation to their homelessness, get a greater understanding of the experiences and characteristics of family conflict, and the role of young people and their family in conflict, as well as the factors and environments that impact on family conflict. It provides a scoping of the recent literature, examines more closely how 'family conflict' is conceptualised, and explores recent studies on the efficacy of interventions with homeless young people and enablers of exiting homelessness.

Chapter 2. Literature review - contemporary literature investigating youth homelessness and family conflict

The purpose of the following literature review is to gain a better understanding of contemporary understanding of the nature, experiences and impacts of family conflict for young people experiencing homelessness. It provides a structured review of international literature relating to family conflict and youth homelessness, and explores contemporary research understandings and perspectives of family conflict in research and how it impacts on young people. It provides insights into the impact of family conflict, causation, enablers for exiting homelessness, as well as the efficacy of interventions with homeless youth. These insights provide important background and context to the qualitative research undertaken for this research project.

2.1 JUSTIFICATION AND FOCUS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

While youth homelessness and its various dimensions have received strong investigation and critique, there is limited investigation of the circumstances and experiences of family conflict among families that experience youth homelessness. As such, there is a need for research to inform understandings of the dynamics of family conflict and how they impact on youth homelessness. This literature review is designed to understand the influences and dynamics of family conflict that impacts on, and applies to young people's experiences of homelessness. It aims to update understandings and practice approaches to family conflict and youth homelessness and in doing so increase the knowledge base regarding contemporary research into family conflict and youth homelessness.

First, this literature review details the methodological approach taken in reviewing the literature, including search procedures and inclusion criteria. Following this, the findings are presented, providing a review of the literature that investigates youth homelessness and family conflict. The results of this review, and its implications in relation to the research questions of this project, are discussed in the final section.

2.1.1 TERMINOLOGY

This review draws on concepts and terms commonly used in literature relating to homelessness and family conflict. It utilises the international and commonly used term 'homeless/ness', understanding it broadly as living scenarios that are socially and culturally constructed as materially inadequate, centred on the absence of a home (Roche, Barker and McArthur, 2017). It also draws on multiple terms to capture literature related to family conflict and family relationships experiencing strain. Alternate terms to 'homeless youth' are sometimes used in the literature such as 'runaways', 'throwaways', 'street youths' or 'system youth' (Edidin, et al, 2011), however, 'homeless youth' is most commonly used and encompasses all of these groups. While the literature generally considers 'running away' to be episodic and 'homelessness' as more long term, the two groups often overlap (Greene et al. 1997; Rotheram-Borus 1991; Schmitz and Tyler, 2015).

This review understands that family types and make-ups are increasingly diverse (Mallet, et al, 2009), and can broadly considered a set of people and relationships with whom young people interact (Barker, 2016). Families are the core unit of society where people are supported and cared for and social values are developed (AIHW, nd). The ABS defines a family as a group of two or more people related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who usually live together in the same household. This includes newlyweds without children, same-sex partners, couples with dependants, single mothers or fathers with children, and siblings living together (ABS, 2016). A family can also be considered a set of cultural norms, made up of expectations, hopes and normative behaviours (Barker, 2016).

While family conflict is frequently used terminology in policy, practice and academic contexts, this review has utilised additional and less used common terms of 'breakdown', 'functioning', 'strain', and 'fighting'. We acknowledge that there are a range of concepts related to youth homelessness and family conflict that have not been incorporated in the review due to being beyond its scope. For example, these include the correlates to youth homelessness and family conflict discussed earlier, such as poverty, child abuse and neglect, mental health or substance abuse, which may indirectly or directly influence circumstances of family conflict, but are not the central objective of this research.

2.1.2 SEARCH STRATEGY

A search strategy was developed to locate relevant academic literature in electronic databases. Search terms were developed from initial searches in the title fields and consultation with the project researchers.

Key search terms and their combinations

The key search terms were developed with reference to the generally accepted definitions of homelessness, young people and family conflict. Variations on the syntax of some searches were needed to accommodate particular databases. The search terms used included:

Famil AND conflict OR strain OR fight* OR relationship* OR breakdown OR functioning AND youth OR young person OR young people OR adolescent OR child* AND homeless* OR intervent* OR prevent**

Boolean searches were conducted that included title, key word and abstract fields. Search terms were not used with full text search functions as they returned too many unrelated results. Following this search, a snowball method was applied, in which the reference lists of relevant articles were examined for further relevant studies.

The following databases were searched:

- Academic Search Complete
- Scopus
- Google Scholar
- Wiley Online
- Families & Society Collection (Australia)

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The search identified studies that fitted the inclusion criteria. Articles had to be published in 2010 or after, be peer-reviewed, and written in English. The studies also had to investigate family conflict with children aged 10 or more. Studies that were not published in the Global North were excluded to ensure the family conflict investigated were relevant to the context of families in Australia.

Result

The literature search was conducted in September, 2016. A total of 12 articles were found to be relevant upon reading their full text. One of these articles (Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk, 2012) was added from searching the reference lists of included articles. See appendix 1 for list of all the articles retrieved.

2.2 FINDINGS

2.2.1 SUMMARY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LITERATURE

Fields of research

The research retrieved is spread across a range of academic fields of research. Most were drawn from the field of sociology, followed by social work, human services and public health. Psychiatry and psychology were also represented by one article each.

Methodological variance across studies

There is extensive methodological variance across the articles examined in this review. Four utilise qualitative methods that explore the role of family in exiting homelessness, young people who are experiencing homelessness, the relationship between poverty and youth homelessness, and the family histories of young people experiencing homelessness. Three articles provide literature reviews relating to youth homelessness that offer insights into family conflict, relating to effective interventions (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf, 2010), the health of homeless youth (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter and Karnik, 2012), as well as the characteristics of youth homelessness and the services that provide interventions (Thompson, et al, 2010). The remaining five articles were quantitative and utilise surveys, case study, and evaluation or randomised control trial methods. Two papers were literature reviews. The qualitative research had large sample sizes, with at least 40 participants. Of the quantitative research, sample sizes ranged from 133 (Heinze, Jozefowicz and Toro, 2012) to 350 (Thompson, Cochran, and Barczyk, 2012).

Participants

Nine of the studies that met the criteria of this review incorporate children and/or young people as participants in their studies. The articles draw participants from differing age groups and apply inconsistent definitions, evidencing the various constructions of youth. The youngest children represented are eight years of age and the oldest thirty years of age.

Geographical and cultural characteristics of studies

Due to the inclusion criteria of this literature review, the included studies are predominantly authored in North America (US and Canada), with some contributions from the UK, the Netherlands, Australia and China (co-authored with a US based author). The literature is therefore culturally and socially relevant to the Australian context for the purposes of this literature review.

2.2.2 FINDINGS IN THE LITERATURE

Concepts of family conflict

There are a range of terms in recent youth homelessness and family conflict literature used to refer to family conflict. The diversity of this terminology provides insights into the multiple approaches to, and conceptualisations of, family conflict, and provides context to the types of behaviours and experiences of family conflict. In this literature, 'family conflict' is also referred to as; 'concerning family relationships' (Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk, 2012); 'family disruption and conflict' (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011); 'parental discord' (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011); 'family discord or dysfunction' (Thompson, et al, 2010), 'family climate' (Milburn, et al, 2012), 'family functioning' (Milburn, et al, 2012; Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk, 2012); and 'worries concerning family relationships' (Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk, 2012).

What is 'family conflict' and what does it look like according to this literature?

As the multiple terminologies above indicate, family conflict is characterised by a range of elements. Family conflict was characterised by; a lack of family cohesion (Guo, Slesnick and Feng, 2015), insecurity, distrust, negative or poor communication within families (Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk, 2012). These characteristics could be a result of 'maladaptive relationships and experiences in the home' (Heinze, Jozefowicz, and Toro, 2010), 'ineffective parenting' (Tyler and Melander, 2010), 'family disorganisation' (Tyler and Schmitz, 2013), or more abstractly 'negative family atmosphere' (Milburn, et al, 2012).

In Thompson, et al's (2010) study, family conflict is understood as a lack of cohesion and warmth that works to hold a family together, as well as low parental responsiveness. Family discord is a primary reason for youth leaving home, which Thompson, et al (2010) present as characterised by high levels of conflict, poor communication between family members, low levels of resolution and verbal aggression. Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk (2012) detail that verbal aggression between family members can create a catalyst for conflict, which can increase feelings of insecurity and trust for homeless youth. Other research presents that a lack of trust and communication between family members can impact negatively on family conflict (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). Further, some young people find it difficult to renew and maintain relationships with family members and describe feelings of discomfort, alienation, distance and disappointment (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011).

2.2.3 CAUSATION AND CORRELATES OF FAMILY CONFLICT AMONG HOMELESS YOUTH IN THIS RECENT LITERATURE

The cause of family conflict for homeless youth was a central theme in the literature identified for this review. While risks and causal pathways are varied and complex, Heinze, Jozefowicz and Toro (2010) argue that findings across a number of studies show that breakdown within the 'contextual support systems' that contain these youth is common, including conflict and disengagement in the home. The family circumstances of young people are frequently cited as a precipitating factor of their homelessness (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). Concurring, Edidin, et al, (2012) cites literature that finds that youth homelessness frequently relates to poor family functioning, unstable home environments, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Edidin, et al (2012) confirms multiple contributory experiences of youth homelessness, including family breakdown, influenced by behaviours of both parents and youth, economic problems, and residential instability (Edidin, et al, 2012). Tyler and Schmitz (2013) utilise pathway understandings of homelessness, finding substance misuse, child maltreatment, and witnessing family violence crucial in influencing their participants' experiences of homelessness. Similarly, Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan (2011) identified family instability and conflict as one of three main pathways into homelessness.

Family home environments, and the relationships within, provide important insights into the cause of youth homelessness. Family transitions and change strongly influence family tension and conflict such as parental death, divorce or remarriage, or the introduction of new guardian figures (Thompson, et al, 2010). Parental discord and marital breakdown was also a common event leading to first homeless experiences for young people (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). In Tyler and Schmitz's (2013) study, 95% of young adult participants indicated that they left their family home due to abuse, physical violence in the household, or conflict. A systematic literature review by (Edidin, et al, 2012) confirms that family breakdown, abuse and disruptive family relationships are common contributing factors to youth homelessness. Further, Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf (2010) find that physical, emotional and sexual abuse is often cited in the literature as key cause of youth homelessness.

In Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan's (2011) longitudinal qualitative study, household instability and family conflict impacted participants lives from early childhood. Childhoods frequently involved a host of family tensions and disruptions, typically ongoing for several years prior to the young person's premature home-leaving (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). Prior to young people's first experiences of homelessness, marital breakdown, parental drug or alcohol abuse and conflict arising from step-parents were common (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). Violence was also reported in their study, with over half of participants experiencing violence in their homes, typically by an adult (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). Edidin, et al (2012) also refers to literature in their review that finds parental drug and alcohol use is frequently experienced by young people experiencing homelessness, behaviours associated with family violence, parental abandonment and child maltreatment. Parental or familial substance abuse also impacts on youths' decision to leave home (Thompson, et al, 2010). Further, negative communication in the home can lead to circumstances in which an adolescent may feel the need to escape to run away from conflict or maltreatment (Thompson, Cochrane and Barczyk, 2012).

Research has also examined the behaviours of young people that contribute to family conflict and subsequent experiences of youth homelessness. Young people's behaviours and activities that contribute to conflict with parents or guardians include peer groups, substance abuse, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, school performance, and personal style which might include dress, piercings or hair styles (Thompson, et al, 2010). Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan (2011) found that young people's patterns of behaviour also contributed to conflict in the family home. Participants reported drug use, staying out late, and socialising with the 'wrong' crowd as contributing to persistent disagreement and conflict with parents. It was not clear whether this was a response to, or a cause of, family instability. It is also important to note that for LGBT young people family conflict is a primary cause of homelessness (Edidin, et al, 2012) and that sexual orientation was found by Thompson, et al, (2010) as a factor that can contribute to conflict between young people and their parents or guardians.

2.2.4 HOW DOES FAMILY CONFLICT IMPACT ON HOMELESS YOUTH?

Family conflict often emerges in early childhood (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2010) and has been found to have direct and numerous negative impacts on homeless youth. Homelessness is often experienced by young people who lack primary supports, and as a result may not develop the necessary skills to develop into self-sufficient adults, and at the same time be at increased risk for long-term homelessness (Tyler and Schmitz, 2013). Further, Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk's (2012) study highlights the central importance of family relationships in mental health symptoms experienced by homeless youth, finding that homeless youth's concern about negative family relationships affects the psychological symptoms they experience. They also found that "poor family communication and worries concerning family relationships have significant direct effects on youths' depression, anxiety, and dissociation, which in turn have effects on youths' posttraumatic stress symptoms" (Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk (2012, p 600). Their results suggest that higher levels of worry about family relationships and poorer communication are positively associated with increases in dissociation, depression, and anxiety. Inadequate parenting is also linked to numerous negative outcomes for homeless youth, such as depressive symptoms and victimisation (Tyler and Melander, 2010). The impacts on mental health is confirmed by Thompson, et al, (2010), who present that experiences of family rejection and conflict are associated with poor mental health outcomes. Another study confirms that experiences of homelessness for young people are often combined with family conflict, together with high levels of physical, emotional, and mental health issues (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf, 2010). High rates of trauma and abuse occur for children and young people both prior to and after experiences of homelessness (Edidin, et al, 2012), and high-risk activities, such as substance abuse, risky sexual behaviour and crime and also contribute to the complexities of experiences of homelessness for young people (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf, 2010; Hill, et al, 2016).

2.3 EXITING HOMELESSNESS - SERVICE RESPONSES, INTERVENTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Some of the research included in this review offer insights into enablers for young people exiting homelessness, as well as evidence around specific service and therapeutic interventions.

2.3.1 ENABLERS FOR EXITING HOMELESSNESS

Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan's (2011) research identifies factors, events and experiences that help young people transition out of homelessness. Much of their research concentrates on the family support mechanisms that can assist young people to exit homelessness and return to living with their parents or carers. They identified three factors that can assist young people to return home; 'communication and trust', 'taking responsibility', and 're-negotiating family relationships'.

'Communication and trust', involved talk and negotiation with improved communication, and was a strong theme for young people who exited homelessness and returned home (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). This required a willingness of young people and their parents to resolve past problems and issues, and was an incremental and slow process (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). In their study, young people spoke about 'taking responsibility' in relationships with their families, largely through setting conditions between young people and their parents, which enable them to exit homelessness and re-establish relationships at home (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). This incorporated demonstrating commitment to engaging in treatment, reducing drug and alcohol use, or breaking ties with particular peers (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). 'Renegotiating family relationships' was another mechanism that supported young people to transition back to their families, and comprised adjusting and balancing power and control for young people (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011). This research by Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan (2011) extends the research of Mallett, et al, (2010) and Milburn, et al, (2009) in demonstrating that homeless young people benefit from ongoing and reintroduced contact with family members, which can help transitions out of homelessness. It also draws together previous research that has found that emotional cohesion helps to keep families together (Thompson, Cochrane and Barczyk, 2012) and that tensions between relationship expectations and their reality are common among young people experiencing homelessness (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011).

A significant message in this research is that focussing on family relationships and dynamics in early assessments is crucial, as well as utilising interventions that target the 'interconnected' needs of both young people and their parents, particularly as family contact assists young people to improve their lives and cope with challenges, and parental support provides practical and emotional support (Mayock, Corr, and O'Sullivan, 2011). In exiting homelessness, support from family was a positive influence and all participants wanted a parent to be involved in their life (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011).

2.3.2 EFFICACY OF INTERVENTIONS WITH HOMELESS YOUTH

A literature review by Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf (2010) found no compelling evidence that specific interventions support family restoration or are effective for homeless youth over a long-term, largely because interventions lack rigorous evaluation. They report that there are only a small number of intervention studies, and no true experimental designs have been used. Edidin, et al (2012) concur, finding that few prevention and intervention studies exist in the area of youth homelessness. Despite these findings, Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf (2010) along with other studies included in this review, provide some important insights into interventions with homeless youth.

According to Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf (2010), 'brief motivational interventions' with homeless youth, based on motivational interviewing, found some reductions in alcohol use over three months, and improvements in marijuana use and abstinence, however no enduring results were recorded relating to use. 'Cognitive-behavioural interventions' record some overall improvements on measures of substance abuse, social stability, depression, internalising behaviours, and self-efficacy, while research into 'peer-based interventions' found some increases in a willingness to take responsibility for actions and assist friends among homeless youth (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf, 2010). They also found no evidence that 'independent living' is an effective intervention for homeless youth (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf, 2010).

A literature review by Thompson, et al (2010) found that youth returning to their family is an optimal arrangement for most young people because evidence shows that young people who do not return to family are more likely to report hopelessness, suicidality and increased family problems. Young people that return home experience positive outcomes over a short-term, including improved school status, higher self-esteem, and improved relationships with parents (Thompson, et al, 2010).

Research by Guo, Slesnick and Feng (2015) provide a comparison between family and individual therapies for substance abusing 'runaway' (short-term homeless) adolescents. They test three interventions for 'substance abuse disordered' runaway youth; Ecologically-Based Family Therapy (EBFT), the Community Reinforcement Approach (CRA), and brief Motivation Enhancement Therapy (MET), and focus on how these influence family cohesion and conflict. They found increases in perceived family cohesion and a significant reduction in perceived family conflict from all interventions in a 24-month follow-up. In addition, an evaluation of a short family intervention found reductions in homeless young people's substance use and risky behaviour (Milburn, et al, 2012). The intervention was designed to improve families' problem-solving and conflict resolution skills which focused on young people and their families' recognising and managing feelings, increasing positive affirmations, and learning and practicing problem solving skills (Milburn, et al, 2012). The intervention reduced risks of some antecedents of family conflict such including delinquent behaviour and the use of hard drugs and alcohol (Milburn, et al, 2012).

Heinze, Jozefowicz and Toro (2010) found among homeless and at-risk youth that the number of resources and services offered did not correlate with overall service satisfaction. Instead, service satisfaction is influenced by agency climate, interpersonal interactions and opportunities for personal growth. These findings suggest that services will be more successful if they provide opportunities to develop and maintain youth-staff relationships which can strengthen contacts with youth and their families. Further, in service contexts, young people need to be given meaningful opportunities to be listened to and taken seriously (Hill, et al, 2016).

2.4 AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

So far, this review has provided important insights into the contemporary literature on youth homelessness and family conflict and highlights areas for future research. These include more detail on family conflict, problematic family dynamics, as well as services and interventions.

2.4.1 MORE CONCEPTUAL DETAIL OF FAMILY CONFLICT

'Family conflict' is a diverse concept in the articles included in this review, with a range of terminology utilised. The terminology refers both to family conflict broadly, as well as the characteristics of family conflict. More detailed understanding of family conflict may help to further future research in this area. Similarly, the studies included in this review used inconsistent definitions of youth and young people making comparisons across studies difficult. Research that is exploratory and investigates the direct experiences of family conflict for young people and their parents is largely absent in recent academic literature. More detailed understandings, definitions or models of family conflict as it relates to young people who experience homelessness would be valuable in progressing policy and practice interventions with families.

2.4.2 FAMILY DYNAMICS

There is a paucity of detailed analysis of the dynamics, interactions, characteristics and mechanisms of conflict between young people and their parents and guardians before and after young people become homeless. In particular, research that explores in detail the specific experiences and circumstances in which young people enter homelessness would be valuable. Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan (2011) argue that "relatively little is known about how family ties are re-established and how relationships are renegotiated between young people and family members, particularly parent(s), following a period of limited (or no) contact with home" (Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan, 2011, p. 396).

2.4.3 SERVICES AND INTERVENTIONS

This literature review has found that a greater evidence base for interventions with homeless youth is an important area for future research (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf, 2010). More methodologically sound research is required that considers closely what specific interventions are beneficial for homeless youths. Particularly under-researched areas in effective interventions for homeless youth relate to areas of social trust, living skills, family and peer support and safety (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf 2010). Edidin, et al, (2012) argues that there is a paucity of research that investigates the impact of homelessness on youth for cognitive skills, behaviours, psychiatric

functioning and social networks, which could help to adapt interventions to better meet these challenges. Future challenges for service providers are to better ascertain the needs of homeless youth (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf, 2010), instead of solely focusing on deficits and pathology, investigate more positive constructs such as well-being, quality of life and the strengths of individuals (Edidin, et al, 2012).

2.5 CONCLUSION

Recent research further confirms the relevance of family conflict as central to experiences of homelessness for young people. Family conflict continues to have a substantial impact on homeless youth across a large number of wellbeing domains. The literature on the 'causes' of youth homelessness is detailed and sizeable, and the impact of family conflict on experiences of youth homelessness is clear. Yet, how family conflict is experienced and realised is under-examined and under-conceptualised. Exploratory research that investigates the direct experiences of family conflict for young people and their parents is largely absent in recent academic literature, particularly as much of the research on family conflict and homelessness is quantitative, utilising diverse preconceived terminology and closed definitions of family conflict.

There is limited understanding of how 'family conflict' is defined and experienced by young people experiencing homelessness, and how the dynamics of family conflict relate to and impact on young people's experiences of, and sometimes choice to, enter a situations of homelessness. In addition, there is varied evidence for specific interventions, nor detailed policy and practice approaches to reducing family conflict as it relates to homeless young people. This paucity of research is a significant finding in itself that provides an important reason to pursue research on the co-occurrence of family conflict and youth homelessness in its various context-bound iterations.

Chapter 3. Method and research approach

The premise and aim of this research was formulated in discussions between Melbourne City Mission and the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) at the Australian Catholic University. The focus of the research in focus groups was also informed by the literature review presented earlier in this report that investigates the intersection between family conflict and youth homelessness.

The research agenda of the ICPS strongly supports engaging young people in research. The merits of conducting participatory research with young people are supported by evidence and well established in contemporary approaches to research (Moore, Noble-Carr and McArthur, 2015; Christensen and James, 2008; Alderson and Morrow, 2005). It is well established that young people (and children) have the capacity to participate meaningfully in research. Children and young people are now recognised as rights holders who are competent social actors with valuable perspectives and knowledge, who actively engage with their social world (Aries, 1962; Corsaro, 2011; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2011; Mayall, 2002).

The methods for this project included seven focus groups; three with young people who have experienced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness, three with parents of young people who have experienced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness as well as family conflict, and one with staff who work in various capacities with young people and families relating to family conflict, homelessness, or with other forms of support.

3.0.1 ETHICS

Ethics approval for this project was provided by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee. In designing this research, researchers drew on literature on ethical research with young people (Alderson & Morrow, 2005; Lambert & Glacken, 2011). In particular, researchers were conscious of the impact on participants relating to the potentially sensitive content of focus group discussions, such as issues relating to family conflict, relationships and experiences of homelessness. There were some risks that the content of focus group discussions may be upsetting to participants with the potential for discussions provoking emotional responses.

These risks were mitigated in a range of ways. Group expectations were established at the beginning of each focus group, discussing and instituting rules around confidentiality and respectful communication. It was made clear to participants that they could exclude themselves from the research at any time and that their participation was not compulsory. In addition, a pre-established protocol was used by researchers to follow in the event that a participant

disclosed abuse. Also to mitigate risks to participants, Melbourne City Mission made staff available to participants throughout their participation in the focus group to provide support if required.

Further, the researchers involved in this project have previous practice experience in youth work and social work. At the end of focus groups researchers asked participants about how they were feeling generally, how the discussions in the focus groups made them feel, and to reflect on the value of participating in the focus group, if any. This was to assist researchers to identify the wellbeing of participants and if any required follow up support from either researchers or Melbourne City Mission staff. In addition, at the conclusion of each focus group, researchers made themselves available for informal discussions with participants relating to the research, concerns, or any further ideas, impressions or perspectives they wished to convey.

3.0.2 CONSENT PROCESSES

All participants provided written and verbal consent prior to their participation in focus groups. We also followed appropriate and age friendly consent procedures which were guided and reviewed by the Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Consent was viewed as an ongoing process throughout the focus groups. For the focus groups with young people in particular, opportunities were afforded to discontinue participation after researchers had verbally described the research project including the content and format of focus groups, and participants were made aware that they could discontinue their participation at any time for no penalty. It was also made clear to participants that it was suitable to not contribute during the focus groups if they did not feel comfortable doing so.

3.0.3 RECRUITMENT

Participants were recruited by Melbourne City Mission staff via their programs across multiple locations in the city of Melbourne. The study recruited young people, parents and carers, as well as Melbourne City Mission workers and practitioners to participate in its focus groups. Prospective participants were provided with information pertaining to the research prior to attending the focus group.

The study had set inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants. It required young people to be aged fifteen or above. It also required young people to either currently or previously have experiences of homelessness, or be at risk of homelessness. Parent or guardian participants required previous experience of family conflict involving young people. Staff/practitioners who participated required experience working in program relating to families or young people.

Prior to inviting prospective participants, Melbourne City Mission staff considered the appropriateness of young people or parents to participate, and whether there were any reasons why they might be excluded from the study. This pertained to participants who may have been experiencing crisis, or their participation had potential to jeopardise their wellbeing.

3.0.4 FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were held in multiple locations across the city of Melbourne, and lasted between 35 and 78 minutes. Preceding the focus group, participants were asked to complete a short survey detailing demographic questions relating to their gender, age, ethnicity, the Melbourne City Mission program they are involved in, as well as the make-up of their family and current living arrangements (young people only). Participants took part in either a young person focus group, a parent/guardian focus group, or a staff/practitioner focus group.

Discussion in the focus groups centred on defining and describing family conflict, discussing how it manifests in the context of family life and relationships, the impact of family conflict on individuals and family members, as well as deliberating on how family conflict and youth homelessness intersect. Discussion also broached topics relating to interventions and supports that could assist families in navigating and resolving conflict.

3.0.5 PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

Twenty-one young people, eight parent/guardians, and ten staff participated in this research across seven focus groups, totalling thirty-nine participants. Young people who participated were aged between 16 and 24 years; an average age of 19.4 years. Ten were male and eleven female, and four identified as culturally and linguistically diverse, with one participant identifying as Aboriginal. Of the twenty-one young people, ten were in a living situation of homelessness at the time of participating including; sleeping rough, in supported accommodation, or in a hotel. Four participants were sharing accommodation with friends, and the remaining participants were living with either parents

or carers. Of the parents and carers who participated, four identified as culturally or linguistically diverse, all were female and aged between 43 and 61 years of age.

The staff who participated identified as managers, case workers, social workers, and youth workers. Their primary client groups were children, young people and families, and they worked in crisis, residential and case management type programs. Their experience in the sector ranged from 5 months to over 10 years.

The quotes presented in the findings utilise participant identifies which indicate which participant group the quote aligns with. *YP* indicates young person, *P* indicates parent, and *S* indicates staff, while *FG* refers to focus group. *A*, *B* and *C* designate differing focus groups.

3.0.6 ANALYSIS

Focus groups were transcribed and then imported into NViVO software for analysis. Transcripts were read fully and coded according to major emergent themes. The focus group transcripts were coded by one researcher. These themes were discussed and refined with the second author and used to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data. This analysis of the focus group data forms the findings of this report and has been used to answer the primary research questions of this research project. The analysis revealed an important set of themes and findings relating to family conflict and responses to these issues.

Chapter 4. Findings – How is family conflict experienced and understood?

The first findings section of this report presents an overview of the experiences and understandings of family conflict held by participants. Emerging from the analysis of participant's contributions is a 're-definition' of family conflict as it applies to families with young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness, and aims to offer a new level of conceptual clarity for both practice and policy. This is based on the contributions of participants who expressed in detail their understandings and experiences of family conflict, providing in-depth interpretations and accounts of family conflict as it applied both in their own lives and others.

The concept of 'family conflict' was understood in various ways, however, emerging from participants' accounts was a distinction between 'overt and situational' and 'latent and ongoing' forms of family conflict. These definitions represent the frequently conceptually invisible, yet experientially potent manifestations of family conflict, based on participants lived experience of conflict that led to homelessness.

'Overt and situational' family conflict

'Overt and situational' family conflict refers to expressive and evident actions and behaviours that are antagonistic in nature. They are 'overt' in that they are explicit forms of conflict, largely identifiable as conflict, have an immediate impact on participants, and are often based on the situational context in which they occur.

'Latent and ongoing' family conflict

'Latent and ongoing' family conflict is accumulated and unresolved conflict underscoring family life. Experiences of 'latent' conflict occur beyond the instance or incident of 'overt and situational' conflict, and is typically ongoing in nature. It is frequently experienced in discreet and implicit forms of family functioning, feelings and generalised atmosphere of family life, often not yet manifested into 'overt and situational' forms of conflict.

This 're'-definition of family conflict, based on our research, answers the question: 'How is family conflict understood and experienced by young people experiencing homelessness and their parents?' It is an explanatory device that provides greater depth of understanding of how family conflict is experienced, and applies to families with young people who experience family conflict and homelessness in combination. This definition can be utilised to provide a name and lens to view and understand family conflict that is not otherwise recognised or explicitly identifiable. This is important particularly for young people and parents who struggle to identify and define their experiences of family conflict in all of their forms, and can find it hard to justify or identify their feeling of being unsafe, unwanted and uncomfortable. It is important to note that these forms of family conflict commonly interrelate and co-occur to varying degrees. We now describe these two forms of family conflict in-depth, and explore how they relate to participant's experiences.

4.1 OVERT AND SITUATIONAL CONFLICT

Participants discussed how family conflict is experienced in everyday life. For both young people and parents, family conflict takes many forms and presentations, however a range of these types of conflict can be considered as both overt and situational in nature. They are overt in that they are definite, obvious and direct presentations of conflict, largely identifiable as conflict, recognised as such, and have an immediate impact on participants, and 'situational' in that the conflict is typically based on the time and place that it occurs. Some of the concepts of family conflict found in the recent literature on family conflict and youth homelessness reflect this, such as in Thompson, et al's, (2010) study which found that poor communication, verbal aggression and low levels of resolution were common.

The focus groups revealed 'overt and situational' conflict as including various forms of verbal conflict, criticism, negativity and aggression, as well as acts of personal violence, typically between parents and young people. Parents and young people had similar understandings of family conflict, however parents focussed more on 'overt' forms of conflict such as verbal aggression and violence in discussing family conflict.

4.1.1 VERBAL CONFLICT – ARGUMENTS, AGGRESSION, CRITICISM AND NEGATIVITY

For participants, verbal conflict was a dominant form, expression and frequent experience of family conflict. Verbal conflict included arguments, insults, strong criticism and various other forms of negative communication. One young person described the context of an experience of verbal conflict, also revealing the situationally based nature of the conflict:

“...when I came back down to Melbourne he [father] was just like you fucked up up there and all that crap, that's why you're back here...” (YP FG-C).

Similar verbal exchanges could emanate from young people. One parent described an incident of verbal aggression with her teenage daughter that she thought of as a core experience of family conflict.

“...she'd turn around and say I wish you weren't my mother. I wish you weren't my mother. I wish you were dead. I hope you get hit by a bus and things like that” (P FG-A).

Participants identified that conflict relating to verbal interaction extended to the way in which criticism was expressed.

“Sometimes it is tone though, sometimes it is the way you say it and sometimes it is the way you handle rejection. Sometimes it's the way you handle acceptance, it's how you speak and your tone and the words you use” (YP FG-C).

A parent offered a comparable statement relating to verbal conflict, but also detailed how hurtful the impact of verbal conflict could be. Speaking about conflict with her daughter, one parent stated that:

“...even now, her words can be like knives. She knows what to say to cut you at your knees” (P FG-B).

For most participants, it was the hurtful intention of verbal forms of conflict which was most significant in relation to forms of family conflict. The following exchange between young people in a focus group highlights agreement around the frustration of unchanging negative assumptions and expectations of parents and carers and its relevance to family conflict. Participants concurred that this was a strong source of conflict between young people and parents.

P1: “...sometimes I'll ask something and she'll [mother] think I'm asking for money or asking for this or asking for that, and it's just those assumptions, like that they hold onto, so instantly they're on the defensive if you ask something. I don't know, it's hard to explain”

P2: “I know what you mean”.

P3: “You got it bang on, you really do”.

P2: “They always think, like you're the same, you'll never change. Do you know what I mean so they'll hold you for the things that you did in the past and they keep reminding you of the stuff that you did in the past. So if you ask them for anything they're like no, I don't have it. You're going to do this and that with it. They think they already know you that much that you're going to do something bad, do you know what I mean?” (YP FG-A).

The content of verbal conflict reflected broader conflict between parents and young people relating to their behaviours, parental expectations and assumptions, as well as general negative dispositions and parental hostility towards them. This is highlighted in an exchange between participants:

P1: “I[t] was just like on the day where I didn't go to work because I was sick, I had gastro or something, like I was throwing up. I told my mum that and she's just like you're just hung over, like always.”

P2: “My sister used to do that to me” (YP FG-C).

The impact of this 'overt' conflict lay in the meaning and thoughts behind the context of the argument. It implied that the young person's mother did not trust or believe them, and that their illness was not important. This outlines how overt conflict is often just one presentation of deeper tension and conflict that is not necessarily related to the current event of conflict. This is discussed further under latent conflict. For example, one young person described the frustration of passive aggressive tension between him and his family.

P1: *“At my house, it's weird. It's not like straight yelling. It's really passive aggressive arguing. Sort of like - it's very frustrating. I can't put it into words.”*

P2: *“I think that's the worst kind because it sounds normal.”*

P1: *“Yeah. To someone not there, it's like get over it...”* (YP FG-A).

Parents offered insights into the circumstances of when family conflict escalated into ‘overt’ angry and aggressive communication between family members.

“...it's gone from being typical family arguments and stuff, to real conflict in the family. I see that as the different part, is when the communication stops and it just becomes angry” (P FG-A).

4.1.2 VIOLENCE

This research also highlights the relationship between violence and family conflict. Violence is primarily viewed by participants as an extension of family conflict as well as part of disciplinary practices. The connection between violence and family conflict is important to note, particularly as violence is generally accepted as a distinct concept to family conflict. This suggests that explanations of family conflict should include violence as a likely result of family conflict. Further, violence used as a disciplinary practice indicates the absence of parental skills to resolve conflict and to manage their children's behaviours in more effective ways.

The focus groups did not aim to discuss experiences of family conflict pertaining to physical violence, however participants viewed violence as an extension of family conflict and an experience that was directly related to their experiences of family conflict. Violence often went hand in hand with other forms of verbal conflict. This is because family conflict, in its various forms, could quickly escalate into violence, typically between young people and their parents. Violence represents the acute and more extreme version of overt conflict that is also typically based on specific situations and contexts. The following young person explained the relationship between family conflict and family violence.

“When I have conflicts with my family... they'd rise up to violence. My mum would start yelling and then my brother and sister would get involved. Then because I didn't fight, they'd beat up on me until I fought back” (YP FG-A).

Another young person also reflected on how an argument initially based on insults escalated into an incidence of violence. In this instance, the conflict escalated into violence based on the content of the verbal conflict.

“Biggest thing for me and my dad was September/October last year we got into a really big argument that turned physical and all that stuff. He was calling me like a deadbeat and all that stuff, you know, just really hurtful stuff...” (YP FG-C).

Other experiences of violence for young people centred on disciplinary practices conducted by family members, were typically a regular experience, and were not always just between young people and parents.

“I'd go to school, come back late, just a little bit late because I have to catch a bus and train and then it's like you went somewhere else. Then I would get hit for no reason, like I would just get hit or yeah, when I was 14 it got serious and went on for years... like my sister and her husband, they were taking the stress – wherever they come from, they come from outside, coming inside, like you didn't do the dishes, little things like that. I'm like oh my god, so you roll your eyes or anything that's when you get bashed” (YP FG-C).

Violence was not limited to between parents and young people. Another young person described violence they had experienced in the family home involving a sibling rather than parents.

“There was a point where I like, I had a knife to my throat kind of thing, kind of yeah, essentially about to get killed but all that shit happens and then, like, it's just like such quick things can make, stupid things like that can jeopardise your life so easily, so quickly. It's ridiculous. For me I feel uncomfortable around my dad but my younger brother I feel unsafe around” (YP FG-C).

In the focus groups with parents, violence was discussed less than in the focus groups with young people. However, some parents provided detailed examples of their experiences of family violence relating to their children and their

impact on their relationships with their children and partners. Violence was often positioned by parents in the context of high levels of frustration around disciplinary techniques. The following parent provided a distinct example of violence as disciplining practice, continuing on from general frustrations with the participant's daughter's behaviour and attitudes.

“It got to the stage of where it was physical contact. And on those sides, I’ll admit, both sides, there were a couple of times I’d clobber her across the head. I’d grab her by the arm, simply because there was a lack of respect there. And being old-school, it’s not that we were too hard on her. What she got, she didn’t get everything she asked for, but she got what we thought was reasonable. She wasn’t deprived of a bike. She wasn’t deprived of a party. She wasn’t deprived of this. What she got was what she got. But whatever she got wasn’t good enough” (YP FG-B).

In this example, violence was justified due to culturally based ideas of appropriate discipline, and the perceived connection between a young person's behaviour and quality of parenting. Another parent reluctantly admitted that her frustrations with a young person she was caring for turned into an act of violence.

“And this day she just doesn’t care. And I was coming and after dropping the two kids before and I come home, and she was on the phone. Like, she said, “Oh, I can’t find my shoes.” I think it was just too much for me and I just went up to her and I grabbed her and shoved her to ground, “Look for your shoes under the bed” (P FG-B).

Not all the examples of family violence provided by parents involved them as the initiators of violence. An example was provided of a young person's violence towards her step-father that was, similarly to other incidents, an extension of other forms of family conflict.

“She was sitting on the couch opposite him and she just got up and flew at him and smacked him fair square in the face. Knocked his glasses off, drew blood on his nose” (P FG-B).

From the focus groups, a clear picture of violence as an extension of family conflict has emerged. Violence co-occurs with family conflict for many young people, and while not as frequent, parents also both experience and utilise violence in moments of high frustration and in disciplining their children. ‘Overt and situational’ forms of family conflict were a common experience of family conflict for both young people and parents and is a central component of family conflict that is experienced in families with young people with experiences of, or who are at risk of homelessness. ‘Overt’ family conflict involves explicit and antagonistic acts and behaviours relating to arguments, verbal aggression and negativity, as well as criticism. Experiences of family violence were frequently an extension of various forms of verbal conflict, often occurring in association with various forms of verbal conflict. This is because family conflict, in its various forms, can quickly escalate into violence, typically between young people and their parents. Overt forms of family conflict are explicit incidents of conflict that are easily identified by participants. They are experienced as irregular events, and are unpredictable. However, participants, particularly young people, spoke in greater depth about other forms of conflict that, they suggested, often had a greater impact, in the form of ‘latent and ongoing’ conflict.

4.3 LATENT AND ONGOING CONFLICT

The insights provided by participants in this research, particularly by young people, suggest that family conflict relates to far more than the overt and situational forms of conflict discussed above. Emerging from our analysis of the focus groups we describe these feelings and experiences as ‘latent’ conflict, which can be defined as a state of conflict that has not developed or manifested into the overt and more identifiable forms of conflict that are ongoing in nature.

Experiences of ‘latent’ conflict occur beyond the instance, incident or event typically involved with ‘overt’ kinds of conflict and is experienced as; an atmosphere of mistrust, hostility and negativity in the home; the accumulation of unresolved tension and conflict, ongoing atmospheres of tension, feeling unsafe and uncomfortable, and/or an absence of warmth, care and consideration within family relationships, and the presumption of negative or damaging intentions relating to behaviours. An important characteristic of ‘latent’ conflict includes its longevity and ongoing nature, as well as how the dynamics and impact of conflict can originate outside moments of ‘overt’ conflict. Some of these concepts have been previously identified such as feelings of general discomfort (Mayock, Corr and O’Sullivan, 2011) and low levels of trust (Thompson, Cochran and Barczyk, 2012).

We found that ‘latent and ongoing’ conflict is significant for two reasons. Firstly, latent conflict can provide the conditions for overt conflict to occur, and provides an explanation as to how ‘overt’ conflict can originate outside immediate incidences of family conflict. Understanding conflict as ‘latent’ in nature assists in identifying ‘overt’ forms of conflict (events and incidents) as a symptom or manifestation of ‘latent’ conflict that underlies the operation and function of family life, although latent conflict is not necessarily required for overt conflict to occur. Secondly, we found that various forms of ‘latent’ conflict have a significant impact on the young people and parents involved, and frequently has a more profound and enduring impact on young people than ‘overt’ forms of conflict. Even after leaving the family home, latent conflict can continue to have an adverse impact on the lives of young people. Naming these forms of conflict renders it visible, and provides a name and concept to conflict something that is not tangible gives it a presence and validation for the people that experience it.

4.3.1 ATMOSPHERE OF MISTRUST, HOSTILITY AND NEGATIVITY

Young people spoke in detail about the negative, hostile and uncomfortable atmospheres of family life that they associated with family conflict. They often used the term ‘atmosphere’ to refer to the pervasive dynamics and interactions that defined family life, and the way family members oriented themselves to each other. A common atmosphere of conflict relates to the various forms of negativity that pervade family life that feels inescapable and has a pervasive and strong negative impact on wellbeing. The following young person described this form of family conflict that they experienced prior to becoming homeless.

“So that’s what conflict is, pretty much; just not being able to escape that constant atmospheric negativity that just has an impact on how you feel as a person. [It] just drives you mental because it just makes you think that the world is just nothing but a place of crap, pretty much” (YP FG-A).

There is a strong temporal dimension typical of the negative atmospheres described by participants, and become one of the most difficult aspects of this form of family conflict. ‘Latent’ conflict is frequently unresolved, ongoing and all-pervasive in this form, making conflict and its associated problems all the more oppressive and inflammatory. One participant reflected:

“Constant negativity. All the time, just - it’s hard to cut a break from what’s constantly going on. It sucks. It really does” (YP FG-A).

4.3.2 ACCUMULATION OF UNRESOLVED TENSION

Another major form of ‘latent’ family conflict involves the ongoing experiences and accumulation of unresolved tension and conflict among family members. The accumulation of this tension results in a constant family disposition of strain and related behaviours, reinforced by constituent events of overt conflict, resulting in higher levels of conflict. This experience of latent conflict is often confusing for young people who find it difficult to judge and manage their impact, and respond to in appropriate ways. For example, one participant found it difficult to explain the impact of this type of conflict, where it emanates, or how it can be resolved, and in doing so highlights the direct impact of this form of conflict.

“Yeah. It’s not big enough - it’s not like she’s coming and punching me in the face. I can’t really go and say that. It’s not like she’s screaming and calling me bad names. It’s very subtle things that... together, it’s a really big deal” (YP FG-A).

Another young person expressed their understanding of this type of tension, referring to their mother and highlighting the typical behaviours involved in this type of conflict.

“Yeah, a lot of neglect and ignoring... What I say I don’t think really matters. Whatever she wants, it’s in her head and she’s going to get it one way or another” (YP FG-A).

Another young person summarised the impact of ‘latent’ forms of conflict, and the difficulty in identifying its source and navigating its impact.

“-[I]t’s definitely an impact that needs to be taken care of. But it has to be taken care of differently. If something’s a passive aggressive, kind of psychological abuse, you wouldn’t treat it the same as a physical abuse scenario, I guess. There’s a lot of different things that need to happen for you to realise that it’s wrong. I think it’s different. The impact of it will still get to you, but I think it’s different” (YP FG-A).

The atmosphere of negativity described in this section can also be conceptualised as a part of the aftermath of ‘overt’ conflict. This is described as ‘rubble’ by one participant, referring to the ongoing fallout and leftover tension relating to experiences of conflict, invoking ideas of broken family dynamics.

“I was going to say the worst kind of conflict is when you can tell that you - say if it's in my situation, it's me and my parents. So those two sides - two different sides, two different points of views, but very passionate about their points of views. The way that it collides just - like it's not a clean slate after it collides. There's a lot of rubble in this. I don't know if that makes sense” (YP FG-A).

4.3.3 FEELING UNSAFE OR UNCOMFORTABLE

A further crucial element of ‘latent’ conflict expressed by participants relates to overarching feelings of safety and comfort in the family home. Young people reflected that their feelings of safety and general discomfort were important indicators of family conflict.

“I think the normal feelings, like you don't exactly feel safe at home or you don't feel comfortable there, or you just – just the general discomfort” (YP FG-B).

Another young person described the impact of family conflict as having a relationship to a consistently negative family atmosphere.

“Just like you develop a state of mind where you cannot be comfortable” (YP FG-A).

This was supported by other participants, with one suggesting that it has a strong impact on their mental wellbeing.

R: *“So is it like a feeling of discomfort that's constant?”*

P1: *“Yeah.*

P2: *Kind of like a paranoia.*

P1: *Exactly. It turns into paranoia” (YP FG-C).*

4.4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OVERT AND LATENT FAMILY CONFLICT

This section of the report has broadened definitions of family conflict and provided a typology of family conflict as it applies to families with young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. While forms of family conflict are diverse, they can be divided into two types; ‘overt and situational’ and ‘latent and ongoing’. While these types of family conflict are experienced to different degrees and in different combinations, they draw attention to the diverse experiences and impact of family conflict, as well as highlight the relationships between forms of family conflict. The contributions from participants confirm that while incidents of overt conflict are a difficult experience, the family environment and atmosphere between outbursts of conflict are just as difficult to negotiate. This indicates limited capacity of family to resolve the overt outbursts of conflict, leaving this conflict a constant fixture of family life.

We also found that the manifestation of ‘overt’ and ‘latent’ forms of conflict often rely on each other. ‘Overt’ conflict frequently occurred within ‘latent’ family conflict environments, often a presentation or symbol of deeper tension and disharmony that was frequently ubiquitous and unresolved in families, laying underneath family dynamics, atmospheres and functioning. However, environments of ‘latent’ conflict were also a product of unresolved ‘overt’ conflict, established out of repetitive and consistent events of overt conflict. It is important to note that latent and overt conflict can also occur in isolation, for example there may be no clear overt conflict but people can live in latent conflict, while there can also be overt events of conflict that get resolved and do not undermine the integrity of family dynamics and relationships. However, the typical experiences of family conflict and their relationship are represented in the diagram below.



Chapter 5 - Findings – What are the sources of family conflict

This section of the report discusses the various sources of family conflict, informed by the contributions in focus groups of young people, parents and carers, as well as staff. Our analysis presents the sources of family conflict in a model with three distinct categories; *micro* (individual), *meso* (familial) and *macro* (socio-cultural). This model offers a presentation of the phenomenon of family conflict in families that experience young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and provides insights into the sources of family conflict in everyday life, as well as highlights the family functions and experiences that impact on family conflict and that lead to homelessness. Here we answer the question ‘what are the sources of family conflict?’ We define these sources across three distinct levels (*micro*, *meso*, *macro*) which highlight the differing types of influences on family conflict, and their proximity to incidences of family conflict itself.

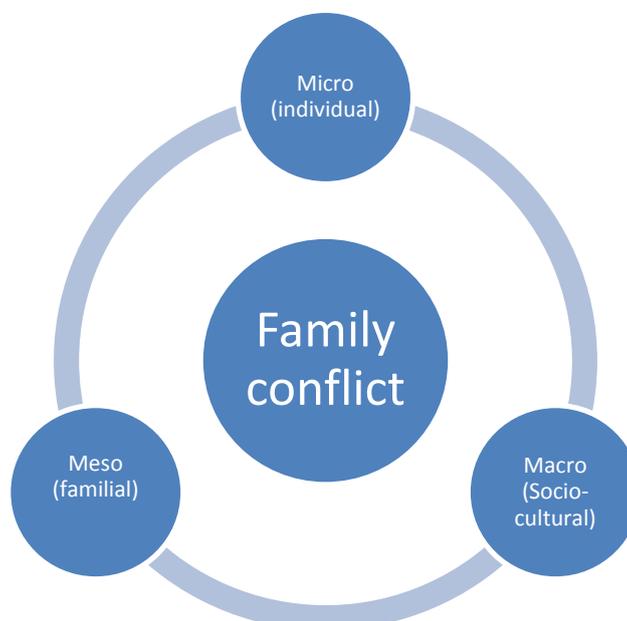
5.1 A MODEL FOR PRACTICE

We detail below a model of the sources of family conflict which highlights the multidimensional factors of family conflict and can be utilised for practice and policy purposes. It demonstrates the range of influences on family conflict, and the relationship between the multiple sources of family conflict. In doing so, it highlights the varied iterations of family conflict and the multiple points in which intervention in families might be possible. While the terms ‘micro, meso, macro’ have previously been used in social research in various ways, such as in models of child development, here we utilise them for their conventional meaning to differentiate between proximity to family conflict as it occurs in everyday life. We also utilise the terms ‘individual’, ‘familial’ and ‘socio-cultural’ to signify the nature of the source of family conflict. Each category corresponds with distinct experiences and behaviours that impact on family conflict, but hold qualitatively different relationships and proximity with family conflict. In addition, each category of conflict impacts other categories of conflict, and provides conditions and environments for conflict to occur at other levels. The purpose of this model and its terms is to provide conceptual clarity to the social phenomenon of family conflict as it applies to the participants in this research. This model shows how each source of family conflict is interlinked, and that all sources of family conflict impact on the phenomenon of family conflict.

Micro (individual) sources of family conflict refer to the types and experiences of conflict involving incidents, events and behaviours that lead to ‘overt and situational’ conflict. These sources mostly pertain to the actions and behaviours of individuals who are directly involved in the conflict itself.

Meso (familial) sources of family conflict refers to underlying family functioning, dynamics and the home environment that can lead to family conflict. These sources of family conflict have an indirect relationship to family conflict, yet have a strong influence over the environment and conditions in which conflict manifests. This category draws attention to how problematic family relationships can be an organising principle of the family. These sources of conflict typically pertain to pervasive and ongoing behaviours and functioning of a family.

Macro (socio-cultural) sources of conflict are the structural stresses on families, the social conditions in which conflict manifests, and the impact of intergenerational trauma and family dysfunction.



5.2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOURCES OF FAMILY CONFLICT

This model aims to offer conceptual distinction and clarity over the sources of family conflict, however in practice, these sources can take on multiple levels and characteristics at any time. All participants, including both parents and young people, recognised that disagreements, quarrels and arguments are inevitable within a family. While the three levels in the model are presented as distinct categories of sources of family conflict, it is important to note that all three levels interact and impact on each other, and influence experiences of family conflict in combination or in isolation. This model prioritises what we found from the focus groups, and aims to highlight the patterns and entrenched behaviours discussed by participants, and as such, should be utilised as a guiding tool only.

Conceptualising sources of family conflict for policy and practice – an explanatory model

| CATEGORY OF CONFLICT | SOURCE OF CONFLICT |
|---|---|
| Micro (individual) Incidents, events and behaviours that cause family conflict. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Routine conflict and general disagreement -Conflict and tension over behaviours for example chores, or the use of internet/social media -Verbal aggression and conflict – arguments and criticism -Violence |
| Meso (familial) Family functioning and home environments that cause family conflict. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Conflict as an organising principle of family life -Disintegration of trust in family -Absence of love in family -Strong feelings of abandonment |
| Macro (socio-cultural) Structural and historical stresses, social conditions and community level influences on family conflict. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Poverty and financial marginalisation -Unemployment -Unstable housing -Family histories and experiences of dysfunction and trauma -Contexts of mental illness and substance abuse |

5.3 MICRO (INDIVIDUAL) SOURCES OF FAMILY CONFLICT

The micro-level sources of family conflict involve the incidents, events and behaviours that cause family conflict on an individual level. This conflict is initiated by a range of sources, including daily events such as phone use, chores, breaking rules or disagreement over core values and behaviours. Each instance is an example of a micro-level source of conflict. Examples of these micro-levels of triggers of family conflict were provided by participants, and include *routine conflict and disagreements, use of social media*, as well as *inflexible and rigid relationships* between parents and young people. These were viewed as both sources and manifestations of family conflict.

5.3.1 ROUTINE CONFLICT AND DISAGREEMENTS

Participants described levels of disagreement and annoyance at family members' behaviours within their household. These were confined to relatively mundane reasons, involving general disagreements, clashes over values or particular practices, or concrete problems such as leaving a mess or not attending to a chore or other domestic issue, or using

social media in a problematic manner. General disagreement was a primary source of family conflict among participants.

"...isn't conflict just not being able to agree on something? Yeah, my experience, not being able to agree on things and it sort of blowing out of proportion sometimes.... Just everything is made a big deal" (YP FG-C).

Parents also reflected on their parenting practices and techniques and described the frustrations when they were ineffective, in particular relating to behaviours around the house such as chores. These practices were often in frustration with their children not responding.

"We set down certain rules; she didn't agree with them. She would not clean her room. She would not do chores. She would not go to bed when she was told. She would not get up for school" (P FG-C).

Parents expanded on the dynamics of these events of routine conflict, in this example explaining the mechanisms of conflict over a disagreement about a young person going out at night.

"But it got to the stage where she was home, she was, I think 14, 15 and she was just going out of a night. I'd say you're not going out. You can't go out. Where are you going? I'm just going out. I'll be back later. I said I am not going to sit up. I was starting work at six, seven o'clock. I am not going to sit up till all hours of the night till you decide to come home. I am going. You're not going" (P FG-B).

The relationship between the use of social media and family conflict was specifically asked in focus groups. It provides a good example of how the multiple levels of sources of family conflict interact, and how conflict based on the use of social media, as an example of routine conflict, impacts on micro-level conflict.

Some workers talked about how social media highlighted other issues, such as disconnection, or an inability to communicate effectively within the family. As the quote below highlights, social media use is actually highlighting the need to connect with others, which is exacerbated by the lack of warmth, communication and presence of conflict at home.

"But also then for the young person that's their means as connecting with other people and with society and with broader communities, it highlights that disconnect; because if I haven't got that at home I can't talk to my mum or my uncle or anyone, so I'm going to talk to Gary in Canada, ..." (S FG).

And:

"I don't know I'm just speculating, but perhaps parents are using that social media and blaming social media for that reason when really in reality..."

"They're just being 16"

"Yeah" (S FG).

The workers themselves articulated how social media use was highlighting problems, but not necessarily the cause or underlying issue. The participant below addressed how social media use was an example of mismatched expectations.

"Someone said before how social media and that kind of communication might be highlighting problems, I think you said that before. So I think what we were talking about here is parent's expectations about children and how social media and the interaction with social media is where the expectations of the young people and the parents are different. So do the parents expect to be able to communicate in a particular way and the children don't, and their use of the phone is the thing that highlights the fact they're not doing what the parents want or..." (S FG).

Reinforcing what was said in the focus groups with parents, workers reported that parents do not know what their children are doing on social media and this lack of shared understanding can lead to fear and uncertainty.

"A lot of it is parents just don't understand why kids are spending six-seven hours on social media, they don't know who they're communicating with and it brings that fear and that unknown and that creates conflict within itself." (S FG).

Others workers then noted that this lack of knowing is also an issue of control, which highlights a lack of trust and communication:

“Lack of control too do you think? You can’t see it or feel it or touch it and they’re on there for hours having no idea what they’re doing and what they’re exploring and I think that’s really scary for parents. And then not knowing how they then do it or get into it.”

“And it brings up that trust area between them and their son or daughter and I think it’s just the unknown” (S FG).

These quotes detail how conflict relating to social media use is often a symptom of other problematic dynamics, such as poor communication styles and techniques. Social media was not seen to simply be the cause of conflict. Rather, social media and mobile phone use was expressed as just another site that can accentuate deeper issues that cause family conflict, such as poor or limited communication.

5.3.2 COMMUNICATION

A lack of or breakdown in communication was a common theme in the focus group with workers relating to micro-level sources of family conflict. It related to poor communication skills that were closed, inflexible and unresponsive. This was explained by workers in different ways.

“What I often find with families is they mean and say the same thing but are using very different languages and that often breeds the conflict. So we find that the arguments that are surrounding that are just purely that the parents aren’t understanding the young person’s development and the way they communicate, and that the young person doesn’t understand the way that the parents communicate also”. (S FG).

Other workers highlighted how families did not even know how to begin communicating:

“At times it can also be lack of communication all together. My experience has been at times that they don’t know how to start the communication going, parents to their young people, and so they need a few strategies and a bit of support to do that. So that’s leading to the conflict because they’re not communicating with each other.” (S FG).

Problematic communication was also a defining feature of family conflict for another parent who described a complete lack of communication between her and her daughter as the essence of family conflict.

“No. Done. Let’s not talk about it. Stop it.” Like that. So, like not discussing things, I find that. And so, there is no communication in the home” (P FG-B).

The following exchange between young people details the frustrations of poor communication and its relationship to conflict, detailing their everyday circumstances.

P1: *“Well that’s the whole point of communication, is to actually understand both sides of what’s going on.*

P2: *And have a two-way conversation, not just a one way street.*

P3: *Just like you need to listen and do and then that’s it.*

P2: *And then hear what you have to say.*

P3: *Yeah you’ve got nothing to say.*

P2: *Yeah, you feel like you’re talking to a brick wall, it just gets you frustrated and it’s going to start an argument.*

- P4: *Some ways to avoid conflict; even if you think you're right, you know, and you don't want an argument or something like that just subtly end the conversation, just be like okay then, I see where you're coming from or something like that. Just try and avoid conflict" (YP FG-C).*

5.3.3 INFLEXIBLE AND CONTROLLING PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Young people also cited inflexible and controlling parenting as a dominant characteristic and source of family conflict at the micro-level. Various examples of controlling parenting were provided by young people who expressed frustration when describing parenting that involved dismissive attitudes to their needs and desires, as well as limited capacity for mutual negotiation. One young person described how their mother took an inflexible approach to parenting and their relationship.

"What I say I don't think really matters. Whatever she wants, it's in her head and she's going to get it one way or another" (YP FG-A).

Similar inflexibility was present in other examples from young people which presented as controlling parenting practices. While this young person conceded that it was not necessarily malicious, it was a source of conflict.

"That control that your parents have over you, they want you to go in this direction or that direction. But sometimes they do it with good intentions but just unreasonable stuff" (YP FG-C).

These types of parenting practices were a source of conflict at a micro (individual), and were also apparent in culturally-based restrictions for several participants. The following young people related conflict to their family's cultural background and related behavioural expectations.

- P1: *Control. Like they always want to control me, because of my background and culture and all this stuff; like you're not supposed to go out on your own because you're a girl or you can't talk to these certain people, you know what I mean?*
- P2: *So like cultural aspects as well.*
- P1: *Culture as well, it's like oh my god.*
- P3: *It's interesting, because especially in this society it's a western society, you'll see all these other people doing it and you're not meant to." (YP FG-C).*

5.4 MESO (FAMILIAL) SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Participants reported a range of meso (familial) sources of conflict, typically involving problematic family functioning and home environments. These sources of family conflict have a strong influence over the environment and conditions in which family conflict manifests, and typically pertain to the behaviours and functioning of a family unit. These include a disintegration of trust, feelings of abandonment and an absence of love in family relationships. Many of these dynamics relate to the 'latent and ongoing' characteristics of family conflict described earlier in the findings, and the family dynamics, relationships and functions that contribute to experiences of family conflict. These sources of family conflict highlight the relationship between conflict and problematic family relationships that have become an organising principle of family life, and in a range of ways, demonstrate how experiences of family conflict can create the conditions in which micro-level sources of conflict occur. The following staff member put succinctly how presentations of overt and situational conflict are a symptom of other underlying issues, such as those discussed in this section.

"I think with the conflict it's interesting because they're kind of warning signs or triggers towards something a lot more in-depth, where I think sometimes they seem so trivial and minor that people might neglect those" (S FG).

5.4.1 DISINTEGRATION OF TRUST BETWEEN YOUNG PEOPLE AND PARENTS

The absence of trust between young people and parents was a key theme in focus groups relating to problematic relationship dynamics in family units. For both young people and parents, a typical element of conflict was the absence or disintegration of trust, which had a significant impact on relationships. Trust related to expectations of behaviour, and the confidence that parents and young people had their best interests at heart. Participating staff observe in their work family members developing roles, assumptions and suspicions about the conduct and motives of other family member's behaviour that is framed by a lack of trust. In addition, participants expressed that an absence of trust was a key characteristic of the conflict they experienced at home, particularly because it is a highly valued component of relationships and an important element of a harmonious family.

“I think it comes out of how you really trust. Everyone's different. I rarely trust very highly. Trust is very important to me. So I think if the trust is gone in the household, which honestly it is in my own household, it definitely doesn't help at all. No.” (YP FG-A).

When a lack of trust emerged in family relationships, conflict became typical of family interactions. The following exchange between participants on the topic of trust between young people and their parents highlights the relationship between trust and family conflict.

“I think it's - I mean, what you're saying, if the lack of trust can lead to conflict; I think that's one type of way. For me it was. Because I had to go behind my parents' backs. I had to do all this. So it was my side which I was lying to them. That lack of trust from them kind of made conflict. So I think it's a unique kind of situation. I'm not sure if it's the same with everyone else.” (YP FG A).

A disintegration of trust was not necessarily a precursor to family conflict as reflected above. Trust could also erode as a result of ongoing family conflict and in this way impacted not only on relationships with parents, but created uncertainty in the longevity of the family unit, and was a key stressor in relation to future living material arrangements.

P1: *Yeah. For me, I lost trust from my parents after the conflict. You could start off with that trust and then the conflict increases and gets worse and worse and worse and then you just automatically trust them less and less as it gets worse. You don't know what's going to happen or where you're going to be in a weeks' time. It's a hard situation to trust in, just put your faith in.*

P2: *It's the same with me.*

P1: *Especially if you're not trusted for no reason, as well. Then you feel like everyone's going behind your back. Then you just get paranoid as shit. You start over thinking - get stressed and then that's when we get conflict (YP FG-A).*

The consequence for young people losing the trust of their parents was clear to them.

“It's about trust I reckon. Sometimes when your family loses trust in you they don't want to support you because they've lost that trust. You just spin-out” (YP FG-C).

Parents clearly expressed a lack of trust as a core characteristic of the family conflict that they had experienced. The disintegration of trust in the family environment also impacted heavily on parents and could have significant longevity:

“Once you mistrust a child I think in the back of your mind, you can forgive them, but you don't forget. I still don't forget a lot of the things she said to me. Maybe I've forgiven it and said turn the other cheek. But they're still here. I know a lot of times I know she lies to me now and I think well why are you lying to me?...” (P FG-A).

Another parent identified the reciprocal nature of trust, and recognised how quickly trust could be broken, and that it is difficult to restore relationships with children afterwards.

But I think what the worse part is that we all forget that they don't - as soon as we don't trust them, they don't trust us back. We don't have to break trust. They automatically tend to go back on that, oh look you don't trust me so I can't tell you anyway so they automatically don't trust us in return, so as soon as that trust is broken, it's both ways... (P FG-A).

5.4.2 FEELINGS OF ABANDONMENT

Young people spoke about their strong feelings of abandonment from their families and highlighted how these feelings are a strong source of ongoing conflict. These feelings demonstrate the impact of problematic and dysfunctional family relationships, and show how family life can impact on family conflict. These feelings show how conflict and problematic family relationships can be an organising principle of the family life, and can provoke conflict, and occur as a result of conflict. Young people spoke about their strong feelings of being abandoned by their parents and extended family, even while living at home.

“I don't know, I just felt abandoned by mum completely.” (YP FG-A).

Another young person expressed confusion and despair at their mother's ongoing neglect and indifference towards them. It was a confronting and continuing experience.

“I've never understood. I've always resented my mother because if - I just don't understand how you can have a child and not give it everything” (YP FG-A).

Feelings of abandonment were present during family conflict when residing at home, as well as subsequently when experiencing homelessness, having a negative impact on the potential for resolving family conflict.

P1: *“Yeah. Yeah. I still feel abandoned. I don't talk... one single family member. I was living at my boyfriend's house and he's all I have...”*

P2: *It's the same with me.*

R: *Is the same true for all you guys?*

P3: *Yeah”.* (YP FG- A).

5.4.3 ABSENCE OF LOVE

For participants, the absence of love in family relationships was a critical source, and result of, family conflict. Feelings and actions of love were thought of as an important part of family life by participants, and impacted on family relationships significantly. The following young person described the impact of a loveless relationship with their parents.

“Yeah <laughing>. That's probably the worst type of sadness and depression is when you want love from your parents. Not just hate them, but just want love.” (YP FG-A).

For one young person, love-less family relationships became a regular part of life, and a stark reality of family life.

“I thought that - I guess I got used to the fact that not everyone gets parents that will love you. Not everyone gets - believe it or not, but not everyone has a mum who loves them or a dad. It's true.” (YP FG-A).

Unreciprocated love among family members could also be a source of conflict. Conflict could emerge when gestures or actions of love were misunderstood or left unacknowledged. The following parent described the impact of this:

P1: *“Well, I give love more than anything to my children. They still don't appreciate that”.*

R: *“So, what does that look when they don't appreciate it?”*

P1: *“What does it look like? What do you feel like? It hurts. They don't acknowledge it.”*

R: *“And what is it that makes them not see that? Why can they can't see it or not acknowledge it?”*

P1: *“Because it's not given back. It's not said back. It's not shown back” (P FG-A).*

5.5 MACRO (SOCIO-CULTURAL) SOURCES OF FAMILY CONFLICT

Participants revealed in focus groups the social and cultural conditions in which family conflict occurs. These were highlighted by staff in particular, who detailed the impact on individuals and the family unit the structural stresses on families, the social conditions in which conflict manifests, and the impact of intergenerational trauma and relationship dysfunction that are regularly encountered and responded to in their work with young people and their families.

Their contributions to this research highlight the complex and multilayered causes and presentations of family conflict, and connect these with both social, cultural and broader structural and intergenerational stresses on family conflict. The workers emphasised the structural and external factors that contribute to and cause family conflict as well as the different ways the conflict manifests itself in family life.

The influences on family conflict described in this section are highly related to entrenched issues, often intergenerational in nature, which highlights how previous dysfunction has a relationship with conflict in the present. In addition, ongoing scenarios of substance abuse, mental illness and violence are pervasive in the lives of families in this study, and have a significant indirect relationship to family conflict. These include the various behaviours and experiences that contribute to family conflict that can be considered the social and cultural conditions in which family conflict emerge.

5.5.1 DISADVANTAGE AND FAMILY CONFLICT

Some of the workers emphasised the chronically disadvantaged circumstances of families and young people, highlighting the structural and entrenched issues that shape their lives. For many workers, their professional experiences informed their view that there is a need to address the structural issues that impact on family life.

“I often see and I believe that there are other multilayered things that cause conflict like poverty, family violence, attachment issues, drug and alcohol. So working with families and young people to improve their communication, but I don't think you can ignore the contributing factors that go on in people's lives because lives are complex.” (S FG).

Worker's contributions in focus groups emphasised that structural issues often shaped their work with profoundly disadvantaged and vulnerable young people and families. Some of the workers spoke about the complex nature of these clients.

“None of the young people that are currently staying in our youth homeless refuge at the moment are out of home because of not flushing the toilet or the internet, absolutely none. A large majority of them have come from a history of [child protection] and residential care so they've also experienced conflict in a familiar way while they're in their residential settings.” (S FG).

The same participant went on to discuss how they saw this complex client's reasons for homelessness being acute presentations of abuse, neglect and other deeply rooted intergenerational issues.

“Most of my experiences, because I haven't worked in early intervention so I've always worked in crisis for the last 10 years, not one of the young people that have actually ended up or I've referred into refuge has come from a history of trauma, neglect, drug and alcohol, mental health and it's intergenerational and it's that inability for emotional regulation, they've not had any mentoring or any consistency, unconditional love, any of that sort of stuff that I think we all take for granted.” (S FG).

The limited parenting capacity of some of the parents seen by the workers is severely impaired and limited due to their own trauma and histories:

“I really agree with you that trauma and the parents' trauma and intergenerational trauma is always present. I work also for [in another service] but that's really coming up quite often that the parents, they haven't dealt with their own trauma and we try to attend to the young person, it's nearly impossible because the parents don't have the ability to respond to the young person because of their own stuff. So it's really, really present.” (S FG).

5.5.2 FAMILY HISTORIES AND CULTURES OF DYSFUNCTION AND ABUSE

Family history of dysfunction and abuse was identified by all participants as having strong implications in the family conflict they experienced and observed. A strong dimension of family dysfunction was its place as a norm in many of their lives, frequently a reproduction of the problematic parenting and family histories that had been their own experiences.

“They get born into this, they don't get taught that they deserve any more, they get treated and the family conflict is the norm so this is how we react, this is how we display our emotions, and if there's significant trauma which there generally is in those settings then often that's played out – we have a large representation in homelessness of BPD, borderline personality disorder, which stems from a traumatic event, as most of us will know, or horrendous sexual abuse or neglect... and they're not getting the treatment. Then they have children early and then that is then played out again.” (S FG).

Workers also discussed how violence was a norm for some of these families as a way of communicating, resolving conflict and trying to achieve different goals, and how these family norms of violence were often seen as being intergenerational.

P1: “I think also that intergenerational stuff so it's often just historic as well and what's the norm. So how people are communicating and how they're being heard is often through violence or it's a learned – I often find, especially dealing with crisis or young people being kicked out a lot of violence and drug and alcohol and all the other complex issues, but it's also often a learned behaviour or response is they've been taught”

P2: “It's the norm, they don't know any different yeah” (S FG).

Staff gave accounts that traced family conflict, particularly conflict that emanates from poor or problematic communication, to mental health, alcohol and other drug issues, as described in the following excerpt.

“Yeah I'm the same, I find we're having a lot of families where it's actually parents that are drug affected and mental health issues associated, and that's causing then the other links around communication and assumptions are made around people's thinking and although it's not said it's just – yeah” (S FG).

Some young people contributed an array of candid and detailed insights into the impact of family dysfunction on their lives. The following young person had experienced multiple forms of abuse, neglect and risks to their safety as routine, prior to becoming homeless. Examples like this, put family conflict in perspective, and highlight how family conflict can be a product and consequence of long-lasting and serious maltreatment and family dysfunction.

“So, say for instance my parents did drugs, alcohol, all that crap, physical abuse, so I grew up in and out of different foster homes and I was living with some pretty shady people. So that's what got me doing stupid shit and illegal stuff, because the people that lived, that's how I grew up. I grew up around that stuff” (YP FG-C).

A strong theme of the family dysfunction and abuse among participants were unstable parent and guardian relationships, and difficult living arrangements they fostered. Young people viewed problematic adult and guardian figures as highly influential over their lives and homelessness histories.

“My mum's made pretty, really shit decisions with a few guys she's dated. You know what I mean? Like abusive physically and mentally. Just absolute arseholes. I really wish that my mum could have actually known better to get a proper male role model in my life or my brothers' lives for that matter, so we didn't have to go through as much shit.” (YP FG-A).

Another young person highlighted the circumstances of family dysfunction that she had endured, and the environment in which family conflict occurred for her.

“It depends on what stage, because my family life has gone up and down throughout the years. Like I originally lived with my mum until I was nearly 13 but I'd been in foster homes for some reason when I was a kid, I don't remember. But my mum left because her friend died and she had a mental breakdown so she just left and then I went to my dad's. And that was fine and then, so we could go to my dad's house now but I wouldn't want to go there because as I say he's an alcoholic or drug addict, he switches in between the two

and also because I don't want to repeat the cycle. That house makes me depressed and it's more likely to make me, when I was living there I was an alcoholic myself. So it's an uncomfortable, not unsafe but as far as unsafe in the way of my health.” (YP FG-C).

The following young person details how family dysfunction impacted on his experience of family conflict and subsequent homelessness. The dysfunction at home was a key component of family conflict.

“The day I turned 16 I left the residential house that I was living in and moved back home. From the day that I was taken I always wanted to go home. I knew what my parents did, I knew what they were like so I wanted to go home but as soon as I moved home it was worse than I imagined and that's when conflict started. I'd go out with friends, tried staying out of the house as much as possible because it was just ridiculous. That's when it all started for me because I just didn't agree with things that they'd do and say and all that stuff”. (YP FG-C).

For a number of participants, the family environment and behaviours within it, had a strong impact on experiences of family conflict and subsequent homelessness. Environments and contexts in which mental illness and drug use could occur were especially highlighted by participants. For example, one participant discussed the mental health ramifications on her and her father of the black Saturday bush fires.

“...we were both going through a tough time. I was 16 and so I was self-harming, suicidal and my dad had recently broken up with his ex and then still dealing with, because we all went through the Black Saturday fires. So we were all still dealing with that” (YP FG-C).

In some cases, substance abuse was linked to experiences of family dysfunction and subsequent family conflict.

“Same bro. I got brought up by my dad for a few years when I was younger. That whole few years, I was seeing a bong being smoked and shit. I was a witness to fucking seeing porn at the age of four years old and then getting backhanded because he thought I was the one that put it in. You know what I mean? Like just all this kind of abuse. Any sort of abuse you could think of just my father's done” (YP FG-A).

5.6 IN COMBINATION – HOW SOURCES OF FAMILY CONFLICT INTERACT

It was clear from participant accounts that the phenomenon of family conflict is a result of a combination of factors and experiences. For many participants, family conflict is embedded in complex and ongoing interaction between individuals (micro), family dynamics (meso), and socially and culturally based behaviours and experiences (macro). It is important to note that these sources of conflict occurred in different degrees for participants, and in each instance are weighted differently. For example, some families did not experience structural stresses or intergenerational trauma, indicating the different significance that each source of family conflict can take.

In the focus group discussions, participants highlighted differing understandings of the sources of family conflict. Young people and parents, with direct experiences of family conflict, were largely confronted and consumed with the phenomenological experience of the conflict and interpersonal interactions, while less forthcoming on the often amorphous and invisible structural strain that impacts on family conflict. The staff who participated frequently highlighted the macro structural issues in which family conflict was situated, and were quick to detail how issues such as problematic family communication overlapped with other issues, such as structural issues (poverty, unemployment, and housing), intergenerational issues, and histories of trauma. For example, in the following quote, a staff member highlights how the accumulation of tension and unresolved issues that are structural, intergenerational and environmental, underscore the presentations of conflict.

“With a lot of my clients... whether it's from violence growing up or their own experience of trauma and they haven't had a chance to deal with it and it's always there, it's always hanging around in the back of their head somewhere. So when their child doesn't flush the toilet it's not about the toilet but it's about a personal attack on me and you are such a horrible person for not flushing the toilet 12 years ago when I'd asked you to do it eight times already. It escalates because of this.” (FG S).

The worker below articulated how their service works with a range of young people and families, with many presentations of family conflict with and an array of causal factors. This worker expresses the complexity of the issue

and the need for workers to consider and address family conflict across the micro, meso and macro levels. However, they signal that there are limits to the work they can do to address these multilayered factors.

“[W]e get two really different polar opposites of conflict. So we have the minor mediation around social media and flushing the toilet and those minor issues that can be solved quite quickly and that communication can be improved, but then we have the complete opposite where ...you have so many complex issues that a lot of them are just symptomatic of what’s going on, and that’s the difficult part. If you’ve got limited time with the family you can deal with some of those communication strategies and some of those soft skills, but some of them are so entrenched with disadvantage or generalisations of trauma and everything that’s been built up, and a lot of those issues are just too complex for many people to deal with and that’s what we come across as well.” (FG S).

This emphasis on chronic and acute cases of homelessness and disadvantage, as noted by the participant, is obscured by the nature of their work. Other workers, and the young people who participated in the research, emphasise that conflict can happen to anyone. As noted in the following quote from another worker:

“Turning it on its head a little bit but talking about [program] here; we do get that basic not flushing the toilets, those basic conflicts and it’s good because when you go and see the family they’ll yell about the dishes but like [participant] was saying there’s so many different layers to that and that becomes more and more unapparent. So the parents will constantly go on about the dishes or the young person will go on about a 10pm curfew, but we’re able to dig and spend that time digging more and more into the different levels of it.” (S FG).

One worker’s response reinforces the idea of the need to look at the source of family conflict issues as one of many potential layers of other ingrained and inculcated issues that impact on young people and their families and contribute to homelessness.

“I think as a service we sometimes just meet those basic needs and sometimes not look more into the core issues of what’s linking them to that. So sometimes you’ll have a young person that presents and it’s really only about a food voucher, but there’s so many more layers to that and I think sometimes where we go wrong is that we don’t dig into what are some of those causing effects? The same in early intervention, with that conflict that’s really leading to homelessness; is it really about the dishes or is it really about just needing a school uniform and actually looking at those flags. I think as a service with the communication, young people and families will attempt to communicate to us with a minor presenting issue – does that make sense?” (S FG).

The participants themselves emphasised how the incidents and apparent topics of conflict were not the issue, but underlying misunderstandings, lack of empathy and connection.

“I think underneath all of that, and what you all said is relevant in my opinion, but underneath is that basic misunderstanding, the lack of empathy, the lack of connection, the lack of atonement from parents’ side to respond to the child or to the young person’s needs. If there was a real connection and real understanding, real interest and a proper responsiveness, all this other stuff wouldn’t matter because there would be communication and all these things would be addressed in a different way. But what you mentioned, all this social disadvantage and poverty and social media, they are all there but the basic what is missing the real connection which stems from the early attachment and it goes through later on.” (S FG).

In the following quote, the staff participant provides and of the relationship between the three categories of family conflict. Here they highlight how social conditions, such as high unemployment, impact on family relationships.

“A lot of relationships fail because of financial issues. If you’ve got no house you’ve got no job and you can’t get a job because you’re an unskilled labourer and all these jobs are gone now in Victoria. It’s really hard to maintain a good relationship with yourself, with your partner, with your children. So some people are homeless and suddenly our behaviours are becoming more and more extreme to meet those needs. It’s a bigger societal issue than just services...” (S FG).

Many of the workers really emphasised the impact of structural pressures on families and the lack of an adequate approach at a systemic level. The worker below discussed how the structure factors that influence and shape the lives of their clients are important, but not to be addressed in exclusion from the other issues that families present with.

“I just think the structural issues are important but we’re going to always have structural issues no matter what and there needs to be resources provided like poverty, all this stuff addressed, but I don’t think that just that will cut the mustard, that won’t respond... So more support into addressing all these other needs because this is what I see, and I’m not minimising what you’re talking [about], it’s also really relevant, but I just feel it’s not enough the structural stuff, the other stuff it’s really...it’s not mutually exclusive” (S FG).

To summarise, this section has revealed the sources of family conflict in everyday life identified by participants in the focus groups. These sources can be understood across three categories; *micro* (individual), *meso* (familial) and *macro* (socio-cultural), which when used in practice, can assist to highlight the multiple sources of family conflict. The next section of this report investigates the factors that contribute to family conflict turning into experiences of homelessness.

Chapter 6. Findings – When does family conflict turn into homelessness?

Participants reflected on the experiences and events of family conflict which contributed to homelessness. Young people largely reported feeling pushed into experiences of homelessness, based on a range of factors. They reported that experiences of homelessness were typically related to ongoing conflict, rather than actions relating to specific incidents or outbursts. For some, ongoing family conflict was mixed with significant and continuing experiences of abuse and neglect. Situations of homelessness were not entered into lightly by young people; they described making highly considered decisions to support their wellbeing, and assessments of alternative living arrangements, which were frequently scenarios of homelessness. Young people were generally future oriented, and were focussed on the implications of their conflict moving forward.

6.0.1 ONGOING CONFLICT

The young people who participated in this research identified that one of the most significant factors impacting on their homelessness was ongoing family conflict without a foreseeable resolution. The ongoing nature of family conflict indicated to young people that family relationships were near irreparable and of limited value. They also felt exhausted from family conflict that had become a regular and routinised part of family life. When ongoing family conflict became unbearable, it would reach a tipping point in which young people decided to leave. The following example highlights the effect of family conflict on young people, as well as the impact of ongoing conflict.

“...you kind of just get to that point where you're like... I need to put myself in a [different] situation - I'm not happy. I'm not safe. You just see yourself slipping into this really awful, really dark routine that you don't want to be in anymore....It's like it's been years and months of constant awfulness and conflict. You just get to that point where you're like, I need to leave. This needs to happen... If something doesn't change, then it's just all going to get worse” (YP FG-A).

The impact of family conflict on young people was such that they could see no foreseeable change in their parents' attitudes to young people and the conflict that is occurring. The following example highlights the rational approach some young people took in responding to the frustration of the family conflict they were experiencing. This young person put their experience in perspective, but highlighted the unchanging nature of family conflict as a crucial component of why they left the family home.

“Like shit's going to happen and maybe you don't get along and stuff like that. But it reaches a point where it just doesn't work and not everyone has that happy family and that happy dynamic in their household. Sometimes, it just doesn't work and it's easier if your parents admit it and say, yeah, this needs to happen and we need to do something about it. But it's so much worse when they just deny that there's even a problem. You can't fix a problem they won't admit” (YP FG-A).

6.0.2 SIGNIFICANT AND ONGOING EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND NEGLECT

While not an experience for all participants, a number described violence and substance dependence in the family home and its impact on experiences of homelessness. These were often repeated or ongoing experiences, and strong indicators of problematic family relationships and conflict that impacted on young people's decisions to disengage from their families. These experiences were also strong evidence that families could not provide to young people the safety and support that they wanted and could also be quite complex to navigate. They underscored experiences of family dysfunction, and contributed to multiple pathways in and out of various care arrangements.

“...my parents did drugs, alcohol, all that crap, physical abuse, so I grew up in and out of different foster homes and I was living with some pretty shady people. So that's what got me doing stupid shit and illegal stuff, because the people that lived, that's how I grew up. I grew up around that stuff” (YP FG-B).

6.0.3 FAMILY VIOLENCE

Several participants spoke about serious incidents of family violence which influenced their homelessness. Exposure to family violence demonstrated to young people an unsafe and dysfunctional family environment that was a strong influence on decisions to leave home.

“I think it all depends on – like a person can only take so much, so like, for example in my situation, I have had to leave my mum’s house numerous times, due to domestic violence with her and her partner. So for something like that, where you’re like “I can’t do this. It’s not normal” you kind of don’t have time to like think about the situation” (YP FG-B).

6.0.4 SUBSTANCE DEPENDENCE

Similarly to family violence, substance dependence of family members strained relationships, and left family members feeling unsafe and unloved. In the following example, the young person describes how her mother’s substance dependence impacted on her material and emotional needs and expectations.

“For me, it was like my mum - because my mum neglected me for ages and hardly ever bought food. I guess she was a crack head she just didn’t give a fuck about me and just cared about getting on the stuff” (YP FG-A).

Substance dependence could impact on relationships between young people and their parents, and be a barrier to improving relationships post-conflict.

“My dad’s always had a history of abuse, like substance abuse and I was working and he’d expect me to give him money for things and I’m like no. Then I tried to reach out and communicate but he was only seeing it from his point of view” (YP FG-C).

6.0.5 HIGHLY CONSIDERED DECISIONS TO LEAVE HOME

In the focus groups young people discussed highly considered decisions they made to leave the family home, which were often based on experiences of ongoing family conflict, and taken over a long period of time. This indicates that young people, despite the impact of family conflict, in some situations could exert control over their homelessness, and is more of a response to ‘latent and ongoing’ conflict. For one participant, their experiences of family conflict reached a ‘tipping point’ in which homelessness was a greater alternative. This translated into considered actions to support their wellbeing. The following young person articulated this process.

“You kind of think - I remember doing this; I was just weighing it in my mind. Like is the warmth of my bed at night worth all of this? Or is a roof over my head worth all of this? It’s weighing the options, in a way” (YP FG- A).

6.0.6 OBSERVING OTHER FAMILIES WITHOUT CONFLICT

For young people, observing other families enjoying each other’s company, spending time with each other and communicating effectively, provoked a realisation of their own family’s problematic conflict, dysfunction and poor relationships. These observations typically allowed young people to reflect on and assess their own situation and role in their family. Young people identified in other families what they desired in their own, and through these observations, developed a strong sense of loss in realising what they were missing in their family life. These realisations contributed to young people’s justifications in leaving their family home. For example, the following young person describes their emotional response after interacting with their girlfriend’s family.

“For me one time I went to an ex-girlfriend’s house over the weekend and then this one day I just kind of like broke down because seeing how her family interacts, you know, they look like a real family... it kind of gave me the feeling of warmth...” (YP FG-C).

These types of responses were very much a shared experience among the young people in this research. The following exchange between participants highlights this, and details the qualities that they saw in the other families relating to relationship warmth and respect.

R: *“What is it that you see in those families that you want or that you don’t have?”*

P1: *Like the communication, that’s it, because you see someone with a family and they’re talking to their dad nice, talking to their mum nice and they’re having a joke about stuff. They’re talking about cooking up a dinner and stuff like that and they cook up a really nice meal and you’re there for it. And you’re just thinking why can’t my family be like this? That’s pretty much it.*

P2: *It’s just little things.*

P1: *Yeah the little things count.*

P2: *Like chocolate.*

P1: *When I was there; the mum and the dad said to their kids and me come on, we're all going to go down the park and have a barbecue and hang out. It's like oh yeah, cool, like hell my parents would do that, too lazy. It's the little things.*

P3: *It's like what you see on TV what families are meant to be.*

P1: *Yeah and when you actually see it in real life it's like shit.*

P3: *Like to all be there for each other, enjoy spending time, communicate effectively and then you go home and that's not happening" (YP FG-C).*

Interacting with other families allowed young people to reflect on and realise their own family's dysfunction and conflict, and come to a better understanding of family relationships, and put into perspective the conflict they experience in their own families.

"So basically, what I mean by this is when you start to see things from different perspectives and you're not just looking at your home situation and you're not isolated and you gain a perspective; that's when things kind of change for you and you start to see things in a different light. You see that things are wrong, basically" (YP FG-A).

Chapter 7. Conclusions

While family conflict is an everyday experience for most families, for some young people conflict has major ramifications, which in some cases leads to homelessness. In response, this report provides in-depth findings relating to the experiences and dynamics of family conflict as reported by young people, parents, and staff who work with these families. It supports other research that highlights the relevance of family conflict to experiences of homelessness for young people (Rosenthal, et al, 2006; Heinze, Jozefowicz and Toro, 2010). It also draws attention to the complexity of family life and the multiplicity of actions, behaviours, environments and structures that impact on conflict among family members.

Our literature review details that concepts of family conflict in previous research, as they relate to young people who experience homelessness, are varied and inconsistent, and frequently offer limited investigations of what constitutes 'family conflict', often with inadequate input from young people themselves. In addition, research that is exploratory and investigates the direct experiences of family conflict for young people and their parents is largely absent in recent academic literature, instead focussing on relationships of causation, and drawing attention to the individual and structural level correlates of family conflict.

This research has attempted to fill some of these research gaps, by focussing on how family conflict is experienced and defined, by young people and their parents who have direct experience of family conflict and youth homelessness. This project centred its investigations on the concept of 'family conflict', to better understand what it looks like, how it is understood, as well as how it is experienced, and utilise these findings to support new approaches to policy and practice.

It is also important to highlight the value this research has placed on the contributions of its participants, in particular young people. This is because engaging young people in research is a meaningful way to produce findings and recommendations that most meet the needs of young people. While this study demonstrates the complexity of young people's lives, it also highlights the enthusiasm of young people to contribute to research that improves policy and practice as it affects them and their peers. The following headings detail key areas of practice ramifications and interest that emerged from this work.

7.1 DEFINING FAMILY CONFLICT FOR PRACTICE

Policy and practice can benefit from improved understandings of how family conflict is experienced and understood. Participants in this research revealed their experiences and understandings of family conflict. Among all participants, conflict was a fixture of family life and relationships, but was experienced in different ways, in different times and contexts. We grouped experiences of family conflict into two categories; 'overt and situational' and 'latent and ongoing' (see page 29).

'Overt and situational' family conflict refers to expressive and demonstrable actions and behaviours that are antagonistic in nature. They are 'overt' in that they are explicit forms of conflict, largely identifiable as conflict, have an immediate impact on participants, and are often based on the situational context in which they occur.

'Latent and ongoing' family conflict is accumulated and unresolved conflict underscoring family life. Experiences of 'latent' conflict occur beyond the instance or incident of 'overt and situational' conflict, and is typically ongoing in nature. It is frequently experienced in discreet and unapparent forms of family functioning, feelings and generalised atmosphere of family life, often not yet manifested into 'overt and situational' forms of conflict.

These definitions can be utilised in practice to provide a name and lens to view and understand family conflict that is not otherwise recognised or explicitly identifiable. This is valuable particularly for young people and parents who struggle to identify and define their experiences of family conflict in all of their forms, and can find it hard to justify or identify their feeling of being unsafe, unwanted and uncomfortable.

7.1.1 UNDERSTANDING THE MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES OF FAMILY CONFLICT FOR PRACTICE

For both young people and parents, family conflict takes many forms and presentations, across both 'overt and situational' and 'latent and ongoing' domains. While these types of family conflict are experienced to different degrees and in different combinations, they draw attention to the diverse experiences and impact of family conflict, as well as highlight the relationships between forms of family conflict. 'Overt' and 'latent' forms of conflict often rely on each

other. 'Overt' conflict frequently occurred within 'latent' family conflict environments, often a presentation or symbol of deeper tension and disharmony that was frequently ubiquitous and unresolved in families, laying underneath family dynamics, atmospheres and functioning. However, environments of 'latent' conflict were also a product of unresolved 'overt' conflict, established out of repetitive and consistent events of overt conflict.

Participants reported that 'overt and situational' family conflict could include; verbal aggression, arguments, disagreements, criticism, passive aggressive behaviours, negative body language, or violence. Participants reported that 'latent and ongoing' conflict included; family atmospheres of mistrust, hostility, negativity or tension, accumulated tension, feeling unsafe, distrust between family members, and or a lack of warmth and care in family life.

7.1.2 UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCES OF FAMILY CONFLICT IN PRACTICE

Another important finding for policy and practice relates to what our study found out about the sources of family conflict. For practitioners, stronger understandings of the sources of family conflict can assist in reducing its likelihood. Our research identified three levels of sources of family conflict (micro, meso, macro) which highlight the differing types of influences on family conflict, and their proximity to incidences of family conflict itself (see page 39). These insights offer practitioners insights into the type of experiences and behaviours that young people have themselves articulated as highly relevant to family conflict that impacts on their homelessness.

This research also draws attention to the mixture of sources of family conflict across micro, meso and macro levels. Families experience these sources of family conflict to different degrees and at different times. For this reason practitioners need to be attentive to all three sources for families, to not only understand the issues, but also to address them in practice.

Finally, these understandings inform instrumental responses to address family conflict, in addition to the individual and structural issues that impact on family conflict and youth homelessness. Models of practice, such as those we have presented here, are able to incorporate multiple sources of conflict, but also detail their relationship. We hope these findings and models can be utilised by practitioners and policy-makers in their work with young people and their families.

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APPENDICES

| Author (year) | Title | Journal | Field | Location | Focus | Methods | Participants | Findings | Findings relating to family conflict |
|---|---|---|----------------|----------------------|--|---------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf (2010) | Effective interventions for homeless youth. | American Journal of Preventive Medicine | Public health. | The Netherlands | Effective interventions for homeless youth. Only quantitative literature. | Systematic review of literature | NA | No compelling evidence that specific interventions are effective for homeless youth. Largely, because interventions lack rigorous evaluation. | Particularly under-researched areas: social trust, living skills, family/peer support and safety. |
| Edidin, Ganim, Hunter and Karnik (2012) | The Mental and Physical Health of Homeless Youth: A Literature Review | Child Psychiatry and Human Development | Psychiatry | The US and Australia | A literature review of homelessness literature that summarises the health of homeless youth. | Systematic literature review | NA | Most of the literature to date has focused on deficits, pathology and problems, rather than strengths, wellbeing and quality of life of homeless youths, which can be exploited for intervention development. | Research indicates that numerous factors contribute to youth homelessness, such as: family breakdown, disruptive family relationships, and trauma and abuse. |
| Guo, Slesnick and Feng (2015) | Changes in family relationships among substance abusing runaway adolescents: A comparison between family and individual therapies | Journal of Marital and Family Therapy | Psychology | The US and China | Comparing three different therapies with homeless youth. | Quantitative. | Aged 12-17, recruited from a short-term crisis shelter. 179 adolescent participants. | EBFT demonstrated better short-term effects on family conflict and better long-term effects on family cohesion than individual therapies. | Family precipitated adolescent's stays in runaway shelters. Change occurs most when the whole family is engaged in interventions. |

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| Heinze, Jozefowicz, and Toro (2010) | Taking the youth perspective: Assessment of program characteristics that promote positive development in homeless and at-risk youth. | Children and Youth Services Review. | Human Services | The US and Canada | The factors associated with positive outcomes in programs with homeless youth. | Quantitative – survey based study. | 133 youth (42 male, 91 female) recruited from six community agencies. | Positive relationships with staff help young people feel accepted in an agency. Experiences of support in agencies are impacted on most by interpersonal interactions, and opportunities for personal growth, rather than material goods or services. | Strong agency structure, safety, relationship quality positive social norms and family/school integration were given high satisfaction ratings by homeless youth. |
| Hill, Taylor, Richards and Reddington (2016) | 'No-one runs away for no reason': Understanding safeguarding issues when children and young people go missing from home. | Child Abuse Review | Human services | The UK | Improving help and supports for children and young people who run away from home. | Case study of service for children who run away involving interviews with children. | 152 children aged between 8 and 17. | Children who run away from home face multiple challenges in their lives. | Young people need to be given meaningful opportunities to be listened to and taken seriously. Children need to be given the opportunity to talk to people. |
| Mayock, Corr and O'Sullivan (2011) | Homeless young people, families and change: family support as a facilitator to exiting homelessness. | Child and Family Social Work | Social Work | The UK | | Qualitative longitudinal study | Phase 1: 40 homeless young people aged between 14 and 22. Phase 2: 30 young people. 40 participants total. | Little is known about how family ties are re-established and how relationships are renegotiated between young people and family members. Findings highlight the need to view families as both requiring and providing resources to young people. | Identified family instability and conflict as one of three main pathways into homelessness. Family instability and conflict was traced to early childhood for many participants. Over half of participants had experienced physical violence by an adult in their homes. Parental discord and marital breakdown was also a common event leading to first homeless experiences. All participants wanted a parent to be involved in their life. |

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|---------------------------|---|--|---------------|---------|---|------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Milburn, et al, (2011). | A family intervention to reduce sexual risk behaviour, substance use, and delinquency among newly homeless youth. | Journal of Adolescent Health | Public Health | The US | Evaluation of a short family intervention in reducing sexual risk behaviour, drug use and delinquent behaviours among homeless youth. The intervention is designed to reengage families of homeless youth. | Randomised controlled trial. | 151 families with a homeless adolescent aged 12 to 17 years. | The intervention to reengage families of homeless youth had significant benefits in reducing risks for young people. | Study viewed homeless youth as running away from home as an ineffective attempt to resolve family conflict. Intervention reduced risks for young people. |
| Schmitz and Tyler (2015). | Homeless Young People's Experiences of Caregiver Rejection | Journal of Child and Family Studies | Sociology | The US | The dynamics of caregiver rejection as experienced by homeless young people. | Qualitative interviews. | 40 homeless young adults aged 19-21. | Homeless young adults identified numerous issues that they experienced in their family prior to leaving home. YP felt experienced familial rejection as they felt like an outsider, or were betrayed by a caregiver. | Many young felt marginalised by their family and as an 'outsider'. Familial discord pushed youth into institutional living. Family discord among participants related to DV, criminal activity, substance use. Participants articulated multiple feelings of rejection. Participants cited at least one instance of 'feeling like an outsider', being betrayed by a primary caregiver for a significant other', 'being pushed into institutional living', 'being kicked out by a caregiver' prior to leaving home. |
| Thompson, et al, (2010). | Homeless youth: Characteristics, contributing factors, and service options. | Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment | Social Work | The US. | An overview of youth homelessness as described in the literature, focussing on causes, characteristics and types of services. | No empirical research | NA | Provides a summary of homelessness services utilised by homeless youth. | A summary of family conflict highlights the significance of poor communication, verbal aggression and a lack of emotional warmth. |

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| Thompson, Cochran, and Barczyk (2012). | Family functioning and mental health in runaway youth: Association with posttraumatic stress symptoms. | Journal of Traumatic Stress | Social Work | The US | The effects of abuse, neglect, poor family communication and worries concerning family relationships, depression, anxiety and dissociation on posttraumatic stress symptoms. | Multiple questionnaires utilised to measure trauma, mental health, family functioning, and abuse and neglect. | 12-18 year olds admitted to emergency youth shelters. 350 participants. | The principal finding of the study was that poor family communication and worries concerning family relationships have significant direct effects on youths' depression, anxiety, and dissociation, which in turn have effects on youths' posttraumatic stress symptoms. | Results suggest that higher levels of worry about family relationships and poorer communication were positively associated with higher dissociation, depression, and anxiety symptoms. The results of this study underscore the critical role of family relationships in mental health symptoms experienced by runaway adolescents. Verbal aggression between family members, however, creates a catalyst for conflict, which compounds feelings of insecurity and distrust. As emotional cohesion aids in holding a family together, negative communications may lead to an unbalanced system where adolescents feel the need to escape, even running away from the conflict or maltreatment. |
| Tyler and Melander (2010). | Foster care placement, poor parenting, and negative outcomes among homeless young adults. | Journal of Child and Family Studies | Sociology | The US | Homeless youth with and without foster care histories and associations with poor parenting and negative outcomes. | Interviews using various tools and scales. Data subjected to quantitative analysis. | 199 young adults were interviewed. 144 were homeless at the time, others had histories of homelessness. | Among participants previously in foster care, physical abuse and neglect were positively associated with depressive symptoms, and sexual abuse and neglect were related to delinquency and physical victimisation. | Abuse and inadequate parenting are linked to numerous negative outcomes for homeless youth. |
| Tyler and Schmitz (2013). | Family histories and multiple transitions among homeless young adults. | Children and Youth Services Review | Sociology | The US | The family histories of homeless young adults and their pathways into homelessness. | Qualitative interview with a series of open questions. | 40 homeless young adults between the ages of 19 and 21. | Homeless young adults have experience multiple living arrangements, and multiple transitions make stable support hard to achieve. | For participants, family backgrounds were characterised by substance use, child maltreatment and witnessing violence. |