When young people head for the streets

Understanding family conflict and its relationship with youth homelessness.

Summary of a study conducted for Melbourne City Mission
Authors: Steven Roche and Justin Barker
Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University

Introduction:

So.. Isn't homelessness just a lifestyle choice?

Melbourne City Mission is often asked why young people choose to become homeless, or whether young people choose homelessness as a lifestyle. While we know that the underlying causes of family breakdown are complex, we wanted to articulate that complexity in a way that could be understood in the wider community. This research does just that.

In 2015, Melbourne City Mission commissioned the Australian Catholic University to conduct this research into the underlying causes of family breakdown. We wanted to understand and assist youth homelessness agencies to articulate the multiple challenges we encounter daily.

Background to study:

Young people's voices were front and centre in this research. The research team conducted seven focus groups, including:

- Three groups of young people who have 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.

Young people's perspectives were also obtained through a short questionnaire.

Profiles of participants:

There were 39 participants in the study, including:

- 21 young people, aged 16 to 24 years, consisting of 10 males and 11 females. Four identified as culturally and linguistically diverse and 1 was from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.
- Of the 21 young people, 10 were homeless, 4 were in share accommodation and 5 were living with parents or carers.
- 8 parent/guardians, aged 43 to 61 years old. All were female and 4 were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- 10 Melbourne City Mission staff, including managers, case workers, social workers and youth workers, with work experience ranging from 5 months to more than 10 years.

When does family conflict turn into homelessness?

Young people described situations of leaving home in circumstances of family conflict. They detailed that leaving home was a highly considered decision, typically in response to ongoing family conflict, and observations of other families.

Ongoing conflict

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 –Focus group A).

Observing other families

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 – Focus group C).

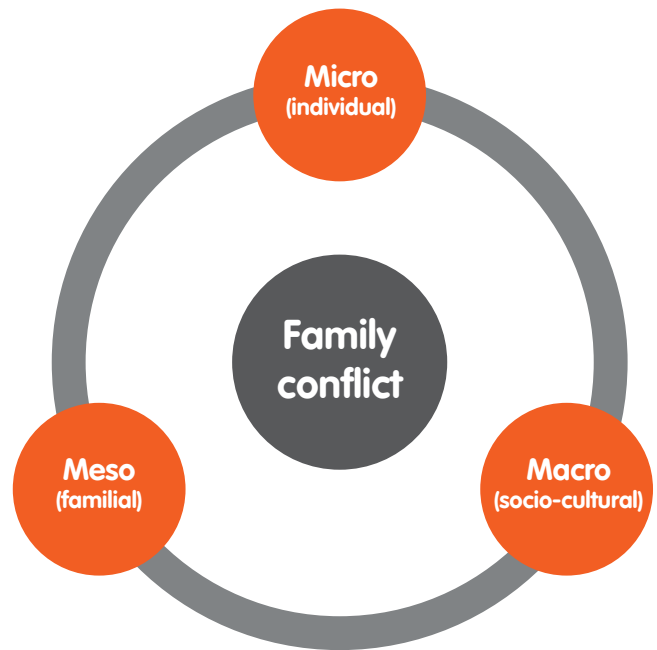### Highly considered decisions to leave home

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 – Focus group A).

What is the source of family conflict?

The study found three sources of family conflict occurring at the
1) micro (individual),
2) meso (familial) and
3) macro (socio-cultural) level.

These findings detail the range of influences on family conflict, and show how each source of family conflict is interlinked.

Category of conflict	Source of conflict
Micro (individual)	• 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 *"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 – Focus group A).
Meso (familial)	• Conflict as an organising principle of family life • Disintegration of trust in family • Absence of love in family • Strong feelings of abandonment *"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 – Focus group A).
Macro (sociocultural)	• Poverty and financial marginalisation • Unemployment • Unstable housing • Family histories and experiences of dysfunction and trauma • Contexts of mental illness and substance abuse *"…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 Staff).

Key findings:

How was family conflict experienced and understood?

Participants described two types of inter-related forms of family conflict – 'overt and situational' and 'latent and ongoing'. These were a common experience for families with young people at risk of homelessness.

'Overt and situational' family conflict

"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 – Focus group A).

'Latent and ongoing' family 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 – Focus group A).

'Overt and situational' conflict

Experienced as:
- Verbal aggression
- Violence
- Arguments, disagreements, criticism, & general negative communication
- Passive aggressive or negative body language

'Latent and ongoing' conflict

Experienced as:
- Accumulation of unresolved tension and conflict
- Ongoing family atmosphere of mistrust, hostility, negativity or tension
- Feeling unsafe or uncomfortable
- Common distrust between family members
- Absence of warmth, care and consideration in family life

What's next?

The full research piece will be available in coming months, if you'd like to be kept in the loop on this and more from Melbourne City Mission, please contact;

Paul Turton
Senior Manager, Youth and Family Homelessness Services
Melbourne City Mission
pturton@mcm.org.au