

Chapter 3: Early Intervention in Practice

Recognising the Abuse and Trauma Histories of Clients in Early Intervention Homeless Initiatives — Insights from Greater Western Sydney and Beyond

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Individuals experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, often access a range of mainstream and specialist services to holistically address their complex needs, including housing and homelessness services.¹

Homeless individuals also often have histories of abuse and trauma which stem from their childhood.

Research to date has recognised that a notable proportion of homeless individuals have been exposed to early developmental trauma, whether it be neglect, psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic and family violence, or disrupted attachment.² Studies, which have largely focused on homeless females, have showed the link between homelessness and childhood abuse and trauma.

A large study in the US found that approximately 92 per cent of homeless women surveyed had experienced physical and/or sexual assault at some point in their lives, with 60 per cent by the age of 12.³ A small qualitative study with women in Melbourne also pointed to child sexual assault as a key contributing factor to becoming homeless.⁴ Trauma is both a cause and consequence of homelessness: abuse and violence in childhood can precipitate into homelessness later in life and can lead to further revictimisation during the homelessness experience. The experience of homelessness itself is traumatic, and the impact of previous trauma (which can manifest into longer-term conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and complex trauma) can erode a person's ability to successfully exit homelessness. People can also be further retraumatised when engaging with services that do not

recognise their traumatic stress, leaving them feeling powerless and controlled.^{5,6} These findings suggest that the interwoven experience of trauma and homelessness cannot be ignored and needs to be addressed during all phases of service delivery.

In 2021, WESTIR Limited (Western Sydney Regional Information and Research Service) undertook a research study called *The Role of Community and Legal Services Covering Greater Western Sydney in Addressing Institutional Child Sexual Abuse: Post-Royal Commission to Present*. The focus of the study was to explore the community service response to institutional child sexual abuse since the Royal Commission between 2013 and 2017, however semi-structured interviews with community service workers revealed that many victims and survivors of institutional child sexual abuse experience homelessness or housing issues, and require support from housing and homelessness services throughout their life:

'I have a few clients who have multiple issues going on, and it kind of seems like as soon as you get one thing half way sorted, there's something else. And they tend to be issues around housing and support'

— Interviewee 1

'We have a homeless young person or a homeless young woman with a history of this nature [of child sexual abuse] that we are trying to support into adequate housing and to support them with a range of issues'

— Interviewee 5

'In the 90s... five of my [homeless] clients overdosed and died as a result of heroin addiction. And when I go back through my notes of each of those clients, they'd all been sexually abused as children'

— Interviewee 13

Early intervention initiatives for homelessness in Australia aim to intervene before people get into crisis and stem the flow of individuals into homelessness. Typical early intervention responses include multidisciplinary family programs, youth specific housing, and youth education initiatives.^{6,7} The findings of this study strongly highlight that the abuse and trauma histories of persons experiencing or at risk of homelessness are significant risk factors that must be considered in any early intervention initiative. In Greater Western Sydney, where this study was based, there are early intervention initiatives^{8,9} designed to respond to the early stages of homelessness. However, study participants raised concerns about whether services, including those providing housing and homelessness support, were providing trauma-informed care:

'I mean housing is really a company and it's not really trauma-informed, and I guess we are [using a] trauma-informed approach, so you kind of feel like you want everyone to at least have done the 101...'

— Interviewee

'I think we need to properly recognise harm and all of the ongoing trajectory that has on people's lives, not as a single point in time, single incident, but disruption to education and

housing and security and safety and family relationships and networks and parenting and all of those things which have got all of those long term wellbeing impacts'
— Interviewee 8

So what is Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) in homelessness service settings and what does it look like? TIC is a strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.¹⁰ TIC is an organisational or system-wide re-orientation which sees all staff of an organisation — whether it be direct care, support staff and executive leadership — undertake their tasks and interactions with an understanding of the impacts of trauma so that every action is consistent with the recovery process and reduces the possibility of re-traumatisation.¹¹ TIC needs to be prioritised across all service providers, from specialist homelessness services to community housing organisations, to better deliver on early intervention outcomes. Some practical ways this can be implemented include:

- Staff training to increase awareness and sensitivity to trauma-related issues.
- Ongoing professional supervision of staff to ensure the practice of appropriate self-care and the prevention or management of vicarious trauma.
- Screening and assessment of the trauma histories of clients during intake.
- Providing a welcoming and relaxing physical space that offers a sense of safety and security for the trauma victim and survivor.
- Adjusting all policies, programs and systems to avoid re-traumatisation.^{12, 13, 14}

TIC also involves offering integrated service models that holistically meet the needs of homeless clients. A number of participants in the research study highlighted the importance of this approach:

'So sometimes people [have other needs that need to be met] before they meet for legal advice. They need the top of their tree needs met, it might be their housing and they can't really deal with their victim's compensation or their family law matter until their housing is resolved. So, you know, that holistic way of working and really getting their client to work through to identify what they think is most important for them'
— Interviewee 8

'We will help clients with things like where they can find food, where they can get other support to help them navigate some of those issues. It might be that they might need financial counselling, it might be there is high needs for their children as well, it might be their housing, that they need housing'
— Interviewee 14

On a structural level, findings from this study reiterate the large body of research which explores how adverse childhood experiences increase a child's vulnerability to homelessness into adulthood. There needs to be an ongoing recognition of the link between childhood trauma, abuse and homelessness in the policy development and service delivery of early intervention initiatives to best address the needs of clients.¹⁵ For victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in particular, the journey of disclosure can be long, complex and throughout life stages.¹⁶ This suggests that the applicability of early intervention principles in homelessness programs need not be confined to just younger clients, but other 'at risk' cohorts such as adults, older people and victims of domestic and family violence.

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Endnotes

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