



LINDSEY FIDLER  
Exploring income  
and housing barriers for  
reunifying Tasmanian families

# IN LIMBO





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LINDSEY FIDLER  
SEPTEMBER 2018



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While poverty can lead to increased rates of actual maltreatment, poverty itself is often mistaken for neglect, resulting in increased rates of child maltreatment reports. The inability to feed, clothe or house a child should not be mistaken for neglect... Addressing poverty as a significant factor in child harm cases could lead to lower rates of child removal, higher rates of reunification and higher rates of parental right retention.

MAREN K. DALE, 'ADDRESSING THE UNDERLYING ISSUE OF POVERTY IN CHILD-NEGLECT CASES', 2014

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[Child Safety Services] know Tasmania's the most expensive state to live in at the moment. The housing's just shocking. They've watched my struggle with housing, I've always worked closely with them. They've watched me move into a house, get kicked out of a house, they've watched me go up and down, up and down. So for me to finally get stable accommodation and them question me, 'Oh is that where you're always going to stay with the kids?' ... I can't look that far ahead into the future because I don't know where I sit with them with the kids coming home.

NAOMI, RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

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It's a really tricky one, because the [CSS] Department, they obviously have the children's best interests at heart, but what we're finding is that the requirements on families, what needs to be in place before A, B, C and D can happen, are often outside of [parents'] ability. For example, a mother might want the child back, and yes they can, but they have to have a two-bedroom unit. And living circumstances, as in finances, a whole bunch of things, make that really tricky to do... So it does go on and well, if you lose your house, you won't be able to have your children back, because there's nowhere for you to have them. And it actually happens more frequently that we might understand it to.

FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM MANAGER

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**Lindsey Fidler, SARC**

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# Abbreviations

<b>ABS</b>	Australian Bureau of Statistics
<b>ACOSS</b>	Australian Council of Social Service
<b>AIHW</b>	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
<b>AOD</b>	Alcohol and Other Drugs
<b>ARACY</b>	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
<b>CPCEs</b>	Clinical Practice Consultants and Educators
<b>CPIS</b>	Child Protection Information System
<b>CRA</b>	Commonwealth Rent Assistance
<b>CS</b>	Child Safety (Services)
<b>CSS</b>	Child Safety Services
<b>CYS</b>	Child and Youth Services
<b>DoC</b>	Department of Communities (Tasmania)
<b>DHHS</b>	Department of Health and Human Services
<b>EAPs</b>	Expanded Accommodation Program
<b>FGC</b>	Family Group Conference
<b>FTB</b>	Family Tax Benefit
<b>HTas</b>	Housing Tasmania
<b>LGA</b>	Local Government Area
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Government Organisation
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>OOHC</b>	Out of Home Care
<b>PFAS</b>	Parent and Family Advocacy Service
<b>PP</b>	Parenting Payment
<b>RCCPs</b>	Reunification Case and Care Plans
<b>SARC</b>	Social Action and Research Centre
<b>SEIFA</b>	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
<b>SHIP</b>	Specialist Homelessness Information Platform
<b>SHS</b>	Specialist Homelessness Services
<b>SoS</b>	Signs of Safety
<b>SPARK</b>	Strong Parenting and Resilient Kids

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# Executive summary

*In Limbo* looks at the nature and extent of the income and housing challenges faced by Tasmanian families who have had children removed by Child Safety Services, and the impacts those challenges may have on positive family reunification outcomes.

*In Limbo* aims to:

- Highlight the income and housing challenges during family reunification for Tasmanian parents whose children are on Short Term Care and Protection Orders, and the impacts those material challenges have on successful family reunification processes.
- Review Tasmania's ability to quantify these issues and estimate the scale and nature of the problem.
- Explore Tasmanian, Australian and international policy, programs and practice responses to these issues that are having positive impacts on family outcomes.
- Offer recommendations that could address the income and housing needs of Tasmanian parents who are engaged in the process of family reunification and enable appropriate family environments during reunification and beyond.

This investigation was conducted through a review of national and international literature; and face-to-face/phone/Skype interviews with 15 academic experts, leading family support practitioners and public servants within policy and practice management roles across Housing Tasmania, social housing providers and Child Safety Services; an interrogation of quantitative data from the Tasmanian government's Child Safety and Specialist Homelessness Services information systems; face-to-face group and individual interviews with 43 front line professionals in government agencies and the community sector with considerable experience of working with parents engaged in the reunification system; and face-to-face interviews with five parents and one grandparent who were or had been actively involved in the family reunification process over the last three years.

## Analysis

### AN ABSENCE OF ADEQUATE PROVISION FOR REUNIFYING PARENTS WITHIN THE TASMANIAN POLICY AND SERVICE LANDSCAPE

The Tasmanian Government's *Strong Families - Safe Kids* strategy (DHHS 2016) renews Child Safety Services' focus on the *best interests of the child*. It focuses on strategies that prevent children being removed from their birth families and, if they are removed, a recognition that the goal, where possible, should be to return children to their families (DHHS 2016). It states that *the first day of child removal is the first day of reunification*.

Child Safety Services assesses risk to a child using the Tasmanian Risk Framework (DHHS 2009). Using the safety planning tool Signs of Safety, CSS will assess parents' capacity to address safety concerns, their level of understanding and engagement in addressing CSS' concerns, their strengths, and the support network that they might draw on to address concerns. Material basics, such as stable housing, adequate food and clothing, and education and training materials, will form part of a wider assessment, along with support for their physical, mental and emotional health and connections to culture and a positive identity, drawing on the Tasmanian Government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework (DoC 2018; DHHS 2017). CSS, family support and housing support workers interviewed for *In Limbo* highlighted that there are no set 'thresholds' for families to meet in terms of material basics in order for children to be removed, or for family reunification to occur; as one family support manager described, 'It's the individual [CSS] worker's interpretation of what's "okay enough"'.

Recognition and provision of parents' ongoing parenting costs when children are removed by Child Safety Services is absent from current federal and state policy. Parents reunifying with their children are pulled between two policy objectives: Child Safety Services requirements for family reunification to occur in an environment appropriate for children - a stable home, connected to their familiar community, with material basics which enable children to thrive; and the federal Welfare to Work objectives to provide a minimum employment-focused income for individuals based on their current, rather than their potential, circumstances. This means that the costs of parenting children in out-of-home care for birth parents are not recognised by either system.

### **THE NEED TO BRING POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS TO THE FOREFRONT OF PRACTICE**

Australia does not have data that allows us to understand the nature of the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect. But from international research we do understand that there is a link. Poverty can have both a direct effect on neglect and abuse through material deprivation, meaning parents face challenges buying support and development opportunities for themselves and their children, and indirect effects through parental stress. Poverty-related stress is well understood and is likely to be exacerbated by parents' ineligibility for parenting-related payments once children are removed from their care. International legislation around child maltreatment varies in how poverty is addressed. Poverty is absent from Tasmania's current legislation on what constitutes child maltreatment. However we need to understand this relationship in order to guide professional practice and design effective interventions that address poverty and homelessness in the context of child maltreatment.

This research revealed a range of professional responses to poverty for families reunifying, similar to those identified in Morris et al.'s (2018) study of UK social workers, which found poverty had become the normalised backdrop of practice.

Reported practice responses amongst Tasmanian family support, housing support and CSS workers included a detachment from poverty – “not my business to solve”; a disconnect between their understanding of poverty and their practice in addressing it, which led to a deficit-focused approach to addressing parenting capacity – “let’s focus on what’s wrong with *you*”; or poverty becoming the wallpaper of practice, too big to tackle – “we feel unable to solve parents’ challenges”.

Support workers and families reported that these practice responses led to a lack of clarity, inconsistency and a perceived lack of realism around the goals relating to stable housing and adequate provision for families reunifying. These goals might shift with different CSS workers and as the reunification process developed. Additionally, there was little clarity on how families were to achieve these goals within current policy and program settings.

Parents experiencing trauma and heightened poverty due to their children being removed are likely to be so consumed by their own material and emotional stability and safety they cannot immediately address any wider safety concerns Child Safety may have (Maslow 1943, 1954; Bromfield et al. 2010). To tackle the direct and indirect impacts of poverty on parenting, we need to shift, or at least broaden, the focus of government agency and NGO practice culture from being mainly about “what’s wrong with you?” (i.e. how we can address individual deficits), to “what’s inhibiting you from achieving your goals?” (i.e. directly address the structural and material barriers to reunification). We need a poverty-informed practice culture that acknowledges that parents need a stable home and resources. We need to shift poverty and homelessness from being the wallpaper of practice culture to being at the forefront of it.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR A DATA-INFORMED RESPONSE TO PARENTS’ MATERIAL CHALLENGES – HOW TASMANIA COULD LEAD THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION**

In their current forms, the two Tasmanian government information systems that relate to child safety (the Child Protection Information System – CPIS) and specialist homelessness services (the Specialist Homelessness Information Platform – SHIP) were unable to quantify the extent of income and housing challenges for Tasmanian families who are reunifying with their children, nor the nature of these challenges for this specific cohort. However, between the two information systems, they have relevant data categories that can provide much of the information we need. CPIS can tell us the proportion of children with a Reunification Case and Care Plan (around a quarter, or 367 to 412 per year between 2015 and 2017). It can also tell us some basic information about their parents at the time that children were removed from their care as well as their age at childbirth. But it can not tell us the proportion of families for whom income or housing challenges were part of the safety concerns that led to the removal of a child, or the proportion of those for whom income and housing have become a concern since removal. SHIP can tell us about clients of homelessness services and the nature of their income and housing needs, what services are provided to assist them and their housing and homelessness outcomes. But it does not record whether those

clients are families who are involved with Child Safety Services or who have an active Reunification Case and Care Plan.

Sharing relevant data available within CPIS and SHIP, along with adding some key additional parental data fields, such as socio-economic disadvantage and the distance between the children's OOHC placement and where their birth family live, could provide us with data we need to understand more about the risks, extent and nature of income and housing challenges, services accessed and outcomes for Tasmanian families reunifying with their children. It would also provide a basis for understanding the types of income and housing challenges that co-occur with other risk factors such as family violence, mental health issues and substance use (Bywaters et al. 2016; Font & Warren 2013). This would be insightful on both a systemic level and a case-by-case basis and enable Tasmania to inform and lead a national conversation and response around these issues.

#### **AN EMERGING TRAJECTORY – SYSTEM-INDUCED POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS HOLDING PARENTS IN LIMBO**

For many Tasmanian parents, given the existing framework of policies, programs and services, there is an inevitable trajectory when their children are removed from their care by Child Safety Services. We can more or less predict the challenges they will face after they become ineligible for parenting income, particularly those who are in private rental accommodation and/or are fleeing domestic violence. Common experiences reported by both families and service providers include increased parental stress due to the need to juggle unaffordable living and parental reunification costs, accumulating debt, and homelessness. Only families who were able to retain or obtain housing that offered income-related rent (either public or social housing, or through living with relatives) were able to maintain a stable base for family reunification to occur.

These challenges have direct impacts on reunification prospects for the family, including negatively affecting parenting confidence and mental health, prolonging children's disruption and trauma, heightened tensions and frustrations between parents, carers and CSS over who is responsible for providing for children's material needs, and a stalling or halting of the reunification process, particularly in the absence of stable housing.

This trajectory inhibits parents' capacities and resources to achieve the goals both Centrelink and CSS desire. Unless they are in accommodation that sets rent relative to their income, they do not have the resources to provide the stable base and material needs for reunification to occur. Due to the many and changing activities required by the reunification process, they are unable to maintain the availability necessary to actively seek and maintain employment, as required by Centrelink, and are thus unable to supplement their income or break dependency on income support. They are held in limbo.

## THE NEED TO ADDRESS RISK AND VULNERABILITY – THE CASE FOR A SUITE OF MATERIAL RESPONSES TO EXPEDITE FAMILY REUNIFICATION

A common observation amongst families and service providers interviewed for *In Limbo* was the lack of service options in Tasmania to address shortfalls in income and housing, leading to family reunification processes taking longer than they need to. We have a policy framework that currently withdraws parenting income from parents when CSS remove their child(ren), triggering an almost inevitable trajectory into poverty and homelessness. These risks and vulnerabilities are well-recognised, but the current Tasmanian service landscape does not offer sufficient options to help parents address these material and structural challenges.

At the point at which parents are at their most vulnerable and experiencing heightened trauma and poverty from the removal of their child(ren), there are very limited case management and parent support programs they can access. The maze of discretionary emergency relief and NGO brokerage funds can not meet parenting and reunification costs and are time-consuming for parents to access, and the current suite of transitional and longer term housing options are at capacity, leaving few options available for reunifying families to access affordable and suitable accommodation that will expedite family reunification.

Service providers in government agencies and in the community sector reported that when information was shared between CSS, Housing Tasmania and Centrelink, it often led to positive outcomes for clients, whether it be allocating public housing with sufficient space for reunification due to Case and Care Plans being shared between CSS and Housing Tasmania; or Centrelink clients successfully obtaining a job search exemption from Centrelink while they focused on reunifying with their child, due to CSS providing evidence of actions parents were required to undertake. But although these processes worked, they were not routinely undertaken. Lack of communication between agencies often had catastrophic impacts for parents and family reunification: delays to parenting income being removed or returned leading to an intensity of poverty-induced stress, or parents languishing on the Social and Affordable Housing Register with no hope of an affordable housing solution to support their family to reunify.

This trajectory is avoidable, but it requires a will to recognise both the emotional and material vulnerability of parents whose children are removed and the ongoing parenting costs they have to meet, so that the first day of removal really can be the first day of reunification.

It requires the availability of consistent case management support for parents to navigate their journey with Child Safety Services – from notification through to post-reunification – at a level of intensity that is appropriate for that family. It requires a reliable source of parenting income to keep households on track. And it requires housing policies that prioritise families from child removal through to family reunification and create a pathway for stability to be re-established and maintained.

As with practice culture, we need to move poverty and homelessness from being the wallpaper of service delivery to being at the forefront of program planning, design and delivery.

## What's happening elsewhere?

### LEGISLATIVE RESPONSES

International legislation around child maltreatment varies in how poverty is addressed. Poverty or material deprivation can be explicitly ruled in or out as being assessed as neglect, or, in many cases, not mentioned at all.

About half of US states have acknowledged that raising a child in poverty does not equate to child maltreatment by including a poverty exemption in their statutory definition of neglect (Dale 2014; Fernandez et al. 2017). These exemptions are on a spectrum, from complete exemption for substantiating neglect if poverty is a factor, to exemptions of neglect on the basis of environmental factors that are outside parents' control. Other states have legislation that prohibits the termination of parental rights based on poverty alone (Dale 2014).

This has assisted these states in preserving the distinction between poverty and neglect and has encouraged authorities to ensure there are responses that assist families in addressing materials basics where there is a risk of terminating parental rights on the basis of poverty, or where reunification requirements that are seen as discriminating against parents in poverty "in the best interests of the child." See Dale 2014 for a detailed commentary on these cases.

### POVERTY-INCLUSIVE FRAMEWORKS

Family-inclusive practice frameworks promote understanding and addressing the social causes of harm to children, including disadvantage, poverty and racism. Jessica Cocks is advocating for such an approach to drive child safety and family support work here in Australia (Cocks 2018).

Krumer-Nevo (2015) offers a practice framework that positions consideration of poverty and material challenges at the centre of assessments and interventions. This "poverty-aware" paradigm updates connections between social work and the developing body of knowledge around the impacts of poverty. It also includes consideration of the role indebtedness plays in family lives (Krumer-Nevo et al. 2016, cited in Morris et al. 2018) and the role that stigmatising and "othering" by social work professionals can play when families' experiences of poverty are not fully considered (Morris et al. 2018).

Northern Ireland's government has recently put into operation a poverty-informed approach to practice by publishing an Anti-Poverty Practice Framework for Social Work in Northern Ireland (Morrison et al. 2018). This framework guides professionals working with children and families to keep poverty at the forefront of their practice

at every stage of their work – from assessments of challenges facing clients to appropriate referrals and interventions. It is aimed at ensuring professionals understand they have a duty of care to remain informed about the role of poverty in their clients' lives and experiences.

### SUPPORTED HOUSING MODELS

Healey et al. (2016) offer a detailed exploration of international approaches to and benefits of supported housing models for homeless families involved with Child Safety Services. They particularly explore the US Family Unification Program, offering vouchers to reunifying families to subsidise housing costs in the private and social housing sectors; New York's Housing First, which marries affordable housing with intensive and integrated support (which has spawned Australia's Common Ground model); and the US' Keeping Families Together pilot project, which addressed affordable housing and coordinated service support for welfare-involved families.

Healey et al. also note:

- The US National Centre for Housing and Child Welfare has demonstrated that the cost of supportive housing is approximately 70% less than the cost of maintaining children in foster care (NCHCW 2015, cited in Healey et al. 2016).
- Affordable, secure housing linked with appropriate services is showing positive outcomes across programs in the US, Europe and England. Again, US research has established that it is the *combination* of focused case management, support services and a housing subsidy that supports housing stability and family wellbeing outcomes (White 2016, cited in Healey et al. 2016).

## **Recommendations: reimagining the provision of material basics within Tasmania's policy, culture and programs to expedite family reunification**

We need to reimagine the policy and practice frameworks relevant to Child Safety, family support, income support and housing within an ecological approach that supports, rather than problematises, families to address the best interests of their children. As Bowlby reminds us, working for the best interests of the child includes ensuring their parents are supported to provide a safe and nurturing environment in which they can develop (Bowlby 1951, cited in Cocks 2018).

These recommendations are designed to inform a suite of integrated responses from legislation and policy, culture and practice, programs and services, and planning and data (see Figures 12 and 13). They are not designed to attribute responsibility for funding or delivering initiatives, but do allocate a lead government agency to explore how these elements could be developed. They are starting points for a conversation about how we can expedite family reunification by focusing on the structural, as well as the personal, challenges that have led to parenting capacity being assessed as unsafe.

## LEGISLATIVE/POLICY FRAMEWORKS

The Tasmanian child safety legislative and policy framework needs to go beyond simply referencing the relevance of families to acting in a child's best interest. It needs to clearly set out that acting in the best interests of the child includes a duty to address the welfare of their families. Secondly, legislation and/or policy needs to be clear about how poverty is understood and treated in relation to child maltreatment, child safety assessments and addressing child safety concerns.

### **RECOMMENDATION 1: Duty of care to families**

The Department of Communities Tasmania should review Tasmania's legislative and/or policy framework around children and families so that it stresses a duty of care for families, in a similar way that there is a duty of care towards the child.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2: Clarity around how child safety practice should treat the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment**

The Department of Communities Tasmania should review Tasmanian child safety legislation, policy and guidance to ensure it prevents authorities from assessing poverty as child maltreatment, outlines the need for structural, as well as personal, responses to poverty and compels a support response when income or housing is identified as a barrier to family reunification.

## PRACTICE CULTURE

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: Bringing poverty and homelessness to the forefront of practice and child safety planning**

Children and Youth Services should explore opportunities for Child Safety Services' practice framework, safety assessment and planning framework, Signs of Safety, and family support interventions to draw on poverty-informed frameworks that acknowledge and address families' structural challenges. This would assist in routinely acknowledging the material challenges families are facing in securing stable accommodation and meeting the costs of parenting and reunification requirements, and assist in clearly stating standards and goals for material basics and the interventions needed to address these.

## PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

### **RECOMMENDATION 4: Offering parents continuous case management to achieve safety goals**

The Department of Communities Tasmania needs to provide parents involved with Child Safety Services access to a continuous working relationship with a case manager who can support families from notifications and assessments, through to child removal, and to family reunification. This case management should include

supporting parents to interact in an informed and constructive way with Child Safety Services and to address the practical and emotional consequences of Child Safety's processes and safety concerns. Post child removal, this case management service should work with parents, Child Safety Services and other relevant agencies and support services to develop a post-removal plan covering what needs to happen for the family to become reunification ready.

**RECOMMENDATION 5: Recognising and providing parenting and reunification income**

The Department of Communities Tasmania, along with other relevant federal and state government departments, should explore a suite of programs and services that recognise and address continued parenting costs post child removal and the significant costs involved in preparing for and undertaking family reunification. These should include the following elements:

- automatic access to financial counselling pre- and post child removal to prepare parents for any change in income and explore ways to address it;
- a form of transitional parenting-related income for the first six months while an active case plan is being developed to either get children home or get parents reunification ready;
- providing parenting-related income once family reunification begins in a way that appropriately responds to day and overnight visits;
- expanding access to finance for significant one-off costs for parents that enable family reunification, such as children's car seats, car registration, maintenance and repair, white goods and furniture;
- routinely reimbursing any expenses parents incur in arranging access visits and meeting reunification requirements, such as travel and medical fees; and
- reviewing guidelines and mechanisms that direct carers to materially support reunification activities when the carer is still in receipt of parenting payments for the child.

**RECOMMENDATION 6: Providing a suite of stable accommodation options for family reunification**

Housing Tasmania and Child and Youth Services should ensure that, in order to expedite family reunification, families whose children are removed by Child Safety Services have a suite of options to support them to maintain stable accommodation. These may be tailored to where parents are in the reunification journey and their level of support needs, but should include elements such as:

- Parents who have had their children removed and are either at the pre-reunification stage, reunification ready or actively reunifying with their children to be a priority cohort for crisis, transitional and longer-term housing

and tenancy support, in a similar way to families experiencing domestic violence. Any tenancy support should routinely be part of the family's case co-ordination team, linked to the parent's NGO case manager, Child Safety case worker and the Reunification Case and Care Plan requirements.

- Developing a suite of housing options for parents who have had their children removed and are either at the pre-reunification stage, reunification ready or actively reunifying with their children. These might include:
  - providing specific guidance and mechanisms for HTAs and social housing providers' Managers to allocate adequate bedrooms for family reunification in available public and social housing;
  - exploring ways to subsidise access to private rental accommodation, as well as access to the community and social housing sector, for parents post child removal, in order to ensure that families have the option to find stable accommodation close to their support networks and children's schooling; and
  - explore possible supported accommodation options for families. These could include both supported clustered tenancies in the community and residential support models that can work intensively with families.

## PLANNING AND DATA

### **RECOMMENDATION 7: Sharing government agency case data to plan for housing allocations that enable family reunification**

Children and Youth Services and Housing Tasmania to explore necessary amendments to policies, processes and documents needed to ensure that active forecasting and planning of public and social housing stock for reunifying families can occur between Children and Youth Services, Housing Tasmania and social housing providers.

### **RECOMMENDATION 8: Sharing government agency case data to enable smooth transitions out of and into parenting-related payments**

Explore necessary amendments to policies, processes, data sharing and documents between Centrelink and Children and Youth Services, to support Centrelink in responding to changes in care arrangements. This should include timely adjustments to parenting-related income and potential use of discretion in suspending Newstart Job Search requirements during family reunification if mutual obligations are inhibiting reunification commitments. An additional consideration would be having reunification activities treated as eligible activity for Newstart requirements.

**RECOMMENDATION 9: Sharing case data to understand parents' income and housing needs for reunification on a case and systemic level**

Children and Youth Services and Housing Tasmania to explore opportunities to share case data across the CPIS and SHIP government information systems, subject to privacy regulations. This would help government agencies and service providers to understand more about families' needs on a case level and on a systemic level, and to plan resources that effectively support successful family reunifications.

**RECOMMENDATION 10: Collecting additional data to enable Tasmania to become a world leader in understanding the role of income and housing in child safety concerns, interventions and service responses**

Children and Youth Services and Housing Tasmania to collect additional data within CPIS on the socio-economic circumstances and disadvantage of families involved with Child Safety Services, whether income and housing challenges are part of safety concerns in initial substantiations and as cases progress, and the distance between birth parents' and carers' households. This would enable a clearer understanding of vulnerability, risks and support needs in a family's reunification process and help us to understand trends in the role material basics have in child safety concerns and family reunifications at a systemic level.

**FURTHER RESEARCH**

**RECOMMENDATION 11: Areas for further investigation**

There are further areas to explore to comprehensively inform the development of policy and practice in this area. These include specific responses to families experiencing domestic violence and exploring differences in experiences for Aboriginal families, culturally and linguistically diverse families and families with disabilities. There is also a need to examine residential AoD support options for parents who have had their children removed and pathways into stable accommodation for this cohort.



**CHAPTER ONE**

**Introduction**

## 1.1 Emerging conversations: a vulnerable Tasmanian household held in limbo within our systems

In the course of the Social Action and Research Centre's (SARC) consultations on housing issues for vulnerable Tasmanians, Anglicare Tasmania community support workers highlighted regularly seeing parents who have had their children removed by Child Safety Services and are working towards family reunification. These parents had very few satisfactory housing options available to them. For many, this was triggered by losing eligibility for parenting-related payments when their children had been removed. Anglicare workers reported that this often leaves such families vulnerable to precarious housing arrangements that did not meet the stable housing requirements necessary for family reunification to occur.

They reported seeing families trapped by the constraints of the systems and scrutinised; they could address all of Child Safety Services' concerns about their parenting skills, their mental health, their addictions – the safety concerns about *their deficits*. But with their limited income and in a competitive Tasmanian housing market, they were unable to provide the material basics required to reunify with their children: stable housing that could accommodate their children and adequate food, clothing, furniture, toys and learning materials. And, for many, this meant that family reunification was held in limbo.

These stories echo international research that has begun to define the 'collateral consequences' of child removal (Broadhurst & Mason 2017). Amongst these consequences are significant ongoing psychological and social challenges, such as coping with the trauma and grief of children being removed and the social and legal stigma. These consequences can spiral into worsening mental health and substance use and impact on parents' ability to effectively engage with practical parenting or therapeutic support.

International research also identifies the removal of their eligibility for parenting-related payments by welfare agencies as an additional material "sanction" that compounds the significant emotional challenges that parents face:

**The inevitable emotional downturn in parental functioning following child removal is compounded by further formal civil disqualifications for parents whose lives are already characterized by considerable adversity... A reduction in parents' income and inadequate housing make it far harder for parents to engage in consistent and meaningful contact with children placed permanently in kin networks or foster care.** (Broadhurst & Mason 2017, p. 53)

Both poverty and trauma have a significant impact on the ability of families to address the issues which led to children being removed and maintain contact with their children, and on a family's chances of successful reunification. It can become challenging for Child Safety Services to discern between a family's level of parenting capacity and the impacts of child removal itself.

The income and housing challenges faced by Tasmanian parents engaged in family reunification have been acknowledged a number of times in recent years, without resolution. This includes Hinton's (2013) work and, notably, a forum held as part of a 2012 Tasmanian symposium by the Domestic Violence Coordinating Committee, which brought together the community sector with Child Safety Services and Centrelink to consider possible outcomes.

*In Limbo* looks at the nature and extent of the income and housing challenges faced by Tasmanian families who have had children removed by Child Safety Services and the impacts those challenges may have on positive family reunification outcomes. It aims to contribute to the evolving redesign of Child Safety Services, given the renewed focus on keeping families together, or expediting family reunifications where possible, to minimise the traumatic impacts on children of removal from their birth families.

## 1.2 Research approach

### PRELIMINARY SCOPING FOR IN LIMBO

Between May and September 2017, the researcher undertook two pieces of preliminary work in preparation for developing *In Limbo's* research proposal, methods and questions.

Pre-research interviews were held with around 18 staff working in family and housing support and domestic violence services within non-government organisations (NGOs) and in relevant government agencies (Child Safety Services, Housing Tasmania and Centrelink). The interviews aimed to map out what typically happens to Tasmanian families' income and housing situations pre- and post child removal and what the policies and support services are that surround this. This ensured the research design considered relevant questions, scenarios and stakeholders for interview.

The researcher undertook initial modelling of changes in income for four "typical" Tasmanian single and two-parent families pre- and post child removal to provide an idea of how this might affect families' ability to afford private rental accommodation. This involved working with Anglicare family support and housing workers and Centrelink social work staff to develop a set of "typical" family households, calculating their likely Centrelink-based income pre-child removal, after removal and during stages of family reunification. Those household income rates were then applied to the 2017 Rental Affordability Snapshot data set for Tasmania. This exercise confirmed that household incomes typically reduced by half to two-thirds when children were removed, which echoed earlier research (Hinton 2013; Broadhurst and Mason 2017). This income reduction completely wiped out any access to affordable and appropriate private rental accommodation.

This preliminary work confirmed SARC's interest in developing a more in-depth piece of research which would explore parents' and services' experiences and engage relevant government agencies and the community sector to consider how challenges could be addressed.

## AIMS

*In Limbo* aims to:

- Highlight the income and housing challenges during family reunification for Tasmanian parents whose children are on Short Term Care and Protection Orders, and the impacts those material challenges have on successful family reunification processes.
- Review Tasmania's ability to quantify these issues and estimate the scale of the problem.
- Explore Tasmanian, Australian and international policy, programs and practice responses to these issues that are having positive impacts on family outcomes.
- Offer recommendations that could address the income and housing needs of Tasmanian parents who are engaged in the process of family reunification and enable appropriate family environments for during reunification and beyond.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the material requirements of family reunification in Tasmania?
- What are the challenges for low-income families who are engaged in the reunification process to meet these requirements?
- What proportion of families in the reunification process face these challenges?
- How do services and professionals supporting such parents currently respond to these challenges?
- How could Tasmanian parents who are engaged in the family reunification process access parenting income and stable housing?

## RESEARCH METHODS

From October 2017 to August 2018, *In Limbo* used a mixed-method approach to addressing the research questions:

**An exploration and mapping of current legislation, policy, programs and practice** that address income and housing issues when parents have children removed, are preparing for and during the family reunification process. This involved a scan of Tasmanian, other Australian, UK and American literature and face-to-face/phone/Skype interviews with 15 academic experts, leading family support practitioners and public servants with policy and practice management roles across Housing Tasmania, social housing providers and Child Safety Services.

**An interrogation of data from Tasmanian government’s Child Safety and Specialist Homelessness Services information systems** to find data about the extent and nature of income and housing challenges for families who have had a child removed by Child Safety Services between 2015 and 2017 and have a Reunification Case and Care Plan in place. This was complemented by a scan of what other Australian and international research could tell us about the scale and nature of these challenges.

**An exploration of the income and housing challenges** Tasmanian families face when reunifying with their children, the impacts these challenges have on families and the services that work with them, how services are currently supporting families to deal with these challenges, and what is needed in order to provide material basics in a way that expedites family reunification. The project investigated this through:

- Face-to-face group and individual interviews with 43 front line professionals in government agencies and the community sector with considerable experience of working with parents engaged in reunification. Interviewees included family support workers who specialise in working with families involved with Child Safety Services, residential family support workers, housing and homelessness support workers, domestic violence specialist counsellors and support workers, and crisis accommodation support workers. Informants were identified through pinpointing key service providers in the initial mapping of the service landscape, engaging with service providers and, where needed, expanding the interview sample through snowballing.
- Face-to-face interviews with five parents and one grandparent who were or had been involved in the family reunification process over the last three years. Families were recruited into the research via recommendations from front line staff within family and housing and homelessness support services. All families were engaged within family reunification support services. Parents who agreed to take part in the research were offered support from the service who referred them at any point during the interview process and afterwards.

Qualitative data was analysed thematically by the researcher. The data provided by government agencies was analysed by the researcher and was sent to agencies for scrutiny prior to publication.

Ethics approval for *In Limbo* was granted from Anglicare Victoria Research Ethics Committee.

## RESEARCH GOVERNANCE

The research was guided by a reference group consisting of professionals involved in Child Safety Services, Centrelink, Housing Tasmania, and community sector family support and housing and homelessness services. This included those working within policy and practice. The group convened three times during the project to advise on policy and practice scanning, research instrument design and fieldwork, report writing and recommendations drafting.

### 1.3 Link to SARC's research program

*In Limbo* is part of SARC's current research program exploring the collateral consequences of child removal for Tasmanian families and how policies, programs and practice do and should address them.

*In Limbo*'s sister project, *Breaking the Cycle*, examines the complexities of assessing and supporting parenting capacity in the context of parental trauma through the experiences of parents who have had repeat child removals.

Although *In Limbo* refers to the trauma of child removal, given its immediacy and impacts for parents, for a more detailed exploration of the traumatic impacts of child removal for parents, please see *Breaking the Cycle* (Hinton 2018).

### 1.4 Research limitations

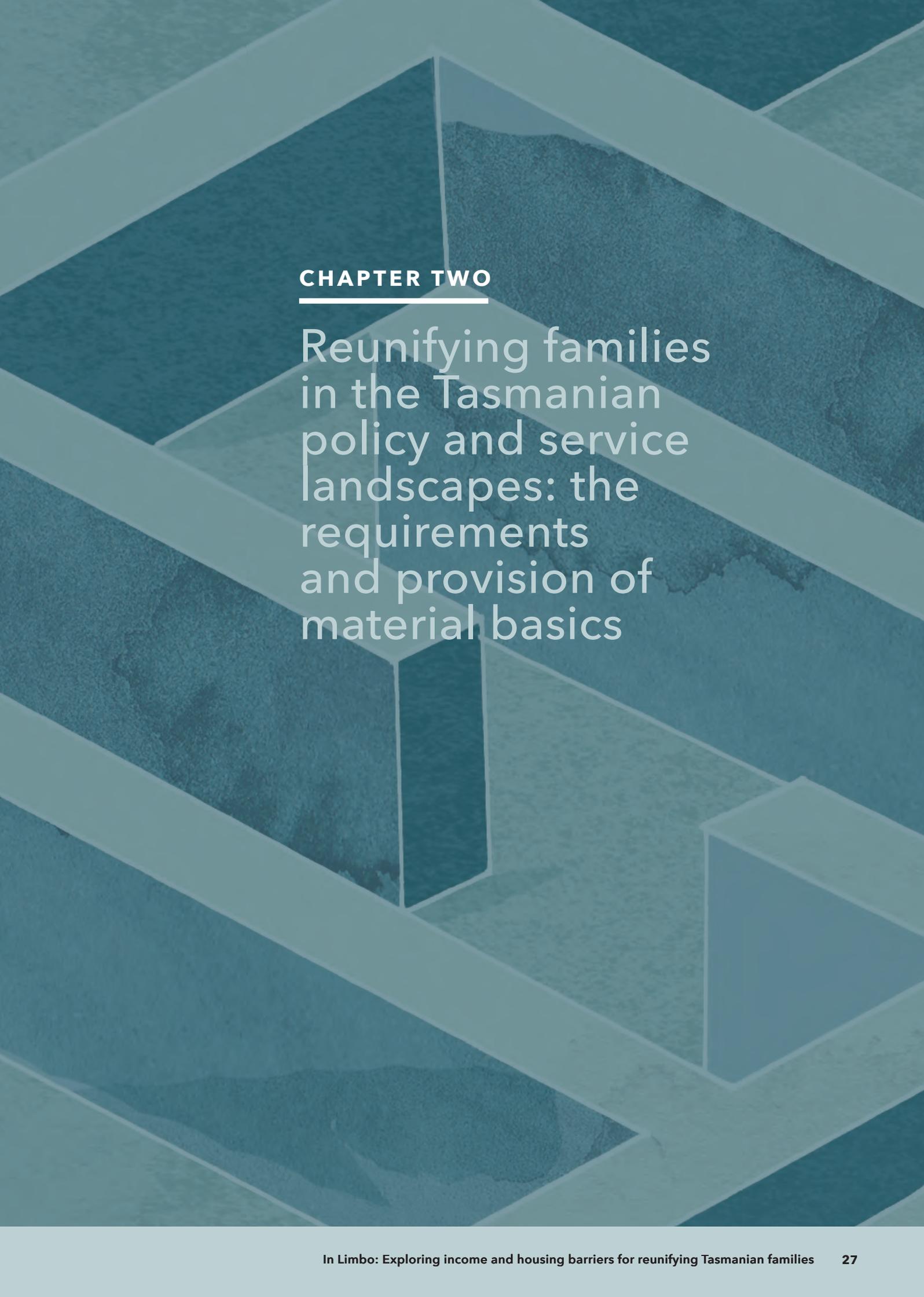
The time limitations for delivering the project dictated the research design. This impacted on the project's capacity to explore whether there may be differences in parents' experiences due to culture, disability or region and capacity to explore whether different forms of poverty or homelessness impact differently on the family reunification process.

The project was not designed to represent the experiences of all families who are reunifying with their children. It provides a broad overview of parents' challenges and their impacts, drawn from the main themes emerging from service providers' and parents' reflections. It also shines a spotlight on these challenges and their impacts through delving into the details offered by parents during the case study interviews.

The research does not provide a specific exploration of experiences for parents of Aboriginal heritage, parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or parents who have a disability.

All families interviewed for this project were engaged with family support services in southern Tasmania. Most parents had experienced a range of homeless experiences – crisis accommodation, sleeping rough, in cars, or couch-surfing – and were able to reflect on how these experiences had impacted on their ability to reunify, or not reunify, with their children. But they were all currently living in a form of shelter, including public housing and living with family, although not all were in "stable" accommodation. As such, this project has not explored the experiences of parents who are or who have become disengaged from services, or are currently experiencing other forms of homelessness, including street homelessness.

This project is designed to provide an initial exploration of the broad income and housing challenges families face when reunifying, the strengths and gaps in policy, programs, practice and data, and to flag what else we might need to consider in developing a model that addresses income and housing issues in a way that will help to expedite family reunification. It is a starting point for a conversation aimed at setting out the possible elements of a policy, program and practice framework.



**CHAPTER TWO**

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Reunifying families  
in the Tasmanian  
policy and service  
landscapes: the  
requirements  
and provision of  
material basics

## *The first day of child removal is the first day of reunification.*

STRONG FAMILIES SAFE KIDS: REDESIGN OF CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES TASMANIA (DHHS 2016)

Families who have had children removed by Child Safety Services in Tasmania find themselves at the intersection of three policy drives: Children and Youth Services' policy objective to act in the best interests of the child; Housing Tasmania's drive to provide affordable housing, particularly for households identified as having a priority need; and the federal government's welfare reform initiatives to tackle welfare dependency and encourage parents into employment. These policy landscapes do not necessarily have family reunification as a mutual objective.

Here we explore the policies and services aimed at supporting parents to achieve family reunification. What are the material requirements for family reunification in Tasmania and how are they recognised and enabled by current federal and state policies?

### **Summary**

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Low-income Tasmanian families are vulnerable to poverty and homelessness in Tasmania's current economic climate and its challenges with housing affordability and supply. This vulnerability increases when children are removed by Child Safety Services.

The Tasmanian Government's *Strong Families - Safe Kids* strategy (DHHS 2016) places emphasis on the *best interests of the child*. It focuses on strategies that prevent children being removed from their birth families and, if they are removed, recognises that the goal, where possible, should be to return children to their families (DHHS 2016). It states that *the first day of child removal is the first day of reunification*.

Child Safety Services assess risk to a child using the Tasmanian Risk Framework (DHHS 2009). Using the safety planning tool Signs of Safety, CSS will assess parents' capacity to address safety concerns, their level of understanding and engagement in addressing CSS' concerns, their strengths, and their support network that they might draw on to address concerns. Material basics, such as stable housing, adequate food and clothing, and education and training materials, will form part of a wider assessment along with support for their physical, mental and emotional health and connections to culture and a positive identity, drawing on the Tasmanian Government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework domains (DoC 2018; DHHS 2017).

CSS, family support and housing support workers interviewed for In Limbo highlighted that there are no set “thresholds” for families to meet in terms of material basics in order for children to be removed, or for family reunification to occur; as one family support manager described, ‘It’s the individual [CSS] worker’s interpretation of what’s “okay enough”’.

There is a vacuum of provision to support the material requirements that would expedite family reunification:

- Federal income support provided through Centrelink does not acknowledge continued parenting costs until children are regularly staying with their parents for more than 5 nights a fortnight. Prior to this, parents without care of their children are treated as adults without dependants who (unless disability is recognised) are available for work. They are expected to be actively seeking work, regardless of the activity required of them to meet reunification goals, unless Centrelink workers are prompted to use their discretion to suspend job search requirements.
- CSS may set reunification goals for parents to meet, including having stable accommodation and providing adequately for the children, but does not directly provide case management or support to parents to achieve these goals. Instead, Children and Youth Services contracts NGOs to provide both case management and direct family support services. These services are not funded to provide the ongoing parenting costs, including stable accommodation, which parents need to provide.
- Tasmania’s affordable housing strategy recognises the challenges of low-income families, but does not specifically recognise families who have had children removed as a vulnerable cohort unless they have experienced family violence.

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## 2.1 The vulnerability of low-income Tasmanian families

### TASMANIAN FAMILIES IN POVERTY

Nationally, poverty rates are highest amongst single parent families (ACOSS 2016; Phillips et al. 2013). A third of lone parents and 1 in 10 couples with children were living in poverty in 2013-14 (ACOSS 2016). This meant that 41% of children in single parent households and 13% of those in couple households were living in poverty.

Tasmanian family households have a high level of vulnerability compared to those nationally. 15.1% of Tasmanians were living in poverty in 2011-12, compared to 11.8% nationally (Phillips et al. 2013). Tasmania’s child poverty rates are also higher than national averages. A third of Tasmanian households are reliant on income support payments (ABS 2016).

### THE STRUGGLE FOR STABLE HOUSING: LOW-INCOME TASMANIANS' VULNERABILITY IN THE HOUSING MARKET

It is increasingly difficult for low-income Tasmanians to compete against higher income renters. Many households face an ongoing struggle to find and keep a safe and secure home in which to live, particularly single parents and increasingly so for two-parent families (Moffatt 2016, 2017; Wisbey 2018).

The growth in Tasmania's affordable housing supply is not meeting demand. There were nearly 3,500 applicants waiting for public housing across Tasmania in March 2018. The average time priority applicants could expect to be waiting for a public housing allocation in March 2018 was 72 weeks (DHHS 2018), six months longer than applicants would have been waiting a year before. So, as Tasmania's *Affordable Housing Strategy* acknowledges, the private rental market is the default provider of housing for many low-income Tasmanians (DHHS 2015).

Competition in Tasmania's private rental sector has been intensified by a decline in the number of properties available. Anglicare Tasmania's most recent Rental Affordability Snapshot, conducted in April 2018, showed there had been a 38% fall in the number of rentals advertised compared to those available in April 2014 (Wisbey 2018).

Meanwhile Tasmanian incomes have not kept pace with rent price increases. The minimum wage has risen by only 2.4% per year (ABS 2017, cited in Jericho 2017), while the Newstart benefit has not increased in real terms since 1994 (Whiteford 2016). However, median rental prices increased by 2.8% over the year to March 2017 (Tenants Union of Tasmania 2017) across Tasmania and 15% in the year to March 2018 (Frost 2018, cited in Wisbey 2018).

For low income families sharing care of their children with the state, obtaining and then maintaining affordable housing in the public or private rental sector that is suitable for access visits and eventual reunification is likely to continue to be challenging under these conditions.

## 2.2 The policy landscape

### ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT PAYMENTS RELATED TO PARENTING AND THE WELFARE TO WORK AGENDA

Over the past decade, there have been two significant shifts in the focus of welfare policy at a federal level that have impacted on material provision for families whose children are involved with Child Safety Services, and resulted in a tension in parents' obligations across government agencies.

Firstly, the Commonwealth Government's 2006 Welfare to Work reforms shaped government focus on ensuring that those who are available for work demonstrate they are actively seeking and securing employment. At a policy level, this shifted Government expectations for parents of older children from caring to employment.

The reforms reduced access to income for lone parents with children aged 8 or over. By 2013, all such lone parents were moved from the more generous Parenting Payment Single to Newstart, reducing their income by around \$60 a week (ACOSS 2016). The policy thrust is to ensure that parents with older children need to be consistently demonstrating their efforts to find and sustain employment unless they have been assessed as unable to work.

Secondly, the policy drive to encourage welfare claimants into work has been renewed and re-energised by the 2015 Review of Australia's Welfare System, known as the McClure Report (DSS 2015). Coming from the lens of the costs to government of prolonged dependence on welfare benefits, the Australian Priority Investment Approach (DSS 2018) has applied an actuarial model to highlighting those groups most "costly" to the welfare state and most in need of support to minimise their dependency.

Parents who have had children of any age removed from their care by Child Safety Services cease to be treated as "parents" by welfare policy and payments and assume the role of an adult without dependants. Unless there are other children who remain in their care, they are transferred into the cohort of claimants who need to be available for and actively seeking work. The following provides a very broad outline of changes to income support entitlements at various stages of the child removal and reunification process. This is a complex area of policy and all households are different. More details about parents' eligibility is provided in Appendix 1.

There are three important criteria that determine the type of government income support and rent assistance payments adults with responsibility for a child may receive (for example Parenting Payment, the "with child" rate of Newstart or Youth Allowance, Family Tax Benefit, and the "with child" rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance). These criteria are: whether you are responsible for a "dependent child"; whether you are deemed the "Principal Carer"; and the number of nights the child stays with you, regardless of whether that child has been in your care during the day (see Appendix 1). In very broad terms, having your child stay for less than five nights a fortnight (or less than 35% of the time) will significantly affect the types of parent-related payments you can claim. This means that in some cases, due to the changes in care, the supporting income a household receives significantly declines as parents transition from Parenting Payment and Family Tax Benefit to the single or partnered childless adult rate of Newstart.

It is the responsibility of parents to inform Centrelink of the change in care responsibilities within 14 days and to reapply for an alternative income support. This means they must contact Centrelink very soon after the removal of their children, during a time of significant trauma. This risks not only emotional but also material upheaval for families (Broadhurst & Mason 2017; Hinton 2013).

When children are placed with carers, the carers can claim parenting payments for that child. Centrelink usually requires the parent to confirm the change in care arrangements. But if the parent has not notified Centrelink about their change of circumstances, any parenting related payments that the parent was receiving will be automatically transferred to the carer. Centrelink will then assess if the parent has a debt to repay for any payments given for periods when their child was with the carer.

Full parenting payments and Family Tax Benefit remains with the carers until the birth parent has their child staying with them for five nights a fortnight or more (35% of the time or more). At that point, parents can submit an application for a proportion of FTB to be paid to them. To be considered their child's Principal Carer and be eligible for Parenting Payment, generally a parent will need to have their child staying with them for more than 50% of the time.

There is, of course, a strong argument for both minimising welfare dependency and encouraging employment amongst those who can and are available for work, including parents. The emotional, psychological, social and economic benefits for themselves, their families and for the government purse are well rehearsed and acknowledged. However, if parents are in the midst of addressing safety concerns raised by Child Safety and proving they can materially provide for their children, they may not be able to be available for or actively seek employment. It may also be challenging to "provide" without having the payments related to parenting.

The rest of this chapter will explore some of Child Safety's requirements, and Chapter Five will explore how these requirements may interfere with the ability to search for, secure and maintain employment.

### **TASMANIA'S CHILD SAFETY SERVICES: THE BEST INTERESTS OF CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES**

Children and Youth Services, within Communities Tasmania (formally part of the Department of Health and Human Services), is responsible for overseeing and upholding Child Safety in Tasmania. Numerous Acts help to govern and guide the processes, the principal Act being the *Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1997* and its subsequent amendments.

The Tasmanian Government's *Strong Families – Safe Kids* strategy (DHHS 2016) renews focus on the *best interests of the child*. It focuses on strategies that prevent children being removed from their birth families and, if they are removed, a recognition that the goal, where possible, should be to return children to their families (DHHS 2016). It states that 'the first day of child removal is the first day of reunification'.

Strong Families – Safe Kids uses a social ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979). That is, it recognises that children and young people's wellbeing does not exist in isolation; it is 'heavily shaped by their relationships with their family and wider community' (DoC 2018). It positions child and youth wellbeing within the context of 'strong and resourced families' and 'strong and supportive communities' (DHHS 2017; DoC 2018) (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1:** Ecological framework for Tasmanian child and youth wellbeing

Source: DHHS 2017; DoC 2018

The proportion of Tasmanian children in out-of-home care is the third highest in Australia - 10 per 1000 children aged 0 to 17 (see Table 1). Sensibly, there is a strong focus in Strong Families – Safe Kids on preventing more Tasmanian children entering OOHC, through investing in intensive family support before children enter care through programs such as the Intensive Family Engagement Service (IFES), redesigning how advice and referral into Child Safety works through the Children’s Advice and Referral Alliance (CARA), and developing family inclusive practice through the safety planning framework, Signs of Safety (SoS).

Whilst family reunification is not named as a focus for renewal within the strategy, the recognition that family reunification is the best outcome for children and for families where possible, invites a review of any barriers to the reunification process.

**TABLE 1:** Proportion of Tasmanian children (0-17) in out-of-home care, all states and territories, 30 June 2011 to 30 June 2015

Year	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total
Number									
2012	17,192	6,207	7,999	3,400	2,548	1,009	566	700	39,621
2013	17,422	6,542	8,136	3,425	2,657	1,067	558	742	40,549
2014	18,192	7,710	8,185	3,723	2,631	1,054	606	908	43,009
2015	16,843	8,567	8,448	3,954	2,838	1,061	671	1,017	43,399
2016	17,800	9,705	8,670	4,100	3,243	1,150	748	1,032	46,448
Number per 1,000 children									
2012	10.4	5.0	7.3	6.1	7.2	8.7	6.9	11.1	7.7
2013	10.4	5.2	7.4	5.9	7.4	9.3	6.7	11.6	7.7
2014	10.8	6.0	7.3	6.3	7.3	9.2	7.1	14.3	8.1
2015	9.9	6.6	7.5	6.7	7.9	9.3	7.7	16.0	8.1
2016	10.4	7.3	7.6	6.9	9.0	10.1	8.4	16.2	8.6

Source: AIHW 2017, Table 5.7, p. 62.

### AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN TASMANIA

Housing Tasmania has a portfolio of nearly 7500 properties within public and Aboriginal housing. Nearly 4000 houses are managed by community housing providers across Tasmania under the Better Housing Futures scheme (DHHS 2018).

*Tasmania's Affordable Housing Strategy* (DHHS 2015) acknowledges that a shortage of public and social housing has led to the private rental sector being the default provider of housing for low-income Tasmanians. It recognises and strives to address the vulnerability of low-income households in Tasmania's private and public rental sectors and for specifically vulnerable cohorts, such as young people, older Tasmanians and families experiencing domestic violence. The strategy and action plan strive to address needs through crisis, transitional and longer term housing responses that span the public, social and private housing sectors.

Since June 2015, Tasmania's Housing Assessment Priority System has organised applicants into either "General" or "Priority". Priority applicants are assessed based on "affordability", i.e. whether they can afford to pay the rent where they live; "homelessness", i.e. whether they are homeless, might lose their home, live in crisis accommodation, or are living with friends and family for a while; "safety", i.e. whether they are safe from harm from other people such as family violence; and "health and mobility", i.e. their physical and mental health (Housing Tas 2015).

Families identified as reunification ready, or in the process of reunifying with their children, are not a cohort identified as Priority for public and social housing, nor are they named as a cohort of concern within the Affordable Housing Strategy. However, by qualifying within another cohort, for example experiencing family violence or homelessness, it is possible for parents to access crisis, transition or public or social housing.

### FAMILY VIOLENCE

Tasmania's Safe at Home Action Plan (DPAC 2015) is a whole-of-government strategy to support the safety and housing needs of families experiencing domestic violence. In recognition of vulnerability and a high risk of homelessness or returning to the perpetrator, the strategy funds specialist housing (50 units of transitional accommodation state-wide under the Rapid Rehousing initiative) and family and counselling support positions.

## 2.3 What are the material requirements for family reunification?

### THE CHILD SAFETY ASSESSMENT AND CHILD REMOVAL PROCESS

Anyone can report concerns about the safety of children and acts of abuse and neglect to Child Safety Services. Some professionals are mandatory reporters, obliged to inform CSS if they are made aware of safety concerns. This is called making a **notification**. Child Safety Intake will carry out an assessment of the notification. If Intake Services feel it necessary to make contact with the child and family, the case is referred to the Child Safety Response Team. This team will undertake an **investigation**. If concerns for the child's safety are significant enough, CSS may apply for an **Assessment Order** while the investigation is occurring. If this is granted, the child is removed from their family and placed either with foster carers or kinship carers while an investigation occurs.

During an investigation, CSS Response Team workers will discuss safety concerns with the family, spend time with the child and draw on other agencies and services to make an assessment about whether the risks to the child are **substantiated**. If the investigation concludes there is no risk to the child's safety, it will be reported that the risk was not substantiated, and if an Assessment Order was granted the child will be returned to the family. If the risk is substantiated, the Response Team may refer the family for intensive family support (see section 2.4 The service landscape).

If the risk is assessed to be significant enough to remove the child from their birth parent(s) and the goal is reunification, the child will be placed on a **Care and Protection Order**. This is usually a short term order of up to 2 years, which is approved by application to the Magistrates Court. Children may be placed with foster carers or kinship carers during the period of the order. Short term orders can be renewed for up to a three-year period through the same legislative system. If safety concerns have

not been addressed during the period of those short term orders, CSS must apply for an 18-year order. At this point, children are treated as being in long term care and reunification plans are usually, but not always, abandoned (CYS 2016a, b).

For reunification to occur, Child Safety Services usually have a number of requirements addressing the risks that led to the child being removed. Some requirements may relate to parents' behaviour or lifestyle (such as addressing substance use or mental health issues) or developing parenting skills. Other requirements may relate to providing material basics, such as stable, safe and suitable accommodation and providing adequately for their children to thrive.

Child Safety Service workers make decisions about child safety by:

- Assessing risks to a child's safety, primarily using the Tasmanian Risk Framework and referring to the categories of abuse and neglect defined under the Tasmanian legislation (see Appendix 1).
- Assessing parents' capacity to address safety concerns, their level of understanding and engagement in addressing Child Safety Services' concerns, their strengths, and their support network that they might draw on to address concerns. CSS workers and families work together to develop danger statements about safety concerns, safety goals and actions to address concerns, using the Signs of Safety assessment and planning model. This practice model is being rolled out across Child Safety to encourage a more strengths-based approach to assessments and safety planning that engages parents to understand and address concerns in order to expedite family reunification.
- Considering a child's holistic wellbeing by referring to the domains and outcomes in the Tasmanian Government's developing Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework.

A Reunification Case and Care Plan usually sets out CSS's safety concerns and how they need to be addressed, will note progress families have made towards reunification, and set out six stages to gradually get children home to their parents. The first two to three stages will usually involve some form of supervised or unsupervised day visits, progressing to overnight stays that increase as reunification progresses. Progress is reviewed through Family Group Conferences that usually involve CSS staff, parents and, if accessed, parents' support worker. FGCs are also a necessary part of reviewing Orders and returning to court. They are designed to be solutions-focused and family-led, and will utilise the Tasmanian Risk Framework and Signs of Safety (CYS 2017).

#### **CHILD AND YOUTH WELLBEING AND MATERIAL BASICS: WHAT ARE TASMANIAN PARENTS SUPPOSED TO PROVIDE?**

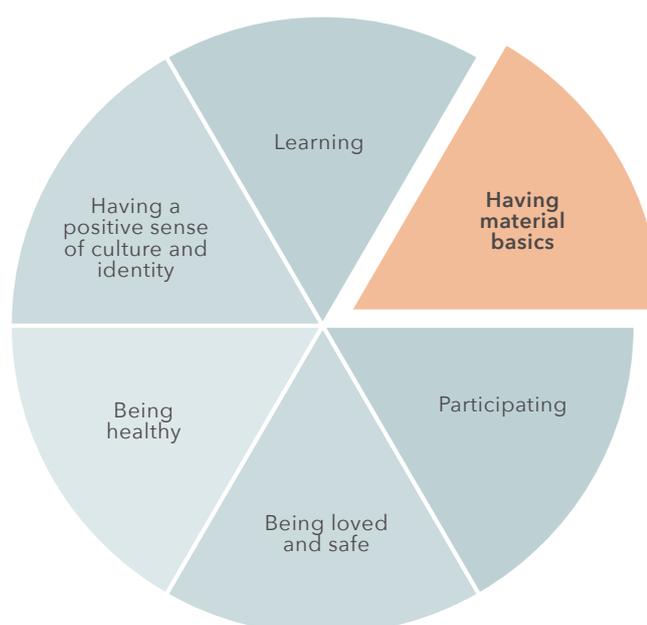
Tasmania does not currently include or exclude poverty as a basis for neglect or maltreatment in our Child Safety legislation. It is absent. Tasmanian guidance does not outline what material basics a child should be receiving, although it does indicate that part of the assessment of a family's strengths and protective factors include 'serious attempts to provide rich experiences for a child despite poverty' (DHHS 2009).

Child Safety Services assess risk to a child using the Tasmanian Risk Framework (DHHS 2009). Using the safety planning tool Signs of Safety, CSS will assess parents' capacity to address safety concerns, their level of understanding and engagement in addressing CSS' concerns, their strengths, and their support network that they might draw on to address concerns. Material basics, such as stable housing, adequate food and clothing, and education and training materials, will form part of a wider assessment along with support for their physical, mental and emotional health and connections to culture and a positive identity, drawing on the Tasmanian Government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework domains (DoC 2018; DHHS 2017).

CSS, family support and housing support workers interviewed for *In Limbo* highlighted that there are no set "thresholds" for families to meet in terms of material basics in order for children to be removed, or for family reunification to occur; as one family support manager described, 'It's the individual [CSS] worker's interpretation of what's "okay enough".'

The implementation plan for Strong Families - Safe Kids promotes the use of a child and youth wellbeing framework to describe an "ideal state" for Tasmania's children and young people within six domains, covering all aspects of their life - being healthy, learning and participating in decisions about themselves and activities, being loved and safe, having a positive sense of their culture and identity, and having "material basics" (DHHS 2017a; DoC 2018) (see Figure 2). This framework draws on the extensive evidence base for child and youth wellbeing constructed within the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth's (ARACY) *Common Approach* (ARACY 2012).

**FIGURE 2:** The six domains of Tasmanian child and youth wellbeing



Source: DoC 2018; DHHS 2017

At the time of writing, the framework is still in development. In version 0.9, within the material basics domain the outcomes are for Tasmanian children and young people to have safe, secure and stable housing and to have their material needs met (DoC 2018). Previous iterations, for example version 0.8, included elements such as the child having ‘access to adequate clothing and footwear’ and ‘access to education/ training materials’, and the family having ‘access to an adequate, stable home’ and ‘adequate heating and cooling’ (DHHS 2017) (see Fig. 3). These outcomes draw on some elements associated with not being “homeless” in accordance with the ABS definition (ABS 2012) of homelessness, and not suffering from the impacts of poverty in accordance with ACOSS (2016) and OECD’s definitions (OECD 2017), explored in Chapter 3.

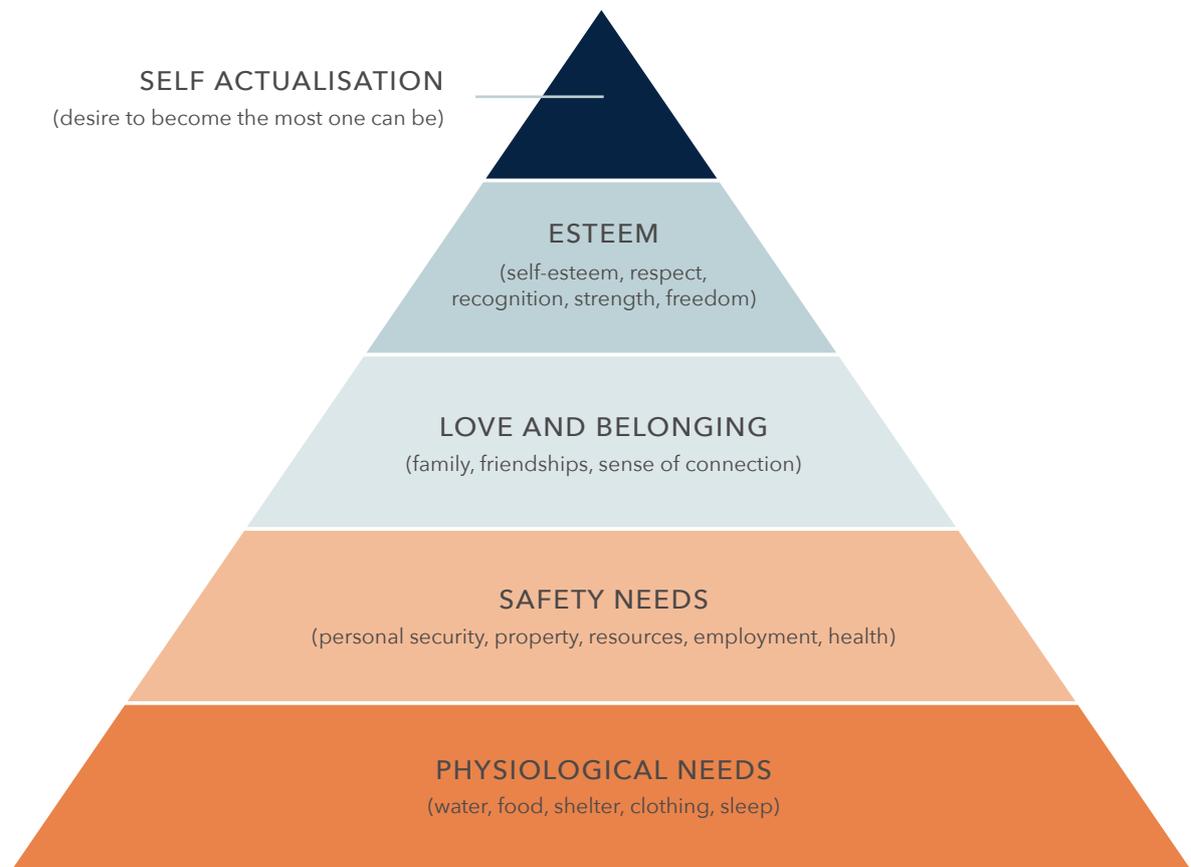
**FIGURE 3:** Wellbeing framework outcomes for Tasmanian children and young people around material basics



Sources: DoC 2018; DHHS 2017

**ADDRESSING THE HIERARCHY OF NEEDS?**

There is no hierarchy within the domains suggested in the Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework. But, as Maslow's hierarchy of needs would suggest, providing basic physiological needs such as stable housing and adequate food and clothing is a foundation from which to build safety, loving and belonging, health and cultural safety, and the learning and participation needed to reach self-actualisation and wellbeing (Maslow 1943, 1954) (see Fig. 4).

**FIGURE 4:** Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow 1943, 1954

Psychological theories and evidence-based family support practice (for example Parker and McDonald’s 2010 review cited in Bromfield et al 2010 ) would suggest that there is an implied hierarchy within the child and youth wellbeing domains. Faced with the complexity of many parents’ support needs, Maslow’s insights are an important frame of reference for how we might think about priorities within policies and programs that support parents to engage with a range of safety concerns to expedite family reunification:

According to Maslow’s theory, individuals are unlikely to be able to focus on their intimate relationships and connections if their survival and safety needs are not attended to first (McAdams, 2006)... Families with multiple and complex problems are often situated within a broader context of poverty and disadvantage. Therefore, parents may derive little benefit from or struggle to benefit from counselling or parenting programs if they are unable to provide their children with appropriate clothing, fix the car, or replace a broken window. Similarly, they may struggle to provide “good enough” parenting if other, more pressing problems such as obtaining food and paying heating bills have not been dealt with (Bromfield et al. 2010).

Addressing material basics, such as stable accommodation and the ability to provide adequate food, clothing and resources to parent effectively, is the foundation that needs to be in place before parents can engage with other concerns about their parenting capacities.

## 2.4 The service landscape: how reunifying families are supported with material basics

The *Strong Families - Safe Kids* Implementation Plan recommends that ‘Child safety and wellbeing is everyone’s business’. For the state government, that includes ‘Services designed to support children at risk of neglect and include income support, housing assistance’ (DHHS 2016, p. 25). Here we describe the material, therapeutic and practical supports being provided for Tasmanian families who are reunifying with their children.

### FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES FOR TASMANIAN FAMILIES DURING THE FAMILY REUNIFICATION PROCESS

CSS views their primary “client” as being the child. So, although CSS may set safety goals for parents to meet in order to retain or regain their children, CSS does not directly provide case management or support to parents to achieve these goals. Instead, Children and Youth Services contracts NGOs to provide both case management and direct family support services.

However, Tasmania's government does not currently contract all case management, therapeutic and practical support services for parents in a way that enables one worker to walk side-by-side with families throughout their entire involvement with CSS. Current family support case management capacities only enable services to work with a small proportion of the 300 to 400 families who may be reunifying across Tasmania in any one year.

### **Pathway Home**

**Pathway Home** is a state-wide parenting support program specifically focused on parents who are reunifying with their children. The program is funded by CYS, led by Anglicare Tasmania and Uniting Care in the North and North West of Tasmania and by Catholic Care in the South. It is a voluntary program for families referred by Child Safety Services, offering case management, practical and therapeutic interventions for families to support the family reunification process and beyond reunification for a period following the expiration of a Care and Protection Order. This enables a continuation of family support and, where necessary, a step down of support by handing families to the Integrated Family Support Service (IFSS). The support provided by Pathway Home is guided by a Reunification Case and Care Plan developed with the family and Child Safety Services.

Each service provider offers a different program design, utilising different evidence-based therapeutic and practical approaches to working with families. For example, Anglicare offers Theraplay, Uniting Care draws on elements of NewPin (New Parent Infant Network), and Catholic Care offers Bringing Up Great Kids and the Positive Parenting Program.

As part of the program's work, family support workers will work with parents around their material needs. For example, Catholic Care uses the Family Star Plus outcomes measurement tool to work on ten domains, including 'home and money'. Pathway Home provides minimal brokerage support to assist families with small material needs during the reunification process, but does not have the resources to enable parents to meet significant material basics that may be required to satisfy reunification requirements, particularly maintaining a stable home. The case management function does, however, enable workers to refer parents to other relevant services, such as Housing Connect and emergency relief funds.

Each program has a different approach to support and capacity will vary due to the length of reunifications and the complexities of the cases. But at the time this research was conducted, Catholic Care was working with up to 30 families at any one time across southern Tasmania, Anglicare Tasmania with seven families in the North of the state and Uniting Care with seven or eight families in the North West.

### Doorways to Parenting

The Salvation Army offers **Doorways to Parenting**. This state-wide program aims to support vulnerable parents, including those reunifying with their children, by offering therapeutic and practical skills and support. Parents can self-refer or be referred by an agency, including CSS. Doorways offers individual counselling, individual case management, playgroups and other support groups. Services include evidence-based parenting programs such as Strong Parenting and Resilient Kids (SPARK), a ten-week program specifically for parents who are either at risk of a Child Safety intervention or have children on a short term order. SPARK will support them to understand Child Safety processes and develop their parenting skills, and they will support and advocate for parents who are working towards family reunification or have a Reunification Case and Care Plan in place.

Through their case management services, they are able to refer families to other services to support parents in meeting their reunification goals and to support challenges with income and housing. Common referrals include emergency relief and Housing Connect. There are six centres across Tasmania – two around greater Hobart, two around greater Launceston, and one each in Burnie and Devonport.

Doorways to Parenting is funded by CYS.

### Parenting and Family Advocacy Service

The Red Cross offers the **Parent and Family Advocacy Service** (PFAS) in southern Tasmania. This service is available to any family involved with Child Safety Service, from notifications through to family reunification. The service empowers parents to talk constructively and in an informed way with Child Safety Services. This can include analysing and interpreting official documents, supporting parents to obtain information from Child Safety, and attending meetings such as Family Group Conferences with parents either as an advocate or to observe, or representing parents who would prefer that. PFAS can support parents to write to or respond to Child Safety constructively, and aims to develop parents' skills to advocate for themselves.

Parents can self-refer or be referred by any agency. When operating at full capacity, the service should have 3 full time staff and a team of parent peer advocates able to support parents. At the time this research was conducted, there were 40 parents being supported by PFAS across southern Tasmania. The service is funded by CYS for four years as a trial, until June 2019.

### Small Steps and DIY Dads

Hobart City Mission offers parents, including those reunifying with their children, two residential support programs – **Small Steps** and **DIY Dads**. These are the only two such services in Tasmania.

Small Steps was developed as a self-funded response to a gap in provision for young mothers and their babies. It offers accommodation and around the clock access to support, including parenting skills and an understanding of child development, maintaining a stable tenancy, budgeting and providing a safe and stable environment for their children. It also focuses on developing employability. Parents can stay for two years and are supported to find their next step into longer term accommodation, leaving with more confidence in themselves, their parenting and their ability to live independently. There is space for 12 parents.

Similarly, DIY Dads was developed in response to a gap in provision for fathers experiencing homelessness who have custody of their children (full- or part-time). Eight units are available for up to two years. It offers a similar program of accommodation, support and parenting skills to Small Steps.

### **INCOME AND EMERGENCY RELIEF SERVICES FOR TASMANIAN FAMILIES REUNIFYING WITH THEIR CHILDREN**

**Emergency relief services** are offered by Uniting Care, Salvation Army, Benevolent Society, Hobart City Mission and St Vincent de Paul across Tasmania. Each provider offers a different range of support, but, in general, emergency relief services provide discretionary support for material needs such as food parcels, supermarket vouchers, nappies, blankets, bus tickets, clothing, household goods and furniture, and support to pay power bills, phone bills and prescriptions. Services usually provide referral to financial counselling services. There are limitations on the number of applications clients can make across emergency relief funds during a three-month period. These funds are utilised by parents reunifying with their children independently and through connection the other services, such as Doorway to Parenting, or Pathway home.

**Emergency food relief services** offer food parcels. Providers include Colony 47, St Vincent de Paul, Hobart and Launceston City Missions, Salvation Army, Uniting Care and The Helping Hand Association. Additionally, food is provided by Loui's Van, Food Bank and Second Bite.

**Child Safety Services** offers some material resources for families to support aspects of the family reunification process. This includes discretionary reimbursement of travel for activities such as access visits, passes to children's play centres and food vouchers for up to \$10 per child per night for overnight visits. These are not routinely provided by CSS and parents must request them.

Housing Connect administers the **Private Rental Assistance** program. This is a fund to help low-income Tasmanians enter or stay in the private rental market. It can assist with bonds, rent or arrears. Families reunifying can apply to this fund, but their capacity to maintain a rental will be assessed based on their current, not potential, income.

## HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

Funded by Housing Tasmania, Housing Connect offers specialist housing and homelessness services across Tasmania for any clients, including parents who are reunifying with their children, who are in housing stress, at risk of homelessness, or experiencing homelessness.

### Front door services

Front door services offer advice, support and referral services. These include supporting people to apply for public or social housing, finding crisis accommodation, supporting clients to seek assistance with significant events such as domestic violence, relationship breakdown, mental illness or addiction, and support and advice to apply for private rentals or stay in their current home, including addressing bond and rent arrears through the Private Rental Assistance scheme. Front door services can also offer material assistance for income or housing challenges through its own brokerage services or by referring to other services such as emergency relief funds or food relief services.

Front door services in the south of Tasmania are led by Colony 47 with a consortium of providers: Anglicare Tasmania, City Mission, Salvation Army and Catholic Care. In the north they are led by Anglicare Tasmania with a consortium of providers: Catholic Care and Wyndarra Centre. These services have youth and domestic violence specialists within their teams, but there are no staff roles tailored specifically to work with families involved with Child Safety Services. Many families in these cohorts access and are supported by Housing Connect services (see Chapter 6).

### Case management and tenancy support

Housing Connect clients, including families involved with Child Safety Services, can be referred for ongoing case management and tenancy support to assist them to maintain their public, social or private sector tenancies. They may also be referred to a range of mainstream services for other forms of support (such as family support or mental health services).

Tenancy support is focused on preventing future housing crises for clients by preventing eviction and stabilising tenancies. Housing support workers work with clients to develop their tenancy skills. This service can also support tenants to negotiate positive housing outcomes with landlords around arrears, maintenance or accommodation standards.

### Crisis accommodation

Crisis accommodation is emergency short term accommodation provided for Tasmanians who are in housing crisis (either homeless or at risk of homelessness). Clients can access services directly or be referred by an agency. They usually offer short term support to address a person's immediate needs and will work with Housing Connect to help people find longer term accommodation.

Maximum stays were designed to be six weeks, but service providers regularly report that in reality stays vary due to a shortage of accommodation to transition clients into:

Well, on paper it's six weeks. But in reality it could be 6, 9, 12 months...  
Probably on average a year.  
At the moment we're really log jammed, because there's not really a lot of exit points for the client. (Focus group: housing support workers)

Demand outstrips supply for all forms of this accommodation. There is a limited supply of crisis accommodation that works with men and women who have / do not have care of their children. Options include:

- shelters – Hobart Women's Shelter, Jireh House and McCombe House in the South, Launceston Women's Shelter in the North and Warrawee in the North West (all women only);
- the Expanded Accommodation Program, or Community Tenancies, provided by Anglicare state-wide, Catholic Care in the South and North, Colony 47 in the South, and Oakleigh House in the North West (all men or women); and
- City Mission's DIY Dads (a residential support service for single fathers and their children).

Crisis accommodation can be used as a base for families to have access visits, but CSS will usually require a more stable accommodation base for family reunification to be progressed.

### Transitional housing

#### *Supported residential accommodation*

Small Steps and DIY Dads are the only supported residential accommodation options available for parents reunifying with their children. Given that these services are at capacity and concentrated in the south of the state, there is a clear need to consider an expansion of such services.

#### *Rapid Rehousing*

Through the Safe at Home strategy (DPAC 2015), the Tasmanian Government has invested in both property and services to help parents affected by family violence move into safe and affordable rental homes. Tenants can be offered short to medium term tenancies (between three and 12 months) across the state. Each landlord is offered \$10,000 towards the cost of ensuring accommodation does not exceed 30% of a tenant's income. The property may have adjustments made to improve safety and security for the tenant (for example, exterior lighting or peepholes). A housing support worker will work with tenants to plan their exit,

preferably into a longer term tenancy. However, there have been challenges with this due to a lack of longer term affordable housing stock in the public, social and private rental sectors (See Chapter 6).

Rapid Rehousing is available for families who are involved with Child Safety Services and can be utilised as a stable base for family reunification to occur.

#### *Private Rental Incentives*

The Tasmanian Government is currently trialling a project to expand the stock of affordable transitional accommodation within the private rental sector. Private Rental Incentives offer landlords \$10,000 in the North and North West and \$13,000 in the South as an incentive to lease their property to low-income households for up to 12 months. Up to 110 properties may be funded across the state by June 2019. Housing Connect will offer tenancy support services during the rental period to support residents to plan their exit or a continued tenancy after 12 months. It is too early to determine whether these properties will be assessed by CSS as suitable for family reunification to occur or whether families involved with Child Safety Services will be able to access such accommodation.

#### *Long term housing*

Tasmanian public and social housing is provided by Housing Tasmania and a number of social housing providers including Centrecare Evolve, Community Housing Limited, Housing Choices Tasmania and Mission Australia Housings. This accommodation is provided for low-income Tasmanians across the state. Rent levels are set relative to tenants' income at no more than 30% at any point in time. This makes such accommodation an attractive and manageable potential option for many parents involved with Child Safety Services, especially given their fluctuation in income as care arrangements change (see Chapter 5).

As previously stated, there are groups who can be flagged as priority for housing in the Social and Affordable Housing Register. But families involved with Child Safety Services, and specifically families who are reunifying with their children, are not amongst those priority groups as a distinct cohort.

If applicants for public housing have a previous debt to Housing Tasmania, 80% of that debt must be paid off before they are eligible for accommodation. This criterion can present a major barrier for some parents wanting to access affordable public housing (see Chapter 6).

## 2.5 Conclusion: an absence of adequate provision for parenting costs

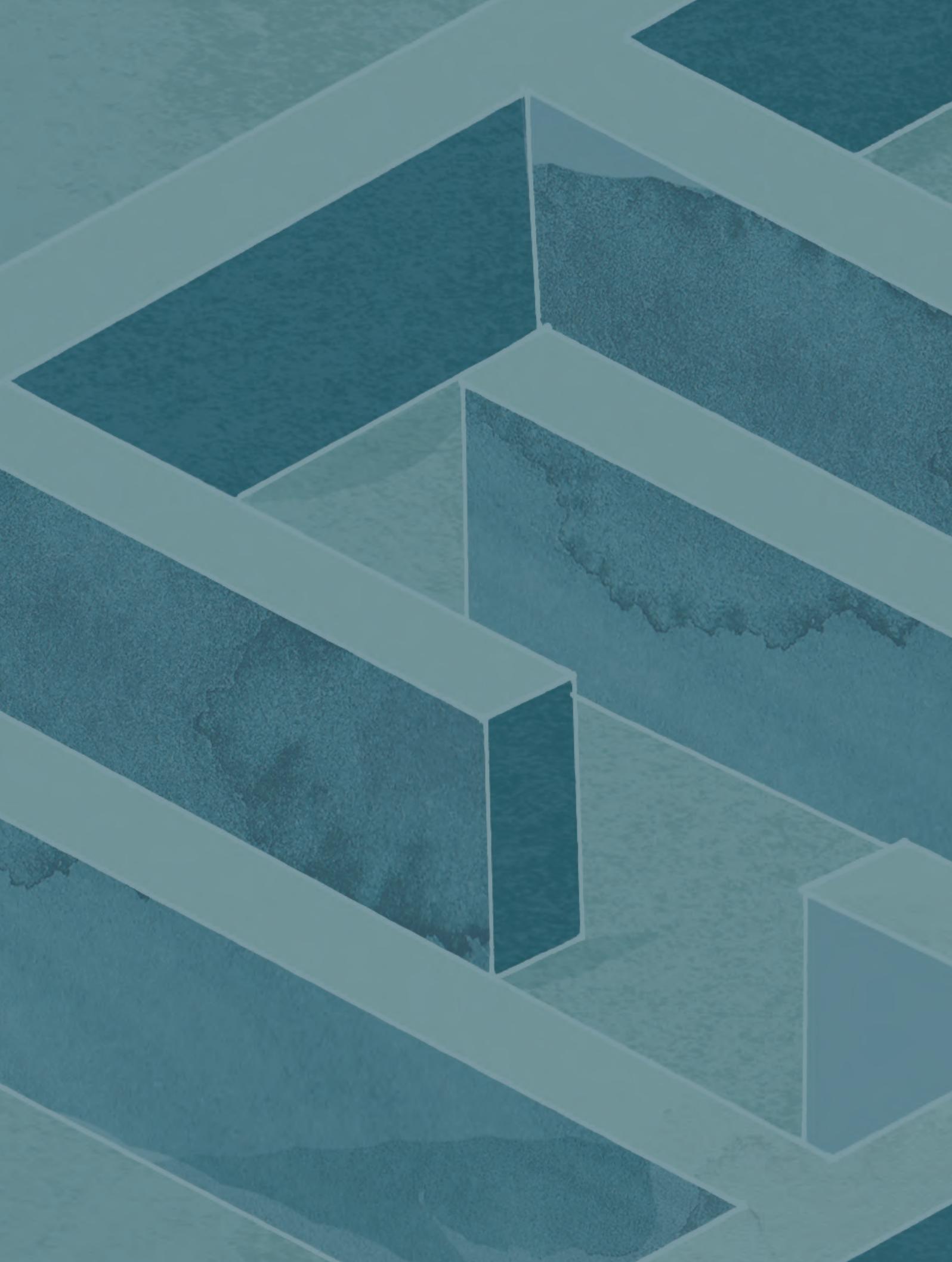
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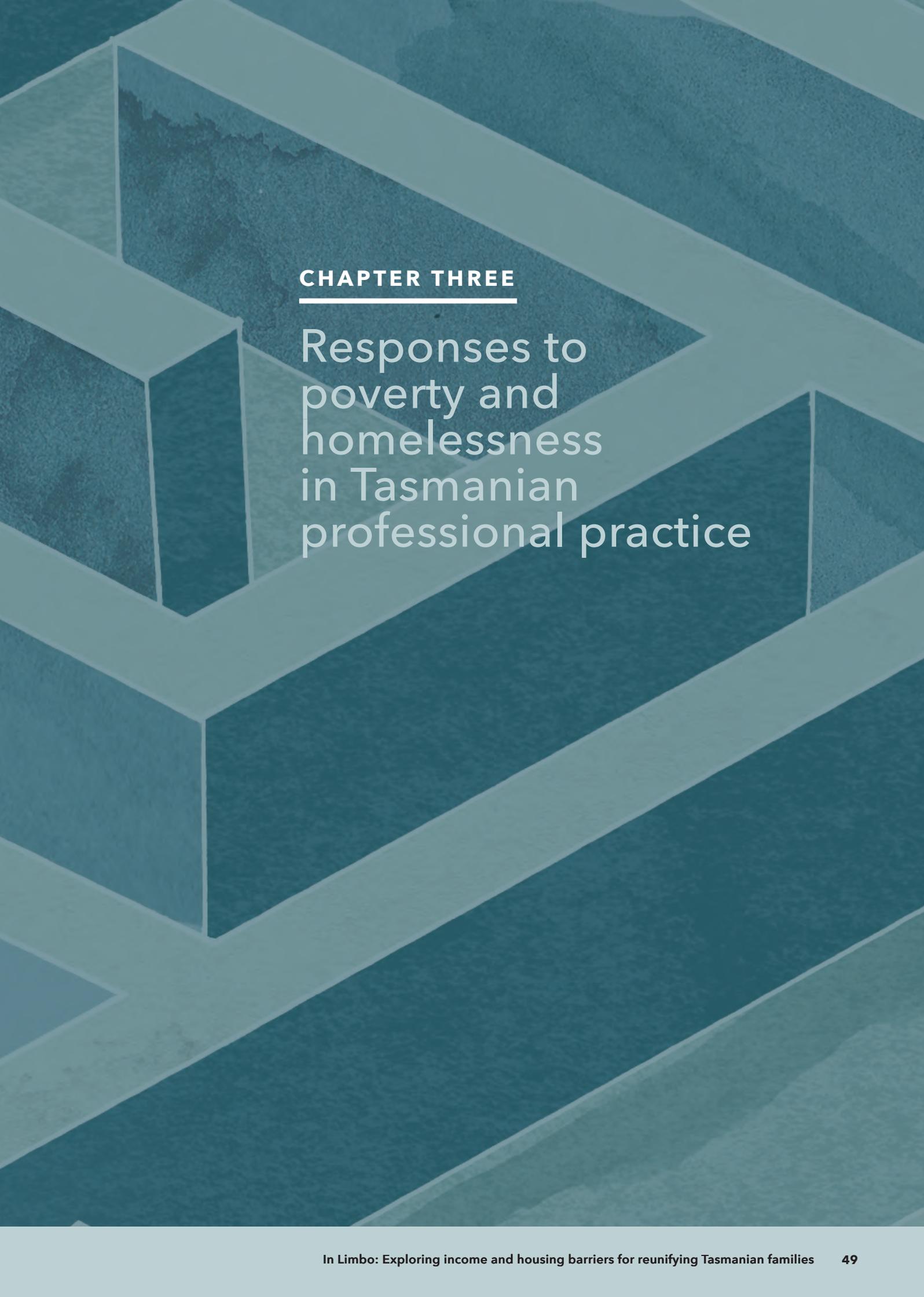
The recognition of and provision for parents' ongoing parenting costs when children are removed by Child Safety Services is absent from current federal and state policy.

Parents reunifying with their children are pulled between two policy objectives: Child Safety Services requirements for family reunification to occur in an environment appropriate for children – a stable home, connected to their familiar community, with material basics which enable children to thrive; and the federal Welfare to Work objectives to provide a minimum employment- focused income for individuals based on their current, rather than their potential, circumstances. This means that the costs of parenting children in out-of-home care are not recognised by either system.

How does this impact on providing for children and addressing parenting concerns in a way that meets Child Safety Services' strategic ambition for the first day of child removal being the first day of reunification?

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**CHAPTER THREE**

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Responses to  
poverty and  
homelessness  
in Tasmanian  
professional practice

## *Poverty is the wallpaper of practice: too big to tackle and too familiar to notice.*

(MORRIS ET AL. 2018)

The *Strong Families - Safe Kids* report on the redesign of Tasmania's Child Safety Services (DHHS 2016) and Australian research such as Bromfield et al.'s 2010 issues paper for the National Child Protection Clearinghouse have highlighted the need for professionals to understand the interactions between child abuse and neglect and complex structural problems such as poverty and homelessness. They have also highlighted the need to understand how these relationships interact with personal complex challenges, such as mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence and trauma, in order to build the capacity of professionals within the Government and the community sectors to effectively address them.

It is salutary to include here the now oft quoted UNICEF maxim, "The challenge of ending child abuse is the challenge of breaking the link between adult problems and children's pain." As is so exquisitely highlighted in the Australian research based practice evidence from Newpin, the core issues of drugs and alcohol, family violence, homelessness and poverty are the key drivers of problems that leave children vulnerable and on the cusp, if not in the centre, of child protection service activity. Quite simply, engaging with this challenge requires connecting adult and child services by capitalising on the multidisciplinary skills across agencies and in the community for the sake of the children. (DHHS 2016, p. 28)

We have little understanding of how Tasmanian family and housing support and Child Safety professionals address poverty and homelessness within the context of complex problems such as poor mental health, substance use and family violence - the acknowledged "toxic trio" of child safety risks (Morris et al. 2018). This is a significant challenge if we want to build an informed collective response to addressing material basics that does not treat poverty as neglect as part of supporting families to overcome complex disadvantage and create safe spaces for children.

This chapter helps us to understand the relationship between poverty, homelessness (i.e. the provision of material basics), parenting and child maltreatment, and what we understand about legislative and professional practice responses to those links. How do professionals handle poverty and homelessness to expedite family reunification? How do professionals working with parents understand, assess, and process responses to parents' material challenges? Do they expect to address poverty and homelessness as part of their practice response?

Do they look to addressing these challenges through goals related to parents' individual capacities, or look at structural responses? By understanding these approaches to professional practice, we can start to examine whether there is a need to shift culture and practice, in addition to offering practical programs and services to assist with providing a stable base for parenting and family reunification.

## Summary

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Poverty is absent from Tasmania's current legislation on what constitutes child maltreatment. However we need to understand this relationship in order to guide professional practice and design effective interventions that address poverty and homelessness in the context of child maltreatment. Australia does not have data that allows us to understand the nature of the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect. But from international research we do understand that there is a link. Poverty can have both a direct effect on child maltreatment through material deprivation, meaning parents face challenges buying support and development opportunities for themselves and their children, and indirect effects through parental stress (Bywaters et al. 2016). Poverty-related stress is well understood and is likely to be exacerbated by parents' ineligibility for parenting-related payments once children are removed from their care.

This research revealed a range of professional responses to poverty for families reunifying, similar to those identified in Morris et al.'s (2018) study of UK social workers, which found poverty had become the normalised backdrop of practice. Reported practice responses amongst Tasmanian family support, housing support and CSS workers included a detachment from poverty – "not my business to solve"; a disconnect between their understanding of poverty and their practice in addressing it, which led to a deficit-focused approach to addressing parenting capacity – "let's focus on what's wrong with you"; or poverty becoming the wallpaper of practice, too big to tackle – "we feel unable to solve parents' challenges."

Support workers and families reported that these practice responses led to a lack of clarity, inconsistency and a perceived lack of realism around the goals relating to stable housing and adequate provision for their children. These goals might shift with different CSS workers and as the reunification process developed. Additionally, there was little clarity on how families were to achieve these goals within current policy and program settings.

Parents experiencing trauma and heightened poverty due to their children being removed are likely to be so consumed by their own material and emotional stability and safety they cannot immediately address any wider safety concerns Child Safety may have (Maslow 1943, 1954; Bromfield et al. 2010). To tackle the direct and indirect impacts of poverty on parenting, we need to shift, or at least broaden, the focus of government agency and NGO practice culture from being mainly about “what’s wrong with you?” (i.e. how we can address individual deficits), to “what’s inhibiting you from achieving your goals?” (i.e. directly address the structural and material barriers to reunification). We need a legislative or policy framework and a poverty-informed practice culture that acknowledges that parents need a stable home and resources. We need to shift poverty and homelessness from being the wallpaper of practice and culture to being the forefront of it. Internationally, there are examples we can examine that attempt to address this as a legislative level (certain US states) and at a practice level (Northern Ireland).

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### **3.1 Some definitions: child maltreatment, neglect and abuse, poverty and material deprivation, housing challenges**

#### **CHILD MALTREATMENT**

‘Child maltreatment’ is widely recognised as: ‘All forms of physical and/or emotional or sexual abuse, deprivation and neglect of children or commercial or other exploitation resulting in harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power’ (Sethi et al. 2014, p. 1, cited in Bywaters et al. 2016, p. 12).

There are four main forms of maltreatment: physical, sexual and emotional/psychological abuse and neglect (Gilbert et al 2009, cited in Bywaters et al. 2016, p. 12). Witnessing violence such as intimate partner violence is also included in some definitions and practice (Bywaters et al 2016, p. 12), including within Tasmanian legislation.

However, there is no internationally recognised set of definitions relating to child abuse and neglect (Forrester & Harwin 2000, Munro et al. 2011a, OECD 2011, cited in Bywaters et al. 2016, p. 12). This means that any comparisons of child maltreatment across jurisdictions is problematic. It also makes any attempt to look at the relationship between different forms of child maltreatment and socio-economic circumstances challenging (Bywaters et al. 2016).

## POVERTY

There are many different measures of poverty (for comprehensive reviews of these, see ACOSS 2016; Bywaters et al. 2016 & Morrison et al. 2018). This project does not measure poverty or advocate for a particular measure to be used. However, as a principle, Henderson's poverty measure that takes into account income after housing costs (MIESR 2017) is a useful point of reference for considering the relative challenges families may face in meeting living, parenting and reunification costs.

The OECD and ACOSS measure people in poverty if their household has less than half of the median household income. In 2014, after housing costs were deducted, for an Australian single parent household with two children, "poverty" was having a weekly disposable income of less than \$548.74; for an Australian couple with two children, it was \$720.22 per week (ACOSS 2016).

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation describes poverty as 'when your resources are not enough to meet your needs or participate in society' (JRF 2018). The significance of poverty for this project is in how we understand its causes, its emotional and practical impacts on families, and various responses to it.

The causes and impacts of poverty are complex. Poverty needs to be understood in the specific context in which an individual or family is living and the structural causes that have most impacted on their circumstances. These circumstances might include:

- what circumstances they were born into (intergenerational poverty, unemployment, abuse);
- how economic and market dynamics have impacted on them (low wages, high costs of living and of housing, unemployment, low local economic productivity);
- how government policies have impacted on them (the welfare benefits system, affordable housing);
- what has happened to them in their life (physical and mental illness, abuse, domestic violence, family breakdown);
- how they have been treated in society (discrimination, stigmatisation, social isolation); and
- how they have responded to their challenges (stress, anxiety, trauma, social withdrawal or connection).

Understanding the context of an individual's or a family's poverty (its structural causes), along with how they are responding to this now (individual capacities), and the impacts (including the nature of a family's income struggles, such as income level being too low to meet household need, high levels of indebtedness, struggles with financial management or a need for crisis expenditure) may help professionals to understand how best to address the specific poverty and disadvantage a family may be faced with (Morrison et al. 2018).

### **MATERIAL DEPRIVATION**

Material deprivation captures the consequences of poverty on individuals and families over time (Morrison et al. 2018; Saunders et al. 2014). The OECD describes material deprivation as 'the inability for individuals or households to afford those consumption goods and activities that are typical in a society at a given point in time, irrespective of people's preferences with respect to these items' (OECD 2007). It is measured by whether people are able to afford certain essential items and activities.

Australia does not have an official measure of material deprivation. But in other countries, such as the UK, items have been identified that households should not 'go without'. Material deprivation is then measured by the number of items a household cannot access (Saunders et al. 2014). This is a useful concept for the purpose of *In Limbo*, despite there being no Australian measure.

### **HOUSING CHALLENGES**

There are many ways in which people may experience housing challenges. For this project, we are addressing housing challenges that include homelessness and housing stress for families involved with Child Safety Services.

The ABS uses a broad definition of homelessness in compiling Australian statistics:

- A person is homeless if they do not have suitable accommodation alternatives and their current living arrangement:**
- is in a dwelling that is inadequate;
  - has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
  - does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

(ABS 2012)

People must lack one or more elements to be defined as homeless, but having the financial, psychological, personal and physical means to access options is key (ABS 2012).

Examples of what homelessness might look like under this definition include:

- Inadequate housing: if the structure is substandard or unsafe and whether there are adequate facilities. This might include improvised dwellings (including tents), sleeping in cars, dwellings that are structurally unsound or damaged, or those without kitchen or bathroom facilities.
- Unstable housing: if the tenant has the legal right to occupy the accommodation with security and stability. This might include a family that is regularly moving due to short tenancies, or being in short term (supported or unsupported crisis or transitional accommodation), including crisis shelters and caravans.
- Control of and access to space for social relations: if a person has access to and control of space for social relations and living sufficient to maintain privacy. This might include overcrowding, inadequate bedroom space, doubling up with people who are not part of the family, or couch surfing.

Additional housing challenges include housing affordability. Housing stress is when a low income household is paying more than 30 per cent of their income on rent or mortgage; extreme housing stress refers to those same households paying more than 45 per cent of their income on rent or mortgage. This impacts on a household's ability to provide material needs and participate in society.

Housing challenges are important to understand for families involved with Child Safety Services, as they are a critical sign of material deprivation, and often an indication of broader disadvantage and social exclusion (ABS 2012). In order for parents to provide a safe and stable environment for their children, housing challenges need to be tackled.

## **3.2 The relationship between poverty, housing inadequacy, parenting and child maltreatment**

### **DOES POVERTY LEAD TO CHILD MALTREATMENT?**

We do not have access to appropriate Australian data to enable us to understand the relationship between poverty, housing challenges and child maltreatment (see Chapter 4 for a further exploration). Thus any understanding we have about this relationship is through international data and research, mainly from the UK and USA.

Recent US and UK studies have shown a relationship between reports of child harm and low income, neighbourhood economic status, employment, food security and parental depression (Bywaters et al. 2016; Fernandez et al. 2016; Dale 2014). But correlation is not causation. Bywaters et al.'s (2016) extensive analysis of the

relationship between poverty and child maltreatment comments: 'Poverty is neither a necessary nor sufficient factor in the occurrence of child abuse and neglect. Many children who are not from families in poverty will experience child maltreatment in some form and most children in families who are living in poverty will not experience child maltreatment. It is caused by many interlocking factors (Bywaters et al., 2016, p. 4).

UK and US evidence also indicates that there is a social gradient in child abuse and neglect, as there is for education and for health outcomes – i.e. increases in family socio-economic disadvantage increase a child's chance of abuse and neglect (Radford et al. 2014, Bywaters et al. 2014, McDaniel & Slack 2005, Beimers & Coulton 2011, Pelton 2015, cited in Bywaters et al. 2016). But we are unable to confirm whether that gradient exists in Australia with existing data.

Likewise, Australian data does not enable us to confirm whether there is a relationship between poverty and different forms of child maltreatment (neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse and exposure to family violence). International evidence on this issue is cautious and inconsistent, given different definitions of what these forms of child maltreatment are. US evidence has suggested that neglect is more strongly related to poverty than other forms of abuse (Sedlack et al. 2010, cited in Bywaters et al. 2016); Bywaters et al. conclude that there is not enough evidence in the UK to make that same conclusion.

There are many international models looking at the relationship between socio-economic circumstances and child maltreatment (see Bywaters et al. 2016 for a detailed exploration). These models describe poverty as having a **direct effect** on neglect and abuse, through material hardship leading to challenges in buying support and providing basic needs, and an **indirect effect** through material deprivation leading to parental stress, shame and stigma, and disadvantaged neighbourhood conditions. These effects can often be compounded by trauma parents bring to the family through their own childhood experiences of disadvantage (see Bywaters et al. 2016 and Hinton 2018 for a more detailed exploration of how trauma may manifest in parenting).

As Bywaters et al. explain, the family stress model is central to many explanations and is worth summarising for the purpose of *In Limbo*, as it provides an insight into how poverty feels for vulnerable families. It also explains how those feelings can influence us in our interactions with others – including our children – with services such as family and housing support, and with agencies such as Child Safety, Centrelink and Housing Tasmania.

Hooper et al.'s 2007 study of UK low-income families living in both disadvantaged and more affluent areas, McDaniel and Slack's 2005 US study of families in poverty and Flanagan's 2009 description of low-income Tasmanians' financial struggles all illustrate the challenges of disentangling the direct effects of poverty and

material deprivation from the indirect effects on parental stress (Bywaters et al. 2016). This presents a challenge for professionals seeking to design a response to support parents.

Such work describes the constant need for parents to juggle and prioritise family household costs, go deeper into debt, go without items like food, deodorant or children's toys, ration resources, pawn household goods, and manage stressful relationships with welfare agencies and emergency relief services. Flanagan and McDaniel and Slack describe the stresses and catastrophic impacts of sudden events such as household equipment breaking down, non-arrival or sanctioning of welfare benefits, car registrations and/or huge bills. Such experiences leave many parents feeling trapped, guilty, with low self-image and low confidence in their parenting (Hooper et al. 2007, cited in Bywaters et al. 2016).

### **HOW DO COMPLICATING FACTORS INTERACT WITH POVERTY AND CHILD MALTREATMENT?**

It is no surprise that models suggest direct/indirect impacts of poverty and material deprivation may interact with other factors that reduce parenting capacity to increase the chance of child maltreatment and service intervention. These complicating factors often create a complex and circular relationship (Bywaters et al. 2016) and may include the following factors.

#### **Mental illness and depression**

Poor mental health can compound poverty and vice versa: the stress of poverty may increase poor mental health; poor mental health may inhibit a person's capacity to work and increase poverty. Evidence tells us that depression can interfere with parenting, potentially leading to child neglect, and depressed mothers are more likely to struggle with domestic violence and substance misuse (Vericker et al. 2010, cited in Dale 2014). But it does not follow that all depressed mothers neglect their children.

#### **Neighbourhood or social support factors**

International evidence - again, predominantly from the US - has found consistent associations between the rates of child maltreatment and a neighbourhood's economic indicators, such as income levels, median property value, poverty rates (Coulton et al. 2007, Deccio et al. 1994, Ernst 2000, Zuravin & Taylor 1987, Dym Bartlett et al. 2014, cited in Bywaters et al. 2016, p. 27), housing stress and drug and alcohol availability (Freisthler et al. 2006, Maguire-Jack & Font 2014, cited in Bywaters et al. 2016, p. 27).

Potential neighbourhood factors, such as availability of social supports, a risk-laden physical or social environment and lack of local social and physical resources such as play spaces or community supports, combined with lack of access or ability to

buy care, respite or better environmental conditions may be additional factors in increasing the likelihood of child maltreatment. However, evidence suggests the links are possibly small and, significantly, Bywaters et al. highlight a key shortfall in our current knowledge – it is not yet explained *how* neighbourhood influences such behaviours.

### **Domestic violence or substance abuse**

Hooper et al. in 2007 explored some of the links between poverty, child maltreatment and complicating factors including domestic violence and substance use (Bywaters et al. 2016). They describe how these complicating factors can compound social isolation and a lack of recognition and respect. This can make problematic child behaviour difficult for parents to bear and manage. A lack of resources exacerbated by substance use may also affect the risks parents take with children's supervision.

The overall message here is that the impacts of poverty on child maltreatment may be difficult to pinpoint or untangle from those caused by more prominently recognised factors, such as the "toxic trio" (see above). But, as Bywaters et al. (2014) stress, the links are nevertheless important and should be treated as such by professionals working with families.

### **DO HOUSING CHALLENGES LEAD TO CHILD MALTREATMENT?**

There are a number of hypotheses that, again, link housing challenges to child maltreatment, but none that *directly* correlate housing challenges with abuse and neglect.

Font and Warren (2013) note that inadequately housed families constitute a substantial proportion of child protection cases within the US. They explore how both homelessness and housing stress can amplify parental stress and argue that this can exacerbate poor parenting behaviours and inhibit parents' ability to appropriately parent their child. Due to the availability of US data, Font and Warren were also able to analyse the relationship between inadequate housing and case length. They found that there were lower odds of case closure for inadequately housed families.

### 3.3 How legislation responds to material challenges in child safety

The strong association between poverty and the risk of children being exposed to child maltreatment, and between the risk of poverty prolonging the process of family reunification, needs to be framed as a public policy matter. As Bywaters et al. (2016, p. 48) describe, an informed legislative and policy framework needs to treat these associations as ‘a matter of unavoidable social inequity’, rather than a source of shame and pressure on individuals and families.

Jurisdictions vary in their approach to addressing the underlying issue of poverty in cases of child maltreatment; poverty or material deprivation can be explicitly ruled in or out as being assessed as neglect, or, in many cases, not mentioned at all. For example, Tasmania does not currently include or exclude poverty as a basis for neglect or maltreatment in child safety legislation. Western Australia’s legislation includes as grounds for intervention ‘parents insufficient means to support child or are indigent’ (Bromfield & Higgins 2005).

Internationally, about half of US states have acknowledged that raising a child in poverty does not equate to child maltreatment by including a poverty exemption in their statutory definition of neglect (Dale 2014; Fernandez et al. 2017). These exemptions are on a spectrum, from complete exemption for substantiating neglect if poverty is a factor, to exemptions of neglect on the basis of environmental factors that are outside parents’ control. Other states have legislation that prohibits the termination of parental rights based on poverty alone (Dale 2014).

This has led to a number of legislative comments on the inappropriateness of terminating parental rights on the basis of poverty and of reunification requirements that are seen as discriminating against parents in poverty “in the best interests of the child”, and observations regarding inadequate support and resources provided for parents by child welfare agencies to address concerns about material provision, compared to the resources pumped into keeping a child in care. It has also led to court observations about inappropriate comparisons between impoverished parents and more affluent foster carers and, in some cases, court interventions to reverse the termination of parental rights. See Dale 2014 for a detailed commentary on these cases.

### 3.4 How professionals respond to material challenges: emerging international understanding and the Tasmanian practice culture

There is a growing interest in social work practice, particularly in the UK and Belgium, in how to effectively work with families in poverty (Bradt et al. 2015; Gupta et al. 2018; Gupta 2017; Morris et al. 2018; Font & Warren 2013).

As such work highlights, poverty not only impacts on parents' self-image and their image of themselves as parents, but also on their potential relationship with support services. This is a key platform for professionals to inform their assessment of strengths, challenges and risks, decisions around options for interventions and the priorities given to these, and key to understanding how to effectively engage parents:

Poverty is undoubtedly about material disadvantage, but it must also be understood in terms of relational and symbolic injustices in a deeply unequal world. Humiliation and shame, fear and distrust, instability and insecurity, isolation and feelings of powerlessness feature heavily in the social and emotional landscapes of families... (Psychologists Against Austerity, 2014) ... Social workers cannot ignore the complex relationship between poverty and parenting. (Gupta et al. 2018)

Understanding how professionals tend to respond to working with poverty is crucial to developing an informed approach to operationalising policy, programs and practice responses aimed at working with parents who are expected to prove their parenting capacity on a significantly reduced income.

Bywaters et al. (2014) point out Wilkinson and Pickett's 2009 work proposing a growing distance between the lives of those needing services and those providing them in unequal societies. They suggest that such distances produce space for feelings of disgust and shame to take on added importance (Morris et al. 2018). Morris et al.'s work indicates a need for an expanded understanding of this dilemma, as consistent exposure to deprivation appears to result in some professionals recoiling from families' socio-economic circumstances.

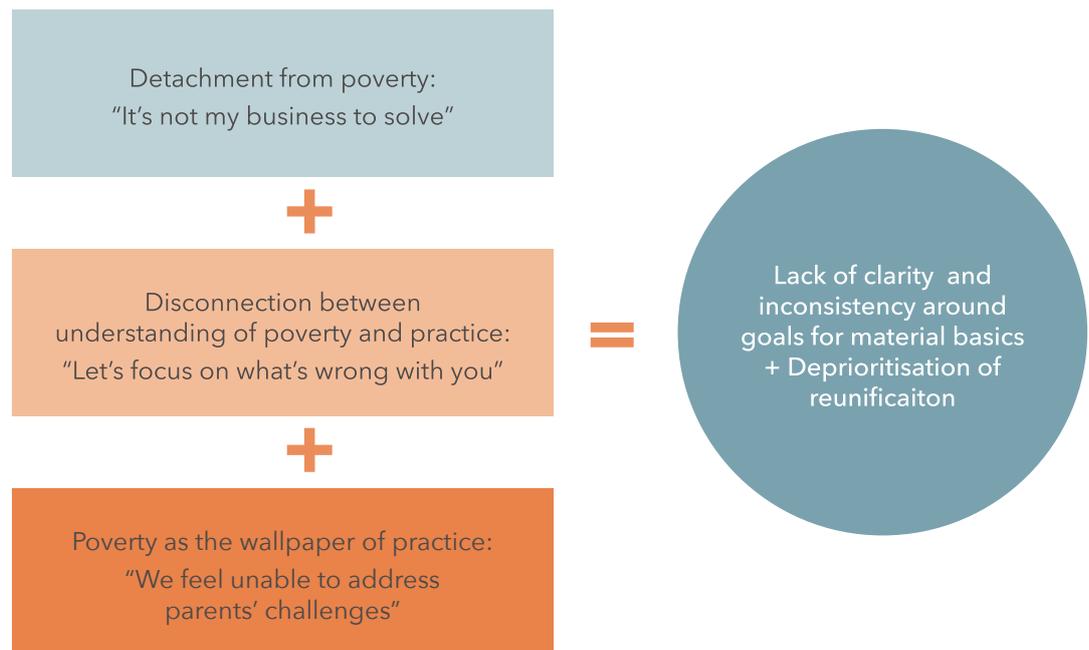
Morris et al.'s powerfully evocative work across children and family services in UK local authorities paints a bleak picture of the relationship between service demand, poverty and place, where the socio-economic geographies of poverty and deprivation were so familiar that many social workers they met had come to construct poverty and deprivation as a 'normative backdrop - something unremarkable and unremarked upon' (Morris et al. 2018). It had become overlooked by many social workers in assessing families' challenges and addressing their needs, particularly when presented with the immediacy of addressing the risks within the "toxic trio" of mental health, substance use and domestic violence (Brandon et al. 2012, Cleaver 1999, cited in Morris et al. 2018).

There are several ways this normalisation of poverty can present in practice, including those described here. *In Limbo* drew on these practice responses when analysing how Tasmanian professionals currently address material basics for families involved with Child Safety Services.

Part of the redesign of CSS is focusing on the cultural and practice change needed to ensure a more consistent and strengths-based approach to assessing safety concerns and reunification goals. Strong Families – Safe Kids has introduced the Signs of Safety practice model within CSS to attempt to shift thinking and practice from deficit-based (“what’s wrong with you that we need to fix?”) towards a strengths-based approach. It offers CSS workers tools to explore and describe a family’s position in relation to their circumstances. The model aims for a co-designed perspective, between CSS, families and families’ safety network. CSS is still in the process of rolling out training for CSS workers and supporting a shift in practice, with the guidance of Clinical Practice and Consultant Educators. These CPCEs work alongside CSS case workers in assessments and planning, including reunification planning. This change in practice will not have filtered into every corner of CSS currently, so comments about CSS practice in this section need to be read with this vision for a cultural change in mind.

In the course of interviews with professionals across CSS and NGO family and housing support work, there were three ways in which poverty was normalised as a backdrop to their practice. They reflected the practice described by Morris et al. (2018) in their studies of UK social workers.

**FIGURE 5:** How poverty is reported to be handled within practice for Tasmanian CSS, Family Support and Housing Workers and its impacts on the reunification process



**A DISCONNECT BETWEEN AN ABSTRACT UNDERSTANDING OF POVERTY AND PRACTICE IN ADDRESSING IT: “LET’S FOCUS ON WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU”.**

Morris et al. describe how the time pressures of caseloads and risk-focused cultures can lead to the social and economic challenges faced by families being deprioritised. Instead focus can shift to deficits in individual and parenting capacity, with responsibility for economic and social hardships being placed on individuals and families.

Tasmanian families and service providers acknowledged that there were some CSS case workers with whom strong and constructive reunification work could be undertaken, but that this was not consistently so.

Some of the CSS case workers are fantastic...It just depends on who and the relationship you have with them. But, yeah, communication’s pretty key...

(Housing support workers focus group)

However, when there was not a good relationship between the CSS worker and parents, reunification work was described as highlighting individual deficits within parents and getting them to address these without reference to what was *structurally* preventing reunification from progressing, such as income to parent or a stable base to parent from.

I don’t know if you’ve ever read an Affidavit or anything like that... An Affidavit points out absolutely everything you’ve done wrong and nothing you do right.

(Naomi)

Natalie, a parent who was living in a one-bedroom unit, chasing appropriate accommodation for her and her three children, described her experiences addressing reunification goals as being very focused on her skills:

I’ve done a lot of courses... Anything that helped get [my children] back, I was up for. So I’ve done the parenting courses, Bring Up Great Kids, all sort of stuff. Kicked all the goals that needed to be kicked and still doing them... I just want my family back. (Natalie)

**DETACHMENT FROM POVERTY AND ITS IMPACTS: “IT’S NOT MY BUSINESS TO SOLVE”**

Morris et al. (2018) also describe how professionals may construct a conscious detachment from poverty and distancing from families, framed as “equitable practice”. Within this framing, a child-focused and risk-oriented approach was interpreted as meaning it was not their duty to consider families’ circumstances. It could be presented as a prism of anti-oppressive practice, highlighting that not all families in poverty maltreat their children, so poverty in itself is not part of the

challenge. Or it could be presented as being concerned that if poverty is treated as having a causal link with child maltreatment, this takes away parental responsibility for their actions.

Tasmanian service providers across family and housing support services reported that such practice had become the norm for Child Safety Services. It was perceived that, as CSS views their primary “client” as being the child, they may set safety goals for parents to meet in order to retain or regain their children, but they were not connecting with how parents were to achieve these goals. This led to a frustration amongst both parents and service providers that CSS was asking parents to provide an environment that was impossible to achieve in Tasmania’s competitive housing market and that parents were not given enough credit for their efforts to provide a stable space for their children – however restricted it was:

It’s a really tricky one, because the [CSS] Department, they obviously have the children’s best interests at heart, but what we’re finding is that the requirements on families, what needs to be in place before A, B, C and D can happen, are often outside of [parents’] ability. For example, a mother might want the child back, and yes they can, but they have to have a two-bedroom unit. And living circumstances, as in finances, a whole bunch of things, make that really tricky to do... So it does go on and well, if you lose your house, you won’t be able to have your children back, because there’s nowhere for you to have them. And it actually happens more frequently that we might understand it to.

(Family support program manager)

Clarity on who was responsible for supporting families to find stable housing was a clear theme in conversations with families and NGO support workers. The goals were set and assessed by CSS workers, but there seemed to be a lack of clarity about who was driving the push to get traction on this issue. One housing worker described their experiences of working with CSS to get clarification of goals around housing and how these goals were to be achieved:

There has been requirements not just that you need to have stable housing, but not near this person and not near that person... Often, you speak to these [CSS] case workers and they say that, yes, your client needs to do this and this and this, but there doesn’t seem to be any structure around it, or any motivation to support them with that or time frames, or anything.

(Housing support worker)

I think also there’s some false expectations around what [family support service] can do. I’m working with two families, one CSO is quite realistic about the expectations of the program; the other one has just gone, oh there’s a [family support service] referral, you can do absolutely everything, off you go.

(Family support worker)

Service providers reported a perception that reunification was not a priority part of the Child Safety Service process; the focus of Strong Families – Safe Kids was addressing the ‘front end’ of Child Safety responses, preventing children coming into OOHC. Because CSS case workers are perceived to be overloaded, they were described as not having the time it takes to engage with children, carers and families in order to expedite reunification. Family support workers described how this led to many – but not all – CSS workers becoming disconnected from the impacts delaying reunification had on parents, as well as on children. In particular there was a concern around stressing that it was in the best interest of the child to err on the side of caution over stability of housing.

It’s also about whether the CSO has time. I mean we’ve been asking for referrals. There’s quite a bit of paperwork that’s involved internally for CS, they’ve gotta do a care plan, and a TRF, and Signs of Safety, and I think that would probably stop a CSO from choosing to go down that path, to recommend a family. It’s many hours’ worth of work...perhaps there might need to be a reunification team that predominantly works in reunification.

(Family support manager)

#### **POVERTY AS THE WALLPAPER OF PRACTICE:**

##### **“WE FEEL UNABLE TO ADDRESS PARENTS’ CHALLENGES”**

Morris et al. describe how those professionals who seek to deliver anti-poverty practice may feel overwhelmed or simply unable to change social and material circumstances within current limited resources and a risk-oriented framework that does not include addressing social conditions. It was neatly summed up by one worker: ‘Poverty is the wallpaper of practice: too big to tackle and too familiar to notice’ (Morris et al. 2018).

The lack of effective options to address parents’ need for income that meets their parenting and reunification requirements and their need to provide stable and adequate accommodation seems to be leading to a feeling of impotency amongst Tasmanian support workers. They have therapeutic and practical options to support parents in developing their parenting skills, but very few options to support parents to adequately “provide” for their children. This sentiment was strongly voiced across income, housing and family support workers within the Tasmanian NGO and Government sectors (see Chapter 6).

### IMPACTS ON PRACTICE AROUND MATERIAL BASICS: LACK OF CLARITY AND REALISM IN GOALS AROUND STABLE AND APPROPRIATE ACCOMMODATION / ADEQUATE PROVISION

The impacts of these three approaches to handling poverty in Tasmanian practice appear to be threefold:

- a lack of clarity around reunification goals relating to income and housing;
- inconsistent practice across CSS workers in relation to housing goals; and
- a “passing of the buck” on who should be leading parents’ search for stable accommodation.

Amongst parents and service providers, the expectation that judgements were not just worker-dependent, but inconsistent, had become normalised; it was the expected approach from CSS workers. When asked whether CSS was clear on what parents needed to achieve around stable housing and adequate provision for reunification to progress, parents and family and housing support workers consistently said this was worker-dependent.

No one interviewed for *In Limbo* could clearly express CSS’s vision of “stable accommodation and adequate provision”. This is not necessarily an issue in itself, as these goals are more meaningfully defined on a case-by-case basis. But the lack of consistency and clarity around how goals were developed, and how they were reviewed in each case was problematic.

Family reunification is a long and difficult process and often not a linear one, as the data in Chapter 4 suggests. So there needs to be an expectation that there will be changes in what is expected of parents as the process evolves. But the lack of consistency across how CSS case workers develop goals and review progress creates frustrations and tensions within the reunification process. Parents and service providers talked about how goalposts might vary between CSS workers and might shift during the family reunification process. Or how new issues, such as unstable/inappropriate housing, can become the main factor that holds up a family reunification, even though it wasn’t the reason for children being removed.

One parent interviewed illustrated this scenario well:

See, I sort of got two different [CSS] workers. This is only a two-bedroom unit and the kids do come to stay overnight here... One worker has said that’s fine as long as they’ve all got a bed... and the other one said what’s going to happen when you get reunified - are you going to get a bigger house or whatnot? And I said, well I don’t get paid for the kids currently and it’s a bit hard. And they’ve all got their own bed. So they sort of contradict themselves and it makes it difficult. (Naomi)

Service providers and parents also regularly talked about high staff turnover in CSS. There was a broad perception that this led to inconsistency in reunification assessment and practice and often held up reunification processes whilst new workers got up to speed with their caseloads. The turnover in CSS staff and the perceived burgeoning of CSS workers' caseloads added to the inconsistency around what was required for family reunification to go ahead and progress. This lack of consistency could be due to workers having different "standards" around issues like material basics, as described earlier. Or it could be due to a worker having a different approach (sometimes perceived by parents and by service providers as a worker having more time) to understanding the progress families had made with safety concerns.

Four of the five parents interviewed described how a change in worker had changed the path of their reunification, and many service providers echoed this experience. For example:

LF: What led to that process of reunification starting?

S: Um... I guess the changing of [CSS] case workers... In the beginning of the year... I got a new [CSS] case worker and she has been pushing for [reunification]... A lot of other case workers hadn't really seen Olivia and I's interactions and things like that. And didn't really understand what was going on within the family...dynamics. So yeah, with a new case worker, I've seen a lot of progress. (Sophie)

We're working with two families, one set [of goals] I would say is developed with the family, the other set is developed by the CS worker and they change their mind on an exceptionally regular basis and the goals have been constantly changing...to the point where I've named up at a professionals meeting that as the worker I'm feeling overwhelmed, let alone the parent, who has a significant intellectual delay. It just feels, it doesn't matter what we're working on, CS have a range of other things they want addressed, and they keep changing their priority. (Family support worker)

I felt like I wasn't included at first, and I think that's what put me into a little bit of depression too, because I'd try and ring up every day and I'd have like no answer. I felt like I was just completely taken away from her [daughter]. But then when [new CSS Worker] came along, it was completely different. She's an awesome lady, that one. (Natalie)

This project did not have the scope or capacity to examine the reality of these premises, so it cannot confirm this as characteristic of current CSS practice. But it is certainly worth highlighting that when family reunification processes are delayed for reasons related to caseload capacities and/or staff turnover, rather than an issue with parenting capacity, it prolongs parents' poverty, risk of homelessness and housing challenges, and prolongs struggles with providing materially for their children. That in itself is possibly an unintended outcome of a system under pressure.

#### **WHAT HAPPENS ELSEWHERE? POVERTY-INCLUSIVE FRAMEWORKS**

Children's rights expert Professor Martin Guggenheim highlights that, 'a genuine emphasis on children's rights is an approach that supports and includes family... Any attempt to fragment or separate the rights of children away from their families is to fundamentally misunderstand the rights of children.' (Cocks 2018). So how can we ensure that addressing families' welfare is a fundamental part of working in the best interests of the children?

Family-inclusive practice frameworks promote an understanding and addressing of the social causes of harm to children, including disadvantage, poverty and racism. Cocks is advocating for such an approach to drive child safety and family support work here in Australia (Cocks 2018).

Krumer-Nevo (2015) offers a frame for practice that positions a consideration of poverty and material challenges at the centre of assessments and interventions. This "poverty-aware" paradigm updates connections between social work and the developing body of knowledge around the impacts of poverty. It includes consideration of the role indebtedness plays in family lives (Krumer-Nevo 2016, cited in Morris et al. 2018) and the effects of stigmatising and "othering" by social work professionals when families' experiences of poverty are not fully considered, including shame and suffering (Morris et al. 2018).

Northern Ireland's government has recently operationalised this poverty-informed approach to practice by publishing an Anti-Poverty Practice Framework for Social Work in Northern Ireland (Morrison et al. 2018). This framework guides professionals working with children and families to keep poverty at the forefront of their practice at every stage of their work – from assessments of challenges facing clients to appropriate referral and interventions. It is aimed at ensuring professionals understand they have a duty of care to remain informed about the role of poverty in their clients' lives and experiences.

### 3.5 Conclusion: the need to bring poverty and homelessness to the forefront of practice

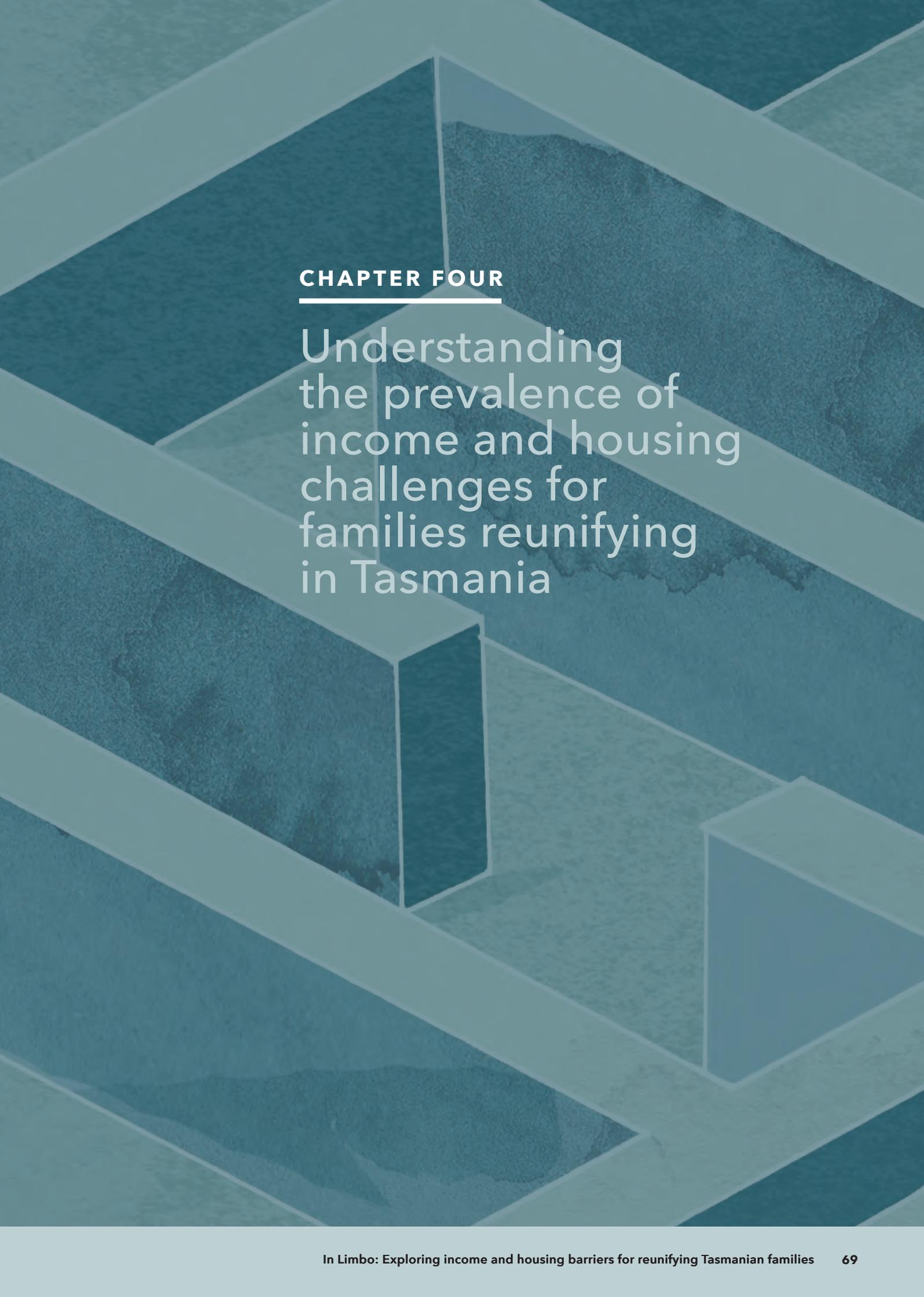
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In order to design effective interventions that address poverty and homelessness in the context of child maltreatment, we need to understand their relationship. Australia does not have data that allows us to understand the nature of the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect, but from international research we do understand that there is a link. Poverty can have both a direct effect on neglect and abuse through material deprivation, meaning parents face challenges buying support and development opportunities for themselves and their children, and indirect effects through parental stress. This stress is well understood and is likely to be exacerbated by parents' ineligibility for parenting-related payments once children are removed from their care.

To address these direct and indirect impacts, there is a need to shift poverty and homelessness from being the wallpaper of practice and culture to the forefront of it. Parents experiencing trauma and heightened poverty due to their children being removed are likely to be so consumed by their own material and emotional stability and safety that they cannot immediately address any wider safety concerns Child Safety may have (Maslow 1943, 1954; Bromfield et al. 2010). So we need to shift, or at least broaden, the focus of government agency and NGO culture and practice from being mainly about "what's wrong with you?" (i.e. looking at how we can address individual deficits), to "what's inhibiting you from achieving your goals?" (i.e. directly address the structural and material barriers to reunification). If we want to focus on assessing parental capacity, rather than assessing someone scrambling to survive, we need culture and practice that acknowledges that parents need a stable home and resources.

Addressing these potential direct and indirect impacts of poverty on child maltreatment in Tasmania could be informed by a clearer understanding of the extent and nature of parents' challenges. What can available data tell us about the extent of these challenges in Tasmania?

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**CHAPTER FOUR**

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Understanding  
the prevalence of  
income and housing  
challenges for  
families reunifying  
in Tasmania

## *Social workers cannot ignore the complex relationship between poverty and parenting.*

GUPTA ET AL. 2018

Tasmanian, Australian and international research broadly acknowledges that parents who have had their children removed by child safety services experience income and housing challenges (see Hinton 2013; Broadhurst et al. 2017; Ross et al. 2017). When asked about the proportion of their clients reunifying with their children who had income and/or housing challenges, community service providers interviewed as part of In Limbo almost unanimously stated “all of them!”

However, the extent and nature of these challenges have not been quantified in Tasmania, or in many other places nationally or internationally (Font & Warren 2013).

Within Australia, Fernandez et al.'s 2017 review of the challenges for parents reunifying in poverty gives us the best domestic insight into the extent of housing and income challenges. Their analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from 502 children in Queensland OOHC found that financial and housing challenges had been a factor of concern in the removal of 16% of children. Fernandez' previous work highlighted that poverty features as a factor in decisions concerning reunification, particularly around concerns about whether there were adequate resources to care for children (Fernandez 2013, cited in Fernandez et al. 2017).

This research sought to explore whether available Tasmanian data could say what proportion of families within the family reunification process face these challenges, and, if that was not possible, what would help Tasmania to understand this.

## Summary

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Around a quarter of children in out-of-home care had a Reunification Case and Care Plan at the beginning of January 2018. The number of children with a plan *each year* remained fairly consistent (within a range of 367 and 412) between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2017. Consistently over the three-year period, reunification plans were most commonly in place for between one and three years, confirming that family reunification takes time.

CPIS holds limited data about children's parents. What we could learn is that parents who have had a child with a Reunification Case and Care Plan over the three-year period were young when they had their children – for mothers, mainly under 25, and for fathers, mainly under 29. Nearly two-thirds of children were living in a different Local Government Area to their birth mother.

In their current forms, the two Tasmanian Government information systems that relate to child safety (CPIS) and homelessness services (SHIP) were unable to quantify the extent of income and housing challenges for Tasmanian families who are reunifying with their children, nor the nature of these challenges for this cohort. However, between the two information systems there are relevant data categories that provide much of the information we require.

CPIS can tell us the proportion of children and families involved with the out-of-home care system who have a reunification case and care plan, but not how many of these parents have had income or housing challenges. SHIP can tell us about the nature of clients' income and housing needs, what services are provided to assist them and their housing and homelessness outcomes at the end of each period, but not whether those clients are families who are involved with Child Safety Services, or who have an active Reunification Case and Care Plan.

Combining the data sets, along with the ability to analyse households by levels of deprivation, whether income/housing challenges were part of safety concerns when cases were substantiated or have become concerns since substantiation, and distance between family household and OOHC placement, would potentially provide us with the data we need to understand more about the extent and nature of income and housing challenges, services accessed and outcomes for Tasmanian families reunifying with their children, as well as those more broadly involved with Child Safety Services. It would also provide a basis for understanding the different response needs across different types of income and housing challenges with other co-occurring risk factors, such as family violence, mental health issues or substance use (Bywaters et al. 2016; Font & Warren 2013).

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## 4.1 Exploring data about families involved in reunification

To assist in reviewing Tasmania's ability to quantify challenges for families reunifying with their children, both Children and Youth Services (CYS) and Housing Tasmania (HTas) generously offered to provide relevant quantitative data from their information systems (Child Safety's Child Protection Information System [CPIS] and Housing Tasmania's Specialist Homelessness Information Platform [SHIP]) for a three-year period. There was not capacity to provide qualitative data from the information systems to inform this research.

CPIS data was provided for children and households with a Reunification Case and Care Plan (RCC Plan) over the three-year period between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2017. There were 594 children with a RCC Plan over this period. CYS also provided snapshot data for 5 January 2018.

SHIP data was offered for clients who had been referred to Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) by a Child Protection Agency (Child Safety Services for the purpose of this report) over the three-year period between 1 July 2014 and 30 June 2017. There were 206 such clients over this period aged between 0 and 59. This cohort is not specifically families of children with an RCC Plan; it is likely to include children leaving care, other parents involved with CSS and carers (amongst others). However, it is the closest we can come to our cohort of interest and as such has been utilised to explore whether there are different profiles of housing need, services accessed and outcomes for clients who are involved with CSS compared to the general profile of Tasmanian SHS clients. It has also assisted in exploring what potential there is within the CPIS and SHIP systems to inform service design for families involved in reunification.

We specifically wanted to see if available data could help to quantify:

- the challenges for low-income families who are engaged with the reunification process in meeting these requirements; and
- the proportion of families within the family reunification process face these challenges.

The project explored with community service providers that support families with Reunification Case and Care Plans the feasibility of extracting data about the extent and nature of income and housing challenges for their clients from their organisations' case management information systems. The project decided not to pursue data via NGOs directly for two reasons. It would have involved a manual extraction of data on a case-by-case basis for all services approached – a hugely labour-intensive process for already-busy service providers. Additionally, this would not have harvested data relating to all families with a child who have a Reunification Case and Care Plan, just those who had been or were currently engaged with services.

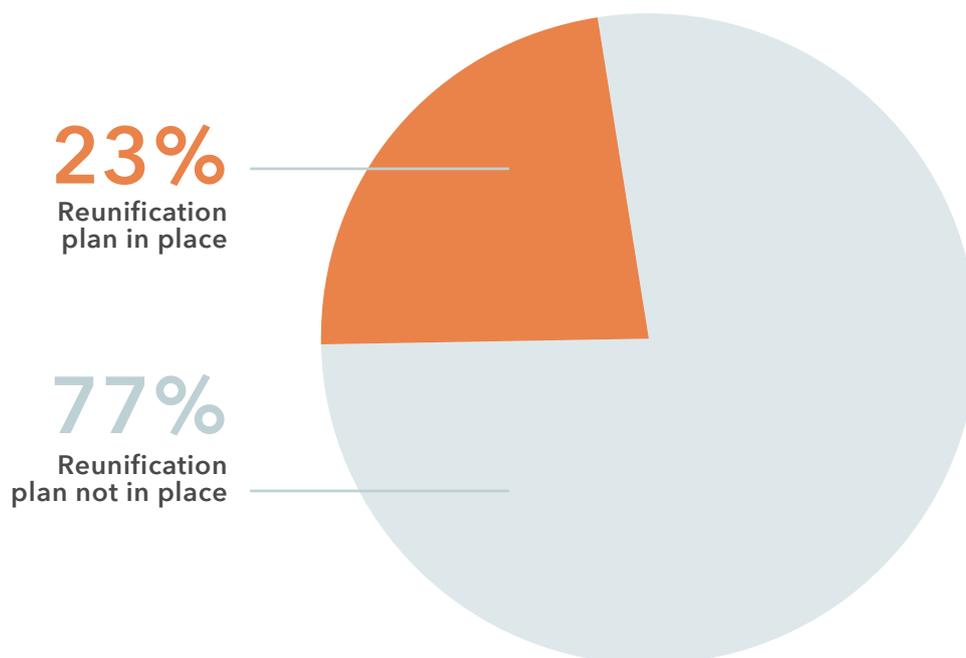
Consequently, this chapter explores what current data from information systems used or managed by government agencies is able to tell us, highlights current opportunities and limitations for providing relevant data and suggests what additional data might inform interventions around material basics.

This is not a comprehensive analysis of data that both information systems could provide, given the time and resources required to extract and analyse. But it provides a starting point to explore what might be possible and perhaps worth exploring to get us to a data set that profiles our cohort of interest.

## 4.2 Tasmanian children with reunification case and care plans

Snapshot data from CPIS tells us that on 5 January 2018, a quarter of the 1239 children in Tasmanian out-of-home care were on short term orders. 23% had an active Reunification Case and Care Plan (see Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6:** Percentage of children in Tasmanian OOHC with a Reunification Case and Care Plan statewide, 5 January 2018



N=1239

Source: Child Protection Information System

The data Children and Youth Services provided for this report relates to children subject to a Reunification Case and Care Plan at some point during the period 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2017. There were 594 active Reunification Case and Care Plans in this period. This figure refers to the number of episodes of planned reunification over this period, rather than the number of children who had a plan at any point over the three-years. Some children may have had more than one plan over the three year period, if reunification was stalled and later restarted, so the total number of Tasmanian children in OOHC who had a reunification plan over this period may have been less than 594. However, these figures may understate the extent of reunification planning within Child Safety Services; in the course of this research CSS have advised that the development and finalisation of plans can take some time, resulting in delays in the recording of planning activity in CPIS.

Identifying families who were flagged as reunification ready but did not have a plan would be a useful additional flag in the CPIS system, to support services from CSS, Housing Tasmania, Centrelink and NGO family and housing support services to plan for and meet their reunification needs (see Chapter 6).

The number of episodes of children with a plan *each year* remained fairly consistent (within a range of 367 to 412), as did the regional proportionality across the state, with just over half of reunifications each year happening in the South of the state, around a third in the North West and under a fifth in the North (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2:** Number of Tasmanian children with Reunification Case and Care Plans 2015 to 2017 and over the three-year period: statewide and each region

Region	2015		2016		2017		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
North	64	17%	62	16%	67	16%	97	16%
North West	116	32%	111	29%	118	29%	175	29%
South	187	51%	215	55%	227	55%	322	54%
<b>Total episodes</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: CPIS

Note: The numbers provided refer to active reunification episodes, not distinct children.

A quarter of the Reunification Case and Care Plans active in 2015 led to children being reunified with their families as of 17 May 2018 (see 'Definitions' under Table 3). For those with plans active in 2017, 14% were reunified. Obviously, families with active plans in 2017 have had less time to reunify compared to families who had active plans in 2015. Over the three-year period, a fifth of plans have led to children being reunified with their family and two-fifths of active plans were still in the reunification process, with a similar proportion leading to children not being reunified or not having a plan in place (see Table 3).

**TABLE 3:** Reunification outcomes for Tasmanian children with a Reunification Case and Care Plan 2015-2017

Reunification Outcome	2015		2016		2017		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Reunified	88	24%	71	18%	57	14%	116	20%
Current reunification plan	60	16%	137	35%	229	56%	229	39%
Not reunified	219	60%	180	46%	126	31%	249	42%
<b>Total episodes</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>100%</b>

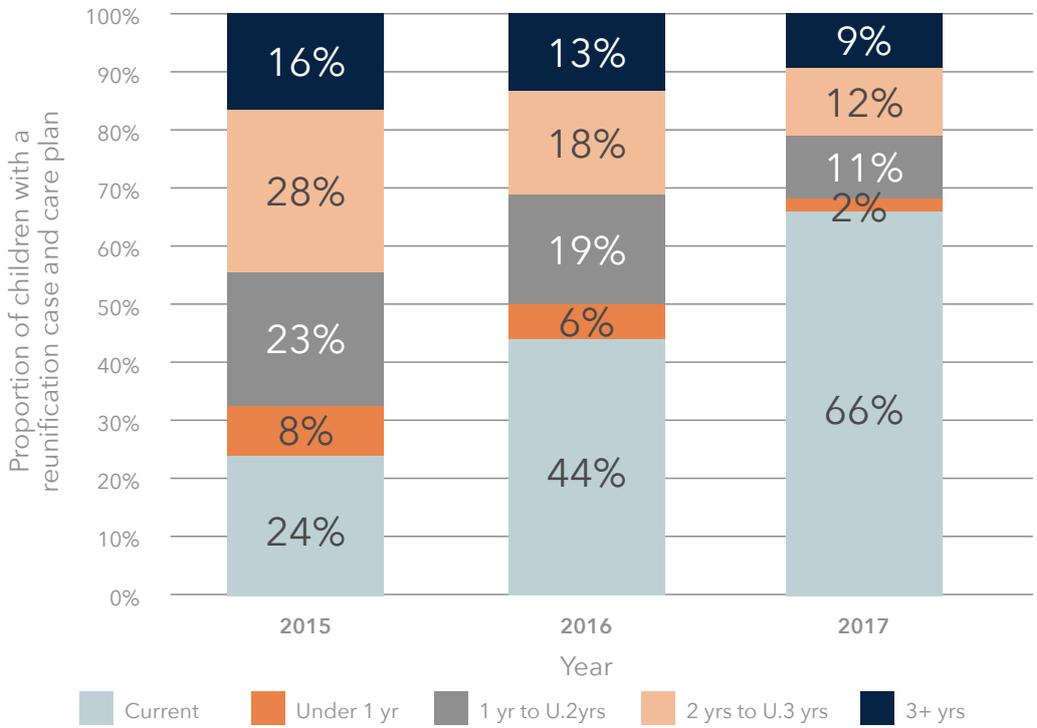
Source: CPIS

Note: Reunification Case and Care Plans are counted in each year they were active. Reunification outcomes were provided on 17 May 2018.

Definitions: Children are counted as 'reunified' if their latest placement was with their parents and they are not currently subject to a care and protection order. Children are counted as 'not reunified' if their case and care plan is no longer labelled 'reunification' or if they are subject to a long term care and protection order (Source: CYS).

Consistently over the three-year period, reunification plans were most commonly in place for up to three years (see Figure 7).

**FIGURE 7:** Proportion of children with Reunification Case and Care Plans by duration in place 2015-2017



Source: CPIS

Note Reunification Case and Care Plans are counted in each year they were active.

2015 n = 367; 2016 n = 388; 2017 n = 412

### 4.3 What we know about families who are reunifying with their children in Tasmania

There is no publicly available data on the characteristics of parents involved with child protection nationally or for Tasmania. Children and Youth Services generously provided this project with data from CPIS concerning the 1188 parents who had a child involved in family reunification between 2015 and 2017.

#### PARENTS’ PERSONAL PROFILES

CPIS data tells us that over the three-year period between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2017, the majority of mothers were young when they gave birth to the child who had been removed – half were under 25. Known fathers were likely to be slightly older when the child who had been removed was born – nearly half (46%) were under 29 (see Table 4).

**TABLE 4:** Age of parents when their child who was removed was born 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2017

Age at birth	Mother		Father	
	No.	%	No.	%
Under 20	108	18%	44	7%
20-24	187	31%	116	20%
25-29	126	21%	112	19%
30-34	113	19%	100	17%
35+	52	9%	73	12%
40+			64	11%
Unknown	8	1%	85	14%
<b>Total parents</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: CPIS

Both CPIS and SHIP record other data on clients' / parents' personal characteristics, such as indigenous status and disability. However, this parental data is not consistently available and as such, this project has chosen not to make use of it.

#### **FAMILIES' HOUSEHOLD MAKE UP AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE**

Australian children in out-of-home care are likely to be from a disadvantaged area (AIHW 2017), but CPIS was unable to provide the socio-economic profile of Tasmanian families who had children removed. We are unable to determine from this data harvest the extent to which socio-economic disadvantage is a common factor for Tasmanian parents' involvement with Child Safety Services.

CPIS data can tell us that between 2015 and 2017, nearly half (47%) of Tasmanian children with a Reunification Case and Care Plan had been removed from households with one parent (mainly a female parent) (see Table 5). Household make up was unknown for nearly a quarter of the 594 families.

**TABLE 5:** Child’s household living arrangements prior to entering out-of-home care 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2017

Child’s living arrangement prior to entering care	No.	%
One parent (female)	248	42%
One parent (male)	32	5%
Two parents (natural)	106	18%
Two parents (step-blended)	70	12%
Unknown	138	23%
<b>Total households</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: CPIS

We know that single-parent households are more likely to live in poverty and disadvantage (ACOSS 2016; Phillips et al. 2013). In Tasmania they are one of the household groups most likely to be facing housing stress (DHHS 2015) and are more likely to struggle to find affordable and appropriate Tasmanian accommodation for their family in the private rental market whilst they are in receipt of Centrelink parenting payments (Moffatt 2016, 2017; Wisbey 2018).

However, household structure is not a proxy for disadvantage or material deprivation. If we are to understand the role that disadvantage plays in Tasmania around child safety risks and outcomes, or the potential impacts of removing parental payments from households when children are removed from parents’ care, it is important to understand both the socio-economic *and* parental makeup of those families pre- and post-removal.

#### **MATERIAL BASICS AS IDENTIFIED RISKS / COMPLICATING FACTORS**

CPIS can provide data on commonly identified parental risk factors to children who are removed, such as mental health challenges, alcohol and drug use and domestic violence – the “toxic trio” identified in Chapter 3. But CSS workers are not required to systematically record whether income and housing challenges were part of initial safety concerns identified by CSS (as mental health, AOD and/or domestic violence might be), or whether such challenges have become concerns/risks during the period in which a child has been in out-of-home care. They are not, as Bywaters et al. (2014) would encourage, given equal attention in understanding complicating factors in addressing safety concerns (see Chapter 3).

Consequently, we cannot use CPIS data to help us understand to what extent the material and environmental challenges parents are facing impact on Child Safety’s assessments of parental capacity and neglect in a way that international research would suggest it might (see Font & Warren’s 2013 estimates in *The extent of income and housing challenges* below). We cannot draw on this data to help us understand

to what extent the provision of material basics are exerting stresses on parents' ability to provide for their children and keep them safe in Tasmania. Neither can we draw on this data to support our understanding of the extent income and housing challenges co-exist with other potential safety risks, such as mental illness, alcohol and substance use and domestic violence (Bywaters et al. 2016; Font & Warren 2013).

#### THE PROXIMITY OF OUT-OF-HOME CARE PLACEMENTS TO FAMILY HOMES

This project wanted to ascertain the extent to which the costs of travelling between family homes and out-of-home care placements during family access visits may present a challenge for parents during the reunification process. We were unable to examine the actual distance between each birth family home and where each child was placed in out-of-home care across Tasmania within the limited time and capacity CY5 was able to provide to this project for analysis. Local Government Area (LGA) was therefore used to provide an indication of the proximity of out-of-home care placements and family homes.

**TABLE 6:** Proportion of Tasmanian children with a Reunification Case and Care Plan who have been placed in out-of-home care within the same or different LGA to their maternal home, 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2017

LGA of placement compared to maternal home	No.	%
Different LGA	353	59%
Same LGA	205	35%
Unknown	36	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: CPIS

Note: For each case, the 'maternal home' was identified as where the child's birth mother was living.

Between 2015 and 2017, over half (59%) of Tasmanian children were placed in out-of-home care (or currently placed, if they had had multiple placements) in an LGA that was different to the LGA where their birth mother was living (see Table 6).

There are significant limitations on using this as an indicator of significant travel costs for family access visits. A different LGA could mean that a child has been placed in a home on the next street to that of their birth mother, so we cannot ascertain whether a different LGA means significant travel for family access visits. But it does give an indication that many Tasmanian children in out-of-home care (maybe the majority) may not be placed within the same neighbourhood/community as their birth parent(s). This may have implications for the ease and cost of arranging reunification visits and for children maintaining connection to family and community. As a starting point, to understand this more thoroughly we would need data on the distance between carers' and birth parents' households.

### THE EXTENT OF PARENTS' INCOME AND HOUSING CHALLENGES

Currently, we are unable to quantify the extent of income challenges and housing inadequacy for families involved with Child Safety Services internationally, nationally or across Tasmania. US estimates suggest that 25% of caregivers, and half of caregivers whose children have been placed in out-of-home care, have been reported as having difficulty in providing basic needs, including housing (Barth et al. 2006, cited in Font & Warren 2013). We cannot assume the proportion of households struggling will be the same in Tasmania as it is in the US, but applying this US estimate to the 1239 children in Tasmanian out-of-home care at the beginning of 2018, up to 619 households may have been having difficulty providing basic needs, including housing. Of course, it would be useful to be able to explore this further.

### TYPES OF INCOME AND HOUSING CHALLENGES PARENTS FACE

SHIP provides useful data about the types of income and housing challenges Tasmanian clients who access Specialist Homelessness Services are facing, what support and services they access and client outcomes at the end of the period.

Unfortunately, we are unable to quantify the types of income and housing challenges specifically faced by families involved with Child Safety Services, compared to those challenges in the general Tasmanian population of caregivers or the general population of SHS clients, because SHIP does not record whether a presenting client is a parent involved with Child Safety Services, or whether their household is participating in a family reunification process.

Consequently, on a systemic level we do not have access to data that would help us to understand the relationship between a family's income and housing struggles (are they homeless, at risk of homelessness due to affordability, are they needing financial assistance to provide for their children?) and family reunification in Tasmania. We, however, do have data that helps us to understand how parents' needs are being addressed by one part of the support system (Specialist Homelessness Services) and outcomes for the family.

SHIP can give us an indication of whether the income and housing needs, services accessed and outcomes may differ for some clients involved with CSS, compared to clients more broadly. Housing Tasmania generously provided *In Limbo* with data for the closest cohort within the system records - those clients referred to Specialist Homeless Services by Child Safety. To ensure the data does not identify specific clients, we are presenting it here for the whole three-year period. *In Limbo* has compared this data to nationally provided data on Tasmania's SHS clients overall during this period (AIHW 2015, 2016, 2017). This starts to provide an indication of potential differences in vulnerability amongst CSS clients who access SHS (See Appendix 2).

## 4.4 What data do we need to tell us about income and housing challenges for reunifying families?

In their current forms, the two Tasmanian Government information systems that relate to child safety (CPIS) and homelessness services (SHIP) were unable to quantify the extent of income and housing challenges for Tasmanian families who are reunifying with their children, nor the nature of these challenges for this cohort. However, between the two information systems they have relevant data categories to provide much of the information we require.

CPIS can tell us the proportion of children with a Reunification Case and Care Plan and some basic information about their parents at the time that children were removed, but not how many of these parents have had or are having income or housing challenges. SHIP can tell us about the nature of clients' income and housing needs, what services are provided to assist them and their housing and homelessness outcomes at the end of each period, but not whether those clients are families who are involved with Child Safety Services, or who have an active Reunification Case and Care Plan (see Appendix 2).

Combining the data sets, along with the ability to analyse households by levels of deprivation (for example by SEIFA profile), whether income/housing challenges were part of safety concerns when cases were substantiated or have become concerns since substantiation, and distance between family household and OOHC placement, would potentially provide us with the data we need to understand more about the extent and nature of income and housing challenges, services accessed and outcomes for Tasmanian families reunifying with their children, as well as those more broadly involved with Child Safety Services. It would also provide a basis for understanding the different response needs across different types of income and housing challenges with other co-occurring risk factors, such as family violence, mental health issues or substance use (Bywaters et al. 2016; Font & Warren 2013).

It is beyond the scope of this project to specify how such data could be shared (for example, the legal, ethical and practical parameters around creating single client records or single client identifiers across multiple information systems). It is worth noting that there are existing projects exploring opportunities to share government data for the purpose of research and planning, such as the Menzies Institute for Medical Research's Tasmanian Data Linkage Unit<sup>1</sup>; establishing of the Department of Communities Tasmania, which includes co-locating Children and Youth Services with Housing Tasmania, may provide other opportunities to review information system linkages for both case management and research purposes.

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1 See <http://www.menzies.utas.edu.au/research/research-centres/data-linkage-unit>

## **4.5 Conclusion: opportunities for a data-informed response to parents' material challenges – how Tasmanian could lead the national conversation**

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Sharing relevant data available within CPIS and SHIP, along with adding some key additional parental data fields, could provide us with the data we need to understand more about the extent and nature of income and housing challenges, services accessed and outcomes for Tasmanian families reunifying with their children. It would also provide a basis for understanding the different response needs across different types of income and housing challenges with other co-occurring risk factors, such as family violence, mental health issues or substance use (Bywaters et al. 2016; Font & Warren 2013). This would be insightful on both a systemic level and a case-by-case basis and enable Tasmania to inform and lead a national conversation and response around these issues.

We can still learn a significant amount about the nature of income and housing challenges from examining parents' lived experience. The following chapter will guide both our understanding of the challenges and how to shape potential program and practice responses.

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**CHAPTER FIVE**

**Material  
challenges  
families face and  
their impacts**

*It's so hard to feed three kids on \$300 a fortnight. [Family support worker] brings a food hamper thing once a fortnight and stuff, and that helps. The kids don't know that I struggle. You always find a way. They don't know and you don't want them to know...*

NATALIE

Families interviewed for *In Limbo* were in the process of family reunification, or had recently reunified with their children. They all spent time parenting their children. The arrangements varied. Two families had their children in their care full time. Three families had parenting arrangements for less than the five nights a fortnight of regular care needed for their parenting costs to be recognised by Centrelink through Parenting Payments and Family Tax Benefit. They included an ad hoc arrangement with kinship carers to parent on a day-to-day basis, the occasional overnight parenting, and parenting for six days and four nights a fortnight. For those families in the process of reunification, whatever their arrangement was, and no matter how many children they were parenting, their main household income was a single person's Newstart payment of \$538.80 a fortnight

This limited income presented significant challenges for these families in meeting their household and reunification costs. Based on both the interviews with parents and reflections from interviews with the 43 service providers in family and housing support, this chapter describes some of the parenting related costs families have and either can or cannot meet, their struggles and strategies to deal with those costs, and what has to give for them.

The research also unpacked some of the reasons why parents may find it such a struggle to achieve the goals of the Welfare to Work agenda to find and maintain employment. Lastly, families and service providers were asked to reflect on the impacts parents' challenges had on families and the reunification process itself. Their experiences were clearly in line with what is widely recognised as struggling with poverty and material deprivation, whilst admirably trying to demonstrate to Child Safety Services their capabilities to both provide for and parent their children. They echoed previous Australian families' experiences described by Russell et al.: 'The impossible situation of having to meet child protection and reunification requirements that required housing with separate bedrooms for the children at a time when the system had removed their benefits' (cited in Fernandez et al. 2017).

## Summary

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The current suite of federal and state income and housing policies and programs do not enable parents to become reunification ready or enable the family reunification process. In contrast, they often act to inhibit reunification. The withdrawal of parenting payments at the point that CSS removes a child leads to an inevitable trajectory for many parents, including the following elements.

**An escalation of poverty-induced stress** as they struggle to maintain their family household expenses, the costs of continuing to provide for their children and the costs of meeting reunification goals on half to a third of their former income. To meet the costs, they usually needed to draw on a number of emergency relief funds, engage in debt or sell belongings. All of this added to their parental stress and took time away from parenting, meeting reunification goals and being able to seek and obtain employment.

**Loss of family housing / unstable living conditions:** Private rental tenancies suitable for family reunification are usually not sustainable on such a reduced income within Tasmania's competitive rental market. Unless parents were already in public housing at the time their children were removed, they were likely to face an extended period of homelessness – sleeping in their car, on couches, sharing with family or intermittently accessing very limited crisis or short term accommodation. This compounded parental stress and disrupted reunification pathways, with no clear way to secure an appropriate family home unless discretion was used to allocation suitable social or public housing.

**Negative impacts on families and the reunification process:** The parental stress caused by daily and relentless poverty and homelessness has a number of impacts on parents, children, relationships with CSS and carers and the reunification process itself, including:

- The reunification process often being stalled or halted by the lack of access to stable, affordable and appropriate accommodation.
- A deterioration in parents' confidence in their capacity to provide for their children; this was compounded by feelings that their parenting role was being undermined by decisions made regarding their children's health and education during a prolonged period in care, which they could not control due to their housing situation. There was a heightened sense of moral injury, as parents felt judged by CSS about what they were or were not providing for their children, and a frustration about the lack of recognition of the costs parenting incurs.

- Parents and support workers reported that the impacts of prolonged reunification for children included extending the trauma of family separation, the disruption of changes in their living and schooling and not knowing when more change would happen, and an increased strain on the child/parent/family bond.
- The erosion of trust between parents, CSS and carers when arrangements for material support for the children are not delivered, and a lack of clarity about the sharing of parental costs (furniture, clothing, food) between parents, carers and CSS.

Where parents live (in proximity to their support networks and their child's schooling), as well as affordability and appropriate bedroom space, were all seen as crucial elements for providing stable and adequate accommodation suitable for family reunification to occur.

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## 5.1 About our families

Interviews were held with 5 parents (four mothers and one father) who had had their children removed by Child Safety Services over the past three years and were now either reunified with their children (two families) or were actively working on reunifying with their children. Among the three families who were actively reunifying, two had a Reunification Case and Care Plan in place and one family was working with CSS on the basis the family reunification would happen without a formal plan in place.

The families lived in Tasmania's South, Midlands and the Derwent Valley. Three were within the greater Hobart area and two in rural Tasmania; two households were living in rural Tasmania at the time their children were removed.

Four families were one parent households, with one couple. They collectively had eight children removed by Child Safety Services and six dependent and adult children who had not. Three children had been reunified with their parents. The five children who remained in out-of-home care were either in foster or kinship care placements and had been so for between two and three years. Seven of the children were aged under eight, with one child aged eight or over.

For one household, unstable accommodation had been the primary reason for their child being removed from their care. Other parents reported that safety concerns had included domestic violence, substance use, physical abuse (by a perpetrator other than the birth parents) and children's behaviour. For the majority of these households, unstable or inadequate accommodation had become an issue since their children had been taken into out-of-home care; stable and appropriate accommodation was a regular part of the conversations they had with Child Safety about what was needed for a successful reunification pathway.

These interviews focused on their income and housing situations and challenges leading up to their involvement with Child Safety Services, once their children were removed by Child Safety Services, and during each stage of the reunification process. They were asked to describe how they coped with these challenges, the services they had been able to draw on, the impacts these challenges had had on themselves, their children and the reunification process, and what would help them to address challenges with income and housing to help them parent positively and achieve Child Safety family and child wellbeing outcomes in a way that would expedite family reunification.

Family and housing support workers were asked to reflect on the income and housing challenges they regularly observed and supported parents to address, and the impacts such challenges had for families and the reunification process.

## **5.2 Considering the emotional impacts of child removal on parents' ability to address material basics: system-induced trauma and moral injury**

Hinton describes the need to address trauma and moral injury – both that developed through childhood or adult experiences and that induced by child removal itself – if we are to support parents to be “good enough” by CSS standards to provide a safe and stable environment for their children. These are important lenses to help us understand parents' states of mind and priorities when their children are removed.

### **TRAUMA**

Through exposure to traumatic life events like abuse, neglect and domestic violence in their own childhood or adult life, many parents involved with Child Safety Services have complex trauma (Hinton 2018). Complex trauma can affect how people manage their internal emotional state; it can manifest in behaviour, such as problems with mood regulation, impulse control, self-perception, attention and memory disorders (Battle et al. 2014, cited in Hinton 2018). It may also lead to negative outcomes in adulthood, including poor mental and physical health, social and relationship difficulties, poor academic and employment outcomes, challenges with substance and alcohol use and an increased risk of suicidality.

Trauma developed in early childhood and adulthood is likely to be compounded by system-induced trauma for parents who experience their children being removed by Child Safety Services (Hinton 2018). When children are removed, parents often struggle with the loss of the role and status of parent, a loss of reputation and a loss of relationships with family and extended family. As well as grief, parents can experience shame, guilt and stigma. Effects can include dissociation, elevated emotional reactivity, anxiety, a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, dissociative identity disorder, substance use and self-harm (Broadhurst et al, 2017; Hinton 2016, 2018).

These are the disruptive behaviours that are often labelled as “problematic”, “out of control” and “unsafe parenting”.

### MORAL INJURY

These parental experiences may be compounded by moral injury (Haight et al. 2017, cited in Hinton 2018). This is a lasting psychological and social harm caused by one’s own or another’s actions that transgresses deeply held moral beliefs and expectations about right and wrong. The mismatch between core beliefs and actions can lead to a breakdown in an individual’s sense of integrity and persistent distress. Parents involved with Child Safety Services can experience moral injury due to harm inflicted by themselves or others on their children, their failure to protect or to provide basic necessities, and when social systems which should be helping them are instead harmful. This contributes to feelings of guilt, shame, rage, depression, betrayal and loss of trust in their own or others’ capacity to behave in an ethical manner. If unaddressed it can lead to acute emotional distress which can persist for years, undermining efforts to move forwards with life or to constructively engage with CSS (Hinton 2018).

The emerging picture for parents is one of being emotionally fractured at the same time as they are faced with significant practical changes to their material circumstances.

## 5.3 Reduction in family income post child removal

At the very point at which CSS removes a child from their family, when they are reeling from the trauma and moral injury that that causes, parents also lose any parenting-related income, such as Family Tax Benefit and Parenting Payment. This can amount to up to two-thirds of their household income (Hinton 2016; Broadhurst et al. 2017). Parents are often left to budget with a fortnightly Newstart payment (\$538.80 a fortnight for a single adult at 2018/19 rates) or Disability Support Pension, with the potential for a lower rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance if they are renting a property. This income leaves most families well below the Henderson poverty line, last estimated to be \$750.90 a fortnight after housing costs for a single parent with one child (MIESR 2017).

### CHILD REMOVAL: A POINT OF HIGH VULNERABILITY

All parents interviewed had lost Parenting Payments and Family Tax Benefit, as well as the “with child” rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance. For many, they had lost the majority of their household income – usually half to two-thirds:

Well, I was in Single Parenting Payment [sic], so I was getting about \$1700 a fortnight...I went to Newstart ...which is \$520 a fortnight.

(Naomi, single parent, 3 children under 8)

I was roughly on about \$1200 before or \$1300 a fortnight...to about \$5-600.

(Sophie, single parent, 1 child under 8)

All of the single parents interviewed talked about this as a time of confusion and immense pain; the income reduction was consistently described as tipping them over the edge into crisis at a time when they were at their most vulnerable:

That was the most horrible stage of my life. I was, I couldn't talk, I cried constantly, I was so weak. I didn't want to be here. (Natalie)

I was very depressed when all this was going on, which is the reason my visits to the psychologist were increasing, 'cause feeling like I needed that extra support, um...yeah, I guess the only thing that was really keeping me going was my daughter. With everything else like piling on top of everything, all the stress of trying to figure out what I was gonna do next, it was just getting to me.

(Sophie)

I didn't know the [Child Safety] system. This was the first time I'd ever been through this... But, yeah, I thought at least someone rang me and let me know what's going on. But, no one did. That was devastating that was. Like a kick in the back teeth that was, big time... (Jack)

### CONFUSION, STRESS AND MORAL INJURY

Parents routinely described the period when safety concerns were being expressed or assessed by Child Safety Services as confusing and stressful. Crucially, they were not clear what their position was with Centrelink parenting payments. There were often delays in receiving income when parents changed from Parenting Payments and Family Tax Benefit to Newstart. This, of course, led to more system-induced financial pressures for these families at a time of heightened stress and change.

A parent whose children were on an Assessment Order talked about receiving confusing messages from CSS about whether to inform Centrelink that their children had been removed, as there was a possibility they might 'get their children back' if concerns were not substantiated. This had led to this parent incurring a significant debt to Centrelink once they did inform the agency of the removal after safety concerns were substantiated.

N: I was told not to change my payment when I got removed, because there's a six week gap where you might get your kids back. So I was told not to go to Centrelink.

LF: And who told you that?

N: Um, the first worker I had when my kids got removed from CSS.

LF: The Child Safety worker?

N: Yes. And then after that six weeks, I got a \$8000 bill, which I'm still paying off.

(Naomi)

Another parent described how surprised he was to learn that his parenting payments had been cancelled, as care had been formally transferred to a foster carer without him knowingly giving consent. This unexpected reduction in his income, from Parenting Payment to Newstart, disrupted his ability to both afford the travel costs he needed to search for housing and his ability to secure appropriate private or public rental accommodation. He reported that as stable accommodation had been CSS's main safety concern, this meant that his child remained in care, in spite of his best efforts.

I left [my son] with me family...I was on Parenting [Payment] and [CSS] told me I got about 21 days to [find stable accommodation]... So I was hoping to get accommodation before the 21 days were up, but didn't happen. All of a sudden, I was talking to Housing [Tasmania] and they said, Oh, we've got a house... But they said one thing, 'We can't access your income'... Checked up and it got cancelled...You have to reapply for Newstart. So I had to reapply and had to wait a week and because of that, I lost the [house]. (Jack)

At the height of their confusion and grief over the removal of their children, these families were left with a strong sense of injustice about how their future ability to practically provide for their family had been handled:

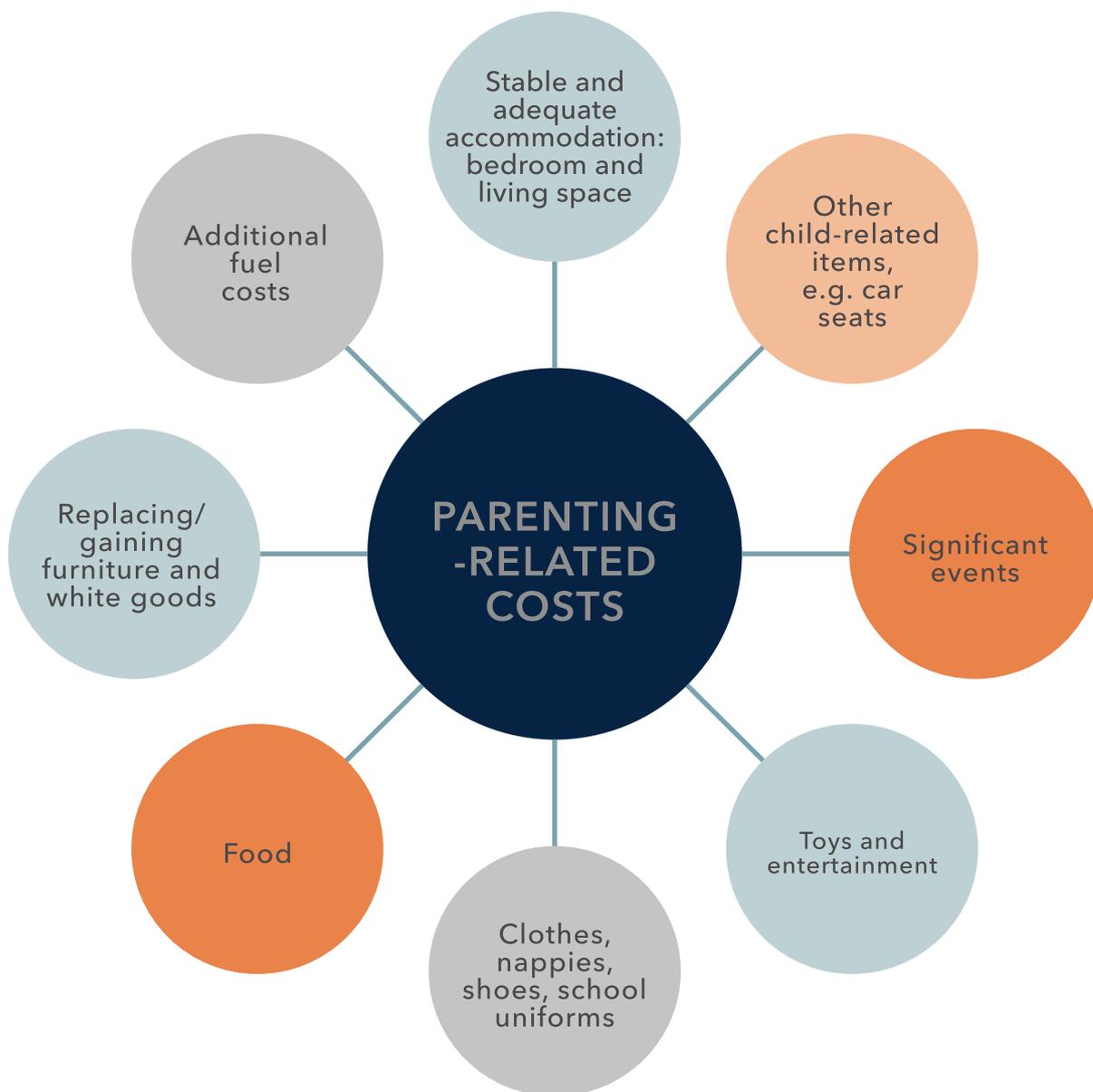
I'd gone from a huge...income...you know, basically being on a Single Parent Pension [sic]. Where you have a child, you start to get situated and things like that...I had 12 months on the budget that I was on...to basically...decreasing that income by more than half. So it was really, really hard and they are expecting me to keep doing the same things that I was doing like supporting my daughter and trying to find the house that's suitable for both of us. But in saying that, I could only afford a one-bedroom and that's not really benefitting my daughter. (Sophie)

You try finding private accommodation on Newstart. You can't. I looked around...Couldn't even rent a caravan out...So I was thinking to myself, how can anyone survive, or get accommodation to support your child on this? You can't. I couldn't do it. On Parenting Payment I could barely do it, but when I went to the Newstart, I couldn't do it. I didn't know what to do. (Jack)

## 5.4 Escalation of poverty-induced stress for parents

### JUGGLING UNAFFORDABLE PARENTING COSTS

**FIGURE 8:** Summary of parenting-related costs parents struggle to meet



### Parenting costs - providing for the basics of space, power and food

Access visits between children and their birth parents incur significant additional basic costs for parents - the costs of maintaining what CSS has required in terms of stable and adequate accommodation, meals (up to three a day as reunification progresses), snacks and drinks during day visits and overnight stays, additional heating, just to name a few basic costs.

Extra food, and extra power for when the kids started coming over for overnights with the heater going and stuff. (Sandra)

Those families who were in public housing prioritised their rent, and the additional costs for when their children stayed in energy bills and food, which left little for other parenting costs, such as providing for special days, such as birthdays, Christmas and any treats during access visits.

Well, we didn't cope really. We was living off [material support from Doorways to Parenting]. The money that we was getting was just covering the heater and rent and just a little bit of food and still trying to get stuff for the kids like for Christmas and Easter and things like that. (Sandra)

By the time I get me Newstart and I pay me rent, comes straight out, I pay me power, that comes out every fortnight, and I pay my other expenses, and by the end of it, I have about \$280 a fortnight. It's not much really, because, by the time I buy groceries for a fortnight, fuel costs, yeah, and my phone, doesn't leave me much... Make sure...got food in the cupboard and power...When I didn't have Sam around I was having a cooked meal every second night...But when you've got your children around you've got to make sure they maintain a proper meal... (Jack)

Those families who had tried to live in private rentals described trying to maintain their rent and have enough for food and energy, along with the costs of providing for and access to their children. All had had to leave their private rental tenancies due to its unaffordability.

I moved into a small cottage and was basically 20 minute drive from [kinship carers], so it was fairly close. But even that, welfare was expecting me to basically drive back and forwards, covering my own petrol and things like that, which was, on the income that I had, I was finding it very hard to maintain the house and the petrol and things like that...So in the end it was just in [daughter's] best interest that I gave up the cottage and move...in with [the kinship carers]. (Sophie)

I was [in a private rental] for about three months or something like that, but, because I was travelling back and forwards a fair bit, I fell behind on rent for about two weeks...I managed to arrange to fix it up and then I think I fell behind again. Cos I was travelling around, on Newstart, expensive fuel and stuff, not being able to cook meals, I had to buy meals. It took my expenses away... I got a text saying, 'Oh, landlord wants you to vacate, tomorrow.'...I rang up and said, 'I'm on my way back with Sam...How about letting them know I'll sell me car to keep the place.' But she goes, 'No, too late.' (Jack)

All parents who had tried to live in private rental accommodation without parenting payments had experienced a period of homelessness and emotional struggle and, of course, the prospect of reunification being stalled until stable housing could be gained (see Section 5.6).

Parenting costs became more of a struggle as reunification progressed. Although parents were glad to have their children staying with them for four nights a fortnight, without parenting payments to cover the additional food, heating, travelling etc, they understood that this exciting progress was also going to push them to the limits of their resourcefulness:

I don't really think [CSS] understand the struggle that parents have. Like if my kids wanted to go somewhere or do something, I wouldn't be able to because I don't have money to... So, I get them [3 children] on Mondays for three nights and I got paid last Wednesday. I've got \$4 to my name. And I don't get paid until the day before they go...I'm excited to have [my children]. I love having my kids. (Naomi)

I think sometimes when families are at that stage [of reunification] they also see a lot of behaviours in children that they're trying to manage, and... that management can involve you know taking them to the swimming pool letting them blow off some steam. You need to have money to get there and then get in. You can take them to Kids Paradise but you need money.

(Family support worker)

CSS had told Jack of an increase in overnight stays for his son with a week's notice. Although he was clearly happy that this progression was happening, it had left him unsure about how he might meet the additional costs that he would incur:

[CSS Worker] asked me about Sam extending the visit. I said, 'Yep, not a problem.' But I might have to have a bit of help just for that extra day and school lunch and that, cos I only get paid once a fortnight and I don't get paid until next week, Friday. So what I've got to do is work on from now til then, till he comes... a bit of help with an extra day or two. (Jack)

### Parenting costs - providing for children's development and creating special memories

Parenting costs outside of food, additional heating and bedroom space were also a massive struggle for families on an income that does not recognise the costs of parenting. There were the basics, such as nappies and wipes for young children. Given that most of the children had not lived full time with their parents for around two years, ensuring that there were age-appropriate toys and clothes was seen as incredibly important for maintaining a connection between children and their parents, but a constant struggle.

Parents also want to provide activities and entertainment for their children that are stimulating and enjoyable and create special memories between them and their children. These parents talked about their struggles to afford such opportunities for their children, whilst also showing tremendous resourcefulness to ensure their children were able to access stimulating activities and play, as well as being clothed appropriately.

His birthday's coming up...and I'm asking him what he wants...I might just get him a bit of clothes and a nice toy...So he's got something to look forward to for his birthday...I got him a little bike and his helmet. On occasion, I'll put it in the back of the wagon and take him to the park, so he can ride around...That bike I got, I go on the freebies site... I find things like that...I fixed them up... That's what I do...It helps...That's what he looks forward to when he comes...go to the park or something like that. Or feed the ducks. (Jack)

Service providers commonly reported working with parents who "guilt parented". As they were seeing their children intermittently, they understandably wanted to make those times special. This could lead to parents prioritising spending on their children over the basics of rent and power.

I have often said to myself, you should be prioritising...Why would you be buying birthday presents when you should be paying your rent. But it's not logical when it comes to children. You want to provide for your kids and kids want you to give them gifts and feel wanted. (Housing support worker)

### Items of big expenditure

Big costs were a problem for all families and could often wipe out a week's worth of Newstart payment. Whitegoods, furniture and repairs, cars and car registration and child car seats were all common struggles mentioned by parents and by service providers as items that were beyond the budget of many parents, but an essential part of keeping children safe:

Eve climbed out of her cot, so...that's dangerous. So at the moment, she's having to share with me. (Natalie)

Both parents and service providers talked about car registration and maintenance as essential costs that were out of reach for many, particularly those living in rural areas where public transport was poor and distances to access services long. Given the many demands the reunification process made of parents – attending multiple appointments and courses, visiting/picking up their children for access visits – a car was often essential.

On Newstart with a car, shortens your budget sometimes... Maybe you need an oil change, you might need a service, you might need to get tires, you might need a battery. If that occurs, that's a big chunk out of your allowance, and when that occurs, you have to turn for assistance... Because that money you had put away for that, you gotta ask for a bit of help... I have used [Doorways to Parenting] a few times in the past, but I try not to unless I really have to. (Jack)

The coach is \$7 something. When the kids are here, it's \$30 to get somewhere. (Natalie)

Health was another significant cost, including access to psychological services or drug counselling. They needed to engage and address health issues to show CSS that they were both responsible and able to address health concerns, but it could leave them floundering and struggling to make ends meet.

Some of the families interviewed had lost most of their possessions / furniture due to fleeing a relationship. This meant they were effectively starting from scratch in setting up a home for their family. They talked about being left with debts from their relationship that they were still responsible for:

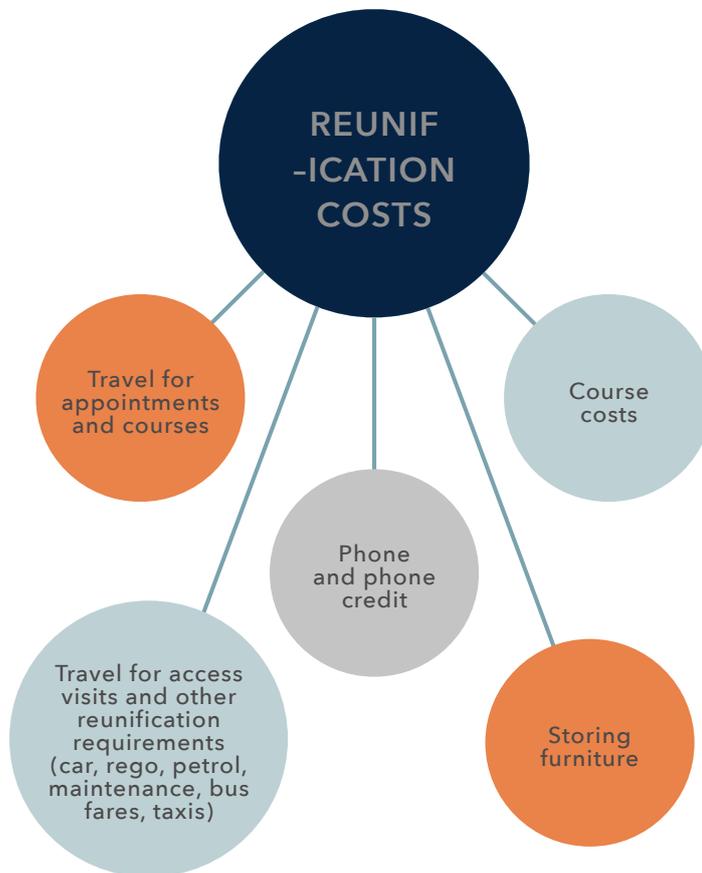
N: I lost absolutely everything when I got kicked out of my house... Me and mum weren't on speaking terms. I had nowhere to put my stuff and no help.

LF: so you've had to start from scratch.

N: Yeah, multiple times. (Naomi)

There were certain things we needed when we moved into a house [fridge, washing machine and a dryer]. I actually went through [a rental company], so I actually had \$100 a fortnight taken out of my payments for goods that I've gotten for a house that I no longer had... I am still paying that... The income, when it was decreased so drastically, seeing \$100 was coming out of that before I even seen any money it was tough. And it was really tough and especially considering all those goods I was paying money for I no longer had because my ex-partner had got into the house and taken it and... said that he hadn't and was hiding the goods and there was no proof, no police report, or anything like that, I just left it because I didn't think it was worth the hassle. (Sophie)

## STRUGGLING TO MEET COSTS OF REUNIFICATION PLAN

**FIGURE 9:** Summary of reunification-related costs parents struggle to meet

With such a reduced income, parents struggle to meet costs relating to goals within their reunification plans and for family access visits (see Figure 9). Conditions may include attendance at appointments such as parenting programs, assessments or drug testing, all of which can require transport costs. Parents have to show continuous engagement in the reunification process, so having a way to be contacted – i.e. a phone – was seen as a necessary, but expensive cost:

There is also the phone credit. 'Cos having to phone in [to CSS] and well, I guess, keeping them informed with what is happening with Olivia and myself. They don't always ring you. You have gotta ring them. Yes, so always making sure I had credit to send emails and things when I needed to. (Sophie)

Parents commonly felt that Child Safety Services were not aware of the costs such activities generated for parents on such a limited income.

One couple interviewed for *In Limbo* had completed five or six parenting courses before being successfully reunified with their children. When asked if she felt

whether CSS are aware of what it cost her to travel to these courses, she replied, *'No I don't think they have a clue. They just expect you to be there no matter what...I think maybe they should be asking..."Can they get there?" first before they make them do it, or offer them a way to get there before they demand that they go there and do that'* (Sandra).

Another parent had had significant costs (\$460 per fortnight) associated with paying for residential drug rehabilitation and another \$220 per month for storing possessions during that process.

There are also the costs of arranging access visits – either getting to the location, for those that are not in the home, and to collect or return children from carers. For those parents whose children were placed a significant distance from where they were currently living, there was a constant stress of either ensuring their car was registered and had enough petrol or they had sufficient bus fares (if public transport was an option), or were dependent on CSS to support them. These journeys ranged from 85km to 13km – one way – to collect their children for a weekly access visit.

Service providers also highlighted transport as a significant issue for parents. They described encountering many families who had separated, so one parent did not have access to the family car anymore. They described how Tasmania's poor public transport provision meant that parents often had to rely on taxis, which meant *'You can just rip half your income doing that'*. They reported working with many parents who had fled from a violent relationship who did not want to take public transport as they felt too vulnerable.

Parents living with relatives who were involved in their child's kinship care did not escape significant costs for access and reunification. Sophie described that, because she was living in the same house as her daughter's kinship carers, the onus to prove her parenting capacity was squarely on her. She needed to send photos and keep diaries reflecting on her interactions with her daughter and observations about her daughter's development and relationship with her; she needed to ensure she attended all appointments CSS had requested, such as with doctors (a 30km journey each way), a weekly psychologist's appointment (60km from where she was living) and parenting courses. These activities incurred phone costs, stationary and significant travel costs due to their rural location.

*Living with my [relatives] and Olivia, I don't have the formal [CSS] visitations... and so the only way that I had proof was just to send photos and update them with what's going on...through email...At one point they actually...proposed that I keep a diary. Whenever I see her. When I first moved out to the cottage, everyday what we did...what times that I would see her...So I would basically spend two hours of my day writing down things that we'd done and things that I'd noticed...And it was very hectic...and on top of that, I was having to worry about getting to doctors' appointments, um, psychologist appointments, which was also a very big requirement that they had me doing. (Sophie)*

## HOW PARENTS MANAGED

Parents commonly managed their income gap to meet living and parenting costs through meticulous budgeting – a skill they had had to acquire, if they had not already possessed it.

### Rationing and going without

Parents talked about providing their children with a balanced diet, age-appropriate clothing and play opportunities. Strategies to keep costs to a minimum included sacrificing significant meals for themselves when they did not have their children staying with them; limiting their consumption of non-processed meat such as chops and steaks; buying their own and their children's clothes and toys second hand; looking online for free items, as mentioned earlier; and cutting back spending on essentials such as food and toiletries. Strategies such as delaying costs if cash flow did not allow (not paying bills, accumulating rent arrears) usually led to additional stress and insecurity about their tenancy or how they were being judged by CSS.

All parents talked about what they were unable to provide for their children. Things like occasionally being able to treat their children – not being able to take them to the movies, or have a takeaway, or buy them a new toy or new shoes were common laments. Again, parents were concerned that they were being judged negatively by CSS for not providing adequately for their children.

Within these limitations, parents described their resourcefulness in providing activities and developing positive memories for their children that did not cost.

I don't believe you really need money to do things with kids, because we all sit here and we'll write up a treasure map, and we'll do it...We've gotta find a red leaf, bottle cap, and we'll go for a walk up in the bush, couple of hours, and we've all got these things, and we'll cross them off, and then we'll make something out of it. Yeah, you don't need money, but it would be nice to be able to take them out, in the holidays. (Natalie)

Parents who had been smokers described their battle to give up cigarettes due to the expense. They talked about how smoking had been an emotional crutch after the children had been removed, but they had since managed either stop or drastically reduce their reliance on this as a source of relaxation:

Well, with the stress that was always going on with Olivia, and welfare and things like that, I was actually still smoking. So that was actually still something I was having to worry about, where I was going to get the money to support my habit... Over the last couple of years, you know, I had gone through... numerous times quitting smoking and then I'd had a stressful start in what's going on and I've taken it back up. It's been...a struggle. But at the moment I am actually not smoking, so it's been good. (Sophie)

I was smoking because of stress. But because I'm getting a bit better, I'm slowing down heaps...It's been hard, because I've been a smoker for years, and withdrawal from nicotine, whew! I eat chewing gum...or just something to preoccupy yourself instead of sitting down...but I'm trying because it's one thing I just can't afford to do. It was relaxing, but it's just too expensive...It's not good smoking around my son...I'd rather not. (Jack)

### Relying on others

When other family members were providing clothes or furniture or treats for their children that they were not able to afford, parents commonly spoke about how this frustrated them; their lack of parenting income undermined their sense of being able to provide for their children:

I'm very independent. My mum works, but they're my children. I should provide for them. I shouldn't have to ask for help. (Naomi)

There has been times when I've had to ring mum or my brothers...and say, 'Look, I can't afford to lend money, but could youse help out? And when I get back up on my feet, I'll help youse back out.' Which I've always, my brothers have been down, I've helped them, the other way round and stuff. So there's times when they've come round with a coupla shopping bags, and mum has as well. (Natalie)

All parents had approached support services, such as Pathway Home, Doorways to Parenting, emergency relief and food relief services for help with their costs. Commonly this help included food and petrol vouchers, food parcels, furniture vouchers and help with car registration. Some had received petrol reimbursement for access visits (for one parent, that was \$50 a fortnight) or vouchers for play spaces from CSS. This support was clearly a lifeline to help parents keep their heads above water and were broadly appreciated by families:

We went from Parenting Payment and Family [Tax Benefit] to just going on the dole... [Doorways to Parenting] was helping us out with food, things like that... we was living off [D to P] really...Food and petrol; she gave us petrol vouchers. And Christmas, she helped us out with Christmas vouchers, presents. She even paid for our rego one time so we could go camping with the kids. (Sandra)

[Doorways to Parenting] has helped with the car...the registration actually, cos that was coming up and I was thinking, 'Ah, jeez, how am I gonna pay this?' I had money partly put away, but you know what happens when you put money away and something comes up. I got a bit short... But I asked and she's helped out and that was good for another six months. That way I don't have to stress about registration. Maintain it, oil for the car, stuff like that. Always make sure the car's reliable. That's one thing I've gotta do for Sam's sake...I hate to think without a car...gives me access to lots of things and opens doors. (Jack)

Service providers reported that the small brokerage funds they had (Pathway Home, Doorways to Parenting, Housing Connect), together with emergency relief funds, Second Bite, Telstra-donated phone cards and Aurora Hardship Funds, were lifelines for how they supported parents with material needs. However, as parents and service providers stressed, this discretionary support was limited. It neither met all the costs parents faced, nor did it enable parents to either make choices about how to provide for their children, or to respond to emergency/unexpected costs that arose (see Chapter 6).

Additionally, service providers felt that parents were reluctant to approach services for financial support when they were in need for fear that this would be seen negatively by CSS – a sign of parents’ vulnerability or inability to provide for their children:

We aren’t provided with stats or data from Centrelink or from CS around people’s tenancy or finances, it’s all dependent on what the family is open to sharing with us, and we have had experiences where parents aren’t necessarily honest with us about those things because if the housing isn’t secure or sustainable or their finances aren’t good that can be seen as a reason to not reunify. We hope people are honest so we can support them to overcome the barriers. (Family support manager)

### Getting (deeper) into debt

Some parents talked about the struggles leading to going into debt, particularly for the big costs such as buying a car, car registration or maintenance, and white goods. This led them into more stress, compounding existing stresses caused by their children being removed and having to prove their parenting capacity.

Going into debt could include borrowing from friends and family. Families described being reluctant to ask family or services for money, as they wanted to be able to provide for themselves. But recognised that their options were very limited.

When I moved..in with my [relatives], I had no car. It was just not working...It was actually one of my friends that loaned me the money to go and get a car... It took me two months to pay her back. (Sophie)

A breakdown of the car, or something cost yer and put you out \$50. Well, you need that help. If I had to, one of my sons. You don’t want to, but if you had to, you had to. Specially what you need to maintain, like fuel, or food whatever. (Jack)

Service providers described supporting many families through deeper payday lending debt, payment plan debt and pawning. For many of these families, debts had accumulated to a level where the majority of their Newstart payment was owed as soon as they got it.

I'm aware of a family in the past that we supported hocking products that they've rented out, so taking it to [a pawnbroker], putting it on hold until they found the money to go and pick it back up. There's a problem right there. You've got a signed thing with [a rental company], you've got a product that doesn't belong to you, I've seen that before.

I think payday loans would also be big.

Yes, yeah.

I've had issues also, with the client who was...borrowing money from say mates and then getting herself in debt and them constantly chasing her knocking on her door. The kids there, and these weren't the friendliest of people and she was putting herself at risk just trying to do the right thing.

(Family support worker focus group)

All parents described this juggle as stressful, or upsetting, or leaving them depressed and exhausted.

## 5.5 The struggle to find employment during reunification

Parents interviewed expressed a desire to work. But the time needed to meet the requirements of reunification plans can interfere with the time required by Centrelink to meet job searching requirements under Newstart.

N: [CSS] told me to go get a job. Easier said than done. I do have a criminal history. I have handed out resumes. But, like I said, it's easier said than done. Especially when workplaces like you to work their time, not work around when I can work. So I have the kids on Monday and Tuesday afternoons, so I can only work a certain time on Monday and Tuesdays and then, when I have them for three nights, I can't work.

LF: So the...arrangements around reunification affects when you'd be able to work?

N: Exactly. And prioritising my kids comes first. (Naomi)

I'm thinking about doing voluntary work, cos I want to go back and get myself occupied doing something...I met this bloke and he was going to hire me part-time driving a truck. But I said I only can work Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, because I have access to [Sam]...I haven't heard back from that bloke and I'm thinking to myself, I don't know whether he'll hire me for two days... Sam comes first I think. He's my priority. I'm sort of sitting back wait to see what's going on [with the reunification process]...I do get times when I'm bored in

myself, like at home. Like I'll often want to be doing something. But then, like I said, I've gotta concentrate on Sam. I've been concentrating on Sam the last two years...doing everything right and correct to get Sam back on track. Whatever happened back at the time it just went out of hand...I'm here for my son and I want to get him back. (Jack)

Not being available to look for or secure employment can put parents' Newstart payments at risk unless Centrelink workers use their discretion to waive mutual obligation requirements. Centrelink social workers report that often they do not have the paperwork from CSS needed to confirm a client's obligations under their family reunification plan and, if discretion is used it is time-limited.

## 5.6 The impacts of losing parenting income on families' housing / stability

### PRIVATE RENTAL TENANTS

Service providers told us that parents who are living in the private rental sector when their child is removed invariably have to face a dilemma: either give up their family home, as the rent levels become unaffordable on such a reduced income, or try to stay in their family home without the income to sustain it. They invariably talked about how that second option – trying to maintain the family home – often led to families accumulating unmanageable debts, eventually leading to them having to leave their tenancy anyway. It was seen as an inevitable consequence of child removal for families who were living in private rental:

Those [parents] that are [in private rental housing] are in circumstances that they can't afford and being pushed to organise something they really can't afford. At the moment, our housing market is going through the roof; it's disproportionate to their income. (Family support manager)

Time and time again, I see families revolving through private rental constantly having trouble paying their rent, then being evicted and moving onto the next private rental...they just really need social housing. They're families that need social housing. And there's just no social housing. It's so hard to get in. (Family support manager)

Three households interviewed for *In Limbo* had been living in private rental accommodation with previous partners or as a single parent when their children were removed from their care. All three had subsequently lost their housing after their children had been removed, either because they could not afford to service the costs or to leave an abusive partner.

So I couldn't afford to live in the unit I was living in with my children, so I was kicked out of that... And I was homeless for a year and a half...couch-surfing, living in a lot of different places. (Naomi)

Like many parents service providers described, the parents interviewed for *In Limbo* who had to leave private rentals were left homeless – sleeping in their car, on couches, sharing with family or intermittently accessing very limited crisis or short term accommodation. This led to a particularly chaotic time, with parents often not seeing their children during this period, which fed their existing stress, anxiety and depression, spiralling one parent into a worsening drug habit. This period was described by two parents as 'hazy'.

The reason I stopped the drugs was sitting on the side of the road, nowhere to go, no one, nothing. Like, I was waiting for a bed at the Bridge [drug and alcohol treatment program], which took quite a long time to get in there... I think it was a four or five month period. I put myself in hospital to get off the drugs. That was my way of having a bed to sleep in, food... (Naomi)

Parents' reduction in household income may preclude them from receiving material support through the Private Rental Assistance, administered through Housing Connect. For example, a parent who could previously afford to rent a two-bedroom flat whilst receiving Parenting Payment and Family Tax Benefit would struggle to maintain that rent level on a single adult rate of Newstart. So PRA may be reluctant to pay arrears to help that person maintain stable housing if their budget assessment suggests they cannot afford to live there any longer:

If you're spending 50% of your income on a property, that's unsustainable. We can't even help you catch up with rent arrears or buy your groceries because ongoing it's unsustainable. (Family support manager)

Share housing was mentioned by parents and by service providers as the only affordable option in the private rental sector for families. Although children can be reunified with their parents into shared accommodation, it requires significant checking of other residents and does not enable parents to control their environment to ensure safety for their children, not something parents were comfortable with.

I think [Housing Connect] said I could get [accommodation in the private sector] worth \$250 a fortnight...Which is just not doable. And he suggested I get a share house. I said, 'I'm not going to have my children back in a shared house. Like it's just, they [CSS] will not let me have my children there. (Naomi)

All the parents interviewed for *In Limbo* resolved their accommodation challenges by either public housing or family members offering accommodation.

## PUBLIC AND SOCIAL HOUSING SECTOR TENANTS

### Parents living in public and social housing at point of child removal

If parents are living in public or social housing at the time their child is removed and their income reduces, their rent should be reduced. Public housing rents and rents set by Better Housing Futures social housing providers should be adjusted to a quarter of their new household income. When parents are able to maintain their tenancy, it can have significant benefits for families who lose their children. For the two-parent household interviewed, this had provided a stable base to maintain a family home.

LF: You're in public housing?

S: Yeah.

LF: So the rent dropped did it, as your income dropped?

S: Yeah. That part was a little bit better...I had to go and tell them [Housing Tasmania] and just show them my income statement and that was fixed straight away.

LF: If you'd have been in private rental when the kids were removed, how would it have been different for you, do you think?

S: I'd probably be homeless. (Sandra)

However, service providers highlighted that it is not always a smooth path for parents living in public housing. For some parents the pressure of maintaining other parental and reunification costs on the household income and/or chaotic behaviour triggered by child removal trauma may result in financial management becoming a daily struggle or even taking a back seat. This may lead to significant rent arrears or tenancy management issues accumulating.

For any parent, it doesn't matter how bad a parent you are or how much you don't meet society's expectations, removing the children is a trauma...And people will behave abnormally. But in the circumstance, it's actually behaving normally to an abnormal circumstance. And what comes with that often in any kind of trauma is the inability to cope with certain things in life, or certain things get neglected, because they're just not in the radar. So housing does fall over.

(Family support manager)

In addition, parents may choose to forfeit their home due to the trauma of child removal. This was Natalie's reaction when her children were removed from her care:

I had three kids, And I was there [in public housing] for seven years. I didn't get kicked out of the house. When the kids went, I couldn't be there anymore, so I just gave the house up. Like I felt like I didn't deserve a house or anything. I went on the streets, I felt that's what I deserved. Because like my kids had been punished, why should I have a house? (Natalie)

Public and social housing managers have a suite of tenancy and arrears management processes to support the resolution of tenancy issues.

Once parents are unable to maintain a stable home, this may be assessed by CSS as an indicator of parents being unable to provide adequately for their children, and at best stall the reunification process. Under such circumstances, there are very few housing options left for parents to access, given Tasmania's limited access to supported accommodation options for families.

### Parents who want to access public or social housing after child removal

For parents applying for public or social housing after child removal, the main struggle is securing a property, given the significant waiting time within the Social and Affordable Housing Register. Families reunifying are not a designated priority group in the way families fleeing domestic violence are.

I tried, I was on the housing list for two years on high priority...If I didn't book an appointment with [the Housing Worker], he didn't book appointments. If I didn't make contact in six weeks, he'd cut me off the system. (Naomi)

However, HTas managers do have discretion to fast-track an application for housing. This was the case for Jack, the father interviewed for *In Limbo*. The provision of support letters from agencies and professionals working with parents, such as GPs and family support services, is clearly crucial here. And there is also an opportunity for CSS to liaise directly with Housing Tasmania to flag the need.

I was sort of pushing Housing [Tasmania]. I was going to see them regularly, asking what's happening... I got a phone call saying, 'Jack, if you're interested, we've got keys to an accommodation place.' I think it was a bit of a push job, with me contacting all the time and a couple of letters from the [CSS] Department here, letters from the doctors into the Housing Department, just letting them know my circumstances was genuine and my situation was the quicker I get back in there, the quicker I start the process of my son getting back into my care. (Jack)

Housing Tasmania will assess families' future requirements for bedroom space and try to allocate appropriate accommodation if Child Safety Services provides evidence that reunification is occurring or is anticipated to occur. This evidence is not routinely provided by CSS to Housing Tasmania; it requires the parent or a proactive support worker to request the evidence be provided.

We've done a couple recently whereby we've had applicants on the wait list who want a house, you know we've got three kids out of care or temporary care arrangements, so we've got the capacity to look at that applicant and afford them a slightly special status just because we've got all of government working

around this family and getting this family back together or getting a kinship arrangement in place. So we would see if we can't allocate an appropriate property which would then allow CSS to reunify the kids quickly and get them out of care, or get them out of multiple care arrangements. You know sometimes it's two kids over here and two kids with one-bedroom apartment up in Bridgewater and you need to put them back together with aunty over here, and we work actively with CSS to do those kinds of things. It's not every day but occasionally they cross our way as well. (Public housing manager)

When this happens, it can have positive outcomes for reunifying families and Jack and Sam were clear beneficiaries of this process:

If I was [in] private [rental accommodation], I would be worrying about paying rent, I'd be worrying about whether I was going to stay there end of lease. At least with this [public housing], I know...I've already signed another 18 month lease. So now I've got a secure, permanent residential address and I can afford the rent. Cos if I was private I would be struggling hard. (Jack)

#### PARENTS FLEEING FAMILY VIOLENCE

With high demand for women's shelters and limited places available through the state's Rapid Rehousing program, families experiencing domestic violence often find themselves unable to secure stable, safe accommodation. This can lead to children being removed due to safety concerns, and can lead to additional challenges for parents needing to secure stable accommodation in order for family reunification to occur. Often victims will opt for returning to the home where the perpetrator lives due to lack of other stable options, even though this is likely to be assessed by CSS as an unsafe option for the children. This often results in reunification being stalled.

Naomi's attempts to find a secure space for her and her children led her to access a crisis shelter and then to find a private rental unit - but ultimately she felt she had no option but to return to the perpetrator.

When I first left my partner, I went to [a crisis shelter]. I was there for 18 days. He found me and he was actually inside the premises...I didn't get assigned a worker at all for that 18 days...Even when I moved into my own house, I wasn't able to protect my own kids from him. Even though I had an FVO [Family Violence Order], I couldn't breach him on the FVO, cos I had no video footage of him being there. It was only verbal. (Naomi)

### SECURING ACCOMMODATION IN THE RIGHT LOCATION

If parents are unable to maintain a stable and suitably sized home and do not have a strong support network, they may be assessed by CSS as being unable to provide adequately for their children, and at best stall the reunification process.

Families in rural areas of Tasmania face particular housing challenges, with limited public housing options and appropriate private rentals. If they are able to secure a rental property in the current competitive rental market, the property may be in a location far from where their children are in care and in school and where their support networks live. This significantly increases travelling costs.

Maintaining stable schooling for their children made it more challenging for some families to secure appropriate accommodation. Two parents, who were both currently living with family, were very mindful of the difficulties of securing accommodation in a location that would not disrupt their children's schooling:

Well, Child Protection [sic] have said that once I get [the children] back, they'd go to one more school and that's it, not to change them again, because Lilly been to three schools already. (Naomi)

Close to kids' school. That's another issue. Because they've already had enough disruption in their life. It's something we think about too, but sometimes, they just shift their children 'cause they've got no other choice.

(Housing support worker)

Location can also be important for helping families leave detrimental networks. Housing providers commented that they were aware that often families needed to leave their existing neighbourhood in order to escape from negative influences or threats of violence:

Some of our places are...in environments where they're probably escaping from...

If we have a place in Chigwell and it's suitable, but they're escaping that area... and that would come out in their assessment, the initial support conversation... They'll say, 'Can't go here...my cousins live over there, they're best friends with my ex...'

And sometimes if it's near a main road, cars and people driving by, women do knock back property, saying no it's too visible, people can see me...

My boyfriend's a stalker. You've got to hide my car...

I know you're talking about reunification, but it always comes back to domestic violence.

(Housing support worker focus group)

Parents described wanting to move to different area due to the stigma of having children removed from their care. Natalie highlighted this:

I don't wanna be somewhere where I know everyone and people look down on me, probably because of what's happened and stuff like that. I don't want the shame. I'd put in for [public or social housing] anywhere else bar [former suburb]. Just a fresh start. I feel a horrible gut feeling going to the shop down there, you know, cos that's the life I used to live. I used to go there with the kids, and, nah, it's not for me anymore. (Natalie)

## 5.7 Regaining parenting income during reunification

Confusion was expressed by some parents and support workers about what point in the family reunification process parents would be able to access parenting-related payments. This is unsurprising, given the complexity of the system. But it added to the challenge for families of planning their finances, as one support worker commented, 'Even when they are at that three night stage it can still be months before they get that payment'.

Jack's situation highlighted this struggle. He was about to have his son for two nights a week, which is just under the five nights (35% of the time) needed to claim some parenting-related payments, such as Family Tax Benefit:

If I get [family support worker] to help if she can; any help apart from myself, to get the ball rolling. Because, see, I hadn't got any of the details; like I'm not sure what I'm gonna receive or what I need to have paperwork, or what Centrelink requires. I'm not sure of that. That's all new to me now again. When [Sam] come into care before, it took me a month and a half paperwork and rigmarole. (Jack)

Natalie, who had reunified with her daughter fully into her care four months ago, was still waiting for her parenting payments to be processed by Centrelink. This led to feelings of frustration with the process and her ongoing invisibility as a parent and her parenting costs:

I have had trouble with Centrelink ever since [reunification]. I still haven't been paid. Me and [family support worker], we have harassed and harassed them. [Kinship carer] gave me a letter to take into Centrelink...I got a lady that just could not be bothered with me...She just looked at me and said, 'What do you want me to do with this?' And I said, I have to give you this to put on file. If you read it, you find it says that Eve's reunified into my care and that any income comes into that. She said, 'All I'll do is photocopy it and pass it onto somebody else.' A couple of days later, I rang up and no one even got hold of this thing...I rang up the [Centrelink] Families Line the other day and they said, 'Yes, it's just in the waiting process and...it's just a big waiting game.' Well that doesn't really help at the moment. (Natalie)

## 5.8 Impacts on families

The pressures of reunifying in poverty and unstable housing can have a huge impact on parents' stress levels and depression. It can exacerbate existing mental health challenges or struggles with addiction.

### DIMINISHED CONFIDENCE IN PARENTING CAPACITY

Such anxiety and depression can often lead to feelings that they are not a good enough parent or have no hope of reunifying. One housing worker described how one of her client's struggles to provide for her children without seeing progress with reunification would lead to a negative cycle of behaviour for her:

I know with Brenda, she spent her little money on setting up the bedrooms, because that was, for her, she lost all her furniture and then rebought it all. And then, when it came [her children] came for visits...she struggled to have food in the house to feed them...and then birthdays and Christmas. She felt like such a failure as a parent. And then that starts that cycle of self-hate, addiction.  
(Housing support worker)

### INCREASED FAMILY STRESS

Parents and service providers talked about parents' stress and trauma being compounded by the huge emotional impact of repeatedly moving and losing their possessions:

A lot of women that you talk to - that sense of loss of their belongings. So they don't have their own bed anymore, they don't have their own couch, they don't have things that you kind of take for granted. So that is obviously a financial cost on them, but the sense of loss. Like I was talking to a lady and she's like, I just don't want to lose any more of my things. [She'd] just lost so much that she'd previously worked hard for and because of her current situation, she'd had to leave it all behind. So that, I think, has an impact on people. Not just them having to replace it all, but just that sense of loss. (Housing support worker)

Embedded in parents' descriptions of what they needed to do to provide for their children on such a limited budget was a strong sense of maintaining their dignity and protecting their children from the parental stress involved. Natalie talked about this well:

It's so hard to feed three kids on \$300 a fortnight. [Family support worker] brings a food hamper thing once a fortnight and stuff, and that helps. The kids don't know that I struggle. You always find a way. They don't know and you don't want them to know...Ben [her son] would stress if he thought I was struggling, because he's got a big heart that child. (Natalie)

**PARENTS FEELING THEIR PARENTING ROLE IS BEING UNDERMINED**

Parental stress and decreasing confidence seemed to be exacerbated by a feeling that their parenting role was being overlooked/ignored by CSS and carers.

Most parents expressed concerns about feeling that their children's welfare was not in their hands. This was particularly strongly expressed around parents' lack of power and authority to progress medical concerns their children may have. These included ensuring children got access to psychologists, as parents were concerned about what impacts the children's removal may be having on them. And in one case, a parent recalled being told his child was ill, only to be left for three days before being updated on his child's health:

I've been asking for my daughter to have a psychologist appointment since November last year. When it went to court for another 12 months Order...My lawyer was disgusted in Child Protection for not doing that and it still hasn't been done....[CSS worker] has been there for the last three months, and [family support worker] has said, 'Are these psychologist appointments going to happen?' and I don't hear anything about it. Lilly's seen quite a lot of things she shouldn't have seen and that's why she suffers from nightmares...they did praise me for being aware of my kids' needs, but what have they done since then? (Naomi)

I got a text one time when [Sam] was first in into care from the [CSS] Department, going 'Sam's got a temperature of 39.5. Not well. Hopefully he's going to get better.' Or something. And that was it! Three days later, I didn't hear a thing from no one. Trying to contact everyone to find out, could contact no one...I rang [the Minister] and told the situation and she got onto them, and I got a phone call straight back to check the situation...I got that upset...Found out the boy's crook, but I think they just took him to the local doctors. Usually someone said if they get a temperature like that, they take him straight to hospital. That's what I was panicking about. That was one of my main concerns ...not having proper contact in case something happens to Sam and no one tells me nothing...Eventually, we had sit down meetings...with [CSS] sort of working out issues and one of the biggest ones was communication. Lack of communication...that's been solved now, but it was worrying at the time. (Jack)

**MORAL INJURY AMPLIFIED: PROGRESS NOT ACKNOWLEDGED**

Parents clearly felt that their considerable efforts to address their previous unsafe relationships and housing, addictions, poor mental health and any concerns about their parenting skills were not acknowledged by the system. They were forced into a state of limbo whilst they were reunifying: being challenged by the system to provide a holding space for their children to return to, without being offered an adequate means of affording it, unless they were offered accommodation where the rent would adjust with their income.

For example, when asked how she felt about reunification being held up by needing to secure appropriate housing on her limited income, Naomi's response was:

Pissed off. Because... [CSS] know Tasmania's the most expensive state to live in at the moment. The housing's just shocking. They've watched my struggle with housing, like I've always worked closely with them. They've watched me move into a house, get kicked out of a house, they've watched me go up and down, up and down. So for me to finally get stable accommodation and them question me, 'Oh is that where you're always going to stay with the kids?' ...I can't look that far ahead into the future cos I don't know where I sit with them with the kids coming home. (Naomi)

It was common for parents and service providers to talk about how little control they had over the reunification path when housing was the main barrier to progress. Jack described his concerns about how tiring it was for his son to make regular long journeys between the carer and his unit, and how his lawyer described his situation as "a dilemma...there's not much you can do about it." And I thought, "Oh, I wish there was!"

One group of crisis accommodation support workers reflected on the typical impacts they witness:

It has a mental impact, a psychological impact in terms of [parents] thinking my next accommodation will...not be stable, because I can't even get short term [accommodation]. To then find something to have with the kids?...  
It puts psychological pressure on them...  
And then CS will look at it and say, 'Well, you've only secured yourself a one-bedroom house. Where are your children going to sleep if you get them back?...' The children, they might think, 'Well, Mum doesn't want us back, or isn't making an effort to get us back, because, yes, she's got a house, but there's only room for her. She hasn't thought about us. She hasn't included us...'  
Often the children don't understand what's going on and the [reunification] process,...and it's often left up to the Mum to...explain, which I find is really unfair. (Focus group of crisis accommodation support workers)

Parents' frustration seemed to be amplified, given that they had addressed other parenting concerns and were demonstrably able to reflect on what's in the best interests of their children:

LF: And the hope is that you will regain full custody?

J: Yes, that's what they're saying...Eventually. You can't just jump Sam back into another environment. Slowly. I'll agree to that too. Adjustment. He's grown to know the foster carers; he's like with Nan and Pop. (Jack)

When stable housing had been secured and reunification had progressed, parents' depression and despair had lifted to give way for reflection and a growing sense of control over their sense of self and their sense of being able to parent their children confidently. Jack reflected on this point well:

Been through a lot, but now it's slowing down, got myself secure accommodation, working on Sam concentrating on Sam, he's coming back slowly, he's happy. I'm getting to feel better in myself, because I'm seeing him more and seeing something happen. Before, when all this was happening and not knowing what was going on - one hour [access] a week, it was stressful. Not knowing who he was with: are they decent people? Is he going to school? Who does he play with? (Jack)

## 5.9 Impacts on the children

### PROLONGING THE TRAUMA OF FAMILY SEPARATION

Evidence and practice tell us that the longer children are separated from their parents, the deeper they are traumatised by child removal. Both parents and service providers reflected that reunification being dependent on parents securing stable housing – a factor outside of most parents' control on their limited income – leads to children being unclear about their future with their family and prolongs the trauma of being separated from their parents.

One parent had been told not to talk to her children about whether reunification would be progressing. This was despite her children being aware that she had addressed CSS main concerns around domestic violence and her substance use:

So for a long time, my kids just thought I was getting better when I was on drugs and my daughter used to say, 'Are you better yet, Mum?' I went to rehab and whatnot and she came to the graduation. So she knows I've been better for quite a long time. I'm not allowed to talk about reunification with my kids. I can't give them a timeframe, I'm not allowed...so when my daughter asks, 'Are you better now, Mum? When are we coming home?' I've got to change the subject. I can't say, 'soon'. ...I can't say when, because I don't know and I can't give her false hope. (Naomi)

### THE DISRUPTION OF CONSTANT CHANGE

Helping their children to handle change was a common issue that parents highlighted. They talked about how unsettling it was for their children to have to change schools and adjust to changes in care arrangements, and the pain of the goodbyes at the end of access visits. Again, these were seen as potential triggers for compounding children's existing trauma. Clarity around the reunification process helped this. But, of course, parents who were not in suitable stable accommodation didn't feel they were able to provide that clarity for their children. Service providers echoed this concern:

The inconsistencies in the routines of both households, which retraumatises... children as they're shuffled between the two houses, and the parent and the caregiver. Because they're basically starting from scratch every time the child re-joins the household. And this can be one night stay with mum back to the carer for three nights, another night stay with mum, they've got different routines. (Family support worker)

When parents were able to be clear with their children about what was happening around the reunification process and change of care arrangements, they felt that this helped their children to overcome the stress and trauma of change:

I said, 'Sam, the [CSS] Department has changed it now. You see Daddy first, have a sleep, and then in the morning, you go and see your Mum.' He said, 'Oh.' Cos he was unsure. That was a bit unsettling for him. He wasn't sure what was going on. But when I explained it to him, he goes, 'Oh.' He's aware of what I say. So that's good, he understands it too...That way he's not wondering what's going on. He knows what's going on. (Jack)

I've actually explained to [CSS] that it wouldn't be fair to Olivia if I actually were to be made to look for housing of my own. Because I've done it twice within you know, the three...twelve month protection orders, and both times I've done it, myself and my daughter have suffered from it. With separation anxiety. (Sophie)

### INCREASED STRAIN ON CHILD/PARENT/FAMILY BOND

Longer periods of separation are likely to reduce children's attachment to their parents and their wider family, which increases their longer term trauma. This in itself makes family reunification more challenging. Parents talked about reunification visits being able to progress more smoothly if children had been placed near to their birth families and within kinship care.

Families who were living in public housing talked more confidently how this stable base had enabled children to spend more time with them and with wider family.

This was helping children to nurture a stronger sense of their identity within their own family – to feel they belong in and with their family:

At least [Sam's] interacting with family members. He's starting to know Paul now, his step brother, starting to know his other [step]brothers, Liam and Alex. He's starting to say, 'What's Alex doing?' or 'What's Liam doing?', or 'Where the girls?' [Sam's nieces], starting to know the other side of his family...Before, when he first come, he wasn't sure who they were. He knew them, but now he does knows them. I got him to reconnect back with them, so that's good. (Jack)

## 5.10 Impacts on relationships with Child Safety and carers

Parents' experiences of moving goal posts and timelines and feeling they have no hope of being able to meet CSS requirements around adequately 'providing' for their children, whilst knowing that foster carers may be receiving parental payments for their children, often strains an already fragile parent/CSS/carer relationship.

### AN EROSION OF TRUST: FEELING LET DOWN AND UNRECOGNISED BY CSS

There was a sense amongst some parents that they were being regularly let down by CSS. Promises or arrangements were made about smaller material aspects, like offering to provide bedroom drawers, or life changing issues, such as not addressing their children's health needs, or the mention of Orders lapsing. But parents seems to experience a regular shifting of sands with these arrangements:

The Department, CS, kept on saying, 'Oh, we're gonna get you this and this and this, and then they just didn't. I'm still waiting on drawers that they said they ordered and they haven't got them...But I got other ones that I bought...They told us everything we had to do and we done everything we had to do. And they told us things they had to do, but then they didn't do what they were meant to... We had to do five or six [parenting] courses. We done all them... (Sandra)

[CSS] did say that maybe they can give me \$10 food voucher per child per night, but we've yet to get that...They're very judgemental. Like they're quick to pick up on the things you do wrong, but don't really like to praise you on the things you do right. (Naomi)

The overall perception was that CSS did not either appreciate or address the financial struggles faced by parents who were reunifying with their children. Poverty was always there for families, but it was neither acknowledged nor addressed by CSS in the goals and expectations they had set for families:

They just think everybody's just like them. Like, not everybody's got a job. And, you know, not everybody's - well I am now - but not everybody's good with their money and can budget like that. They just expect too much really, from some people that can't afford it. (Sandra)

### TENSIONS IN PLANNING FOR CHILDREN'S PROVISION

Most parents described how their children would arrive from their carers to stay with their family without adequate provision for their stay: no extra clothes or toys or, if needed, school uniforms or food. Jack's comment was typical:

Every time I've had access, had Sam, he's come down with nothing. Steps out the car in his jumper on and that's it. Not even a coat sometimes in the cold winters, no coat, no nothing... (Jack)

This was a clear source of frustration for parents, given they did not receive parenting income for their children. Service providers regularly mentioned this as a current tension in the system too:

So the overnight stays aren't until stage three or four of a six stage plan, so it's not for quite a way down the track that they actually have access to those overnight visits, and the onus which also causes conflict between the foster carer and the family, is that the foster carers are often told that they're the ones that have to provide the money back to the parent because they're the ones receiving the parenting payment. So that can cause conflict between the two families because one is being asked to provide the other one with money... And it's giving the foster carer the power, control to refuse, or it's actually driving a wedge in the relationship between the carer and the parent because the carer has to provide and pay for the parent. That's an awful situation to have to be in. (Family support worker focus group)

Given that carers were receiving parenting income during those days/nights of access, but not providing for children's needs during that time, this led to parents expressing some frustration with both the way the system does / does not recognise the cost of caring and the lack of co-parenting between birth parents and carers.

He comes down for access with just his clothes he's wearing, so when he comes down, I change them into the clothes I got. He wears them for a few days, or the weekend, and when he goes back [to the carers] I put him back into the clothes he was wearing from there... I thought that's more sensible to ask me have I got clothes for him? No one's asked me nothing. I thought I don't know whether they just assumed I have, but you think I would have been asked.

(Jack)

The foster carer, she don't send clothes. So even though Naomi's got [her children]...[they are wearing] clothes I've got for her...Ethan's a lot bigger and all his clothes have been put away for Noah. So we've had to go out and we're buying clothes to fit him...[The foster carer] collects a pension for the kids...

and she gets their child support and she also gets paid from Child Protection [sic] (Naomi's mother)

### LACK OF CLARITY AROUND SHARING COSTS OF CARE AS REUNIFICATION PROGRESSES

The seeming distance between the parent and carer around the children's care lead to a lack of clarity for parents about what they would need to provide as the reunification process progressed – another source of stress, as well as heightening that lack of partnership around their children's welfare:

Cos, like I said, \$280 a fortnight don't go far, specially if you've got access with your son. Like I've had him for four nights and two days [a fortnight] and no help on that side of it. But...we'll manage. I'll budget it and make sure...It'll be that extra day, and plus school lunches. I've gotta find out from the carers what they actually give him or do they want me to just make something up for him. Cos I can do that...Are [the foster carers] gonna give me his school bag and school lunchbox? That's another question. I know they'll have to give me his school clothes, cos, like I said, I have to [drop Sam off at school]. (Jack)

### DOUBLE STANDARDS?

Some families expressed frustrations around feeling that, whatever the standards for stable and appropriate accommodation were, they were not being applied in the same way to carers as they were for birth families. One family whose last hurdle to reunification had been stable and adequate accommodation highlighted that their children were sharing a room at their carers, even though CSS had expressed concerns about their children doing so with them:

So they live with a lady...and her...granddaughter and there's five kids. And it's only a three bedroom house, I think. (Naomi)

And that was the reason, part of the reason, why I couldn't have the kids full time; because I only had a two-bedroom unit. ...At the foster carers, they're all in the same room. (Naomi's mother)

Such perceived 'double standards' are likely to add to any sense of moral injury parents may have developed.

#### UNDERMINING PARENTING

Parents expressed frustration and moral injury towards CSS, and sometimes carers, around not being informed about their children's health and welfare, or involved in decisions around their child's emotional, cultural or spiritual development. This ranged from issues relating to their children attending a faith-based school, through to decisions around their children's sleeping habits, as Naomi described:

Lilly suffers from quite severe nightmares sometimes, especially when stuff starts to move a bit. So she'll sleep in [the carer's] bed. Noah sleeps in a normal bed here...sleeps in a cot at [the carer's]. Lilly and Ethan were actually sleeping in the same bed together until last year. And when they moved in there, that was one thing I asked not to happen, because when I got Ethan, I had terrible trouble getting him in a bed by himself. (Naomi and her mother)

### 5.11 Impacts on the family reunification process

Three families reported that the lack of housing options had become the only or the main outstanding safety concern expressed by CSS. As parents were at the whim of a competitive Tasmanian housing market, addressing this issue promptly was out of parents' control.

Providers talked of this being the case for many families trying to reunify with their children. They were not seen as a priority for the in-demand public housing stock and there were seldom options on parents' income within the private rental market. This leaves many parents being in limbo while they secure suitable accommodation; the family reunification process is often prolonged beyond concerns about the family's capacity to parent safely. For many, the reunification becomes about material concerns.

**FIGURE 10:** The common trajectory for the income and housing challenges amongst parents who have children removed by CSS



## **5.12 Conclusion: an emerging trajectory - system-induced poverty and homelessness holding parents in limbo**

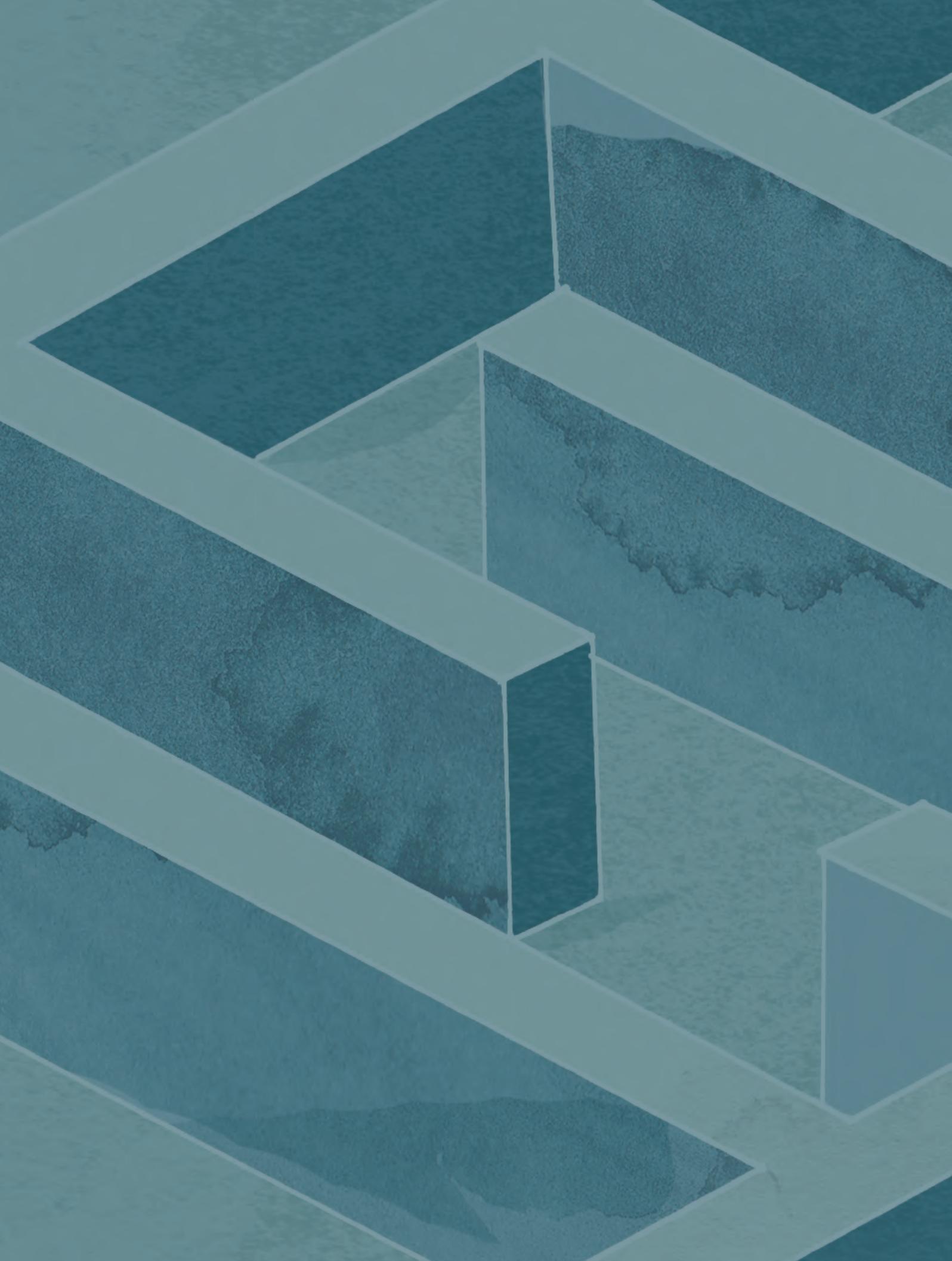
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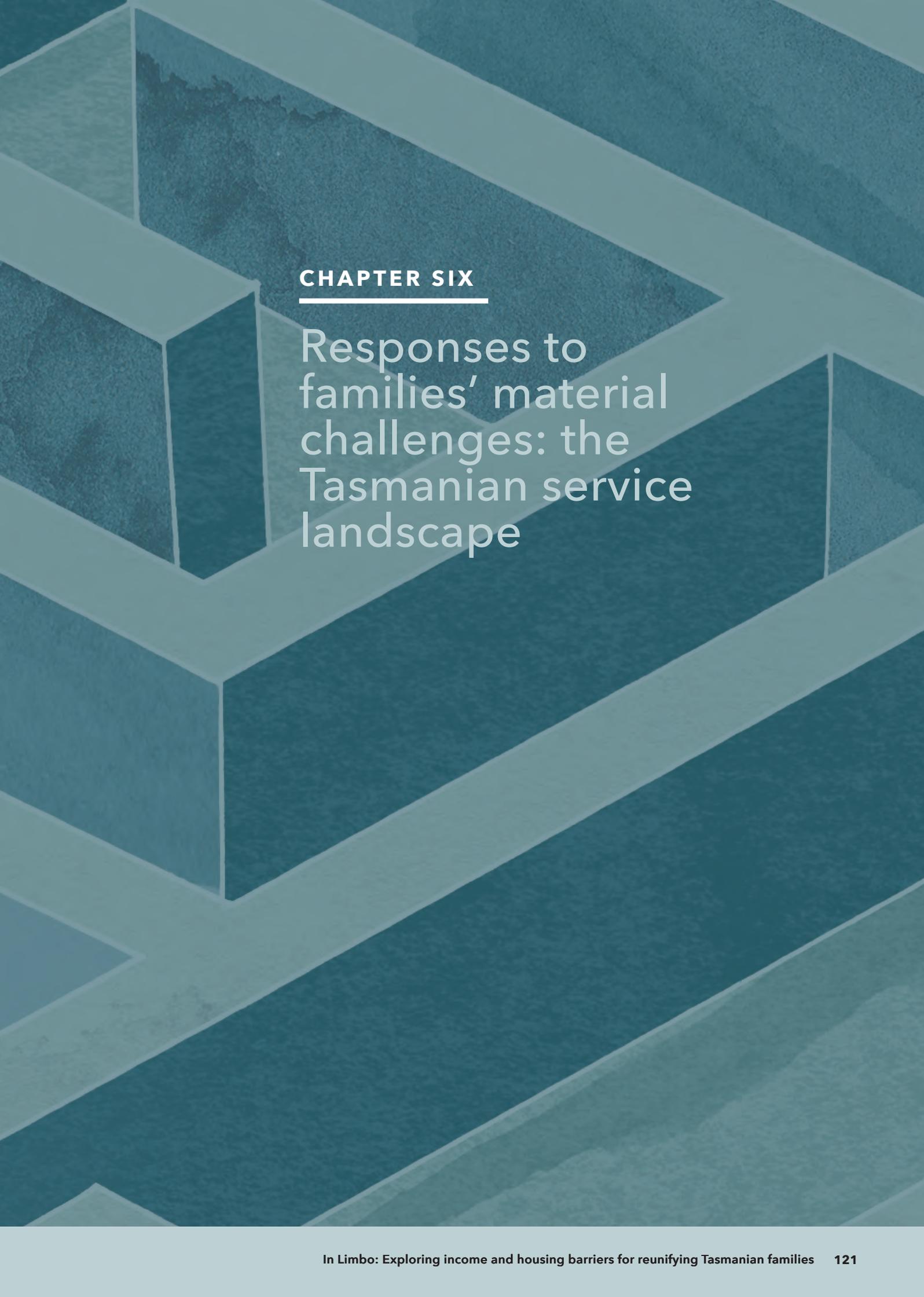
For many Tasmanian parents, there is an inevitable trajectory when their children are removed from their care by Child Safety Services within the existing framework of policies, programs and services. We can more or less predict the challenges they will face after they become ineligible for parental income, particularly those who are in private rental accommodation pre-removal and/or are fleeing domestic violence. These challenges have direct impacts for their and their children's reunification prospects.

This trajectory inhibits parents' ability to achieve the strategic goals desired by CSS and Centrelink. They do not have the resources to provide a stable base and the material needs for reunification to occur unless they are in accommodation that sets rent relative to their income. And they are unable to supplement their income or break dependency on income support by actively seeking and maintaining employment, as required by Centrelink, due to the many and changing activities required by the reunification process. They are held in limbo.

What are the strengths and gaps within the current Tasmanian service landscape that can support parents out of this state of limbo?

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**CHAPTER SIX**

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Responses to  
families' material  
challenges: the  
Tasmanian service  
landscape

*[Parents] have to be resourced to make the most of that time with their kids, because if they're only to see their kids once a week,... and they can't do anything much in that time cos they're too broke, it's really, really damaging.*

FAMILY SUPPORT PRACTICE MANAGER

Given the well-acknowledged risks of material deprivation and homelessness for parents when their children are removed, due to current policy responses, how do professionals supporting such parents currently respond to these challenges?

Drawing on programs and practice approaches elsewhere in Australia and internationally, how could Tasmanian parents who are engaged in the family reunification process access parenting income and stable housing that enable appropriate family environments for them and their children during reunification and beyond?

The following are common themes from interviews with families and professionals working with reunifying families in the government and community services sectors. Service providers and government agency staff were asked to explore their understanding of parents' income and housing challenges, how they responded to those challenges, the strengths of current service provision to address material challenges, and what would help them to work more effectively with parents in addressing income and housing challenges that might expedite reunification.

## Summary

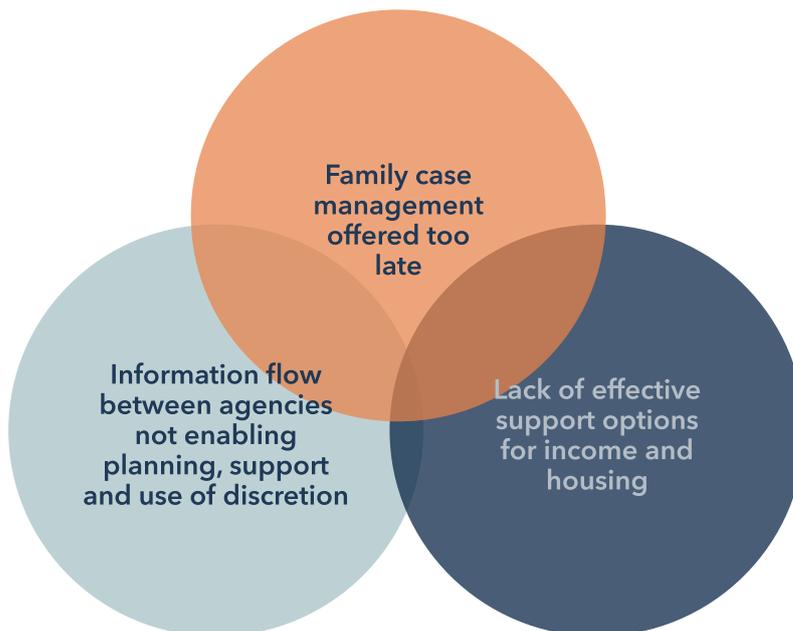
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The research revealed:

- A service landscape that does not provide consistent case management for parents at the point when they are at their most emotionally and financially vulnerable – when their children are being removed. This leads to support workers feeling that they are not engaging with families early enough to support them through their journey with Child Safety and prevent or intervene with any income or housing challenges that occur.
  - Case management and family support for families reunifying is perceived as insufficient to meet the demands of the 300 to 400 families who may be in the process of reunification in any one year.
  - A service landscape that is unable to make up for the lack of statutory recognition of parents’ ongoing parental and reunification costs, leading to professionals feeling discretionary emergency relief and brokerage funds are ineffective in addressing material basics in a way that can expedite reunification.
  - A housing support sector unable to meet the demands parents have for transitional and longer term affordable housing options in Tasmania’s current housing market. The private sector is ruled out by many support workers as unaffordable and too competitive, adding to the pressure on the log-jammed public and social housing sectors. The lack of longer term housing options was perceived as created a log jammed transitional housing sector and a lack of intensive residential or clustered family support options was a gap in provision for this cohort.
  - Service providers in government agencies and the community sector regularly reported that when information was shared between CSS, Housing Tasmania and Centrelink, it often led to positive outcomes for clients on that particular issue. But these processes were not routinely undertaken and were often prompted by a parent finally accessing a case or support worker who pushed CSS for a document, or a persistent parent who understood the system well enough.
  - There is international evidence to suggest significant cost savings for government and positive family outcomes when homeless or inadequately housed parents involved with Child Safety Services are offered a supported housing response.
-

Among providers interviewed for *In Limbo*, there was universal recognition that the collateral consequences of child removal often include increased trauma, poverty and housing challenges for parents. There was universal recognition that the consequences are not addressed adequately by current policy, program and practice responses in a way that expedites family reunification.

**FIGURE 11:** Challenges with Tasmanian service responses to material basics for families who are reunifying



## 6.1 Family case management post child removal

Family support and housing workers consistently reported feeling they are not engaging with parents early enough to support them. Support workers commonly feel that they don’t get to create a positive working relationship with parents that would enable them to support families during the removal process and cope with the immediate collateral consequences (i.e. heightened poverty and trauma). By the time the parents present to them, if at all, they have already lost appropriate housing or are having significant financial difficulties; supporting the parents to (re)establish stable and appropriate housing and financial management is then difficult within the current very limited support options.

And you can’t be reunified with your kid if you’re homeless.  
 And you can’t reunify. It’s a downward spiral post-removal for parents, and one thing we’ve noted is no supports are put in place for the parent post-removal. So while the focus of CS is on the child, there is no one to go, ‘But hang on, who’s supporting the parent?’ So there is a very big service gap that exists, and I don’t know if – look, I don’t think it’s CS’s role to support the parent, but there needs to be something that runs alongside it. If a child is removed then a service need to go in to support that parent, one, to maintain stability, and two, to work on whatever the reasons were that the child was removed. (Family support worker focus group)

Tasmania’s government does not currently contract most case management, therapeutic and practical support services for parents in a way that enables one worker to walk side-by-side with families throughout their entire involvement with CSS. Current family support case management capacities only enable services to work with a small proportion of the 300 to 400 families who may be reunifying across Tasmania in any one year.

Rather than encouraging parents and professionals to develop a safe, trusting, consistent relationship which builds skills to address trauma, as well as the practical parenting skills needed, parents are offered piecemeal opportunities to work with family support case managers and services at different parts of their journey. This means there are gaps in state-funded family case management and support services within the Tasmanian system at crucial points in children’s and family’s interactions with CSS – for example, the inability of services to provide the intensity of support needed when children are removed in order to assess the child’s safety following a notification, and the paucity of case management and consistent therapeutic and practical support at the point when safety concerns are substantiated and a decision is made to remove a child, through the period when the child is removed, until there is a family reunification plan in place.

These are points of high vulnerability and change for parents and for children, when symptoms of trauma and impacts of heightened poverty and risk of homelessness are likely to be at their peak. Naomi’s experience of case management before, during and after child removal highlighted this inconsistency well:

N: [Case manager before removal] had safe houses, they had domestic violence houses. She brought me furniture. She was gonna book the kids into child care, so I had a break every now and then. She was there to help me like, we was making progress. But two weeks later, my kids were gone...  
 LF: And you weren’t able to access her?  
 N: She did come with me to Child Protection [sic] when they told me I wasn’t going to have my kids back.

LF: What worked about the relationship between you?

N: ...She was understanding. It's hard, like a lot of people used to have opinions on my drug use and stuff like that. But they'd never been through domestic violence or had a drug addiction. And for me, trying to explain to them what was going on, they didn't understand cos they hadn't been there... I am well spoken, I am quite intelligent and whatnot, so they think that you can do that stuff all by yourself. And you can't. (Naomi)

The valuable current case management and support services that are available force parents to retell their intimate story and rebuild their key relationships at each disjointed opportunity for support, which is likely to retraumatise them. It does not enable parents, case managers and service providers to build a shared understanding of clients' histories, experiences and culture, build shared strategies to address trauma, poverty and homelessness and develop safe parenting in a way that will sustainably address safety concerns.

#### WHAT DO FAMILIES NEED?

Building positive and consistent working relationships and connections are key to breaking through the emotional wall of mistrust and alienation that moral injury and trauma can build for parents involved with child protection.

Kenny (2015) describes some of the key elements of trauma-informed practice:

- a safe, supportive environment which protects against re-traumatisation;
- understanding clients and their symptoms in relation to their history, experiences and culture;
- ongoing collaborations through all stages of delivery and treatment; and
- an emphasis on skill-building rather than managing symptoms. (Hinton 2018)

Fernandez et al.'s (2017) recommendations for working with reunifying families in poverty highlight that engagement with families is crucial to successful outcomes. Families require help to find and retain a home and manage financial stressors and other complicating factors, such as poor mental health or challenges with alcohol and drugs. They point to the need for a tailored case plan and integrated services at an early point in the relationship with Child Safety Services.

Families talked about wanting to have a support worker who would walk with them through their whole involvement with CSS – a continuous advocate and organiser for their needs, who understood their circumstances, with whom they could develop a meaningful working relationship, who could be on their team when they were discussing concerns and plans with CSS and who could point them towards the support they needed.

Stability and structure - That’s what I needed... I just needed someone to take me under their wing and head me in the right direction. (Naomi)

Service providers regularly talked about the need for early intervention for families post-child removal to keep living conditions stable and enable case managers to work with families in a way that opens and keeps family reunification a possibility for as long as possible.

We need to have something that supports parents to keep their living conditions relatively stable...regardless of whether or not that reunification decision has been made. By not providing that support until the reunification decision is made, we are reducing the chance of reunification. We’re throwing them into this state of poverty that they will find...very hard to get out of.  
(Family support practice manager)

Service providers talked about case management services ensuring parents have access to the therapeutic, emotional and other practical services they need at each stage, including referral to support and services that can help parents address income and housing challenges. This case management service should work with parents whose children are on Assessment or Short Term Orders as well as longer term. They said Child Safety Services and other relevant agencies and support services need to develop an immediate post-removal plan covering what needs to happen to either get children home within the first six months or for the family to become reunification ready.

## 6.2 Lack of effective service options post-removal

There was universal recognition amongst service providers interviewed that the collateral consequences of child removal often include increased poverty and housing challenges or homelessness for parents and increased parental stress. They also recognised that the consequences of removing parental income are not addressed by current policy and program responses, even though such depression / poor mental health / diminished parental confidence can be assessed by CSS as an indicator of parenting capacity being compromised.

### NO STATUTORY FINANCIAL RECOGNITION OF PARENTS’ ONGOING PARENTAL AND REUNIFICATION COSTS

Service providers and parents regularly expressed incredulity that there is no statutory federal or state replacement income for parents whose children are removed by Child Safety that recognises the ongoing costs families have – some form of payment to recognise the need to maintain a stable family space, meet ongoing parental costs, and the costs of meeting the goals needed for a successful family reunification to occur.

This seems to result in parents feeling that CSS does not recognise their struggles and successes in meeting parenting costs on such a reduced income. Parents are left to find and draw on a handful of discretionary emergency support services to address their material deprivation. Such payments certainly help to bridge the income gap for some parents, but do not meet all their needs and lead to parents being occupied by the constant juggling of costs, resulting in stress and anxiety, rather than being able to concentrate on any other remaining safety concerns, as explored in chapter 5.

Some of those big costs that are associated with having children, they stay. They don’t change...Why wouldn’t we have a situation where parents could continue to pay for things, like they do all the time? They want to take their kids on activities and have fun times when they spend time together and they can’t afford it. So they’re having to ask agencies for that help. And some agencies give it and many don’t. If they’re then able to use that money to pack a sandwich, pack a picnic basket and pay for the movies or whatever, it is [what] normal families do when they spend time together. Park the car, get to the venue, meet people, do that with a bit of bloody self-respect instead of having to ask for stuff and be told, ‘no’. (Family support practice manager)

Service providers also highlighted how detrimental withholding parenting-related income is for parents and children’s relationships, for realistically assessing parenting capacity and for progressing family reunification:

They have to be resourced to make the most of that time with their kids, because if they’re only to see their kids once a week for a couple of hours, and they can’t do anything much in that time cos they’re too broke, it’s really, really damaging. (Family support practice manager)

### **FINDING AFFORDABLE ACCOMMODATION WITHIN TASMANIA’S “HOUSING CRISIS”**

Most service providers across the community sector and government agencies reported that the lack of options for parents to meet the standards for material basics is being exacerbated by the booming Tasmanian housing and tourism economies, making private rentals even less affordable and in short supply and adding to the pressure on the shortage of public, crisis and transitional and long term housing options.

Service providers commonly reported that crisis and transitional accommodation options across the state were at full occupancy, with endless demand waiting in the shadows. This led to crisis accommodation, such as shelters and, in particular, community tenancies, being utilised as transitional housing – on average for a year.

At the moment, we’re really log jammed, because there’s not really a lot of exit points for the client. (Housing support worker)

It made prioritising accommodation for certain cohorts extremely challenging and meeting the needs of Tasmania’s homeless families impossible. Allocating crisis and transitional housing had become about the right client being in the right place at the right time:

Essentially, it is very ad hoc and we don’t have enough supply for families needing community tenancies [EAPs]...

We don’t have a waiting list [for EAPs], because there’s no point. The waiting list would be huge.

(Housing support workers focus group)

Service providers also reported that they worked with many parents who could not access public or private rental accommodation due to previous debts:

The options for these people, they’ve burnt all their bridges by the time they get to us... Most of the people going into community tenancies when they first come through, they could be escaping domestic violence...

Like sometimes, we find they don’t even know they have a debt, because they’ve moved around so much and it’s not until we actually do a new application for them that Housing Tasmania goes ‘Oh, there you are!’ And then that’s when we find out if they’ve got a big debt. And you know, if they’ve had a history of domestic violence or things, the debt might not even relate. It might be a relationship that’s ended years ago.

You find a lot of...women incurring these massive debts because of domestic violence...

It just adds to the level of trauma...Often, if it’s financial abuse as well, they might have a whole raft of debts as well that aren’t things they’ve actually got, but they’re in their name... (Housing support workers focus group)

Service providers talked about the important role of Rapid Rehousing in addressing transitional housing needs for women fleeing domestic violence, including those whose children had been removed by CSS due to safety concerns. But again, that demand far outstripped supply and there were not enough affordable accommodation options for families to exit to:

After 12 months, [the rent] goes back up to market rent in the private rental sector. It can be an issue, because they still can’t afford the market rent, so the support worker needs to find alternative accommodation. So it’s not stable accommodation. It’s not secure. It’s still transitional. It’s good to have

something like that and we’ve got some good outcomes with it... But it’s come at a time when affordable housing in the rental market is just not there.

(Housing support worker)

However, housing workers were consistently clear that there was an important role for transitional housing in providing a stable base for families to address other challenges and reunify with their children:

We see it as a really positive aspect of what we do, particularly for families in that reunification space...

We see it as a great opportunity to work with families who have so many issues going on for them...If you were to put a family straight into a general tenancy, that could quickly fall over ...because of all the issues going on for them, their finances might drop off. They’re not in a place where they can manage the tenancy enough to keep it. Whereas when they’re in a community tenancy, or a direct tenancy, it allows us the opportunity to work with them and for them to identify where they need support. And we would be much more lenient and understanding around those issues.

We can get all that support around them and work with them for that time and then we can move along, knowing they can be successful.

The other thing about it is...the rent is so low that they are able to be in secure housing while they work on getting their children in their care. Whereas if you’re trying to do that in private rental, it’s near impossible.

And we can also, with our community tenancies, if they have a housing debt and also a debt with a real estate, we can still put them in there and then we can work with them to pay off these debts and then open up their options for housing again. (Housing support workers focus group)

There is clearly a need to create a pathway of accommodation for families reunifying with their children from crisis accommodation, through transitional, to longer term housing options. Enabling stability for children to return is a crucial part of progressing a reunification plan. Natalie described how she had successfully accessed crisis accommodation, which enabled her and her child’s reunification to progress, only to have the process stalled by her lack of transition options to more long term accommodation:

I contacted Hobart Women’s Shelter and they had a little unit there for me, so Eve could come there one-two days a week and stay and stuff like that, and that was really good. Yeah. But I needed to have somewhere stable before they could give her back. (Natalie)

### ADDRESSING INCOME AND HOUSING AMONGST OTHER COMPLEX NEEDS

Challenges with mental health and alcohol and drug use can exacerbate parents’ financial and housing challenges. So accessing appropriate – including residential – mental health and AOD support options needs to be a key part of successful family reunification paths. These options are not readily available to families, which prolongs challenges with achieving stable and appropriate accommodation and successful reunification.

One parent highlighted that, for her, a residential rehab options had not led to a transition to accommodation.

LF: So, once you were off the drugs, what did you need at that point that would have helped you to be able to reunify with your children as quickly as possible?

N: Accommodation (Naomi)

It is beyond the scope of this project to examine this pathway in detail. However, the need to do so will be flagged within the recommendations (Chapter 7).

### WHAT DO FAMILIES NEED?

Parents and service providers highlighted that early in their involvement with CSS, it would have been useful for them to have been advised of the income changes they could expect if their children were removed. This would enable them to be clear on the Centrelink processes they had to engage with and understand what to expect in terms of a drop in their household income. They needed routine access to support that would help them to plan for that income drop and address the consequences for how they could continue to provide for their children and maintain their accommodation. They wanted access this support to start before children were removed, or at least immediately after.

Well, the first step would be to have someone...sit down and talk to me...

Go to someone, like [Doorways [to Parenting] ], or like a [financial] counsellor, who’ll listen to you, [say] here’s what you’re doing, mate. And then you can say, ‘Right, [I’m going to need] a bit of help here’, or what you’re doing wrong each fortnight, what you shouldn’t be doing. You know what I mean? ...but the main factor is, can you keep to your budget? A lot of people can’t. (Jack)

Secondly, parents and service providers described parents needing income that recognises parenting needs and reunification requirements.

Well, I just think there should be some payment. Like, I know you need to have your kids 33% [sic] to get a payment from Centrelink. I think there should be a payment for each night you have your kids. (Naomi)

They need a reunification income from Centrelink, they need some acknowledgement from the government departments that yes they are going through this process and their income needs to be increased in order for them to be able to support their children.

LF: What would that look like? Are we talking about an increment happening once you’ve got an overnight stay and then another overnight stay, or?

I think it needs to be before an overnight stay. I mean we’ve got an incidence where we’re working with a family and the parent has access to them five days a week and no income, providing breakfast, lunch, and sometimes dinner, no extra funds.

LF: Five days but no overnights?

No overnights. And so Centrelink only kicks in when you have three overnights, it actually needs to come back prior to that and actually say when reunification and parents are trying to pack a healthy lunch, a school lunch or whatever it is they need to be packing, that’s when it should be increased.

Bedding, furniture, all of these things are additional costs that our reunifying parents have to get out of Newstart, which, you know, uses a lot of funds.

Ideally it would be very nice if [government agencies] would work together to have a reunification payment. The payment increases the more you have the children and it doesn’t affect the payment of the foster care family who’s looking after the child.

LF: Okay, so based on interaction, as it were?

Yep, yep. The whole idea of reunification is to have those families supporting their children as if they were living with them. They’re attending school, they’re looking at school lunches. They’re looking at breakfast, they’re looking at appropriate healthy dinners, and that costs extra costs.

(Family support workers focus group)

I think that [providing parenting-related income] should be the first thing before they send the children back... When I first started having Eve overnight, like two...nights a week...if the communication [between Centrelink and CSS] was better between different people, they could’ve let Centrelink know that I was having her, and put a certain percent in my bank, rather than [the kinship carer] having to worry about it. And then it woulda been easier for when she had to come back full time. (Natalie)

It is beyond the scope of this project to offer a specific ‘solution’ to meeting parenting costs for reunifying parents. The project has, however, explored elements of a possible model to expedite family reunification based on the evidence provided.

An important point here is that there is no evaluated replacement parenting income provision to guide us. We can draw on lessons from population-level US studies that have shown an increase in parents’ employment replacement income decreased substantiated or indicated findings of child maltreatment (Beimers & Coulton 2011, cited in Bywaters et al. 2014). However, as previously highlighted, in Australia we do not have an evidence base to draw on about how income adjustments may impact on positive parenting outcomes.

Service providers with significant experience in family and housing support suggested that any model needs to recognise continuing parenting costs from the point of child removal onwards in order to maintain a stable foundation to address safety concerns and expedite family reunification. A couple of service providers highlighted how attractive the prospect of a parenting income trial could be.

If we could ...[have]...a trial keeping [parents] on their family payments for a certain length of time. Not just when a reunification plan is decided on, but maybe some sort of period of time after [child] removal that they get to keep those payments in recognition of their ongoing parenting role. They’re still seeing those kids regularly. They still have to pay their rent on their three-bedroom house where their kids would come back to. All of that, so they can keep their capacity to parent alive during that time. Have their kids over...and they’ll be a full fridge of food... Ideally...we have a situation where they keep their payments regardless of what the caseplan goal is, at least for a period of time...I think it would be amazing, even if we trialled it in Tasmania...[and]... in a small part of New South Wales or whatever...to see if it made a difference. I think we’ve got good research evidence for that, because we do have evidence, I think, don’t we, that when you increase people’s income, ...they’re more likely to get their kids home and...children are less likely to be abused.

(Family support practice manager)

Other practitioners highlighted the need for carers to be part of the reunification process, including a consideration of how there could be a more proactive division of parenting costs between birth parents and carers:

I think there’s real capacity for a greater role for foster carers in doing some of the practical support and supporting reunification...Just normalising those relationships. Not all carers can do it, but we obviously need that to be a core attribute of foster carers is to engage and support families to get their kids back home. (Family support practice manager)

Thirdly, service providers suggested that parents’ reunification activities needed to be recognised by Centrelink as eligible activities within Newstart. They argued for there to be an official recognition that reunifying parents were occupied with meeting their reunification goals and getting their children home, and that this limited both their availability for job searching and their ability to secure and hold down employment:

Maybe like the way the exemption from job hunting works at the moment, where the GP or someone medical writes a letter saying for the next three months this person cannot do job hunting, so for the next three months this person is working on the reunification.

And that to go through the social work department. They should be part of the reunification team in some way, and CS are the ones who update them to say yes the reunification plan has increased therefore their payment should increase accordingly.

Which is interesting because CS do that now, so once you get up to your certain percentage CS writes a letter and you take it into Centrelink and that starts your payments. So they’re already doing that process, why couldn’t they put it at the front end? (Family support worker focus group)

Fourthly, parents and service providers talked about needing clear supported housing pathways from crisis accommodation, through transitional, to longer term provision. Such accommodation needed to have a few elements – relevant and sufficient stock, affordability and flexibility in the right locations. One family support worker summed up the importance of the need for clear pathways for parents reunifying with their children:

Ideally I’d love a nice big live-in complex where the parents can come in and learn to be parents and that’s the focus.

LF: So are you talking there about a supported accommodation model for families or are you talking about a parenting support centre that families would go to for support?

Somewhere they go to, start their reunification, they would start the process through there, part of that process upon a successful reunification would be adequate appropriate housing and support within the community.

LF: Right, gotcha. So start off with supported housing.

Yeah, it’s like a step up step down. You come in and you learn all about parenting and you learn how to look after your kids and you learn how to do all that stuff, you do budgeting, you do all the big pieces that you need to know, and as it progresses you actually get transferred into housing within the community and you’re supported in that space until reunification is a success.

(Family support worker)

When asked what service providers need to support parents who are reunifying with their children, one respondent summed up the general sentiment succinctly: ‘Houses’. The lack of affordable housing stock is clearly the largest challenge in addressing the needs of this cohort, as it is with many other vulnerable groups. This appears to be the case across crisis, transitional and longer term accommodation options.

Service providers commonly cited the importance of housing-led support for parents – without a stable base, parents were at risk of disengaging, spiralling negatively into destructive behaviours and disengaging from other support responses, such as addressing mental health challenges or substance use issues, or challenging cycles of domestic violence. Even though family reunification was not viewed in itself as a housing-led program, stable accommodation was seen as a crucial foundation for it to happen:

Wrap [services] around [stable accommodation]. But unfortunately, we just don’t have...[long term housing] stock when [clients] come into the front door, rather than, okay, we’re going to work with you, but at the moment, you’re going to be at [a shelter], or you’re going to be brokered into a hotel.

(Housing support worker)

The second crucial element is affordability for parents who are not in receipt of income for parenting. Their options for securing a space are particularly compromised by their income, as well as the lack of stock. As Naomi summed up:

I think it just needs to be affordable. Like there needs to be affordable housing and more options. Because you just go on a list and you wait for a long time. And, unless you’re going through domestic violence, you can’t get into a women’s shelter... (Naomi)

Housing support workers reported the need for housing interventions at the first point of vulnerability, rather than waiting until parents were in crisis. Workers described a number of families who they had worked with who had become homeless whilst their children were in the care of Child Safety Services and had then struggled to find a stable base to reunify with their children. Any model of support needs to enable affordable housing options across the housing sectors – public, social and private. This would help to alleviate pressure on public housing stock and potentially respond to families’ location needs. Support providers’ comments reflected the need for this mix of options:

You need decent housing...If the department wanted to trial subsidised private rental for a decent length of time, like a really decent length of time, so that we were subsidising...help to get into the private rental market and we will subsidise you for two years or...twelve months...to pay your rent, just to get back on top of things, so that they’re not in a constant state of chaos and getting into debt and then having to move. (Family support practice manager)

### WHAT HAPPENS ELSEWHERE?

Healey et al. (2016) offer a detailed exploration of international approaches to and benefits of supported housing models for homeless families involved with Child Safety Services. They particularly explore the US Family Unification Program, offering vouchers to reunifying families to subsidise housing costs in the private and social housing sectors; New York’s Housing First, which marries affordable housing with intensive and integrated support (which has spawned Australia’s Common Ground model); and the US’ Keeping Families Together pilot project, which addressed affordable housing and coordinated service support for welfare-involved families.

Healey et al. also note:

- The US National Centre for Housing and Child Welfare has demonstrated that the cost of supportive housing is approximately 70% less than the cost of maintaining children in foster care (NCHCW 2015, cited in Healey et al. 2016).
- Affordable, secure housing linked with appropriate services is showing positive outcomes across programs in the US, Europe and England. Again, US research has established that it is the *combination* of focused case management, support services and a housing subsidy that supports housing stability and family wellbeing outcomes (White 2016, cited in Healey et al. 2016).

## 6.3 Flow of client information between agencies

Service providers in government agencies and the community sector regularly reported that when information was shared between CSS, Housing Tasmania and Centrelink, it often led to positive outcomes for clients on that particular issue, whether it be allocating public housing with sufficient space for reunification to occur or Centrelink clients successfully obtaining a job search exemption. But although it worked, these processes were not routinely undertaken. They were often prompted by a parent finally accessing a case or support worker who pushed CSS for a document, or a persistent parent who understood the system well enough. CSS, Housing Tasmania and Centrelink were perceived as not currently “talking” to each other in a way that supported family reunification processes around income and housing needs:

I think that CSS could...do a better letter [to Housing Tasmania]...[The CSS case worker] did mention that she was going to write a letter to Housing stating that it wasn’t up to them to say yes or no to a transfer, that she needed Eve to have her own room... And, you know, there’s no yard for her to play in. I can’t let her out of the front, cos there’s a road right there, there’s no fences... A letter like that would be great. A letter with a bit more detail from Child Protection would be really good. (Natalie)

**WHAT DO FAMILIES AND SERVICES NEED?**

Families and service providers regularly talked about the need for CSS to provide both Housing Tasmania and Centrelink with clear information about what was happening in the reunification process and when there is a change of care that would impact on parenting-related payments:

That letter from CSS. The government departments need to be talking to each other. Yes they’re starting this process and this is the stages [sic] and whether or not it’s checking to say are they still in reunification or whether it’s a report back to Centrelink.

When a family hits their three nights CSS write a letter and that goes to the family to Centrelink. We need to do that earlier. That’s all it is, it’s just a letter identifying they have a percentage of care and they’re entitled to payments now.  
(Family support manager)

Families felt that information from authority to authority would have more weight and more impact on triggering actions.

I think they just need to link it together a bit better...Like Centrelink needs to know what Child Protection [sic] are doing, because it’s a he-says, she-says. I could go in there and tell them whatever, but are they gonna believe me or not?...If there’s a reunification plan, they can see that plan and what it looks like, so they can have some sort of idea of my availabilities. (Naomi)

They need to really connect together, to get things done quicker. If Housing worked with Child Protection to put someone in here that needed it and give me a bigger house before they gave Eve back, and then they worked with Centrelink also, it’d make the process so much easier and quicker...None of them knows what the other one’s doing. It’s confusing. I think that if they worked together a bit more, for children to be reunified, it would be a lot...easier. (Natalie)

Service providers also explored the value of CSS reunification “forecasting” – sharing family reunification planning on a systemic level to support Housing Tasmania to plan future stock allocations and support housing workers to allocate additional bedrooms to parents. This project did not have the scope to explore the possibilities or feasibilities within this. However, it is an issue worthy of further investigation.

## **6.4 Conclusion: the need to address risk and vulnerability - the case for a suite of material responses to expedite family reunification**

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A common observation amongst families and service providers during *In Limbo* was the lack of service options in Tasmania to address shortfalls in income and housing, leading to family reunification processes taking longer than they need to be if poverty and housing challenges were addressed. We have a policy framework that currently withdraws parenting income from parents on the substantiation of safety concerns regarding their parenting, triggering an almost inevitable trajectory into poverty and homelessness. These risks and vulnerabilities are well recognised. But the current Tasmanian service landscape does not offer sufficient options to help parents address these material and structural challenges.

This trajectory is avoidable. But it requires a will to recognise both the emotional and material vulnerability of parents whose children are removed and the ongoing parenting costs they have to meet in order to maintain a stable base, so that the first day of removal can in reality be the first day of reunification.

It requires the availability of ongoing support for those parents to navigate their journey with Child Safety Services – from notification through to post-reunification – at a level of intensity that is appropriate for that family. It requires a reliable source of parenting income to keep households on track. And it requires a suite of supported accommodation responses that can prioritise families from child removal through family reunification and create a pathway for stability to be re-established and maintained. There is international evidence to suggest significant cost savings for services and positive family outcomes where homeless or inadequately housed parents involved with Child Safety Services are offered a supported housing response.

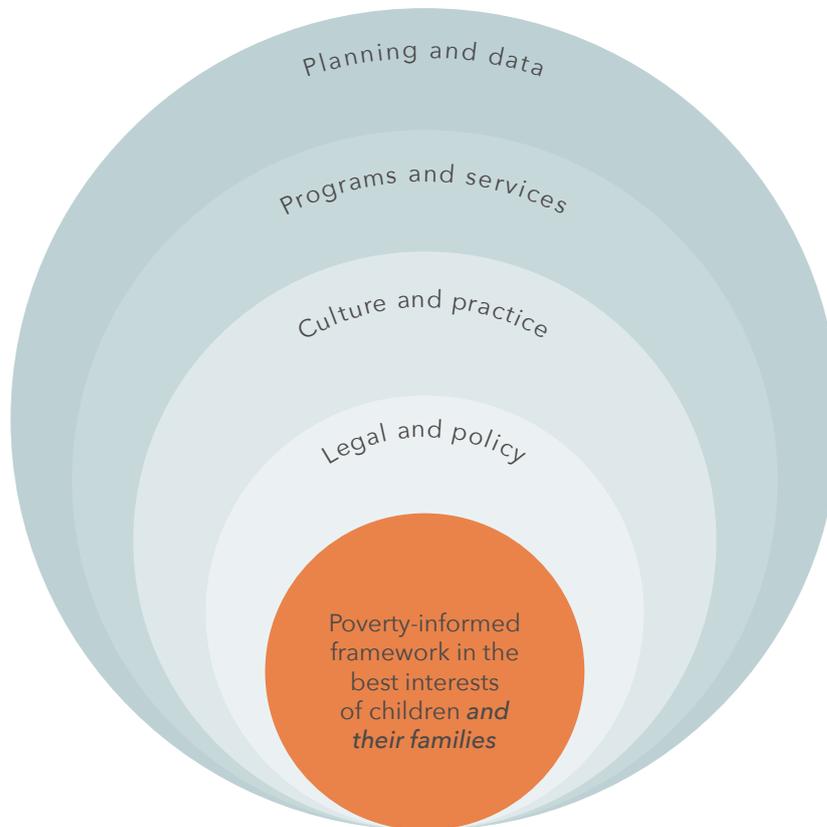
How do we ensure that parents continue to be recognised as parents, with all the costs that that entails, when their children are removed? How do we ensure that families have access to appropriate spaces in which to reunify with their children? As with culture and practice, we need to move poverty from being the wallpaper of service delivery to being at the forefront of program planning, design and delivery.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Recommendations: reimagining the provision of material basics within Tasmania's policy, practice and programs to expedite family reunification

**FIGURE 12:** The elements of a re-imagined framework to address material basics for parents reunifying with their children



We need to reimagine the policy and practice frameworks relevant to Child Safety, family support, income support and housing within an ecological approach that supports, rather than problematises, families. As Bowlby reminds us, working for the best interests of the child includes ensuring their parents are supported to provide a safe and nurturing environment (Bowlby 1951, cited in Cocks 2018).

But how could we operationalise an ecological approach to working with parents and children with poverty and housing challenges in a way that will deliver the policy aim of Strong Families - Safe Kids- *the first day of child removal is the first day of reunification*? This project's recommendations are designed to lay out elements such a framework should contain, in response to the research findings.

This research has found that under the current system:

- poverty and homelessness are not directly acknowledged or addressed in current policy and practice for families whose children are removed by Child Safety Services;

- the withdrawal of parents' eligibility for parenting-related payments when children are removed is likely to trigger a trajectory of poverty-induced stress, unstable housing, strained relationships between parents, CSS and carers, and stalling or halting family reunification; and
- the current suite of programs and services do not respond to these income and housing challenges in a way that expedites family reunification.

The following recommendations are designed to inform a suite of integrated responses from legislation and policy, culture and practice, programs and services and planning and data (see Figs. 9 and 10). They are not designed to attribute responsibility for funding or delivering initiatives, but do allocate a lead government agency to explore how these elements could be developed. They are starting points for a conversation about how we can expedite family reunification by focusing on the structural, as well as the personal, challenges that have led to parenting capacity being assessed as unsafe.

## 7.1 Legislative / policy frameworks

The Tasmanian child safety legislative and policy framework needs to go beyond simply referencing the relevance of families to acting in a child's best interest. It needs to clearly set out that acting in the best interests of the child includes a duty to address the welfare of their families. This would steer policy and programs towards a holistic suite of family support within the design of CYS initiatives. Secondly, legislation and/or policy needs to be clear about how poverty is understood and treated in relation to child maltreatment, child safety assessments and addressing child safety concerns. This would help to guide practice and action in a more consistent manner and ensure that assessments focus on both personal and structural barriers to family reunification.

What does this mean in practice?

### **RECOMMENDATION 1: Duty of care to families**

The Department of Communities Tasmania should review Tasmania's legislative and/or policy framework around children and families, so that it stresses a duty of care for families, in a similar way that there is a duty of care towards the child.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2: Clarity around how child safety practice should treat the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment**

The Department of Communities Tasmania should review Tasmanian child safety legislation, policy and guidance to ensure it prevents authorities from assessing poverty as child maltreatment, outlines the need for structural, as well as personal, responses to poverty and compels a support response when income or housing is identified as a barrier to family reunification.

## 7.2 Practice culture

The research revealed how normalised challenges with poverty and homelessness had become for many professionals working with families who have children in OOHC. How do we develop a practice culture within government agencies and NGOs that shift us from poverty being the wallpaper of practice (Morris et al. 2018) to it being at the forefront of practice?

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: Bringing poverty and homelessness to the forefront of practice and child safety planning**

Children and Youth Services should explore opportunities for Child Safety Service's practice framework, safety assessment and planning framework, Signs of Safety and family support interventions to draw on poverty-informed frameworks that acknowledge and address families' structural challenges, such as poverty and homelessness. This would assist in routinely acknowledging the material challenges families are facing (around securing stable accommodation, meeting the costs of parenting and reunification requirements), clearly stating standards and goals around material basics and interventions needed to address these.

## 7.3 Programs and services

The research highlighted the paucity of income and housing responses for parents to address their material basics in a way that expedites family reunification. It is not sufficient to *recognise* the material vulnerability for parents reunifying with their children. Tasmania needs to invest in comprehensive programs and services that *address* the income and housing challenges currently triggered or amplified by federal and state policies; we need to ensure that family reunification is not inhibited, but enabled by how we provide income and housing options for families who need to reunify with their children. This needs to be addressed before children are removed and continue post reunification to prevent to prevent an approach which is simply around crisis management.

### **RECOMMENDATION 4: Offering parents continuous case management to achieve safety goals**

The Department of Communities Tasmania needs to provide parents involved with Child Safety Services access to a continuous working relationship with a case manager who can support families from notifications and assessments, through to child removal, and to family reunification. This case management should include supporting parents to interact in an informed and constructive way with Child Safety Services and to address the practical and emotional consequences of Child Safety's processes and safety concerns. Post child removal, this case management service should work with parents, Child Safety Services and other relevant agencies and support services to develop a post-removal plan covering what needs to happens for the family to become reunification ready.

**RECOMMENDATION 5: Recognising and providing parenting and reunification**

**income:** The Department of Communities Tasmania, along with other relevant federal and state government departments, should explore a suite of programs and services that recognise and address continued parenting costs post child removal and the significant costs involved in preparing for and undertaking family reunification. These should include the following elements:

- automatic access to financial counselling pre- and post child removal to prepare parents for any change in income and explore ways to address it;
- a form of transitional parenting-related income for the first six months while an active case plan is being developed to either get children home or get parents reunification ready;
- providing parenting-related income once family reunification begins in a way that appropriately responds to day and overnight visits;
- expanding access to finance for significant one-off costs for parents that enable family reunification, such as children’s car seats, car registration, maintenance and repair, white goods and furniture;
- routinely reimbursing any expenses parents incur in arranging access visits and meeting reunification requirements, such as travel and medical fees; and
- reviewing guidelines and mechanisms that direct carers to materially support reunification activities when the carer is still in receipt of parenting payments for the child.

**RECOMMENDATION 6: Providing a suite of stable accommodation options for family reunification**

Housing Tasmania and Child and Youth Services should ensure that, in order to expedite family reunification, families whose children are removed by Child Safety Services have a suite of options to support them to maintain stable accommodation. These may be tailored to where parents are in the reunification journey and their level of support needs, but should include elements such as:

- Parents who have had their children removed and are either at the pre-reunification stage, reunification ready or actively reunifying with their children to be a priority cohort for crisis, transitional and longer-term housing and tenancy support, in a similar way to families experiencing domestic violence. Any tenancy support should routinely be part of the family’s case co-ordination team, linked to the parent’s NGO case manager, Child Safety case worker and the Reunification Case and Care Plan requirements.

- Developing a suite of housing options for parents who have had their children removed and are either at the pre-reunification stage, reunification ready or actively reunifying with their children. These might include:
  - providing specific guidance and mechanisms for HTas and social housing providers Managers to allocate adequate bedrooms for family reunification in available public and social housing;
  - exploring ways to subsidise access to private rental accommodation, as well as access to the community and social housing sector, for parents post child removal, in order to ensure that families have the option to find stable accommodation close to their support networks and children’s schooling; and
  - explore possible supported accommodation options for families. These could include both supported clustered tenancies in the community and residential support models that can work intensively with families.

## 7.4 Planning and data

The three key government agencies in the lives of many families who have had their children removed are Child Safety Services, Centrelink and, for some, Housing Tasmania or NGOs providing social housing options. These agencies’ policies and services are interconnected as the care of parents’ children changes. The agility of their responses to each other’s actions can positively or negatively contribute to whether families have gaps in their income and housing options that work for their needs.

Designing and targeting resources or support that addresses families’ needs and expedites family reunification in the best interests of the child is challenging without understanding the extent, nature and patterns of families’ struggles with material basics, and how these challenges interact with risk factors such as mental illness, substance use and domestic violence.

### **RECOMMENDATION 7: Sharing government agency case data to plan for housing allocations that enable family reunification**

Children and Youth Services and Housing Tas to explore necessary amendments to policies, processes and documents needed to ensure that active forecasting and planning of public and social housing stock for reunifying families can occur between Children and Youth Services, Housing Tasmania and social housing providers.

**RECOMMENDATION 8: Sharing government agency case data to enable smooth transitions out of and into parenting-related payments**

Explore necessary amendments to policies, processes, data sharing and documents between Centrelink and Children and Youth Services, to support Centrelink in responding to changes in care arrangements. This should include timely adjustments to parenting-related income and potential use of discretion in suspending Newstart Job Search requirements during family reunification if mutual obligations are inhibiting reunification commitments. An additional consideration would be having reunification activities treated as eligible activity for Newstart requirements.

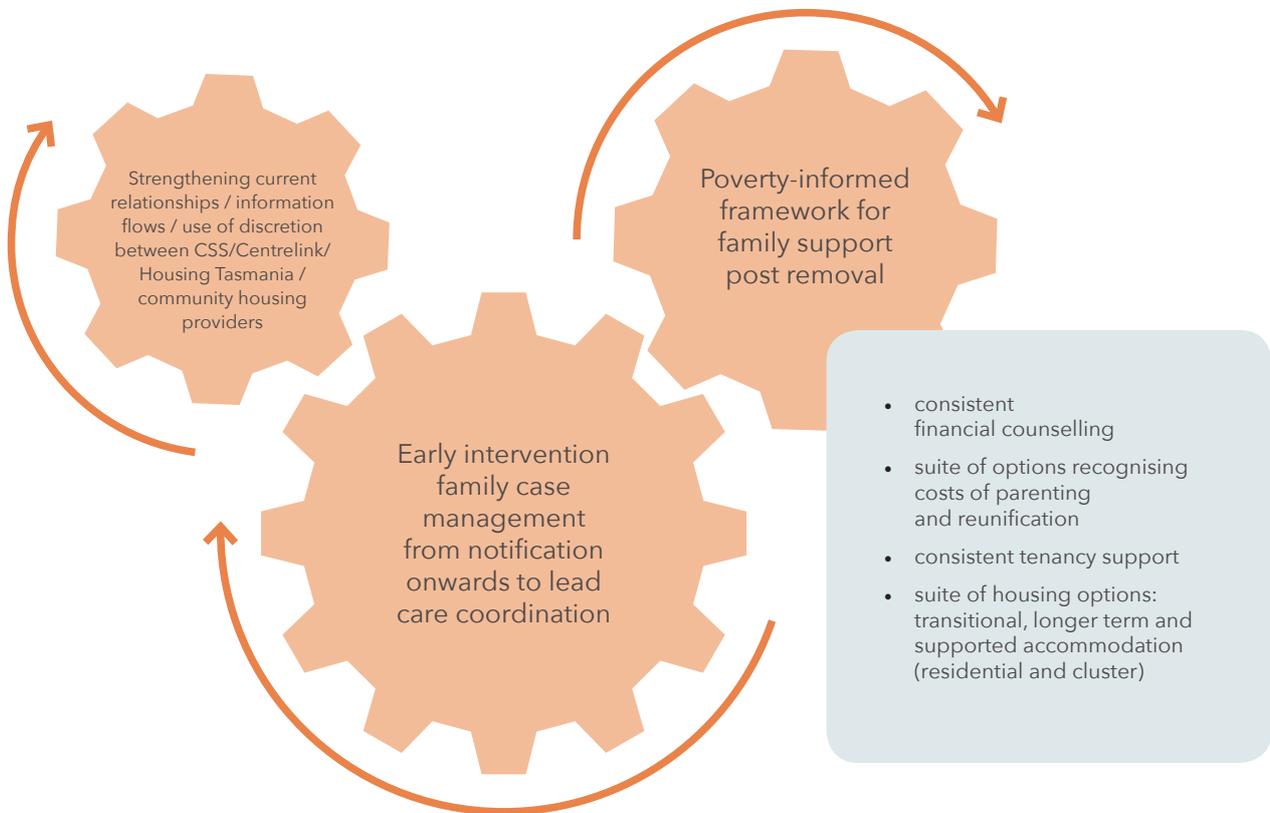
**RECOMMENDATION 9: Sharing case data to understand parents' income and housing needs for reunification on a case and systemic level**

Children and Youth Services and Housing Tasmania to explore opportunities to share case data across the CPIS and SHIP government information systems, subject to privacy regulations. This would help government agencies and service providers to understand more about families' needs on a case level and on a systemic level, and to plan resources that effectively support successful family reunifications.

**RECOMMENDATION 10: Collecting additional data to enable Tasmania to become a leader in understanding the role of income and housing in child safety concerns, interventions and service responses**

Children and Youth Services and Housing Tasmania to collect additional data within CPIS on the socio-economic circumstances and disadvantage of families involved with Child Safety Services, whether income and housing challenges are part of safety concerns in initial substantiations and as cases progress, and the distance between birth parents' and carers' households. This would enable a clearer understanding of vulnerability, risks and support needs in a family's reunification process and help us to understand trends in the role material basics have in child safety concerns and family reunifications at a systemic level.

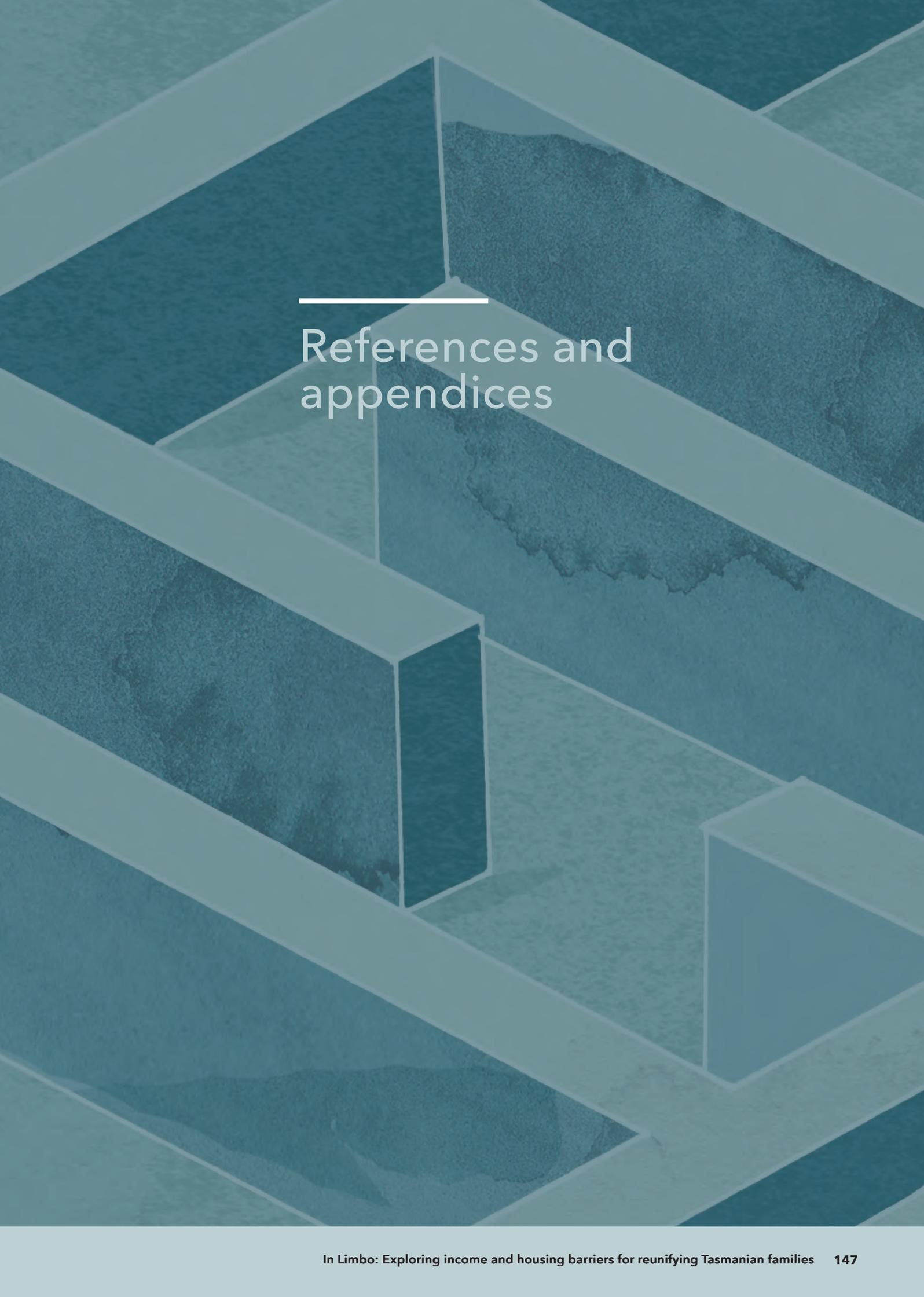
**FIGURE 13:** Summary of the integrated elements of a program and service response needed for families to expedite family reunification



## 7.5 Further research

### RECOMMENDATION 11: Areas for further investigation

There are further areas to explore to comprehensively inform the development of policy and practice in this area. These include specific responses to families experiencing domestic violence and exploring differences in experiences for Aboriginal families, culturally and linguistically diverse families and families with disabilities. There is also a need to examine residential AoD support options for parents who have had their children removed and pathways into stable accommodation for this cohort.



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# Appendix 1

## Further policy details: income support and types of child maltreatment in Tasmania

### Access to federal government payments related to parenting

The following advice was provided by Centrelink for this project.

#### PRINCIPAL CARER AND DEPENDENT CHILD

Social Security Guide 1.1.P.412 Principal carer ( <http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/1/1/p/412> )

Social Security Guide 1.1.D.70 Dependent child ( <http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/1/1/d/70>)

Through the Australian Government, parents with children in their care may be eligible to receive Income Support Payments such as Parenting Payment, Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance, Family Assistance and Rent Assistance. If you have a dependent child in your care the rate of Income Support entitlement is higher; this is known as “with dependent child/ren”. A Principal Carer (the carer with the most amount of responsibility for the day to day care, welfare and development of a child) may qualify for a higher rate of payment. If your child’s care arrangements change this may affect your Centrelink payments, your concession, and your health care cards.

The amount of nights your child is in your care may affect the “with child”/Principal Carer higher rate determination. Depending on the payments received, the assessment of the actual, ongoing care arrangements may reduce the rate of or change the type of Income Support you are eligible to receive. For example, if you have your child in your care 4 nights or less a fortnight (or less than 35% of the time) you may still be eligible for a “with child” rate of Newstart Allowance and maintain eligibility for Rent Assistance, but you’ll no longer be eligible for a rate of Family Tax Benefit Part A or Part B. In this circumstance if you’re receiving Parenting Payment you may need to apply for another Income Support payment as you may not be considered the Principal Carer of a child.

A customer may be paid the “with child” rate if they are not a principal carer but they have a dependent child in their care where care of the child is shared, and in some cases where the dependent child definition is not met but the child is considered a regular care child. These customers do not have access to the single principal carer income test.

## TEMPORARY ABSENCE FROM CARE - FAMILY TAX BENEFIT (FTB)

### 2.1.1 FTB Child & Regular Care Child

A child may continue to be an FTB child or Regular Care Child (RCC) of a customer during short-term (temporary) absences, generally less than 4 weeks. Temporary absence from care provisions must not be applied when the change of care is formal, even if it is less than 28 days.

Formal care can include instances where:

- a child is removed by a **relevant** state child protection service and placed into the care of another carer;
- the care is legally authorised by a court; or
- the change of care involves a change in legal responsibility (whether this is removal of legal responsibility from a carer or where an additional carer gains legal responsibility of the child without the current care losing legal responsibility)

However, in some circumstances, a longer period may still be regarded as a short-term absence that does not affect FTB eligibility. For example, a child may be away on holiday with relatives for longer than 4 weeks. The child may be given money for expenses by their parent who is also still responsible for making decisions about the child's welfare while the child is away. In these cases, the child may still be an FTB child of the parent.

### TRANSFER OF PAYMENTS TO CARERS

When a carer makes an application for Income Support due to a child entering their care, the change in care circumstances needs to be confirmed before any change to entitlement is affected. If the Parent hasn't yet advised of the change before the gaining carer, a request is sent to the Parent to respond to. If no response is received within 22 days the change can be recorded as per the Gaining Carers verified details.

Note: in most cases it is mandatory to attempt to contact the other carer, even if the other carer is not claiming FTB.

Exceptions to this are:

- if care arrangements have changed as a result of an order by a state welfare authority, there may be sensitivities involved, and staff should exercise their judgement on a case-by-case basis to determine whether it is appropriate to make contact; and
- if there is a family and domestic violence situation and there is concern that the customer or child/ren will be placed at risk if the other carer is contacted, the Service Officer must be satisfied based on the available evidence that a decision can be made without contact.

If the new carer is in hardship and is currently receiving an income support payment or has a claim pending, the FTB claim may be determined without delay. However, the change of care must still be confirmed; this can be by phone. If contact cannot be made and the evidence to support the decision is satisfactory, FTB can be paid to the gaining carer. The customer should be advised that if the care arrangements are contested, this may result in an overpayment for the customer.

### **REGAINING PARENTING-RELATED INCOME**

To be eligible for a partial rate of Family Tax Benefit a Parent will need to have an eligible child in their ongoing care more than 35% of the time e.g. 5+ nights a fortnight. To be eligible for Parenting Payment a parent will need to be considered as the Principal Carer of an eligible dependent child; generally the child will be in their care more than 50% of the time.

Parents may be entitled to some auxiliary benefits such as Rent Assistance, Health Care Card and Child Care Child Subsidy if they have a dependent child in their care 2 or more nights per fortnight (14%).

### **Payments or concessions for a regular care child**

#### ***Family Assistance Guide > 2.1.1.13 Regular Care Child***

An individual who has care of a child for less than 35% of the time will not be eligible for the child components of FTB.

Instead of receiving the child components of FTB, a parent who has care of a child between 14% to less than 35% of the time will have the costs of the child taken into account in working out how much child support the parent will pay. This level of care is called regular care and will be counted as meeting 24% of the costs of raising the child for child support purposes.

Individuals with regular care of a child will continue to be eligible for the Rent Assistance component of FTB Part A and other government benefits if they meet eligibility requirements. The benefits include:

- Childcare Subsidy – if child care fees are paid to an approved provider, the individual, or the individual's partner (1.1.P.30) may be eligible to receive CCS;
- a Healthcare Card (if income does not exceed the income free area for the maximum rate of FTB Part A);
- the lower threshold for the Medicare safety net in certain circumstances; and
- additional Remote Area Allowance paid with social security income support payments (e.g. NSA).

A parent who has shared care of a child for 35% to 65% of the time can be eligible for a share of the child components of FTB. This includes fortnightly or lump sum payments as well as supplements. If an individual has more than 65% care of an eligible FTB child, they will receive 100% of the payment.

For income support payments such as Parenting Payment a person could be considered the Principal Carer, (the carer with the most amount of responsibility for the day to day care, welfare and development of a). This generally is considered once the carer has at least 51% of the care.

Parents can test their eligibility for Family Tax Benefit if they have an eligible child in their care. The assistance available is dependent on their ongoing percentage of care. If they have an eligible child in their care at least 14% of the time, then they may be eligible for Rent Assistance, Health Care Card and Child Care Child Subsidy. A parent who has shared care of a child for 35% to 65% of the time can be eligible for a share of the child components of FTB. This includes fortnightly or lump sum payments as well as supplements. If an individual has more than 65% care of an eligible FTB child, they will receive 100% of the payment.

For income support payments such as Parenting Payment a person could be considered the Principal Carer, (the carer with the most amount of responsibility for the day to day care, welfare and development of a child. This generally is considered once the carer has at least 51% of the care

## **Grounds for reporting suspected child abuse in Tasmania**

Grounds for reporting suspected child abuse in Tasmania include (DHHS 2009):

Physical abuse: of, or non-accidental or unexplained injury to, a child.

Sexual abuse: A disclosure of sexual abuse of a child by the child themselves or a witness. The presence of a combination of factors which suggest that sexual abuse may have been suffered by the child such as exhibiting concerning behaviours, or where a known or suspected perpetrator has had unsupervised contact with the child.

Emotional abuse and ill treatment of a child impacting on the child's stability and healthy development.

Neglect: Persistent neglect, poor care or lack of appropriate supervision (including regular lack of attendance at school), where there is a likelihood of significant harm to the child's stability and development.

Family violence: Persistent family violence or parental substance misuse, psychiatric illness or intellectual disability, where there is a likelihood of significant harm to the child or the child's stability and development.

Other: Where a child's actions or behaviour may place them at risk of significant harm and the parents are unwilling or unable to protect the child. Where parents are believed to be deliberately involving the child in criminal activity. Where a child appears to have been abandoned, or where the child's parents are dead or incapacitated, and no other person is caring properly for the child.

# Appendix 2

## SHIP data relating to clients referred from Child Protection Services: do these clients' needs differ from those of the general Tasmanian client base for SHS?

### **Who's included within clients referred to SHS by CSS?**

The data set includes 206 clients over the three-year period. These clients could include families who have had children removed from their care and either are or are not on a reunification path, carers, and 16 to 18 year olds leaving care and transitioning to independent living. We are aware in particular that independent care leavers are likely to have a very different set of needs and service requirements than parents, and parents perhaps to carers. So this data set is likely to present that spectrum of need and services accessed.

A client is a person who receives a direct service from SHS. Children are counted separately as clients if they share a service provided to their parent(s), such as accommodation or support (AIHW 2017c).

So, amongst the 206 clients we are examining here, most if not all of the 72 children aged under 15 (see Table 7) and the 54 clients in the 15-17 age group who were referred from CSS are likely to have been part of a household with their parent(s) or carer(s). We do not know how many would have been part of a household reunifying with other children in OOHC, but they are likely to be from a family/carer household involved with CSS.

SHS can offer services for those aged from 16 years as independent clients. Of the 82 clients aged 18 plus (Table 7), together with the independent 16 and 17 year olds, some presenting clients would have been part of family units. We cannot assume there are any common households between the CPIS data set and this SHIP data set, as they do not utilise a common identifying code.

**TABLE 7:** Age profile of clients referred to Specialist Homelessness Services from CSS, 2014/15 to 2016/17

Client's age	Number
0-4	32
5-9	13
10-14	27
15-17	54
18-19	26
20-24	14
25-29	19
30-34	11
35+	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>206</b>

Source: SHIP data extraction, Housing Tasmania

### What do housing need, service access and outcomes look like for SHS clients referred from CSS compared to all Tasmanian clients?

Clients referred to Specialist Homelessness Services from Child Safety Services had a similar profile of need compared to all Tasmanian clients over the three years, but the prevalence of these issues differed. For example, domestic violence and inappropriate dwellings were the most common main reasons for seeking assistance amongst clients referred to SHS by CSS, with housing crisis being the fifth most common main need. For the general population of Tasmanian SHS clients, housing crisis was the most common main reason for seeking help, with domestic violence being the second most common.

**TABLE 8:** Top five main reasons for seeking assistance from SHS: clients referred from CSS compared to all Tasmanian SHS clients, 2014/15 to 2016/17

Top five main reasons for seeking assistance: clients referred from CSS	Number	Top five main reasons for all Tasmanian SHS clients seeking assistance: 1. Housing crisis 2. Domestic/family violence 3. Inappropriate dwelling 4. Financial difficulties 5. Previous accommodation ended
Domestic violence	53	
Inappropriate dwelling	36	
Transition from foster care / CS placements	21	
Previous accommodation ended	16	
Relationship /family breakdown	16	
Housing crisis	11	
Other reasons: named - at risk of homelessness*	37	
Other reasons: not named	16	
<b>Total</b>	<b>206</b>	

\*Includes financial difficulties, housing affordability stress, time out from family situation, sexual abuse, non-family violence, mental health issues, drug/substance use, transition from other care, transition from custodial arrangements, itinerant, environmental reasons.

Source: SHIP data extraction, Housing Tasmania; AIHW state data sets 2015, 2016, 2017

Perhaps unsurprisingly, family services were a more commonly provided SHS service for clients referred from CSS compared to services provided for the general population of SHS clients. This nested amongst the other common services provided for both cohorts – short term accommodation, domestic violence services and assistance to sustain their housing tenure (see Table 9). Given the expected trajectory for families involved with CSS (see Section 5.12), this would perhaps be the expected suite of services. Each client is able to receive multiple types of assistance.

**TABLE 9:** Top five types of assistance provided by SHS for clients referred from CSS and for all Tasmanian SHS clients, 2014/15 to 2016/17

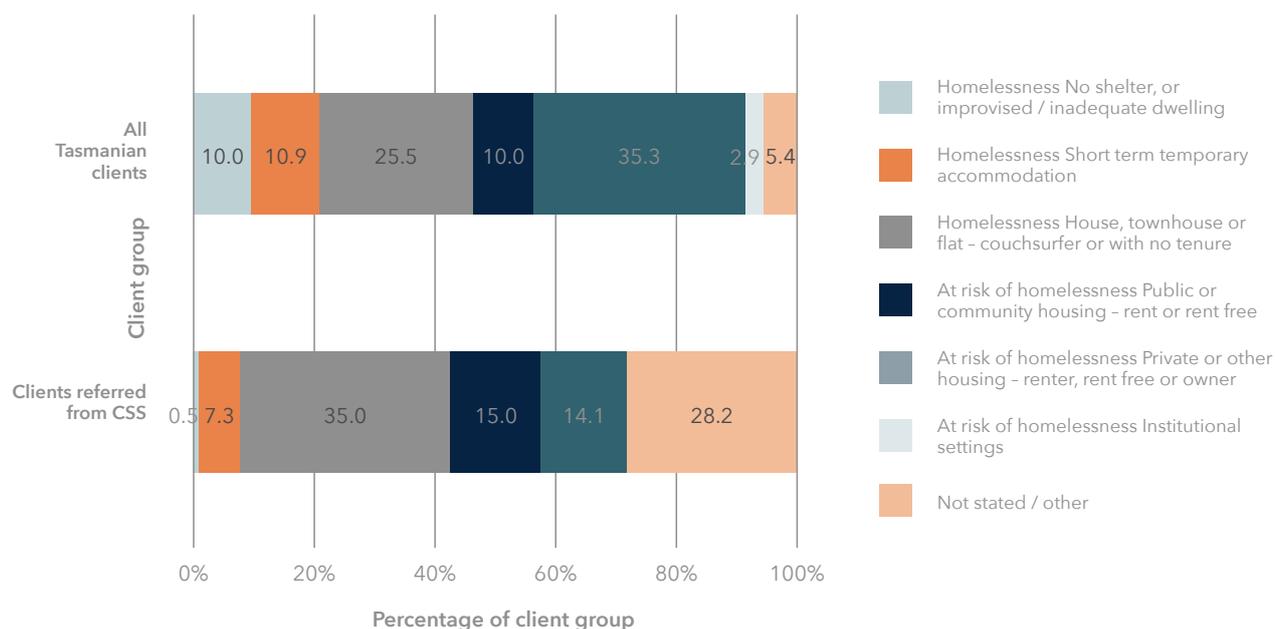
Top five main types of assistance: clients referred from CSS	Number	Top five types of assistance provided for all clients: 1. General services 2. Short-term accommodation 3. Assistance to sustain housing tenure 4. Domestic violence services 5. Medium-term accommodation
General Services	183	
Short-term accommodation provision	110	
Family Services	77	
Domestic violence services	43	
Assistance to sustain housing tenure	41	
Other services: named*	78	
Specialist services: not named	36	
<b>Total</b>	<b>568</b>	

\*Includes medium term accommodation provision, long-term housing provision, mental health services, disability services, drug/alcohol services, legal/financial services, immigration/cultural services.

Source: SHIP data extraction, Housing Tasmania; AIHW state data sets 2015, 2016, 2017

It is noticeable that clients referred to Specialist Homelessness Services by CSS had a more vulnerable dwelling profile compared to the total population of Tasmanian SHS clients. They were more likely to present to SHS as having no tenure (a third), compared to only a quarter of general clients (see Figure 14). We need to bear in mind that this cohort will include care leavers, who would be coping with the transition from OOHC, so couch-surfing and other more vulnerable coping strategies would be reflected here. Clients referred from CSS to SHS are also less likely to present to SHS whilst being in crisis or temporary accommodation, or at risk of homelessness in private rental/owned dwellings. Again, we are unsure of who this cohort consists of. But it could fit with what we would expect to see for some parents who may find it challenging to financially manage tenancies if children are removed (see Chapter 5).

**FIGURE 14:** Clients' housing situation when first present:  
Tasmania 2014/15 to 2016/17 - clients referred from CSS and all clients %



Clients referred from Child Safety Services: n= 206

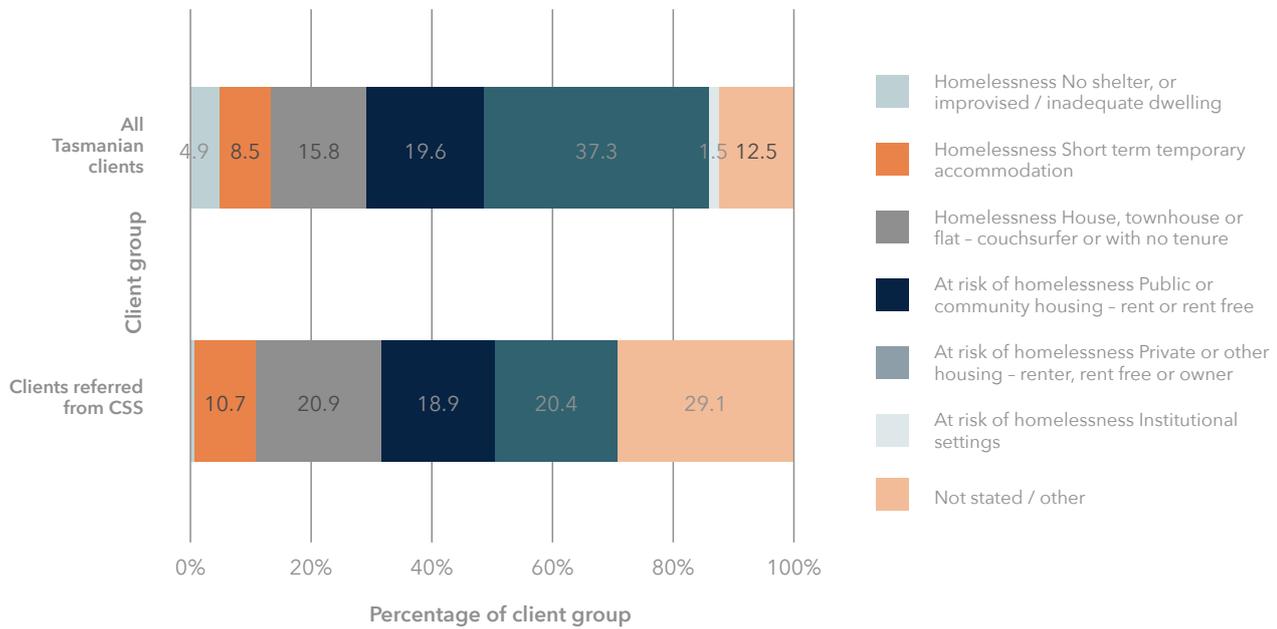
All Tasmanian clients: n=16949

Source: SHIP data extraction, Housing Tasmania; AIHW state data sets 2015, 2016, 2017

A higher proportion (just over half) of clients referred to SHS from Child Safety were homeless at the last reporting compared to all Tasmanian clients. No tenure was again the most common challenge with no tenure again being the most common challenge, but crisis accommodation was a challenge for a higher proportion of CSS referred clients, compared to the general Tasmanian client base (see Figure 15). Around 15% of clients referred from CSS were at risk of homelessness within the public/community housing sector, and a similar percentage in the private sector. Private sector vulnerability was a lot lower than for the general Tasmanian client base, again possibly due to this sector being unaffordable to access for many CSS-referred clients.

This insight into clients referred to SHS by CSS provides a picture of a cohort with extreme vulnerability in their accommodation needs and outcomes. As already stressed, we cannot accept this group as a proxy for families who are reunifying with their children. We know this group is likely to contain both independent care leavers and other families/carers involved with CSS. However, exploring this data set has been a useful exercise for the *In Limbo* project to explore the potential power in the existing data to inform service planning and delivery for our cohort of interest and confirm that homelessness experiences for those involved with CSS are likely to be both distinct and need tailored data and service approaches.

**FIGURE 15:** Clients' housing situation by end of reporting period: Tasmania 2014/15 to 2016/17 - clients referred from CSS and all clients %



Clients referred from Child Safety Services: n= 206

All Tasmanian clients: n=16949

Source: SHIP data extraction, Housing Tasmania; AIHW state data sets 2015, 2016, 2017

The data also showed that 31% (62 out of 206) of the clients had no income when they first presented for SHS assistance. This represents significant income challenges.



