

**WORKING
PAPER
SERIES**

No. 2025-04

February 2025

Motels as Crisis Accommodation for Families

A Snapshot of the Current Literature

Ella Kuskoff

Cameron Parsell

Karyn Walsh AM

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence
for Children and Families over the Life Course

Phone +61 7 3346 7477 **Email** lcc@uq.edu.au

lifecoursecentre.org.au



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



**THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND**
AUSTRALIA



**THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY**



**THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA**



**THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE**

Research Summary

Why was the research done?

In response to the current housing crisis, governments across the country are increasingly implementing strategies to facilitate access to crisis accommodation for people—particularly families with children and women at risk of domestic and family violence—who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Increasingly, this crisis accommodation is provided in the form of motels. While existing literature demonstrates that for individuals, some motel crisis accommodation may offer more dignity and respect compared to traditional shelter responses, the experiences of families are less understood. This targeted literature snapshot therefore seeks to summarise current evidence relating specifically to at-risk families residing in motels.

What were the key findings?

Despite the potential for motel accommodation to provide a more dignified response to homelessness compared to congregate shelters, the existing literature clearly establishes the sub-optimal nature of motels as a crisis accommodation response for families. In particular, the inappropriate motel environment, lack of control, and lack of exit pathways are significant and ongoing challenges that families must navigate during their time of crisis, and which undermine their ability to achieve safety and stability in the long term. Because motels exist in the private market and are not designed as crisis accommodation, the appropriateness of this response to families varies significantly based on the diversity of quality and form that encompasses the stock of motel accommodation.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

This literature snapshot contributes to an increasing body of evidence calling for immediate and significant government investments into social and affordable housing for families experiencing or at risk of homelessness. In the absence of a significant increase in the supply of social and affordable housing, families will continue to rely on the suboptimal motel model as an ongoing, and harmful, feature of family life.

Citation

Kuskoff, E., Parsell, C., & Walsh, K. (2025). 'Motels as Crisis Accommodation for Families: A Snapshot of the Current Literature', Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2025-04. Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

The authors

Ella Kuskoff

The University of Queensland

Email: e.kuskoff@uq.edu.au

<https://social-science.uq.edu.au/profile/3691/ella-kuskoff>

Twitter: @EllaKuskoff

Cameron Parsell

The University of Queensland

Email: c.parsell@uq.edu.au

<https://social-science.uq.edu.au/profile/2741/cameron-parsell>

Twitter: @cameronparsell

Karyn Walsh AM

Micah Projects

<https://www.micahprojects.org.au/about-micah-projects/who-we-are/leadership>

Acknowledgements/Funding Sources

This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Project ID CE200100025) and ARC Industry Fellowship (IM230100850). We thank Micah Projects for their in-kind support.

DISCLAIMER: The content of this Working Paper does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Life Course Centre. Responsibility for any information and views expressed in this Working Paper lies entirely with the author(s).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live across Australia.
We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise their continued connections
to land, sea and community.

Background

It is well established that Australia is in the midst of a housing crisis (Kohler, 2024; Morris, 2023; Schatz & Thomas, 2024). In response to this crisis, governments across the country are increasingly implementing strategies to facilitate access to crisis accommodation for people—particularly families with children and women at risk of domestic and family violence—who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness and who have no other housing options (see for example: Homelessness NSW, 2023; Queensland Government, 2024). Often, this crisis accommodation is provided in the form of motels (Victorian Government, 2020).

The current response of supporting people at risk of homelessness to access motels reflects prominent critiques of traditional congregate shelter models. A large body of international evidence speaks to the problems inherent in the traditional shelter response, including their tendency to undermine autonomy and expose residents to high risks of violence (Kerman et al., 2023; McMordie, 2021; Parsell, 2023). Families living in homeless shelters with children face the additional stigma and judgement of being required to participate in therapy and parenting programs (Carr, 2011) and being required to adhere to shelter rules that do not necessarily align with their parenting aspirations (Cosgrove & Flynn, 2005). For these families, homelessness is treated as synonymous with poor parenting (Carr, 2011).

Further complicating the issue is the lack of shelter or crisis accommodation available for families in Australia, compared to countries such as the United States (Hastings, 2020). Historically, Australia has had very limited crisis accommodation available for adults with children, except for women and children escaping domestic and family violence. Although different states and territories have different responses to crisis accommodation for families, these do not necessarily address the diversity of families' composition, needs, or reasons for being homeless (including the often co-occurring experiences of homelessness and domestic and family violence) (Flanagan et al., 2019).

The limitations of the traditional approach to crisis accommodation suggest that a move to supporting families to access motel accommodation might be a positive step

forward. Indeed, existing evidence regarding single people has found that, compared to shelter accommodation, motel accommodation is experienced as providing far more dignity, respect, and privacy (Colburn et al., 2022; Padgett et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2022; Stambe et al., 2024). Motel accommodation is also experienced as less oppressive, with fewer rules and the space for residents to exercise greater agency (Padgett et al., 2022). However, given the relative novelty of the current policy emphasis on accommodating families in hotels, it is critical to understand the experiences of families and how these may differ from the experiences of individuals.

This targeted literature snapshot engages with evidence relating specifically to at-risk families residing in motels as crisis accommodation. The snapshot focuses on Australian and New Zealand literature. Given the relatively novel nature of the response, the majority of the current evidence is in the form of grey literature—that is, literature not published in academic and peer reviewed outlets. The snapshot is not intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive; rather, it aims to provide a high-level overview of the current state of knowledge regarding the use of motels as crisis accommodation for families. The snapshot focuses on two core themes (1) families' experiences of living in motels, and (2) service providers' experiences of supporting families living in motels.

Living in motels

Room condition and amenity

Motels were routinely found to have poor living conditions, often being described as damp/mouldy, dirty, rundown, and overcrowded (Flanagan et al., 2019; Uniting, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). Motels frequently lacked essential amenities, such as cooking facilities, laundries, and enough beds for families (Batterham et al., 2023; McAuley Community Services for Women, n.d.; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022). The lack of kitchen facilities was particularly challenging for families with children or those with specific dietary needs, and led to many participants spending large proportions of their limited income on takeaway or new kitchen appliances to enable them to prepare food (Northern and Western Homelessness Networks [NWHN], 2021; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022).

Location and accessibility

Motels were often poorly located away from necessary supports and services, such as public transport, grocery stores, schools, medical centres, social services, as well as participants' own communities and networks (Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). Compounding these challenges was the requirement for some participants to actively engage in seeking private rental accommodation as a condition of their stay in the motel. For these participants, this task was not only viewed as futile due to their limited incomes and lack of rental history, it also meant long and expensive days of travelling to inspections, often with small children in tow (Batterham et al., 2023; Uniting, 2022). Thus, to assess the suitability or otherwise of motels to meet people's crisis housing needs, one must also assess the government prescribed conditions of stay along with the broader housing market.

Cost of accommodation

Participants in motels also faced financial difficulties as they were often required to contribute towards the cost of the motel. For some, these arrangements were ad hoc (e.g., participants would pay for one day a week, or every second full week) (Uniting, 2022), while for others it was a flat rate (Batterham et al., 2023) or 25% of their income (Pawson et al., 2024). These co-payments were seen as a barrier to progressing towards independence, as participants were unable to save money during their time in the motels, thus further limiting their ability to move to more sustainable housing (Batterham et al., 2023).

Length of stay

Although the intention of the motel response is generally to provide short-stay crisis accommodation (e.g. 3-4 nights), the increasing reliance on motel crisis accommodation and the lack of exit options means more families are often staying in motels for much longer periods (McAuley Community Services for Women, n.d.; Uniting, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). Given the poor amenity and living conditions noted above, practitioners have expressed concern around families and children being exposed to these conditions in the long term (Williams et al., 2024).

Uncertainty and lack of control

Many participants felt like they were in limbo during their time in motels, with their lives on hold until they were able to access stable housing (McAuley Community Services for Women, n.d.). Participants in motels experienced the added stress of not knowing how long they would be able to stay – in several examples, participants were required to re-apply for crisis motel accommodation every two to four days to extend their stay (Flanagan et al., 2019; Uniting, 2022). This uncertainty surrounding how long they would be in the motel contributed to feelings of lacking control over their own lives.

Feelings of safety

Participants overwhelmingly reported feeling unsafe in their motel accommodation. Alcohol use, drug use and dealing, theft, violence, and harassment were all raised as concerning behaviours happening frequently within motels (Batterham et al., 2023; NWHN, 2021; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022). Safety fears were compounded for families with children, who would often keep their children inside all day to minimise risk (Batterham et al., 2023; Uniting, 2022, Williams et al., 2024). This had implications for feelings of isolation, mental health, and children's development (Williams et al., 2024; Uniting, 2022).

Impact on children

The limitations of the motel environment undermined families' ability to care for their children and support their children's development (McAuley Community Services for Women, n.d.; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022). Children staying in motels had limited space for play, and were reported to have health, sleep, anxiety, and behavioural issues which were attributed to the unsafe, unclean, and unstable motel context (NWHN, 2021; Uniting, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). It was also difficult for children to remain connected to education (Launch Housing, n.d.; McAuley Community Services for Women, n.d.; Uniting, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). Children remaining in motel environments for long periods was a significant concern – indeed, long-term stays were seen as entrenching health and developmental inequalities (Williams et al., 2024). The literature demonstrates the impact on children is produced through both the lack of amenity within motels and the policies that lead families to frequently move from one motel to another.

Domestic and family violence (DFV)

The above practical, financial, and health/mental health related difficulties made motel accommodation particularly difficult for DFV survivors, and at times this meant that they felt they had no choice but to return to perpetrators for support (Flanagan et al., 2019; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022). It also led to concerns about survivors' ability to care for their children in the motel environment, with some perpetrators arguing that the children were better off residing with them rather than with the survivor in a motel (Uniting, 2022).

Supporting clients in motels

Sourcing rooms

Sourcing rooms to accommodate clients was a significant challenge for service providers. Motels have the freedom to decide to whom they will let rooms, and often service participants were not high on their list of preferred guests (Flanagan et al., 2019; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022). When participants were accepted, this often came with more stringent rules and expectations (e.g., requiring bonds, low tolerance for alcohol and smoking) (NWHN, 2021). Limited motel options and low vacancy rates compounded the challenges of sourcing motel rooms, particularly during certain times of the year (Flanagan et al., 2019; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022). As a result, participants were often accommodated in whatever motel was available, regardless of its ability to meet participants' needs and uphold their dignity (Batterham et al., 2023; Sheehan, 2022).

Motel staff experiences

Motel staff would often encounter service participants who were staying in the motel, some of whom presented with significant histories of trauma, complex needs, and challenging behaviours (NWHN, 2021; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022). Motel staff were not trained in responding to these participants, and struggled to balance participant needs and safety with their own (NWHN, 2021; Sheehan, 2022; Uniting, 2022). This, along with the previously discussed difficulty of sourcing motel rooms, points to the significant challenges of relying on for-profit businesses to work within a social services model (NWHN, 2021; Sheehan, 2022).

Support worker experiences

Despite engaging in flexible support practices, support workers reported the difficulties involved in providing effective, accessible, and trauma-informed support services in the context of motel accommodation (Batterham et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2024). Support workers felt that the motel accommodation did not align with their goal of supporting participants, and at times experienced distress when the only accommodation they could provide was substandard and clearly unable to meet participants' needs (Sheehan, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). As Uniting (2022) argues, “a considerable burden and stress is being placed on frontline workers and agencies left holding the responsibility to mitigate risk within a broken system that is not fit for purpose”.

Lack of exit pathways

Although most models that enabled access to crisis motel accommodation intended for this to be a short-term emergency response (e.g., several nights), participants often experienced extended stays in motels due to a lack of feasible exit pathways (Batterham et al., 2023; Sheehan, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). According to Uniting (2022), the length of time participants spent in motels increased by 150% between 2020/21 and 2021/22. Exit plans were severely hindered by a lack of affordable housing for participants to move into. Moreover, long waitlists meant that social housing was not a viable option, and there was limited transitional housing available (Uniting, 2022).

Conclusion

Despite the potential for motel accommodation to provide a more dignified response to homelessness compared to congregate shelters, the existing literature clearly establishes the sub-optimal nature of motels as a crisis accommodation response for families. In particular, the inappropriate motel environment, lack of control, and lack of exit pathways are significant and ongoing challenges that families must navigate during their time of crisis, and which undermine their ability to achieve safety and stability in the long term. This literature contributes to an increasing body of evidence calling for immediate and significant government investments into social and affordable housing for families experiencing or at risk of homelessness. In the absence of a significant

increase in the supply of social and affordable housing, families will continue to rely on the suboptimal motel model as an ongoing, and harmful, feature of family life.

References

- Batterham, D., Tually, S., Coram, V., McKinley, K., Kolar, V., McNelis, S., & Goodwin-Smith, I. (2023). *Crisis accommodation in Australia: Now and for the future*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- Carr, E. (2011). *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*. Princeton University Press.
- Colburn, G., Fyall, R., McHugh, C., Moraras, P., Ewing, V., Thompson, S., Dean, T., & Argodale, A. (2022). The impact of hotels as non-congregate emergency shelters: An analysis of investments in hotels as emergency shelter in King County, WA during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Housing Policy Debate*, 32(6), 853–875.
- Cosgrove, L. & Flynn, C. (2005). Marginalised mothers: Parenting without a home. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 5(1), 127-143.
- Flanagan, K., Blunden, H., valentine, k., & Henriette, J. (2019). *Housing Outcomes after Domestic and Family Violence*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- Hastings, C. (2020). *Family homelessness in Australia: A quantitative critical realist study*. [Doctoral thesis, Macquarie University].
- Homelessness NSW. (2023). Safe, Accessible & Available? Examining the Temporary Accommodation System in NSW. Homelessness NSW.
- Kohler, A. (2024). *The Great Divide: Australia's Housing Mess and How to Fix It*. Black Inc.
- Kerman, N., Kidd, S. A., Voronov, J., Marshall, C. A., O'Shaughnessy, B., Abramovich, A., & Stergiopoulos, V. (2023). Victimization, safety, and overdose in homeless shelters: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *Health & Place*, 83, 103092.

- Launch Housing. (n.d.). *The Education Pathways Program*. Launch Housing.
- McAuley Community Services for Women. (n.d.). *'Cold and Scary' Women's Experiences of Homelessness*. McAuley Community Services for Women.
- McMordie, L. (2021). Avoidance strategies: Stress, appraisal and coping in hostel accommodation. *Housing Studies*, 36(3), 380–396.
- Morris, A. (2023). Housing and Inequality in Australia. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 34(1), 86–103.
- Northern and Western Homelessness Networks [NWHN]. (2021). *Crisis in Crisis II: A Way Forward*. Northern and Western Homelessness Networks.
- Padgett, D. K., Bond, L., & Wusinich, C. (2022). From the streets to a hotel: A qualitative study of the experiences of homeless persons in the pandemic era. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 32(2), 248–254.
- Parsell, C. (2023). *Homelessness*. Polity.
- Pawson, H., Clarke, A., van den Nouwelant, R., Petersen, H., Moore, J., & Sigler, T. (2024). *Breaking Ground: Progress Update and Assessment of Queensland's Housing Crisis*. University of New South Wales.
- Queensland Government. (2024). *Immediate Housing Response Guidelines, Specifications and Requirements*. Department of Housing, Local Government, Planning and Public Works.
- Robinson, L., Schlesinger, P., & Keene, D. E. (2022). “You have a place to rest your head in peace”: Use of hotels for adults experiencing homelessness using the COVID-19 pandemic. *Housing Policy Debate*, 32(6), 837–852.
- Schatz, L., & Thomas, M. (2024). *Housing: Budget Resources*. Parliament of Australia.
- Sheehan, L. (2022). *Motel Coordination Project*. The Salvation Army.
- Stambe, R. M., Plage, S., Parsell, C., Kuskoff, E., & Wagland, E. (2024). A Shelter by Any Other Name? Delivering Homeless Crisis Accommodation Services in a Hotel. *Housing Policy Debate*, 1–19.
- Uniting. (2022). *Motel Project SMA – Area Mapping Report*. Uniting.

Victorian Government. (2020). *Report of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor*. Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor.

Williams, B., Murray, L., & Erueti, B. (2024). “Plaster solutions” – Providing support for children residing in emergency housing motels in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand. *Child Protection and Practice*, 2, 1-5.