

CRISIS

A RESEARCH DOCUMENT ON
FAMILIES IN CRISIS SITUATIONS





CRISIS

Emergencies occur more often in Australian families than they used to. That is the verdict of social welfare experts who have witnessed dramatic changes in the ways welfare needs are being expressed today.

And that is why the Archbishop of Sydney's Winter Appeal has combined with other agencies to open the Camperdown Family Centre, offering accommodation to families in crisis.

Here is the background to the decision to commence this new service.

While institutional care in children's homes, hospitals and hostels is still in heavy demand, there has been a swing towards providing emergency help in crisis situations.

The emergence of the "refuge" demonstrates this.

- Elsie Women's Refuge at Glebe, started by feminists in 1974 in a house then owned by the Church of England, was the first self-help refuge to offer emergency accommodation to women running away from their husbands, with or without their children. Of course, the Salvation Army and other churches have had institutions and hostels for many years offering help to runaway women.
- Many other women's refuges have started, some by Roman Catholic orders, to supplement the more institutional kind of care offered by existing hostels and homes. Most provide professional counselling, and most have fairly well understood rules of conduct, and length of stay. Of 22 such refuges now operating in

Australia, 11 receive funding from the Federal Government.

- Youth refuges have sprung up, some simply because there has been a need for them rather than that someone had a "bright idea". At Chippendale and Redfern, the University Settlement three years ago started taking in runaway teenagers who had nowhere else to go. Some were on drugs; others were fleeing from a violent home; others had simply no family, no support at all.
- These youth refuges have had all kinds of difficulties: getting enough volunteers to man them overnight; getting Government subsidies for rent and overheads; getting counsellors prepared to give their skill and time voluntarily. These refuges have tended to be haphazard, and they have moved location frequently. This has made them hard for troubled young people to find.
- There have been more informal "refuges" such as the Drug Referral Centre at Kings Cross, and Lifeline; and many parish churches have kept alive youth groups which have offered supportive fellowship and personal relationships. The difficulty arises when "things get out of hand" at home and the teenager feels he has to leave in a hurry.
- The other new category of need is the family, with both mother and father still together, who need emergency accommodation and counselling. Sudden unemployment affecting the family's ability to keep up rent payments is possibly the Number One cause of this problem. And 358,000 of Australia's workforce was unemployed in the official February, 1977 figures.

It was the combination of such factors that led the Archbishop of Sydney's Winter Appeal into funding a new Family Centre which would offer emergency accommodation for families whose other options had run out.

FAMILY BREAKDOWN

Professor Julian Katz of Sydney University has written: "It is probably trite to say that we are living in a complex and problematical society in which the anxieties and emotional problems of the individual show few signs of diminishing. In fact they seem to be very much on the increase. Whatever criteria one might take as indications of social breakdown, the disintegration of the family is a frequent and predominant finding in these situations.

"The family has evolved over eons of time to ensure the biological survival of the species. The result has been the development of deep needs in the individual for the maintenance of family integration, not merely for survival but for a comfortable healthy existence.

"On the other hand it has only been within relatively recent times that urban and technological growth have put great strains on the biological family. This stress has resulted in a marked increase in disturbances of emotional growth and personal stability. Of the many conflicts within our complex society, one of the most vital is that which exists between our biological needs and the wish for technological advancement."¹

This is right in line with generally accepted Christian attitudes on the family. In Western countries such as Australia the nuclear family is the basic unit of society, and Governments can rightly be urged to have a responsibility to maintain the stability of society by holding its families together.²

PRESSURES ON THE FAMILY

In the main report of the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, the Commission stresses that "from the national survey of incomes we discovered that there was a substantial number of people who were very poor — below an austere poverty line. One of the most disturbing aspects of this situation was that there were a quarter of a million dependent children who were in very poor families, many of them in two-parent families with the father in full-time employment."³

Later in the same report: "A further way in which many low-income families are placed under stress is in relation to the freedom parents have to decide how they will divide their time between working, looking after their children, and other activities. Because of financial pressures some parents are confronted with the choice of spending more time earning money and less time at home, or else struggling on an income below the poverty line."⁴

Economic arguments have developed for participation in the labour force of mothers of young children. Feminists have supported this, and have clamoured for higher quality child care arrangements.

But it is clear from at least two studies in Australia that a significant proportion of women with young children would prefer to stay at home to care for their children themselves if this economic pressure was relieved.

SOCIAL PRESSURES ON FAMILIES

Never has the family been so small and expected to do so much. Mothers have taken on or had thrust upon them most of the responsibility for socialising the children. When the mother is under pressure the whole stability of the family unit is at risk.⁵

Many families, and particularly young mothers, suffer from social isolation. One reason for this is that since more women are returning to work after their children have reached school age, community life in the suburbs is depleted. Grandmothers are increasingly members of the workforce and many fathers work very long hours away from home, which means both groups have little time to share the responsibility of child rearing. The mother who wishes to care for her own pre-school child is likely to find herself increasingly alone in weekday suburban life.

Many attitudes in our society mitigate against the mother, therefore the family. Great value is placed on 'paid work' and some mothers are led to believe that seeking employment is the only way to avoid loneliness and feelings of worthlessness.

Attitudes towards children — that they are naughty, bad, interruptive — often force mothers to feel that caring for children is a negative task. Many nuclear families and mothers in particular, find that society places many burdens on them without giving support. Coupled with the economic pressures of keeping up adequate income, housing and employment, many family relationships break down.

WHAT CAUSES ACCOMMODATION PROBLEMS?

• Lack of income

There are some people, especially low-income earners, who would be able to obtain accommodation security but are prevented from doing so by the lack of finance. Costs of illness, hospitalisation, as well as the provision of other basic facilities, limit the ability of such families to seek out adequate accommodation. Thus there is a close link between income and housing needs and the extent to which these are met.

• Lack of Neighbourhood and Family Networks

There appears to be a close link in our society between ability to secure accommodation and the extent to which a client or client family has been able to secure the help of friendship and kinship networks. People come to social welfare agencies because these links may be temporarily or permanently broken or non-existent, eg, deserted wife and children with accommodation problems; or a family or young person who has just moved from one city to another. These people, for one reason or another, cannot use the resources of their kith or kin.

• Lack of "Suitable" Permanent Housing

Because of the lack of sufficient "permanent" accommodation available, either through private rental or purchase or through the Housing Commission, it could be said that many people who are 'housed temporarily' by social welfare agencies are simply unable to secure adequate permanent accommodation.

WHICH DISADVANTAGED SOCIAL GROUPS TEND TO HAVE ACCOMMODATION PROBLEMS?

- (1) **The unemployed.** The present economic recession has increased the numbers of people seeking accommodation. Lack of work in one area induces people to move towards areas where work may be found. Thus, migration, especially from country areas and interstate, brings with it the problem of seeking out accommodation on limited finance. Those who migrate from one centre to another but who lack a supportive resource group, are at a disadvantage and seek assistance from welfare organisations.
- (2) **The unemployable.** Limited physical resources make participation by certain groups in the search for suitable accommodation often very difficult. Amongst those who receive benefits and who use hostel accommodation, those receiving Invalid Pensions form the greatest numbers.
- (3) **Young people — “under 25s”**
 - There are many young people from the country seeking work in the city area. They come little prepared for the realities of city life.
 - There is a highly mobile “group” of young people who are “compulsive movers”. They are more adept at using networks of self-help.
 - **The unmarried mother.** Both before and after the birth of the child, the mother often has extreme accommodation problems. At present many girls are forced to move away from family ties to have the baby. After the birth, often unsuitable “live-in” positions are the only jobs that can be easily obtained.

- **Institutionalised adolescents.** Adolescents who have been through psychiatric hospitals or have been the responsibility of the Child Welfare Department are faced with difficulties because of a lack of sufficient “half-way” accommodation which allows adequate supervision with opportunity to readjust their life-style. In general terms, adolescents face accommodation problems because society has ambivalent attitudes about the status of adolescents who live away from their homes. Especially, is this so for the girls.

- (4) **Psychiatric patients.** The efforts of the psychiatric institutions to move provision of services, to some extent, to outpatient clinics has meant that patients formerly accommodated within the institutions must now seek accommodation in the general community. “Half-way” supervised accommodation is limited and whilst liaison with some boarding houses and guest houses exists, psychiatric treatment centres have not been able to find adequate long-term solutions to the problem of ensuring a supply of such accommodation.
- (5) **Families.** A problem for social welfare agencies is that of ensuring adequate accommodation for members of a family unit or sub-unit. The major reasons for lack of accommodation may be classified as follows:
 - The male head is unemployed and unable to support his wife and dependants.
 - The mother, either deserted, separated or widowed, is unable to obtain accommodation herself or be supported by friends or relatives.
 - The spouse and dependants are unable to secure accommodation

because of the temporary incapacitation of one member. The problems are aggravated if the family is not familiar with the local area or has been forced to give up previous accommodation during hospitalisation of the spouse.

- Eviction because of lack of payment of rent.

- (6) **Homeless men and women.** Those single or separated people, usually of "middle age" and over, who have been unable to secure single, separate accommodation and who, therefore, are using hostel facilities.

HOW SPECIAL HELP COULD BE GIVEN

A committee which brought together various agencies of the Church of England in Sydney — the Inner City Committee, the Home Mission Society Counselling Service, St. Stephen's Newtown Parish and the Archbishop of Sydney's Winter Appeal — met late in 1976 to consider whether all these factors were pointing to the possibility of the Church providing some kind of crisis accommodation.

An obvious place to site such a provision would be somewhere in the inner city, possibly around Newtown or Camperdown. A research study was undertaken into the nature of that part of Sydney, its social and health factors, and into the present demands for such crisis accommodation.

The "Social Indicators Study" of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research confirmed that Newtown, at the intersection of the municipalities of South Sydney, Sydney and Marrickville, was right at the crossroads of the highest health and social risk factors in the whole of the State.

Population was at its most mobile; family breakdown was at its most

frequent; cash assistance to needy families was high; income was low and unemployment high; 69% of dwellings were not owned by the resident; and it had first rank for number of people divorced or permanently separated. In short, all the factors were present for a high demand for crisis counselling and accommodation.

A survey was then conducted of nine agencies, including hospitals, in the area to determine how many requests they had received for this kind of help, and how they had dealt with them.

The results were:

- In the six month period surveyed, 52 requests were made to agencies for accommodation.
 - A breakdown of figures for the month of August 1976 indicated that the largest number of requests were made by single women. These requests were satisfactorily met because of the availability of accommodation in women's refuges.
 - The second largest number of requests came from single men. The men were accommodated in existing hostels in the city. In one instance a week's rent was provided for a room.
 - Five families with children and one without children requested accommodation in August. In each case the family was accommodated in separate hostels.
- Every agency expressed dissatisfaction at having to separate the family unit.
- The one instance of a male with children was accommodated temporarily in a parish hall while his wife was in hospital.
 - The single female with children was placed in Butler Lodge.
 - In most cases agencies also provided food and sometimes clothing and cash.

The need for accommodation was only one of a number of needs.

- Not all agencies were able to indicate the cause of the client's problem. In nine of the cases there were three problems: alcohol, hospitalisation of one adult in the family and lack of accommodation on discharge from psychiatric hospital. In a further six cases eviction was identified, and desertion was identified only once.
- Four agencies indicated that clients were followed up by home visits, or they continued to come to the agency or they were referred to a community clinic.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The general lack of accurate statistics available from the agency makes it difficult to be specific about which client group has the greatest need.

Although single females with or without children seem to make the largest number of requests for emergency accommodation, agencies are able to place them readily in suitable accommodation. This is due to the number of women's refuges that have sprung up in the inner city and suburbs. It appeared from comments made by the agencies that they were reasonably happy with this sort of short term accommodation for their clients. However, one centre said that many women placed in their Home for Mothers and Children did not like the 'religious overtones' or the association with the 'establishment'.

It was generally felt that accommodation for men was also readily available.

All agencies expressed dissatisfaction with separating families and felt they would all use a centre where families could be accommodated together.

In all cases, whether they were families or single people, follow up with emotional and material support was given by the agencies, and any centre providing accommodation would need to be able to provide this support or allow the referring agency to follow up its clients.

CAMPERDOWN FAMILY CENTRE

As a result of a generous offer from the Sydney Rescue Work Society of a hostel which formed part of the recently-closed South Sydney Women's Hospital in Gilpin Street, Camperdown, the Anglican committee decided to conduct a twelve-months trial providing crisis accommodation for families. It is called Camperdown Family Centre, and it is scheduled to start operating in May, 1977, using the professional counselling services of Margaret Simon, a social worker with the Anglican Home Mission Society's Counselling Service.

A 1976 grant of \$6,000 from the Archbishop of Sydney's Winter Appeal has financed the commencement of the project, and a further grant in 1977 will keep it operating.

It is based on the self-help principle, with the provision of counselling and volunteer assistance. This self-help principle accords with the Christian concept of the dignity and worth of every person, and it is adopted here as a substitute for the paternalism of which church agencies are sometimes accused in their welfare work. A statement on the centre says: "The Centre will provide a real refuge for families who need counselling in a supportive situation — families who have been evicted through unemployment, sickness or other problems and who have inadequate resources to arrange their own accommodation. In some cases, they may be families with a

deserted father who has lost his job through caring for the children.

"Whatever their situation, Camperdown Family Centre will offer them a temporary home where they can stay together, perhaps save a little money from their social service benefits, think their situation through and generally reorganise their lives."

In 1977 this Centre will be a major project of the Archbishop of Sydney's Winter Appeal, meeting need in crisis situations. The Winter Appeal each year meets many other crises in:

- providing cash grants to parish clergy to help them meet need at the front door, and in the parish;
- supporting welfare aspects of the work of the diocesan worker among Turkish migrants;
- providing as much as \$20,000 a year to the Home Mission Society Counselling Service for their assistance to the 5,000 calls on them made each year by families and individuals in need;
- special grants to such organisations as the Aboriginal Medical Service, South Sydney Community Aid, and other groups receiving inadequate assistance from community and government.

Footnotes

1. Prof J. Katz — *Future Lobby Journal No 1 "Care of the Young Child"*, Sydney 1976.
2. *"The Family"*, Anglican Information Office.
3. P. 1, *First Main Report, Commonwealth Commission of Inquiry into Poverty*.
4. P. 204 *do*. See also comments pp. 9-10, *"Poverty — Is Money the Answer?"*, AIO
5. Pp. 9-12, *"Human Relationships"*, AIO.

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This is the fourth educational booklet produced by the Anglican Information Office, Sydney, for the Archbishop of Sydney's Winter Appeal. The others are "Casebook on Poverty" (1973), "A Taste of Security" (1974) and "Poverty — Is Money the Answer?" (1976).

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