

# Homeless Children's Brokerage Program – Report 2016-2017



Statewide Children's  
Resource Program

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July 2017

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Please note some of the artwork used throughout this report was produced from art classes funded in the Goulburn and Ovens Murray Region

## The Statewide Children's Resource Program

The Statewide Children's Resource Program (SCRP) was developed in recognition that accompanying children were a large cohort within adult-focused specialist homelessness services (SHS) and family violence services (FV) and their needs were being inconsistently assessed and met. The ongoing work of the SCRCP is to encourage capacity-building and continue to develop best practice in responding to children who experience homelessness and family violence. The SCRCP aims to ensure that children receive the support and care they need for their safety and wellbeing.

The SCRCP is made up of ten positions supporting all SHS and FV agencies, across 17 areas and four divisions of Victoria. Each of the positions is auspiced through one agency on behalf of the area. Each local area has developed a model that is



responsive to their particular needs. Whilst the programs are responsive locally, each regional program shares the same statewide aims and core functions, endorsed by Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

The SCRCP aims to ensure that children are responded to and supported along a service continuum from prevention through to recovery. SCRCP coordinators engage with allied services including; education, family services, Child Protection, Victoria Police, early years services and Local Government networks to represent children's unique experiences of homelessness and family violence within the broader service system. By assisting the broader service systems, the SCRCP aims to increase awareness of the impact that the trauma of homelessness and family violence has on children and assist to develop a collaborative and holistic service response to vulnerable children and their families. The SCRCP Coordinators engage and collaborate with SHS services and related networks to build on existing strengths to address the needs of children. This involves identifying and addressing the systemic and structural limitations that impact on the effective service responses to children experiencing homelessness and family violence. The coordinators work to build the capacity of practitioners within the sector to recognise the impacts of trauma on children, provide assessment and engagement strategies and ongoing case management support. This helps to contribute to a sustainable, skilled workforce within SHS and FV services.

Through regular communication, strategic planning and collaboration, the SCRP are able to share information, provide training, develop resources, contribute to ongoing policy and academic discourse and be involved in consultative processes. By situating themselves across a wide number of networks, the SCRP can provide strong advocacy, advice and resources to ensure that the response offered by support services aligns with the latest research, policy and best practice recommendations. It also ensures that children's needs are identified, responded to, and supported along the service continuum from prevention through to recovery.

### Brokerage Success Story

The change made this year with the School Kids Bonus was something we in the Community organisations were not prepared for.

We saw a low attendance rate with kids going back to school mainly due to the cut to funding that our community had previously received. Kids were missing school because families were struggling to properly outfit their kids with the appropriate school uniforms, families had no money to support their children with school booklist, uniforms, school fees, bus fares, and I could go on forever talking about how our communities struggle to make ends meet on a daily basis with just providing the basic essentials for their children.

I am a great advocate for the wonderful work the Children's Resource workers do in support of our Indigenous kids.

We are able to buy uniforms for our children so they are not being identified as being different due to their lack of correct uniforms. We are also with your support able to encourage our children's natural athletic abilities to shine on their chosen field of sport with the added support for sports registrations and uniforms.

Children are able to attend school with bus passes provided by children's brokerage funding.

We as an indigenous community would really struggle to engage our children in the education system without your wonderful support and information around other avenues for securing financial supports.

On behalf of my community I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you for your continuous support with our wonderful children.

- Loddon Mallee



## Children who experience homelessness and family violence

Children are one of the largest cohorts of people accessing SHS services. In 2015-16 AIHW reported that 28% of clients were children or young people aged under 18 (79 000 clients), and 16% were aged under 10 (around 46 000)<sup>i</sup>. This data identifies a significant issue, as the current cost of not assisting children in homelessness services each year has been estimated at approximately \$1billion<sup>ii</sup>.

It has been a long held view that children will bounce back from their experiences of homelessness and family violence relatively unharmed. Homelessness and family violence are often not, however, an experience they will simply 'bounce back' from. Just as all people are unique, the need for an individual and tailored response to each child is required.

The impact homelessness and family violence has on children is evident across all developmental areas. Children who have experienced homelessness and family violence have often not had their needs met in a way that promotes optimum development or encourages positive opportunities.

Emotional and spiritual needs are specific to each individual and are developed through relationships and interactions with others. One aspect of this is a secure attachment with a primary caregiver from

infancy. This forms a basis for future development; the need for stability and security is crucial within the relationship between the child and caregiver. If attachment is disrupted due to homelessness or family violence, research suggests that the emergence of sleeping and feeding problems can arise in babies, and the ability for children to self-soothe is limited. Primary school aged children can show aggressive behaviour towards others, have a reduced interest in social interactions, and reduced capacity to retain and understand information<sup>iii</sup>. Children of this age often consider themselves to be the cause of their family becoming homeless which can be detrimental to their sense of self-worth<sup>iv</sup>. Financial hardship often results in children self-excluding from activities and educational opportunities that contribute to overall social and emotional development.

Homelessness and family violence has a profound impact on children's physical and mental health. Children with experience of homelessness and/or family violence are more likely to have low self-esteem, display an increased prevalence of anxiety and depression, show symptoms of

### Brokerage Success Story

We applied for access to the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program for swimming lessons for two young siblings from a CALD family.

The family had spent time in a refugee camp and had recently arrived in Australia.

The children had never been exposed to a swimming pool and the look of delight as they had their first lesson was priceless.

They have now been doing swimming lessons for two terms and have improved exceptionally. Every time I visit they love to tell me all of the new things they learn and just how well they are doing.

Their self-esteem has definitely increased since starting the swimming lessons and they have made lots of new friends.

The family is so appreciative for the brokerage funds.

- North West Metro

posttraumatic stress disorder, and experience developmental trauma. Physical effects of homelessness may include an increase in cardiovascular disease, asthma, metabolic abnormalities, obesity and anorexia and increases in infections due to impaired immune responses. Impaired cognitive development and pervasive mental health issues can impair social interactions with family and friends. Likewise, lack of community connections and feelings of loss and grief create barriers to school engagement and can lead many children to underperform academically<sup>v</sup>.

In Australia the leading cause of homelessness is family violence. For all children accessing SHS, at least 60 per cent have experienced family violence<sup>vi</sup>. The effect family violence has on children is significantly different from adults. To assist vulnerable children we need to shift our focus and provide more individualised trauma recovery interventions in an attempt to reduce cumulative harm and trans-generational homelessness<sup>vii</sup>.



By effectively supporting children who are affected by homelessness and family violence, we give them the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to overcome the adversity they face. By providing opportunities for children to engage in activities that stimulate their social and emotional development, and provide resources and training for practitioners to increase current service capacity, and increase the diversity of services available for children, everybody can make a difference.

To move forward it is essential for organisations to work collaboratively and to share knowledge and resources at a local level in order to support children experiencing homelessness and family violence in their community. The SCRPs are an integral component of a more integrated homelessness and family violence service system, one that is responsive to children and cognisant of the unique challenges they are faced with.

## Homeless Children's Brokerage Program

The Homeless Children's Brokerage Program is funded through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness. Earlier this year it was announced that this funding agreement would be an ongoing arrangement, which provides important security in the support of children experiencing homelessness and family violence.

Funding for the program is distributed by the SCRP Coordinators and is limited to \$300 per child, per financial year. The brokerage program is child-specific and aims to encourage workers to think in a child centred way when addressing children's needs.

The Homeless Children's Brokerage Program was established to enhance opportunities for children experiencing homelessness and family violence. Its three main aims are:

- To engage and maintain children in their education (including early education services such as childcare and kindergarten),
- To reduce social isolation by enhancing access to a range of specialist supports, and social and recreational opportunities within their community, and
- To provide social and emotional growth opportunities for children and provide opportunities to increase relational bonds between parents/carers and their children.



The Homeless Children's Brokerage Program also aims to provide further encouragement to homelessness and family violence providers to integrate child focused assessment and case planning into their work practice

### Brokerage success story

The Homeless Children's Brokerage Program provided internet access to a family with two teenage girls struggling with their education. One of the teenagers was struggling to keep up with part time work, study and caring for her mum who has cancer. Her mum's diagnosis was sudden, unexpected and she could no longer work, throwing the whole family into turmoil.

The other teenager, still at Secondary School, withdrew from her family and friends and was also struggling to cope having to walk to the library to use the internet often returning in the dark.

The Homeless Children's Brokerage Program provided support for them to gain internet access at their house. They both now study together at home and support each other with their education. This has enabled the eldest to continue with her TAFE course and is enjoying being able to participate remotely in live class discussion. This has also assisted her sister as she no longer has to walk in the rain and dark to do her homework; she has been given an opportunity to do what most of her peers take for granted – to study at home.

The funding has made such a difference to their everyday lives and they are very grateful.

- Gippsland



## Data Overview

All data in this report is collected by the application process that is completed by the family's practitioner. The application process collects information on the child's age, education, living arrangements, presenting issues, the funding being sought, and including the child's Indigenous or culturally diverse status. All information collected remains confidential, for the purpose of this report there will be no names or identifying information used.



We aim to produce data that is reflective of client need. Although this is not always possible resulting in some of the data in the graphs showing missing values or discrepancies due children being open multiple times creating multiple support periods for each child.

The data presented in this report is from all DHHS areas across Victoria. It shows the use of the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program to support children who experience homelessness and family violence. The graphs below show an overview of the demographics of the children who have been supported.

The brokerage program has assisted children throughout Victoria for the costs associated with education, sport and recreation, specialist services and developmental activities for children experiencing homelessness and family violence.

Data from the last three financial years shows that most applications were received for children aged between 6 and 14 years of age, from single parent families and with a non-indigenous background.

Over the last three years there has been a significant rise of family violence being identified as the main presenting issue. It is speculated that this trend reflects the increase in public awareness and people seeking support, rather than an actual increase in people experiencing family violence, but conclusions cannot be reached from this dataset. The second most common main presenting issue was financial difficulty, highlighting the often tenuous housing security experienced by people on low incomes.

Education expenses have been the highest activity applied for over the years and is expected to maintain or increase over time. A rise in essential school materials such as book packs, text books and laptops illustrates the growing need for assistance with school materials. This year has seen an almost double increase being spent on school materials. Sport and recreational activities also make up a large proportion of brokerage applications providing opportunities for children to engage in activities with peers, increasing connection to community and exposure to sporting and cultural activities.



## Number of applications and Comparison of genders between financial years

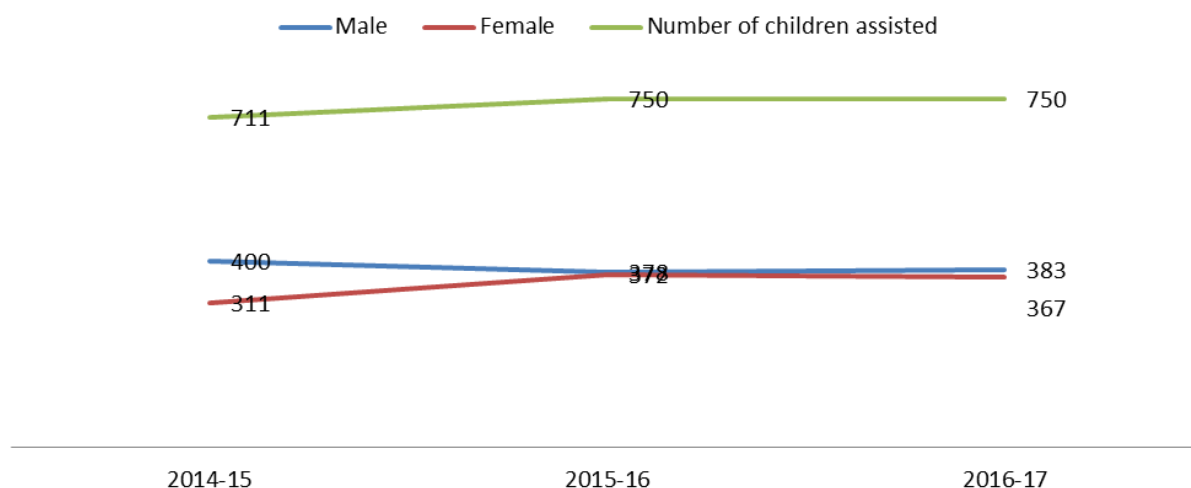


Figure 1. Applications and gender comparisons

## Age comparison between financial years

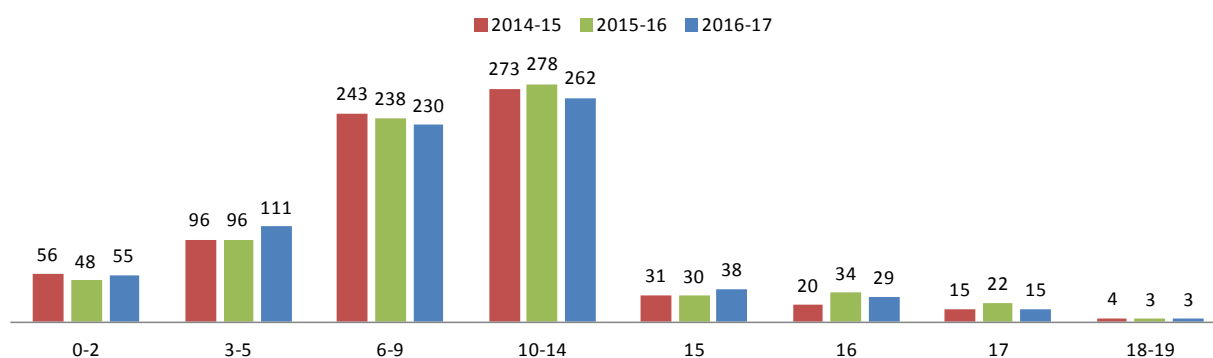


Figure 2. Age Comparison

## Indigenous status comparison between financial years

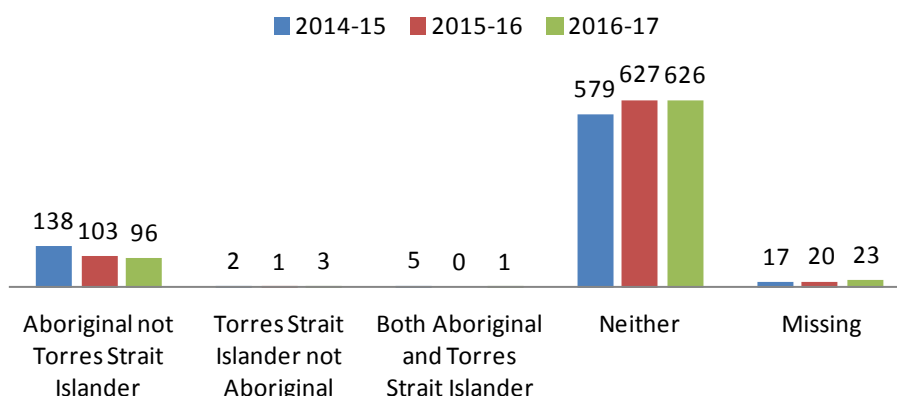


Figure 3. Indigenous status comparison

## Education comparison between financial years

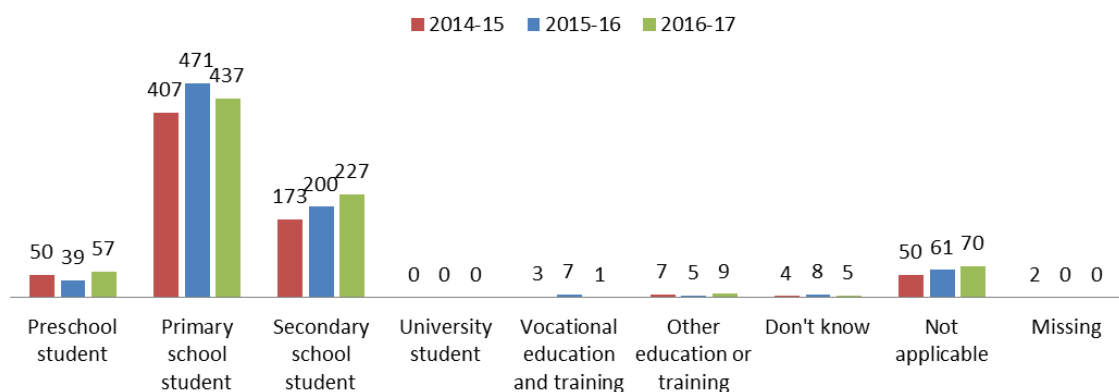


Figure 4. Education comparison

## Living Arrangements

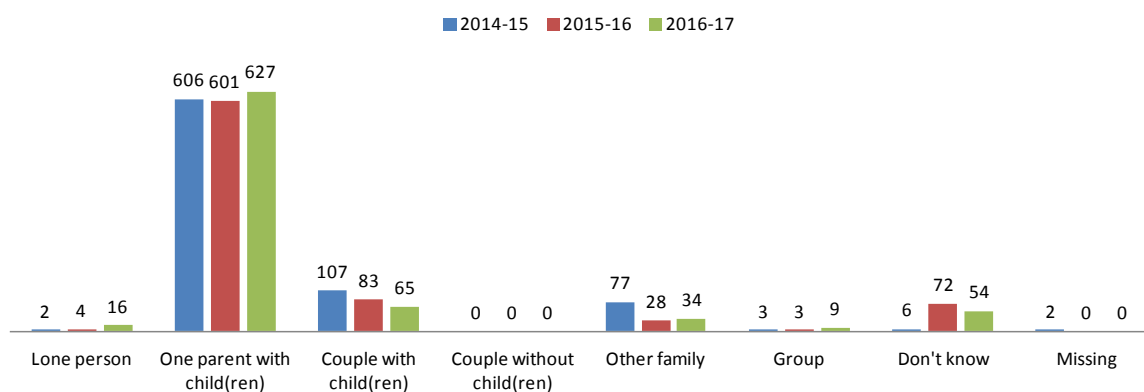


Figure 5. Living arrangement comparison

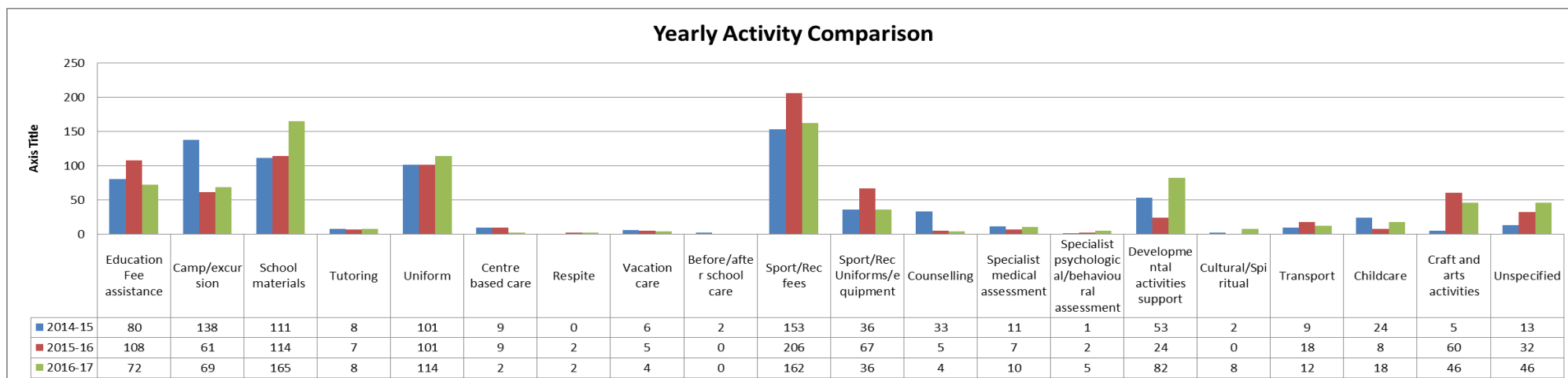


Figure 6. Yearly activity comparison

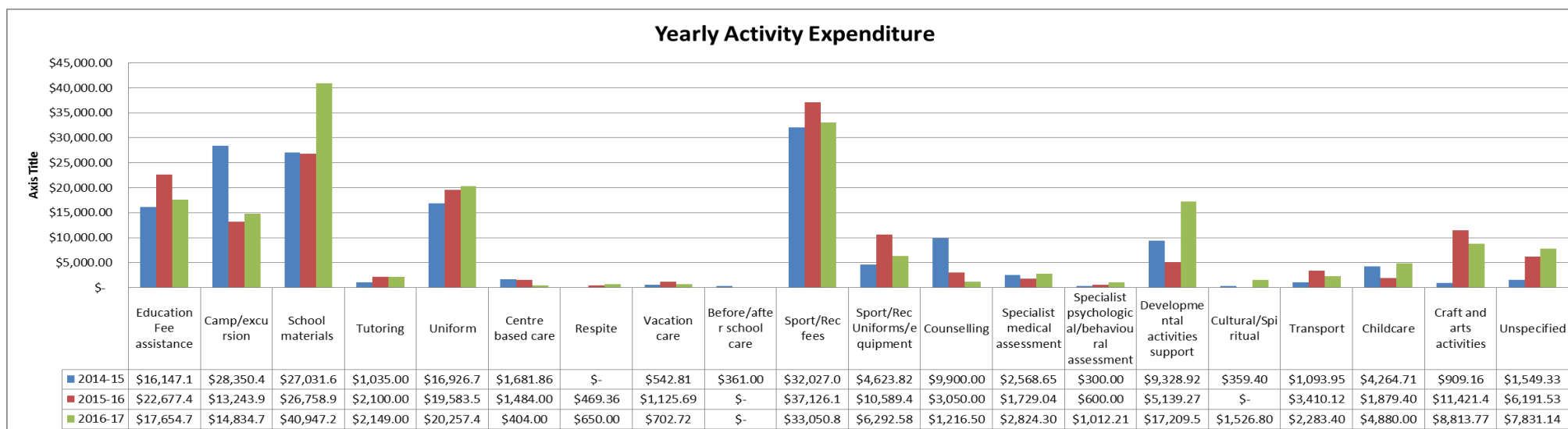


Figure 7. Yearly expenditure comparison

Comparison between financial years on main presenting reasons

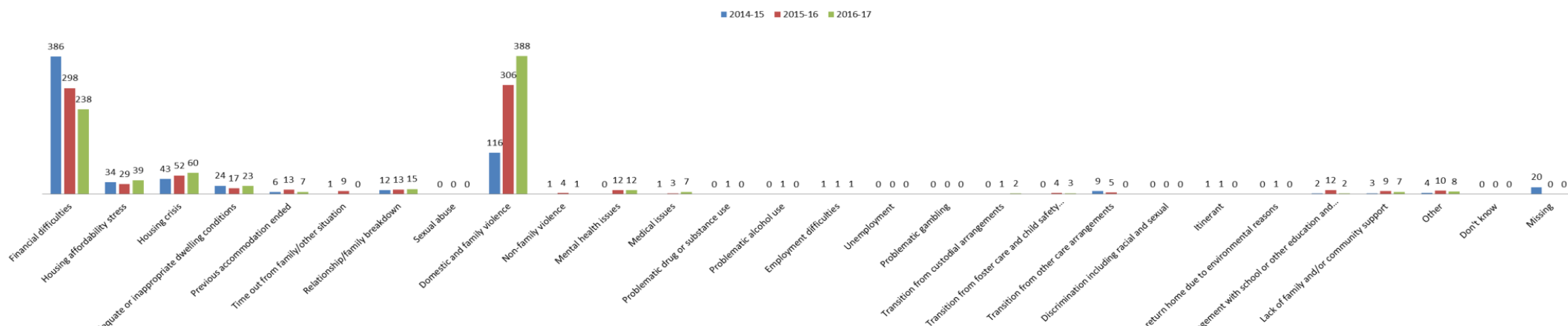


Figure 8 Main Presenting reasons

### Brokerage Success Story

This funding has allowed us to financially support our clients and their children with costs they normally could not afford. Parents are struggling at this time of year with Christmas and the school holidays just ending and a new school year starting, as they are faced with extra costs. Majority of our families have more than one child, this is a very expensive time for the parents and the stress they are facing wondering how they are going to come up with the costs impacts them immensely.

Our role in housing is to ensure parents are not allowing themselves to get into rental arrears from paying for school costs instead of their rent, to ensure their children have all items required to attend school and therefore avoiding future arrear debts that then cause ongoing stress and financial difficulties as they have had to arrange debt agreements.

Children truly benefit from this program as they are attending school from the start of the year and not feeling different or left out as they have all their items and feel a part of the school and grade as a whole. This is especially important to our Aboriginal children who face various barriers at school and with this financial support this is one barrier that they do not have to face.

The parents of the children are also very thankful for the funding provided as this allows them to be proud of sending their children to school knowing that they will not be judged by not having the items they require and fit into the new school year without having this issue of being seen as poor and their children being bullied over it.

One of our children in grade 3 did not attend school for the 3rd and 4th term, but with this financial assistance from brokerage in 2017 we were able to purchase an iPad and since then the child has attended daily. This has allowed this child to attend school and not fall any further behind in his education. This has strengthened the child's wellbeing and confidence overall as he is now not feeling left out and can be involved in his ongoing learning. The parent is also now not facing the stress of the child not attending school and falling behind in his education and pressure of trying to come up with the financial cost of an iPad. With ongoing weekly bills and expenses to ensure the family is housed and living costs covered, the iPad cost was always put on hold.

This example is one of many that have benefited our community, and without this funding families are being forced to send their children to school without items. This then creates various other issues for the family and child and their overall wellbeing.

- Loddon Mallee



## Discussion

Over the past three years the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program has provided assistance to over 2,000 children who have experienced a period of homelessness or family violence. This year our data shows a consistency with the 2015-16 year on the number of applications, age, indigenous status and living arrangements. It is important to note the subtle increase in applications from children attending secondary school as seen in figure 4.

The program has helped to foster a sense of normality to the lives of children by supporting them to engage with education, interact with peers, make new links, to access specialist medical supports, and provides them with positive childhood experiences. This is reliant on SHS and FV workers to 'think child' and keep the needs of children at the forefront. This report demonstrates the need for specialist services for children and the importance of providing support to access assistance.

During 2016-17 financial year there has been an increase in the main presenting reason 'domestic and family violence' (figure 8), it shows a steady climb over the last three years. This may be due

to the increase in political and media spotlights on family violence as well as the increase in service options for families. Financial difficulties have always been a driver in applications to the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program, the decrease over the years could reflect the emphasis that SCRP Coordinators have placed on ensuring that brokerage applications accurately reflect the situation of the child and their family.

The expenditure of the Homeless Children's Brokerage has been used mainly on educational needs and sport and recreational activities.

Educational expenses expected to be borne by families is increasing. There has been added pressure for families to supply all the items (books, uniforms, laptops and iPads); their children require to attend school. Failure to have the necessary items can lead to the child missing out on certain activities. This increase is most keenly felt by those who most

struggle to pay. As seen in figure 7, fee assistance, camps, materials and uniforms are the items most applied for during 2016-17 which saw a 53% increase on brokerage monies spent on school materials, when compared with the previous year. Anecdotally, there has been an increase in students experiencing negative reactions at school, (including staff blaming children, detention, exclusion from lessons) because they do not have a particular text book, uniform or access to technology. This can become a significant issue for a child's self-esteem and can endanger a child's engagement with their education.

This year the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program has seen an increase in demand in providing assistance children to become 'school ready' by providing items such as school books and technology. However, the flow-on effect from providing more assistance for children to be



'school ready' is that there is less brokerage available to assist children to meaningfully engage in community and recreational activities.

The SCRP have been proactive in raising the issue of the burden of school costs on low income families. A report was sent to government outlining the financial difficulty that disadvantaged families face to be able to fully engage with education, urging an increase in funding to meet the increasing needs as well as the importance of the ongoing funding of the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program.

The benefits of engaging children in extracurricular activities are significant. Research has shown that engaging children in activities, sports and camps gives children the opportunity to have positive and supportive relationships with team mates, coaches, and parents. They develop physical and interpersonal skills, knowledge, and competencies, have opportunities to make decisions about their sport participation, and have experiences that are consistent with their particular needs and developmental levels. It has also shown to have increased their mental health, achievement with schooling and engagement in other social supports.<sup>viii</sup>

The Statewide Children's Resource Program is privileged to be able to assist case managers and practitioners to better support children experiencing homelessness and family violence. The use of the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program this year shows there is an increasing need for support for children who are affected by homelessness and family violence. As the only brokerage program specifically targeted at children the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program remains an important option for service providers to access within a suite of brokerage options.

We wish to acknowledge the extensive work done by the Victorian State Government in their response to service sector reform, as well as the Federal Government for ensuring that the Homeless Children's Brokerage Program can continue to support children and young people affected by homelessness and family violence.

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<sup>i</sup> AIHW. (2017). *Specialist homelessness Services 2015-16*. Canberra: AIHW

<sup>ii</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. (2008). *The Road Home: A national approach to reducing homelessness*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>iii</sup> Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Siegel, B. S., Dobbins, M. I., Earls, M. F., McGuinn, L., et al. (2011). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, 232-246

<sup>iv</sup> Barker, J., Kolar, V., Mallett, S., & McAurthur, M. (2013). *What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family domestic violence Part 1: Literature Synthesis*. Melbourne: Hanover Welfare Services.

<sup>v</sup> Barker, J., Kolar, V., Mallett, S., & McAurthur, M. (2013). *What works for children experiencing homelessness and/or family domestic violence Part 1: Literature Synthesis*. Melbourne: Hanover Welfare Services.

<sup>vi</sup> AIHW. (2013). *Specialist homelessness services 2012-13*. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>vii</sup> Keys, D. (2009). *Children and homelessness: Literature review*. Melbourne: The Salvation Army Australia Southern territory.

<sup>viii</sup> Blom, L., Bronk, K., Coakley, J., Lauer, L., & Sawyer, T. (2013) Maximizing the benefits of youth sport. *American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 84(7). 8-13