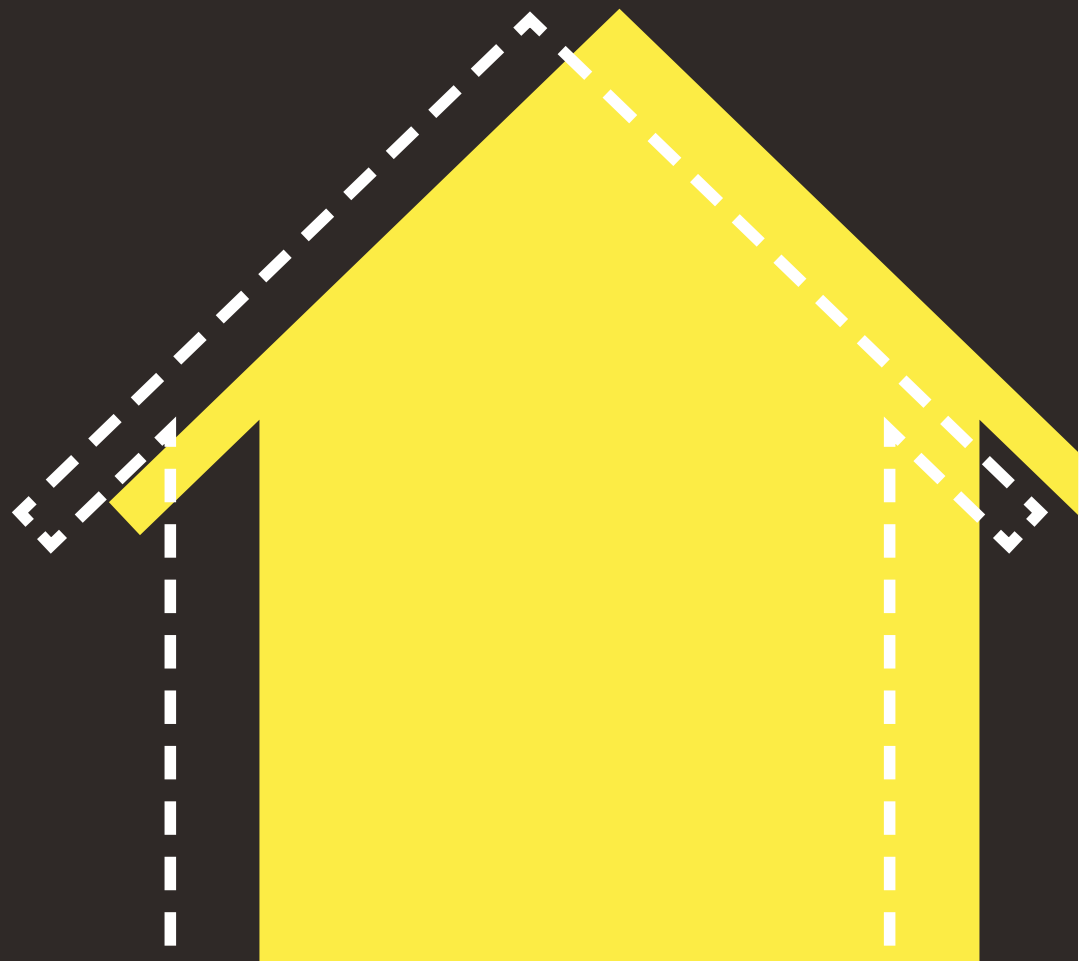


HOUSING INSTABILITY IN TĀMAKI MAKAURAU

Stories from single mothers
and front-line service providers



September 2018

Thank you to
the incredibly brave and generous women
who shared their stories with us.

the front-line staff who contributed their
time and expertise to this project.

everyone who is working on this important
kaupapa to create an Auckland where
homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

This report explores the findings of a rapid research project commissioned by Auckland Council and led by Innovation Unit.

Innovation Unit is a not-for-profit social enterprise that grows new solutions to complex social challenges. By making innovation happen we help create a world where more people belong and contribute to thriving societies. We build alliances with ambitious places, organisations and systems around the world to adapt, adopt and scale innovations that deliver lasting impact.

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Background

A homelessness plan for Tāmaki Makaurau

Auckland Council is working with partners to develop a regional, cross sectoral homelessness plan for Tāmaki Makaurau.

Partners include government agencies, non-government service providers, philanthropic organisations, mana whenua, academia and the private sector.

The plan will deliver collaborative, cross sectoral initiatives for the Auckland region, to ensure homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring.

Focusing on single mothers who have experienced homelessness

To narrow the scope of the research, Auckland Council asked the Innovation Unit to focus specially on single women with children who have experienced homelessness, or intense housing insecurity. This is because single mothers and their children are known to be particularly vulnerable to homelessness and if we can get solutions right for this group of people, there would be learnings for addressing the needs of other vulnerable groups too.

Bringing the voice of people with lived experience

To inform the development of the plan, Auckland Council's Affordable Housing Policy team commissioned Innovation Unit to understand people's lived experience of housing instability. This included the triggers that cause people to become homeless, the barriers they face in seeking support and finding suitable housing, and what enables them to then secure stable housing. Auckland Council also wanted to understand the impact of their experience of unstable housing.

Methods

Discovery questions

To define the scope of what we wanted to understand, we created the following three discovery questions to guide our discovery process:

1. *What are the triggers that lead people to insecure or unsuitable housing?*
2. *What are the enablers and barriers for single mothers to secure suitable housing or shelter?*
3. *What is the impact of insecure or unsuitable housing on single mothers and their children?*

Rapid information review

Innovation Unit worked with Auckland Council to conduct a rapid information review of the following publications to find out what was already known about single mothers' experience of housing instability in Auckland:

- *Invisible in the SuperCity; Hidden Homelessness in Auckland*. Harris, R. (2015). The Salvation Army Social Policy Unit.
- *Hard Times: A glimpse into homelessness in West Auckland*. Harris, R. (2015). The Salvation Army Social Policy Unit.
- *'Insight into the Experience of Rough Sleeping in Central Auckland'*. (2015). Lifewise, Auckland Council, Auckland City Mission, ThinkPlace.
- *Housing support services for families/whānau and individuals who have experienced homelessness: a case study of Vision West Community Trust, West Auckland*. Woolley, L. (2014).
- *Children and Housing Literature Review*. Fu, M. (2015). University of Auckland.
- *Experiences of housing insecurity among participants of an early childhood intervention programme*. Turnbull, H & Loftson, Kristjana & Muhajarine, Nazeem. (2013).
- *Designing Housing First for the Auckland City Centre*. (2016). Lifewise.
- *Inside the Cup; Bringing the street voice to decision makers*. (2017). Lifewise.
- *Exploring the Security of Tenure through Co-design*. MBIE, Auckland Council, The Auckland Co-design Lab.
- *Mana Wahine; Building an understanding of women's experience of homelessness in the Auckland City Centre*. (2018) Lifewise.

Findings from these publications created a basis for the barriers, enablers and impact findings (pages 20-24) and helped us further refine questions to explore with front-line service providers and single mothers, including:

- Does the stress and low self esteem that are experienced as a result of housing instability contribute to the barriers that single mothers experience when seeking or accessing services?
- Do single mothers experience cycles of homelessness?
- For single mothers who find stable housing for a period, what happened to change their circumstances and susceptibility to homelessness?
- Does the negative impact of housing instability on social connections act as a barrier to single mothers finding stable housing?

Workshops with front-line staff

Three workshops were then held in Henderson, Mount Roskill and Manukau with 29 front-line staff from support provider organisations to draw on their expertise of working with single mothers. Staff from the following organisations attended:

- VisionWest Community Trust
- Work and Income
- Ministry of Social Development
- Barnardos
- Auckland District Health Board
- Counties Manukau District Health Board
- The Fono
- Monte Cecilia Housing Trust
- LIA Trust
- Department of Corrections
- Emerge Aotearoa
- Lifewise
- Turuki Health Care
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Te Whare Marama o Māngere
- Salvation Army Transitional Housing
- Catholic Social Services
- Auckland Action Against Poverty
- Te Roopu o Te Whānau Rangimarie o Tāmaki Makaurau
- De Paul House
- Rainbow Youth
- Society of Saint Vincent De Paul

Conversations with single mothers

Conversations were held with ten women across the Auckland region to map their experience of housing instability. The women were recruited through Facebook posts and through front-line staff.

We spoke with women who:

- live in Auckland
- have sole responsibility for their children
- experienced housing instability in the past, including: not knowing where they will stay the following night, having to stay with friends or whānau, and/or staying somewhere unsafe/insecure (such as a car or a garage)
- are now in safe, secure, and suitable housing.

Of these woman,

- 7 currently live in West Auckland
- 2 currently live in South Auckland
- 1 currently lives in North Auckland

The women identified with a range of ethnicities and ages, and had experienced unstable housing for anywhere from 1 to 29 years.

The conversations were held in library meeting rooms, cafes, in their homes, and in a service provider's headquarters.

Outputs

Synthesis

Once the data was collected, we went through a design synthesis process to identify themes, similarities and differences in the women's journeys.

Maps

Based on these groupings, we created the three journey maps (see Nikita, Sofia and Renee's stories) to represent the different stories we heard.

We also created a more generic process map describing the triggers, enablers and barriers women face when looking for secure housing, and an impact map to describe how mothers, their children, and their wider relationships were affected by their experience.

Although these tools have been validated by findings in the rapid information review, they are intended as a snapshot into single mothers' lives and the challenges they face to inform a co-design process, rather than a definitive report or representative piece of research.

Key insights

Single mothers are determined, skilled and resilient

The majority of mothers that we spoke with said that the number one thing that enabled them to secure stable housing was their sheer determination to better their situation for their children. They also demonstrated:

- resilience in the face of push-backs when seeking formal and informal support,
- organisational skills to manage the logistical demands of interacting with a range of agencies
- initiative to navigate a highly competitive private rental market
- resourcefulness by networking to find the support they needed to improve their families' situation, and
- research and advocacy skills to ensure they received their full support entitlements.

However, mothers raised their concern around whether anyone without the above skills and attributes would be able to find secure housing in Auckland.

"My kids won't go in a Housing New Zealand house when they're older. I've got them in a good school and given them a good upbringing. I'm overcoming generations of abuse in my family."

"All I want is to have my family together under a roof. Their well-being means everything to me."

"I'm blessed to have innate determination. I don't know how others would get through it though."

Opportunity

How might we re-design the housing system to make it easy for people to get the support they need to find and keep a home?



Single mothers make difficult decisions with little – or conflicting – information

Mothers described the difficult parenting, financial and well-being decisions they had to make throughout the housing process, with very little information to inform their decisions.

This lack of transparency was particularly apparent around Work and Income entitlements, and Housing New Zealand criteria, processes and wait times. Although MSD is now responsible for managing the Social Housing Register, it was unclear for mothers where they could find the information they needed, and they were often passed between organisations or told different things by different people.

To further complicate these decisions, mothers explained that options that were better for their children often came at the cost of their own well-being.

“I kept asking, what's happening? Where am I on the list? They can't tell you anything, and just say they'll get in touch when a house comes up. But how long will that take!? How do I get prioritised? Do I need to commit a crime? Become a drug addict?”

Parenting decisions Do I...

<i>Keep fighting to find a place when I don't know how long it will take?</i>	OR	<i>Give up the care of my children so that they are better off for now?</i>
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<i>Take a Housing New Zealand house in an area that means uprooting the kids from their schools and friends?</i>	OR	<i>Decline the Housing New Zealand house and be put at the bottom of the wait list?</i>
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Well-being decisions Do I...

<i>Go back to an abusive environment to have somewhere to live?</i>	OR	<i>Stay in my car with my kids which is safer but isn't a home?</i>
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<i>Prioritise my own self-care so I can continue fighting for my family?</i>	OR	<i>Meet my children's high support needs?</i>
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Financial decisions Do I...

<i>Take an expensive private rental house that is offered to me now?</i>	OR	<i>Wait for a Housing New Zealand house that will be more affordable?</i>
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<i>Buy sanitary items to keep on top of my hygiene?</i>	OR	<i>Buy noodles for the kids?</i>
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Opportunity

How might we empower mothers with clear, relevant and consistent information to make the best decisions for their family?

Single mothers 'on the edge' of homelessness often fall into support gaps

The mothers that we spoke with described going to formal support organisations (such as Work and Income) as a last resort when they had no other options to turn to. However, these mothers often did not meet support criteria the first time they asked for help. If they were treated poorly and/or turned away without support, they learnt to distrust, fear and avoid support services.

This meant that instead of seeking formal support again, some mothers:

- went without food for them and their children
- got into debt which impacted their credit ratings and future prospects
- stayed in insecure, unhealthy and unsafe environments, and
- avoided communication with support organisations

"When you swallow your pride and go and ask for help only to get a no from everyone, it really pushes you back. You learn to deal with it on your own, by yourself."

"Sometimes you'd rather starve and go hungry than be treated like that and looked down on."

"I was over the income threshold until I went on maternity leave. I couldn't be pro-active."

"I knew the refuge because my mum would go there when my dad was violent. They said I wasn't in immediate danger so they couldn't help. I felt like the world was against me."

Opportunities

How might we ensure that mothers are connected to the support they need, the first time and place they ask for help?

How might we improve families' situations and well-being at every interaction?



Some single mothers have to lie – or worse – to be able to provide for their families

When mothers did not meet criteria – at a range of organisations – and were desperate to feed and house their children, they were encouraged by friends, colleagues, and front-line staff to ‘stretch the truth’ to get the support they needed. Lying also proved necessary in the private rental market to get around barriers such as not having a past landlord reference.

Front-line staff also described how support criteria sometimes incentivised women to make decisions that improved their short-term ability to provide for their children, but could have negative long-term impacts. Examples included women leaving supportive partners (or lying about being single) to improve their support entitlements, or declining a part-time job offer which would lower their Social Housing wait-list rating, increasing their wait-time to get a house.

Some mothers also expressed frustration at seeing other people, whom they deemed as less responsible parents, being prioritised on the Social Housing wait-list seemingly because of their unhealthy behaviour.

Opportunity

How might we prioritise support based on preventative impact as well as immediate need?

“I’ve been asked, are you sure you don’t have an alcohol problem? I think they were trying to get me higher in the priority list.”

“Housing New Zealand gives you brownie points for being an irresponsible parent.”

“I went to a Māori Non Government Organisation, but was scared I wouldn’t get support, so I lied and said my father was Māori.”

“Someone said maybe you should just say you’re on P, but I don’t want that on my record. I’m happy to say I’m a booze-hag if that gets me a house though, that’s not illegal.”

“Work and Income said I couldn’t afford the place and would only give me the bond if I had someone write a letter saying that they’d help pay for food and bills. I wrote the letter myself and got my mum’s friend to say she was the baby’s grandmother.”

Uncoordinated support adds to the burden on single mothers

Some mothers talked about how the emotional, time, and financial cost of proving eligibility and coordinating formal support sometimes outweighed the perceived benefit.

Others described how, even when they met support criteria, their family got stuck in catch-22 situations due to siloed policies between different organisations.

Opportunities

How might we create co-ordinated support, policies and criteria across the sector to keep families together?

How might we ensure that accessing and navigating support does not add to the burden on single mothers?

"I was interacting with 12 agencies at once. It was overwhelming, but I was scared to let go of one in case they said I was unfit to be a mother."

"You have to work so hard to get what you're entitled to."

"I was passed between Studylink and Work and Income for 3 months. In the end I put my son on the phone and told the worker to explain to him how he was going to eat that night."

Catch-22

"I needed enough rooms for my older daughter to live with me..."

...but because I had let her go and live with her Dad, I was only entitled to a two-bedroom place."

Mother leaves home seeking safety from domestic violence. Refuge won't take older son, so Oranga Tamariki take him.

Mother goes down on HNZ priority list as child is not in her care. Can't get child back as she doesn't have a house.



Support for single mothers needs to be:

01 Empathetic

Build a relationship with me. Listen to what I'm experiencing and be kind, patient, and encouraging so I can trust you and your support.

02 Transparent

Empower me with clear, relevant and consistent information. Inform me of processes and progress, as well as my entitlements and options for support, so I can make the best decisions for my family.

03 Proactive

Support me the first time and place I ask for help. Work with other organisations to provide me with what I need to look after my family then and there. Help me identify and avoid potential future risks.

04 Streamlined

Make the most of my limited time. Give me flexible options to interact with you around my busy life and commitments, and make it easy for me to control what information is shared between organisations.

05 Wholistic

Take my values, goals and priorities into account. Work alongside me to achieve my current and future aspirations for my family.

Nikita's story



Nikita is a young mother staying in her mum's three bedroom private rental house in West Auckland. It's a full house, with her mum and step-dad in one room, Nikita's older brother and his partner staying in another, and their three kids sleeping in the lounge with Nikita's two year old son. Nikita has a tense relationship with her Mum, and they fight often.

Nikita was a good student at school and did well in her classes, but fell in with the "wrong crowd" and became pregnant when she was in year 11. Her relationship with her partner has been on and off, but she ended it recently as he was becoming increasingly abusive. A few months later, she finds out that she is pregnant with her second child.

Key points in journey

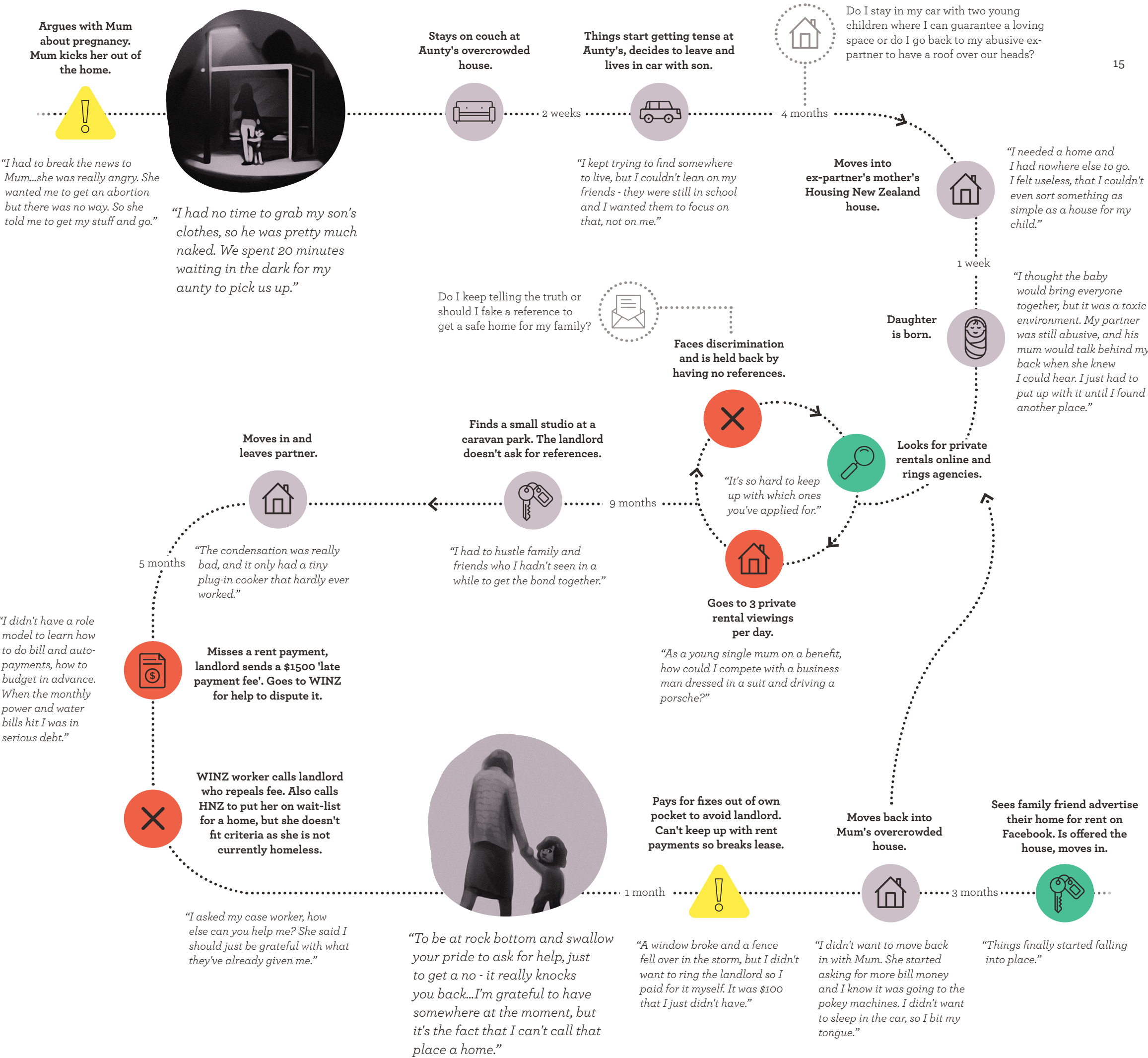
- Key barriers**

 - Workload to find house
 - Discrimination
 - Past records
 - Not meeting criteria
 - Lack of information
 - Lack of budgeting skills
- Key enablers**

 - Determination
 - Research skills
 - Organisation skills
 - Networks
- Key triggers**

 - Relationship breakdown
 - Unexpected costs
- Key decisions**

 - Stay in car or live with abusive partner.
 - Tell the truth or fake a reference.



Sofia's story



Sofia is a single mother boarding with her friend in his HNZ house in South Auckland. Sofia suffers from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but is well connected to community support such as her counsellor and a monthly arts and crafts group. She has a long history of unstable housing and is familiar with Work and Income (WINZ) and Child, Youth and Family (CYFs) processes (now Oranga Tamariki). She uses her organisation skills to keep on top of endless meetings and appointments for her and her children.

Sofia's three teenage children live with their grandparents and uncle and have complex health needs. When her kids start to transition back to her, Sofia needs to find somewhere safe and healthy for her family to live together.

Key points in journey

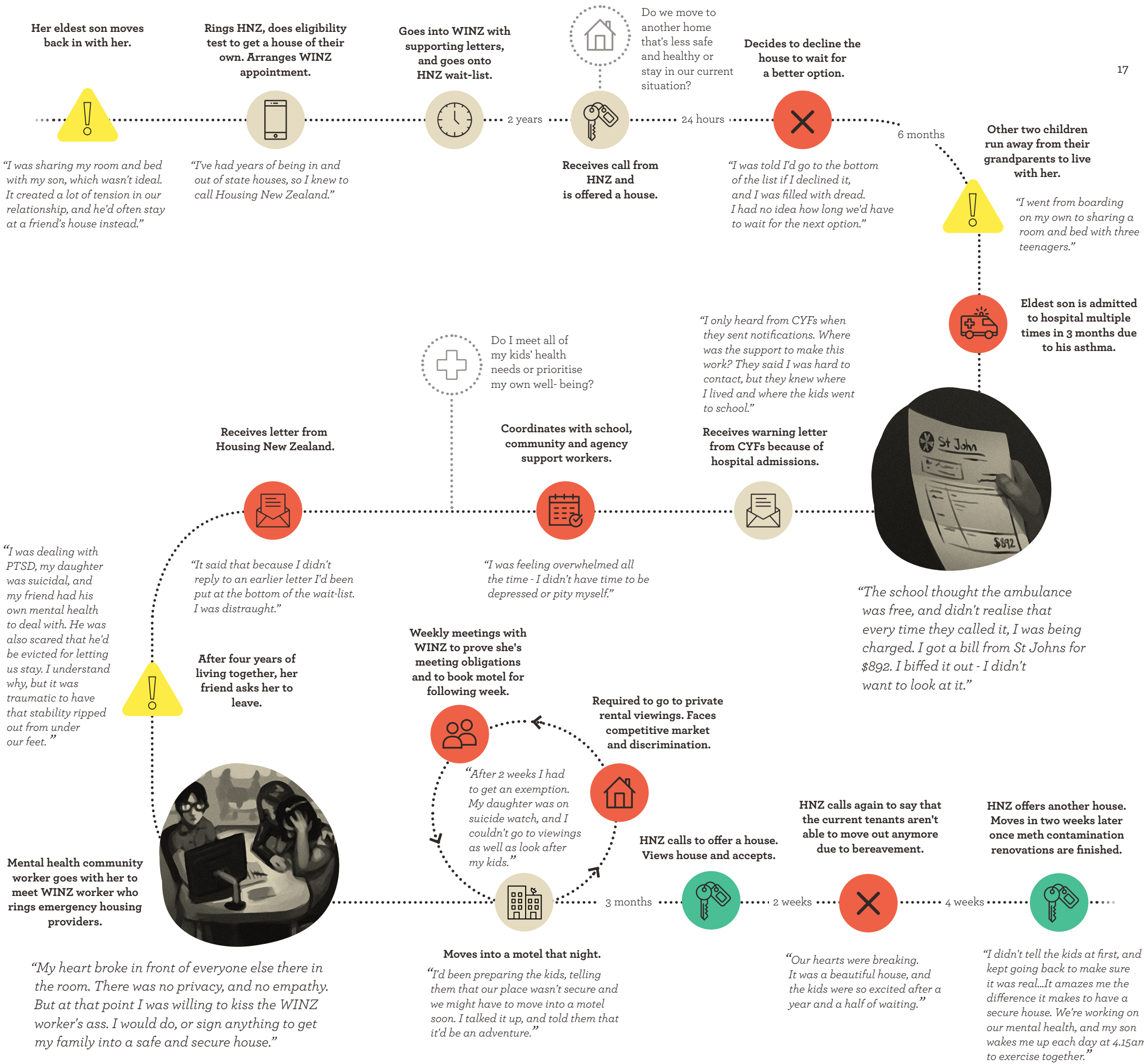
- Key barriers**

 - Lack of appropriate housing options
 - Workload to coordinate support
 - Unexpected health costs
 - Poor communication channels
 - Unpleasant service experiences
- Key enablers**

 - Resilience
 - Organisation skills
 - Mental health team
 - Community support worker
- Key triggers**

 - Kids transitioning into her care
 - Relationship breakdown
- Key decisions**

 - Take unsafe/unhealthy HNZ home or stay in current house.
 - Prioritise kids' health needs or own well-being.



Renee's story



Renee is a recently single mother of two, living in a private rental in the North Shore. After finishing her degree in Sociology, she has been working for both government and Non Government Organisations for the past few years.

After leaving her husband, Renee finds out that she is pregnant again. Within the same month, her organisation has a restructure and her role is made redundant. Although she is highly skilled and determined, the massive changes in her life are a lot to deal with on top of trying to find somewhere stable to live before her baby is born.

Key points in journey

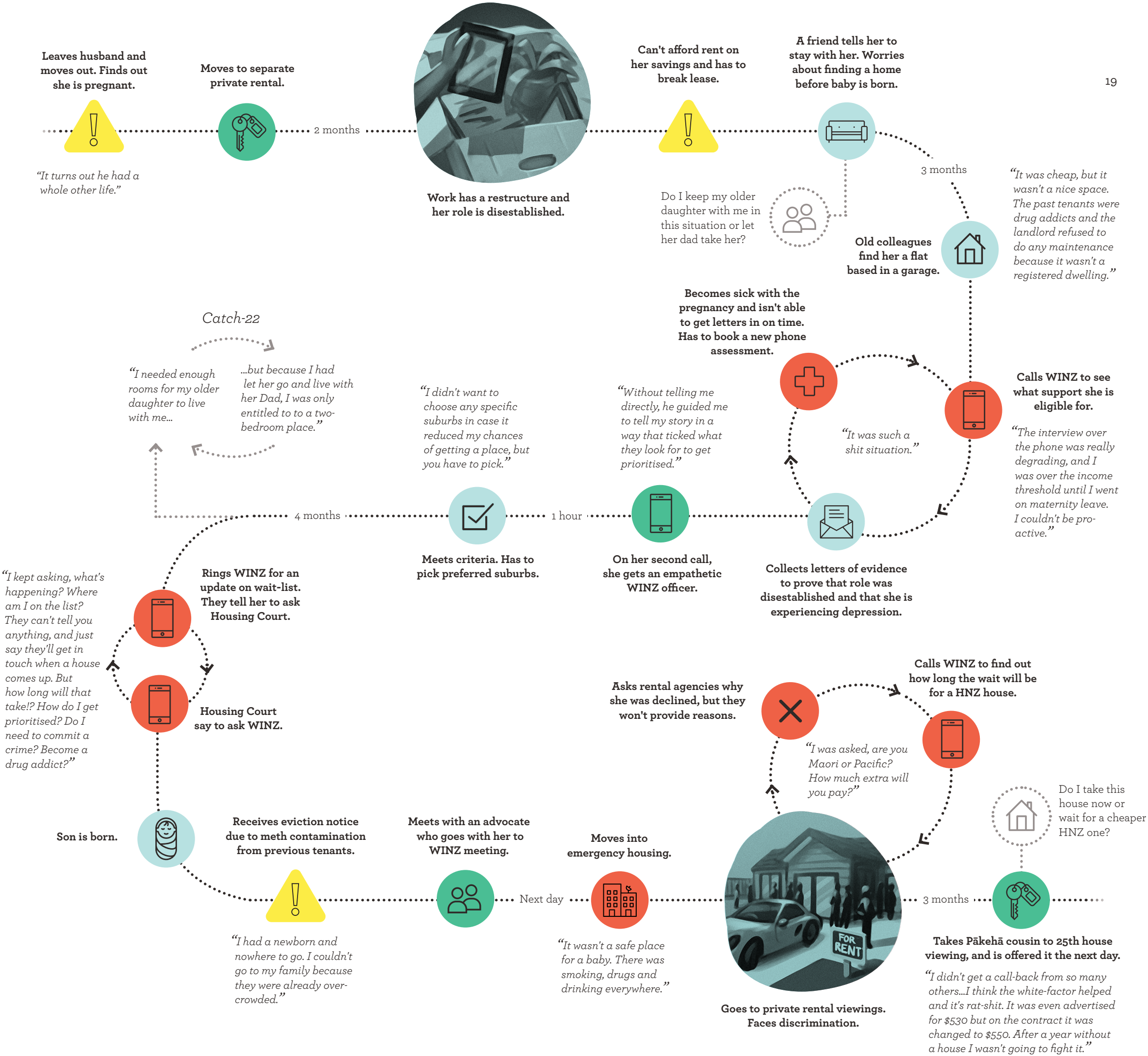
- Key barriers**

 - Not meeting criteria
 - Health complications
 - Lack of information
 - Unsuitable emergency housing
 - Discrimination
- Key enablers**

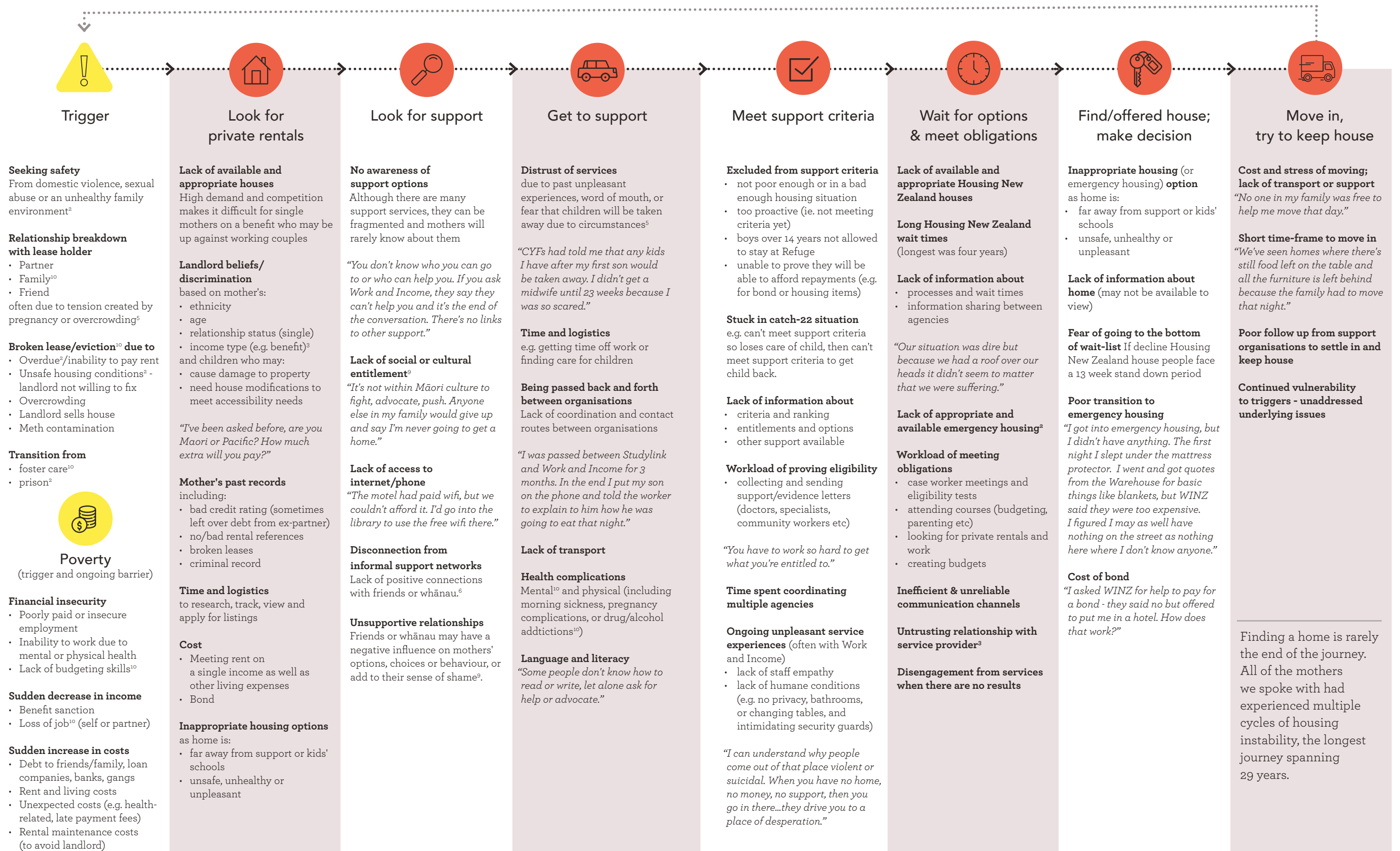
 - Determination
 - Friends/colleagues
 - Advocate
 - Positive prejudice
- Key triggers**

 - Relationship breakdown
 - Loss of income
 - Meth contamination
- Key decisions**

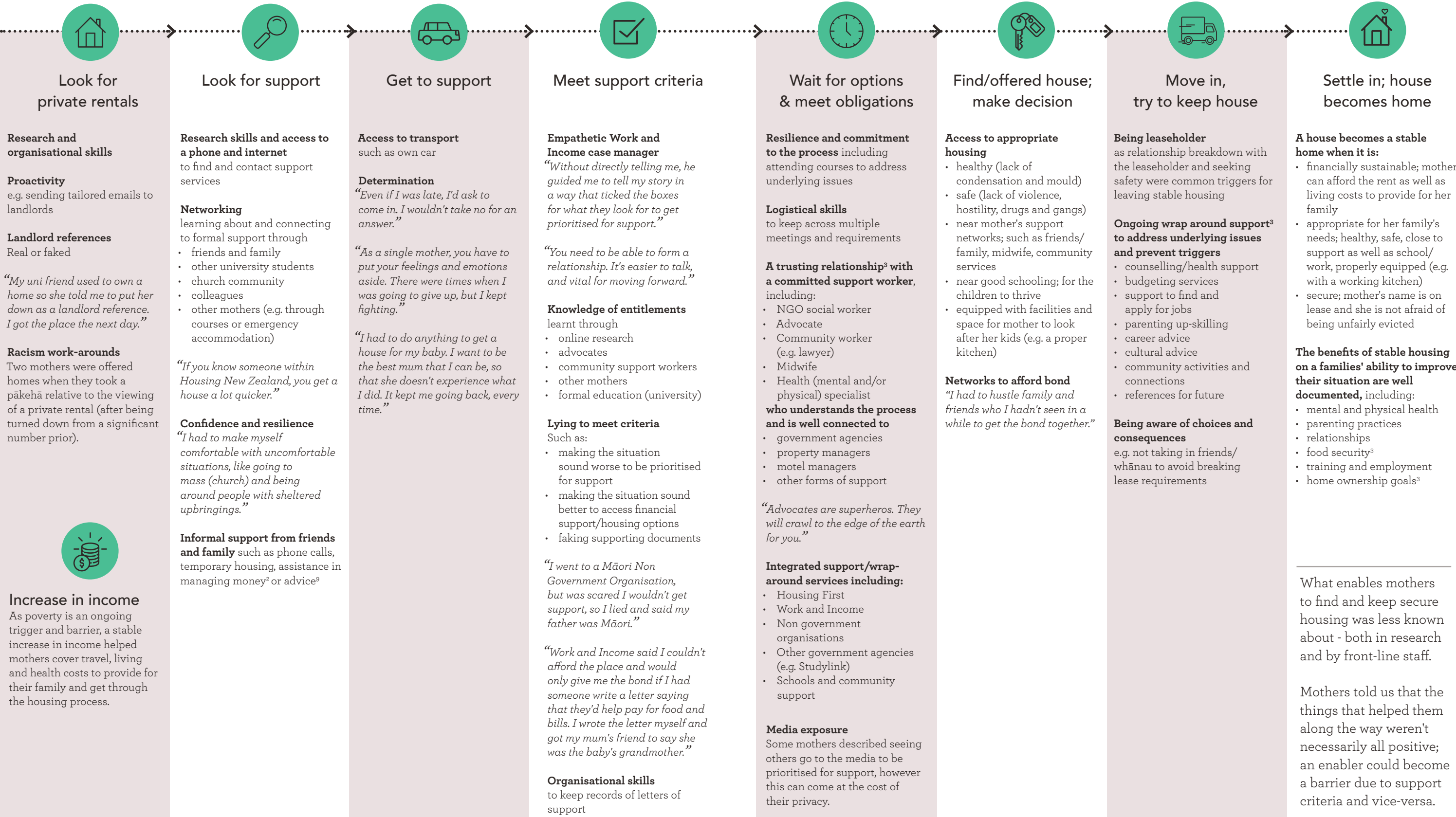
 - Keep child with me or give up to father
 - Take private house now or wait for more affordable HNZ house



Finding secure housing: Barriers

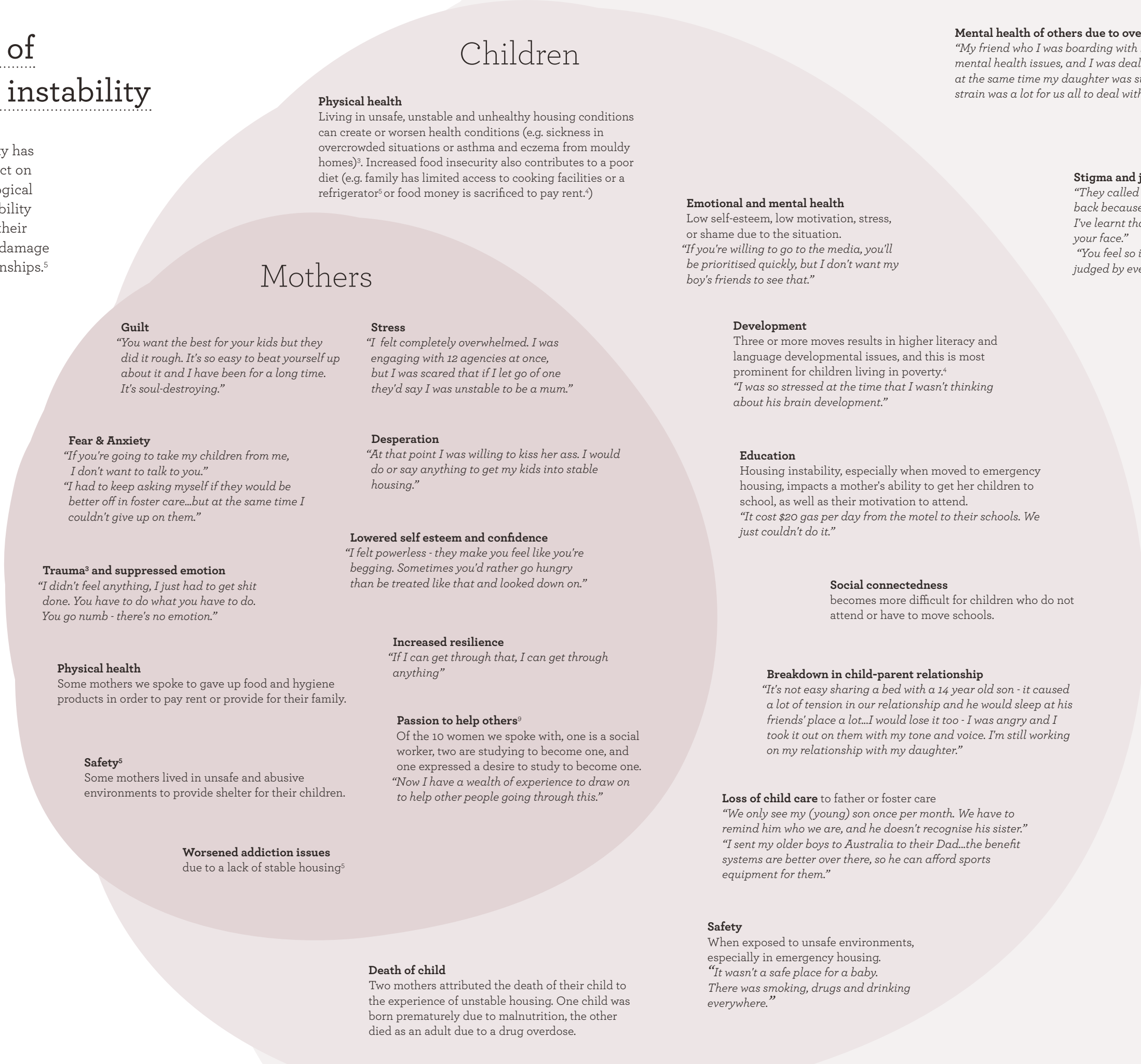


Finding secure housing: Enablers



Impacts of housing instability

Housing instability has a significant impact on mothers’ psychological well-being, their ability to do the best for their children, and can damage their wider relationships.⁵



Conclusion

The findings from this discovery process will inform the development of a regional, cross sectoral homelessness plan for Tāmaki Makaurau to ensure homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring.

The stories shared with us of single mothers' lived experience of housing insecurity will be used to ensure that the plan is grounded in the realities of the housing system, to keep the needs of those experiencing it at the centre.

References

1. Harris, R. (2015). *Invisible in the SuperCity; Hidden Homelessness in Auckland*. The Salvation Army Social Policy Unit.
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