

Research Brief

Family Violence and Homelessness

Introduction

Family violence has been prominent as a pressing social issue in Victoria and nationally in the past years, with growing attention on understanding the experiences of those facing family violence and creating appropriate policy responses to support those victim/survivors' safety and security. In this context, the significance of the relationship between family violence and (risk of) homelessness has increasingly been recognised. The watershed 2016 Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) heard that saturated private rental markets, a shortage of affordable housing, discrimination against single women and their children, and the stress associated with short-term housing deters women from leaving violent relationships and can increase the risk of violence and lead to homelessness (RCFV 2016). This research brief examines some of the intersections between family violence and women's homelessness, with a focus on Victoria.

Definitions

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), three broad categories of homelessness emerge in the literature (AIHW 2018a: 1):

- primary homelessness, referring to "rough sleepers": people living on the streets, under bridges, on park benches, and so on;
- secondary homelessness, referring to moving between short-term accommodations such as staying in a refuge or temporarily with others; and
- tertiary homelessness, referring to people living with shared facilities and without security of tenure, such as in a boarding house.

The Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC), the main data collection agency on homelessness, relies on similar definitions to the primary and secondary classifications for its clients (AIHW 2018a: 1).

To estimate the homeless population on Census night, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) similarly relies on more expansive definition of homelessness based on the lack of a 'home' rather than a 'roof' (ABS 2012). It uses six 'homeless operational groups' to estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness for the Census:

- *Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out;*
 - *Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless;*
 - *Persons staying temporarily with other households;*
 - *Persons living in boarding houses;*
 - *Persons in other temporary lodgings; and*
 - *Persons living in 'severely' crowded dwellings.*
- ([Explanatory Notes](#), ABS 2018: [14])

In 2012, the ABS expanded its definition of homelessness to consider key notions of "adequacy", "tenure" (and whether this is extendable) and "control of and access to space for social relations". Under this definition, a woman in temporary accommodation because of family violence is considered homeless. However, a woman remaining with a perpetrator in her home (and therefore possibly lacking control of and access to space for social relations) is not currently captured in the ABS' definition of homelessness due to difficulties measuring these situations ([Domestic and Family Violence](#), ABS 2018). In recent work on women with disability and violence, these questions of home and security of tenure in the context of family violence were critical ([Maher et al 2018](#)).

How much of a contributor is family violence to homelessness?

Family violence is a leading cause of homelessness in Australia and Victoria. It increases housing vulnerability for women and children experiencing family violence in two ways: by removing 'the sense of safety and belonging that is associated with the home' and because leaving a relationship often means women and their children need to leave their homes ([Spinney & Blandy 2011](#): 12).

According to the most recent data collected by the SHSC ([AIHW 2018b](#)):

- 288,273 people across Australia accessed specialist homelessness services in 2016-17.
- Of these, nearly 173,000 (60%) were female, [114,757 people \(40%\) were experiencing domestic and family violence](#), and 79,000 (28%) identified the main reason for seeking assistance as domestic and family violence.
- Of those who identified family violence as the main reason for seeking assistance, [91% of adults were female, 48% were single parents, and 25% were Indigenous](#).
- Victoria assisted [50,000 people experiencing family violence in 2016-17](#); the most of any State or Territory and an increase of 10% from the previous year.

The Australian Homelessness Monitor also found the identification of family violence as the main reason for seeking assistance in the SHSC data has risen by 24% between 2014-15 and 2016-17, confirming 'the growing importance of domestic violence as a cause of homelessness in Australia' ([Pawson et al 2018](#): 83). Concerningly, older women have been identified as a growing demographic at risk of homelessness according to the AIHW, based on data from the 2016 Census:

Although older women do not account for the majority of homeless people, they represent a rapidly growing demographic in the homeless population— increasing by 31% from 2011. Factors such as domestic violence, relationship breakdown, financial difficulty and limited superannuation can put older women at risk of homelessness. ([AIHW 2018c](#))

Moving in and out of specialist homelessness services is typical of the cycle of family violence ([Flinders Institute for Housing, Urban and Regional Research 2008](#): 16-17). According to the 2018 National Survey of Workers in the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Sectors, homelessness services had the second most frequent contact with victim/survivors of family violence, with 96.3% of Specialist Homelessness Services, refuge or other accommodation related support services having frequent (every day) or very often (weekly or more) contact ([Cortis et al 2018](#): 76, Figure 9.5).

Yet many requests for accommodation support continue to go unmet in Australia. In 2018 the SHSC found that, although the number of unassisted requests for accommodation support in Australia fell in 2016-17 compared to 2015-16, there still remained on average 261 unassisted requests across Australia (of which two-thirds were from women) ([AIHW 2018b](#)). Unmet long-term accommodation needs were particularly high, with only 5% of men and women needing long-term accommodation provided with those services ([AIHW 2018b](#)). This is especially concerning considering that stable, permanent accommodation has been noted to reduce the likelihood of women returning to live with perpetrators of family violence ([DSS 2018](#): 21).

Government responses

Historically, refuges have played a critical role in protecting and supporting women and children leaving violent relationships. However, Spinney (2012) argues this history unintentionally 'normalised' women and children leaving their homes to escape violence, and consequently underpinned responses to family

violence until recently ([Spinney 2012](#): 11; also see [Chung et al 2000](#): 4).

Increasingly approaches are being developed and adopted that assist women and children to remain at home, such as 'Safe at home' programs. These programs operate on the premise that perpetrators, rather than those who have experienced family violence, should be held accountable for violence and removed from the family home ([Chung et al. 2000](#), Edwards 2004, McFerran 2007). Across Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the four "pillars" of these programs that allow victim/survivors of family violence to safely remain at home are:

- excluding the perpetrator from, and maximising women's safety at home;
- a highly integrated response between local service providers;
- a prevention strategy to support and inform a woman of her housing options before the situation reaches crisis point; and
- recognition of the vital role of women's economic security ([Breckenridge et al. 2015](#): 9).

Despite the success of the 'stay at home' model for some women and children, it is only one approach. Its limitations include that it may only help in certain circumstances and must be embedded within wrap-around supports for women and children ([Spinney & Blandy 2011](#); [Flinders Institute for Housing, Urban and Regional Research 2008](#); McFerran 2007). A recent Victorian study found that, despite the positive perceptions of 'safe at home' strategies:

Stronger safety measures and a tighter enforcement system are needed if staying "safe at home" is to be a genuine option for more women and their children who want to separate from a violent and abusive partner. ([Diemer, Humphreys and Crinall 2017](#): 44)

Notwithstanding, Victorian initiatives and funding for housing and family violence were recognised as 'positive changes' by the Australian Homelessness Monitor in 2018 ([Pawson et al 2018](#): 11, 104). The Victorian Government is continuing to introduce initiatives to support women and children experiencing family violence as part of the implementation of RCFV recommendations, such as redeveloping the design of refuges (see Nyhuis 2018) and funding a 'Family Violence Housing Blitz' ([DHHS 2018](#)).

More broadly, since 2009 Commonwealth funding to States and Territories for specialist homelessness services was provided through the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). In the 2017/18 Federal Budget, the Commonwealth Government replaced the NAHA with the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), noting that 'three out of four benchmarks set by the National Affordable Housing Agreement had not been achieved' ([Australian Government 2017](#): 1). Under the NHHA, the Commonwealth Government has committed continued funding to States and Territories until 2021/22, but will require stronger accountability measures from States and Territories to demonstrate improved outcomes.

The *National Partnership to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children 2012-2022* also provides a framework for action for Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments ([COAG 2010](#)). As part of consultations for developing the Australian Government's Fourth (and final) Action Plan under the National Plan (due in 2019), adequate crisis accommodation and improved supports for women and children's longer-term safety needs have been identified as key priorities for the next phase of collaboration ([DSS 2018](#): 21).

Conclusion

Improved responses to homelessness experienced by women and children affected by family violence are increasingly being recognised and implemented as critical policy initiatives by the

Australian and Victorian governments, with growing attention being given to meeting women and children's long term housing and safety needs. However, policy responses for crisis and refuge support remain critically important. With growing recognition of family violence generally, there are also increasing demands on services working with women and children experiencing family violence at the point of crisis. Consequently, as Young, Andy and Doherty state:

While addressing the underlying social, economic and gender inequalities that drive family violence through prevention is a vital element of policy, improving crisis services and removing barriers to refuge entry and exit remains critical. (2018: 29)

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Authors: Kara Beavis (2017), revised by Kate Thomas (2018)
For further inquiries: arts.monash.edu/gender-and-family-violence