



**MISSION
AUSTRALIA**

**Inquiry into family,
domestic and sexual
violence 2020**

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(Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs)

Mission Australia is a national, non-denominational Christian charity that has been helping vulnerable people move towards independence for more than 160 years. During the 2018-19 financial year, we supported over 160,000 individuals through 519 programs and services across Australia.¹ Over 3,000 people were supported through 13 primary and domestic violence services. Of all those who accessed our services, close to 10,000 individuals disclosed they were experiencing domestic and family violence with an additional 6,555 individuals suspected of experiencing domestic and family violence.

Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia. This submission is based on a combination of research and insights from our service provision across Australia. It includes testimony from some of our practitioners and the participants they work with.

Recommendations

Mission Australia recommends that the Commonwealth government:

- Fund and deliver effective primary prevention strategies to address the attitudes, practices and power differentials that drive violence against women and their children. This should include promoting and strengthening positive equal and respectful relationship between women and men, and girls and boys.
- Implement the recommendations made to the Women's Safety Ministers Forum by the peak advocacy bodies and sector organisations as a matter of priority, including;
 - Fully fund the specialist services that improve women's safety, and hold men who use violence to account.
 - Remove the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility and emphasis on shared parenting in the *Family Law Act 1975*.
 - Initiate a standard screening, risk assessment and referral process nationally, to ensure public health, social and community services are trained to identify key safety risks early.
 - Agree to institute improved AVO standards.
 - Ensure victims/survivors seeking help can access free translating and interpreting services.

¹ Mission Australia, Annual Report, 2019, accessible at: <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2019/1320-annual-report-2019/file>

- Increase funding for legal, community services, justice and law enforcement services to operate in a coordinated way across federal, state and territory and local government jurisdictions.
- Increase social and affordable housing stock by developing 500,000 new homes by 2030 to ensure people fleeing domestic and family violence are able to access long-term, safe and sustainable housing. This should include at least 30,000 social housing units over the next four years as part of an economic stimulus package.
- Increase funding for crisis, transitional and long-term accommodation for victim-survivors and their families to be safely housed with access to necessary supports and services.
- Facilitate services and supports to house perpetrators of violence where victim-survivors wish to remain at home.
- Engage diverse sectors including health, housing, legal, private and corporate sectors in developing and delivering supports to victim-survivors escaping violence.
- Increase social security payments (including supplements) permanently to above the poverty line to shield people experiencing domestic and family violence from poverty and provide a financial safety net to leave abusive relationships.
- Integrate perpetrator intervention programs including evidence based men's behaviour change programs into holistic domestic and family violence responses.
- Fund domestic and family violence services that are co-designed to meet the needs of diverse cohorts of the community including children, young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from migrant and refugee backgrounds including those on temporary visas, people with disability, older people and LGBTIQ+ people.
- Create training programs for staff and workers who are likely to be the first-to-know of domestic and family violence to ensure they are able to provide trauma informed, sensitive and culturally appropriate supports to women and children at risk of or experiencing domestic and family violence.
- Continue to provide additional funding and resources to ensure domestic and family violence services are able to meet the increasing demand as a result of COVID 19 restrictions.
- Increase advertising of information in relation to domestic and family violence related services on multiple formats including TV, radio, online platforms and through community organisations.
- Provide funding certainty to community services to ensure that necessary and essential wrap-around, holistic supports to people experiencing domestic and family violence are available and accessible.

Current context

Domestic and family violence results in a significant number of deaths every year.² Women and children are more likely to be the victims of domestic and family violence. One woman is killed every nine days and one man is killed every 29 days by a current or former partner.³ In 2019, there were 142 victims recorded of domestic and family violence related homicides.⁴

An estimated 1 in 6 women (1.6 million) aged 18 years and over have experienced violence by a partner since the age of 15.⁵ The onset of financial pressure and the requirements to spend extended periods of time at home as a result of COVID 19 has resulted in an increase of demand of for domestic and family violence related support.⁶

Domestic and family violence is also a leading cause of homelessness. Almost four in 10 (38%) clients seeking assistance from SHS during this period were experiencing family and domestic violence, with half (50%) of all younger SHS clients (aged under 18) experiencing family and domestic violence.⁷

The number of people experiencing domestic and family violence are likely to increase over the coming months as the COVID 19 related impacts including the economic downturn become more severe. We are encouraged by the government's initial commitment of funding to support people through this pandemic, however, further funding and resources are needed to address the growing demand.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story, 2019, p.13, accessible at: https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b180312b-27de-4cd9-b43e-16109e52f3d4/aihw-domestic-and-family-violence4-FDSV-in-Australia-2019_in-brief.pdf.aspx?inline=true

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story, 2019, p.13, accessible at: https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b180312b-27de-4cd9-b43e-16109e52f3d4/aihw-domestic-and-family-violence4-FDSV-in-Australia-2019_in-brief.pdf.aspx?inline=true

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Victims of Family and Domestic Violence related Offences, 4510.0 - Recorded Crime - Victims, Australia, 2018, accessible at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4510.0~2018~Main%20Features~Victims%20of%20Family%20and%20Domestic%20Violence%20related%20offences~6>

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019, 2020, p. 4, accessible at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b0037b2d-a651-4abf-9f7b-00a85e3de528/aihw-domestic-and-family-violence3-FDSV-in-Australia-2019.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

⁶ Women's Safety NSW, Media Release: New Domestic Violence Survey Shows Impact of COVID-19 on the Rise, 2 April 2020, accessible at: <https://www.womenssafetynewsw.org.au/impact/article/new-domestic-violence-survey-shows-impact-of-COVID-19-on-the-rise/>

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019, 2020, p. 4, accessible at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b0037b2d-a651-4abf-9f7b-00a85e3de528/aihw-domestic-and-family-violence3-FDSV-in-Australia-2019.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

a) Immediate and long-term measures to prevent violence against women and their children, and improve gender equality

While it is widely recognised that violence against women and children is at critical levels, current measures in place are not adequate or effective enough to reduce and prevent domestic and family violence. Thus, a range of immediate measures are needed to prevent violence against women and children and it requires commitment from all levels of government as well as engagement of the justice system, law enforcement, diverse communities, sector advocacy bodies and service providers.

In addition to the Fourth National Action Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children,⁸ in March 2020, Council for the Australian Governments (COAG) established the Women's Safety Council, 'elevating the status of the existing Women's Safety Ministers Forum'.⁹ The aim of this forum is to implement the Fourth National Action Plan, develop and implement the next action plan beyond 2022 and consideration of other action to reduce violence against women and children. Domestic and family violence advocacy bodies and other organisations have advocated for the Women's Safety Ministers Forum to take action on 5 key priority areas:¹⁰

- Fully fund the specialist services that improve women's safety, and hold men who use violence to account.
- Remove the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility and emphasis on shared parenting in the *Family Law Act 1975*, to ensure a child's safety and wellbeing are the key considerations, so that courts are determining the best parenting arrangement for their needs and circumstances.
- Initiate a standard screening, risk assessment and referral process nationally, to ensure public health, social and community services are trained to identify key safety risks early for people experiencing violence in their relationships, and able to refer them to the services that can help them achieve safety and recover.
- Agree to institute improved AVO standards to make clear what is expected of police, magistrates and courts to hold perpetrators accountable, and ensure women and children subjected to domestic and family violence are able to rely on these orders to achieve safety and justice.

⁸ Department of Social Services (Commonwealth), The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 – 2022, Fourth National Action Plan, accessible at: <https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/the-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children-2010-2022>

⁹ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for Women, COAG Women's Safety Council, accessible at: <https://pmc.gov.au/office-women/coag-womens-safety-council>

¹⁰ Australian Women Against Violence Alliance, Letter to Women's Safety Ministers on urgent actions for women's safety, March 2020, accessible at: <https://awava.org.au/2020/03/05/in-focus/womens-safety-ministers-urgent-actions-for-womens-safety>

- Ensure victims/survivors seeking help can access free translating and interpreting services, so that regardless of their disability, cultural or language background, or geographical location, any woman reaching out for help to build a safer future is able to access the assistance she needs.

Mission Australia supports these recommendations and call on the Ministers Forum to action these measures as a matter of priority.

Both long and short term measures should be targeted and meet the needs of people holistically. People experiencing domestic and family violence should be able to access services when they are ready to do so and the services must be trauma informed and sensitive to individual's needs. The needs of people experiencing various forms of domestic and family violence also vary based on their age, cultural background, residential area and socioeconomic background. All these factors need to be considered when developing sustainable responses to domestic and family violence.

Long-term measures to address domestic and family violence should have a clear and strong focus on primary prevention strategies. A primary prevention approach works across the whole population to address the attitudes, practices and power differentials that drive violence against women and their children.¹¹

In the *Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia* study, more than half (56%) of the homeless youth surveyed had to leave home on at least one occasion because of violence between parents or guardians. Our service experience suggests that many young people seeking homelessness related services may have experienced or had exposure to domestic and family violence either directed at them or at other family members. However, some of them may not divulge these due to stigma, shame or fear of retaliation by the perpetrator and in some cases the continuous exposure has normalised this violent behaviour. Thus, there should be more support at the school level to educate young people about respectful relationships, personal safety and support services available in the community.

Providing violence prevention education in adolescence when an understanding of relationships is being developed is an important measure to break the cycle of violence and has strong prospects of success.¹² It is vital that the supports extend to parents and families where appropriate.

Love Bites

LOVE BiTES is a Respectful Relationships Education Program for young people aged 15 to 17 years. It consists of two interactive workshops: one on Relationship Violence, and one on Sex and Relationships, followed by creative workshops and community campaigns. Love Bites is a flexible model with options

¹¹ OurWatch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) and VicHealth, Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia, 2017.

¹² Youth Action and Policy Association NSW, Submission: Blueprint for the domestic and family violence response in NSW, 2017, accessible at:
https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/youthaction/pages/209/attachments/original/1456807427/Youth_Action_Blueprint_Submission_FN.pdf?1456807427

to use a full day or multi session delivery approach. The program emphasises the importance of a whole-of-school commitment to respectful relationship education.

LOVE BiTES aims to provide young people with a safe environment to examine, discuss and explore respectful relationships. All Love Bites programming takes a strength-based approach and views young people as active participants who are able to make choices for themselves and their relationships when supported with information and opportunity for skill development. LOVE BiTES education is focused on three critical areas for learning:

- Knowledge: youth-led collaborative learning
- Attitudes: critical thinking and decision-making and
- Behaviours: problem solving and communication skills

The overall aims of the program are to equip young people with the knowledge needed to have respectful relationships, encourage and develop their skills in critical thinking and assist them in being able to problem solve and communicate effectively. When equipped in these areas, NAPCAN believes that young people can make the right choices for themselves and their relationships that are free from violence and abuse.

Respectful Relationships Education¹³

Respectful Relationships Education is the holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence. It uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces, to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from such violence. A whole of school approach to respectful relationships education not only provides in-class education, but addresses school's culture, policies and procedures, and promotes gender equality among staff.

A toolkit has been created by Our Watch to support schools in delivering Respectful relationships education and was developed as part of the Respectful Relationships Education in Schools. The tool kit draws on the experiences of the 19 Victorian schools that participated in the Respectful Relationships Education in Schools pilot as well as the decades of work in this area that has been led by many schools and women's sector leaders. The tool kit provides clear implementation steps and tools that are flexible and adaptive to meet the specific needs of different schools.

Access to safe, sustainable housing that meets people's needs

Homelessness or lack of access to safe accommodation can mean that victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, especially those with children return to the same household as the perpetrator of

¹³ Ourwatch Respectful Relationships Education, 2020, accessible at <https://education.ourwatch.org.au/a-whole-of-school-approach/>

violence. In some cases where victim-survivors do not have a safe housing option, they may leave the perpetrator and experience homelessness. Therefore, it is imperative that responses to domestic and family violence are holistic and take into account the housing related issues victim-survivors may experience.

Social housing is increasingly difficult to secure and demand exceeds supply in all States and Territories resulting in long waiting lists for those who need a home. Australia is projected to need another 500,000 social and affordable dwellings by 2030 in order to meet affordable housing needs.

As a strong supporter and partner of the Everybody's Home campaign, Mission Australia has been calling on the Federal Government to develop a coherent National Housing Strategy that includes the development of 300,000 new social housing properties and 200,000 new affordable housing properties.¹⁴ Such a strategy should determine the respective roles of federal, state and local governments in supporting the development of the needed housing stock, and identify the appropriate policy, financial and institutional instruments required to achieve the target.

A joint proposal has also been designed by the community sector organisations titled 'Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program' (SHARP).¹⁵ The SHARP proposal aims to build 30,000 social housing units over a four-year period, plus accelerate the maintenance and renovation of existing social housing stock. As well as the benefits of increasing social housing available to low income households, the construction process will provide much-needed jobs and economic stimulus Australia-wide following the Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 shutdown of a range of industries.¹⁶ On average over the four-year period, the SHARP would support between 15,500 and 18,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs.

Access to safe, affordable and sustainable housing is a key measure to support people leaving violent relationships. However, there are a range of other holistic, wraparound supports that should be available to ensure that people who have been through traumatic experiences are supported to overcome the barriers they experienced while they were in the abusive relationship. These supports can vary based on the circumstances and experiences of each individual and can include mental health related services, community engagement, education and employment.

¹⁴ Everybody's Home, Our Campaign, accessible at <http://everybodyshome.com.au/our-campaign/>.

¹⁵ Community Housing Industry Association, Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP), 2020, accessible at: <https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SHARP-Full-Report-1.pdf?x59559>

¹⁶ SGS Economics and Planning, Economic Impacts of Social Housing Investment, 2020, accessible at: <https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200197-SHARP-Final-ReportSGS.pdf?x59559>

Pets and suitable housing options for domestic and family violence victim-survivors

There are multiple reasons preventing people from leaving abusive relationships. Companion animals, or pets are not generally thought of as barriers, yet they often are in the context of intimate partner violence.¹⁷ A study in Victoria reported that 53% of women entering a refuge to escape domestic violence and abuse reported that their pets had been harmed.¹⁸

Animal cruelty related issues where victim-survivors are unable to flee the abusive relationship due to lack of pet friendly accommodation options, inability to house the pets safely until more suitable accommodation options are found and returning to the abusive partner's residence as they fear for the safety of the pets require careful consideration.

There are some services that provide shelter for a fee or coordinate placements of animals with other residents in the community until permanent accommodation options are made available to the pet owners.¹⁹ This process allows pet owners to be reunited with their pets once they secure more permanent accommodation. Options such as these should be examined in addition to increasing pet friendly housing options for people leaving domestic and family violence.

Recommendations

- Fund and deliver effective primary prevention strategies to address the attitudes, practices and power differentials that drive violence against women and their children. This should include promoting and strengthening positive equal and respectful relationship between women and men, and girls and boys.
- Implement the recommendations made to the Women's Safety Ministers Forum by the peak advocacy bodies and sector organisations as a matter of priority, including;
 - Fully fund the specialist services that improve women's safety, and hold men who use violence to account.
 - Remove the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility and emphasis on shared parenting in the *Family Law Act 1975*.
 - Initiate a standard screening, risk assessment and referral process nationally, to ensure public health, social and community services are trained to identify key safety risks early.
 - Agree to institute improved AVO standards.

¹⁷ A. Fitzgerald, et al, People in abusive relationships face many barriers to leaving — pets should not be one, The Conversation, 17 June 2020, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/people-in-abusive-relationships-face-many-barriers-to-leaving-pets-should-not-be-one-139540>

¹⁸ RSPCA, Web article, is there a link between domestic violence and animal abuse? Accessible at: <https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/is-there-a-link-between-domestic-violence-and-animal-abuse/>

¹⁹ See further: Young Animals Protection Society, accessible at: <https://www.yaps.org.au/>

- Ensure victims/survivors seeking help can access free translating and interpreting services.
- Increase social and affordable housing stock by developing 500,000 new homes by 2030 to ensure people fleeing domestic and family violence are able to access long-term, safe and sustainable housing. This should include a minimum of 30,000 social housing units over the next four years as part of an economic stimulus package.

c) The level and impact of coordination across different layers of government, community organisations and business

The primary vehicle for domestic and family violence policy at the national level is the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2010-2022 (The National Plan).²⁰ The National Plan provides a framework for the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments to reduce violence against women and their children, and provides a mechanism for coordinated action across jurisdictions. Alongside the National Plan, the Commonwealth, state and territory governments have additional frameworks and policies to reduce violence against women and their children within their jurisdictions.²¹

When domestic and family violence does occur, it is important that the safety, recovery and wellbeing of those who have experienced domestic and family violence is supported and repeat violence is prevented through integrated services. This can be achieved through flexible service provision at a local level and co-design to meet the needs of various groups affected by domestic and family violence. Therapeutic interventions should be funded for both adult and child victim-survivors of domestic and family violence and a trauma-informed approach consistently applied.

Multi-agency collaborations are needed to provide effective and accessible services to women and girls who have experienced domestic and family violence.²² Currently, expertise exists across different service sectors (disability, family and domestic violence, etc.) and is not readily accessible to service workers.²³ Cross sectoral training packages and professional development placements or internships may be helpful in cross-pollinating knowledge from the various sectors.

²⁰ Council of Australian Governments, National plan to reduce violence against women and their children, Australian Government, 2010.

²¹ See further: ANROWS, The Australian Policy Context, accessible at: <https://www.anrows.org.au/resources/government-relations/>

²² P. Frawley, S. Dyson & S. Robinson, Whatever it takes? Access for women with disabilities to domestic and family violence services: Key findings and future directions, Sydney: ANROWS, 2017.

²³ J. Maher, et al. Women, disability and violence: Barriers to accessing justice: Key findings and future directions, Sydney: ANROWS 2018.

A recent review of Australian integrated service provision in response to violence against women found that integrated responses are promising but that good data is limited due to a lack of high quality evaluations of relevant service models.²⁴

Mission Australia believes that ensuring services that address complex and chronic needs are coordinated is important to an effective response to victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. While organisations including Mission Australia attempt to use an integrated service model where possible within the constraints of government funding models, more integrated responses should be funded by governments and co-designed with service users.

More coordinated service delivery between specialised workers and services for women experiencing domestic and family violence such as counsellors, lawyers, financial counsellors, doctors, child support workers etc. would be beneficial. Better coordination between government departments including law enforcement, courts, community services, health, Centrelink and housing is also required to ensure a holistic response. Co-locating medical and legal supports can minimise the number of contacts that women need to make.²⁵

Providers funded under the Staying Home Leaving Violence program coordinate legal supports and service providers to assist women and their children to remain in the home and not be displaced by the perpetrator. The service includes brokerage funds to increase home security, working with police and local courts to ensure the offender is removed, and assisting women to navigate legal, financial and tenancy issues.²⁶

Numerous services already work in collaboration with a range of stakeholders to support people experiencing domestic and family violence irrespective of the existence of formal arrangements. These collaborations require dedication of human and physical resources that some community organisations may not have as they are already working at capacity. Thus, the future contractual arrangements and service design models should take the need for financial support for broad collaboration into consideration.

Case study

Dee* is a mother of 2 children aged 5 and 3 years old. She moved to Australia in 2015 after she got married to an Australian citizen. At the time of her marriage she was unaware that her husband had

²⁴ J. Breckenridge, et al. National mapping and meta-evaluation outlining key features of effective 'safe at home' programs that enhance safety and prevent homelessness for women and their children who have experienced domestic and family violence: Key findings and future directions, Sydney: ANROWS, 2016.

²⁵ L. Forsdike et al, An Australian hospital's training program and referral pathway within a multi-disciplinary health– justice partnership addressing family violence, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 2018 vol. 42 no. 3, pp 284-290

²⁶ NSW Department of Family and Community Services (n.d.), Staying Home Leaving Violence, accessed at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/domestic-violence/services-and-support/programs/staying-home-leaving-violence>.

previously been married and had two children who were in their late teens. She experienced physical, psychological, financial and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband and his 2 adult children.

She was told that if she complained to anyone she would lose her children and would be sent back to her parents. When she flagged concerns about sexual abuse by her step-children, her husband insisted that their behaviour was normal.

In early 2019, she informed her GP of the domestic and family violence that she had endured over the years. Her GP connected her with a domestic and family violence service, which immediately referred her to one of Mission Australia's housing services. Dee removed herself from the violent relationship and moved into temporary accommodation managed by Mission Australia Housing.

She informed her case manager that she did not have a bank account and had never engaged with Centrelink or other authorities. Her case manager drove her to the bank and opened a bank account and applied for parenting payment and other payments, supported her with getting electricity and internet set up at her new address and other tasks that she was not confident in doing by herself.

Dee was determined and wanted to provide a safer home for her children. She was supported to enrol in English and driving lessons. Her children were enrolled to attend a local school close by. She recently moved into a private rental property and informed the case manager that she successfully transferred her electricity, gas and internet by herself. She is currently saving money to buy a car.

*Name has been changed for privacy

In addition to the Federal government funded supports, many states and territories have introduced various measures to provide additional protections for people experience domestic and family violence. In addition, various reports have been produced with pragmatic recommendations to curb domestic and family violence. For example, the Victorian Royal Commission into Domestic and Family violence²⁷ and Safe State NSW²⁸ reports produced a range of practical recommendations The Federal government could work in collaboration with state and territory governments to implement these state specific, localised measures to ensure that there are no replications of supports and services.

Recommendations

- Increase funding for legal, community services, justice and law enforcement services to operate in a coordinated way across federal, state and territory and local government jurisdictions.

²⁷ The Royal Commission into Domestic Violence in Victoria, Final Report, 2016, accessible at: <http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Media/Royal-Commission-report-delivered-to-Government-Ho.html>

²⁸ Safe NSW, Acting to End Domestic and Family Violence, 2019, accessible at: https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/safensw/pages/41/attachments/original/1540514938/A_Safe_State_-_Final_Policy_Platform_%28Oct_2018-Mar_2019%29.pdf?1540514938

d) Impact of health, housing, legal services and economic independence on the ability of women to escape domestic violence

Victim-survivors of domestic and family violence are likely to come into contact with a number of mainstream services such as hospitals, GPs, Centrelink and other community services that provide emergency relief, housing and homelessness related supports and the like. These organisations have a role in providing supports to people experiencing domestic and family violence including the ability to make appropriate referrals or provide information as the first point of contact.

Housing and homelessness

Concern for their own or their children's safety may lead women experiencing domestic and family into homelessness. Women reach a crisis point, whether after a single incident of violence, a period of prolonged violence or an escalating series of incidents, at which point they have to leave their home to find safer accommodation.²⁹ Lack of availability of appropriate accommodation is likely to prevent people leaving abusive relationships. Therefore, housing assistance measures for women affected by domestic and family violence need to include options that allow women to remain safely housed or to find affordable, stable and suitable accommodation within a short timeframe.³⁰

Meekatharra Family and Domestic Violence and emergency accommodation service

Meekatharra family and domestic violence and emergency accommodation service is available for two types of intervention. It helps women who need crisis intervention, but also assists women who recognise escalating patterns of behaviour and wish to remove themselves and their children from potentially dangerous situations to avoid further trauma.

The Meekatharra service also works with women and children at risk of homelessness to find suitable safe accommodation either in their community, with relatives in neighbouring communities or elsewhere. Women and children who come into the service are assisted with a range of issues including housing applications, accessing income support through Centrelink and seeking legal advice from appropriate family law services to help them to remain safe.

The majority of women and children accessing this service identify as Aboriginal. The Meekatharra Aboriginal Reference Group (MARG) has played a crucial role in shaping and delivering these services.

²⁹ S. Tually, et al. Women, domestic and family violence and homelessness: A synthesis report, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2008.

³⁰ S. Tually, et al. Women, domestic and family violence and homelessness: A synthesis report, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2008.

Case study

Jess* and Daniel* have been in a long term relationship and have 3 daughters and a son who are between 7 and 14 years. One of the children has a disability and Jess has to travel to Perth for treatment on a regular basis.

For many years, there were multiple incidences of violence and police were called frequently to address family violence related disputes. Often violence occurred when Daniel was under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Jess has also been severely assaulted requiring her to be hospitalised for treatment.

Jess was referred to one of Mission Australia's domestic and family violence services in the Pilbara. Before Jess arrived at the crisis accommodation facility, she was supported by other services to obtain a 72 hour Police Order as Daniel was trying to find the location of Jess and the children.

In addition to providing Jess and her children with safe accommodation, food and other practical support, Mission Australia's casework team worked with Jess to formulate a safety plan, provided informal counselling and supported her to obtain a Violence Restraining Order (VRO) for 2 years.

Jess decided that the best option for her and her children would be to live in Perth as it would allow easier access to health and support services for her daughter. Mission Australia's casework team sought advice from the WA Department of Communities in relation to accessing priority housing in Perth. They also assisted Jess to apply for a family violence emergency payment which was approved within a few days.

Jess was connected with a range of services in Perth as well as with temporary accommodation until they are able to access public housing, mental health supports for Jess and her children to address trauma they have experienced and a range of other services. Since moving to Perth, Jess recently contacted the Mission Australia service to let the case work team know that they found a place ideal for their family in the private rental market and that they are settling in well.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Women will often cycle in and out of homelessness as they try to rebuild their relationship with their abusive partner.³¹ Reasons given for returning to a violent partner include the partner's promise to stop the violence, returning for the sake of the children's wellbeing, limited financial resources, having nowhere else to go and/or fear of the partner.³² Safe accommodation is therefore a vital part of the

³¹ C. Chamberlain & D. MacKenzie, Counting the homeless 2001, Australian Census Analytic Program, Canberra: ABS, 2013.

³² C. Humphreys, Domestic violence and child protection: Challenging directions for practice, Sydney: Australian domestic and family violence Clearinghouse, UNSW, 2007.

service landscape. This includes increasing the stock of crisis, transitional and long-term social and affordable housing across the country.

Some programs are being implemented to remove violent men from the home, enabling women and any children stay safely where they are connected to social networks, community support and schooling. This includes Safe at Home in Tasmania and Victoria and Staying Home Leaving Violence in New South Wales. In other cases, rapid rehousing can ensure that housing is sustained for those who need to leave a violent perpetrator.

Preventing homelessness resulting from domestic and family violence is not only critical to wellbeing, but also a cost-effective approach to supporting individuals and families experiencing or at risk of violence. Data analysed and published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare indicates that it is possible to make significant inroads into homelessness for women experiencing domestic and family violence through prevention approaches, with homelessness able to be prevented in nearly nine out of 10 cases of domestic violence.³³

Rapid rehousing is a model premised on a Housing First philosophy (that is, it privileges the rapid allocation of long-term housing over preparations to make individuals 'housing ready'). It is primarily intended for people who have maintained tenancies in the past and works with them to secure new tenancies, usually in the private rental market.³⁴ Research from the US has indicated that preventing families from entering crisis accommodation and instead providing them with immediate long-term housing with low-intensity support is an effective and cost-effective way of addressing their needs.³⁵

The majority of states and territories have legislation to support people fleeing domestic and family violence to resolve rental arrears, terminating perpetrator's tenancy and a range of other measures such as immediate termination of rental agreements and releasing bond payments.³⁶ However, victim-survivors who are a sub-tenant without a written agreement in a share-house, a lodger or a guest are not covered by legislation and may still be forced into homelessness.³⁷ There needs to be better protections to ensure all victim-survivors of domestic and family violence are protected by enforceable legislation.

³³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Housing outcomes for groups vulnerable to homelessness: 1 July 2011 to 31 December 2013, Canberra: AIHW, 2014.

³⁴ Council to Homeless Persons (n.d.), Rapid Re-housing, accessed at <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/rapid-rehousing.pdf>.

³⁵ D. Culhane, & S. Metraux, S. 'Rearranging the deck chairs or reallocating the lifeboats?', Journal of the American Planning Association, 2008, vol. 74, no. 1.

³⁶ See further: Residential Tenancies Regulation 2019 under the Residential Tenancies Act 2010, accessible at: <https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/regulations/2019-629.pdf>

³⁷ Tenants Union NSW, Domestic Violence and Tenancy, accessible at: <https://www.tenants.org.au/factsheet-12-domestic-violence>

Role of businesses and corporate stakeholders

Numerous services and supports have a crucial role in supporting people experiencing domestic and family violence. In addition to the community and legal sector, corporate entities such as banks, employers, businesses and education institutions have a role to play in ensuring that victim-survivors are supported to overcome various challenges they are experiencing as a result of domestic and family violence.

The Fair Work Ombudsman's National Employment Standards contain family and domestic violence unpaid leave.³⁸ Given that finances and domestic violence are inextricably linked, there are arguments in favour of paid domestic and family violence leave.³⁹ The employers have a role to play in supporting victim-survivors of domestic violence and as a result should adopt measures to implement policies including paid domestic and family violence leave.

Economic abuse is the most common form of family violence that confronts the banks but is the most difficult to identify and is poorly understood.⁴⁰ It can be in the form of financial control, for example when a partner insists on seeing how all money is spent or makes important financial decisions without input or discussion; or financial exploitation when debts are accrued in the victim's name or a partner spends money needed for household bills; and also financial sabotage when someone is prevented by their partner from working or studying.⁴¹

The impact of financial abuse can impact on future housing, education and employment prospects of the victim-survivors. There needs to be a better understanding of these challenges among various institutions and concessions should be made to ensure victim-survivors are not disadvantaged due to the actions or inactions of the perpetrators.

Case study

Sally* is from Victoria with 3 young children. She has recently married her partner of 10 years. Once married, her social security payments reduced significantly as her husband was in a managerial role with a considerable income. At the initial appointment with Sally, she indicated that she was desperate to find work. However, her husband was required to travel frequently for work, often with short notice. Due to the unpredictability of his work to arrange childcare, it was difficult for Sally to focus on her career.

After a few appointments Sally informed her case manager that she was experiencing financial and emotional abuse. Her husband often told Sally that she was unintelligent and not capable of working to

³⁸ Fair Work Ombudsman, National Employment Standards, accessible at:

<https://www.fairwork.gov.au/leave/family-and-domestic-violence-leave>

³⁹ K. Farhall, Why Family Violence Leave should be Paid?, The Conversation, 28 March 2018, accessible at:

<https://theconversation.com/why-family-violence-leave-should-be-paid-94113>

⁴⁰ ANROWS, The National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey, 2017, accessible at:

<https://www.anrows.org.au/NCAS/2017/home/>

⁴¹ R. Russell, The banking sector can do its bit to combat family violence, The Conversation, 7 April 2016, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/the-banking-sector-can-do-its-bit-to-combat-family-violence-57215>

make a living. Sally's husband gave a budget of \$100 per week for herself and the children to cover expenses for food, clothes and to pay for education. Unable to manage all household expenses with \$100, Sally had got into significant personal debts, which impacted on her personal credit rating.

The caseworker immediately linked Sally with a number of support services in the community including a financial counsellor in the local area.

Recently, Sally informed her caseworker that she had separated from her husband which increased her social security payments and is slowly regaining financial control and becoming independent. She wanted to pursue a career in beauty and make up. Due to COVID 19 restrictions the courses were being offered online which was a more suitable option for Sally. However, she was unable to enrol for the online course due to her poor credit rating while she was still married.

After liaising with the institute, Mission Australia's service made a partial payment and supported Sally to enrol for a course on beauty and make up. She is still engaged in education and feels optimistic about her future.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Real estate agents are one of the groups that are likely to become aware of or suspect incidences of domestic and family violence.⁴² They are also likely to come into contact with perpetrators who may request access to properties where victim-survivors may reside or request forwarding addresses for victim-survivors who may have vacated the shared properties. Further, real estate agents may know about financial difficulties of the victim-survivors as they may fall behind on rent, utility and other related payments. Therefore, it is important that the real estate agents are provided with necessary training and support to assist victim-survivors.

Macarthur Real Estate Engagement Project (MREEP), NSW

The Early Intervention and Tenancy Support Service team in South West Sydney currently leads this Project, working with Real Estate Agents and multiple services in health, housing, employment and Centrelink. Supporting tenants who are struggling to maintain their tenancies, MREEP provides early intervention for new and existing tenants of Real Estates to avoid them entering homelessness. Flexible appointments, wraparound supports (financial planning/budget, setting goals, free health checks), and a person-centred approach and support to build positive relationships with Real Estate Agents and enables tenants to gain confidence to access services, activities and community events. Outcomes so far

⁴² Consumer Affairs Victoria, Fact sheet: family violence in a tenancy Real estate agents and landlords, accessible at: <https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/library/publications/resources-and-education/family-violence/family-violence-in-tenancy-real-estate-agents-and-landlords-pdf.pdf>

have included 138 tenants (including their families) have exited social housing and secured private rent, with 170 tenants having avoided eviction.

Economic independence

Perpetrators of domestic and family violence can use financial or economic abuse as means of control. This can include preventing or interfering with participation in education, training or employment, or with the acquisition and use of economic resources.⁴³ Even when economic abuse is not directly applied, other forms of domestic and family violence can result in economic harm and financial disadvantage for victims. This influences victim-survivors' ability to escape violence, and to recover and rebuild after experiences of violence.⁴⁴

The impacts of economic abuse can be severe,⁴⁵ and can lead to long-term issues such as poor credit records and erosion of the victim-survivor's sense of financial capacity. It is often perpetrated post-separation, extending the experience of abuse. It can impact on children's wellbeing, resulting in material deprivation and social exclusion. Further, it can impact on a victim-survivor's decision to stay in violent relationships, as they are forced to 'choose' between poverty and violence. Economic abuse is a major reason why women stay in or return to violent relationships, particularly where there is inadequate social security support.

Economic abuse particularly contributes to housing insecurity.⁴⁶ Housing is the major household cost for most people and in some cases a source of wealth that can be lost when women leave a violent relationship.

Recent research has found four broad areas in which the economic injustice resulting from violence should be addressed:

1. Preventing the economic loss associated with violence, including improving women's economic status, early specialist advice and assistance to secure property and finances, and to prevent loss upon separation, improving interactions with Centrelink, and preventing loss through employment.
2. Meeting women's basic living needs and economic security in the crisis period and beyond, including improving secure housing options, and ensuring adequate levels of income support and responses from Centrelink.

⁴³ T. Corrie, Economic security for survivors of domestic and family violence: Understanding and measuring the impact, Abbotsford, VIC, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, 2016.

⁴⁴ N. Cortis, & J. Bullen, Building effective policies and services to promote women's economic security following domestic violence, Sydney: ANROWS, 2015.

⁴⁵ Corrie, T. & McGuire, M. (2013), Economic abuse: Searching for solutions, s.l.: Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service & UnitingCare Kildonan.

⁴⁶ N. Cortis, & J. Bullen, Domestic violence and women's economic security: Building Australia's capacity for prevention and redress: Key findings and future directions, Sydney: ANROWS, 2016.

3. Redressing economic injustice associated with violence, including improving Family Court outcomes and access to legal representation and support, and providing specialist domestic and family violence skills for financial counsellors.
4. Promoting women's future earning and economic wellbeing, including ensuring access to affordable housing, and education, training and employment options and supports.⁴⁷

Access to social security payments through Centrelink can be particularly important in providing a source of income for women. Access to social security payments are an important part of addressing domestic and family violence in two ways:

1. Supporting women in being able to leave violent relationships, and
2. Enabling them to re-establish themselves and rebuild their lives.⁴⁸

Given the reliance of many victim-survivors of domestic and family violence on income support, improving interactions between people who have experienced domestic and family violence and Centrelink is a critical part of addressing economic and therefore housing security. Increasing rates of payment including parenting payments, JobSeeker payment and Commonwealth Rent Assistance are also extremely important in preventing and responding to homelessness resulting from domestic and family violence so that victim-survivors and their children can find and maintain a home. Thus, there is a clear need to increase social security payments (including supplements) permanently to above the poverty line to shield people from poverty.

Recommendations

- Increase funding for legal, community services, justice and law enforcement services to operate in a coordinated way across federal, state and territory and local government jurisdictions.
- Engage diverse sectors including health, housing, legal, private and corporate sectors in developing and delivering supports to victim-survivors escaping violence.
- Increase funding for crisis, transitional and long-term accommodation for victim-survivors and their families to be safely housed with access to necessary supports and services.
- Facilitate services and supports to house perpetrators of violence where victim-survivors wish to remain at home.
- Increase social security payments (including supplements) permanently to above the poverty line to shield people experiencing domestic and family violence from poverty and provide a financial safety net to leave abusive relationships.

⁴⁷ N. Cortis, & J. Bullen, Domestic violence and women's economic security: Building Australia's capacity for prevention and redress: Key findings and future directions, Sydney: ANROWS, 2016.

⁴⁸ National Social Security Rights Network, How well does Australia's social security system support victims of family and domestic violence?, Sydney: N SSRN, 2018.

g) The efficacy of perpetrator intervention programs

Men's behaviour change programs (MBCPs) emerged in a number of countries, including Australia, in the late 1970s and early 1980s in recognition of the problem of violence against women.⁴⁹ Their intention is to reduce rates of recidivism and thus improve the safety and wellbeing of previous, current and future intimate partners. They may also contribute towards safer parenting and healthier childhoods.⁵⁰

Historically, arguments against MCBPs include that they:

- Divert resources from victims' services;
- Reduce perpetrator accountability through the criminal justice system;
- Are ineffective;
- Are complex and expensive; and
- Contribute to the risk of violence by giving victims a false belief that violent behaviour will cease.

However, increasing support is being shown for perpetrator interventions including through *Australia's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children*, which contains stopping perpetrator violence and holding them to account as one of its outcome areas.

There are several different approaches to perpetrator programs, based on different theoretical understandings of what causes people to commit violence. Each of these has its proponents and critics, and there is a need to develop best practice evaluation principles and to evaluate specific programs to determine effectiveness across the spectrum of perpetrator interventions.⁵¹

A recent review of the Australian literature found mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of perpetrator programs.⁵² In general, there is some early evidence that perpetrator programs can be effective, but limited research in Australia and internationally to support any one particular model.⁵³ The majority of such programs in Australia use a group work approach and are voluntary.

In 2015, Australian governments adopted a set of *National Outcomes Standards for Perpetrator Interventions*. These Standards help to guide the assessment of perpetrator interventions in Australia. The Headline Standards are:

⁴⁹ E. Mackay, et al. Perpetrator interventions in Australia: Part one – Literature review. State of knowledge paper., Sydney: ANROWS, 2015.

⁵⁰ L. Kelly, & N. Westmarland, Domestic violence perpetrator programmes: Steps towards change, Project Mirabal Final Report, London, 2015.

⁵¹ E. Mackay, et al. Perpetrator interventions in Australia: Part one – Literature review. State of knowledge paper., Sydney: ANROWS, 2015.

⁵² Urbis, Literature review on domestic violence perpetrators, s.l.: Urbis, 2013, accessible at https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/09_2013/literature_review_on_domestic_violence_perpetrators.pdf.

⁵³ E. Mackay, et al. Perpetrator interventions in Australia: Part one – Literature review. State of knowledge paper., Sydney: ANROWS, 2015.

- Women and their children’s safety is the core priority of all perpetrator interventions.
- Perpetrators get the right interventions at the right time.
- Perpetrators face justice and legal consequences when they commit violence.
- Perpetrators participate in programs and services that enable them to change their violent behaviours and attitudes.
- Perpetrator interventions are driven by credible evidence to continuously improve.
- People working in perpetrator intervention systems are skilled in responding to the dynamics and impacts of domestic, family and sexual violence.⁵⁴

Men’s behaviour change programs should be funded in alignment with the Standards and further investment is needed in evaluation to determine which models of men’s behaviour change programs are most effective. Perpetrator programs also require links and protocols with drug, alcohol and gambling services.⁵⁵

Research has established that one of the most concerning problems with the service system in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia is the lack of services for perpetrators, outside of the police and court systems.⁵⁶ Mission Australia’s experience in working in regional, rural and remote areas confirms this. Consultation with local communities in many areas of Australia has indicated that community members are concerned about the lack of options for dealing with perpetrators, including lack of temporary accommodation and men’s behaviour change programs.

Adequate and appropriate perpetrator programs are required in all jurisdictions and tend to be lacking in regional and rural areas.

Manin' Up Men's Behaviour Change Program – Western NSW

The primary outcome being sought is a reduction in domestic and family violence by those attending and completing the Manin’ Up Men’s Behaviour Change Program. This overarching goal is underpinned by a number of key strategies:

1. Application of contemporary evidence based practice in reducing re-offending including:
 - a. Matching the intensity of the intervention to the level of risk that a participant is assessed as having.
 - b. Targeting offending needs or dynamic risk factors which are known to contribute to domestic and family violence offending.
 - c. When dynamic risk factors are targeted appropriately, these risk factors can be altered positively.

⁵⁴ Commonwealth Department of Social Services, (n.d.), National Outcome Standards for Perpetrator Interventions: Baseline report, 2015-16, Canberra: Australian Government.

⁵⁵ Chung D, Kennedy R, O’Brien B & Wendt S (2000) Home Safe Home: The link between domestic and family violence and women's homelessness, Commonwealth of Australia accessed at: <https://wesnet.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/homesafehome.pdf>

⁵⁶ Wendt, S. et al. (2017), Seeking help for domestic and family violence: Exploring regional, rural, and remote women’s coping experiences: Key findings and future directions, Sydney: ANROWS.

- d. Delivering the program using a cognitive behavioural and social learning approach which also accommodates the learning styles, capability and characteristics of program participants.
2. Delivering programs as they are designed (i.e. with treatment integrity) so that what is known to be effective in reducing reoffending risk actually gets facilitated in sessions.
3. Improved retention in the program through a strong focus on engagement of participants from the outset, by fostering active collaboration between the program provider and the participant.

The supports provided to victim-survivors are also nested into this model to improve the safety of women and children experiencing domestic and family violence.

Caring Dads – Illawarra Shoalhaven Region NSW

Caring Dads is part of a pilot program being delivered in the Illawarra Shoalhaven region. Caring Dads is a parenting program for men who are perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

Men are provided with an opportunity to reflect on the impact of domestic and family violence on children as a motivator for change. Participation is voluntary and the program runs for 17 weeks.

The program is progressing well and the results of men that have completed the program have been positive, with both the male perpetrator and the victim noting that it has made a positive change in their behaviour.

In addition to perpetrator intervention programs, other complementary supports should also be made available more widely, including access to mental health services and alcohol and drug rehabilitation services.

Case Study

Tania* and Mick* were in a long-term relationship and they have 2 young children together aged 3 and 4 years. Mick has a history of alcohol and drug use including methamphetamine and often violence escalated when he had been binge drinking.

Tania contacted the police when Mick was being violent as she feared for the safety of herself and the children. Mick has assaulted Tania in front of the children in the past and she was concerned that he might get violent towards the children or hurt them accidentally.

Tania had not engaged with services in the past. However, due to escalating violence, she agreed to receive support from one of Mission Australia's domestic and family violence services in regional WA. After arriving at the service, she informed her case worker that often violence would go unreported as she did not want to see Mick get into trouble with the police as he was the father of their children.

Even after leaving their family home, Tania was worried that Mick and his family would retaliate by hurting her or the children for leaving him. Considering the safety risks, Tania was provided with information about Violence Restraining Orders and the benefits of obtaining one. As Tania felt it was needed for the safety of her family, she asked Mission Australia caseworkers to assist her to obtain a 72 hour order. However, she did not want Mick to be criminally charged.

Tania was initially provided with accommodation and informal counselling. She was also supported to develop a comprehensive safety plan after completing a risk assessment. Mick had damaged Tania's phone during a violent incident. Tania was provided with a mobile phone with contact numbers of various crisis and support services.

With Tania's consent, her caseworker engaged with Mick and referred him to access the Community Alcohol and Drug Service (CADS). With the safety plans, emergency contacts and ongoing support in place, Tania moved back to her house with her children. She informed her caseworker that Mick was continuing to access CADS and that their relationship has improved. Mick's family also acknowledged the extent of drug use that results in violence and the impact it has on Tania and the children. They agreed to provide the family with greater level of support. Tania also informed the caseworkers that she would not hesitate to complain to the police and put her safety plan into action if violence does occur in the future,

Tania has also been linked with a number of local community groups. She has now been exited from the service and maintains contact with Mission Australia's outreach team if she ever needs support from the service.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Recommendations

- Integrate perpetrator intervention programs including evidence based men's behaviour change programs into holistic domestic and family violence responses.

h) The experiences of diverse cohorts including women

There are numerous structural, social, economic and policy factors that create barriers for women and children when reaching out for domestic and family violence related support. Therefore, responses to domestic and family violence should clearly identify that people experiencing domestic and family violence are not a homogenous group and that their needs are diverse based on their current circumstances, life experiences and the broader support network.

Support services should be trauma informed and flexible in scope to meet the diverse needs of people experiencing various forms of violence. In order to achieve positive, long-term outcomes, services

should be able to provide holistic wrap around supports for people to address the multitude of challenges they are experiencing.

Domestic and family violence related services including accommodation supports have historically focused on women with young children. There is also a lack of accommodation options that are affordable for older women on low and moderate incomes. With the emergence of older women leaving abusive relationships, service responses need to expand to target older people escaping violence.⁵⁷

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

As a consequence of colonialism, racism, impact of stolen generations, dispossession from land, culture and traditional social structures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience disproportionately high levels of disadvantage, contributed by social stressors such as poor housing or overcrowding, poverty and unemployment.⁵⁸

In 2016–17, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were 32 times as likely to be hospitalised for family violence as non-Indigenous people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women accounted for more than 1 in 3 (35%) of all hospitalisations for family violence, and most commonly specified a spouse or domestic partner as the perpetrator (62%) in 2016–17.⁵⁹

Case study

Anna* is an Aboriginal woman in her mid-20s who first engaged with Mission Australia's Charcoal Lane traineeship program when she was 16 years old. Upon completing her Certificate III training, she left the program as she was pregnant with her first child. Anna reconnected with the service seven years later and indicated that she was interested in reengaging with the program to complete her training. She stated that when she was previously engaged with the training, she felt confident about her independence and she felt like she was achieving her goals.

During the intake process, Anna indicated that she has three young children and was experiencing significant challenges to engaging with the training due to family violence. On one occasion, she had to contact the police for her safety. Following police reports, her children were taken into the care of child protection authorities. Soon after, Anna's ex-partner was in a motorcycle accident and suffered an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI). Since then, Anna had realised that her life had been controlled by her ex-partner and that he restricted her movements significantly until he suffered the ABI.

⁵⁷ McFerran, L. 2010, It could be you: Female, single, older and homeless, Sydney: Homelessness NSW and Older Women's Network NSW Inc.

⁵⁸ See further: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: a focus report on housing and homelessness, Cat. no. HOU 301, 2019, accessible at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/1654e011-dccb-49d4-bf5b-09c4607eccc8/aihw-hou-301.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

⁵⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019, accessible at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-australia-2019/contents/table-of-contents>

Anna also realised that living at home was triggering anxiety and paranoia and informed her case coordinator that she was not feeling safe living in the house with her ex-partner. Due to years of experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her ex-partner, Anna's mental health deteriorated which resulted in her sleeping rough, becoming dependent on drugs and being arrested.

When Anna described her situation, it was evident that she needed to leave the environment in order for her to recover from her mental health issues and drug issues and apply for reunification with her children. Anna's Charcoal Lane case coordinator worked with her to address a range of challenges including her mental health issues.

Given her precarious housing situation, she was supported to obtain separate letters from Djirra (Aboriginal Family Violence Legal Service), Department of Human and Health Services (DHHS) Child Protection, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and Charcoal Lane requesting a public housing transfer. When there was no response to the letters, her Charcoal Lane case coordinator followed up to find out about the progress of the request. The case coordinator was informed that there were not enough allocations of properties available for Anna.

Anna entered a culturally appropriate Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) rehabilitation facility and is continuing to work with her Charcoal Lane case coordinator to find her more suitable accommodation. Anna has indicated that she hopes to move into a new house and regain custody of her young children to start a new life. However, so far she has not been able to find an appropriate housing option.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Case study

Jane* a young mother in her mid-twenties and her 5 year old son was referred to one of Mission Australia's Specialist Homelessness Services in NSW by Link to Home. Jane is an Aboriginal woman and has experienced family violence growing up. She moved to Victoria to be away from her family and had dealt with drug and alcohol issues in the past.

She met her partner in Victoria and they had a son when she was about 20 years old. She was experiencing domestic violence and decided that the safest option was for her and her son to leave the violent relationship. She moved back to her home town with her son. As crisis accommodation facilities were unavailable, the service provided her with accommodation at a local hotel until a vacancy was available at the crisis accommodation facility. She was provided with emergency relief to meet her immediate needs and informal counselling.

After she moved into the crisis accommodation, she was provided with a range of supports. There were a number of deaths in her community that impacted her and her family. The services linked her with culturally appropriate services to support her with grief. She was also assisted to access social security payments and supported her with her priority housing application with Housing NSW. She is currently

being supported to find long-term accommodation and address other challenges that she was experiencing.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Important new approaches to family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities include a focus on social and emotional wellbeing that draws on connection with cultures, and spirituality as protective factors against the occurrence of family violence and putting Elders (male and female) at the centre of interventions wherever possible.⁶⁰

Services designed to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be co-designed and implemented with community members, Elders and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to ensure they are culturally secure, adapted and effective. Particularly in regional and remote areas, relationships with the local community and having a strong understanding of local cultures and protocols are critical to developing the necessary trust from community members to engage with local services. Further, the location and confidentiality of services are key to uptake of support in small communities.

Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds

Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds may experience violence from their intimate partner, extended family or adult children. The experience of migration itself can lead to women becoming socially isolated, and therefore beholden to a partner and possibly his family.⁶¹ Stigma and shame associated with domestic and family violence can result in women from migrant and refugee backgrounds being less willing to speak out or seek assistance and remain in abusive relationships.⁶²

Women who are newly arrived in Australia may have limited understanding of Australian laws with respect to domestic and family violence. Many migrant and refugee women are also unfamiliar with services that are available to them, including the police, domestic and family violence services and homelessness services. Lack of early intervention is therefore common among this group, leading to their overrepresentation among those needing crisis services.⁶³ Therefore, proactive measures must be adopted to ensure that these women are able to access early intervention and other supports.

The difficulties in accessing social security payments faced by recent migrants, often mean that they are unable to afford to leave violent relationships. People who arrive in Australia from overseas are required

⁶⁰ H. Blagg, et al, Innovative models in addressing violence against Indigenous women: Key findings and future directions, Sydney: ANROWS, 2018.

⁶¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, Intimate partner violence in Australian refugee communities Scoping review of issues and service responses, 2018, CFCA paper no. 50, p.2.

⁶² Australian Institute of Family Studies: Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, Supporting women from CALD backgrounds who are victims/survivors of sexual violence Challenges and opportunities for practitioners, 2011 No 9, p. 9-10

⁶³ Department of Social Services, Hearing her voice: Report from the kitchen table conversations with culturally and linguistically diverse women on violence against women and their children, 2015.

to meet certain thresholds of residency before they are eligible for social security payments and while there may be some exceptions for circumstances of domestic and family violence, these may be difficult to navigate.⁶⁴ The risks of homelessness for people seeking asylum have also been amplified by changes to the eligibility criteria for the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), leaving many people without access to income and supports.⁶⁵

Particular visa classes can restrict a woman's access to housing, employment, social security, health care, child care and education, or establish dependency on men where sponsorship is required. Women on temporary visas experiencing violence face particular barriers to support including fear of deportation, loss of custody of their children, lack of social networks, understanding of their rights and English language skills. Perpetrators can use these barriers to maintain power and control and to continue to use violence against women.⁶⁶

There are significant costs for providers when offering services to women who do not have an income or access to Medicare and who require support for complex legal, immigration and protection matters.⁶⁷ Women and children in this situation often end up in short-term crisis accommodation and then refuges for a long period of time due to difficulties in accessing the private rental market, having few family members or friends to assist, and long waiting lists for public housing.⁶⁸ Services sometimes try to manage the resources required to bear the cost of supporting these women by moving them around to multiple locations.⁶⁹

Although most women from migrant and refugee backgrounds report positive experiences with domestic and family violence and homelessness services, some reported difficulties accessing them due to high demand, and some felt pressured to make life-changing decisions quickly without proper access to an interpreter or sufficient information about their rights and options.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ National Social Security Rights Network, *How well does Australia's social security system support victims of family and domestic violence?*, Sydney: 2018.

⁶⁵ J. Van Kooy, et al. *An Unnecessary Penalty: Economic Impacts of the changes to the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS)*, Refugee Council of Australia, 2015, accessed at: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/SRSS_economic_study_FINAL.pdf

⁶⁶ National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence, *Path to Nowhere: Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence and Their Children*, 2018, accessed at: https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/sites/homelessnessnsw/files/2018-12/Path%20to%20Nowhere_0.pdf

⁶⁷ C. Vaughan, et al. *Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia: The ASPIRE Project: Key findings and future directions*, ANROWS, 2016.

⁶⁸ Department of Social Services, *Hearing her voice: Report from the kitchen table conversations with culturally and linguistically diverse women on violence against women and their children*, 2015.

⁶⁹ C. Vaughan, et al. *Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia: The ASPIRE Project: Key findings and future directions*, ANROWS, 2016.

⁷⁰ C. Vaughan, et al. *Promoting community-led responses to violence against immigrant and refugee women in metropolitan and regional Australia: The ASPIRE Project: Key findings and future directions*, ANROWS, 2016.

Case study

Mary* was married to her husband for 22 years and has a teenage son. They migrated to Australia from the Ukraine when the son was 3 years old and have no family support in Western Australia (WA). In 2018, police were called by a neighbour when they saw Mary running out of the house with injuries. Mary's injuries were found to be serious and she was flown to Perth for further treatment. Although there was no record of previous violence, Mary disclosed that she has been experiencing domestic violence throughout her marriage and she often had to take time off work due to bruising on her face. She also stated that her husband was extremely controlling and monitored her actions and movements.

While Mary was receiving treatment in Perth, the Family and Domestic Violence Response Team (FDVRT) was in contact with the hospital. An intensive multi-agency case management plan was developed in preparation for Mary's return from hospital. Mary was consulted and was regularly updated throughout this process. During this process, arrangements were made for Mary's son to join her in Perth. His school was notified of the situation and the school psychologist was involved in the development of the multi-agency case management plan. Mary was also regularly updated on the progress of the court proceedings.

During this period, Mary's husband was released on bail which made her fearful of retaliation as a result of having the police involved. The case management team worked with the police and Mary was provided with a duress alarm. Her support workers were able to advocate on her behalf and arrange suitable accommodation in Perth for Mary and her son. She was also linked to the relevant metropolitan Central Referral Service (CRS) in order for her to receive appropriate local support. Mary is receiving ongoing support from a range of community organisations and her son is attending a school in the local area.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Multiple reports demonstrated the significant impact COVID 19 had on people who were on various temporary visas.⁷¹ The inability to access social security payments, loss of employment and limited financial security, limited support from social networks and limited understanding of supports available may result in women on temporary visas being unable to leave their abusive partners. Community services were able to provide supports with certain state and territory governments increasing funding to support temporary migrants however, there is a clear need for more targeted support from the Federal government, including through access to income support and Medicare.

⁷¹ P. Whiteford, Open letter to the Prime Minister: extend coronavirus support to temporary workers, The Conversation, 7 April 2020, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/open-letter-to-the-prime-minister-extend-coronavirus-support-to-temporary-workers-135691>

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, non-binary, intersex, questioning, queer, asexual and more (LGBTIQA+) community members

Attributes of biological sex, gender identity and expression and sexuality are distinct and sometimes overlapping attributes impacting on experiences of domestic and family violence for LGBTIQA+ people. LGBTIQA+ people can experience domestic and family violence from current or former intimate partners as well as from other family members who do not accept their sexual or gender identity.⁷²

There is limited information on the incidence of domestic and family violence among people in LGBTIQA+ relationships. However, research undertaken in NSW in 2014 indicated that domestic and family violence is a significant experience for many LGBTI people.⁷³ Although the survey underpinning the report was not based on a representative sample, and is therefore unable to give robust prevalence estimates, respondents to the survey indicated experiences of violence and abuse that included:

- 55% had previously been in one or more emotionally abusive relationships.
- 35% had been physically or sexually abused by a previous partner.
- Transgender, gender diverse and intersex respondents were disproportionately affected, with 75% having experienced emotional abuse and 53% having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse.
- Of those in a current relationship:
 - 42% had been verbally abused by their partner.
 - 26% had been emotionally abused by their partner.
 - 22% experienced physical aggression from their partner.

Some types of abuse are unique to LGBTIQA+ people, including threatening to 'out' the victim-survivor to people they know, isolating the victim-survivor from the LGBTIQA+ community, and pressuring victim-survivors to stop expressing their identity or lived experience.⁷⁴

Case Study

Brian* was linked with one of Mission Australia's Specialist Homelessness Services in mid-2019. Brian had struggles with his family about his sexual identity and was referred to the service by his school principal. His mother and 8 siblings were opposed to him coming out and he was threatened with physical abuse if he mentioned anything about his sexual identity to other people.

⁷² Our Watch, An analysis of existing research Primary prevention of family violence against people from LGBTI communities, Melbourne, Our Watch, 2017.

⁷³ LGBTIQ Domestic and Family Violence Interagency and the Centre for Social Research in Health, University of NSW, Calling it what it really is: A report into lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex and queer experiences of domestic and family violence, Sydney: UNSW, 2014.

⁷⁴ LGBTIQ Domestic and Family Violence Interagency and the Centre for Social Research in Health, University of NSW, Calling it what it really is: A report into lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex and queer experiences of domestic and family violence, Sydney: UNSW, 2014.

Brian received continuous support while he was at crisis accommodation with school engagement, mental health related supports and independent living skills. In December last year, he was able to move into an independent transitional property. Brian struggled with living independently. He was hospitalised a number of times for attempted suicide or suicide ideation. He also experienced seizures which were linked to emotional distress.

As the medical staff determined it was unsafe for him to live by himself, his case manager offered for him to temporarily move back into the crisis accommodation facility where he can interact with staff and other residents. Brian agreed to move back as he believed it was in his best interest. After moving back to youth accommodation facility, he experienced suicide ideation and was hospitalised at a mental health unit. His case manager and others continued to provide him with support.

In addition to mental health related supports, the case manager provided practical assistance including visits to the hospital, accompanying him to various cardiology and neurology appointments and the local LGBTIQ+ services where he was able to form new friendships. He was also linked with faith based services that welcomed LGBTIQ+ community members which made a huge impact in his life.

Since the beginning of the year, Brian has made numerous positive strides and has informed his case manager that he is happier with his life. Brian has reconnected with his old friends and hopes to reconnect with some of his siblings in the future.

**Name has been changed for privacy*

LGBTIQ+ people are also often reluctant to report their experiences of violence and abuse to the police, particularly those who are transgender, gender diverse or intersex. This may be from fear of the police or concern they would not be treated with dignity.⁷⁵ Police and domestic and family violence and homelessness services need more training for staff to be able to better cater to unique issues arising for LGBTIQ+ people, particularly those who are transgender.

The General Social Survey in Australia conducted by the ABS in 2014 recorded that 20.8% of bisexual people and 33.7% of lesbian/gay people had ever been homeless in comparison to 13.4% of heterosexuals.⁷⁶ Higher levels of homelessness or increased risk of homelessness among LGBTI young people has been attributed to family rejection and/or violence perpetrated by family members.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ LGBTIQ Domestic and Family Violence Interagency and the Centre for Social Research in Health, University of NSW, Calling it what it really is: A report into lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex and queer experiences of domestic and family violence, Sydney: UNSW, 2014.

⁷⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, General Social Survey in Australia, Cat No. 4159.0, 2014, Canberra: ABS accessed at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>

⁷⁷ K. Robinson, et al Growing up queer: Issues facing young Australians who are gender variant and sexuality diverse, Melbourne: Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, 2013.

Transgender people may also experience discrimination due to their gender identity when accessing accommodation and homelessness services.⁷⁸ According to a recent survey, 22% of transgender young people had experienced homelessness or accommodation crises and of those transgender young people who were able to access temporary housing or accommodation, 43% reported that gender identity was not respected.⁷⁹ Sensitive and trauma informed supports for LGBTIQ+ community should be made more widely available.

It is imperative to ensure that gay, bisexual, transgender and non-binary people experiencing domestic and family violence are also provided with the necessary sensitive and appropriate supports.

People with disability

Domestic and family violence is a significant issue for people living with disability. Good quality data about the prevalence and incidence of violence against women living with disabilities is generally limited, and likely to be under-reported.⁸⁰ However, data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the *2016 Personal Safety Survey*⁸¹ indicated that women living with disabilities are around 40% more likely to experience domestic and family violence compared to women living without disabilities.

In 2018–19, 7,200 (2%) Specialist Homelessness Services clients reported a severe or profound core activity limitation (self-care, mobility, and/or communication).⁸² Approximately 20% of these clients experienced domestic and family violence.⁸³

Forms of domestic and family violence specific to women living with disabilities may include withholding medication or aids, limiting access to disability support or other services, and forms of denigration such as making threats relating to a woman's mothering or caregiving role.⁸⁴ Many women living with disabilities experience social isolation as both a risk factor for, and a consequence of, violence.⁸⁵ Discriminatory stereotypes also contribute to the belief that women with disability are a burden to

⁷⁸ Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Health and Wellbeing Ministerial Advisory Committee, *Transgender and gender diverse health and wellbeing Background paper*, Melbourne: State of Victoria, Department of Health, 2014.

⁷⁹ P. Strauss, et al. *Trans Pathways: the mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people*. Summary of results, Perth: Telethon Kids Institute, 2017.

⁸⁰ P. Frawley, S. Dyson, & S. Robinson, *Whatever it takes? Access for women with disabilities to domestic and family violence services: Key findings and future directions*, Sydney: ANROWS, 2017.

⁸¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics *Personal safety*, Australia, 2016, cat. no. 4906.0, Canberra: ABS, 2017, accessed at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0>.

⁸² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2018-19*, Canberra, AIHW, 2019.

⁸³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2018-19*, Canberra, AIHW, 2019.

⁸⁴ J. Maher, *Women, disability and violence: Barriers to accessing justice: Key findings and future directions*, Sydney: ANROWS, 2018.

⁸⁵ *Women with disabilities Victoria, Position statement: Violence against women with disabilities*, Melbourne: WDV, 2014.

those supporting them. This can result in a lack of acknowledgement that formal and informal supporters can be violent towards these individuals.⁸⁶

Women with disability, in particular, face precarious housing situations when leaving their homes to escape violence and abuse. They often face discrimination when looking for rental properties, and may not have sufficient financial resources to set up a new living environment that supports their independence.⁸⁷ Some 16% of people living with disability have been served with a 'without grounds' eviction, compared with 9% for the rest of those who rent.⁸⁸ It is also estimated that less than 5% of new housing has basic accessibility features such as wider doorways, one entry point for wheelchair users, and a toilet on the ground floor.⁸⁹

People with disability also have housing costs that non-disabled people do not share, including limited availability which can push the market price up, utility costs and the need for modifications. Furthermore, 38% of people with disability live below poverty line⁹⁰ and as a result are more likely to be at risk of homelessness due to financial stresses such as additional health care costs and modifications to existing housing.⁹¹

It is also reported that women with disability are likely to fear that accessing domestic and family violence services will result in them being institutionalised and thus, refrain from raising concerns.⁹² Further, it was found that women receiving treatment for a mental health condition are likely to be reluctant to exercise their rights to protect themselves and their children from further violence for fear that the perpetrator may use mental illness to deny access to children.⁹³

Case study

Megan* was a young person from NSW who was born with a hereditary condition that impaired her vision, making her legally blind. Her mother had the same condition. Her stepfather frequently verbally abused her and often told her that 'she couldn't do anything properly' and that she was 'hopeless'. As

⁸⁶ PWDA and DVNSW (2015) Women with Disability and Domestic and Family Violence: a guide for policy and practice, accessed at: http://dvnsw.org.au/pwd_doc1.pdf

⁸⁷ PWDA and DVNSW (2015) Women with Disability and Domestic and Family Violence: a guide for policy and practice, accessed at: http://dvnsw.org.au/pwd_doc1.pdf

⁸⁸ National Shelter, CHOICE and National Association of Tenant Organisations. (2018), Disrupted: The consumer experience of renting in Australia, p.19.

⁸⁹ People with Disability Australia (2019), Federal Pre-Budget Submission 2019, accessed at: <https://pwd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/SB01022019-Treasury-Pre-Budget-Submission.pdf>

⁹⁰ Davidson, P., Saunders, P., Bradbury, B. and Wong, M. (2018), Poverty in Australia, 2018. ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 2, Sydney: ACOSS.

⁹¹ Homelessness Australia (2016), Homelessness and Disability, accessed at https://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/sites/homelessnessaus/files/2017-07/Homelessness%20and%20disability_0.pdf.

⁹² PWDA and DVNSW (2015) Women with Disability and Domestic and Family Violence: a guide for policy and practice, accessed at: http://dvnsw.org.au/pwd_doc1.pdf

⁹³ Humphreys, Cathy, and Ravi Thiara, (2003), 'Mental Health and Domestic Violence: "I Call It Symptoms of Abuse"' 33 British Journal of Social Work 209-226.

her living conditions became untenable, she moved away from home and got in touch with Mission Australia.

She was provided with crisis accommodation, counselling to overcome the impact that her step father had on her self-confidence and other supports to navigate the services available to her. Small milestones such as doing her laundry by herself was celebrated to boost her confidence. Megan was supported to move into transitional accommodation.

The staff also supported her to get additional help from Vision Australia and other disability support services specifically equipped to help with her disability. She is a talented musician and has won awards during Youth Week. She plans to pursue a career in music. Megan is determined to find work and told her support staff that “I don’t want to be on the disability pension for long”. She has exited the service after finding suitable accommodation and is continuing her education.

* Name has been changed for privacy

Recommendations

- Fund domestic and family violence services that are co-designed to meet the needs of diverse cohorts of the community including children, young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from migrant and refugee backgrounds including those on temporary visas, people with disability, older people and LGBTIQ+ people.
- Create training programs for staff and workers who are likely to be the first-to-know of domestic and family violence to ensure they are able to provide trauma informed, sensitive and culturally appropriate supports to women and children at risk of or experiencing domestic and family violence.

i) The impact of natural disasters and other significant events such as COVID-19

Global and local research demonstrate the increase in demand for domestic and family violence since the beginning of the pandemic. A vast number of research provide evidence of increasing violence during natural disasters or significant disruptions in social and physical environments.⁹⁴

A survey of practitioners found that the pandemic has led to an increase in the frequency and severity of violence against women as 59% of respondents reported that COVID-19 has increased the frequency of

⁹⁴ S. Wagers, Domestic violence growing in wake of coronavirus outbreak, The Conversation, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/domestic-violence-growing-in-wake-of-coronavirus-outbreak-135598>

violence against women and 50% reported it has increased the severity of violence against women.⁹⁵ Perpetrators were found to be using the COVID-19 restrictions and threat of infection to restrict women's movement, gain access to women's residences and coerce women into residing with them if they usually reside separately.⁹⁶

According to another research with over 15,000 participants, two thirds (65.4%) of women who experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to May said the violence had started or escalated in that period. One in three (33.1%) said that this was the first time their partner had been violent towards them in this way.⁹⁷

Community services were at capacity or were unable to cope with the demand prior to the bushfires and pandemic. However, with COVID-19 and the bushfires, the whole service system is even more strained. Therefore, careful planning is needed to ensure adaptation strategies are in place to support people in times of disaster and prevent people and families from experiencing domestic and family violence at the hands of the perpetrator.

Case study

Jo* is a 54 year old woman from South Australia who was accessing one of Mission Australia's community services. Jo disclosed that she was experiencing domestic violence to her caseworker at the time. The perpetrator had disrupted and broken down all Jo's friendships and her relationship with family. Therefore, Jo did not have a support network other than the services she was engaged with.

When the caseworker offered to support her, she stated she was doing well and started avoiding appointments by making excuses to cancel which was out of the ordinary considering Jo's enthusiasm to participate in activities in the past. Jo continued to answer the telephone responding to the caseworker's questions when she could. There was a noticeable reduction in attendance for appointments face to face as Jo regularly cancelled her appointments. Jo stated that she was hopeful the perpetrator would get help and his violence against her would stop. She stated that she could 'help him to get better'.

⁹⁵ Pfitzner, N., Fitz-Gibbon, K. and True, J. (2020). Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions. Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University, Victoria, Australia.

⁹⁶ Pfitzner, N., Fitz-Gibbon, K. and True, J. (2020). Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions. Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University, Victoria, Australia.

⁹⁷ The Australian Institute of Criminology, The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, accessible at: https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/sb28_prevalence_of_domestic_violence_among_women_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf

The caseworker had previously provided Jo with information about the local domestic violence services and safe language in a safety plan in the event she wanted to communicate with the caseworker while the perpetrator was present.

In early April Jo was not answering her phone and the caseworker had no way of getting in touch with her. The caseworker drove past her house with a second caseworker who noticed that all of the blinds were drawn and that mail in the letter box had not been collected in days. Jo did not answer her door, she called out to say she may have contracted COVID 19 so she will not be able to answer the door.

After ringing Jo over a number of days, Jo sent a text message to the caseworker that she was doing well but her caseworker felt that something may have happened to Jo. Jo finally answered her phone. Although she was unable to speak to the caseworker in detail, the caseworker sensed that Jo might be experiencing domestic violence. The caseworker used the code words in her safety plan to establish that Jo was unsafe and contacted the police to do a welfare check.

Jo had been severely beaten by the perpetrator about 10 days prior to the police arriving to do a welfare check and she has not been allowed to leave the house to see a doctor. After her statement was taken and the perpetrator was arrested at the scene. Jo was taken to the hospital and treated for multiple injuries including hematoma as a result of the abuse. Jo revealed that the perpetrator had returned from an interstate trip early and was required to self-isolate at home for 14 days.

She was completely under the control of the perpetrator and unable to reach out for support. The perpetrator is currently in remand and is charged with grievous bodily harm and other criminal offences.

The local Family and Domestic Violence Unit linked her with a range of supports and the caseworker advocated with public housing for immediate transfer to obtain a more suitable and safe housing option for Jo. Jo has since relocated into a new property. Her caseworker continues to work alongside clinical supports team to assist her recover from the trauma of her experience.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Case study

Hannah* is a 25 year old woman who was exited from a service in South Australia. While she was engaged with the service, her caseworker suspected that Hannah was experiencing domestic violence. Hannah did not disclose any experience of abuse and did not wish to talk about those issues.

Since COVID 19 related restrictions came into place, Hannah contacted the service and informed the caseworker that she was experiencing physical and sexual abuse at home. She spoke via email and informed the caseworker that it was unsafe for her to speak on the phone as the perpetrator is always around and that she will email when it was safe to do so.

The caseworker received an email that night detailing the experiences of violence. However, when the caseworker inquired whether she could call the police on Hannah's behalf, she instructed her caseworker not to contact anyone. Hannah has moved house since she was last in touch with the services therefore the caseworker was unable to arrange a welfare check.

Hannah said she wanted to get in touch with a counselling service face to face. However, none of the services were delivering counselling face to face supports since the introduction of COVID 19 restrictions. Hannah stated that without face to face supports, she felt like she has to 'put up' with the violence. The caseworker provided details of services available for counselling, crisis and emergency numbers, domestic violence services, homelessness services, mental health crisis support numbers and informed that Hannah could get in touch with the caseworker for any emergency. The caseworker continues to maintain contact with Hannah via email.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Research has already established the correlation between unemployment and domestic and family violence.⁹⁸ Furthermore, recent employment data shows an increase in unemployment, underemployment, and underutilisation of the Australian workforce in April 2020 due to the effects of COVID-19.⁹⁹ Concerningly, women experienced a greater reduction in hours worked than men, and women's labour force participation rate also decreased at a higher rate than men.¹⁰⁰ These demonstrate the disproportionate impact of unemployment, especially on women and children experiencing domestic violence by increasing the risk of violence or inability to leave the perpetrator of violence due to financial instability.

The experiences and forms of domestic and family violence is becoming more complex with emotional abuse extending to other aspects such as sharing intimate pictures of the victim-survivor as a form of control and abuse. Australia's eSafety Commissioner received more than 1,000 reports of image-based abuse since the introduction of lockdown measures between March and May 2020. This represents a 210% increase on the average weekly number of reports they received in 2019.¹⁰¹ There was also a huge spike over the Easter weekend, where there was an almost 600% increase on usual reporting figures.

⁹⁸ D. Anderberg et al, Unemployment and Domestic Violence: Theory and Evidence, 2013, accessible at: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp7515.pdf>

⁹⁹ Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Gendered Impact of COVID – 19, May 2020, accessible at: https://www.wgea.gov.au/topics/gendered-impact-of-covid-19#_edn1

¹⁰⁰ Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Gendered Impact of COVID – 19, May 2020, accessible at: https://www.wgea.gov.au/topics/gendered-impact-of-covid-19#_edn1

¹⁰¹ A. Powell and A. Flynn, Reports of 'revenge porn' skyrocketed during lockdown, we must stop blaming victims for it, The Conversation, 3 June 2020, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/reports-of-revenge-porn-skyrocketed-during-lockdown-we-must-stop-blaming-victims-for-it-139659>

It was also reported that in over 90% of the cases, the Commissioner has been successful in removing the images.¹⁰² Therefore, information in relation to complaint mechanisms other than police such as Australian eSafety Commissioner should be distributed via multiple online and other platforms, especially among young people.

There is a need to educate public through a national campaign about the supports available for victim-survivors of violence, especially in the current context where domestic and family violence is increasing across the country. A campaign could also include information about the confidential and sensitive nature of service provision.

“People who are reaching out for our supports mostly just find us on google. We worry that they might not even be getting the support they need because sometimes services have websites but the service has closed down or don’t deliver services in that geographic area. There needs to be a national campaign encouraging people to reach out and seek support before it’s too late.”

Mission Australia, Program Manager NSW

Recommendations

- Continue to provide additional funding and resources to ensure domestic and family violence services are able to meet the increasing demand as a result of COVID 19 restrictions.
- Increase advertising of information in relation to domestic and family violence related services on multiple formats including TV, radio, online platforms and through community organisations.

j) The views and experiences of frontline services at this unprecedented time

Although some reports claim that, contrary to international research recent Australian evidence from New South Wales and Queensland suggests that domestic violence reported to the police did not increase in March or April 2020, there is a lack of research into the prevalence of domestic and family violence since the start of the pandemic and the majority of women experiencing violence do not engage with services particularly while they remain in a relationship with their abuser.¹⁰³

¹⁰² A. Powell and A. Flynn, Reports of ‘revenge porn’ skyrocketed during lockdown, we must stop blaming victims for it, The Conversation, 3 June 2020, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/reports-of-revenge-porn-skyrocketed-during-lockdown-we-must-stop-blaming-victims-for-it-139659>

¹⁰³ The Australian Institute of Criminology, The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, accessible at: https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/sb28_prevalence_of_domestic_violence_among_women_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf

The decline in reported incidents of domestic and family violence to the police could also result from the perpetrator being at home and monitoring the communications of the victim-survivors. This also makes provision of supports challenging for domestic and family violence services.

“The perpetrators have the victim-survivors exactly where they want. People can’t reach out for services, no one can see the bruises and can’t necessarily leave their home or even make a phone call without being heard.”

Mission Australia, Domestic and Family Violence Senior Caseworker, SA

Crimes in the home are hard to detect unless victims or family members report them.¹⁰⁴ Both domestic violence and child maltreatment are widely under-reported. This means they tend not to be investigated by the authorities, and many victims don’t get the support they need.¹⁰⁵ Research also demonstrated that more than a third of women (36.9%) who experienced partner violence said that there had been at least one occasion when they wanted to seek support but could not.¹⁰⁶

Frontline staff delivering services also feel that it is too early to ascertain the co-relation between COVID 19 restrictions and increase in demand for services as the services are still in the process of attending to crisis and are just beginning to compile information. However, in some areas there has been a clear increase in demand for housing services by people experiencing domestic and family violence.

“We are certainly seeing an unprecedented increase. For example, our Bega homelessness service in May had 27 referrals and 7 of those were DFV cases, in June we had 29 referrals and 13 of them were DFV related and so far in July (as of 17th July) we have had 13 referrals and 6 are DFV related referrals ... our area was hugely impacted by the bushfires and now by this. Employment options are low and for a tourist town we are not doing well. People are feeling the pressure and it could be one of the reasons why we are seeing an increase in cases.”

Mission Australia, Program Manager – regional NSW

The introduction of COVID 19 related restrictions meant that the services had to find alternative ways to deliver services. Most services resorted to delivering services over the phone or online. Services have offered to provide financial support to people with their phone and internet bills. However, this has

¹⁰⁴ S. Bandyopadhyay, E. Kane and J. Chandan, Lockdown: crimes in the home are on the up – new measures are needed to alert the authorities, The Conversation, 10 June 2020, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/lockdown-crimes-in-the-home-are-on-the-up-new-measures-are-needed-to-alert-the-authorities-139607>

¹⁰⁵ S. Bandyopadhyay, E. Kane and J. Chandan, Lockdown: crimes in the home are on the up – new measures are needed to alert the authorities, The Conversation, 10 June 2020, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/lockdown-crimes-in-the-home-are-on-the-up-new-measures-are-needed-to-alert-the-authorities-139607>

¹⁰⁶ The Australian Institute of Criminology, The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, accessible at: https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/sb28_prevalence_of_domestic_violence_among_women_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf

been challenging as people we work with have a limited number of devices, limited internet for streaming and other associated equipment that they often share with their children. This has resulted in parents prioritising meeting the education needs of children over their own support needs.

Another gap with providing support online or phone supports is that the services are unable to provide comprehensive services online or over the phone when the perpetrator is living within the same residence who can interfere or listen into personal conversations.

“We don’t know how many of our clients were experiencing abuse because we can’t see what’s happening.”

Mission Australia, Domestic and family violence Senior Caseworker, SA

Another factor that contributes to the undercounting of incidents of domestic and family violence is the limited opportunities to have meaningful interactions given the restrictions in relation to physical access to services. Services such as Emergency Relief are receiving requests for supports that are possibly linked to domestic and family violence.

“In our Emergency Relief program, we're seeing women coming in with bills in their husband's or male partner's name, and then they're disclosing that if they don't pay the bill or get the bill paid in some way then the partner or the husband will lash out at them. So DV (domestic violence) is showing itself in different ways, particularly in Emergency Relief.”

Mission Australia, State Leader NSW Metro

Although referrals can be provided to domestic and family violence services, given the current employment conditions and the general uncertainty in relation to women and children experiencing violence are likely to be reluctant to leave the perpetrator. In instances where they do leave, it may not be possible for them to plan the move and may leave suddenly with limited or no personal belongings.

“I helped 3 different clients recently who were provided DFV emergency accommodation but because of the urgency to flee they didn’t have warm clothing and things they need for children from clothes to drawing books and things. I gave them food and Target vouchers ... There’s very little we could do because of the scope and nature of our service (Emergency Relief) and the increase in demand because a lot of people are losing jobs relying on Emergency Relief.”

Mission Australia, Program Manager, NSW

Some researchers are highlighting the risk of losing the essential workers on the frontlines of domestic violence response as a result of overwhelming workloads and potential burn out.¹⁰⁷ A 2017 Victorian

¹⁰⁷ N. Pfitzner et al, ‘We are in a bubble that is set to burst’. Why urgent support must be given to domestic violence workers, The Conversation, 1 July 2020, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/we-are-in-a-bubble-that-is-set-to-burst-why-urgent-support-must-be-given-to-domestic-violence-workers-141600>

family violence workforce census revealed that almost one third of specialist practitioners were considering leaving their job due to burn out.¹⁰⁸ In addition to increasing support for people experiencing domestic and family violence, mental health and other supports should be made available to people working in the domestic and family violence community sector.

Recommendations

- Provide funding certainty to community services to ensure that necessary and essential wrap-around, holistic supports to people experiencing domestic and family violence are available and accessible.

¹⁰⁸ Victorian Government, Family Violence Workforce Census, 2017, accessible at: <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-workforce-census>