

Out of the shadows

Snapshot

Domestic and family
violence: a leading cause of
homelessness in Australia

MISSION
AUSTRALIA



Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands throughout Australia and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, the culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are the future leaders.

We also wish to acknowledge the many victim-survivors of domestic and family violence across Australia. Their stories must be heard if we are to prevent and address domestic and family violence and the homelessness that occurs as a consequence. We hope that this report adds to the evidence, raises awareness and amplifies calls for policy changes to end the violence and end homelessness.

This report may be cited as: DiNicola K, Liyanarachchi D and Plummer J 'Out of the Shadows, Domestic and Family Violence: a leading cause of homelessness in Australia' Mission Australia.

We would also like to thank the many Mission Australia staff who contributed to this report and also the valuable review and feedback provided by Domestic Violence NSW, Homelessness NSW, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand and Our Watch.

If the information presented raises any issues for you, these services can help:

1800RESPECT

1800 737 732, 1800respect.org.au

Lifeline

13 11 14, lifeline.org.au

Kids Helpline

1800 551 800, kidshelpline.com.au

Men's Referral Service

1300 766 491, ntv.org.au



Eliza's story

Eliza* and Aaron* had been married for several years and had five children together. While Aaron was incarcerated for drink driving offences, Eliza took the opportunity to go to police to report historical domestic and family violence. She told police that Aaron had a history of alcohol and drug use and had perpetrated domestic and family violence. At times, this included extreme verbal abuse, threats to kill Eliza and the children, accusations of affairs and physical violence. Eliza reported that on one occasion Aaron held her at knife-point while pregnant. She desperately wanted to escape the situation, but was too fearful. She contacted police on several occasions to tip them off when Aaron had been drinking and driving, leading to his incarceration.

Apprehended Violence Orders were put in place against Aaron and he was sentenced to a Good Behaviour Bond for domestic and family violence related offences.

Eliza struggled as a single parent. Her eldest son would mimic the misuse of power and control his father demonstrated, forcing Eliza to relive the trauma she endured. This put increased pressure on Eliza as she sought to care for her other children who needed support after the violence they were exposed to.

In addition to dealing with trauma, one of Eliza's daughters had a serious medical condition. Her ability to attend medical appointments and pay for treatment was made difficult due to the constant supervision and attention required in caring for her triplets. She wanted to enrol the triplets into mainstream child care but struggled to find an appropriate arrangement due to a lack of vacancies and the family's remote location.

When Mission Australia started working with the family, Eliza was extremely fearful. She had low self-esteem and extreme fatigue due to the high demands of caring for her children. The support worker helped Eliza focus on prioritising her family's safety, aiding her healing process and building her confidence as a parent. Staff also

helped Eliza find in-home child care, allowing her to return to part-time work.

The triplets now attend a local mainstream child care centre one day per week, which has significantly improved their wellbeing. All three are now meeting their developmental milestones. Since implementing these changes, Eliza has reported a significant improvement to her mental health and wellbeing. She has also taken her son to a psychologist, which has helped improve his behaviour and their relationship. With the help of the case worker, Eliza's eldest daughter is being supported to access and navigate the NDIS and is enjoying school.

Eliza now has a strong support system around her, including Mission Australia staff, domestic violence liaison officers, family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Mission Australia has helped her apply for Victims of Crime compensation, helping her fund the installation of security, surveillance and safety technology in her home.

Despite the difficult road she has endured, Eliza continues to show resilience and strength in her journey of healing and recovery. She has consistently thanked her case worker for the support provided, and her son recently said to the case worker: "Thank you for trying to keep us safe. I've really liked you coming over. It's been great."

*Client names have been changed to protect their privacy





Introduction

Domestic and family violence continues to affect a large number of Australians each year. Domestic and family violence causes a range of harms, including physical and psychological damage, intergenerational violence, and homelessness.

While domestic and family violence is not limited to one group, culture, gender, or sexuality, overwhelmingly it is violence perpetrated by men against women and it is women and children who are at greatest risk of homelessness as a consequence.

In Australia, domestic and family violence is one of the major reasons that women and children leave their homes.¹ Data collected from Specialist Homelessness Services show that domestic and family violence is the most common main reason for seeking assistance from these services, and that the number of clients who reported that they have experienced domestic and family violence has increased an average of 9% each year between 2012-13 and 2017-18.²

Mission Australia's commitment to helping those affected by domestic and family violence and homelessness

Mission Australia's strategic goal is to reduce homelessness and strengthen communities. In 2017-18, Mission Australia supported nearly 120,000 people through 461 programs and services. This included 67 housing and homelessness services Australia-wide, which together assisted over 20,000 people, many of whom were escaping domestic and family violence.

Mission Australia also operates a smaller number of services that are specifically established to assist people with domestic and family violence issues, providing either prevention or crisis-focused services. These include crisis or transitional accommodation for women and children, advocacy services, and men's behaviour change programs.

Many Mission Australia clients disclose experiences of domestic and family violence – not only in domestic

and family violence-specific or homelessness services, but across the range of services offered. Of the people supported during the last financial year, 8.6% disclosed experiencing domestic and family violence and an additional 6.1% were suspected of experiencing domestic and family violence by the service staff. Our staff across a range of services see the frequent interaction between domestic and family violence and homelessness to which the research points.

Addressing both domestic and family violence and homelessness – and the ways in which they intersect – is a vital part of Mission Australia's work through both direct service provision and by being a courageous voice for change. Our services facilitate people to feel safe and one of our measures of success is that clients are able to live in homes that are free from violence. We are also advocating for a national plan to end homelessness which must address the drivers of homelessness including domestic and family violence, rapidly rehouse people who become homeless and address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the homelessness system.³

Responses to domestic and family violence-driven homelessness



Executive summary

Domestic and family violence is a major driver of homelessness in Australia, particularly for women and their children. This paper seeks to draw attention to the intersections between these issues, draw out the evidence and put forward recommendations for change.

Despite growing awareness of domestic and family violence in recent years, prevalence rates remain high. Approximately 17% of women and 6% of men have experienced violence by a partner since they were 15. Further, 75% of victim-survivors of domestic and family violence reported the perpetrator as male, compared with 25% reporting the perpetrator as female.⁴

Of the almost 290,000 clients who sought assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services in 2017-18, 42% (or 121,000 clients) were experiencing domestic and family violence. Nationally, the number of clients reporting they had experienced domestic and family violence and sought assistance from specialist homelessness agencies has risen, on average 9% each year since 2013-14.⁵

Everyone has the right to a safe and secure home. Domestic and family violence undermines safety and can precipitate women leaving their home to find safer accommodation. Childhood experiences of family violence also lead to greater likelihood of adult experiences of both violence and homelessness.

Of the people who sought Specialist Homelessness Services due to domestic and family violence related issues, 78% were female. A large number of these clients were children with 34% or nearly 42,000 aged under 18.⁶ Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness among children in Australia and has a range of other negative effects on their mental, emotional, educational and physical wellbeing and development. The particular impacts on children need to be addressed.

There are also different risks and experiences for different groups of people that experience domestic and family violence that require tailored policy responses. This includes children, young people; older women; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI)

people; culturally and linguistically diverse women including those on temporary visas; people living in rural, regional and remote communities; people with disabilities; and male victim-survivors of violence.

There are also a range of cultural, social, situational and personal factors that create the environment in which domestic and family violence can occur. This includes rigid gender roles, male dominance in the family, childhood experiences of violence, unemployment, socioeconomic status, social and geographic isolation and alcohol and other substance abuse.

As an organisation committed to reducing homelessness and strengthening communities, we understand that preventing and intervening early in domestic and family violence as well as supporting the safety and recovery of those experiencing domestic and family violence are key to ending homelessness in Australia. We must also prevent homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence and intervene early and support the safety and recovery of those made homeless by domestic and family violence.

Mission Australia provides services across this spectrum from school-based education, to men's behaviour change programs, crisis and transitional accommodation for women and long-term community housing.

The best way of preventing homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence is to prevent the violence from occurring in the first place. This requires cultural and systemic change to change individual and community attitudes on gender and violence.

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. Therapeutic interventions should be funded for both adult and child victim-survivors of domestic and family violence and a trauma-informed approach consistently applied.

Adequate policing and legal resources are also required to provide quick responses and meet demand and evidence-based perpetrator interventions should be



funded to prevent future violence. Housing options for men who use violence also enables them to engage with services and reduces the risk of reoffending.

Responses that seek to prevent homelessness or intervene early for those who have experienced domestic and family violence are also required. This includes the expansion of safe at home programs and rapid rehousing options through a housing first model for women who cannot or choose not to stay at home. Additional funding is also required for crisis and transitional housing to meet demand.

In 2017-18, among clients of Specialist Homelessness Services who had experienced domestic and family violence: short-term or emergency accommodation was needed by 40% and received by 70% of those who needed it; long-term housing was needed by 30% with only 4% receiving this service.⁷ These figures reveal a significant unmet housing need for people escaping domestic and family violence – particularly for those who are seeking long-term housing.

To effectively reduce homelessness, we need 500,000 more social and affordable homes across Australia, an increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance to relieve rental stress and bi-partisan commitment to a national plan to end homelessness by 2030.

Promoting economic security is also crucial. This includes providing crisis payments through Centrelink to meet basic living needs and enable

women to leave violent relationships and promoting the future economic wellbeing for women through training, education and employment supports. The Commonwealth Government should also ensure adequate income support to people experiencing domestic and family violence to enable them to live safely including single mothers, refugees and those on temporary visas.

There is not one simple answer and we need to work across sectors and silos, fund adequately and holistically and move beyond awareness raising and crisis responses. We can prevent domestic and family violence and we can prevent homelessness and both of these approaches must be a priority as well as addressing domestic and family violence and homelessness when it does occur.

Work has started in many jurisdictions across the country, but there is still much more to be done. This paper highlights many service examples that could be expanded and tailored to the needs of various groups and communities. It also highlights the stories of women and children who have been clients of these services and have demonstrated enormous strength and resilience. The light of public attention must remain and urgent policy responses are required if we are to honour these stories of survival and ensure that we prevent and address both violence and homelessness in the future.

Policy recommendations:

1 Prevent, reduce and eliminate domestic and family violence

All levels of government should fund specific primary prevention strategies that aim to prevent family and domestic violence from occurring in the first place, by addressing the underlying drivers of this violence in order to prevent both violence and any resulting homelessness. This includes:

- a) Addressing social and cultural drivers through direct education programs on domestic and family violence and gender equality as a priority in all schools and for groups at heightened risk of domestic and family violence.
- b) Promoting and strengthening positive equal and respectful relationships between and among women and men, girls and boys.
- c) Addressing community attitudes around rigid gender roles and challenging the condoning of violence through programs at an organisational and community level and through social marketing and civil society advocacy.
- d) Promote and normalise gender equality in public and private life including promoting women's independence and decision-making in relationships and more broadly.

2 Respond well to domestic and family violence so that homelessness and other negative outcomes are minimised

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.

a) State and Territory governments should implement flexible, placed-based responses to domestic and family violence that are designed according to local needs and underpinned by contracting and funding arrangements that allow for flexible service provision within local areas and corresponding impact measurement.

b) Funding should also allow police, legal services and community services to operate in a coordinated way.

c) Domestic and family violence services need to be funded by all levels of government to meet the needs of the following cohorts and co-designed with these groups to ensure appropriateness for:

- Children
- Young people
- People living in rural, regional and remote areas
- People with disability
- Culturally and linguistically diverse women, particularly those on temporary visas
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women
- Older women
- LGBTI people
- Men

d) Adequate policing and legal resources are required to provide quick responses and meet demand. Police, Magistrates, interpreters and others in the justice system also need training to understand the complexities and sensitivities of domestic and family violence and take a trauma-informed approach.

e) Staff and workers who are likely to be the first-to-know of domestic and family violence should be provided with training and information to ensure they are able to support women and children at risk of or

disclosing domestic and family violence and/or homelessness. This includes client-facing staff in hospitals, schools, early childhood education and parenting programs.

f) Perpetrator interventions should be incorporated as part of an integrated response and continually evaluated to ensure effectiveness in preventing future violence.

3 Prevent homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence

Responses that seek to prevent or intervene early when homelessness does occur as a result of domestic and family violence are essential to ensure that homelessness either does not occur or is quickly resolved. To achieve this:

- a) State and Territory governments should fund rapid rehousing options through a housing first model for victim-survivors who cannot or choose not to stay at home.
- b) State and Territory governments should expand Safe at Home programs to enable women experiencing domestic and family violence and their children to remain safely in their home if that is their choice.
- c) State and Territory governments should provide additional funding for accommodation options for men who use violence to enable women to more safely stay in their home. This is in addition to requisite funding for women's accommodation.

4 Respond well to homelessness with housing that gives victim-survivors the choice to stay or leave and non-housing supports as needed

Supporting the safety and recovery of those who have become homeless as a result of domestic and family violence is vital to ensure that those who have experienced violence can access housing and other supports needed to break the cycle of homelessness:

- a) The Commonwealth Government adopt the proposals put forward by the Everybody's Home campaign including support for the development of 500,000 social and affordable homes, providing relief for Australians in chronic rental stress by increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance and developing a plan to end homelessness by 2030.
- b) Crisis and transitional housing should be funded at levels that meet demand and appropriate models implemented for women leaving domestic and family violence such as the core and cluster model.
- c) Therapeutic interventions should be funded for both adult and child victim-survivors of domestic and family violence and a trauma-informed approach taken by workers across all agencies and service systems that interact with victim-survivors of domestic and family violence.
- d) The Commonwealth Government should ensure adequate income support to people experiencing domestic and family violence to enable them to live safely including single mothers and refugees and simplify access to income support for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, including crisis payments.



We stand together with Australians in need, until they can stand for themselves

Contact us

For further information please contact our
Research & Social Policy team on:



02 9219 2041



researchandpolicy@missionaustralia.com.au



missionaustralia.com.au



@MissionAust



facebook.com/MissionAust

Endnotes

1. Spinney, A. & Blandy, S. (2011), Homelessness prevention for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence: Innovations in policy and practice (AHURI Positioning Paper No. 140), Melbourne: AHURI.
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, (2018), Specialist Homelessness Services annual report 2017-18, Canberra, AIHW.
3. See www.everybodyshome.com.au for more information and to join the campaign
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017), Personal safety, Australia, 2016, cat. no. 4906.0, Canberra: ABS, accessed at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0>.
- 5, 6, 7. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, (2018), Specialist Homelessness Services annual report 2017-18, Canberra, AIHW