

Domestic and family violence, housing insecurity and homelessness

Domestic and family violence is the main reason women and children leave their homes in Australia and is consistently one of the most common reasons clients seek assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services (Spinney, 2012).



PURPOSE

This synthesis examines the intersection of housing insecurity and homelessness and domestic and family violence (DFV), including recommendations for policy and practice.

This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive literature review—it focusses on existing ANROWS research, while also drawing on statistics from national surveys.

AUDIENCE

This synthesis is designed for policy-makers and practitioners engaging with people affected by domestic and family violence and housing insecurity/homelessness.

SUMMARY

Key issues

- Women forced to leave their homes due to DFV can have trouble securing accommodation, long-term.
- Women leaving DFV may experience housing stress, even if they stay in their own homes.
- Women’s housing insecurity following DFV is tied to their economic insecurity.
- Poor housing conditions and overcrowding in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities can exacerbate violence and vulnerability.
- Many women rely on their personal networks for housing after leaving a violent relationship.
- Women sometimes return to violent partners due to housing insecurity.
- More robust evaluations are needed to determine the efficacy of “Safe at Home” programs.
- Crisis-oriented DFV funding overlooks women’s longer-term housing needs.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety. (2019). *Domestic and family violence, housing insecurity and homelessness: Research synthesis* (2nd Ed.; ANROWS Insights, 07/2019). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

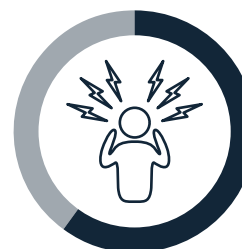
FAST FACTS



Over **50%** of women who permanently left a previous violent partner

reported that they, and not their partner, moved out of the home they shared.

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017)



In one study, **60%** of women who had separated from their partners reported

experiencing housing stress, post-separation.

(Kaspiew et al., 2017).



After they permanently left a violent partner, over **40%** of women stayed with friends or family.

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017)



42% of clients accessing Specialist Homelessness Services had experienced DFV. **94%** of the adult clients were women.

(AIHW, 2018)

Key issues

WOMEN FORCED TO LEAVE THEIR HOMES DUE TO DFV CAN HAVE TROUBLE SECURING LONG-TERM ACCOMMODATION

The 2016 ABS Personal Safety Survey (2017) revealed that over 50 per cent of women who permanently left a violent partner reported that they, and not their partner, moved out of the home they shared.

Many women who leave their homes following DFV struggle to find suitable accommodation. Over 90 per cent of first requests by DFV clients to Specialist Homelessness Services for long-term accommodation were unable to be met (AIHW, 2016). According to an ANROWS study on domestic and family violence and parenting, nearly 60 per cent of women who had separated from their partners reported experiencing housing stress post-separation (Kaspiew et al., 2017).

The problems are compounded for women in regional and remote areas. Interviewees from an ANROWS study in the Kimberley region noted that there were very few safe and affordable housing options for women in the area. Women often lived in highly disadvantaged circumstances and were not able to save money. This, plus a lack of private transport, could make securing alternative long-term accommodation very difficult (Wendt et al., 2017).

WOMEN LEAVING DFV MAY EXPERIENCE HOUSING STRESS, EVEN IF THEY STAY IN THEIR OWN HOMES

Evidence suggests that in some cases, victim/survivors who remain in their home experience housing vulnerability for years following separation from a violent partner (Cortis & Bullen, 2017). If their partner leaves the home, victim/survivors can come under increasing financial stress, particularly women who are not able to find well-paid employment.

Despite policy reforms that prioritise victim/survivors remaining in their homes, many women are still forced to leave. Feedback from victim/survivors using “Safe at Home” program evaluations indicated that when they left their homes, it was often because they could not afford rent or mortgage repayments on a single income (Breckenridge et al., 2016). In addition, Breckenridge et al. (2016) found that women reported having to leave due to financial insecurity, continuing harassment or violence by the perpetrator, lengthy and costly family court matters, and a lack of family or other support (which in itself may have been driven by tactics of isolation by the perpetrator while living with the victim/survivor).

WOMEN’S HOUSING INSECURITY FOLLOWING DFV IS TIED TO THEIR ECONOMIC INSECURITY

In Kaspiew et al. (2017), women reported that financial abuse escalated or occurred for the first time after separation. This included ex-partners refusing women access to finances or misusing money

What is a “Safe at home” program?

There is no shared understanding of what constitutes a “Safe at home” program (Breckenridge et al., 2016). Lead agencies in each state or territory decide how the program is delivered. Some of the similarities identified across jurisdictions were:

- a goal to assist women remaining in independent accommodation;
- safety planning and risk assessment with the woman and other agencies;
- the use of protection orders and ouster/exclusion provisions;
- brokerage funds that provide security upgrades;
- strategies to enhance the economic security of women to enable them to stay in their own home and remain financially independent of their ex-partner;
- support and advocacy on behalf of clients; and
- capacity building of local interagency partners to facilitate a coordinated response.

(Breckenridge et al., 2016)

(Kaspiew et al., 2017). For some women, this meant they experienced housing issues or periods of homelessness.

In Cortis and Bullen's study (2016), one interviewee noted:

Newstart... is so low. It actually is well below the poverty line. There is those real practical aspects of "am I better off to stay in this space where violence is part of it?... Or do we make that significant and far reaching change and then face the real prospect of homelessness and insecurity, insecure tenancy and struggle with the basics?"

(Interviewee 16 in Cortis & Bullen, 2016)

ANROWS's ASPIRE project found that asylum seeker women without access to financial assistance often had little control over where they lived. For example, in Wahida's case:

In 2 months we were moved [between crisis accommodation and refuges] eight times... after 4 to 6 weeks they found a place for [other women in the refuge]... Our case was different because we were asylum seekers.

(Vaughan et al., 2017)

Despite the fact that economic security for women leaving a violent partner was recognised a critical factor in maintaining secure housing, only three of the 20 "Safe at Home" programs mentioned women's economic security in either the program or evaluation goals (Breckenridge et al., 2016).

POOR HOUSING CONDITIONS AND OVERCROWDING IN ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES CAN EXACERBATE VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY

Housing issues—particularly homelessness, inadequate housing, and overcrowding—disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Productivity Commission cited in Australian Law Reform Commission, 2016). In an ANROWS-published report on the ways that Indigenous women are working to prevent and respond to family violence, overcrowded and poorly maintained housing were highlighted as exacerbating violence and making women and children more vulnerable to abuse from a broad range of potential abusers (Blagg et al., 2018). As discussed below, inadequate housing is also a factor that can perpetuate abusive relationships: if women needed stable housing, particularly if they need housing to maintain custody, they are more likely to return to an abuser (Blagg et al., 2018).

As they make up a high proportion of those living in severely overcrowded conditions in the Northern Territory, children were highlighted in the report to be at increased risk. Concerns were raised that sexual assaults against children are the "opportunistic" outcome of having so many adults staying in households (Blagg et al., 2018).

In addition, common safety planning tools can be unsuitable for Indigenous women experiencing family violence who do not have stable housing. Advice, for example, to gather items to store safely in a house, or to lock doors, will not be actionable (Blagg et al., 2018).

Key recommendations

FOR POLICY

- The availability of immediate and long-term housing options for women leaving violence, including crisis accommodation, rental assistance, affordable housing and "Safe at home" programs should be increased, in order to cater for the diverse needs of women escaping violence (Cortis & Bullen, 2016).
- Specialist domestic and family violence services, including refuges, should be given adequate resourcing for the provision of crisis assistance and support for accessing justice services, as well as for case managing referral to financial counselling, employment programs and long-term housing support (Cortis & Bullen, 2016).
- Funding for specialist domestic and family violence services, including refuges, should recognise the increased cost of service provision for women with no income, including asylum seekers (Vaughan et al., 2016).
- Domestic and family services, including refuges, should be embedded in their local community, operating through a hub-and-spoke model. This model allows practitioners to provide longer-term support to women as they transition between accommodation (Wendt et al., 2017)
- Domestic and family violence brokerage support should be strengthened by allowing more flexible access to and use of funds (Breckenridge et al., 2016).

WOMEN AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS SOMETIMES ENGAGE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AND “SURVIVAL SEX”

For some young women at risk of experiencing homelessness, sex and intimate relationships are among the few resources at their disposal (Watson, 2018). “Survival sex” typically refers to the exchange of sex for necessities, such as food, accommodation and safety, and can be a feature of intimate relationships (Watson, 2018). Some young women engage in “survival sex” in order to secure material support and physical protection, but also for emotional security and stability (Watson, 2018). Young women experiencing homelessness must also negotiate expectations that they are willing to exchange sex for necessities (Watson, 2018).

MANY WOMEN RELY ON THEIR PERSONAL NETWORKS FOR HOUSING AFTER LEAVING A VIOLENT RELATIONSHIP

Over forty per cent of women who moved out of their home after they permanently left a violent partner stayed with friends or family (ABS, 2017).

Qualitative research commissioned by ANROWS supported this finding. Many of the rural women interviewed in Wendt et al., (2017) said they preferred to use their own social networks to seek help for domestic and family violence, including to secure alternative accommodation. For example, one study participant found a rental property after a friend allowed her to move in immediately, and pay rent once she received assistance from Centrelink (Wendt et al., 2017).

WOMEN SOMETIMES RETURN TO VIOLENT PARTNERS DUE TO HOUSING INSECURITY

Breckenridge et al. (2016) found that women were more likely to return to their partner if they had difficulty maintaining independent accommodation. According to the 2016 ABS Personal Safety Survey (2017), around one in five women returned to violent partners because they had no financial support, or nowhere else to go.

Several service providers reported that some women who left their home were forced to return to an arrangement of “separated under the same roof” (Cortis & Bullen, 2016). Interviewees from different parts of Australia reported that this practice had been increasing because of women’s financial pressures due to rising housing costs.

MORE ROBUST EVALUATIONS ARE NEEDED TO DETERMINE THE EFFICACY OF “SAFE AT HOME” PROGRAMS

Several evaluations, reviewed by Breckenridge et al., (2016), showed that a significant number of women were able to stay in their homes due to a “Safe at home” program. However, there is currently limited evidence on the long-term impact of “Safe at home” programs, because of a lack of longitudinal evaluations (Breckenridge et al., 2016).

Key recommendations

FOR PRACTICE

- Pathways should be developed for victim/survivors to access financial counsellors – memoranda of understanding between services or co-location of specialist financial counsellors are two options (Cortis & Bullen, 2016). This counselling should be understood as an initial step in fostering financial independence, and not a solution in itself.
- Recognition that secure housing is inextricably tied to financial security (Breckenridge et al., 2016). For example, safety planning and longer-term case management for “Safe at home” clients should consider financial safety strategies (Breckenridge et al., 2016).
- “Safe at home” programs should collect outcomes data about factors that lead to housing security/ insecurity and their usefulness to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD populations (Breckenridge et al., 2016).
- Support and build the capacity of housing providers to play an active part in assisting victims of DFV to maintain their housing (Community Housing Industry Association NSW, n.d).

There is evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and women with disabilities are using “Safe at home” programs—however, many program evaluations do not include any specific measurements on how effective the programs are for these groups (Breckenridge et al., 2016).

CRISIS-ORIENTED DFV FUNDING OVERLOOKS WOMEN'S LONGER-TERM HOUSING NEEDS

A common theme across ANROWS's research is a concern that the services that support women leaving violence are increasingly under-resourced. This has meant that support workers must prioritise those in most urgent need of short-term assistance. In one ANROWS study, practitioners highlighted that victim/survivors need more consistent help to attain their preferred housing, whether this was to remain in their home, access private rentals or apply for public housing (Cortis & Bullen, 2016). Crisis-oriented funding can also mean that fundamental support services, rather than being employed long-term once a woman is safely housed and able to engage, are instead ceased once the woman is 'safe'.

Services had particular difficulty in providing long-term support to women and children on temporary visas (Vaughan et al., 2017). Because of visa restrictions, refugees often had to cover the costs for these women's basic needs—in some instances, for up to two years.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[*Estimating homelessness, 2016*](#) (2018)

This publication presents estimates of the prevalence of homelessness from the ABS 2016 Census of Population and Housing.

[*Journeys Home: Research Report No. 6*](#) (2015)

This report from the Journeys Home project presents findings from a longitudinal survey designed to understand risk factors for homelessness.

[*Working with Perpetrators of Domestic and Family Violence: A Toolkit to Support Community Housing Providers*](#) (2018)

This toolkit offers community housing providers practical resources, strategies and information to support engagement with perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

[*Path to Nowhere: Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence and Their Children*](#) (2018)

This report examines the issues for women on temporary visas experiencing violence and their children.

[*How well does Australia's social security system support victims of family and domestic violence?*](#) (2018)

This report presents the results of a National Social Security Rights Network study considering the relationship between the Australian social security system and family and domestic violence.

[*Family violence prevention programs in Indigenous communities*](#) (2016)

This publication addresses the nature and extent of family violence in Indigenous communities and provides an overview of a selection of trialled programs aimed at reducing family violence. It highlights poor and overcrowded housing conditions as a risk factor for family violence.

FORTHCOMING RESEARCH

[*Integrated housing support for families*](#)

This Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute inquiry will focus on the provision of integrated housing support for families, including those affected by domestic and family violence.

[*Exploring culturally suitable "Safe at Home" security options or solutions*](#)

The Australian National University, UNSW, Ipsos and Winangali are currently undertaking research about "Safe at home" options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in remote communities.