AHURi Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence

From the AHURI Inquiry
Integrated housing support for vulnerable families

AUTHORED BY

Kathleen Flanagan
University of Tasmania

Hazel Blunden
University of New South Wales

kylie valentine
University of New South Wales

Jane Henriette
University of Tasmania

Executive summary

Key points

- The principal crisis response for women and children who have to leave their home due to violence is provided by the Specialist Homelessness Services system, yet data suggests that for many clients, there is little services can do to provide a pathway from crisis into stable, secure and long-term accommodation.

- Existing DFV support programs cannot compensate for the absence of affordable, suitable housing—so moving from short-term or transitional accommodation into permanent, independent housing is very difficult, and sometimes unachievable, for women and children affected by DFV.

- Reliance on private rental market subsidies as a way to achieve housing outcomes is problematic in tight markets and such assistance cannot always successfully overcome other barriers like limited affordable supply and competition from other prospective tenants.

- Governments around Australia have adopted strategic responses to domestic and family violence that promote integrated service delivery for affected families.

- This integrated response to domestic and family violence is generally working well, promoting collaborative working relationships amongst services and providing support that is valued and appreciated by service users.

— For service users, a relationship with a skilled, capable and well-connected support worker is crucial, both therapeutically and for sustaining their engagement with support.

— Other areas of government policy, such as the income support system, can exacerbate poverty and disadvantage and make re-establishing stable housing more difficult for victims.

- Where safe, secure and affordable housing is not available, women may decide to return to a violent relationship because they perceive this as a safer option than the alternatives.

In recent years, domestic and family violence (DFV) has had a high profile as an issue warranting governmental and societal attention and intervention. Governments have adopted strategies, policies and programs designed to hold perpetrators accountable and support and protect victims. These have been accompanied by substantial investment and reform to promote the provision of more integrated services for families affected by violence. The relationship between DFV and homelessness is also well recognised, with responses ranging from traditional interventions like women's refuges through to 'safe at home' programs, which promote women's right to live in their own homes without violence.

Research indicates that effective responses for people experiencing DFV include an integrated range of interventions (Breckenridge, Rees et al. 2016). In particular, secure, stable housing is critical to promote safety and wellbeing, including for children (Breckenridge, Hamer et al. 2013). Women leaving violence travel a diverse range of housing pathways, including moving

between different housing tenures and markets, depending on their resources, choices and needs.

Key findings

Policy

All jurisdictions have adopted strategic responses to DFV supported by legislative frameworks. Approaches vary, but in general, states and territories have adopted governance models that explicitly draw different perspectives and policies together, and reforms to services that emphasise connected and collaborative approaches, consistency of practice, and capacity-building within non-specialist agencies, particularly police.

However, attention to the housing needs of women and children leaving violence is much less prominent—although states and territories offer a range of policies and programs, there is limited evidence of widespread take-up of interventions designed to address systemic barriers across the housing market.

> The way our system is set up is as a system of shelters for people, mainly for women, fleeing a violent situation and many of them with their children. And unfortunately, our capacity to offer suitable, affordable and safe housing options for these women has deteriorated over the last few years. On one income, it is now unaffordable for an adult to re-establish a home in a private rental market, which is really their only option for housing. Some, of course, will attain social housing, but not anywhere near the numbers that need it. (stakeholder)

Pathways

Because our primary recruitment method was through service providers, the service users interviewed for this research had all received assistance, including housing assistance, from services. This experience may not be typical, as AIHW data on unmet need (AIHW 2018a; 2018b) suggests that a high proportion of requests for assistance with accommodation, particularly long-term accommodation, are unable to be met.

Our further analysis of AIHW data also indicated that for many recipients of SHS assistance, there is little change in housing situation over the time in which they receive support. The data implies that the most important determinant of someone's post-support housing situation may well be the housing situation they were in prior to commencing support. Services do appear able to move people who are entirely without shelter into some kind of housing, but few of these clients are moving into stable, long-term, appropriate accommodation. This suggests that **specialist homelessness assistance is not functioning as a mechanism for moving people along housing pathways.**

Integration

Our interviews with service users and service providers indicated that at a day-to-day practice level, integration is less about specific initiatives or programs and more about the **maintenance of productive, mutually-supportive working relationships between agencies and/or workers.**

For service users, support from a capable, caring and well-connected case worker is crucial. A number of participants had experienced rudeness, disrespect or a lack of empathy from frontline workers in non-DFV services, and this actively discouraged them from approaching those services again for help.

> I think the service needs to understand what these women are going through and how frightened they are and how at a loss they are. They can't necessarily move on. And

you're treating them as if they're annoying. Or you don't get back to them when you say you will. Or you just don't have anywhere for them or what you have is a crap suburb and it's not a safe house—it's like, come on! (worker)

There are gaps in the current system, including inadequate legal assistance, delays in access to counselling and other services, and constraints on the length of time women can receive intensive assistance. More critically, policies and practices in other areas of government can undermine integration and work against the needs of people trying to leave violent relationships. In particular, the research identified:

- inadequate income support payments that leave women and children living in poverty and unable to afford decent housing;

- limited protection and assistance for migrant women sponsored to come to Australia by men who later become violent and abusive;

- challenges at the intersection point between the child protection and family violence systems, particularly where lack of housing prevents women from regaining custody of children taken into statutory care; and

- Family Court decisions that trap some women in unaffordable housing markets in order to enable their violent ex-partner to continue to have access to children.

Integration may be ineffective when it results in the dilution of specialist expertise and experience and it can be difficult to achieve in small rural communities where there is limited availability and coverage of critical services, including police.

Housing

Existing DFV support programs cannot compensate for the absence of affordable, suitable housing—so moving from short-term or transitional forms of accommodation into permanent, stable, independent housing is extremely difficult, and sometimes unachievable, for women and children affected by DFV.

Women leaving DFV theoretically have three tenures available to them: home ownership, social housing and the private rental market.

- In practice, **home ownership** is out of reach for many service users. (Women who own their home and are victims of DFV may not use SHS and other services because they do not need them or because they do not know about them; these women are often 'invisible' to the service system, to policy and to research).

- Access to the **social housing** system is restricted by decades of residualisation, underfunding and targeting to those with the most complex needs. Although it remains an important housing option for women escaping DFV and is valued for the ongoing affordability and tenure security it offers, in some areas it is inaccessible to women leaving DFV, as well as other groups facing barriers in the private housing market.

    You can email the housing delegate and ask her to organise that and she could get priority being put forward as a serious risk at Safety Action Meetings, but if there's no properties, it doesn't matter what priority list you're on, there's no properties. (worker)

- To alleviate pressure on the social housing system, governments have developed specific subsidies or programs available to assist people escaping DFV to access **private rental housing**, including the Rent Choice Start Safely subsidy in NSW and the Rapid Rehousing head-leasing program in Tasmania. Families may also be eligible for state-based bond assistance programs, and Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) at the national level.

Those interviewed suggested that this support is valuable in certain markets, giving women a degree of choice and flexibility and access to a greater portion of the market than they would otherwise have had. However, in other markets, where rents are high and climbing, the assistance provided is insufficient to effectively defray the cost of rent or make housing of adequate size and quality available. Even if housing is affordable with the subsidy, once the subsidised period ends, the unsubsidised rent becomes unsustainable.

Even if they can afford rent, women leaving violence may also face discrimination from landlords, or be unable to effectively compete with childless, working couples in tight markets where landlords can choose from a large number of prospective tenants. This can be compounded if they have a poor tenancy record due to the behaviour of a violent ex-partner, or are stigmatised due to receipt of a government-funded housing subsidy.

Safety

DFV often leads to homelessness, but this research found that victims sometimes decide to remain in or return to a violent relationship because of the lack of available and appropriate housing.

The shortage of affordable housing means that women can feel pressured to accept accommodation that is substandard, too far from critical support networks or located in neighbourhoods or settings that feel unsafe or are unsafe. Housing choices may be further constrained by the actions of a perpetrator who continues to harass the victim.

If women reject a housing offer due to fear, trauma or a desire to provide appropriate living conditions for their children, this can be perceived by services or defined within policies as declining support or failing to engage, which has ramifications for future offers.

> *Having a clean mattress is one of the most important things because they've probably come from having really nice stuff and if you're forced to put your child on a soiled mattress because that's all there is then you start thinking, this is what I've forced my children into, maybe it wasn't so bad at home. A stained mattress is a huge barrier to a woman staying away. (worker)*

DFV is a diverse and complex phenomenon and does not always involve physical violence. When responding to DFV, policy makers and service providers need to recognise the complexity of the circumstances within which women exercise agency and make decisions, and direct support and assistance accordingly.

Policy development options

This research found that largely, the immediate response to DFV is effective and timely, although constrained by resources and growing demand. The main challenge facing services and their clients is the lack of pathways by which women can move on from crisis and transitional responses into secure, long-term housing.

Government investment in social housing is inadequate and access restricted to those in greatest need. Expenditure on direct housing provision has been replaced by a focus on the provision of individual subsidies (Caulfield 2000; Dodson 2006; Yates 2013). These are not always effective in tight and costly rental markets, and as a result, housing options are limited, and safety and security are not assured.

Women and children leaving violence are in diverse circumstances and have a range of needs. The crisis system provides valuable support for many, but the lack of secure, affordable and permanent housing is a systemic issue. To meet the needs of vulnerable families, more

investment is needed in a range of affordable housing options, including safe, secure and supportive social and affordable housing.

The findings of this research have a number of implications for policy and practice:

- The SHS sector plays a critical role in providing assistance, including access to shelter, for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

  — However, the system is under considerable pressure, much of it deriving from the lack of realistic, appropriate 'exit points' from crisis assistance into stable, long-term housing.

  — Provision of such 'exit points' is beyond the capacity of services, which must rely on other parts of the system, including social housing and the private rental market, to accommodate their clients.

- 'Integration' is mostly working well for service providers and users, and women and children who seek assistance are generally finding the support they need.

  — However, there are gaps, inconsistencies and shortcomings in the system, and other areas of government policy can act to further marginalise people affected by violence by forcing them into further poverty or trapping them in inappropriate housing situations.

  — The effectiveness of the system is underpinned by relationships, amongst workers, organisations and institutions, and between clients and workers. These relationships are crucial, but can be jeopardised by excessive workloads, burnout and frustration. If workers treat clients with disrespect, impatience or rudeness, this can discourage clients from seeking help in future.

- There is little integration between the DFV response and the wider housing system, and therefore women leaving violent relationships are routinely unable to obtain long term, safe, affordable, accessible and appropriate housing.

  — Without secure housing, vulnerable families remain in crisis and transitional housing for longer than is appropriate. This creates insecurity and uncertainty for them, and puts pressure on the whole crisis response system.

  — Private rental subsidies and head-leasing have alleviated some pressure on social housing and offered women a pathway into the private rental market. However, there is an inherent contradiction in expecting a profit-oriented market to act as part of the housing assistance system. Even with subsidies and other support, affordability, competition and scarcity continue to present barriers for those perceived as less desirable tenants due to assumptions about risk. This includes women and children seeking to leave a violent relationship.

  — Social housing continues to be an important destination tenure for women leaving DFV. While it does not always offer an ideal living environment for women dealing with trauma or safety concerns, it does provide secure tenure and ongoing affordability. The residualisation of the sector limits opportunities to generate positive revenue streams for investment in new supply—yet this could have wider social and economic benefits and contribute to greater social equity (Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019).

- The lack of adequate and affordable housing is leading some women to make the decision to return to, or remain in, a violent relationship.

  — Much of the attention given to DFV has focussed on situations where violence is physically harmful and the risk of serious injury or death is high (valentine and Breckenridge 2016). These situations undeniably exist, but so do other forms of violence that may be less visible and may not be perceived in the same way, including by victims.

— This research demonstrates that housing options available to women leaving violence can often be substandard, in a neighbourhood that feels risky or dangerous, or involve frequent moves (due to insecure or short-term tenure) that disrupt children's schooling and support networks. In such circumstances, women may decide that returning to the perpetrator is a better, safer option for them and their children.

The study

This research is part of a wider AHURI Inquiry into housing outcomes after domestic and family violence. It had three main components:

- a desktop policy review which mapped the policy and service landscape, producing a summary of the legislative framework, key documents, strategies, governance arrangements and major initiatives related to DFV in each state and territory;

- in-depth interviews with 28 women who have had to leave their homes due to DFV, exploring their housing histories and current circumstances, their experiences of receiving support, and their perceptions of wellbeing, safety and risk for themselves and (if applicable) their children; and

- interviews and focus groups with 80 policy, service delivery and industry stakeholders to explore their views on housing pathways for women affected by violence and to obtain insight into the day-to-day practice of service integration.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted in two contrasting case study jurisdictions, New South Wales and Tasmania. The findings were contextualised by the desktop policy review and by additional analysis of national Specialist Homelessness Services data from 2016–17 on the housing situations of women affected by DFV at the commencement and completion of support.

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