



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families

From the AHURI Inquiry  
Integrated housing support for vulnerable families

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## Executive summary

### Key points

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- Indigenous<sup>1</sup> women and children have very limited housing pathways to choose from in the aftermath of domestic and family violence.
  - Acute shortages in crisis, transitional and long-term housing particularly in regional and remote locations mean Indigenous women and children are routinely turned away from refuges and safe houses because they are at capacity. In these circumstances they become trapped in a revolving door between crisis and transitional services, homelessness—often involving shelter with family/friends—or returning to an unsafe home. This is likely a key factor in the high rates of domestic and family violence-related injury and death amongst Indigenous women.
  - Whilst Governments around Australia have improved responses to domestic and family violence through law reforms and integrated service systems they still tend to adopt a one size fits all approach that fails to respond to the intersectionality of Indigenous women’s and children’s experiences with domestic and family violence.
  - The unintended consequences of limited housing pathways puts Indigenous women at significant risk of having their children removed by Child Protection. Reunification is also compromised if long-term stable housing cannot be secured within generally, a 12 month timeframe given current prescribed State and Territory legislative and policy time limits for transitioning children to permanent care.
  - Developing culturally appropriate responses to Indigenous domestic and family violence and improving integration between housing, domestic and family violence and child protection services should reduce rates of Indigenous women's injury and death, as well as rates of Indigenous children's out-of-home care.
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### Key findings

#### Housing pathways

This research found three dominant housing pathways available to Indigenous women and children in the aftermath of domestic and family violence. These are:

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report the words ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ are used interchangeably to refer to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. When reporting policy and research reports we use the terminology of the report. When referring to specific Aboriginal groups we use local, language or skin names. In using these terms we acknowledge the diversity of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations.

- 1 Staying with family/friends
- 2 Staying at a refuge/safe house
- 3 Remaining in an unsafe home.

Women often cycle through the three options repeatedly in the search for safety in crisis situations. The acute shortages in crisis, transitional and long-term housing create significant bottlenecks within the housing pathways resulting in beds being routinely unavailable. This situation leaves women and children with little alternative but to rely on family/friends for a place to stay or to return to an unsafe home. The lack of housing choices for Indigenous women in the aftermath of domestic and family violence is, therefore a significant contributor to the high rates of Indigenous women's injury and death.

These circumstances also contribute to the high rates of Indigenous children in out-of-home care. They increase the likelihood of child protection service involvement and the risk of losing her child(ren) despite the fact she is dealing with circumstances largely outside of her control. This is a significant concern given the historical legacy of Indigenous child removal and increasing over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care.

### **Policy and service integration**

Australian governments have in the past decade focussed much needed attention on violence against women and children. They have taken steps to provide both a legislative and integrated service framework to provide support to women and children in the aftermath of violence, to hold perpetrators accountable, and to build community knowledge and awareness around these issues to prevent future violence.

These initiatives have resulted in substantial improvements to the way in which government and community services respond to domestic and family violence. Examples where these improvements can be identified include: better collaborative working relationships between government departments and service providers; provisions for the sharing of information; and through increased accountability of services 'people do what they say they are going to do'.

Women and children generally have benefited from these improvements with services becoming more attuned to identifying and meeting their needs in a timely manner. However, these initiatives are still aligned to a one size fits all model that can fail women and children who experience domestic and family violence through the lens of intersectionality.

This research found that Indigenous women and children continue to experience significant barriers to receiving a model of care that respects and embraces their difference. Indeed, their experiences give voice to being judged and questioned as to whether they are worthy victims deserving of support. This is influenced by attitudes expressing a normalisation of violence, complacency towards that normalisation, and a further undertone of racism both within the community and of most concern, within the service sector. This impacts directly on victims' safety, their housing pathways, and whether they are able to retain custody of their children.

While there have been positive advances in domestic violence policy, this research also identifies that there are still a number of areas where disconnects in policy and service integration exist. This is most profound at the intersection of housing and child protection. The heavy reliance of Indigenous populations on social housing given their general exclusion from the private housing market, particularly in regional and remote areas, means the wait for long-term accommodation can be considerable. Delays in being placed on priority housing wait lists were also regularly experienced due to a high proportion of Indigenous women having housing debt specifically related to their experience with domestic and family violence.

It was in this context that women were routinely waiting in excess of a year before being allocated long-term accommodation separate to their partner. Given housing instability is a risk

factor for child protection service involvement, women in these circumstances are subject to ongoing surveillance. Indigenous women, in particular given the historical and intergenerational experiences with child removal, found this involvement threatening and were fearful of its consequences for their children, themselves and their families.

### **Child protection**

The intersection between housing and child protection and its profound impact for Indigenous women and children experiencing domestic and family violence was a consistent theme throughout this research. Its significance cannot be underestimated nor the urgency to address it. With all States and Territories having now introduced legislative timeframes prescribing specific time limits (typically between 1–2 years) for children to transition from out-of-home care to permanent care, parents are needing to quickly demonstrate that they have stable housing.

Given the bottlenecks in crisis, transitional and the extended waiting times for long-term housing, it is very likely that delays in obtaining social housing will conflict with child protection law and policy. The risk that Indigenous women will lose their children permanently through no fault of their own, but rather as a consequence of systemic failures in housing policy and stock availability jeopardises not only the mother-child relationship but also puts at risk the familial and cultural continuity of Indigenous people. It is incumbent then that efforts to mitigate these unintended consequences of policy disconnect be prioritised as a matter of urgency.

### **Policy development options**

The clearest area requiring policy development identified by this research is to address the bottlenecks in crisis, transitional and long-term housing. In part, this would involve an investment in housing stock, particularly in regional and remote areas. There is also a need for housing and child protection policy and practice managers to improve service co-ordination, to ensure the decisions of either agency do not unduly disadvantage Indigenous women from maintaining care and custody of their children. Some of the areas for policy development include:

- Managing domestic and family violence related housing debt in a way that ensures it no longer acts as a barrier to safety by delaying placement at the top of priority housing waiting lists
- Improving co-ordination between housing and Centrelink so that when women seek safety by leaving the family home, delays in establishing identity do not place her and any children at risk of homelessness
- Addressing the high rate of tenancy failure amongst Indigenous women whose pathway to safety is relocation from the family home. Given the high risk they will return to an unsafe home, it is essential they are provided with targeted tenancy and related support
- Provision of crisis accommodation for Indigenous women with (i) mental health, substance use or other behavioural problems and for (ii) women with accompanying male children aged 12–14 years
- Employment of housing liaison officers by shelters and refugees
- Acknowledgement of the significance of housing within family safety framework strategies. Housing services should be required to ensure Indigenous women in imminent danger of serious injury or death, have appropriate options for safe, affordable accommodation, regardless of their housing history. Given the severe resource constraints on housing services this may require Commonwealth funding to provide more accommodation as well as increased resources for retro-fitting homes with increased safety measures. This is

especially important in regional and remote locations where options for safety may be severely constrained and services are limited

- Streamlining safety upgrades of women's homes to improve speediness and reduce costs.

The severity and distinct profile of domestic and family violence on remote Indigenous communities requires new models of intervention that recognise that many women wish to remain on their community. Holistic, strengths-based, culturally responsive responses are required that, wherever possible, draw on local networks and supports. A first step is for Indigenous-led projects that have been trialled and proved effective elsewhere (Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams 2015) to be extended to other locations.

Given the potential for extended family members (mothers, grandparents) to support women and children consideration should also be given to policies that facilitate this role. Their informal role in providing accommodation to female relatives escaping domestic and family violence could be recognised through funding for home upgrades that increase home security. The extension of programs such as the Northern Territory's 'room to breathe' could also be considered as a way of meeting the need for crisis and transitional accommodation on remote Indigenous communities.

Over the past two decades, there has been a growth in local, place based community initiatives designed to respond to Indigenous domestic and family violence. This has been made possible through government funding support. However the sustainability and continuity of these initiatives has never been assured. Given the over-representation of Indigenous women and children as victims of domestic and family violence and its ongoing impact on their lives over their life course, there is a demonstrable need for stable, recurrent funding of programs to address and support their specific needs.

These programs need to be consultative, co-designed and integrated initiatives that respond to domestic and family violence holistically. This means that they will first and foremost provide safety and support to victims, but that they will also provide support to perpetrators so that they can reflect on and change their behaviours. Housing is critical to these responses, ensuring that both parties are appropriately housed in the short, medium and long-term.

This research has also demonstrated the need for policy to have a focus on the empowerment of Indigenous women. It is critical that policy makers hear their voices, their experiences, and that they accept that Indigenous women are the 'experts of their own lives'. Their strength, resilience and resourcefulness are what keeps their families together and strong. Indigenous women demonstrate their ability to negotiate complex interpersonal, interfamilial, and outside relationships that arise from domestic and family violence every day and this is a reflection of their ability to assess risk, manage conflict and to be self-determining in complex and difficult circumstances. By identifying and supporting Indigenous women's strengths and empowering them to be self-determining we build the capacity within Indigenous communities to stop domestic and family violence and to heal those affected by it.

## **This Study**

This research is part of a wider AHURI Inquiry into housing outcomes after domestic and family violence. This research employed a multi-method research design, comprising:

- 1 An evidence and policy review that identified the scholarly and policy literature to describe the profile of Indigenous domestic and family violence, the domestic violence policy prevailing at the time of research, and its intersection with housing and homelessness policy, child protection policy and criminal justice policy.

- 2** Qualitative interviews with nine Indigenous women who had experienced domestic and family violence. The interviews were broad ranging covering: housing histories and current housing circumstances; experiences of support from services, family and friends; the impact of domestic and family violence on their sense of safety and their housing choices; their perceptions about the impact of their housing and support experiences on their children; and their hopes and plans for the future.
- 3** Qualitative interviews with 30 relevant policy and service delivery stakeholders from housing, domestic violence, legal and health related sectors. These interviews covered a range of topics including the policy and service delivery context; the effectiveness of service integration; Indigenous domestic and family violence reporting trends; service delivery limitations and opportunities; and the intersectionality of domestic and family violence with housing for Indigenous men/women and children.

The interviews were conducted in two regional cities in New South Wales and the Northern Territory. The findings were then contextualised against the evidence and policy review.

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