

The missing link—housing and Indigenous domestic and family violence



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 320:

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

What this research is about

This research focuses on the housing needs of Indigenous women and children who are severely over-represented in rates of both homelessness and domestic and family violence (DFV).

The context of this research

In 2017–18, Indigenous people made up 3.2 per cent of the Australian population, yet comprised 25 per cent of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) clients. Within this group, domestic and family violence was the second most common reason for homelessness (25%). Twenty two per cent of these Indigenous clients were children aged under 10 years, compared with 15 per cent of non-Indigenous clients. A high proportion (21.5%) of Indigenous people live in social housing. Social housing policy therefore plays a critical role in the well-being of Indigenous individuals and families

The key findings

Where DFV is occurring

In the Northern Territory, which has the highest proportion of Indigenous adults of any Australian jurisdiction, the rate of DFV was more than double that of any other jurisdiction at 1,730 victims per 100,000 persons. Rates of domestic violence related assault vary significantly, with remoteness being a contributing factor. In 2017–18 they

ranged from 907.5 per 100,000 population in Darwin to 7508.4 per 100,000 population in Katherine.

NSW police data reveals a profile of high rates of domestic and family violence in towns such as Walgett (2374.8 per 100,000), Broken Hill (1147.0 per 100,000) and Dubbo (1032.7 per 100,000).

‘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’

Causes and types of violence

While it is well established that Indigenous domestic and family violence needs to be understood as

both a cause and effect of social disadvantage and intergenerational trauma, the crowding that results from housing shortages also plays a critical role. In some remote communities such as Alice Springs and Katherine, crowding is further exacerbated because households receive large numbers of visitors because these locations are meeting points across surrounding regions.

Indigenous domestic and family violence must also be recognised that it taking place in a context where the practice of power and control by one partner against another is evident. The types of violence that takes place in the context of power and control include: physical violence; sexual violence; threats; emotional abuse; financial abuse; jealousy; isolation; and lateral violence. High levels of Indigenous incarceration means the latter is particularly prevalent when police become involved and extended family and friends exert pressure on victims to not ‘make trouble’ for the family.

Complexities of leaving home

For women with children, the decision to stay or leave is complex. Women are often in an untenable position when it comes to establishing safety for their children. Under current legislation

inadequate or insecure housing or unsafe homes including exposure to domestic violence are reasons for removal of children. But if shortages in crisis and long-term housing mean she cannot find a safe home away from the perpetrator, she risks child removal whether she leaves or stays.

If women decide to leave, children may be significantly traumatised and therefore difficult to manage. Child care is a shared responsibility within most Aboriginal communities, so women may find it difficult and challenging to manage the children on their own. Children in situations of domestic and family violence often have behavioural problems and may be difficult to manage, causing harm to the properties they dwell in.

As well as weighing up the disruption to schooling and the potential trauma of departure, Indigenous women must also deal with the impact of departure on her wider kinship networks. In many communities there is an expectation that extended kin will be involved with child rearing. In one community, cultural expectations were that fathers—and the male side of the family more broadly—should always have access to their children, making the decision to leave especially difficult.

Limited emergency housing options for women and children

Indigenous women and children have very limited housing pathways to choose from in the aftermath of domestic and family violence, with three common housing pathways available:

- staying with family/friends
- staying at a refuge/safe house
- remaining in an unsafe home.

Women often cycle through the three options repeatedly in the search for safety in crisis situations.

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, transitional services and 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.

Difficulty of accessing and sustaining long-term housing

Relocation away from family and community was described as being relatively uncommon, partly because of the difficulty in accessing secure housing. This is partly due to housing debts that are often passed on to the woman by the perpetrator. This creates significant delays in being placed at the top of the priority waiting list for public housing.

Women from remote communities face particular difficulties in sustaining tenancies in urban environments. While some may be able to stay with relatives on another remote community, fear that the perpetrator will find them and problems of crowding means their only chance of accessing safe, affordable accommodation is by relocation to a larger population centre. However, the experience of service providers was that few women lasted beyond a few months as they were unused to the tenancy obligations required in urban social housing and had difficulty meeting them. This includes timely rent payments and the need to manage visitors where they breach occupancy regulations or cause problems of good order.

Staying in the family home

While the preference for most women is to remain in the family home, current policies are failing in providing safety for women who do this. The reasons for this are two-fold.

Firstly, safe at home policies that support home upgrades for women to stay in their home are only available in limited locations. Whilst housing providers reported they are amenable to upgrading properties to support women's safety they also said that they were constrained by property management budgets. They explained

that remoteness can make it particularly difficult, as 'sometimes you will have to pay for these quotes to be done, because if the contractor has to travel to quote the job they've got to cover their costs'.

The second barrier is the length of time to execute the delivery of upgrades. It can take several weeks for properties to be assessed, and several more weeks before formal approval is provided and contractors instructed to do the upgrade works. Service providers felt that there was a need to find ways of minimising the timeframes and were open to using their own staff to take photographs, measurements or do drawings of the women's homes to streamline the process and reduce costs. It is in this context that Safe at Home policies may be more accessible and successful in regional and urban environments as in these locations they can better manage timelines and supports than in remote locations.

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Excluding male DFV perpetrators

Domestic Violence Orders (DVOs) that exclude men from the family home have been considered an alternative to the women leaving the family home, particularly with the added support of housing safety upgrades. However, the research found the men rarely had housing options, and even if they were excluded, because they were effectively homeless, they usually returned to the family home, making this policy largely ineffective in the Indigenous context.

There was also a consensus among service providers that sending the men to jail (for breaching DVOs) was not helping the women in domestic and family violence situations. Indeed it was arguably exacerbating their experiences.

The tightly woven cultural and kinship connections in small communities require a holistic response to DFV that caters to the housing and support needs of both men and women. In the absence of an equivalent service response for men, providing services to women and children in isolation to the men is at best, a band-aid solution of limited long-term effectiveness.

‘There is a need for housing and child protection to work more closely together to ensure that the decisions of each agency do not contradict each other or compromise the safety and long-term well-being of Indigenous women and children. Inadequate policy integration between housing and child protection is a significant contributor to the high, and increasing, rates of Indigenous out-of-home care’

Unsafe housing can lead to removal of children

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. All states and territories have 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.

Given the historical and intergenerational experiences with child removal, Indigenous women found this involvement threatening and were fearful of its consequences for their children, themselves and their families.

The removal of children has collateral consequences that may exacerbate financial insecurity, housing insecurity, substance use and risks to health. At the heart of the policy disconnect between child protection and housing is the lack of affordable housing.

What this research means for policy makers

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 Indigenous women’s and children’s experiences with domestic and family violence.

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 in out-of-home care.

There is an urgent need to increase crisis and transitional accommodation and to increase social housing stock. Social housing providers also need to review policies on housing debt in households experiencing domestic and family violence, to ensure that exclusion from the highest priority waiting list does not effectively prevent victims—including children—from establishing a safe home away from the perpetrator.

Despite the difficulty Indigenous women have in relocating to a new area away from family and community, this may sometimes be the only way of establishing safety and retaining the children. If the ‘revolving door’ of tenancy failure and returning to an unsafe home is to be addressed, policy needs to recognise this and provide targeted support to these women and their families. As well as tenancy education and support to establish the home, this kind of after-care should include linking them to essential services such as Centrelink and schools. The likely isolation of the women in these situations also needs to be addressed by helping them establish local networks, especially with other Aboriginal women and services in their new area of residence

Improving service delivery

Policy reform of the past decade has emphasised the importance of integrated frameworks for service delivery in response to domestic and family violence, and the sector has much improved collaboration, information sharing and accountability. There are, however, gaps that still require ongoing reform.

Family safety meetings are often chaired by police. They operate within justice departments and target women identified as in imminent danger of harm or death. Strategies include regular meetings between key government agencies and community sector services; assistance for victims to relocate; fast-tracking of priority housing; and provision of additional home security measures. Currently the role of social housing providers in family safety meetings is discretionary; budgets and the shortage of housing limits the prioritising of housing support. Given the significance of housing in the establishment of safety, the Commonwealth should consider establishing a program that specifically targets housing support for Indigenous women. As well as appropriate, safe crisis accommodation this should include prioritising relocation where appropriate.

Family safety meetings should also

ensure they are inclusive of all services involved with women and children (especially Centrelink and housing). The inclusion of these additional services would ensure responsive wrap-around holistic care. They can also provide essential information to progress applications for income support or housing in a more timely way both at the time of crisis and in the aftermath of violence when ongoing care and support may be required.

Given that the women are 'experts of their own lives', enabling their participation either individually or with the support of an advocate in safety meetings is an important step in

empowering them to make safe decisions for themselves and their children.

There is also a need for housing and child protection to work more closely together to ensure that the decisions of each agency do not contradict each other or compromise the safety and long-term well-being of Indigenous women and children. Inadequate policy integration between housing and child protection is a significant contributor to the high, and increasing, rates of Indigenous children in out-of-home care.

There is also a case for improving

training for housing and related services, including family safety program participants, to ensure that they operate free from intentional or unintentional bias and/or racism.

Methodology

This research reviewed evidence and policy, and interviewed Indigenous women who have experienced domestic and family violence and policy and service delivery stakeholders. Data collection took place in two sites in regional towns in New South Wales and the Northern Territory.

Further information

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