Ensuring safety and wellbeing for vulnerable families by connecting housing and support services

Based on AHURI Final Report No. 339: Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families

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What this research is about

This AHURI Inquiry was framed to answer the overarching question: How can housing support for vulnerable families be best integrated with other types of support, to enhance safety and wellbeing? It focused on how integration is actually operating in different contexts: the integration of housing and other support for women experiencing domestic and family violence in different housing tenures; integrated support for Indigenous women experiencing domestic and family violence; and the integration of social housing policy with policies to support women affected by domestic and family violence and other especially vulnerable households.

The context of this research

Domestic and family violence is a significant risk factor for homelessness, especially for women and children. A range of policy responses has been devised to prevent homelessness among those who have experienced violence, and to provide support to those who are experiencing homelessness. Evidence is emerging of promising practices that could be expanded. However, there are also indications of existing practices and policies in the housing field that may impede effective responses or worsen the hardships and injustice faced by vulnerable groups.

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The key findings

The housing and other needs of vulnerable families cannot be met by one sector. This is increasingly recognised in policy and program design. The *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*, for example, recognises that 'all systems need to work together' and aspires to 'an unprecedented level of collaboration with the broader community and governments'. However, there are gaps in provision to vulnerable families across the housing system, and a need for improved responses in emergency accommodation, social housing, and private rental housing.

The interactions between housing and human services, particularly child protection and family support, also work against policy aspirations to improve support for vulnerable families and reduce the risks of homelessness and other adverse events. While areas of strength and effective service delivery are evident, these are not uniformly available to all groups and in all areas.

Crisis accommodation

Crisis and emergency responses are generally effective in meeting the short-term needs of non-Indigenous women and children in major urban areas. However, Indigenous women and children in remote and regional areas face acute shortages in housing support and access to culturally safe services, including crisis support.

Services operate on an immediate response basis in most jurisdictions, and temporary accommodation may be provided by government agencies, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) providers or other NGOs. Refuges and shelters are often full, which leaves providers with few options, other than brokered accommodation. In many cases, this immediate response is achieved by agencies paying for motel accommodation. Refuges and shelters also provide relatively short-term accommodation. This temporary accommodation in smaller towns is often problematic, especially if the perpetrator lives in the same town.

In some jurisdictions, this precarious situation is exacerbated by policies around temporary accommodation, which is not part of the SHS system. In New South Wales (NSW), for example, it is a requirement that people needing emergency accommodation re-request this every two days.

There are also differences in the quality of service provided to some groups of women and children, which are based on systemic discrimination and views of 'deservingness'.

In some cases, crisis accommodation providers have exclusion criteria that prevent women receiving support, such as:

- boys over the age of 12 are often excluded from women's shelters. Finding safety for the woman may mean separating from her older, male children, and risking their care to another family member, or strangers, at a time of severe family stress

- bans on the use of alcohol and other drugs

- failure to follow the accommodation rules, and clashing with other residents or workers

- family pets are excluded from some shelters and transitional accommodation. Some services offer boarding at discounted rates, but take-up of this service is low because costs are still too high for most people.

Private rental accommodation

Moving from short-term or transitional accommodation into permanent, independent housing is very difficult, and sometimes unachievable, for women and children affected by domestic and family violence. Cost is a significant barrier, because has women who have escaped violence often have very low incomes and constraints on employment.

Accommodation in the private rental market is supported by policies to address homelessness, including rent subsidies specifically for people who have experienced domestic and family violence. However, there are barriers to entry for many. Landlords and their agents typically select tenants to minimise risk and maximise return, and therefore people with poor or no rental histories, who are unemployed, or in insecure work are often perceived as presenting a greater risk. Households with children, pets, or from particular cultural backgrounds may also face discrimination and stereotyping.

The quality of affordable housing in the private rental market is concerning to clients and service providers in some areas.

Initiatives to increase the accessibility and affordability of the private rental market, such as stronger subsidies or rental guarantees for landlords, can provide some pathways to stability. However, the cost to government of these initiatives is likely to increase, and their effectiveness likely to decline, over time.

There is research emerging that demonstrates that investment in new social and affordable housing supply, planned in response to patterns of population growth, is a more sustainable and efficient option to meet widespread housing need than demand-side subsidies, and produces a range of other social and economic gains. While the rental market is an important part of the domestic and family violence policy response, a policy reliance on this form of housing tenure will be less effective than investment in social and affordable housing.

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Social housing

Social housing is valued by tenants, and investment to increase supply could potentially address problems with pathways to permanent housing for vulnerable groups. However, in social housing's currently marginalised state, tensions exist between aspirations to support vulnerable groups and policies relating to tenancy management: in particular, the role of social landlords in relation to crime and anti-social behaviour.

Insufficient social housing supply results in blocked pathways for women leaving violence and, for those who make it into social housing, tenancy management practices that are shaped by sharp conditionality, unrealistic expectations about controlling the behaviour of others, and punitive approaches to crime and anti-social behaviour.

Social housing legal responses to crime and to non-criminal anti-social behaviour, such as 'three strikes' policies and legislative amendments intended to facilitate termination proceedings and evictions, conflict with other policies and practices to support vulnerable families in sustaining their tenancies. This has specific implications for responses to domestic and family violence. Although social housing landlords are generally strongly committed to assisting women leaving domestic and family violence, in social housing women are subject to unrealistic expectations about controlling the misconduct of male partners and visitors, and may be evicted because of violence against them.

Tenancy termination is a blunt, heavy instrument that especially impacts on women, children, Indigenous persons and persons with problematic alcohol and other drug use.

Many disputes between tenants and social housing landlords lead to both escalating threats to the tenancy and obligations to the tenant towards 'engaging' with the landlord. This suggests that encouragement to seek support should move out of the shadow of termination. Referrals for support should be made more freely, and earlier in a tenancy, and support delivered by services at arm's length from the landlord.

Constraints on housing pathways

The primary source of pressure on the crisis accommodation system is at the interface between support services, including those in the domestic and family violence sector, and the wider housing system. Vulnerable families, including women leaving violent relationships are routinely unable to readily obtain safe, affordable, accessible and appropriate housing in which they can settle for the long-term. Without this, they remain in crisis and transitional housing for longer than is appropriate, and the consequences of this are felt, not just in their insecurity and uncertainty, but throughout the whole system.

Resolving this situation will require substantive and extensive measures to improve integration between support services and the housing system, particularly in relation to social and affordable housing.

While there are many instances of service working well and vulnerable people being supported, this is not the case in all areas, and for all people. Constraints on support are driven by funding to services, as well as local housing markets. The consequence of this is that factors that should not be relevant to support, such as geographic location, affect the quality of support available.

Indigenous women and children are faced with more barriers to sustainable housing pathways than other vulnerable groups. Bottlenecks in crisis and transitional accommodation services mean many Indigenous women are trapped in a revolving door involving short-term departure of a few days, weeks or months from the family home, then shifting between different types of accommodation including relatives' homes, safe houses (in remote communities), shelters and temporary accommodation, such as caravans and motels.

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What this research means for policy makers

Policy development options to better integrate specialist homelessness services with the broader service system include:

- greater investment in a range of affordable housing options, particularly social housing that is planned and designed to be safe, secure and supportive, as well as affordable in the long-term

- strategies to address the impact of different levels of affordability and availability of housing across private rental markets

- alignment of integrated, trauma-informed practice, which occurs at the level of local service delivery, with broader systemic interventions

- changes to income support policies to address poverty and social exclusion.

Policy development options to better support Indigenous families include:

- establishing and building the capacity of specific Indigenous landlord organisations, housing officers in mainstream providers, support workers and tenant advocates

- harnessing the experience and knowledge of Indigenous landlord organisations to build community capacity with a view to adjusting tenancy law, policy and practice. In particular, these organisations and communities can work towards changes that recognise cultural obligations and extended family responsibilities, rather than imposing responsibility and liability on tenants individually

- sustained investment in building the cultural safety of mainstream services and systems

- strategies to address the tensions between policies to support families to maintain care of their children, with child protection policies that mandate permanency planning.

Policy development options to better integrate social housing policy with policies to support vulnerable people include:

- reviewing social housing policies and practice for gender impacts, and sponsoring the cultivation of respectful relationships

- adopting 'the best interests of the child' as the paramount factor in decisions about tenancy termination affecting children

- moving support out of the shadow of tenancy termination, so the provision of support is not tied to the threat of termination

- giving tenants more certainty through commitments that no-one will be evicted into homelessness

- ensuring proper scrutiny is applied to termination decisions and proceedings, and to sector practice

- more effective service integration between housing and child protection practices, so that children are not removed or remain in out-of-home care unnecessarily

- reforming the law regarding tenants' extended and vicarious liability for other persons

- adopting harm minimisation as a guiding principle for responses to alcohol and other drug use, including where there is criminal offending.

Methodology

This Inquiry encompasses included evidence and policy reviews; qualitative interviews with women (including Indigenous women) who have experienced domestic and family violence; interviews with policy and service delivery stakeholders; and reviews of laws and policies relating to social housing legal proceedings and responses to misconduct.

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