

Young Women's Experiences of Violence & Homelessness

This report summarises qualitative research exploring young women's experiences of domestic and family violence (DFV), sexual abuse, and homelessness and housing insecurity, and the implications of those experiences for service provision. Interviews with young women highlighted the cumulative effects of violence and homelessness over the course of their lives and their need for services that responded to trauma and associated complex needs. These service needs extend beyond the need for stable housing. Interviews with service providers suggested that integrated services and trauma-informed approaches are effective, but highlighted the challenges of implementing these in the context of the fragmented housing and violence service sectors. A policy framework that synthesises a safety-first and a modified housing-first approach may be most effective in supporting responses that address interrelated housing, therapeutic, social, practical and life skills needs.

KEY POINTS

- Childhood trauma is a key theme in young women's trajectories into homelessness.
- Unsupported transitions to adulthood and an absence of family, social and financial resources compound the risks of homelessness.
- Young women's own experiences of DFV contribute to housing instability and homelessness.
- Young women experience multiple forms of victimisation and multiple episodes of homelessness across their life course.
- Services that support individual and cultural needs are most valuable.
- Safe housing necessitates emotional, social and physical safety across the domains of relationships, dwellings and neighbourhoods.
- Outreach is key to supporting young women. The type of outreach is informed by the scope of service activities, but most service providers integrate assertive and trauma-informed principles in outreach.
- Achieving and maintaining safe and sustainable housing requires meeting clients' multiple needs. This is challenging in a context of fragmented and changeable service environments.

*This bulletin is based on research by **Associate Professor Kristin Natalier and Professor Sarah Wendt.***

*The research was funded by Housing SA. It has been prepared in the context of the South Australian Government's release of the *Our Housing Future 2020–2030 10-year plan*. Strategy 4 of the plan is to prevent and reduce homelessness through targeted and tailored responses.*

The plan also argues for a move away from reactively responding to crisis towards tailored and robust solutions that target early intervention and prevention. Service and supports must be provided in a timely manner that is outcome and people focused, incentive based, and which ensures people are supported into their own tenancies quickly, effectively and sustainably.

Developing a stronger understanding of the links between DFV and other factors such as ethnicity, family relationships, drug and alcohol use, poverty, and mental health and age creates a stronger evidence base to inform South Australian policy.

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CONTEXT

DFV is a leading cause of homelessness experienced by women, young people and single-mother-headed families.

The relationship between DFV and homelessness is complex. Understanding this relationship requires a holistic analysis of the complexities of women's lives and their position in wider socio-economic and cultural contexts and service systems.

The focus of research and policy needs to shift from the immediate housing crisis sparked by a woman's decision to leave a violent relationship, to an exploration of the longer-term processes through which women can attain and sustain safe housing.

Existing research indicates that the processes that facilitate safe housing outcomes are multidimensional. They require attention to the capacities and needs of individual women, the practices of services, and the service systems and broader policy context within which these are located.

For young women who have experienced DFV and/or sexual violence, necessary services are likely to extend across systems including housing, violence, health, legal/criminal justice and social services. These are not always well integrated and can reflect the requirements of the service systems rather than the complex needs of young women.

METHODOLOGY

This research had three components. First, a rapid systematic review and scoping review were conducted to map the evidence base on young women, DFV and sexual violence, and homelessness and housing insecurity, and effective service responses.

Second, 22 young women participated in in-depth interviews focused on experiences of violence and homelessness/housing insecurity and the supports they received.

Third, focus groups were conducted with 30 practitioners from housing, violence support and

youth services to gain insights into service provision. Narrative and thematic analysis were used to identify key findings from the young women; thematic analysis was applied to the service provider data.

KEY FINDINGS

Young women

In most of the young women's biographies, housing instability and homelessness were associated with childhood experiences of violence and trauma, unsupported transitions to adulthood and DFV perpetrated by intimate partners. These experiences left them with very few social, material and emotional resources to recognise, attain and maintain safe housing and relationships.

The young women experienced multiple forms of victimisation and multiple episodes of homelessness across their life course. These contributed to cumulative disadvantage and trauma, evident in multiple and interrelated vulnerabilities and needs. The young women described insecurity and loneliness, the erosion of trust in others and often psychological challenges, in addition to poverty, homelessness and housing insecurity, and investigations by child protective services.

The most valuable services were those that supported the young women's cultural and individual needs. Responsive services offered them security and time to think about their options and to develop and implement short- and longer-term plans. Such services also validated their sense of self, autonomy, cultural identity and capacity to be good mothers.

Housing needs were met through safe housing, which included emotional, social and physical safety offered by the accommodation, its neighbourhood and the relationships facilitated or mitigated by this housing.

Service providers

The service providers' definitions of safe housing aligned with those of the young women.

They emphasised the importance of providing housing that meets young women's needs for emotional,

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social and physical safety in relationships, dwellings and neighbourhoods.

Multidimensionally safe housing is often not available. Accommodation can be inappropriate or degraded in ways that exacerbate past traumas and create new risks for young women and their children. The immediate need for shelter is often more pressing than placing young people in neighbourhoods that offer positive and safe social connections. Supporting young women in safe housing is complicated by their misrecognition of violence and control in relationships.

While short-term housing is a necessary crisis response, maintaining safe housing requires a longer-term approach. It requires meeting young women's therapeutic needs and developing their life skills and capacities across multiple domains so that they can maintain tenancies and meet the demands of independent living. Commonly required services include physical and mental health services for young women and their children, drug and alcohol supports, life skills including budgeting, financial literacy and learning to drive, and connecting young women with communities.

Meeting young women's needs is challenging in a context of fragmented, changeable and underfunded service environments and the associated diverse eligibility criteria of different services.

Outreach is a key element of supporting young women. The type of outreach implemented is informed by the scope of service activities, but most service providers attempt to integrate client-centred or assertive outreach.

Key outreach principles include a trauma-informed approach, flexibility, proactive communication, and time and resource intensiveness.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The central recommendation is to build a policy environment that privileges a safety-first approach and aligns it with a modified housing-first approach. Such an approach enables a joined-up, lifetime trauma-informed policy response to young women experiencing violence and homelessness. It also recognises and responds to gender-based violence as the cause and driver of their homelessness and trauma while recognising the importance of safe housing in preventing this violence and minimising its effects.

The approach emphasises recognition of and responses to gender-based violence by holding perpetrators to account, safety planning, risk assessment and wrap-around trauma-informed services provided by specialist women's services. Stable and appropriate housing is supported in conjunction with – rather than prior to – services that address complex violence-related needs.

This alignment is supported through the following principles:

- DFV should be recognised as a unique driver of homelessness.
- Service systems should be more integrated so that young women's eligibility for a full range of supports is not determined by their point of entry.
- Funding and service responses should recognise the cumulative impacts of homelessness and DFV across the life course, including the need for longer-term support.
- Governments should invest in housing that meets multiple dimensions of safety as defined by young women.
- Gender-responsive, culturally appropriate and trauma-informed care should be prioritised.
- Active outreach should be a core element of service responses.
- The agency and capacities of young women should be central to policy development.

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Practice recommendations include:

- Institutionalised collaboration across service systems and service providers.
- Real availability of crisis, short-term, transitional and independent housing options, responsive to individual women's needs.
- Short- and longer-term supports meeting young women's multiple and complex needs (therapeutic, logistical, practical, information, social and life skills).
- Ongoing training on DFV as gender-based violence and its impacts on young women and their children.
- Commitment to a lifetime trauma approach, supported through ongoing training.
- Culturally safe practices.
- Implementing flexible not coercive service provision.
- Centring the agency and empowerment of young women.
- Promoting respectful and personalised relationships and service supports for young women.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS The Flinders SWIRLS team recognises that the Flinders Social Work discipline operates on the traditional lands and waters of the Kaurna People and we pay respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their sovereignty and continued responsibility to care for country. We respect the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, languages and spirituality and their relationships with country. We are committed to truth telling about the history of social work education and practice in this state and working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to achieve our shared vision for reconciliation.

SWIRLS gratefully acknowledges the financial and other support it has received from Housing SA and other government and non-government organisations that enabled young women and service providers to participate in the research. SWIRLS also acknowledges the young women and service providers who gave their time to tell their stories for the research.