

**INQUIRY INTO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRENDS AND
ISSUES IN NSW**

Organisation: Homelessness Australia

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Domestic and family violence, homelessness and housing insecurity

Preventing domestic violence is a key concern for Homelessness Australia and our members. In addition to the immediate need to prioritise the safety of the person experiencing the violence and to ensure the perpetrator is held accountable for acts of violence committed, Homelessness Australia believes that it is vital that people can access safe and secure accommodation in a timely manner when they leave a home in which violence is occurring.

A consistent finding from specialist homelessness services data is that domestic and family violence is the often cited reason provided by women for seeking assistance, often with young children. Leaving violence, like any pathway into homelessness can be understood as a process. Upon leaving the immediate priority must be safety. This means that women (and children) must be able to quickly access accommodation that is safe and secure upon leaving a violent partner. Women frequently find themselves with nowhere to go after summoning the courage to leave a violent situation and in fact may feel coerced to stay because of a lack of accommodation options, particularly those that offer anonymity, safety and security.

We contend that women escaping domestic and family violence are at significant risk of becoming homeless and that this will remain a significant risk into the foreseeable future. Many women will simply not be aware of where they may be able to go to seek help when experiencing violence while for others, the trauma of the abuse they are enduring will be so overwhelming that they will not be in a state of mind to begin the process of accessing accommodation and support services.

In addition the experience of cyclical domestic and family violence can create housing insecurity for all parties as those experiencing violence may leave, return and leave again several times either because they believe they love the perpetrator or they are stalked and coerced to return to the situation in which violence is occurring.

While there is a critical shortage of affordable housing and a lack of crisis/refuge accommodation across NSW it will be difficult for women to find the courage to leave situations in which violence is likely. While it may be seemingly beyond the ambit of this Inquiry, Homelessness Australia recommends that the NSW Government commits to the implementation of policies and programs that expand the supply of affordable housing and ensure that homelessness services for women escaping domestic and family violence are sufficiently well funded to accommodate every person seeking refuge, every night.

Homelessness Australia would like to acknowledge the significant new investment on homelessness programs and services by the Australian Government and the NSW Government since 2008. This new investment should significantly increase the number of short and medium term accommodation available to people experiencing homelessness including women and children escaping domestic and family violence. We also applaud the recent investment in new social housing which will see more than 5000 new dwellings constructed across NSW, half of which will be allocated to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.



Alternatively, many women (and children) will want to be supported to remain in the family home and an integrated domestic and family violence response should be put in place to enable them to do so safely. There are of course inherent dangers as many violent partners will engage in stalking and other intimidating behaviour and this may be easier for them if they know exactly where the person they have abused is located.

Apart from obvious necessities such as the need to upgrade security around the home, change door and window locks, etc, there may need to be an increased response from law enforcement and women (and children) may need to be supported to take steps to improve personal safety.

The use of GPS bracelets for perpetrators that is mentioned in the terms of reference for this Inquiry is an issue worthy of consideration in the context of the expansion of models supporting women (and children) to remain safely in the family home.

In the longer term there may be issues arising from a potential separation or divorce and family law implications if children are involved. There may also financial implications including an inability to financially afford to maintain housing depending on the employment status of the survivor of violence and their capacity to service the cost of a mortgage or rental payments. This suggests that an integrated response to domestic and family violence will be necessary to assist survivors to move on from violent partners and regain their emotional, psychological, social and economic independence.

Early intervention strategies to prevent domestic and family violence

Between July 2008 and June 2009, there were 26,081 recorded domestic assaults in NSWⁱ. Given the level of underreporting the actual number that occurred is likely to be significantly higher. In any case, the level of domestic violence that is occurring is completely unacceptable. Homelessness Australia therefore strongly supports the adoption, promotion and expansion of early intervention strategies that prevent domestic and family violence from occurring.

Women and children in NSW have the right to be and feel safe; particularly in the place they should feel most secure – the family home. Preventing domestic and family violence from occurring by addressing key risk factors is an essential component of achieving this objective.

ⁱ NSW Domestic and Family Violence Action Plan Stop the Violence- End the Silence, 2010, p.3.