

Domestic Violence and Homelessness in the Northern Territory

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There is an intrinsic link between homelessness and domestic violence. Disturbingly, domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness in Australia.¹ Concurrently, homelessness can increase the risk factors for domestic violence, and create an additional barrier for a person wishing to leave an abusive relationship.

Domestic violence continues to occur at critical levels in Australia, gravely affecting the stability and health of families and communities around the country. While domestic and family violence affects men, women and children, data shows that it is women who are overwhelmingly subjected to domestic violence as victims.²

Central Australia is host to particularly high rates of domestic and family violence, and the Northern Territory (NT) records the highest rates of domestic violence homicide per capita in Australia. Many victims of domestic violence experience additional and overlapping social and legal issues, including homelessness. As a Women's Legal Service operating in Central Australia, we observe the links between domestic violence and homelessness all too frequently.

For starters, it is often the victims of domestic violence who are forced to leave an unsafe home, rather than the perpetrators of such violence, even where police are involved. In many instances, a perpetrator charged with domestic violence assaults is bailed to reside at their home address. This means that the victims of violence are forced to relocate elsewhere at least temporarily — to the homes of friends or family; to a hotel, caravan park or other form of paid accommodation; to crisis accommodation services; or, to no home at all. This may be the case

even where the primary victim is on the lease or a joint home owner with the perpetrator. Even in matters where the perpetrator has been remanded in custody, the risk of further violence and harassment from the perpetrator's family can also prompt a victim to relocate for their own safety.

Women who find themselves homeless as a result of domestic violence are then exposed to a further risk of physical or sexual violence whilst sleeping rough. For some women, the lack of available alternative accommodation may be a barrier to leaving a violent relationship. And once homeless, the ability for a person to accept an offer of public housing or even to progress on a waiting list may be compromised by a lack of consistent contact details.

Rates of homelessness amongst Aboriginal people in Australia are particularly high. A shortage of affordable and public housing means that many Aboriginal people in the NT experience severe overcrowding, in both urban contexts and remote communities. Housing issues are at crisis level for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Northern Territory, with a severe shortage of appropriate accommodation and long waiting lists for those who have applied. In fact, the highest rates of overcrowding amongst Aboriginal households (defined as a household where at least one resident is Aboriginal) are in the NT.³

Overcrowding can lead to a range of health and social issues and may in fact exacerbate tensions between couples or family members, thereby heightening the risk of domestic violence occurring. Overcrowding can also increase the risk of children being exposed to domestic violence.

Aboriginal people travelling from remote communities to a 'service hub' such as Alice Springs may experience homelessness or 'sleep rough' while in town, due to a lack of affordable or available accommodation options.

Transient or people experiencing homelessness face additional barriers in terms of accessing public housing, especially where homelessness has occurred as a result of eviction due to property damage or complaints about their residence. Eviction can flow from such events even where those evicted were not responsible for the property damage caused. A victim of domestic violence may struggle to stand up to an abusive perpetrator who may cause damage to the property, or create cause for complaint from neighbours or the police. Similarly, due to disempowerment or fear, a woman experiencing domestic violence may find it difficult to control unwanted visitors, or the use of alcohol or drugs on the premises.

For many Aboriginal tenants who live in public housing in prohibited material areas (per the *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory (Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Act 2012 (Cth)*)⁴ and who are also victims of domestic and family violence, there is a risk of eviction and ultimately homelessness because of the behaviour of others, including abusive partners.

Women and children who become homeless as a result of domestic and family violence still remain relatively 'invisible' to broader society, largely due to the tendency of women themselves wanting to avoid being labelled as homeless, as a 'victim' or be seen as a 'bad mother'.⁵ Many women also see themselves as having a home to live in — but it is simply

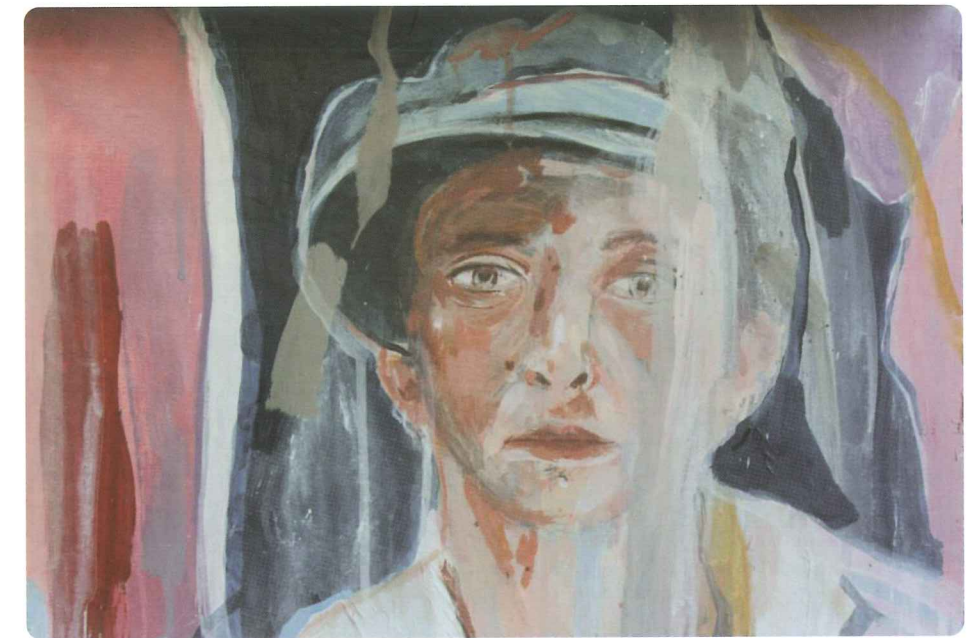
because this family home becomes unsafe that they become homeless.⁶ Accordingly, many women who may be eligible to access the limited housing assistance that is available may not do so out of a reluctance to identify as homeless.

Homelessness or the risk of homelessness for victims of domestic and family violence can also act as a precursor to other issues, including child protection involvement, alcohol abuse and risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. Involvement from child protection authorities may stem from concerns around the health of a homeless child, a child's access to education or ability for the child's parents to keep the child safe. Increasingly, women who are made homeless as a result of domestic and family violence are exhibiting more complex and overlapping needs, as a result of additional factors such as alcohol or substance abuse, disability and mental health issues.⁷ As such the cost to society, both in terms of social health and economically, becomes far more pronounced.

So, homelessness can be both a product and a cause of domestic violence. What can be done to address this situation?

Safe housing for victims of domestic and family violence is an integral aspect of assisting victims and their families to live a life free from violence, and as a mechanism to prevent subsequent social, health and legal issues and risks directly associated with homelessness. It is important to acknowledge that there is no one pathway into homelessness and that many women experiencing domestic and family violence related homelessness may move between housing, crisis accommodation and homelessness, and require different levels and mechanisms of support at different times. Ideally, shelter services are able to offer clients, either through their service or as a warm referral, a range of ongoing and holistic supports including access to health and social services.

A Northern Territory specific affordable housing strategy would also be a vital step forward in ensuring that victims of domestic violence in the Territory have



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accommodation options. This strategy should encompass the needs of victims of domestic violence who are made homeless in both urban and remote settings. A range of shorter term, transitional housing options is also vital for women who cannot secure permanent housing.

The complexity of the individual issues of homelessness and domestic violence and their intersection cannot be underestimated. Increased resourcing of crisis accommodation agencies and other services that support victims of domestic and family violence, would assist in these services being able to provide ongoing holistic support to victims who may cycle in and out of homelessness. It is also imperative that those who work in the housing sector, including Public Housing Officers, receive comprehensive training about the nature and impact of domestic and family violence, and be guided by these principles in their enforcement of public housing policy.

More often than not, women needing assistance regarding domestic violence or housing are likely to present with a range of issues that need to be addressed. Attempts to deal with an issue in isolation, while leaving others looming, will often prove fruitless. Sustained and enhanced resourcing of these multiple specialist areas is essential, as is cross-sector knowledge and collaboration as to referral pathways that will provide clients with the best possible outcomes.

* The Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS) is a not for profit organisation funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department and the Northern Territory Government. CAWLS provides free legal advice and assistance to all Central Australian women in the areas of domestic and family violence, family Law and property, discrimination, victims of crime, child protection and housing. CAWLS is based in Alice Springs, in the Northern Territory, and services women across the Barkly Region. Approximately 50 per cent of CAWLS client base identify as Aboriginal.

Endnotes

1. Tually S, Faulkner D, Cutler C, and Slatter M 2008, *Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness: A Synthesis Report*, report prepared for the Office for Women, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, August 2008. p. 1.
2. Ferrante A et al 1996, Crime Research Centre, University of Western Australia, *Measuring the extent of domestic violence*, Hawkins Press, p. 104.
3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2008*, ABS cat no 4704.0, p. 41.
4. *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory (Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Act 2012 (Cth)*
5. Tually S, Faulkner D, Cutler C, and Slatter M 2008, op cit p.1.
6. Johnson, G, Gronda H and Coutts S 2008, *On the outside: pathways in and out of homelessness*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne.
7. Tually S, Faulkner D, Cutler C and Slatter M 2009, *Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness: Putting Housing Back in the Equation*, Special Issue: Rethinking Domestic Violence and Homelessness, *Parity*, vol.22, no.10, Council to Homeless Persons, Collingwood.