

Housing and Aboriginal Family Violence: the missing link

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Background

- 1 of 3 research projects funded under a broader AHURI Inquiry : Integrated housing support for vulnerable families
- Focus of this research was on 'How can housing and other service responses to family and domestic violence be improved to meet the needs of Aboriginal individuals and families?'

Method

- Multi-method research design, comprising:
 - Rapid evidence and policy review;
 - Interviews with Indigenous women who have experienced DFV; and
 - Interviews with policy and service delivery stakeholders
- Two research sites: NSW and the NT

Research Findings

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BARRIERS TO PATHWAYS TO SAFETY ...



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Housing

- Indigenous women and children have very limited housing pathways to choose from in the aftermath of DFV;
- Acute shortages exist in crisis, transitional and long-term housing particularly in regional and remote areas;
- Indigenous women are trapped in a revolving door cycling between crisis services, shelter with family and friends, and returning to an unsafe home.

Housing

- Long delays in placement on priority housing lists;
- The burden of housing debt (for arrears in rent, damage to property) was largely borne by Indigenous women as head lease holder and impacted their placement on priority housing lists;
- When women were finally offered housing, often after extensive waits, they often felt they were set up to fail.

Service Integration

- Law and policy reform in respect of DFV has improved service integration generally, but often fails to meet the needs of Indigenous women given its 'one size fits all approach'.
- Indigenous women were often being judged as to whether they were 'worthy victims' deserving of support;
- Instead of supporting and improving Indigenous women's circumstances service integration had the potential to compound their disadvantage and to further disempower them.

Service Integration

- Violence experienced by Indigenous women was normalised;
- Some service responses also normalised the violence experienced by Indigenous women and this effected the services offered or rather not offered;
- An undertone of racism was also prevalent.

Child Protection

- Children's exposure to DFV is understood as damaging, consequently all jurisdictions prescribe mandatory reporting to Child Protection by individuals and/or professions;
- Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to child protection involvement;
- Indigenous women face a situation of triple victimisation: through family violence, removal of children, and homelessness that has long lasting consequences.

Policy Disconnect

- Most profound at the intersection of housing and child protection:
 - Prioritisation and timeliness of being offered housing acceptable to child protection;
 - Location and condition of housing consistent with child protection policies relating to risk; and
 - Financial implications whilst women wait for departmental decisions.
- Unintended consequence children removed may not be reunified because of things outside of Aboriginal women's control.

Policy and Practice Implications

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20 YEARS OF AHURI

Policy

- Investment in housing stock to improve bottlenecks in crisis, transitional and long-term housing;
- Managing DFV related housing debt to ensure that it no longer acts as a barrier to safety by delaying access to priority wait lists;
- Addressing the high rate of tenancy failure amongst Indigenous women by providing targeted tenancy and related support;

Policy

- Extending 'Safe at home' funding to retro fit homes with increased safety measures;
- Addressing the high rate of tenancy failure amongst Indigenous women by providing targeted tenancy and related support;
- Review of housing policy to enable home upgrades for informal helpers routinely providing respite to victims of violence;
- Supporting in a sustainable way Indigenous local place based initiatives designed to respond to DFV and that empowers Indigenous women.

Practice

- Service coordination between housing and child protection to ensure that decisions of either agency do not unduly disadvantage Indigenous women and children;
- Provision of crisis accommodation for Indigenous women with 1) complex needs and/or 2) male children aged over 12yrs;
- Employment of housing liaison officers by shelters and refuges;
- Streamlining safety upgrades of women's homes to improve speediness and to reduce costs

Practice

- Service coordination between Centrelink, housing and other organisations to improve the sharing of information to verify identity and to enable women's financial independence quickly;
- Training and support for workers recognising difficult environments they work in but also addressing areas where their good work can be undermined;
- Supporting initiatives that build and strengthen Indigenous women's empowerment.

Concluding Thoughts

- This research demonstrated the extent to which housing is implicated in the difficulties Indigenous women face in finding safety in the aftermath of DFV.
- It also demonstrated that given the nature of Indigenous women's intersectionality it is encumbrment upon the state to do better in its delivery services.

Concluding Thoughts

- Doing better requires: genuinely hearing Indigenous women's voices, their experiences and accepting that they are the 'experts of their own lives';
- Honouring Indigenous women's strength, resilience and resourcefulness; and
- Supporting their desire to be self empowered and self determining.