

Domestic and family violence is surging amid COVID-19 lockdowns

NSW urgently needs to invest in social housing to support victim-survivors who have been made homeless due to domestic and family violence.

Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) is the peak body for over 100 specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) services in New South Wales. DVNSW provides a representative and advocacy function for specialist services and the women, families, and communities they support.

“DVNSW is calling for 5,000 new homes to be built each year for the next 10 years to address the serious lack of housing supply. We needed 5,000 homes, but the NSW 2021/2022 state budget only delivered 400” commented DVNSW CEO, Delia Donovan. “With more than 50,000 people on the waiting list for social housing, these figures are completely insufficient.”

Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and is the main reason women and children leave their homes in Australia ([FaHCSIA, 2008](#)).

The latest data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) shows:

- 41% of clients nationally, and 39% in NSW, who spoke to Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) for assistance had experienced domestic and family violence (DFV) (AIHW, 2020)
- SHS agencies provide the main crisis response for women and children who must leave their home due to violence, yet data suggests that for many there is little services can do to provide a pathway into stable, secure, long-term housing due to lack of availability (Flanagan et al., 2019).
- The majority of people attending SHS services due to domestic and family violence (56%) have been homeless before and are returning clients (AIHW, 2020).

Older women are the fastest growing cohort experiencing homelessness (ABS, 2016)

On census night in 2016 there were an estimated 6,866 women over 50 who were homeless, representing a 31 per cent increase since 2011 (ABS, 2016). Older women are particularly vulnerable to homelessness often as a result of DFV, pay inequity, little to no superannuation or savings, divorce, and time taken as unpaid carers. Due to the lack of appropriate affordable accommodation for older people, many older women are at risk of becoming homeless.

Being a victim-survivor of domestic and family violence increases the need to access homelessness services for support

Analysis of the Pathways to Homelessness dataset has found people experiencing DFV are more likely than the general population to access homelessness services, and that these services are also often a first point of contact for victim-survivors (FaHCSIA, 2021).

Only 1 in 8 (13%) people presenting to homelessness services due to DFV have been involved in a DFV police incident in the previous three years, demonstrating a low level of interaction with the justice system (FaHCSIA, 2021). Homelessness services may actually represent the first point of contact with government services for many within this vulnerable group.

The devastating impact of COVID-19 on domestic and family violence

A recent [report by DVNSW](#) on the impacts of the 2021 Greater Sydney COVID-19 lockdown on specialist DFV services and their clients found that there has been an increased demand on services and heightened complexity of cases (DVNSW, 2021). The report also found that existing housing issues for victim-survivors have been exacerbated by COVID restrictions.

- 73% of services said they have seen an increase in demand (n=57), with 50% of services seeing an increase in demand from between 75-100% (n=39).

Specialist DFV services also reported:

- An increased lack of crisis, temporary and social housing, difficulty for people couch surfing due to restrictions, and concern over elderly parents' wellbeing.
- Regional rental markets being largely inaccessible due to influx of people from Greater Sydney moving regionally.

One service stated they were receiving “a lot of referrals for women and children fleeing DFV seeking accommodation who are still in the home with the perpetrator. Usually, they leave before contacting our service.”

A recent [national survey of DFV service providers undertaken by Queensland University of Technology](#) has found COVID-19 has contributed to increased DFV and stress levels linked to greater hardship, particularly financial and housing insecurity, due to job loss. Increased housing instability was also frequently cited by 22.8% (n=26) of service providers who identified greater levels of hardship among DFV victim-survivors (Carrington et. al, 2021).

A [2020 report by Equity Economics, A wave of disadvantage across NSW: The impact of the covid-19 recession](#) compares the May-June period in 2020 and the same period in 2019, revealing an alarming increase in DFV incidents attended by police across many regions of NSW (Equity Economics, 2020).

A [survey conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology](#) in May 2020 found a large increase in women reporting domestic abuse for the first time and also an increase in abuse (AIC, 2020).

Secure and stable housing is critical to promoting the safety and wellbeing of women experiencing DFV and their children, but there is an absence of affordable housing options.

Existing DFV support programs cannot compensate for the absence of affordable, suitable housing—so moving from short-term or transitional forms of accommodation into permanent, stable, independent housing is extremely difficult, and sometimes unachievable, for women and children affected by DFV.

To support women and children escaping DFV and all those at risk of homelessness, the NSW government must:

- 1. Deliver at least 5,000 additional social housing dwellings per year for the next 10 years**
- 2. Increase funding to the specialist homelessness sector by at least 25%**
- 3. Acquire existing social and affordable housing stock to meet the immediate public health needs of COVID-19**
- 4. Commit an additional \$500 million to repair existing social housing stock**