

Domestic and family violence

Position Statement

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Domestic and family violence has a profound impact on the lives of thousands of women and children living in Australia and is well-recognised as a serious and widespread problem in our communities. The physical and psychological harm caused by family violence can be tremendous. Ultimately however, the harm caused by domestic and family violence is preventable.

Domestic and family violence affects families and individuals across all Australian communities, regardless of location, socio-economic status, age, cultural and ethnic background or religious belief. Leaving a violent relationship is an incredibly difficult process which can involve significant risk to those who do so. Domestic and family violence is currently the leading cause of homelessness in Australia, and is a key contributor to children being placed in out-of-home care.

While important work has been done in the prevention of domestic and family violence across many of Australia's jurisdictions, much more must be done. There is a significant lack of coordination between services that support people escaping violence, and service providers still struggle to meet increased demand. In addition, efforts to hold perpetrators to account are inadequate and there is still too little effort devoted to prevention and early intervention.

Baptist Care Australia is committed to the prevention, early intervention, increased awareness and support of people experiencing domestic and family violence. We believe that every person has the right to feel safe and secure within their homes and within their intimate relationships. At a time where community awareness of the severity and impacts of violence against women and children has never been higher, it is important that all levels of government continue to make it a major priority to eliminate domestic and family violence.

Background

Domestic violence is any act that causes or could cause physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, including threats of harm or coercion, between two people who are or were in an intimate relationship. Family violence refers to violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person who coerces or controls a member of a person's family or causes a family member to be fearful. In both situations, the violence experienced may not explicitly be physical violence but also may include psychological, emotional, economic, spiritual and sexual abuse.ⁱ Overwhelmingly, the majority of perpetrators are men, and the significant majority of victims are women and their children, however it is important to note that power and control dynamics that are involved in domestic and family violence is not just limited to male perpetrators.

In 2017 it was estimated that almost 210,000 women living in Australia will experience violence at the hands of an intimate partner.ⁱⁱ Domestic and family violence is the main reason woman and children leave their homes in Australia, and consistently is one of the most common reasons people seeking assistance from specialist homelessness agencies.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, intimate partner violence

contributes to more death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 than any other preventable risk factor.^{iv}

Statistics show that:

- On average, at least one woman a week is killed by a partner or former partner in Australia^v
- One in three Australian women over the age of 15 has experienced physical violence
- One in four Australian women has experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner
- Of those women who experience violence, more than half have children in their care
- Some groups of the population are at greater risk of violence or experience it at increased rates. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and women with disabilities.
- However, violence against women is not limited to the home or intimate relationships. Every year in Australia, over 300,000 women experience violence (which is often sexual violence) from someone other than their partner^{vi}

It is widely accepted that exposure to violence causes profound harm to children, with exposure impacting on attitudes towards relationships and the acceptability of violence, as well as behavioural, cognitive and emotional functioning, and social development.^{vii}

In addition to the physical and mental harm caused by family and domestic violence, there is also a significant economic cost. In 2015, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) found that violence against women costs Australia \$21.7 billion each year, with governments carrying more than a third of the cost burden. Additionally, the report estimates that if no further action is taken to prevent violence against women, the costs will accumulate to \$323.4 billion by 2045. This report shows the major economic benefits from investing in primary prevention.^{viii}

From a policy perspective, addressing the issue of violence against women and their children is complex and will require generational change and long-term targeted investment in permanent solutions. With increasing awareness of the high prevalence and costs of domestic and family violence, we have the opportunity to take effective action to address family violence in Australia.

In any policy response, it is essential to consider and reflect upon the experience of those who have experienced violence, and recognise that the majority of family violence incidents occur in the context of intimate partner relationships. This recognition has implications for prevention and response actions, which must focus on the ways in which gender inequality and community attitudes influence family violence.^{ix}

At the same time, it is important that any response also takes in to account the many other manifestations of family violence, such as violence against children, violence of children against their mothers (typically where the children mirror behaviour), parents, siblings and older people and violence in same-sex relationships. More work needs to be done to identify how to best meet the specific needs of these groups of people, particularly with sustained focus on supporting children and young people.

Domestic and family violence policy must also take in to account the particular experiences of people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 35 times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women.^x The

provision of appropriate frontline services for these communities is often difficult due to the geographic location of the people who have experienced violence, and is compounded by discrimination and trauma associated with historical and ongoing injustice.

Baptist Care Australia supports initiatives that build programs and supports that are responsive to need, as well as links services together. Unless support services are able to respond in a timely and appropriate way, more harm than good can be done. Baptist Care Australia believes that governments need to adequately fund programs across a range of settings so that the work of preventing violence against women and children is integrated into all levels of society. This includes ensuring the funding of family violence services, sexual assault services, health services, legal aid and men's behaviour change programs.

Baptist Care Australia believes that people escaping domestic and family violence should not be put at a disadvantage for leaving an abusive situation. Governments and workplaces have a responsibility to ensure that systems are in place to ensure that women and children escaping violence are not economically or legally disadvantaged.

Family violence policy must aim to stop violence at its source. It is not the responsibility of the person experiencing the violence to stop the violence, and those who use violence should always be held responsible for their actions. This would require the collaboration of key agencies across the states and territories, and although difficult, would have a long and lasting impact on the safety of Australian women and children into the future.

Solutions

- The Federal Government must continue to make the elimination of domestic and family violence a high national priority and work with state, territory and local governments as well as the community sector to ensure that every effort is made to ensure that people experiencing domestic and family violence are supported.
- As part of a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy, there must be an increase in the supply of safe housing and accommodation for women and their children escaping violence, which includes both crisis accommodation and secure long term housing.
- Primary prevention strategies offer one of the most critical ways to address the link between gender inequality and violence against women and children. A range of prevention activities are essential in addressing the stereotypes and gender imbalances that are deeply embedded within our society. These activities must be appropriately targeted and funded. Funding should be prioritised for prevention initiatives, early intervention programs, and specialist men's services that address perpetrator behaviour.
- Currently the majority of funding for domestic violence services is provided through homelessness programs at a federal level. As domestic and family violence is not just a housing issue, a range of support programs that look at early intervention and prevention need to be available and securely funded.
- The gaps in service availability for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people living in rural, regional and remote areas must be addressed. This is

particularly true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This includes appropriate legal services, crisis accommodation and support as well as culturally-appropriate services for perpetrators of violence.

Why we care

As service providers Baptist Care Australia members witness first-hand the damage caused by domestic and family violence. Our members work tirelessly through their range of programs to ensure that women and children supported. Several of our members are involved in the White Ribbon Workplace Accreditation Program, and we are working to ensure that all state members will be accredited by 2022.

In addition, we are actively involved in partnership with the wider Baptist movement in developing and sharing resources that help churches better understand and respond to domestic and family violence.

About us

Baptist Care Australia is the national representative body for Baptist community service organisations. We work to bring social justice to Australian communities, advocating nationally on issues important to our members.

Baptist Care Australia members serve people in aged care, affected by family violence, experiencing homelessness, on low incomes, experiencing relationship breakdown, living with a disability, and affected by multigenerational disadvantage. Services include crisis accommodation, social housing, out of home care for children, counselling, no and low interest low schemes, and other programs that help people rebuild their lives or live independently with the right support.

ⁱ Our Watch (2018) Facts and figures. <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Facts-and-figures>

ⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) Personal Safety Survey 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist homelessness services annual report 2016–17

^{iv} Based on Victorian figures from VicHealth (2004) [The health costs of violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence](#), Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. A comparable national study is pending.

^v [Australian Institute of Criminology](#) (AIC), 2015

^{vi} ABS (2013), see note 4. Survey extrapolated to population figures on the basis of 3.8% of all women surveyed reporting having experienced physical or sexual violence from a non-partner in the past 12 months (and approximately 9 million women over the age of 18 in Australia).

^{vii} Frederick, J. and Goddard, C. (2007) Exploring the relationship between poverty, childhood adversity and child abuse from the perspective of adulthood, *Child Abuse Review*, 16, pp. 323–341; and Humphreys, C. and Houghton, C. (2008) The research evidence on children and young people experiencing domestic abuse, in Humphreys, C., Houghton, C. and Ellis, J., Literature review: Better outcomes for children and young people affected by domestic abuse – Directions for good practice, Scottish Government, Edinburgh. Several jurisdictions now recognise this harm as a form of family violence in and of itself.

^{viii} Price Waterhouse Coopers (2015) [‘A high price to pay: the economic case for preventing violence against women’](#), report prepared for Our Watch and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth).

^{ix} Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, 2016

^x Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2016) [Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: Key indicators 2016](#), Productivity Commission, Canberra, p.4.98