

Submission to the NSW Government

**Blueprint for the Domestic and Family Violence (DFV)
response in NSW.**

**Prepared by
Jess Fielding (Policy Officer)**

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Recommendations

- *Yfoundations recommends that greater investments be made into understanding the drivers of Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) and the implications for young people as well as further and sustained investments into programs that seek to change the perceptions of respectful relationships amongst young people.*
- *Yfoundations recommends that greater investments be made into early intervention programs, such as the Community of School Program, that identifies and supports young people experiencing or at risk of DFV.*
- *Yfoundations recommends that data collection mechanisms collecting DFV information be strengthened and that services be adequately supported to provided trauma-informed, comprehensive social and emotional support to young victims of DFV.*

About Yfoundations

Yfoundations' mission is to create a future without youth homelessness. We represent young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness; and the services who provide direct support to them. Yfoundations provides advocacy and policy responses on issues relevant to young people affected by homelessness, and issues relevant to service providers. Our vision is to ensure that all young people have access to appropriate and permanent housing options that reflects their individual need.

Since its formation in 1979 this organisation has called for reform and improvement to broader systemic responses to youth homelessness and young people at risk of homelessness, to promote, protect and build on existing good practice and excellence and to ensure that youth homelessness remains a priority in public policy on homelessness, youth affairs, youth justice, education, child protection, employment, health/wellbeing and housing. In accordance with the United Nations convention on the rights of the child¹ we advocate that every child has the right to appropriate care and protection.

In pursuit of these goals, we have identified five 'foundations' for the positive growth and development of a young person and the process of ending youth homelessness:

- Home & Place
- Safety & Stability
- Health & Wellness
- Connections & Participation
- Education & Employment

These foundations place youth homelessness in a broader context, recognising that it interrelates with a range of issues, and the ending youth homelessness will require coordination across silos. They provide a framework for reaching out to other service areas to explore collaborative and integrated solutions. We believe it is vital that each young person has the opportunity within each domain to thrive. More information about these foundations is available on the Yfoundations' website.²

¹ Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, (1998), United Nations Convention in the rights of the Child,

² <https://yfoundations.org.au/>

Introduction

The links between Yfoundations' focus area of youth homelessness and Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) are obvious. DFV is one of the main drivers of youth homelessness. A Significant amount of SHS resource is dedicated to supporting women, children and young people escaping DFV. These young people have typically experienced significant trauma either directly or vicariously and require intensive and often long term social and emotional support as well as appropriate housing.

Yfoundations welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Blueprint for the Domestic and Family Violence response in NSW.

Our submission will be confined to addressing the core areas of *Preventing DFV by addressing its underlying causes*, *Intervening early to support those at risk of DFV* and *Supporting the safety and recovery of victims*.

Context

Domestic and family violence is a significant issue for the Australian community.

Domestic, Family and Teen Dating violence is a core issue for young people, as they are involved in the vast number of domestic violence incidences. Young women (aged 18 – 25) are twice as likely to experience physical or sexual violence than older women, with some estimating it could be up to 4 times more likely for young women aged 14 – 19.³ Young people experience violence at home and in their own relationships. Approximately one third of adolescents experience some type of violence from an intimate partner, with an estimated 12% experiencing physical violence.⁴

Domestic and family violence and youth homelessness are inextricably linked. DFV has been reported to be the main reason for women and children to leave their homes in Australia.⁵ A 2012 study exploring the 'The cost of Youth Homelessness'⁶ within the Australian community, revealed that 90% of respondents who were experiencing homelessness, reported that they had witnessed violence between family members at home in one form or another, including both parents or carers arguing, criticising or calling other person names, threatening violence, hearing or seeing a parent or carer, hit, throw, kick or smash something.

The homelessness associated with leaving situations of violence can be a severe source of stress for a young person.⁷ These young people are more likely to exhibit significant psychological

³ S. Allison & L. McGaurr, 'Violence against young women in Australia: Snapshot', Face the Facts Series, Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, accessed via <http://acys.info/resources/face-facts/violence-against-young-women/violence-against-youngwomen-snapshot/>

⁴ C. Halpern, S. Oslak, M. Young et al., 'Partner Violence Among Adolescents in Opposite-Sex Romantic Relationships: Findings from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health', American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 91, No. 10, 2000, p. 1682

⁵ Spinney, A. Home and safe? (2012) Policy and practice innovations to prevent women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence from becoming homeless. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Swinburne Research Centre

⁶ Paul Flatau, Monica Thielking, David MacKenzie, Adam Steen, 2015, The cost of youth homelessness in Australia study: snapshot report 1, Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Salvation Army Australia, Mission Australia, Anglicare Australia, Centre for Social Impact, viewed 04 February 2016, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4225/50/55AC3D19B3DAE>>.

⁷ Dockery, A. M., Kendall, G., Li, J., Mahendran, A., Ong, R. and Strazdins, L. (2010), Housing and children's development and wellbeing: a scoping study, Final Report no. 149, AHURI, Melbourne.

distress, and health problems, including poor nutrition and the poverty caused by the cost of transitional accommodation and take away foodstuffs.⁸ Young people may be forced to leave often friends, other members and familiarities including school and neighbourhood. This may result in young people becoming 'withdrawn, unsettled and angry and even suicidal.⁹ Leaving violence disrupts schooling, and the transiency of the situation and the trauma makes focusing on school far more difficult. Particularly when families have to stay in motel or boarding house or have to move between accommodations several times before finding a permanent place.¹⁰ Living with domestic violence can affect the emotional and cognitive development of a child or young person. Research suggests that one in four children who have experienced domestic violence have serious social and behavioural problems.¹¹

Before addressing the core areas of action, it is important to keep in mind that the right to adequate safety is a social and economic issue, as well as a children's rights issue.¹²

Every night in Australia, thousands of young people go to sleep without the safety, stability and support of a family home. Youth are resorting to abandoned buildings, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) refuges and/or other short term, makeshift shelters, couch surfing with friends and sometimes strangers or sleeping in a car. All youth have strengths, but youth experiencing homelessness often lack positive opportunities and support to apply them.

Children residing outside their family home are some of the most vulnerable young people in Australia. They are more likely than their peers to have:

- Experienced abuse, neglect or family violence at home
- Experience mental illness
- To have interacted with the justice system
- Use drug and alcohol
- Be disengaged from education

Around half of all adults who are homeless had their first experience of homelessness before they were 18 years of age.¹³

Adolescence is a period of life in which major transformations occur. It is a period of sudden, novel and uncontrollable changes in physical, emotional, academic and social domains. These transitions are a normal part of growing up and typically cause emotional imbalance and uncertainty.

For young people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is even more challenging. The temporary and transient nature of their situation can cause significant trauma, or contribute to existing trauma, of which the effects of this trauma are long lasting and often transferred across all life domains including cognitive development,

⁸ A Spinney and S Blandy, Homelessness prevention for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence: innovations in policy and practice Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Swinburne–Monash Research Centre, June 2011

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia,(1998), United Nations Convention in the rights of the Child, 17th Report; Article 19, http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Protection_list.pdf

¹³ Unaccompanied children under 16 years accessing Specialist Homeless Services fact sheet, June 2014

interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, educational attainment and employment opportunities and social and emotional health.

Strategies that support young people must account for the specific needs of adolescents and youth transitioning to adulthood and the role families can play in both the reasons for becoming homeless and the potential solutions. A life course approach needs to be taken for all children in ensure developmentally appropriate care that will enable term to function to the best of their ability during childhood, adolescence and through adulthood.¹⁴

With those points in mind, the core action areas of *Preventing DFV by addressing its underlying causes*, *Intervening early to support those at risk of DFV* and *Supporting the safety and recovery of victims* are addressed below.

Preventing DFV by addressing its underlying causes

Recent evidence shows young Australians are exposed to and influenced by gender-based violence and gender inequality, and have more violence-supportive attitudes than the general population.¹⁵ Young people are recognised as a key cohort to change attitudes because violence prevention among children and young people has been shown to work.¹⁶

Schools have a chance to build cultures where stereotypes are challenged, gender-based discrimination is not tolerated and gender equality is promoted and modeled. In addition to teaching young people how gender-based violence manifests and how it can be prevented, they can also promote and model gender equality across age groups and the broader school culture. Respectful Relationships Education is the holistic approach to school-based, primary prevention of gender-based violence. It uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence and create a future free from such violence. Respectful Relationships Education explicitly centers on addressing the drivers of gender-based violence.¹⁷

International research has shown the impacts of school-based programs, if implemented correctly, can be profound. A recent systematic review of approaches to prevent violence against women and girls in *The Lancet* ascribed school-based activity the highest marker of effectiveness.¹⁸ Two longitudinal studies of programs in America and Canada have demonstrated that these approaches can reduce future violence perpetration and victimisation of students. Further information about these programs can be accessed

¹⁴Bromfield, L., Osborn, A. L., Australian Institute of Family Studies, & National Child Protection Clearinghouse. (2007). 'Getting the big picture': a synopsis and critique of Australian out-of-home care research. (P33-34) Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

¹⁵ Flood, M. & Fergus, L. (2010) An assault on our future: The impact of violence on young people and their relationships. Sydney, New South Wales: White Ribbon Foundation. Available from http://www.whiteribbon.org.au/uploads/media/Research_series/An_assault_on_our_future_FULL_Flood_Fergus_2010.pdf ; Harris, A., Honey, N., Webster, K., Diemer, K. & Politoff, V. (2015) Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women – Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey for respondents aged 16-24 years. Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ C Gleeson, S Kearney, L Leung & J Brislane, Respectful Relationships Education In Schools, 2015, Evidence Paper, Our Watch

¹⁸ Ellsberg, M., Arango, D.J., Morton, M., Gennari, F., Kiplesund, S., Contreras, M. & Watts, C. (2015) Prevention of violence against women and girls: What does the evidence say?, *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 1555– 1566. Available from [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(14\)61703-7/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(14)61703-7/fulltext)

Yfoundations recommends that greater investments be made into understanding the drivers of DFV and the implications for young people as well as further and sustained investments into programs that seek to change the perceptions of respectful relationships amongst young people.

Intervening early to support those at risk of DFV

Early life experiences have significant influence on adult life satisfaction. Historically, education and intellectual development were purported to be the most important predictors on adult life satisfaction. More recently however, it has been noted that the emotional health of a young person is a powerful determinant of adult life satisfaction.¹⁹

Between the ages of 15 and 25, youth experience a significant developmental period of growth when the brain is open to adaption and learning, this is the second most significant period of brain growth over the life course.²⁰ Executive functioning skills (planning, organising, controlling impulses, delaying gratification, problem solving, decision making) are refined and optimized between the ages of 15 and 25 and are fundamental characteristics of resilient adults.²¹

Adolescence is a period of sudden, novel and uncontrollable changes in physical, emotional, academic and social domains. These transitions are a normal part of growing up and typically cause emotional imbalance and uncertainty.

For young people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is even more perplexing. The temporary and transient nature of their situation can cause significant trauma, or contribute to existing trauma, of which the effects of this trauma are long lasting and often transferred across all life domains including cognitive development, interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, educational attainment and employment opportunities and social and emotional health.

It is imperative that greater investment be made into early intervention programs, which identify children and young people at risk or DFV. One such program is currently operating in Geelong Victoria, and in the areas of the Northern Beaches in Sydney and Ryde in New South Wales.

The Project is a place-based, 'community of schools and youth services' approach to early intervention. It uses population screening, a flexible practice framework and youth-focused, family-centered case management to identify young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and DFV. The model builds in longitudinal follow-up and support to reduce homelessness, and achieve sustainable education and lifetime outcomes. The model and the current project has grown out of a collaboration between university researchers and the Geelong Early Intervention Working Group, comprised of service providers and schools. The approach to early intervention is 'indicative prevention' whereby the risk levels of individuals are identified and appropriate responses enabled. This is proactive rather than reactive and the

¹⁹ Layard et al (2013). What Predicts A Successful Life? A Life course model of wellbeing, IZA, Discussion Paper No. 7682, October 2013

²⁰ 'Building The Brain's "Air Traffic Control" System: How Early Experiences Shape The Development Of Executive Function.' (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011)

²¹ United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, Framework To End Youth Homelessness (1st ed, 2013)

support for at-risk students and their families is needs based, comprehensive and flexible.²² The Northern Beaches Project in NSW is currently operating within a pilot phase, and although still in its infancy, is showing great promise of creating change within the locality. For example, of the 1446 students who completed the surveys in 2015, 75% of young people identified as 'at risk' had not yet been recognised by their respective schools. All of these young people and their families are now being assisted with the relevant supports.

DFV can be prevented in the long term. For this to be achieved all parts of the community, Government, mainstream and specialist sectors services, must be committed to working in partnership, using common definitions, measures and standards for service delivery.

Yfoundations recommends that greater investments be made into early intervention programs, such as the Community of School Program, that identifies and supports young people experiencing or at risk of DFV.

Supporting the safety and recovery of victims

In Australia, an average of one woman a week is murdered by a current or former partner, and thousands more are injured or made to live in fear. One in three women has experienced physical assault and one in five women sexual assault²³, while one in four has endured violence by an intimate partner.²⁴ Domestic and Family violence is a major issue within our community.

According to the recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Report 2013/2014, 17% of all clients (88,793) accessing SHS were young people aged 0-9 years. A further 28% were aged 10-24 years (148,933). Of the total number children and young people were accessing SHS, 38,790 of 0-9 year olds and 49,345 10-24 years olds were seeking DFV related support.²⁵

DFV is particularly destructive to children and young people. The experience of DFV on a young life, whether it's directly or vicariously, can have significant long-term social and emotional implications. Trauma caused by experiences of domestic and family violence has been attributed to having serious effects on the developing brain. Chronic, toxic stress of the sort experienced by maltreated children, and particularly in the absence of consistent, supportive and interactive relationships with adult caregivers, has been found to have an especially deleterious effect on young children's growing brains. Exposure to complex and chronic trauma can result in persistent psychological problems.²⁶

We are aware that when children and young people leave the family home, their housing conditions often deteriorate. Women SHS and youth specific SHS are struggling to meet the increasing need caused by DFV. Despite individual services trying their best to accommodate

²² For more information regarding the model, visit <http://www.thegeelongproject.com.au/>

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) 2012 Personal Safety Survey. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4906.0Chapter1002012>

²⁴ Cox, P. (2015) Violence against women: Additional analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey. ANROWS Horizons Research Report No. 1. Melbourne: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. Retrieved 6 October 2015 from [http://](http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/151021_horizons_1.1_pss_.pdf)

<http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/domestic-violence-and-homelessness/>

²⁵ *Child Family Community Australia, 'Effects Of Child Abuse And Neglect For Children And Adolescents' (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014)*

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/effects-child-abuse-and-neglect-children-and-adolesce>

women and their children and young people presenting alone, there are limited places available, particularly when long term, permanent housing is the support required.

Every SHS is contracted to support a particular client group as per their agreement with Family and Community Services (FaCS). Services also have their own internal policies about whom they can accommodate at any given time to ensure clients are safeguarded from further abuse. This however may be problematic for young families seeking assistance. For example, when there is family breakdown, it is common for the woman to leave the family home with the children. Crisis refuges have a particular formation and number of individuals they can accept at any given time. Therefore accommodating a woman and her children can be difficult. This is particularly evident in regional/ areas where there are no designated refuges supporting families, or less services operating altogether. As a safeguard, a women's shelter may only accept females, and we have heard of instances where families have been turned away because they were unable to accommodate her eleven year-old son. The family was forced to seek refuge in their car.

Yfoundations is aware of the hidden nature of youth homelessness. There is a cohort of young people sleeping in cars and couch surfing, who are experiencing homeless but have not yet reached out to services for support. We are confident that the prevalence of young people experiencing DFV is under-represented in the current data.

For example, we are aware, albeit anecdotally, that when a young person is the victim of sexual abuse, and particularly when the perpetrator is a parent or an intimate partner; it is unlikely they will reveal their experience immediately. It is usually only after an extended period of time, and after a trusting relationship is established with a caseworker, that a young person will share their experience of abuse. It may also never be revealed as the true pathway into homelessness

Yfoundations recommends that data collection mechanisms collecting DFV information be strengthened and that services be adequately supported to provided comprehensive, trauma-informed, social and emotional support to young victims of DFV.

Conclusion

DFV is a significant community problem that requires a significant community response. For a genuine cultural shift to occur, and if we are to create a future free from gender-based violence, multiple strategies across Australia need to focus on change at the individual, organisational and community, system, institutional, and societal level.

It is imperative that the Government and broader community work collaboratively to ensure all services working with children and young people have the capacity to provide timely and culturally appropriate responses to those escaping DFV.

Investment into education, prevention and early intervention strategies that change the perceptions of acceptable human behaviour in Australia and respectful relationships amongst families, peers and intimate partners is paramount.

If the next generation of children and young people are not educated in how to recognise and reject violence, and build healthy, respectful relationships, no amount of investment in reducing violence against women and their children can be sustainable.

For further information or clarification about this submission contact:

Michael Coffey

CEO Yfoundations

mob: 0425 228 758

Michael@yfoundations.org.au