

Intimate Partner Violence and Homelessness: Young Women Lost in the Intersectionality

Rhianon Vichta and Ashleigh Husband, Brisbane Youth Service

While considerable attention has been paid to domestic violence (DV) as a primary cause of homelessness, there has been a historic lack of discourse and awareness across community services systems about the intersectionality of intimate partner violence and homelessness. The commonly used term 'domestic violence' defines intimate partner violence by its occurrence within a 'home' context, rather than situating it within interpersonal relationships, whereas the term 'Intimate Partner Violence' (IPV) is arguably more inclusive of violent experiences that occur outside of the domestic space.

Low visibility of IPV as it occurs outside of the domestic space contributes to a lack of intersectionality which in turn can result in highly vulnerable people, particularly women, being left stranded in the gaps between problem-specific service systems. This issue is further exacerbated for young women, with young women who experience IPV while homeless facing multiple barriers to accessing support from services that lack the resources, capacity and risk-tolerance to respond to the co-occurring concerns. Despite the complexity of this work and the challenge of siloed

problem-driven funding parameters; there is much opportunity to improve intersectional and interagency practice to respond to the mutually compounding vulnerabilities of these challenging issues.

Service Provider Experiences

Witnessing, perpetrating or experiencing violence is a day-to-day reality for young people living on the streets, with young people commonly reporting being physically assaulted, threatened with weapons and robbed.¹ Living in temporary accommodation or sleeping rough elevates risks; and experiences of



Meeting and interviewing people living in Boarding Houses during 500 Lives 500 Homes Campaign Registry Fortnight.

Photo: Robyn McDonald



Brisbane street art

violence may often prolong periods of homelessness. The findings of the 500 Lives 500 Homes homelessness survey of Brisbane showed that almost half (45.5 per cent) had experienced violence since becoming homeless.²

Brisbane Youth Service (BYS), as a holistic youth service provider, has a developing awareness of young people not only being impacted by co-occurring homelessness and IPV, but facing unique systemic and structural barriers to accessing support and safety.

Approximately 55 per cent of the young people accessing BYS each year are currently homeless. While it is important to note that young people frequently under-report experiences of violence during early contact with services; one in four of these young people report that they are currently experiencing either family violence or relationship violence. One quarter of young people acknowledge that they have used violent, threatening or

intimidating behaviours themselves and 40 per cent of young people tell workers, at first assessment, that they want help with violence-related issues.

While there is a strong pattern of violence preceding homelessness (70 per cent of young people accessing BYS report past experiences of violence); BYS sees clear evidence of co-occurring violence and homelessness, with young people who are homeless reporting experiences of relationship violence at significantly higher rates than those living in public, private or family housing situations. Almost 60 per cent of young people reporting current or past relationship violence are currently homeless and 58 per cent of young people who report as homeless also report past or current experiences of relationship violence. While reporting rates are lower overall for current (15 per cent) relationship violence compared with past relationship violence (44 per cent), rates for young people who are homeless are still significantly

disproportionately high compared to rates reported by young people who are in stable housing. Youth workers at BYS report young women are often turned away from both homelessness accommodation services and domestic violence programs. Rejected referrals are often identified as too risky or as falling outside of funded service parameters.

Young Women's Experiences

ABS and IVAWS data shows that young women experience intimate partner violence up to three times the rates of older women.³ Support to prevent longer-term cycles of violence is particularly crucial for younger women; as is awareness that young women are particularly vulnerable to the health and well-being disruptions resulting from homelessness. There are, however, multiple barriers to young women accessing support. Young women report difficulty accessing safe spaces and legal protection mechanisms when one or both parties have no fixed address.

Young women coming to BYS describe unique complexities of IPV during homelessness, including the dichotomous role perpetrators hold as both inflictors of harm and inadvertent protectors from other homelessness related risks. Young women experiencing homelessness describe forming relationships with men who are feared in their communities in order to have protection from other forms of violence such as sexual assault. With IPV experienced by young people who are homeless being often highly recurrent, severe and including acts of significant physical violence such as being beaten, burned or stabbed,⁴ it is critical that the dual issues of safety from violence and safe housing are concurrently addressed.

When sleeping rough, young women report being unable to find safe spaces away from violent partners. Safety during homelessness most often depends on supportive social networks, meaning young people experiencing IPV may be forced to choose between relationship violence and the potential dangers associated with being cut off from their communities of safety. Further, IPV risks extend beyond the immediate homeless experience to be a critical

barrier to young peoples' capacity to move out of homelessness.

IPV impacts the ability to maintain supported accommodation and other tenancies, once attained, due to unauthorised visits by former partners; potential property damage and police involvement; risks to other tenants; as well as the impact of trauma on mental health and capacity for self-care and property maintenance. The mutually reinforcing cycles of homelessness and IPV highlight the critical need for intersectional intervention to concurrently address both issues; so that vulnerable young women do not continue to fall through gaps between domestic violence, youth accommodation and child safety services. The immense impact of such systems gaps on individual lives cannot be underestimated.

What Can We Do?

It can be accepted that homelessness and youth support workers will frequently witness IPV in both the behaviours and stories of people accessing support. Service providers across all sectors can engage in whole-of-person conversations that overtly recognise the power and control dynamics of IPV in relationships and pro-actively seek to identify co-occurring violence and homelessness concerns.

Service providers have a critical opportunity to consistently maintain a practice culture which not only promotes awareness of the complex dynamics of IPV, but which directly challenges and holds young people accountable for the unacceptability of violent and controlling behaviours. A strengths-based perspective will see workers acting from the belief that people have the power to change their use of violence in relationships. While frequent exposure to violence puts workers at risk of becoming desensitised to IPV and thus complicit in normalising violence, organisational training and reflective practice opportunities can ensure that cognisance of the complexity, risks and impact of IPV underpin service delivery frameworks and practices.

A trauma-informed practice approach provides a strong foundation for workers supporting young people experiencing and

using violence.⁵ Given the importance of intervening to break cycles of violence early, even when young people using violence have been victims of violence in their own lives, workers should be skilled in holding empathy and engagement with the young person using violence without excusing their behaviour. With consideration of potential safety risks, organisations can adopt targeted practices, including:

- routinely conducting separate assessments for couples presenting together
- ensuring adequate internal communication mechanisms are in place around violence risks
- prioritising separate engagement with both people who are experiencing violence and those who perpetrate it
- proactive psychoeducation programs around healthy relationships
- strategically developing collaborative interagency relationships between youth, violence and homelessness services.

Greater awareness of IPV and homelessness needs to provoke strengthening of intersectional policy and cross-sector service responses. Policy and practice frameworks that fail to recognise and accommodate this intersectionality not only falsely segment the complexity of vulnerable young people's experiences; they can compromise the quality of service and outcomes from well-intentioned service delivery agencies.

Strategic interagency collaboration can enhance service capacity to respond to the co-occurring issues and thus avoid or reduce incidences of young women being bounced between homelessness and violence services. Cross-cutting the theme of interagency collaboration is the principle of bringing violence-related services to the spaces occupied by young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Targeted IPV awareness interventions within homelessness services; as well as expansion of pro-active outreach and street-based services may build opportunities for service connection with young people for whom controlling violent relationships limit their capacity to independently access support.

The importance of focussing on both interagency collaboration or 'joined-up' practice, and collective impact in both homelessness and violence services is widely recognised.⁶ Developing collaborative interagency responses is consistent with both the 'The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness' goal of improving and expanding services and with The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022.^{7,8} Specialised research is needed to better understand and contextually respond to the reciprocally compounding complexity of IPV and youth homelessness, recognising that the risks and complexity is often greater than the sum of the parts. With awareness and enhanced sector capacity, we can develop specialist responses that more effectively meet the needs of highly vulnerable young women.

Endnotes

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