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to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children

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National mapping and meta-evaluation outlining key features of effective "safe at home" programs that enhance safety and prevent homelessness for women and their children who have experienced domestic and family violence: *Key findings and future directions*

Associate Professor Jan Breckenridge, School of Social Sciences and Co-convenor, Gendered Violence Research Network, University of New South Wales

Professor Donna Chung, Head of Social Work, School of Occupational Therapy and Social Work, Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University

Dr Angela Spinney, Research Fellow/Lecturer, Swinburne Institute of Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology

Dr Carole Zufferey, Lecturer in Social Work, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia

ANROWS Compass (Research to policy and practice papers) are concise papers that summarise key findings of research on violence against women and their children, including research produced under ANROWS's research program, and provide advice on the implications for policy and practice.

This report addresses work covered in ANROWS research project 3.1 "National mapping and meta-evaluation outlining key features of effective "safe at home" programs that enhance safety and prevent homelessness". Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project. In addition to this paper, an ANROWS Landscapes and Horizons are available as part of this project.

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Acknowledgement of Country

ANROWS acknowledges the traditional owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past, present and future; and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and knowledge.

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Introduction

Most jurisdictions in Australia and several other countries have implemented “safe at home” programs or approaches which aim to mitigate the specific homelessness and safety impacts of domestic violence on women and their children. However, many of these “safe at home” programs are relatively new and only some have been evaluated, hence the need for a national (and international) mapping and meta-evaluation of the key features of “safe at home” programs.

This summary is based on the report *National mapping and meta-evaluation outlining key features of effective “safe at home” programs that enhance safety and prevent homelessness for women and their children who have experienced domestic and family violence*, commissioned by Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS). It provides recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers, as well as an overview of the research project undertaken for this report, including definitions, methodologies and key findings.

Messages for policy-makers

- The Council of Australian Governments (COAG)/ANROWS should lead a national conversation focusing on developing a shared cross-jurisdictional understanding and definition of “safe at home”.
- Each jurisdiction needs to encourage a “culture of evaluation” at both the sector and organisational levels to ensure that evaluation is a priority for all “safe at home” interventions.
- A shared “safe at home” evaluation framework or strategy should be developed to ensure that evaluations collect standard data and address core questions, thereby building a national evidence base.
- It is critical that exclusion clauses or ouster orders are consistently granted by magistrates in protection orders across jurisdictions.
- Residential tenancy laws across all jurisdictions should permit locks to be changed and for a victim of domestic violence to more easily become the sole name on ongoing tenancy agreements where they were previously an occupant and the perpetrator is a tenant. Presently, both a protection order and an application to the equivalent state tribunal are required which can be a lengthy and onerous process for women to pursue.
- As a key strategy of “safe at home” responses, brokerage should be strengthened by allowing for more flexible use of funds. This would enable tailored and targeted practical support for victims, which – alongside safety upgrades to properties – can have long-term benefits in sustaining a tenancy and/or a safe return to employment.

Messages for practitioners

- Organisations and funding bodies should facilitate a “culture of inquiry” – for example, through supervision, external consultation, conferences and peer support – so that “safe at home” workers/managers can take advantage of existing research and consider priority areas for future research.
- Where appropriate, the implementation of a dynamic risk assessment process (i.e. which captures changes to women’s circumstances) is recommended so that additional routes to safety can be offered if risk is heightened.
- In jurisdictions where a common risk assessment framework is used, it is critical that the assessed risk for “safe at home” clients is able to be shared across agencies, particularly where other agencies have information about the risk of the perpetrator.
- It is important that safety planning and case management for “safe at home” clients go beyond housing needs by taking into account the material realities of women’s lives and incorporating financial safety strategies.
- To promote sustainable safety and economic security, it is critical that “safe at home” responses are offered in conjunction with longer-term case management and support.

Messages for researchers

- To ensure robust evaluations, “safe at home” evaluations should be adequately funded and resourced, externally evaluated where feasible, and be subject to some form of peer or ethical review process.
- Future evaluation should also consider when a “safe at home” response is not safe, and what factors or circumstances suggest that it may not be a viable option for some women. In addition, these evaluations could explore why some women consider that there are advantages to remaining in their own home even in circumstances where police are not able to ensure their safety.
- Further research is required to examine the circumstances in which “safe at home” responses are most useful and for which population groups (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse women, and women with disabilities).
- Greater understanding is needed of how safety alarms can be optimally implemented to best support women who are at high risk of violence or potential lethality.
- A strategic process should be established whereby evidence produced from “safe at home” evaluations is collected and translated back into program development (e.g. by this meta-evaluation becoming a living document).

Background

“Safe at home” definition

“Safe at home” programs can be broadly defined as interventions and strategies that aim to keep women and children in their home or in other independent domestic accommodation thereby reducing the risk of the perpetrator being present and using further violence and abuse.

For the purpose of this project, an expanded definition of a “safe at home” response was developed as follows:

- is funded as a specific initiative;
- has a designated domestic and family violence focus;
- is focused on preventing women who have left a violent relationship from entering or remaining longer than necessary in specialist homelessness services or supported accommodation;
- has a criminal justice focus on women’s safety; and
- aims to support women to remain safely in independent accommodation of their choice at the time of accessing this service, regardless of whether the women accessing the program have ever used supported accommodation in the past.

Research structure

The research was structured into two distinct phases: the preparation of a state of knowledge paper with a mapping of Australian and selected international “safe at home” programs; and a meta-evaluation of select evidence about Australian “safe at home” responses.

A “meta-evaluation” is a systematic assessment or overarching evaluation of evaluations – in this case, “safe at home” program and strategy evaluations – to ensure that the evidence is sufficiently credible for consideration when planning program improvements, and to enhance the quality of future evaluations. In addition, this particular meta-evaluation has reviewed and analysed the data to identify key features related to “safe at home” responses in Australia.

Historical development

Since the 1970s, high security refuges have been the primary response to women and their children who sought to leave a violent relationship. However, in the mid-to-late 1990s, advocacy groups and researchers proposed the option of women and children remaining safely in their home while the perpetrator is removed. This approach – which became known as “safe at home” – is a social justice response underpinned by two core beliefs:

- perpetrators should be held accountable for their violence; and
- there is a historical injustice in the expectation that women should be forced to leave their home to leave the violence.

“Safe at home” was never intended to be a universal response, but can now be considered a viable alternative for women who leave a violent partner. It does not and is not intended to replace the need for refuge and specialist homelessness services. Instead, it is one of a suite of interventions that women may choose according to their circumstances.

Phase one: State of knowledge paper

Methodology

The authors conducted a scoping review of published studies considered relevant to the research aims, including peer-reviewed articles, grey literature and websites. Data from relevant conceptual and empirical studies from 2000-May 2015 were extracted and results from this extraction were collected, with select thematic data synthesised and conveyed in the state of knowledge paper.

- Identified/reviewed – 561 resources.
- Included – 154 resources (policy documents, websites, media releases and web pamphlets, but excluding legislation).

In addition, key stakeholders in select government departments and NGOs were contacted to further check that “safe at home” responses offered in their jurisdiction were included in the “safe at home” service mapping.

Common elements

The literature review and the mapping of “safe at home” services identified some common program elements, including the following:

- case management with an explicit or implicit goal of assisting women to remain in independent housing in their own home or home of their choice;
- safety planning and common risk assessment protocols undertaken in conjunction with the woman and other agencies, and in some cases, assessment of the risk of ongoing violence posed by the perpetrator;
- the use of protection orders and ouster/exclusion provisions;
- brokerage funds for security upgrades such as alarms, security doors and window grilles;
- strategies to enhance the economic security of women to enable them to stay in their own home and remain financially independent of their ex-partner;
- support and advocacy on behalf of clients with agencies involved in integrated service provision; and
- capacity building of local interagency partners to facilitate a coordinated response.

Four “safe at home” pillars

The State of knowledge paper identified four pillars underpinning “safe at home” responses which provide a conceptual platform for developing and implementing “safe at home” strategies:

- a focus on **maximising women’s safety** using a combination of criminal justice responses – such as legal provisions to exclude the perpetrator from the home and protect victims from post-separation violence, proactive policing, safety alarms and home security upgrades;
- a coordinated or **integrated response** involving partnerships between local services;
- “safe at home” as a **homelessness prevention** strategy – which includes ensuring women are informed about their housing options before the time of crisis and at separation, and providing support for women to maintain their housing afterwards; and
- recognition of the importance of enhancing **women’s economic security**.

Phase two: Meta-evaluation

Methodology

A total of 52 evaluations were identified for potential inclusion, and this number was reduced to 20 after applying the inclusion criteria. Once an evaluation was assessed as meeting the inclusion criteria, a comprehensive summary of the evaluation was completed using a meta-evaluation matrix which included:

- program/strategy background;
- inclusion rationale;
- key information about the evaluation; and
- assessment of the evaluation quality.

In addition, the authors assessed the quality and relevance of available evaluations using criteria adapted from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist.

Evaluation quality

The assessment of the quality of the 20 included evaluations indicated that not all evaluations were undertaken by independent evaluators or were subject to a peer review or ethics appraisal process. Indeed, the relatively high proportion of evaluations conducted internally suggests that many “safe at home” programs rely on internal review as the primary means of enhancing their practice. In addition, the majority of evaluations depended on qualitative and/or monitoring data with only a few implementing outcome scales and measures.

However, the majority of the evaluations included in the meta-evaluation applied robust methodologies. While the analytic methods used in each evaluation were not always described in detail, most evaluations did not make claims beyond what the data allowed. Most evaluations collected data from multiple sources and included primary data analysis as well as secondary data analysis (e.g. monitoring data, case files and program documentation). Almost all evaluations collected qualitative data via interviews or focus groups, which in many cases provided a rich description of interventions and perceptions around why interventions were experienced as helpful.

Overall, the meta-evaluation showed that there is no shared agreement of what constitutes a “safe at home” program or initiative. Very few of the evaluations attempted to define the meaning of “safe at home”, and the purpose and aims of the evaluations differed across jurisdictions. This means that identifying what is “good” practice from the included “safe at home” evaluations was not straightforward and can be highly contested.

Key features of “safe at home” programs

The four pillars of “safe at home” responses identified in the synthesis of the literature – maximising women’s safety, integrated response, homelessness prevention and women’s economic security – were evident across the 20 included evaluations. However, emphasis on one or more pillars varied among the evaluations and the interventions focused on different pillars at different times.

The included evaluations indicated that a key feature of “safe at home” programs is an **integrated response** either at the sector or local agency level as women’s needs after leaving a violent relationship frequently require a coordinated approach.

Maximising women’s safety and **homelessness prevention** were also universally noted and one or the other was reflected as the predominant pillar in the evaluated “safe at home” responses, as follows:

- *Integrated criminal justice strategies focusing on safety by managing perpetrator risk via protection orders and ouster/exclusion provisions.* Maintaining independent housing may or may not be an explicit goal in this type of “safe at home” response. Rather, women’s safety is the primary focus and is addressed by managing perpetrator risk and potentially excluding the perpetrator from the home by using criminal justice strategies – primarily protection orders and ouster/exclusion provisions. These “safe at home” strategies may be understood as contributing to crime prevention and ensuring perpetrator accountability. Other identified integrated criminal justice strategies include safety alarms and security upgrades. However, not all of these strategies are exclusively “safe at home” and may be used by any woman leaving domestic and family violence, or any person who is at risk of violence perpetrated by another person.
- *“Safe at home” programs focusing explicitly on women staying in accommodation with or without protection orders and ouster/exclusion provisions to address safety concerns.* These programs focus on women and their children and usually provide case-management to assess risk, manage safety planning and consider women’s needs over time. There is a tendency for these to be called “stay at home” schemes which reflects the primary aim of remaining in independent accommodation. These programs are housing-focused, but do not necessarily have a narrow definition of housing needs.

Enhancing **women’s economic security** is an emerging area of research and practice response that recognises the importance of women being able to mitigate post-separation poverty. Select evaluations noted strategies aimed at increasing economic security including brokerage, up-skilling women’s educational status, and assistance to maintain or enter employment.

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