

Kids escaping family violence can be vulnerable to intimate partner abuse

October 23 2023, by Carmel Hobbs and Catherine Robinson



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Nearly [13,000 Australian children aged 10 to 17](#) sought help alone from specialist homeless services last year. Many of these young people will have [escaped family violence](#) and then been [endangered by abusive](#)

[partners](#).

Our respective research tackles this emotionally tough terrain head on, speaking with [teens experiencing intimate partner violence](#) and [children](#) under 18 who experience [homelessness](#) and are not accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Children and [young people](#) have told us about having nowhere safe to live, feeling invisible to government and being harmed. Their stories show Australia's adolescent service system is frighteningly out of step with their needs.

The reality of vulnerable teens' lives

The [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) reported its findings this year from surveying 8,500 Australians aged 16 and over. It found 28.5% had experienced [sexual abuse](#), 30.9% [emotional abuse](#), 32.0% physical abuse and 39.6% exposure to domestic [violence](#).

For unaccompanied homeless children and young people [exposure to domestic violence](#) is even greater. [Australian research](#) shows 90% of homeless children and young people witness [family violence](#) at home, more than half leave home to escape parental or guardian domestic violence. Some 15% leave home more than 10 times due to violence.

Escaping family violence is a frequent precursor to unaccompanied child homelessness.

As part of research into unaccompanied child homelessness and mental ill-health in Tasmania, Viviana, aged 17, told [a common story](#). She escaped family violence only to experience violent and abusive relationships and cycles of homelessness:

"Mum kicked me out of home over a pair of school shoes [...] she was being very violent, very aggressive [...] her partner [...] he ended up being quite aggressive and violent [...] So I moved in with [my boyfriend's] family and then things happened with me and that bloke a year later [...] And so that's when I ended up being homeless for a bit."

Homeless children and young people who do not have a reliable parent or guardian are highly vulnerable. The severity of violence in subsequent relationships they may come to rely on is extreme. Elise was 13 when she met David, who was three years older. During their nine-year relationship, her life was endangered repeatedly:

"He rammed me into the wall, grabbed me by the throat, choked me [...] I remember he picked up the couch and smashed it up through the wall [...] Smashed up the whole place, carried on, told me, 'You want to fucking leave because I'm going to come back, I'm going to fucking shoot you.'"

Lilly was 14 when she met Jase, who was three years older. Being homeless and sleeping rough meant she couldn't escape his violence and abuse:

"I can't even remember how many black eyes I had from him [...] I've got a scar there [...] where he's cut my arm open with a knife, trying to kill me. And there was nothing I could do. I was homeless, so I couldn't get away from him, because he just knew where I'd be."

Children and young people who [experience homelessness](#) and repeated [cycles of violence](#) talk about persistent [suicidality](#), [mental illness](#), abortion, miscarriage and substance use as common features of their lives.

Mismatched responses

A lack of supported accommodation options for teens [places girls in particular](#) in highly vulnerable positions. Unable to access safe spaces, [they become trapped](#) in violent and abusive relationships.

They are being failed by systems that do not adequately recognize and engage with child and youth specific domestic violence and homelessness. Children and young people describe accessing [support services](#) that dangerously misread the risks they encounter.

Katie described systemic failure she faced at age 15.

"I tried to get Centrelink [benefits] and they refused me and I told them my situation. I said, 'Well, like, I have no family, I have no money. I'm at risk of homelessness' and all they gave me was a Kids' Helpline number [...] The system failed me, actually, and the only thing that they could do for me to get money is get Tom [her abusive partner] to claim Family Tax Benefits. "

Viviana—who had escaped sexual abuse at home—described how she felt her ongoing risks were missed in counseling and therapy targeted to children in both school and state child and adolescent mental health services.

"They weren't actually giving us like, I guess, adult solutions for the adult problems we did actually have, even though we shouldn't have had them, we were only kids. And we sat down watching Lego videos on how to deal with depression and stuff like that. And I was like, this ain't going to do shit for me."

Meeting them where they are

The mismatch between the reality of children's lives and the availability

of systems and services to support them is stark. Children's efforts to remove themselves from harm may be characterized by overstretched systems as [proof of their "independence"](#).

What they need are standalone responses that address the extremities of their need. Yet neither national [homelessness](#) or [domestic violence](#) policies are yet to acknowledge the relationship of [domestic violence](#) and homelessness in the lives of children and young people.

State and [federal governments](#) can begin to fix the cracks in the system by ensuring all agencies are held accountable for upholding the rights of children outlined by the [United Nations convention](#)—especially of those without family they can rely on.

There are positive advances underway in [Victoria](#) and [Tasmania](#) to break the silo of child protection and re-build child and adolescent service systems with prevention and early intervention at their core.

A collaborative, integrated response that recognizes the complexity and reality of children and young people's lives including their independent housing, health, and safety needs is critical. This will only happen when we grow up and acknowledge children have adult problems too.

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