



# Social Justice STOCKTAKE



## Family Violence

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### Were you surprised about the level of concern for family violence reflected in the Stocktake?

We know that family violence is incredibly prevalent in Australia but it is also often hidden so in some respects it is surprising that so many people identified it so consistently. Almost a quarter of women in Australia have experienced violence from a current or former partner and on average in Australia, one woman every week is murdered by her current or former partner. These are unacceptable statistics that creates no doubt that family and domestic violence is a national crisis.

In recent years we have seen increased efforts by governments and community groups to raise awareness around family violence and also to encourage a public conversation. The high level of concern we see in the Stocktake results is entirely appropriate given how widespread and prevalent family violence is in Australia.

### Were there any geographic differences in the prevalence of family violence in the results that are of concern or surprise?

In the Stocktake, electorates that were in rural areas generally had a slightly higher proportion of respondents identifying family violence as a social justice concern. These elevated concerns for family violence in rural areas align with previous research that has identified that rates of family violence are higher in regional, rural and remote areas than metropolitan areas.

Smaller towns and less populated communities increase the difficulty and risk of disclosure of family and domestic violence for women and children. A lack of support and services also elevates the risk for women and children. There are currently few family and domestic violence services available in rural and regional areas. This means that victim-survivors often have to travel great distances to access a women's shelter, financial service or health or legal centre.

### Did you see an increase in those seeking to flee violent situations during lockdown? And if not, why not?

Family and domestic violence has been labeled as the 'shadow pandemic' with COVID-19 and responses to the pandemic increasing both the frequency and severity of family and domestic violence.

Between March and April 2020, demand for supports offered by us through family and domestic violence flexible support packages grew by almost 60 per cent. In the same period, demand for safe accommodation and trauma-informed case management grew by 7 per cent.

The Salvation Army's experience identified a high proportion of women entering services on insecure or unstable temporary visas as they had no access to income and no other support. The pandemic



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also served to highlight the urgent need for more affordable housing and for additional support for victim-survivors, their children and perpetrators to enter into the private rental market.

## Some people still have narrow views of who a domestic violence sufferer is. But what is the reality you see in your work?

There is a common stereotype that the overwhelming majority of family violence perpetrators and victim-survivors are from seriously disadvantaged backgrounds and have regular contact with police. However, family violence can occur in any part of society.

Family violence is not just physical abuse, nor is it a single incident. It is a pattern of abusive behaviours over time. Underlying the abuse is the use of coercive control. Coercive control is a pattern of use by an abuser to control their partner and create an uneven power dynamic.

Perpetrators employ tactics and behaviours to gain complete control over their victim, so that the victim-survivor loses their individual autonomy, self-esteem and independence. These tactics and abusive behaviours include but are not limited to social, financial, psychological and technology-facilitated abuse.

## What is the process when a victim turns up seeking assistance from The Salvation Army?

We understand that experiencing family violence can be frightening and isolating. When a victim-survivor turns up at a Salvation Army Service, they can be assured that they will not have to battle through alone. Our family violence stream will help victim-survivors address immediate safety concerns and provide advice, referrals and connections to assist them on their recovery journey.

The Salvation Army offers a wide range of services for people who have experienced family violence including counselling, safety planning and managing risk to their safety and safety of any children, we offer crisis and long-term specialist accommodation and case management to support their recovery and establish a future free of violence. We also offer a behaviour change program to assist people who have used violence in their relationships with understanding the underlying drivers for violence and support their capacity to make different choices in the future.

## What do you see as the biggest impediment in catering to your clientele?

We see a wide variety of clients in our family and domestic violence services, and they all have differing interests and needs. However, from our experience the biggest impediment is a lack of housing. Ensuring that women have access to stable housing is a critically important first step. Without stable housing other factors such as education and employment, are often seen as aspirational.



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## What happens when clients present with children?

We have many single parents with children requiring The Salvation Army's assistance because of family and domestic violence. Our family and domestic violence services provide support to both women and their children. This support includes refuge, counselling, accommodation and outreach.

We operate a specialist family and domestic violence response for children and adolescents that is developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed and cognisant of the long-term impacts of family violence.

## Some victims are reticent to leave their abuser if they have pets. Have you experienced this and are any plans underway which could help when pets are victims too?

Family and domestic violence can be directed towards animals or pets and can be used as a threat to make a victim-survivor feel further trapped.

In many cases, pets may be a victim-survivor's only or closest friend and companion and threats of violence against a pet if a woman seeks help is very real.

Accommodation options with support services available that also allow for pets are not very common and it can also be difficult to find a private rental that allows for animals, further limiting the already few available exit pathways.

Our service delivery experience has emphasised the importance of pets in providing ongoing comfort and security. We work with other providers to find solutions for women who present with pets, but the lack of appropriate options is an issue that the sector faces.

## What would you say to anyone who thinks those in abusive or violent relationships should "just leave"?

The psychological reasons behind a victim's choice to stay in a violent relationship are less visible, making it difficult for many to understand why they 'don't just leave'. People in abusive relationships are often caught in a web made from isolating, confidence-crushing abuse and by legitimate fears of greater harm.

It is also important to remember that the most dangerous time for a victim-survivor in an abusive relationship is when they leave the relationship. Family and domestic violence is all about power and control, and when a victim leaves, the perpetrator has lost their power and control. Perpetrators who experience a loss of control at this point may try to regain it through escalating forms of violence.

## Family violence has traditionally been something not widely discussed or acknowledged by society, but this seems to have changed can you explain why?

Historically, a culture of silence surrounding domestic violence led it to being seen as an invisible crime, with victim-survivors being too fearful or ashamed, and bystanders too uncomfortable or



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conflicted to speak out. This culture of silence has only changed because of the willingness of many to stand against complacency.

Today, research has allowed us to understand more about the prevalence of family and domestic violence and the specific needs of victim-survivors than any previous generation.

Much law reform regarding violence against women has occurred in both an Australian and international context since the 1970s and 1980s. The reform was largely spurred on by feminists as they advocated on behalf of victims of gender-based violence. For example, rape occurring in the context of marriage was criminalised in all Australian states and territories in 1991.

## What do you believe are the most important factors in alleviating and eradicating family violence?

Violence against women is not inevitable, it is preventable. To stop violence from happening in the first place, we need a primary prevention approach. This means addressing the 'primary' or underlying drivers of this violence.

Gender inequality provides the underlying conditions of violence against women. Meaning that if we want to eradicate family violence, we need to increase gender equality in our society and promote equal and respectful relationships and support men and boys to develop healthy masculinities.

Not all family violence is directed at women and all victims-survivors, irrespective of their gender or the nature of their relationship, must be supported to seek help.

## What is the most important and necessary steps in helping victims of family violence get back on their feet?

Housing is a critically important step in helping victim-survivors of family violence. If there's a housing first response, victim-survivors know the location that they are going to reside in and the primary school they can link their children into. They can build the community connections and start to attend local groups and make friendships. They can also look at education for themselves and employment options. Housing therefore has to be fundamentally at the centre of our response.