Assisting Women to Break Free of the Cycle of Repeated Use of Refuge and Crisis Accommodation

By Angela Spinney, Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology

This article describes the progress of a research project named Early intervention strategies to reduce the need for women and children to make repeated use of refuge and other crisis accommodation.

The project is being currently being conducted by the author as part of the National Homelessness Research Agenda. It is funded through the Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement between the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA) and the Homelessness Research Collaboration (HRC). The HRC is a consortium of four universities (the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology, RMIT, Murdoch and NATSEM at the University of Canberra together with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare).

My research project focuses on those whose homelessness can be attributed to domestic violence, because they are a specific and significant population of homeless people (Parker and Fopp, 2004). The project looks specifically at the period prior to final separation, when women and child victims of domestic and family violence can find themselves repeatedly leaving their homes after experiencing family violence and accessing crisis accommodation for a while, but returning to live with the perpetrator.

These attempts at reconciliation often ultimately lead to permanent separation, but this can take some time, and several attempts, for the women concerned to come to a realisation that an end to the violence will only happen if the relationship permanently ends. The repeat of incidents of violence and abuse, and “churning” through homelessness services (especially crisis services) at this stage can be extremely disruptive and stressful for both children and their mothers.

Although work has started in this area, currently in Australia there is still a direct and critical link between experience of domestic violence and homelessness. More than half of all women with children who have sought assistance through SAAP gave domestic violence as the primary reason for seeking assistance. As they frequently bring more than one child with them, the majority of those accommodated in domestic or family violence refuges, and other crisis and transitional accommodation are children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007).

The client group for this research are therefore major users of homeless services and domestic violence is the primary factor associated with their homelessness (Anderson, 2003). Structural factors create the conditions within which homelessness will occur, but people with personal problems are more vulnerable to these adverse social and economic trends than others (Parker and Fopp, 2004).

Most women using homelessness services designed for victims of domestic violence in Australia do have a dwelling Homelessness for this group of women and children is a symptom of the problem (violence), rather than a cause of their problem (Nunan, 2005). This classification of domestic violence as a factor associated with women’s homelessness, but not as a cause of homelessness, is useful in clarifying the issues surrounding why women frequently “churn” through homelessness services and can return several times to live with the perpetrator.

Unlike most other groups of homeless people, these women and children do in fact have a home to return to, but they do not feel safe there. Women and children who are subjected to domestic violence are vulnerable to homelessness in two ways: because violence disrupts and violates the sense of safety and belonging that are associated with the home, and because when women and children make the decision to leave a family violence situation, they are usually required to leave their homes.

Relationships with support networks are often severed in the process, and women can face isolation, emotional trauma and acute economic disadvantage as a result of their decision to leave. When women and children are forced to leave their homes because of violence, the loss of home in itself will often have a traumatic impact and they can suffer a real sense of loss from having to leave their home, which they often attempt to mitigate by trying to return.

To try to counter these negative factors and to identify gaps and potential improvements in Australian service provision, the research is investigating to what extent innovative early intervention schemes introduced in the United Kingdom and Australia have been successful in enabling women and children to reduce their experiences of violence and multiple use of refuge and other emergency accommodation.

The project has been designed to complement research being conducted by the same researcher for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) on homelessness prevention for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. That project looks specifically at issues surrounding how and to what extent homelessness prevention measures have been successful in enabling women and children to remain in their homes and localities.

As both projects draw on learning from the experience and from earlier this year I visited a range of Sanctuary Scheme projects in England, where the removal of the perpetrator, and support for the victims to remain in their home by a combination of security measures and on-going support, have become the norm in terms of policy and practice during the last six or seven years. Sanctuary Schemes are run by Local Authorities in some areas and the Police in others.

I interviewed workers, managers and partner stakeholders operating metropolitan, suburban and rural sanctuary schemes in , and in order to compare how they differ in terms of their methods of operation, I also visited innovating perpetrator programs such as Strength to Change in Hull to investigate how preventing violence can help prevent homelessness and repeated use of refuge and crisis accommodation.

In Australia I have met with stakeholders of Tasmania’s State-Wide integrated justice led response Safe at Home, with policy makers and practitioners in New South Wales involved with the Staying Home Leaving Violence projects and with outreach services and projects working on the early stages of Safe at Home in Victoria.

Currently I am in the process of holding discussions with South Australia and Queensland policy makers and practitioners as well, in order to discuss the implications for the States of these ways of working with women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. It is anticipated that the final report of the project, which will include a review of the literature on the topic and the finding of this research will be with FAHCSIA by the end of the year.