If women and children are to remain in their home rather than become homeless, it is absolutely important that their risk in staying, where the ex-partner knows where they are, is measured against the risks of moving.

Domestic violence is made up of many controlling and intimidating behaviours. Many countries have normalized the ‘solving’ of domestic violence situations by removing the women and children from their home to a place of safety. However, in some cases the perpetrator’s violent behaviour can be controlled by the relationship being brought to an end, and by a strong judicial system that removes the perpetrator from the family home and prevents him from contacting or approaching the victim. This does not mean that remaining in the family home is the best option for all women and children who have experienced domestic violence, but it does mean that, for many, if the correct justice and welfare systems are in place, the abuse can be brought to an end without them having to leave their current home. This article explores some of the findings of research examining “joined up” staying at home homelessness prevention measures for women and children in England and Australia (Spinney, 2012). These joined up approaches consist of housing, judicial and support services working together to help women and children stay in their home. These approaches often include:

- **Judicial**: improving police responses to breaches of court orders, providing court-based family violence advocacy services, domestic violence courts, law reform;
- **Housing**: private rental brokerage programs for women who have experienced family violence, 24-hour response services by housing agencies, perpetrator accommodation;
- **Welfare**: outreach support services, emergency support, personal development and confidence-building assistance.

These types of homelessness prevention schemes usually involve collaboration between the police, courts and outreach support staff. The police role is to encourage the women and children to remain in the home unless there are immediate dangers preventing them from doing so, seek exclusion orders and (sometimes) offer accommodation to the perpetrator. The outreach teams conduct risk assessments to assist the client in deciding whether to remain in the home, ensure necessary protection orders are in place, and conduct safety audits (Bega Women’s Refuge, 2007), as well as providing ongoing emotional support, sometimes for several years.

**RISK MANAGEMENT AND SAFETY PLANNING TO FACILITATE THE PREVENTION OF HOMELESSNESS**

If women and children are to remain in their home rather than become homeless, it is absolutely important that their risk in staying, where the ex-partner knows where they are, is measured against the risks of moving. Becoming homelessness is an enormous step, and comes with its own risks of having to live in inappropriate (and perhaps unsafe) accommodation without security of tenure. When families do move out of their home, perpetrators are often aware of where they have moved to, especially if there are family law requirements for shared parenting arrangements. However, separation can also bring about new extremes of behaviour. This can be the time when women and their children are in the greatest physical danger, whether or not they remain in their home or seek refuge elsewhere. For these reasons, “joined up” approaches involve both assessing and managing the risk to family members, and planning and implementing the security steps necessary to minimize that risk.

**SECURITY UPGRADING AND ‘TARGET HARDENING’**

The research revealed that expenditure on relatively inexpensive items such as padlocks for manholes, meter cupboards and loft hatches, motion sensitive external lighting, removing of greenery near the house, and provision of torches and rape alarms can go a long way to making women feel more secure, and that most women do not want their home to be turned into a ‘fortress’ with the provision of a panic, or safe, room. Staying at home schemes have been successful in enabling women to remain in their home even in isolated rural properties, however, each case is different because it depends on the aggressiveness of the perpetrator, whether he is in custody, and on the determination of the women not to have to leave their home.

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HOW HOMELESS PREVENTION SCHEMES FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN WORK

Most referrals to outreach support services come from the police. The outreach service are involved in the assessment of risk and liability, creation of a safety plan, ongoing case work, court support and advocacy, and referral to other specialist agencies.

The process typically works in the following way;

1. Referral;
2. Phone contact with prospective client by outreach agency;
3. New clients visit the service for an initial assessment. This can take a couple of sessions;
4. Staff visit clients at home in order to conduct a risk assessment and safety planning;
5. Some clients choose to move out of their home. The services often continue to work with these women and regard ‘planned moves’ as a success, because they do not tend to lead to the homelessness that is created by leaving at a time of crisis. Most clients do not enter a refuge or other form of crisis accommodation.

THE ADVANTAGES OF ENABLING WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO REMAIN IN THEIR HOMES

- A reduction in homelessness attributed to domestic and family violence;
- Potential to reduce repeat victimization of the crime of domestic violence both by helping women to consider that they have options other than to return to a relationship with their violent ex-partner, and by deterring him from returning to harm her;
- Cost saving to the criminal justice system and other agencies;
- Children are less disrupted and the damage done to them by experiencing domestic violence is not worsened by having to lose their home, which can otherwise have long-term consequences for their wellbeing;
- Schemes that enable women to remain in their homes can be regarded as emblematic that society deems domestic violence to be wrong. This is important because it shifts the power balance away from the perpetrator, and demonstrates to the children of the family what constitutes unacceptable behaviour. This can impact on their later ability to sustain relationships themselves;
- Women are empowered to stay away from the violent relationship and are not condemned to return to the perpetrator in order to maintain their children’s home;
- Removes the need for women to have to stay in refuges. This is one of the reasons why they have become so popular;

In England, attitudes concerning the rights of women to remain in their own home have become normalized in a relatively short time span. Stay at home schemes began being piloted around ten years ago and are now mainstream practice. Their popularity indicates that they play a vital role in meeting the choices of many women.

CONCLUSION

One of the most significant findings of the research is that “joined up” schemes have an important role to play in preventing homelessness for women and children who have experienced domestic violence, and that this is true for those living in very different situations in very different areas of Australia, and England. Women living in metropolitan areas, rural isolated areas, in owner occupied, privately rented, public housing, jointly owned, jointly tenanted, with injunctions and police orders or without, have all been assisted to remain living safely in their homes through these types of projects, and with no evidence that they are more at risk than if they had left.

Although the research identified that affordability issues for women (whether they stay or go) are real and pressing, it is clear that the time has come for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence to always have the choice to remain in their home with support, wherever they live.

REFERENCES