



YOUNG PEOPLE AS VICTIM SURVIVORS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE:

Submission to the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against
Women and Children.



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Acknowledgement of Country

Melbourne City Mission acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work and note that this document was developed on the lands of the Bunurong, Wurundjeri and Woi Wurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the culture, dreams, and aspirations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are the true custodians of the land upon which we live and work.

We recognise that the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and young people in the child protection and justice systems, many of whom have experienced family violence, is in part a devastating consequence of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and ongoing experiences of systemic racism.

We pay our respects to the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures and recognise their unceded sovereignty.

About MCM

Melbourne City Mission (**MCM**) is a community service organisation that provides a range of supports to people who are experiencing different forms of disadvantage across Victoria.

Our vision is to contribute to a fair and just community where people have equal access to opportunities and resources. We work alongside people and communities to provide long-term, sustainable pathways away from disadvantage.

MCM has more than 80 programs which span multiple service systems, including homelessness, disability, early childhood intervention, education and care, health (home-based palliative care), mental health, and education and training. MCM also runs the Hester Hornbrook Academy, an independent specialist school providing education and wrap-around supports to some of the most challenging and disengaged young people in Victoria.

Family violence is a common thread that underpins much of our work. There are very limited specialist family violence supports for young people who are victim survivors of family violence – the default response to young people disclosing family violence in Victoria is to pathway them into the homelessness system.

MCM provides a range of homelessness supports to young people, including:

- *Frontyard Youth Services* provides a range of integrated supports to around 2,500 young people aged 12 to 24 experiencing or at risk of homelessness each year, including support with housing, health, mental health, legal issues, Centrelink, employment and living skills. Frontyard operates the only state-wide specialist access point for young people aged 16-24 seeking to access the homelessness services system, including an 18 bed CBD-based crisis accommodation service supporting over 300 complex young people experiencing rough sleeping.
- Four youth refuge programs across the Northern and Western suburbs of Melbourne which provide

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short-term accommodation to over 600 young people each year.

- Youth Foyer Programs that provide intensive case management and fully furnished medium term accommodation to young people for up to 2 years.
- Early intervention programs across Victoria supporting over 594 young people to remain connected to family, school, and their community, and in housing each year.

MCM has implemented a systems-level, whole of organisation approach to trauma informed healing-oriented care. A 'Healing Oriented Framework' has been developed by MCM to promote the physical, emotional, social, psychological and spiritual health and wellbeing, cultural inclusion and ongoing safety of people in contact with MCM. MCM maintains a holistic view of individuals, families and communities in their ongoing process of healing.

Introduction

MCM welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the development of the next National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (next National Plan) and commends the Australian Government on maintaining this important focus. The development of the next National Plan provides an opportunity to expand on family violence reforms to date, to eliminate all forms of gender-based violence and support the country's recovery efforts.

The increased focus on preventing and responding to family violence across Australia is strongly welcomed by MCM, however despite this focus, young people (including adolescents) who are experiencing family violence, continue to fall through the cracks of the system. The gap in responses for young people that have experienced family violence is widely recognised by the family violence sector, as is the lack of practice guidance for working with young people.

Family violence against young people is prevalent in Australia. The Crime Statistics Agency in Victoria reports that in 2020, 14,942 Affected Family Members in a police family incident were aged 15-24. However, family violence amongst young people is under reported, and the actual figure is likely to be much higher.

The next National Plan must improve the family violence system to ensure young people are recognised as victim survivors of family violence in their own right, have access to age-appropriate support (including access to housing and emergency accommodation) and that there is an increased understanding in the family violence service system on the specific needs of young people.

This submission does not attempt to comment on all the listed National Priorities in the draft Framework or all areas of family violence reform. We focus on the system response to family violence experienced by young people and seek to draw the Government's attention to some of the challenges and opportunities that we believe should be prioritised in the next National Plan.

We provide our endorsement of submissions made by the Victorian Council of Social Services and Domestic Violence Victoria. MCM also recognises the right to self-determination and provides endorsement of submissions made by Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations.

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This submission has been developed in consultation with young people with lived experience of family violence. MCM would like to thank and acknowledge the young people who showed incredible resilience and allowed us to share their stories.

Submission

MCM supports the Principles and Priorities listed in the draft Framework for Australian's next National Plan, particularly the need to improve service system responses, mental health and the importance of lived experience in policy and program development.

MCM makes three overarching recommendations on additional priorities for inclusion in the next National Plan; Children and Young People, Access to Safe and Affordable Housing and Legislative and Policy Measures.

Priorities

Children and Young People as Victim Survivors in their Own Right

The next National Plan must recognise children and young people as victim survivors in their own right.

Despite the increased focus on preventing and responding to family violence in Australia, there is still a system gap in supports for young people under the age of 25 who are experiencing family violence in their home of origin and in their intimate relationships (teen dating violence). Children and young people are too often seen as extensions of their parents or carers for the purposes of support.

While under legislation, children and young people are considered victim survivors in their own right, services are not funded to provide a system wide focus on the needs and recovery of children. Further, the system also fails to recognise the distinct needs of young people. This is in part due to a policy setting that classify children and young people as one homogenous group, meaning too few services and responses are adapted with the consideration of the developmental needs of adolescents and young people specifically.

The impacts of family violence on young people are immense. Young people experiencing family violence have an increased risk of eating disorders, teenage pregnancy, early school leaving, suicide attempts, mental illness and use of violence. They experience disrupted schooling and consequent harm to chances of getting and keeping a job, difficulty making and keeping friends due to the stress and shame of trying to keep the violence secret, and the disruption of moving houses and schools to escape. Young people who experience violence are also more highly represented in the justice system, mental health system and in homelessness services.

While young people often seek to ensure their families are provided with support, young people express a strong desire to be seen in their own right. They want to have options and choices, and have their agency respected in making decisions.

We urge the Australian Government to include 'Children and Young People' as a priority in the next National Plan. Further, the needs of young people as distinct from children must be recognised and subsequent program responses developed for targeted crisis responses and extended support.

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RECOMMENDATION 1: To ensure children and young people are seen as victim survivors in their own right, 'Children and Young People' must be a focus area in the next National Plan. Government and services must also recognise the distinct needs of young people as distinct from children and subsequent program responses developed for crisis responses and extended support.

RECOMMENDATION 2: To meet the distinct needs of young people experiencing family violence, the National Partnership Agreement for Family Violence on COVID-19 Domestic and Family Violence Responses must include the needs of young people as well as children.

Access to Safe and Affordable Housing

The next National Plan must ensure access to safe and affordable housing, from crisis accommodation to long-term housing as a critical foundation of a functioning family violence system.

MCM is pleased that 'improvement of service system responses' has been included in the Draft Framework, however it is vital that 'Access to Safe and Affordable Housing' is included as a standalone priority in the next National Plan. Some of the most significant fault lines exposed by the pandemic have related to housing and Australia's long-standing lack of social housing has become more acute than ever, especially for victim survivors of family violence.

Australia's percentage of social housing as a proportion of total housing continues to fall, from 7.1 per cent in 1991, to 4.2 per cent in 2018, 2.9 per cent less than the OECD average.

Access to safe and affordable housing and emergency accommodation is vital for young people experiencing family violence. Some young people may be supported to stay safer in the family home through the development of a safety plan. For others, there is a need for alternative accommodation if staying at home is no longer an option, from crisis accommodation through to longer term housing.

These options include:

- **Emergency hotel accommodation:** At times of high risk, and when there is no current refuge available, homelessness services use brokerage money to accommodate victim survivors of family violence in motels. While this is not optimal, it is often used. For young people under 18, this is problematic given many motels will not accommodate them as this poses a safety risk due to their age and independent living skills. For those over 18 who can access motels, this is still not age appropriate.
- **Refuge:** There are youth-specific refuges in Victoria, with MCM's Frontyard Youth Services being the only specialist access point for young people aged 16-24 seeking to access the homelessness services system. At present, there are insufficient bed numbers to meet demand and there are rarely places available. Further, this is not family-violence specific and therefore cannot be considered a 'secured' facility.
- **Out-of-home care:** For young people under 16, the out-of-home care system is still an option that is explored. However, this is more likely the younger cohort.

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- **Longer-term housing:** The lack of social housing stock is well documented in Australia. For young people who are unable to live at home and are not in the out-of-home care system, this creates significant barriers to their safety and wellbeing.

Further, it is rare for young people to accompany parents to refuge, and as above, rare for young people themselves to have access to emergency accommodation in their own right. The complex relationships that exist, such as with their parents and with others for whom they rely upon for their accommodation, is currently overlooked when responding to issues of family violence.

RECOMMENDATION 3: To prevent and address violence against women, children and young people, 'Access to Safe and Affordable Housing' must be included as a standalone priority in the next National Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 4: To ensure access to safe and affordable housing, the Australian Government must work with the states and territories through the National Partnership Agreement on Housing to increase the supply of crisis accommodation and social housing for victim survivors of family violence.

RECOMMENDATION 5: To meet the distinct needs of young people experiencing family violence, a youth lens needs to also be applied to safe housing options for victim survivors of family violence and appropriate and youth-specific housing options explored, including secure facilities, and funded.

Systems Focus: Legislative and Policy Measures

While individual support is important, focus must also be on the external environment that is contributing to the young person's experience and to the barriers that are impacting their safety and recovery.

Structural issues such as guardianship and family law, access to income support, the need for parental consent when the parent is the perpetrator of violence and discrimination, all form part of a young person's experience of family violence.

Legislative and policy measures to keep young people safe from family violence must be prioritised in the next National Plan. This includes safer Family Law and Social Security systems that also protect and support young people's economic safety, independence, and wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION 6: To prevent and address family violence against women, children and young people, legislative and policy measures must be prioritised for reform in the next National Plan. This includes reforms to the Family Law and Social Security systems to ensure safety-first approach, to improve consistency between state-based and federal jurisdictions and to ensure a trauma-informed response to family violence.