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Violence Against Homeless Women: Safety and Social Policy

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Abstract
Over the past 20 years there has been increasing understanding of the gendered nature of homelessness in Australia. Most significantly, this gendering has occurred through the acknowledgement of the links between domestic violence and homelessness and this has played out in Australian social policy through the funding of specialist domestic violence services. However, not all women are assisted by these specialist services—either because they are not homeless due to domestic violence, or because they fall through the gaps in the service system. Homelessness exposes these women to heightened vulnerability to violence. This article considers homeless women’s experiences of violence and their implications for homelessness policy. Framed by Australian and Victorian social policy and drawing on a qualitative study of 29 women, all of whom had experienced violence during homelessness, the article argues that greater policy attention needs to be paid to ensuring homeless women’s safety.

Keywords: Homelessness; Australian Social Policy; Violence Against Women; Gendered Violence; Domestic Violence

The gendered nature of homelessness in Australia has received increasing attention in social policy in recent years. Most notably, links have been made between domestic violence and homelessness, which has resulted in the funding of specialist domestic violence services for women and children in the form of women’s refuges, outreach services, and crisis phone lines. Homelessness data confirms the importance of these services to women: at the time of the 2006 Census, there were over 9,200 homeless females in Victoria, or 45% of the total homeless population in that State (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2009). Moreover, nearly two-thirds (64%) of those seeking homelessness assistance were women (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2008). Data from homeless services and anecdotal evidence indicates that the number of single adult women has increased significantly in recent years (Department of Human Services, 2010).

In Australia, the primary reason for women seeking homelessness assistance is in relation to domestic and family violence, with half of all women attributing their homelessness to violence (Homelessness Taskforce, 2008). There is already a
considerable body of research concerned with women’s experiences of domestic violence as the cause of homelessness (e.g., Chung, Kennedy, Brien, & Wendt, 2000; Tually, Faulkner, Cutler, & Slatter, 2008). Women and children leave their homes because they cannot remain there safely (Nunan, 2009). As noted by Lenon (2000), “for women, homelessness is not resolved by simply having a roof over her head unless it is accompanied by a sense of safety and security” (p. 123) Other forms of violence such as sexual abuse during childhood are also known to be factors likely to increase women’s vulnerability to homelessness (Wardhaugh, 2000; Wenzel, Leake, & Gelberg, 2001; Zugazaga, 2004).

Homeless people are at greater risk of violence than those who are housed (Larney, Conroy, Mills, Burns, & Teesson, 2009; Robinson, 2010) and, while it is acknowledged that homeless men also experience violence, international research suggests that violence, especially sexual violence, is more prevalent among homeless women (Heslin, Robinson, Baker, & Gelberg, 2007; Lenon, 2000; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001; Wenzel, Koegel, & Gelberg, 2000). After becoming homeless, women may experience violence and intimidation or live with the fear of violence and a lack of safety. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), one in three Australian women will be a victim of physical violence and one in five will experience sexual violence. Like housed women, homeless women experience violence but their vulnerability is greatly heightened by their insecure (or lack of) housing. Thus, in addition to violence being a cause of women’s homelessness, women may experience violence during homelessness.

In Australia, Chamberlain, Johnson, and Theobald (2007) have noted women’s experiences of violence and intimidation in boarding houses and HomeGround Services (2004) highlighted similar safety issues for women and their children living in caravan parks. In Parkinson’s (2004) study, women reported the lack of safety during homelessness associated with staying in motels and rooming houses. Casey (2002a, 2000b) identified violence as a reason that single women did not use mixed-gender homelessness services and noted incidents of sexual assault and intimidation in a range of homeless settings. Hatty’s (1996) study of homeless young women found “violence was integral to life on the street” (p. 420), which was consistent with the findings of international research such as that by Carlen (1996), Gaetz (2004) and Wardhaugh (2000). Other research has highlighted the increased risk of sexual violence experienced by homeless women (e.g., Lenon, 2000; Morrison, 2009; Tyler et al., 2001). Some women seek increased safety through a male partnership that may lead them, at least temporarily, out of homelessness but may ultimately lead to violence (O’Dwyer, 1997; Wenzel, Tucker, Elliott, & Hambarsoomians, 2007). In their study of homelessness, Johnson, Gronda, and Coutts (2008) spoke to women who, to avoid living in squats, lived together with a male partner. However, this relationship could then become a source of violence and exploitation. In relation to her biographical study of violence and homelessness, Robinson (2010) noted that, “reflecting the gendered nature of violent victimisation, women participants in particular described enduring violent intimate relationships in the context of
In summary, as stated in the findings of a large USA study, violence is “pervasive” in the lives of homeless women (Wenzel et al., 2001, p. 747).

In acknowledgement of this vulnerability to violence, Australian and Victorian social policy has identified the safety of homeless people as a concern. However, it is possible that some aspects of the homelessness service system increase women’s vulnerability to violence. This study explored the ways in which homeless women experience violence, responses to that violence by the service system, and the resultant implications for homelessness policy.

**Policy Context: Women and Homelessness**

One of the principles guiding the Australian government’s most recent response to homelessness—*The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*—is “the need to focus on keeping people safe”. While paying particular attention to women and children escaping domestic and family violence, this principle also acknowledges the impact of “other forms of abuse” (Homelessness Taskforce, 2008, p. 19). It echoes the acknowledgement of safety found in the longstanding Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) where homelessness is seen to be determined by “inadequate access to safe and secure housing” (SAAP Act 1994, emphasis added).

Over the past 25 years SAAP has been central to the Australian government’s response to homelessness. SAAP is a joint State and Commonwealth-funded program that funds, through the State and Territory governments, mainly nongovernment agencies to provide transitional supported accommodation and other related support services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (AIHW, 2007). Arising from the then Rudd Labor government’s pledge to halve homelessness and reduce the number of people sleeping rough by 2020, there are currently changes underway in this area of policy, both at Federal and State levels.

In Victoria, the site of the research study from which this article is derived, SAAP funds a range of services that provide support to homeless women, including specialist domestic violence services, crisis accommodation services that are for women without accompanying children who are not in an immediate situation of domestic violence, mixed-gender crisis accommodation services and youth refuges that accommodate young women up to 25 years of age, two of which are for young women only. There is also a women-only drop-in centre that provides meals and other practical support and intensive case management for selected women with the most complex needs. However, there are few services for single women (where “single” means lone women without accompanying children, where

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1 While the Commonwealth/State SAAP agreement has been superseded by the National Affordable Housing Agreement, SAAP funding arrangements continue to operate for the time being and other sources of State and Commonwealth funding have seen the initiation of a range of other programs in this area (Department of Human Services, 2010).
some of whom may have children but not have them with them). Single women cannot access domestic violence services if they are not in “immediate danger from domestic violence” although, as noted by Robinson and Searby (2006, p. 16), and clearly demonstrated by this research, they may be in danger of “immediate violence of other kinds”.

Even though there is a specialist domestic violence service system, demand regularly outstrips the availability of SAAP-funded beds or other support. If domestic violence refuges are full, women are referred to motels where it is likely that they will receive very limited support or, in the case of outreach services, be placed on a waiting list (AIHW, 2005; Weeks & Oberin, 2004). As noted by Tually et al. (2008) “an increasing number of women and children who because of domestic and family violence find themselves unintentionally homeless or living in inappropriate accommodation—couch surfing, living in a car, sub-standard accommodation, in caravan parks or boarding houses” (p. 2). What this means is that, in the existing service system, both women experiencing domestic violence and especially those who are homeless for other reasons, face the possibility of being referred to sites of temporary (and potentially long-term) accommodation known to be unsafe.

In Victoria, transitional housing (“THMs”) is an exit point from crisis accommodation and a key aspect of the service system. Clients are referred to transitional housing to await long-term housing, but here there are significant problems due to the “crisis in affordable housing” (Johnson, 2010, p. 54). Unlike crisis accommodation where the usual maximum period is six weeks for women’s homelessness services, in some instances (typically in the specialist domestic violence services), women can remain in transitional housing for longer periods if they are deemed to be making efforts to secure long-term housing. During this time they receive outreach support. In other instances, access to transitional housing is limited so that if long-term housing has not been secured within a predetermined time period, the woman is required to leave the property. This often means exiting into the homeless population and once again seeking crisis accommodation with the likelihood of it being unavailable and then returning to unsafe housing alternatives. Johnson and colleagues (2008) asserted that SAAP was “based on the assumption that homelessness is typically a short-term crisis” (p. 218) but, as Johnson (2010) later pointed out, the lack of affordable housing is “a key factor in perpetuating homelessness” (p. 54).

These safety issues were reiterated in Victoria’s former public policy framework in relation to homelessness, the Victorian Homelessness Strategy, under review at the time of the research, which identified homelessness as a priority for the previous Victorian Government and outlined various “key areas for improvement”. These problems included the lack of suitable exit points and an emphasis on “short-term throughput assistance rather than longer-term outcomes” (Department of Human Services, 2002, p. 12). Intrinsic to these responses were safety concerns and recognition that aspects of the existing service system are unsafe:
When resources are limited, it may not be possible to provide the consumer with the best response. Workers and consumers must often compromise with the available options. When the only option does not fully meet the consumer’s needs, or carries some risk for the consumer, it is essential that contact with the consumer continues, in order to ensure the best possible outcome under the circumstances. (Department of Human Services, 2008, p. 8, emphasis added)

Since the research was undertaken, the then Victorian government released A Better Place Victorian Homelessness 2020 Strategy with its emphasis on prevention and early intervention, harm minimisation, and assistance to move people out of homelessness permanently (Department of Human Services, 2010). A number of flagship projects aimed at particular target groups are being implemented and evaluated. One flagship project specifically targets families affected by domestic violence; other target groups are determined by life stage, cause (and effects) of homelessness, and length of homelessness, but do not identify women specifically. Across all target groups there is an acknowledgement that “the available options” (as identified in the earlier strategy document, cited above) include situations in which homeless people are “highly vulnerable and disadvantaged” (Department of Human Services, 2010, p. 10).

**Method**

**Research Strategy**

This article is framed by the view that “susceptibility to violence and abuse is not randomly distributed, but instead connected to social context, status and identities, as well as access to resources” (Fraser & Craik, 2009, p. 228). In this instance, those interviewed for this research experienced violence because they were homeless women—that is, the particular social context of homelessness and their lack of access to resources, as well as their gender, produced the circumstances in which violence could occur. By considering “structures and social relations as they affect individuals” (Hick, 2005, p. 39), my research is informed both by an analysis of the social policy context as well as by the perspectives of the women themselves. This is done not in an effort to devise responses that offered “treatment and cure of individual problems and deficiencies” (Mendes, 2009, p. 17), but rather as a way of better understanding the ways in which women are affected by the structural inequities of homelessness and gendered violence, and what could be done to address them. As a feminist researcher and consistent with a narrative approach, I am interested in these “women as social actors in their own right and in the subjective meanings that [they] assigned to events and conditions in their lives” (Chase, 2005, p. 655). Moreover, like Fraser and Craik (2009, p. 229), I am of the view that “attempts should be made to eliminate violence, or at least reduce it”, and that social policy has a role to play in doing so.
Participants, Sampling, and Procedure

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 29 women, all of whom had experienced violence during homelessness. The interviews were based around a series of open-ended questions that encouraged each woman to give an account of her experiences of homelessness and violence in her own words. A number of direct questions were also asked to gain demographic information such as age, whether the women had children, and current accommodation. Drawing on a tradition of feminist and personal narrative, I invited the women to tell their story about the nature of the violence that they had experienced, the settings in which it occurred, who perpetrated it, and the responses to the violence. In doing so, not only did they describe “what happened”, but their narratives also “express[ed] emotions, thoughts and interpretations” (Chase, 2005, p. 656). However, I acknowledge that these narratives were also “socially situated interactive performances” in the sense that the women were speaking with a researcher previously unknown to them about topics that, for some, were highly sensitive and, in other circumstances, private (Chase, 2005, p. 657). The narrative, in effect, was shaped by me in a range of ways including by virtue of my positioning as a researcher, as well as by the purpose of the research, that is, to inform social policy.

The 29 women were aged between 19 and 52, with an average age of 32 years. Nearly two-thirds of the group of women interviewed had first experienced homelessness at 18 years of age or under and most women could be categorised as experiencing long-term or chronic homelessness (Casey, 2002a, 2002b). Only two of the women interviewed had experienced homelessness of less than one year. Thirteen of the women interviewed entered the homeless population as young people as a result of violence or conflict with their families. Twelve women became homeless as a result of domestic violence. A housing crisis and substance abuse were the pathways into homelessness for two women in each case. However, it is important to note that often these reasons were not clear-cut and typically they overlapped. For example, while none of the women explained their pathway into homelessness as precipitated by mental health issues, almost all of the women described experiences of mental ill-health over their lives. Moreover, while nearly half of the sample of women first entered the homeless population as young people as a result of violence or conflict with their family, for many, mental health or substance abuse issues contributed to later episodes of homelessness.

To maintain their privacy and to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used. Due to the potentially distressing nature of the interviews, various strategies were put in place to ensure that the research participants were safe and supported (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). The women were recruited via purposive sampling through The Salvation Army Crisis Services (located in St Kilda, Melbourne), and it was then known that each woman was linked into the service support system. While this may have produced a particular sample of women who were most likely to use these types of services (i.e., crisis services, rather than other services, or none at all), it was
considered more important that the women had known access to assistance if required, although clearly they may have sought support from elsewhere.

Findings
The following discussion reveals the nature and extent of the violence experienced by the group of homeless women where the violence was perpetrated by partners, former partners, strangers, acquaintances or male coresidents, during homelessness. While acknowledging that homeless women are also the victims of violence perpetrated by other women, the majority of violence identified in this study was perpetrated by men and it forms the focus of this article. My presentation of the women's narratives is ordered around several topics, each key aspects of my thematic analysis (Maxwell, 2005). First, I consider the source of the violence and the environment in which it occurred, noting that typically there are multiple sources of violence. Second, I discuss the ways that the women resited the violence and, third, how the violence was addressed by the service system. This analysis then informs my discussion of the policy implications, presented in the following section.

Violence Against Women During Homelessness
Although domestic violence is commonly understood in contemporary social policy to be a cause of homelessness, less acknowledgement is made of the ways in which this violence can continue to occur during homelessness. For example, Sandra, aged 29, had experienced severe physical and emotional violence over many years from her former partner. She described the violence as “walking around with a broken nose and two black eyes every day . . . He never used to bash me with his fist, he used to bash me with sticks and iron bar”. The violence continued despite her having intervention orders in place so she “just packed up and took off”. She moved away from the town where they lived and came to the city to stay with family but “he’s still ringing me up threatening to kill me”. Sandra’s fear was heightened because he had told her that “he won’t let me rest . . . he’ll keep looking for us”. So, despite leaving the violence, she continued to experience violence in the form of serious threats while homeless.

Overlaying the ongoing domestic violence, Sandra also experienced violence from within the wider environment of her homelessness. Sandra was unable to stay long-term with her family and, with no other options, she spent several months sleeping rough, a time she described as “scary”. Again, violence was experienced as the threat and fear of violence. She had been able to escape this situation after gaining advice from a street-wise acquaintance. She sought assistance from a crisis service that was able to do no more than refer her to a motel—used as a form of unsupported crisis accommodation because all refuges were full. At the time of interview, she was hoping that transitional housing would become available.

In a similar way, Carla described experiences of violence or fear of further violence that were a continuation of the violence that had caused her homelessness, as well as
other forms of violence perpetrated against her while homeless. Carla, now 24 years old, had left home at 14 as a result of violence by her mother and stepfather. She experienced emotional and physical abuse by her mother and, at the same time, her mother was experiencing domestic violence, which Carla witnessed. One day, Carla “just had enough” and she intervened to attempt to stop the violence by attacking her step-father. She left home after this incident and stayed with friends but returned home, left and returned again on a number of occasions with the periods in-between spent staying with friends, on the street, in a caravan park, and in a refuge. During this time of intermittent contact with her mother and stepfather, the violence between them, and also that directed at her, continued.

For other women, domestic violence did not lead to homelessness, but was a part of being homeless. For Zoë and Lauren, the violence was perpetrated by their male partners, even though they described very different responses to their abuse. At 19 years of age, Zoë was in a long-term relationship and, throughout this relationship, including during periods of homelessness living in a car and with friends, she had experienced domestic violence. She described her partner as “very domineering” and that “he had done things that he knew would get to me, that would eat me up inside”. While she was unhappy about some aspects of their relationship and was aware of support services, she was not willing to end the relationship. She expressed this conflict by saying that “I’m partners with him, we’re a couple, I love him to death, but I hate him so much, he’s ruined my life”. Part of the “ruin” had been the loss of her son to State care and their eviction from two public housing rentals that resulted in further periods of homelessness. She attributed one of these evictions to a serious episode of mental ill-health precipitated by drug use. About the loss of this house she said, “I couldn’t keep it . . . everything else was too much around me”. At the time of interview, Zoë and her partner were living with his friends in circumstances that she described as emotionally abusive.

Lauren too had been in a violent relationship during homelessness. Lauren was 32 years old and first experienced homelessness as a child. More recently, her partner’s violence and drug use had been a major contributing factor in their ongoing homelessness. Lauren had since decided to leave the relationship: “I’m old enough and wise enough to know that that’s not for me . . . so I’ve left him behind”. While Lauren was able to move on in her life away from the violent relationship, Zoë had not. This may have been at least partly because she had not been able to receive long-term supported housing.

Some of the women interviewed experienced sexual violence by men who were acquaintances or unknown to them. For example, over the past nine years since she was first homeless at 14 years old, Claire had spent periods of time sleeping rough. She said she had been raped many times but declared that what was worse was not the physical violence, but the fear that of being attacked again evoked: “Sometimes that, for me, is worse because you never know when they’re going to come and get you and attack you”. Twenty-three-year-old Christine had also been sexually assaulted during homelessness and, like Claire, she was fearful of further violence. Christine
had shared transitional accommodation with a woman whose boyfriend was verbally abusive and “was coming over and hitting on me”. Although he did not rape her, she was concerned that on another occasion when her girlfriend wasn’t home, “God knows what he could have done”. As a consequence, while Christine remained living in this situation she said she spent much of her time in her room, partly to escape his advances and partly because she did not want to be exposed to his violence towards his girlfriend.

When crisis accommodation is not available, private rooming houses are used as sites of emergency (and longer-term) housing. The poor security within private rooming houses raises the risk of sexual and physical violence against women, especially in situations where men were the majority of residents, as they are in mixed-gender rooming houses (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2003). This lack of security was at least partly explained by Rhonda: “men break the locks” so that doors are unlockable. This meant that women were especially vigilant around showering and tended not to use shared spaces. To keep safe they either stayed in their rooms or spent their days out, severely curtailing their activities. The women who had stayed in mixed rooming houses all emphasised the need to have someone guard the door while showering. Lisa, now aged 36, considered herself “luckier” than some because she had lived in rooming houses with a partner: “I always had him stay outside the girls’ bathroom while I was having a shower”. However, he was not there much “so whenever I was by myself I always stayed in my bedroom . . . I just didn’t feel safe . . . even if you close your door, you still don’t feel safe being on your own”.

Responses to Violence Against Homeless Women

The women were neither passive victims of violence nor unwilling to seek assistance. Some examples of resistance to violence have already been suggested: Lisa’s use of a guard when showering, Christine’s retreat to her bedroom to escape from her coresident’s boyfriend, and Lauren’s ending of the violent relationship. As well as resistance, women took other steps to respond to the violence. They sought assistance, with varying results, and their narratives provide evidence of where social policy had not prioritised their safety. Indeed, Robinson (2010) found that among the participants she interviewed “violent victimisation had become an ‘ordinary’ part of everyday life to which they did not expect services to be able to respond effectively” (p. 46). While the women spoke of various instances where they had received (mostly unhelpful) responses from police, I will retain the focus here on the homelessness service system. This is not to suggest that the police are not important in responding to violence—indeed, they have a critical role—rather that my interest here is on homelessness social policy.

Thirty-year-old Anita was raped at a mixed-gender crisis accommodation service but the response had been unsatisfactory, as she explained: “They moved me to a motel out of the refuge. Instead of the perpetrator being moved, the victim’s moved, which I think really sucks”. She did not go to the police because she thought that they
would blame her for using drugs and that they would not take action because she is “a working girl” and has a mental illness. As noted by Quadara (2008), sex workers are “one community for whom experiences of sexual assault are frequently met with derision, scepticism or silence” (p. 20).

While several women described positive experiences of support from the service system and situations where they had received assistance to secure crisis or longer-term accommodation, others expressed deep concerns. In several instances, women who should have been eligible to enter services that catered for women escaping domestic violence did not get there, due to the lack of knowledge of the agencies which they contacted, or the lack of available accommodation or other resources available at the time of contact. For example, Carol, aged 33 and with five children, was escaping domestic violence, but did not know about refuges and the support service she went to did not refer her to one. Instead, on the advice of a friend she went to live at a caravan park where she experienced harassment and intimidation from coresidents as well as from her former partner. After two years at the caravan park an acquaintance helped her to get support from a specialist domestic violence service that lead to placement in transitional housing, where she remained awaiting long-term accommodation.

Women sought long-term accommodation as a way of addressing violence during homelessness but there were concerns about safety in public housing, as Lisa described: “The same thing happens. You might socialise with a few in the block but you’ve really just got to be careful who you socialise with and choose your friends very wisely … I get that when I go home, people yelling and screaming and carrying on … So, it’s almost the same living in the boarding house”.

Carol explained that she hoped that her long awaited new home would not be “around bad people”. As her former partner had left her with large debts she was blacklisted from the private rental market and public housing was now her only option. Two of the young women interviewed, while living in transitional housing, had been offered properties that they deemed unsuitable due to safety reasons, especially as they both had young children. For example, 21-year-old Cherie, had left a violent relationship and had been offered a public housing flat. She declined it because a friend who lived in the same block had been attacked by a group of men there. Her refusal of this property meant that she had to find alternative accommodation, and she returned to live with family members, a situation that she had previously found unsustainable, which recurred. She then received further support from a homelessness service and returned to transitional housing, where she remained at the time of interview.

Discussion

Implications for Social Policy

These experiences of violence and the responses to them have implications for social policy. One concerns the need for early intervention. In relation to all the women,
effective early intervention responses to prevent violence and homelessness, including more effective policing and safe, secure and affordable long-term housing, were needed. Their experiences show that the longer the women stayed homeless, the greater the risk of their exposure to violence, intimidation, and harassment. To prevent long-term homelessness and the risk of violence, early intervention responses that have the capacity to produce sustainable, long-term outcomes should be implemented. Part of this early intervention response should ensure that those agencies most likely to encounter women at risk of homelessness are able to assist them or refer them to services where they can receive support.

A second social policy implication relates to the limited availability of crisis accommodation. One particular concern is regarding the availability of crisis accommodation for single women and, according to Grigg and Johnson (2007, p. 9), “many women, particularly those whose biographies are characterised by ongoing violence throughout their lives, get stuck in the homeless population where their problems tend to get even worse and more complex to resolve”. Due to the lack of stock of crisis accommodation, safety issues are heightened. While this research has indicated that crisis accommodation and shared transitional housing can be unsafe for women, the options all have safety risks. For example, private rooming houses can be “a dangerous environment” (Wylie & Canty-Waldron, 2004, p. 18) and, according to Gallagher and Gove (2007):

> Staff report that feeling unsafe is the main reason people do not want to go into boarding house accommodation … Many people have reported that they have experienced assault, intimidation and theft perpetrated by co-tenants and visitors and also by private boarding house owners and care-takers (p. 4).

But despite these concerns, in Victoria, rooming houses have become “an integral part of the system of emergency accommodation” (Chamberlain et al., 2007, p. 27). Homeless women are currently being referred to private rooming houses because there is no other accommodation available. Rooming houses are known to be unsafe and put women at risk of violence, intimidation and harassment.

A third social policy implication relates to the need for intensive resourcing of support. Given the complexity of the issues faced by women such as Zoë—dealing with domestic violence, addressing problematic drug use and mental health issues, as well as developing practical day-to-day living skills—there is clearly a strong need for more intensive resourcing of support services (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2008; Rayburn et al., 2005; Tually et al., 2008; Wenzel et al., 2000). There are also specific needs in this area, such as in relation to Anita, Claire, and Christine, whose experiences demonstrate the need for homelessness services that recognise and are able to support those who have been sexually assaulted (Morrison, 2009; Robinson, 2010).

Finally, there are implications for long-term housing. There were several women who disclosed their concerns about the safety and adequacy of public housing, and these concerns are not unfounded (Malone & Pullen, 2005). While unlikely to
prevent all forms of violence against homeless women (domestic violence, for example), providing long-term housing sooner could make a considerable difference. Access to long-term safe, secure, and supported housing removes women from a significant source of violence because, as we have seen, commonly (but certainly not always), the perpetrators of this violence are coresidents and acquaintances living with them in crisis or other temporary accommodation, or on the street. Instead of homeless women “graduating” through a range of transitional accommodation options (such as crisis accommodation and transitional housing), a “housing first” model is characterised by the provision of long-term housing as soon as possible. It is, in effect, an early interventionist approach that provides support to people in their own home and one that has the potential for substantially reducing violence against homeless women (Gordon, 2008; Reynolds, 2009; Tsemberis, 2004).

Conclusion

Victoria has a policy framework for a homelessness service system that is safe and supportive but, in practice, as these women’s experiences tell us, the service system is failing. There was evidence of women having to stay in unsafe and inadequate accommodation because there was nowhere else to stay. Due to the limited number of crisis accommodation services, women had stayed at private rooming houses or slept rough with routine exposure to violence and intimidation. Moreover, even though there are specialist domestic violence services, women had fallen through the gaps. Instead of getting supported crisis accommodation, which women in these circumstances are expected to receive, they had ended up in caravan parks, rooming houses and sleeping rough for extended periods of time awaiting secure long-term housing.

Even though attention is being paid to the intersections of domestic violence and homelessness, there is clearly much more that could be done, as well as improved responses to those women who become homeless for reasons other than domestic violence. Australian and Victorian public policy that focuses on the prevention of violence against women and the protection and support of women and children who experience violence is an area that could guide further work with homeless women. The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women focuses on sexual assault and domestic violence, both forms of violence central to women’s experience of homelessness. The National Plan recommends that, consistent with the findings of this research, “women need access to high-quality crisis and support services that can respond to women’s need for personal safety, housing and counselling” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 9). The Victorian government’s Violence Against Women Policy Statement, reiterates similar concerns and common goals (Office of Women’s Policy, 2010).

Women are not a minority group among the homeless, making up nearly half of the homeless population and nearly two-thirds of those seeking homelessness assistance, and vulnerability to violence is a part of women’s experiences of
homelessness. As this research shows, these experiences include both violence that is a continuation of that which caused the homelessness, as well as violence that is a part of being homeless. From these women’s experiences we can see the need for greater efforts to prevent homelessness, and for social policy that enhances homeless women’s safety.

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