



Shelter from the storm

Learning from the rise in domestic
and family violence during COVID-19

June 2021

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has touched everyone in every corner of our community, but it has had a more profound impact on some. For women and children facing domestic and family violence, the pandemic presented another barrier to seeking help, another layer of control to be used by perpetrators and further strain on service providers – particularly women’s shelters.

Women’s shelters provide essential emergency services to vulnerable women and children who would otherwise be trapped in abusive households or homeless. Shelters provide immediate

accommodation in a crisis, however they also provide additional supports including medium term accommodation, counselling and psychological services, financial support and specialist children’s services.

In mid-2020, in response to the pandemic, emergency ‘surge funding’ from the Paul Ramsay Foundation was provided to 33 women’s shelters across Australia. Depending on the domestic and family violence needs of their communities, shelters allocated the grant across 1-4 ‘surge’ target areas.

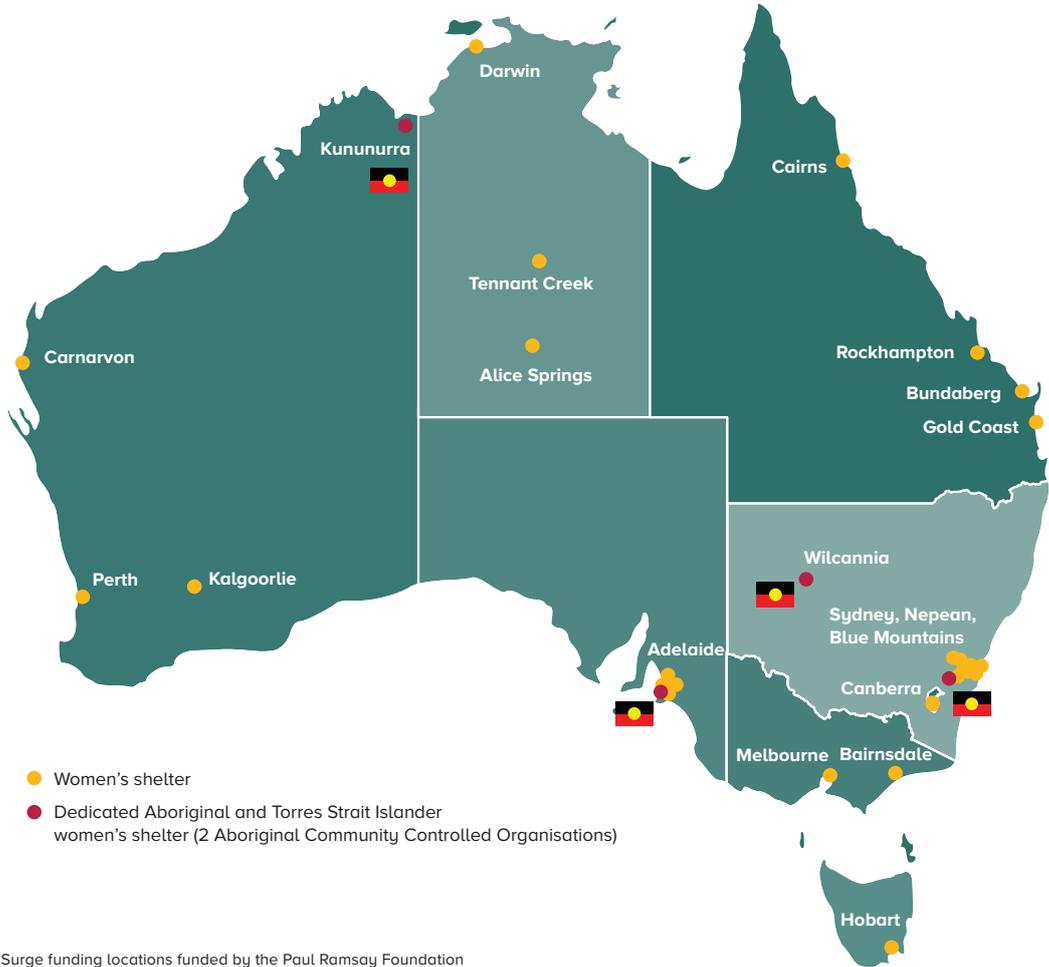


Figure 1: Surge funding locations funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation

In the absence of a peak association to provide advice, we sought to deliver the funding to those we could identify with significant need in a way which would deliver swift outcomes on the ground in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The funding provided by the Paul Ramsay Foundation was deliberately targeted to smaller not-for-profit organisations, in particular women-run, community-embedded and trauma-informed shelters that focused on women and children.

This project provided an opportunity for us to put a microscope over the sector at a time of great strain to learn from the people at the coal face about the challenges they face in undertaking the important work they do for our community.

We would like to sincerely thank our partners in this project for their work under extremely difficult circumstances during the pandemic, and for investing their time in the survey which informed this report. Using the insights from this survey, the Paul Ramsay Foundation has sought to understand the learning and implications from the rise in domestic and family violence during COVID-19.

This report seeks to convey the impact that COVID-19 has had on women’s shelters, the women and children that use them, and the staff that work within them. It highlights the current capacity

and scope of these services, and where funding arrangements and constraints resulted in critical needs left unmet.

The Paul Ramsay Foundation’s mission is to break cycles of disadvantage in Australia. We work with a broad range of partners across various sectors who share this purpose. While philanthropy has an important role to play in developing new approaches and building better off-ramps from the vicious cycles of disadvantage generated by family and domestic violence, ultimately the capacity of these services needs to grow. This has clear implications for governments who remain overwhelmingly the primary funder of services. This report shines a light on the gaps in funding, the approach to supporting the sector and the real-world impact of these shortcomings.

While the focus of this project – and this report – is on women’s shelters which largely operate at the crisis end of the service spectrum, it is hard to avoid the reality that these services are often the only services dedicated to supporting victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. While a range of other general services exist, such as public housing or mental health services, the lack of specialised, dedicated services designed to address the long-term drivers and implications of domestic violence on women and children is a conversation which needs to be had.

When:
Conducted in late 2020

Participants:
Women’s shelters

Questions:
41 questions

Focus:
Service type, shelter income and sources of income and the effects of COVID-19



Breaking the cycles of disadvantage caused by domestic and family violence will mean more investment in the domestic violence sector, especially in medium and long-term housing options as well as primary prevention, early intervention and recovery. This should not come at the expense of the crisis end of the system, but investment in the longer term is critical for women throughout our community and the children who will build our future, and whose future depends on our response.

While the survey was conducted in the context of a crisis, this is a sector that is perpetually in crisis. The pandemic acted like a giant stress test on our national response to domestic violence, and as such the report has much broader implications beyond the pandemic.

A relevant limitation of this study is that of the 33 shelters funded in this project, three organisations manage clusters of shelters totalling 16 shelters between them. This report does not attempt to speak for the experience of every women's shelter in Australia, but rather provide a broad 'snapshot' of the sector based on the feedback of those involved. We are publishing themes from their qualitative views here, based on responses from 32 of the 33 shelters who received funding.

The findings presented here are the aggregated data from the surveys, summarised into key areas we believe are of significance. This report does not seek to compare the survey results to wider data points or research as a primary aim, and the scope is limited by questions based on what services are currently funded rather than areas of desired future funding.

We believe there is real value in listening to this feedback from the sector. We also openly acknowledge the limitations of the survey. Unfortunately, dialogue to assess need directly with the shelters was not possible prior to funding and the lack of available data mitigated against tailored contributions.

Throughout this document we have de-identified quotes and data to maximise the privacy of those who have provided us with this information.

We hope this report helps lift the voices of those at the coalface of one of Australia's great challenges – ending the scourge of domestic and family violence and lifting its survivors out of dangerous cycles of disadvantage.

The shelters

Funding was provided to 33 women-run, community-embedded and trauma-informed shelters which focus on women and children. The services were spread geographically across all states and territories, including four services dedicated to supporting women and children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Of the services which received funding, 32 shelters for women (and 31 shelters for children) responded to the survey.

On average, these shelters provide services to a median of 130 women and 98 children per year. While the range in size and scale was wide as shown below, most shelters (60 per cent) service fewer than 200 women each year and 80 per cent to fewer than 200 children per year.

And while most shelters provide accommodation services, 32 per cent of women accessing the services each year are not provided with accommodation.



This funding has allowed us to continue to offer our emergency relief program which we had lost our Commonwealth funding for in 2019. This is a program that supports women and children affected by Domestic and Family Violence by providing emergency relief in the form of essential goods, emergency accommodation and travel, and any form of relief the client might need. It may include mobile phones & credit removing the ability for the perpetrator to trace their whereabouts, emergency repairs to vehicles so the women & children have a safe vehicle and even gift cards for food and clothing.”

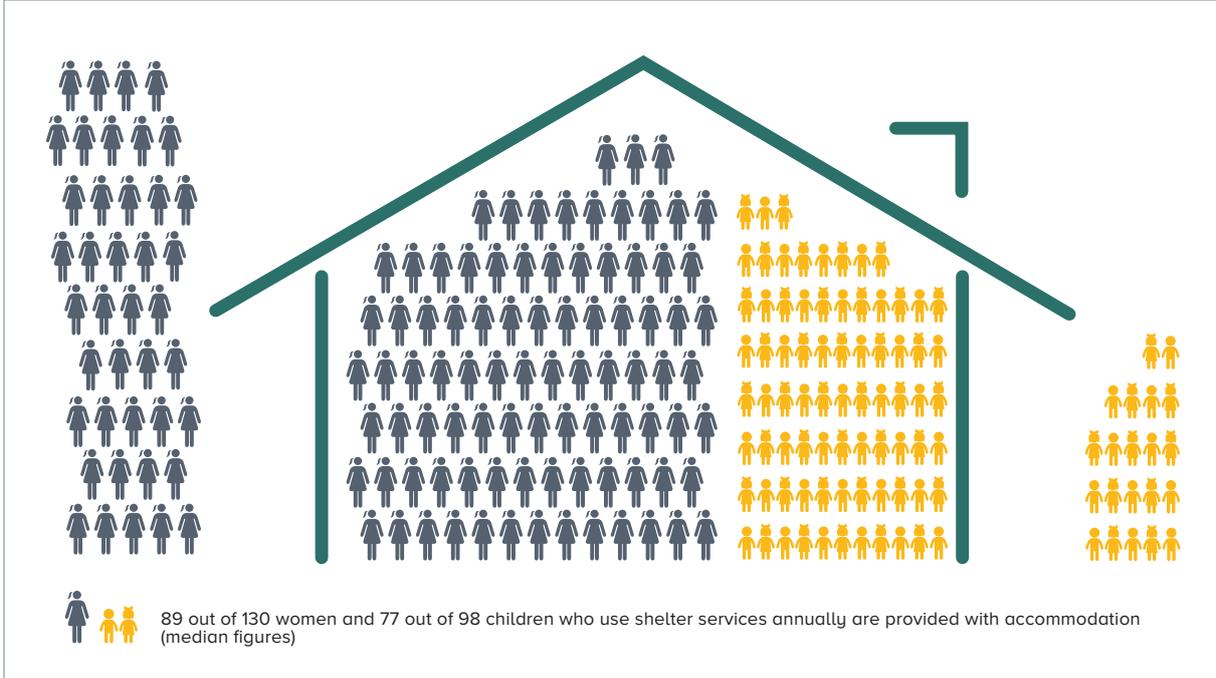


Figure 2: Median number of women and children who received services from each shelter. The shelters’ responses for clients receiving services each year ranged from 20 women/children to 1,934 women and 980 children. The annual number who received accommodation ranged from 20 to 650 women and 19 to 363 children.

The key funder of shelters surveyed is government. More than two-thirds of respondents received all of their funding from government, and the centre with the lowest reported level of public funding still only received 25 per cent of their funding from other sources.

The main variability was on a state basis, with West Australian shelters receiving a higher percentage of non-government funding. Three of four West Australian shelters received more than 10 per cent of their funding from other sources.

Excluding five outliers¹, the median annual revenue for the shelters was \$842K (average annual revenue was \$1m). The non-government contribution was zero for many shelters.

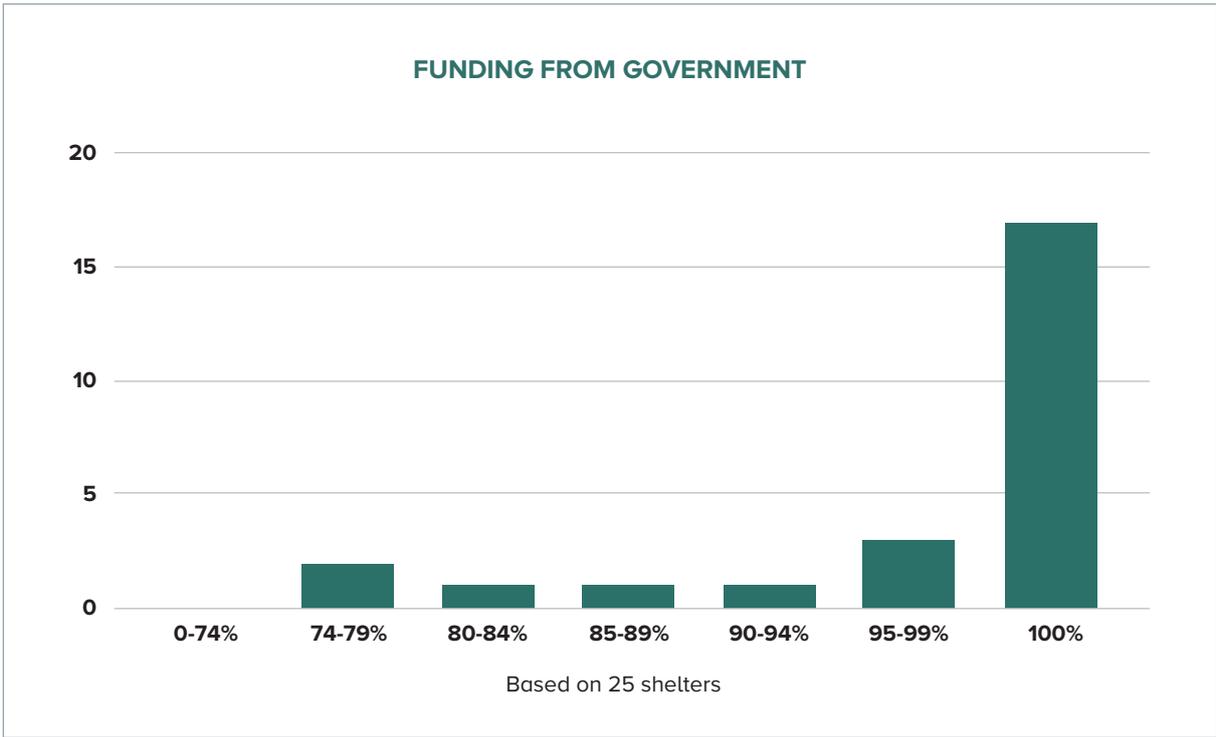


Figure 3: Sources of funding for shelters

¹ Outliers were defined as services with an annual budget over \$4.5m p.a. as these higher annual revenues were due to consolidated service provision, state-wide remit for services and remits beyond DFV services. There were 5 outliers in this instance.

The clients

At the time of accessing the shelters, women were more likely to be sole parents, not employed and had experienced homelessness in the past five years. These factors are indicative of the nature of family and domestic abuse which relies on power, control and the erosion of individual agency.



Low rates of employment is seen in most women who access our services. This is largely due to the control element in the cycle of domestic violence. Perpetrators will isolate women from their friends, family and often relocate out of their local area.... Unemployment increases the perpetrator's ability to have financial control over the victim, leading to more barriers for women to leave."

While the data has limitations including outliers, the majority of shelters reported that between five and 15 per cent of women were employed at the time of seeking services with a median employment rate of seven per cent.

Strong links were identified between coercive control by the partner/perpetrator and the difficulty of maintaining employment when domestic and family violence was occurring. Culturally and Linguistically

Diverse (CALD) women on temporary visas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, especially in remote locations, were highlighted by the sector as particularly vulnerable.



The majority of women accessing the service are not in a position to look for work, safety and security being the priority followed by dealing with Centrelink if already on a benefit or gaining an income through Centrelink. The complexities of their situations require their focus on dealing with the issues of becoming homelessness, applying for Domestic Violence Orders, relocating schools, dealing with the Family Law Courts (or) immigration if not an Australian resident."

The vast majority (median 84 per cent) of women were sole parents at the time of seeking services. This point-in-time knowledge doesn't deny the complicated and ever-changing relationship definitions of women experiencing domestic and family violence. Some individuals maintain or re-engage in a relationship with their partners after seeking support as they "want their kids to have a father"; and some violent partners are not the biological parents of children.



7%
employed

High proportion of women with disabilities

70%
homeless in past 5 years

Increasing number between 16-24 years

84%
sole parents

40%
interacting with child & family services

High likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system



[Our shelter] supports both women who are still in relationships and women [who] have left their relationships. The support required for a woman who is in a current domestic violent relationship requires specialist skills and can look very different to the support being offered to sole parents/single mothers. It requires a high level of skill to support a woman with or without children who is still residing in a violent relationship. We develop codes and special communication modes from the outset.”

The majority of women accessing a women’s shelter have been homeless in the past 5 years (median 70 per cent). A limitation to this data is that some shelters dealt exclusively with homeless women.



Victims/survivors with children usually have short periods of homelessness compared with women without children. Victims stay in relationships because there is not enough crisis accommodation services for women and children to flee to and temporary accommodation isn’t appropriate for women who are scared of partners.”

There were strong links between fear of being homeless – especially with children – and remaining in domestic and family violence situations. A shortage of stable housing was a key reason for returning to a partner. Many women and their children were unable to safely remain in the primary home.



As we know, the cycle of violence... [defies] easy description. Some are a second or third generation of homelessness, held captive by a lack of education, addiction and opportunity.”

A median of 40 per cent of women have had their child(ren) interact with child and family services due to real or perceived family risk. We note this question in the survey was subject to interpretation by the shelters, with some confining their response to those women who have formal child safety conditions in place and others reporting anyone who has had contact with child protective services, capturing a wider cohort.



The child protection system still sees women experiencing DFV as ‘failing to protect’ their children, this is beginning to change with a key focus becoming the safety of both mother and children - but still a long way to go.”

While national data is not available, a number of services noted the growth in young women (16-24 years) seeking support from shelters. The anecdotal evidence from those at the coal face that this group is a growing part of the client-base is concerning, particularly given the unique challenges associated with supporting this group. It is also worth noting that for many shelters, their remit is to support women over 18 years of age, however the shelters are providing services to women under that age.

Some of the unique challenges in supporting very young mothers include the likelihood of abuse by an intimate partner and/or other immediate family members and the difficulty keeping them engaged with available support.



This age group is least likely to stay engaged with the service for a long enough time so outcomes can be achieved.”

The data about women with disabilities experiencing family and domestic violence is challenging due to the expected high level of undiagnosed disability. Some services reported the proportion of women with disability accessing their services is as low as 10 per cent, where others reported levels as high as 80 per cent.



Percentage high due to trauma and mental health impact of women and children in domestic violence that can be debilitating and invisible to mainstream services. Diagnosed is in the 20% range - identified, may be on DSP or NDIS or active diagnosis. Undiagnosed potentially as high as 80%.”

While the vulnerability of this cohort is a factor, there are also many women whose disability is attributed to the violence they have experienced, both physical and mental.



Many women will have acquired brain injuries (either diagnosed or in many case undiagnosed) due to injuries to the head from assaults (these are often repeated assaults over time) and women who experience attempts to strangulate. Women with disabilities are known to be at higher risk of domestic violence and vulnerability increased.”

Experience with domestic and family violence often leads to direct interaction with the criminal justice system as a complainant or witness and this came through strongly in the survey, as did the significant correlation between women who are captured within the justice system as ‘offenders’.

The complex interaction between domestic and family violence, justice and child protection was noted, often with the mother doubly-disadvantaged by being judged “responsible” for the violence, leaving the perpetrator “invisible” to the system.



As the prime carer for children, women are often blamed for the child protection issues. They are the primary focus for intervention and scrutiny of their parenting with perpetrators of violence often invisible and not being held accountable. Aboriginal children are over-represented, Aboriginal women continue to live in fear of child protection services and having their children removed.”

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were specifically noted by shelters in relation to the intergenerational impact of family separation and child protection.



The Children’s Framework model is implemented by [our shelter] identifying that children are clients within their own right and as required case managers provide case plans for children in the service which allows for their voices to be heard particularly when the children are within the DC&J system.”

What we heard

CURRENT SERVICES

Crisis response and, to a certain degree, shorter-term recovery support are clearly the main tasks undertaken by shelters in this survey, with a much smaller focus on primary prevention or early intervention. The relatively small focus on legal and justice services is also noteworthy, considering the strong intersection between domestic and family violence and the law, and is an area for further consideration. While other services (legal aid) exist, they are not always available to women and

children who are living with family and domestic violence, and generalist services are not always well suited.

The lack of coordinated services at the prevention and early intervention end of the spectrum of service is at least partly a function of lack of funding for these longer-term interventions, however further work is required to better understand this and to what extent investment in skills and capacity building is needed.

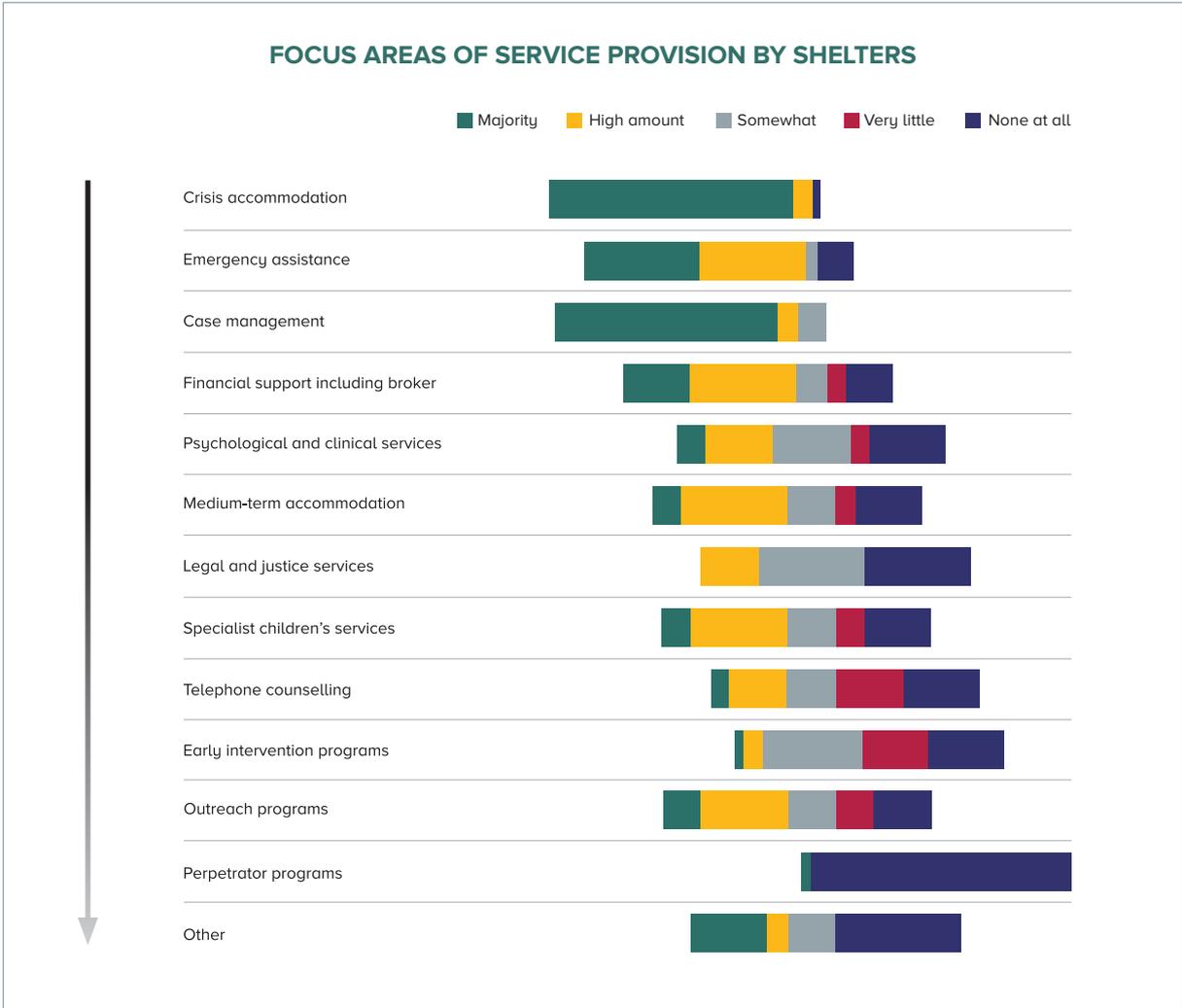


Figure 4: Range of services provided: crisis response, recovery, early intervention and primary prevention.

Some shelters said they deliberately maintain a broader focus by tapering their support to build increased independence for women, including financial support, outreach programs, medium-term housing, psychological services and children's services.

We want to highlight that the low number of perpetrator programs in the chart above was entirely expected – women's shelters are not 'in the business' of providing perpetrator programs.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Data from the shelters indicated a dangerous paradox where the pandemic drove a need for greater services, but the restrictions accompanying COVID-19 meant less could be provided.

Designated as an essential service, shelters remained open and available, however services were severely affected. Face-to-face contact and group sessions were cancelled; support and counselling shifted to telephone or video conferencing; housing, which is often shared, saw reduced capacity and the restricted use of shared spaces such as kitchens and bathrooms. Expenditure on cleaning and sanitizing also increased, placing further strain on the sector.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, service delivery of emergency accommodation was impacted dramatically. This included the reduction of the number of clients being supported with crisis accommodation (shared accommodation) as well as engagement via face to face. The service was reliant on using technology to provide support for our clients in the refuge, in transitional housing properties and in an outreach capacity."

Services were further affected by the lack of 'line of sight' to women and children, with the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and CALD women specifically highlighted.



When supporting Aboriginal clients, building rapport and trust is critical at first contact to build the foundations for effective support. Social emotional and wellbeing of our clients was impacted as our clients were not able to connect through normal means and seek treatment/support. We saw a decline in engagement from our clients as well as an increase in requests for outreach assistance."

Shelter staff and volunteers were under pressure with increased numbers of clients and more limited options of support. Their own networks faced restrictions, with some staff working from home and unable to engage with co-workers for debriefing and support – sometimes grappling with new or difficult technology.



We continued to accept referrals for the temporary supported accommodation...(but) placed restrictions on clients coming from hotspots. Clients were quarantined in motels if necessary. There has been an increase of Police referrals and overall increase in referrals from other services."

Measures to ensure social distancing and/or lockdown restrictions exacerbated points of stress on those experiencing domestic and family violence, and in some cases the threat of the virus itself was weaponised by perpetrators.

- Increased stress and social isolation
- Impact of home schooling
- Decreased wrap-around services
- Increased return to perpetrators due to financial and/or housing hardship
- Increased alcohol and other drugs usage
- Inability to report violence or make safety plans to leave violent relationships



Many women report being threatened with infection in order to keep them within the house.”

In many instances, access to technology and associated resources just didn't exist.



Many women did not have a laptop or data sufficient for their children to engage in their schoolwork. We worked hard to ensure educational packs were developed for the children at the shelter and liaised closely with school social workers to ensure that hard copy resources were available for children.”

Perpetrator behaviour also changed with increased coercive control, incidence and intensity of domestic and family violence including sexual violence, and alcohol and other drug use. Increased technological control meant that for some there was no ability to access support, and there was a decrease in wrap-around support services available.



Perpetrators have used the lockdown and lack of resources to their advantage in maintaining control and power which are the two central tenets of the domestic violence cycle. Domestic violence cycles have shortened in time due to emotional and financial stressors therefore violence has increased.”

The types of coercive control identified included:

- Telling women/children when (and how much) they can eat
- Limiting access to toilet paper
- Escalation of violence in homes due with women cut off from social, professional, family and community supports
- Using COVID as a reason that women could not leave the home
- Accusing women of intentionally contracting COVID and spreading it to the family



For women and children already experiencing the adversity of homelessness and or domestic violence, COVID added an additional layer of isolation, fear for themselves and family members contracting the virus, and lack of trust in the future.”

HOW FUNDING WAS USED

The surge funds provided by the Paul Ramsay Foundation primarily supported the shelters' crisis response and recovery programs which were constrained and often required modification in response to the increase in demand during the pandemic (for example the capacity of shared accommodation and use of outside accommodation to meet needs).

Based on the needs of their communities, shelters were allocated the funding grant across 1-4 'surge' target areas:

1. Facilitation of accommodation needs for families
2. Essential goods and services for women
3. Essential goods and services for children
4. Critical operational needs of the shelter (e.g. extra case workers; specialist short-term roles such as psychologists).

Of the 33 shelters, more than 65 per cent used at least some part of the surge funding for accommodation upgrades or purchasing accommodation-related goods, reinforcing that elements of existing accommodation are often unsuitable for the specific needs of children and women leaving domestic and family violence.

In some cases, the surge funds were used to fill gaps where there had been a withdrawal by a previous funder, or for capital works to meet new COVID-19 requirements.

Shelters reported these key areas for the use of funds:

1. Resourcing responses required as a direct result of increased service demand due to the pandemic
2. Extending some services
3. Providing specialist support
4. Addressing funding gaps
5. Capital works as a result of new COVID-safe and pandemic guidelines



To access more staff to allow for the high amount of clients during COVID when it is most needed. It assisted with clients moving into their own homes, to address chronic homelessness by setting up leases, providing furniture. It has provided children with resources for school holiday activity and various needs such as school supplies and access to sports and activities.”

Testing our findings

On 22 April 2021, we held an online video discussion with professional representatives from the women's shelters to outline the key findings from this survey, test whether these outputs reflected the lived experience accurately, and hear their feedback and thoughts about the issues this work had raised.

Participants from every state and territory joined the discussion with further feedback received via email after the session. **The overall response was positive, with the shelters' representatives expressing enthusiasm for greater advocacy and further work to achieve common objectives.**

In addition, a presentation of the aggregated findings – especially in relation to the summary recommendations – led to discussion which highlighted four additional points in particular:

1. Not only is there an ongoing housing need per se, but the current housing stock is also inadequate *right now*: Many shelters have access to older properties in desperate need of upgrade and/or motels which are also unsuitable (More on this in the following section – Opportunities for further work, points 1 and 6).



Our properties are more than 40 years old. A lot of them seem to be falling down around us."

2. Increasing homelessness: This is now a major issue facing shelters. We heard many women and children were sleeping in cars, or in overcrowded conditions, due to lack of access to beds. Participants spoke in detail to the severe shortage of affordable/community housing which had worsened post-COVID. (See Opportunities for further work, points 1 and 6).



The hardest thing we have to do is turn people away when they need our assistance."

3. How providing support is 'counted': There is concern regarding the complicated 'entry' and 'exit' points for women and children accessing these services. Women are recorded at 'entry' if they receive any kind of support – even something as small as food vouchers – but the whole experience does not meet their underlying need and there aren't enough realistic 'exit' options (See Opportunities for further work, points 3 and 6).



We need to speak together as one."

4. Coordinated voice of the sector: Many participants remarked on the absence of a national peak body and the concomitant lack of a united political voice for the sector. They discussed the need to move from state-based voices to a more unified, independent and respected professional voice which could advocate on their behalf at a national level (See Opportunities for further work, point 2).

Opportunities for further work

1. Lack of suitable medium and long-term accommodation

Despite the fact that accommodation is often the primary focus of shelters, around one-third of women accessing services are unable to be housed. The undersupply of medium and long-term accommodation for women and children living with domestic and family violence means thousands of women seeking help are left without a safe and secure place to stay, leaving them trapped - a feeling which is exacerbated when there are children involved and also at risk.

Ensuring women and children can access medium and long term accommodation is clearly part of the solution to ending multi-generational violence. The pandemic has highlighted questions around a lack of options, and also whether shared accommodation is fit for purpose. More work is required to understand the ways of providing accommodation that can work in a COVID world. However, while COVID placed a microscope on the above issues, a lack of suitable accommodation options was a reality for women before the pandemic.

The limitations of this survey mean further work is needed to understand turn away rates, length of stay and the potential mismatch between supply and demand for emergency shelter.

2. State variation was a significant feature of our results

There is a wide variation of available accommodation and other support options across states and territories. Each jurisdiction provided variation in the size and scope of shelters, their focus and their funding arrangements, which are often complex and involve multiple stakeholders.

The history of individual shelters, resources provided and state/territory jurisdictions themselves may account for this, however, narrowing the gap by benchmarked standards may help to improve outcomes, as well as providing a better understanding of what type and scale of service model may be optimal for shelter services.

Finding the best practice models and lifting standards across all jurisdictions should be a priority for government.

3. Greater attention to primary prevention, early intervention and recovery is needed

Services are often left to fundraise year-on-year to support these critical areas of need, yet these are the type of services which have the potential to break the long-term cycles of violence and disadvantage that flow from domestic and family violence.

Existing funding agreements may be focused on addressing crisis situations and this remains a critical area of need, however, services must be supported and empowered to go beyond the immediate crisis and break the cycles of domestic and family violence, including with greater access to legal and justice services.

4. Employment is a critical off-ramp from the cycles of domestic and family violence

Housing and accommodation is clearly the focus of women's shelters and this is a critical aspect to off-ramps from the cycles of domestic and family violence. We also know that denying employment is one aspect of control used by perpetrators, making employment services for women in these situations a critical feature of a best practice model of support.

Considering how employment status intersects with experiences of domestic and family violence should be priority for further investigation.

5. Intersection with the criminal justice system

The Paul Ramsay Foundation's focus on prevention of contact with the criminal justice system and reducing exposure to domestic and family violence is a priority area of our future investigation. We know that domestic and family violence has self-evident links to incarceration: an overwhelming majority of women in prison are in fact survivors of domestic and family violence, reinforcing the need for holistic support services to create off-ramps from this potentially devastating cycle of disadvantage.

6. Opportunity for a holistic study about the women's shelter sector

Research in this area, including this report, often focuses on areas of service provision and what organisations are funded to provide.

There is an opportunity to look more holistically and broadly for solutions, starting with the question: what would shelters do and what services would they provide if their singular consideration was 'What do women and children most need?' And what is the best practice model for a further suite of services which would help reduce the cyclical nature of domestic and family violence?

We seek to identify and partner with individuals, communities and organisations working to create an Australia where people can overcome disadvantage and realise their potential. The late Paul Ramsay AO established the Foundation in 2006 and, after his death in 2014, left the majority of his estate to continue his philanthropy for generations to come. His commitment to good works has allowed us to support the for-purpose sector with grants of more than \$350 million made since 2016 to more than 90 different partners committed to achieving lasting change. Find out more at paulramsayfoundation.org.au

www.paulramsayfoundation.org.au

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