

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Ela Stewart

Organisation Name: inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence

Your position or role: Policy Officer

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Family violence, Services, Public housing, Housing affordability, Employment, Mental health, Rough sleeping, Indigenous people

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

An advocacy body , Other (please describe)

We are a family violence service

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

Migrant and refugee women and children

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

Please note my initial attachment was the incorrect file. This is the correct file.

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5e74399c8ec5b-inTouch Submission to the Homelessness Inquiry Victoria.pdf](#)

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Ela Stewart

March 2020

Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

According to the Census of 2016, there were approximately 116,000 people who were homeless in Australia.¹ This rate was 4.6 percent higher than the number of homeless people in Australia in 2011.²

Since the 2016 Census, statistics collected and analysed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) showed that in the 2018-19 year, 290,300 or 1.2 percent of the Australian population were assisted by Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS).³ Of the clients who presented at these services, 153,700 were at risk of homelessness, and 112,000 were homeless.⁴ An analysis of the characteristics of these clients showed that 60 percent were female, 17 percent were children under the age of 10, 13 percent were young people aged between 10-17, and the largest group of adult clients – 18 percent – were aged 25-34 years.⁵

The AIHW also reports that “116,400 SHS clients experienced family and domestic violence at some point during the reporting period”. Of those who experienced family and domestic violence, 76 percent were female. Furthermore:

“Australians known to be at particular risk of homelessness include those who have experienced family and domestic violence, young people, children on care and protection orders, Indigenous Australians, people leaving health or social care arrangements, and Australians aged 55 or older.”⁶

inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (inTouch) estimates that approximately 21.7 percent of our clients are in non-conventional, emergency, or transitional housing. This includes those who are staying in crisis or emergency accommodation, staying in boarding or rooming houses, caravan parks, or staying with relatives or friends. This figure has been collated from data collected by intake staff at our organisation using the Special Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP). Anecdotal information from our case managers and legal staff indicates that the number of clients who are homeless is actually much higher than this figure and that this particular reporting mechanism does not adequately reflect the full picture.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2049.0 – Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016, Canberra <<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/2049.0Media%20Release12016>> accessed 11 March 2020.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2049.0 – Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016, Canberra <<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/2049.0Media%20Release12016>> accessed 11 March 2020.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Homelessness and Homelessness Services, 2019, Canberra, AIHW. <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/homelessness-and-homelessness-services>> accessed 11 March 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

In this submission, we would like to highlight the multitude of barriers women from migrant and refugee communities who experience family violence face when they are at risk of homelessness. Our clients face significant structural barriers as a result of their migration experience, visa status, and low/no income status. These barriers emerge for our clients from the point at which they are in crisis, through to post-crisis periods when they are seeking stable, long-term housing. We make a number of recommendations for consideration:

1. We echo the calls of our colleagues across the family violence and homelessness sectors for **increased government funding and resourcing to ensure there is adequate emergency, medium-term, and long-term housing** for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
2. Women and children who are leaving situations of family violence require safety and stability. We believe **more fit-for-purpose accommodation** that can meet the needs of these clients is crucial.
3. **Urgent housing and support services are required for women who are on temporary visas.** Many of these clients are ineligible for a range of support services including public health, social security and housing support, making them incredibly vulnerable.
4. **Specific and customised housing support and resources for migrant and refugee women** experiencing family violence is required. inTouch's inLanguage, inCulture model means that we provide a culturally tailored approach to case management and advocacy for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds experiencing family violence. Offering and expanding programs that are culturally safe and responsive, and offered in different languages would increase the reach and effectiveness of support services.
5. The **increased provision of information, services and support in different languages** is urgently required.

About inTouch

inTouch provides integrated, culturally appropriate services to migrant and refugee communities. Over the past 35 years, we have addressed the specific needs of communities and helped over 18,000 women experiencing family violence. In the 2018–19 financial year, inTouch provided services to 1430 women from 101 different countries, and over 1350 of their children.

We have become a critical piece in Victoria's family violence response system. In 2016, the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria recommended that the government fund inTouch to better support the system in meeting the needs of people from refugee and migrant backgrounds experiencing family violence. As a leading expert with these communities, the reach and impact of inTouch's work has significantly increased.

inTouch works across the family violence continuum, from prevention and early intervention, to crisis intervention, post-crisis support and recovery. Our services and programs include:

- An integrated, culturally responsive model based on inLanguage, inCulture case management. Our 21 case managers are highly diverse, offering direct client services in

over 25 languages. They have a unique understanding of a client’s lived migration experience, cultural influences, and the barriers faced when trying to seek help.

- An in-house accredited community legal centre, the only one of its kind in a specialist family violence service, which provides legal advice, court advocacy and immigration support to inTouch clients.
- Capacity building of specialist and non-specialist family violence providers, and community organisations to better deliver support to refugee and migrant women experiencing family violence. This includes a public training calendar.
- An early intervention program, Motivation for Change, working directly with men from culturally and linguistically diverse communities who use violence towards their families.

About our clients

inTouch is a state-wide service providing case management and legal services to clients across Victoria. Although most of our clients reside in metropolitan municipalities and councils, in 2018-2019 five percent of our clients were located in rural and regional locations.

Almost half of our clients were aged between 25 and 34 years. Over 70 percent of the clients we assisted in 2018-19 had arrived in Australia from 2010 onwards, and 30 percent of our clients arrived in Australia in the past five years.

Figure 1. inTouch client age groups, 2018-2019

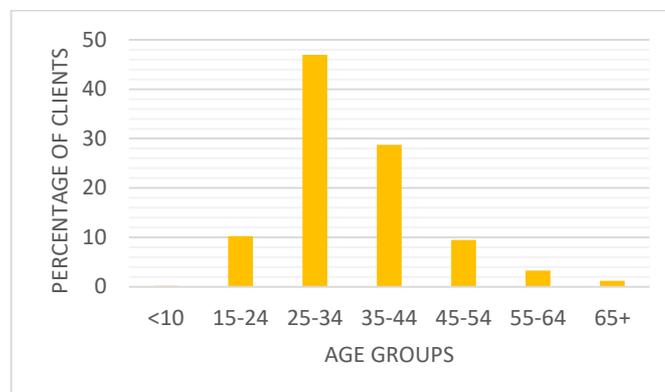
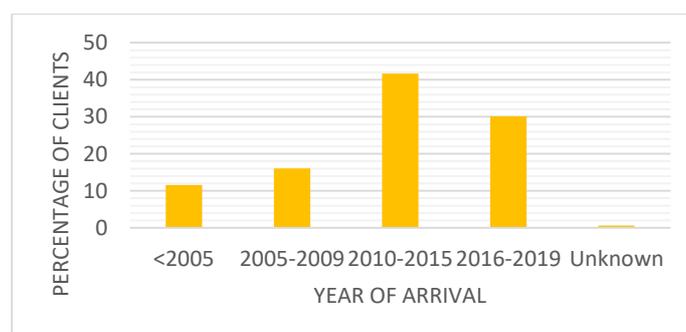


Figure 2. Year of arrival of inTouch clients, 2018-2019



We estimate that approximately half of our clients are temporary visa holders or temporary residents. Clients who are temporary visa holders or temporary residents include those who are on spousal or partner visas, working visa holders, student visas, tourist or visitor visas, and bridging visas.

Our statistics show that 36 percent of our clients receive no income at the time of presenting at our service. Only 25 percent of our clients have income from paid work, and approximately 29 percent of our clients receive some sort of a government allowance or payments (half of which receive parenting payments such as Family Tax Benefits). Only 10 percent of our clients are receiving Newstart allowance at the time of presenting at our service.

What are the issues?

Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for our clients. Our clients experience homelessness either because they have been forced to leave the home due to the danger they face from the family violence, or because the perpetrator has been removed from the home, and the woman cannot maintain rental, mortgage, and other household payments on her own.

Almost half of our clients at inTouch are women on temporary visas, including those on spousal visas, student visas, and working visas. Many of these women do not have relatives or a close network of friends who they can choose to stay with. Many women who have been in Australia for a short period of time share the social networks and families of their partner. For these women, finding somewhere to live after leaving family violence can be very challenging, and out of desperation and a lack of options, many women are choosing to remain in the abusive household. It is our experience that our clients will only leave the abusive relationship when things are extremely unsafe due to their lack of networks, and the real or perceived lack of housing options and support services that are available to them.

When our clients become homeless, it can be for extended periods of time due to the barriers they face in the housing services sector as well as private rental sector. These barriers are determined by a number of factors, including their visa status, their migration status – with a large portion of our clients having arrived in Australia in the past five years and not having an extensive rental history – and also their employment and financial status. As mentioned earlier, a large number of our clients are on low or no income. These factors are contributing to the barriers our clients face at each stage of engagement with homelessness and housing services.

When child protection services are involved, women are often given the choice to either have their children removed if they remain in the abusive situation, or the women are encouraged to leave the violent household and seek support from a housing service.

Gaps in the services sector: where to turn for stable, safe, and affordable housing?

In this next section of our submission, we wish to highlight the barriers and the challenges that our clients face from initial crisis support and accommodation, to being referred to housing services, and in seeking long-term housing.

Crisis support and accommodation

Our clients who are in critical or dangerous situations can access support through Safe Steps.

Our case managers have however reported that refuges may be reluctant to take clients who have no income – such as temporary visa holders – as they won't have anywhere to leave to. Some of these clients may therefore be placed in motel accommodation instead. Whilst motel accommodation is a viable option for those who require urgent safety, staying in a motel with multiple children is difficult for many of our clients. Many motels don't have cooking facilities and being in one room with multiple children can cause distress and other incidental problems.

Our clients who are on student visas or working visas are anxious about being in a refuge as this can mean they need to breach the conditions of their visa in order to stay in the refuge. For example, students are often advised they can no longer attend their classes due to security risks – which are crucial conditions the refuge or women's shelter must make for the safety of the woman and everyone else in the refuge. Class attendance and adhering to the requirements of their course are conditions of the student visas however. This can therefore make women reluctant to seek assistance in a shelter.

Other forms of transitional housing such as rooming houses or boarding rooms are another essential service provided to women who are in crisis and face homelessness. The state of many of these types of accommodation have been reported extensively by the housing support sector.⁷ In line with the views of many in the housing sector, our clients also report that some of these types of emergency accommodation women are placed in are overcrowded, dirty, and many of our clients are fearful of their environments. The individual and fundamental needs of our clients in these environments may not be met – such as sufficient space for prayer and dietary requirements. These environments can incidentally cause distress and other problems for many of our clients.

Case study

Jessie is an international student living and studying in Melbourne. Her boyfriend has been violent towards her and after many attempts, she has decided to leave him. A crisis service referred her to a women's refuge. She has been advised by the refuge that she can't attend her classes.

Jessie decides not to stay in the refuge because she is worried about her visa. Her family back in her home country are paying her student fees and she is terrified of failing.

Working with housing services

Women who have been through crisis housing are then referred to homelessness services. These services provide assistance to the women to secure longer term housing. A designated housing

⁷ Northern and Western Homelessness Networks, A Crisis in Crisis: The appalling state of emergency accommodation in Melbourne's north and west, 2019, Melbourne.

worker will assist the woman to ascertain her needs, and try to match her with any availability in the private, community or public housing sector.

In most circumstances, the woman is expected to make financial contributions towards the cost of where she is living. This is another barrier for our clients. As discussed earlier, many of our clients receive no income and many are on temporary visas ineligible for Centrelink payments. Housing services are therefore unable to provide support or solutions to these clients.

The experiences of those clients who do receive referrals and support to housing services are mixed. Whilst some find the experience helpful and empowering, many of our clients note significant difficulties through the process. For example, some of our clients feel that they are expected to accept any housing that is found for them. Some of our clients report that their housing support worker disengages with them if they refuse a housing option due to the location or other reason.

Anecdotal information from our case managers and clients indicates that experiences with housing services depend considerably on the specific housing worker. Some housing workers are familiar with the barriers faced by migrant and refugee women who experience family violence. They are therefore proactive in their approach to working with our clients and to meet their specific needs.

Case study

Meryem is in Australia on a visitor visa. She has been here visiting her partner who had promised to sponsor her to stay. Her partner has been violent however, and one day out of fear Meryem left the home and was referred to crisis accommodation. After a few days in a women's shelter, Meryem was referred to multiple housing services. The services would not take on Meryem's case because she is not eligible for Centrelink and has no income.

Finding long-term accommodation

Our clients face considerable barriers to finding long-term accommodation. As discussed earlier, 30 percent of our clients have arrived in Australia in the past five years. They have spent a considerable if not most of this time with their ex-partner, and have very limited if any rental history. In addition, many of our clients are low/no income earners and are unemployed. These factors make our clients undesirable candidates for rental properties.

A number of our clients have found places in share housing. Whilst this has been a viable and useful option for some of our clients, there can be complications for vulnerable clients. It can also be difficult for those who have children. Clients who are renting a room or a bed in a share house are frequently left off the lease agreement and the leaseholder may not want to officiate the agreement by signing any documentation that will assist our client to obtain rent assistance and support through the Flexible Support Packages. We have also had clients who have been exploited in these situations by the leaseholder, charging high rates of rent and in one particular case, our client was forced into servitude.

Public housing is a very attractive option for many of our clients. As well-known across Victoria, the waitlists for public housing are very long. Most of our case managers report that whilst applications that are submitted for women experiencing family violence are prioritised by the Department of Health and Human Services, women and families face significant wait times of over one to two years.

Case study

Mae is on a spousal visa in Australia and recently left her abusive husband (also her visa sponsor). She has been homeless since she left him and unable to secure any private rental accommodation. She works for a restaurant who will only pay her cash-in-hand. She hasn't lived in Australia previously and therefore has no housing or employment references. She has been advised by a private real estate agent that she would be unable to find a suitable rental property for her.

'Stuck' in transition

inTouch currently has a number of clients who have remained in motels or other transitional housing for extended periods of time. At the time of writing this submission, one client has been living in shared accommodation through a not-for-profit housing service for two years. Another client has very recently secured a private rental after staying in a motel room for one year with her six children. A third client has been living in shared accommodation through another not-for-profit organisation for eight months. Although this client is happy there, she is unable to have her children live with her and is seeking long term, affordable housing options.

Our recommendations

Our service calls on the implementation of a number of initiatives to alleviate the barriers that our clients face when they are seeking stable, long-term housing. Knowing that our clients in most cases will choose to stay in a dangerous and abusive situation rather than be homeless is incredibly concerning.

1. We echo the calls of our colleagues across the family violence and homelessness sectors for **increased government funding and resourcing to ensure there is adequate emergency, medium-term, and long-term housing** for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
2. Women and children who are leaving situations of family violence require safety and stability. We believe **more fit-for-purpose accommodation** that can meet the needs of these clients is crucial.
3. **Urgent housing and support services are required for women who are on temporary visas.** Many of these clients are ineligible for a range of support services including public health, social security and housing support, making them incredibly vulnerable.
4. **Specific and customised housing support and resources for migrant and refugee women** experiencing family violence is required. inTouch's inLanguage, inCulture model means that we provide a culturally tailored approach to case management and advocacy for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds experiencing family violence. Offering and

expanding programs that are culturally safe and responsive, and offered in different languages would increase the reach and effectiveness of support services.

5. The **increased provision of information, services and support in different languages** is urgently required.

For further information, please contact:

Sonia Morabito
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