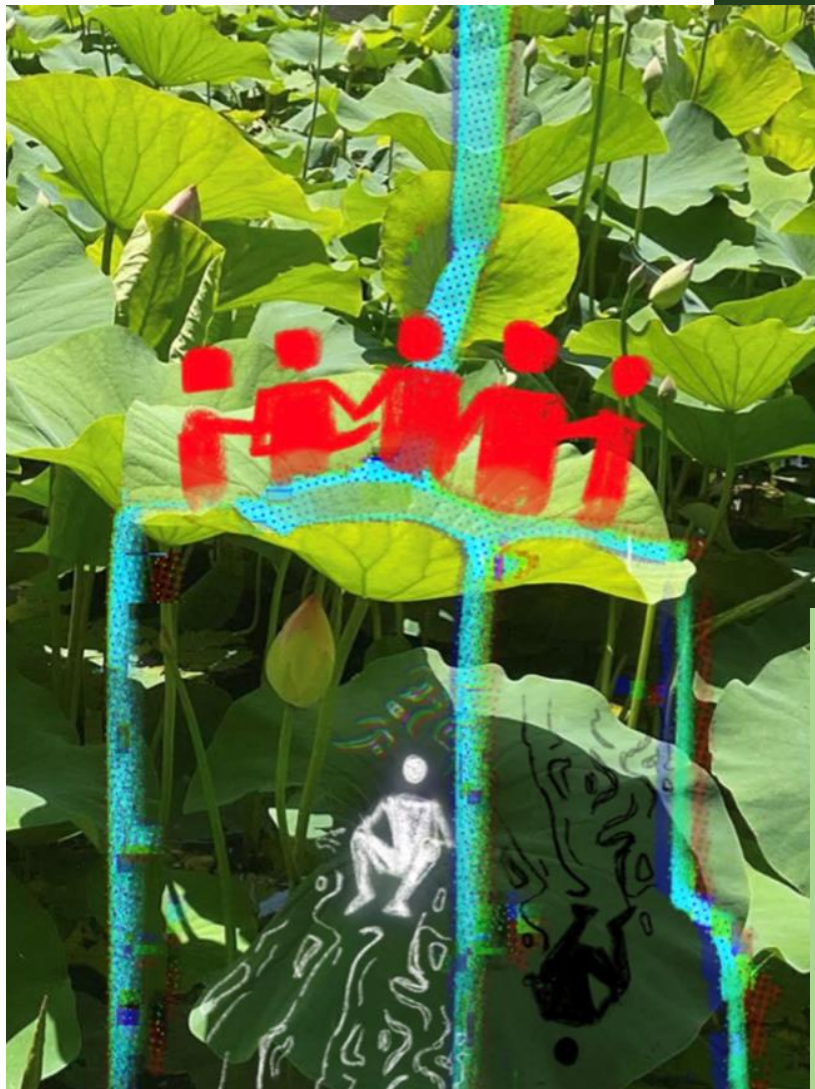




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THE ACCESS PROJECT

Children and young people seeking safety from family violence

2026



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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live. We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and recognise the leadership and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including children and young people, in building the knowledge to end family violence in all communities. Our project honours the rich and enduring culture of storytelling as a way of sharing knowledge.

Thank You

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the young people who worked with us on this project for generously giving their time and sharing their stories. We acknowledge their strength in doing so. The images in this report include photographs, artworks, written reflections and creative writing that have been shared by young people in the spirit of generosity. We acknowledge their creativity and the stories these images carry, and we thank them for allowing us to share their perspectives with others.

Thanks also to our project partner Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre, whose expertise and support have been invaluable throughout this project. We acknowledge their commitment to finding ways to better support children and young people affected by family violence through leadership, advocacy and research.

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This project was funded by the Victorian Government.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

This report includes creative works produced and owned by young people who participated in this study. These works are shared here with their permission.

We request that they not be reproduced, copied or circulated further without the explicit consent of the young people who created them.

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 8

BACKGROUND: SITUATING THE PROJECT 11

Policy and evidence context: with and by young people	13
Children, young people and family violence crisis responses	15
About this project	17
About Safe Steps	17

RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH 18

Study One: Practice responses for children and young people in crisis accommodation	18
Study Two: Young people's experiences of family violence crisis response	21

FINDINGS 27

Study One: Practice responses for children and young people in crisis accommodation	27
Study Two: Young people's experiences of family violence crisis response	32
Recognition	39
Being seen, heard and respected	43
Building safer futures	48
Imagining a better system	51

DISCUSSION 52

In summary	52
Policy and evidence context: with and by young people	53
Strengths, challenges and limitations	54
Insights and priority actions	55
Building safer futures	59

REFERENCES 62

Acronyms

This report makes limited use of acronyms to support accessibility and ease of reading. Where acronyms are used, they are spelled out in full on first mention and are provided below for reference.

ACMS	Australian Child Maltreatment study
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ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
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ANROWS	Australian's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety
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MARAM	Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework
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NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
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SHIP	Specialised Homelessness Information Platform
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A note on language about children and young people

For this report, we adopt the terminology of ‘children and young people’ and use the terms together or separately depending on context. We acknowledge that ‘child’ and ‘children’ are legislatively enshrined as referring to those under the age of 18 (United Nations, 1989), and we adopt that definition here. We note that this group encompasses a wide range of ages, developmental stages and needs, which has important implications for service responses.

Similarly, the age ranges encompassed by the term ‘young person’ are broad and vary across legislation, policy and practice at the state level, nationally and internationally. Following Australian youth scholarship, this report recognises that a ‘young person’ is not defined solely by biological age but rather in relation to the people, institutions, laws, social norms and material conditions that shape their lives (Wyn, Cahill and Cuervo, 2024).

Ultimately, as researchers of lived experience, we embrace a flexible use of the term ‘young people’ and recognise that developmental stage and individual needs are often of most relevance to experiences. We acknowledge that such an approach is not always possible or practicable within service contexts, where age-based boundaries shape jurisdictions and the allocation of resources. However, in developing an understanding of how services fit (or do not fit) into young people’s lives - rather than vice versa - there is a need to de-centre the terms in which service systems understand service users and consider young people’s experiences in their own terms.

Executive Summary

Despite Australia's policy intentions to recognise children and young people as victim-survivors of family violence *in their own right*, and to listen to their ideas and perspectives in shaping services, current responses remain misaligned. Children and young people continue to navigate a fragmented web of services often described as 'not fit for purpose.' In practice, this means that while policy frameworks acknowledge the need for child-centred approaches, service delivery remains largely adult-centric, poorly equipped to respond to young people's needs and difficult for young people to navigate or influence.

This project

This report presents findings from the ACCESS Project, which explored children and young people's experiences of seeking safety from family violence. Recognising that empirical evidence to guide policy and service design is scarce, the project used participatory and creative approaches to explore young people's experiences and identify what needs to change within existing service systems. Central to this approach was a commitment to privileging the lived expertise of young people, while also engaging with service data to critically ask: *what if services were designed with children and young people at the centre?*

Research design and approach

The ACCESS project employed a mixed methods design, comprising two distinct but complementary studies.

Study One: involved a qualitative case file review of Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre service data. A total of 30 case files were selected and reviewed to explore the profiles of and practice responses for children and young people accessing crisis accommodation.

Study Two: was collaborative and arts-based, informed by the participatory research method, 'photovoice', in which young people creatively represented their perspectives, experiences and lives. They produced photographs, artworks, written reflections and creative writing and participated in a series of discussions about their experiences of family violence and seeking safety. To conclude this study, we shared insights generated by young people with practitioners and policy stakeholders during a workshop, where we invited reflection and discussion.

Key findings

Study One: The case file review highlighted that children and young people are involved in a substantial part of the work undertaken in Safe Step's family violence crisis accommodation services. Across the 30 family case files, support was provided to 75 children, ranging in age from seven weeks to 19 years. Findings documented a complex web of cascading impacts of family violence that permeated young people's lives. The review showed that practitioners responded with flexibility and innovation, coordinating a wide range of practice responses that extended well beyond family violence risk assessment and safety planning to encompass preventive care, disability- and health-related assistance and support. It demonstrated the essential and unique role of crisis accommodation as both a place of safety and a hub for early intervention supporting children's wellbeing and longer-term recovery, alongside that of their families.

Study Two: Nine young people participated in the arts-based study, ranging in age from 19 to 29 at the time of the project. Data were generated through visual, creative and narrative materials that young people produced and chose to share, and through discussions about the work they had produced. The experiences shared by young people were diverse and complex: represented through three overarching themes: (1) recognition - of violence and by services, (2) being seen, heard and respected and (3) building safer futures. Together, their insights highlighted the urgent need for 'reimagined' responses to family violence that support children and young people regardless of where or why they engage with the system, whether through specialist family violence, homelessness and housing, mental health or disability services. Their collective vision was for service systems that place people at the centre.

Strengths, challenges and limitations

A key strength of the project was its design with each study generating different forms of evidence: one offering a structured, system-level view of practice through the lens of a case file analysis, and the other providing rich, contextualised insights into young people's experiences of family violence and seeking safety through arts-based methods.

The two studies were not without their challenges, and a degree of caution is warranted when interpreting the findings. Study One was limited to 30 case files from a single provider of crisis accommodation services in Victoria and was further constrained by data systems that do not readily identify children and young people as distinct from a parent seeking safety. This represents both an important finding and a potential limitation.

Study Two, while rich in detailed insights into young people's perspectives and experiences, was not designed to document specific and temporal information about participants interactions with crisis accommodation or other services in response to family violence. Rather, the findings are illustrative of key experiences of young people seeking safety and offer a depth of understanding made possible through collaborative and creative research processes.

Insights and priority actions

Insights from **Study One** – the case file review - clustered around the interconnected issues of complexity, (in)visibility and resourcing, and give rise to the following recommended priority actions to:

- **invest in 'fit-for-purpose' data systems** (which may include enhancing the capacity of existing systems) that explicitly support policy intentions to recognise children and young people as victim survivors and service users in their own right (rather than being subsumed under adult or family records), thereby enabling the full extent of crisis accommodation practice responses for children, young people and families to be made visible and counted.
- **recognise crisis accommodation as a site of early intervention** for children and young people, not just as a temporary accommodation stop. While practices in crisis accommodation are already deeply engaged in supporting children, young people and family's safer pathways out of violence, they are not currently resourced to fully realise this potential.

Insights from **Study Two** - the participatory arts-based study – clustered around the themes of recognition, (in)visibility and agency. The following recommended priority actions reflect what young people shared about their living and lived experience, and point to the need to:

- **develop youth-led resources about family violence**, ensuring their perspectives and experiences shape the content and approach. These resources should support children and young people to understand what is happening to them as violence and provide information about their rights and available supports.
- **integrate people with lived and living experience of family violence into service design and delivery** (in family violence, homelessness and other services) to bridge gaps between young people and services and increase engagement and human-centred design. While this can involve utilising ‘peer worker’ models, it should also involve ensuring that people with lived experience of family violence are included as staff (at all levels) and board members across services.

The priority actions outlined here aim to improve how family violence crisis responses support children and young people. However, enacting them effectively - and achieving meaningful impact - demands a **seismic shift in the design and delivery of services**, ensuring they are *truly* person-centred and responsive to children and young people’s distinct circumstances and priorities. Such a shift would involve the development of services that can listen well to those who access them, taking as their starting point the needs and priorities of children and young people rather than the systems in which they are embedded. Ultimately, this shift can only be realised through a genuine and meaningful commitment to youth and lived experience leadership in the co-design of evidence, policy and practice.

Background: situating the project



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Globally, domestic, family and sexual violence is highly prevalent, and its detrimental impacts on the lives of children and young people are profound and well documented (Noble-Carr et al., 2019). In Australia, recent nationally representative data on children and young people's experiences of violence paint a stark picture. Surveying over 8,500 young people, the *Australian Child Maltreatment Study* (ACMS) found that nearly one in two survey respondents (62%) had experienced at least one form of maltreatment in childhood and adolescence including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect or exposure to domestic violence (Mathews et al., 2023). While many young people reported multiple and overlapping forms of violence, exposure to domestic violence emerged as one of the most common experiences (Higgins et al., 2023).

Along with data on prevalence, the ACMS adds to a growing body of evidence about the negative and lifelong consequences for children and young people who grow up in environments where family and domestic violence occurs. Prior research has found that childhood experiences of violence are associated with short- and long-term impacts on physical, emotional and mental health, as well as a range of adverse outcomes across education, housing, relationships and future parenting (Tzouvara et al., 2023). Children and young people affected by violence are at heightened risk of intergenerational cycles of disadvantage (Papalia et al., 2025). Some young people exposed to violence in the home may

go on to use violence themselves: against other family members/carers or in intimate relationships (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). The risk of experiencing violence later in life is even greater. Data indicate that around one third of women in Australia who witness family violence as children go on to become victim-survivors of family violence in adulthood (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The ACMS further highlighted the links between childhood maltreatment and adverse outcomes in adulthood including problematic alcohol and drug use, suicide and self-harm (Laurence et al., 2023).

Family violence research, policy and practice have traditionally prioritised the experiences and needs of adult victim-survivors. However, evidence on the prevalence and impacts for children and young people underscores the pressing need for policy intentions recognising children and young people as victim-survivors of family violence in their own right to be translated into practice settings.

Policy and evidence context: with and by young people

Several national policy initiatives in Australia emphasise the critical importance of recognising children and young people's distinct needs, rights and voices within family violence response services and systems. Underpinned by the principles set out in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), *The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* (Department of Social Services, 2022) and *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* (Department of Social Services, 2021) acknowledge children and

young people as experts in, and of, their own lives and the need to listen to their ideas and perspectives in shaping services. Supporting this, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) recently synthesised recommendations from over 20 reports on children and young people's experiences of family violence, producing four guiding principles and eight priority actions. Central to these actions is the recognition that children and young people are aware of their needs and that their right to contribute to solutions should be actively supported (Gilfeather-Spetere & Watson, 2024).

In Victoria, the legislative and policy landscape similarly recognises children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, including through the most recent Rolling Action Plan to End Family and Sexual Violence 2025–2027 (Victorian Government, 2025). *Until Every Victorian is Safe* places a strong emphasis on understanding and addressing the responsiveness of the family violence system to the specific needs of children and young people. This includes a commitment to building capacity to undertake risk assessment through the rollout and ongoing implementation of the Child and Young Person-focused Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) practice resources. Importantly, actions contained in *Until Every Victorian is Safe* highlight that placing children and young people at the centre of family violence services and systems extends well beyond risk assessment, emphasising a commitment to listening to and learning from their experiences. Together, these national and state policy frameworks provide a strong foundation for research and practice that is *with* and *by* young people.

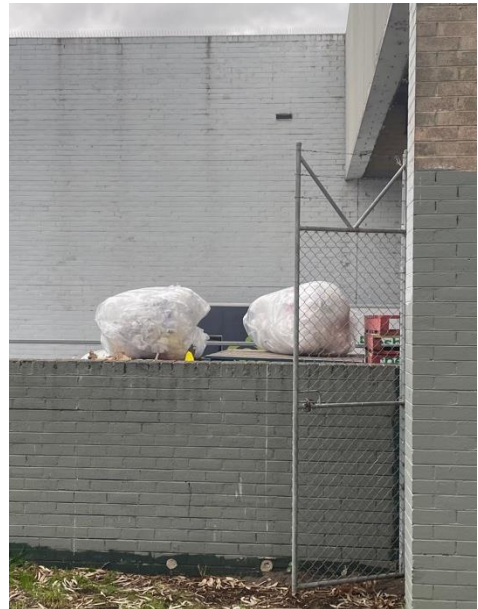
While children and young people have not been entirely absent from family violence discourses (Baker, 2005), they have historically been viewed as passive witnesses to violence or as an addendum to a protective parent or carer, with their needs

assumed rather than recognised. Often considered too ‘vulnerable’ to be directly involved in research about their needs, children and young people’s experiences of violence have been typically filtered through the prism of adults including parents, practitioners or other institutional gatekeepers (Arnell & Thunberg, 2023). Children and young people see and experience the world differently from adults, and it is increasingly acknowledged that their views cannot always be reliably represented by adult proxies (Robinson et al., 2023).

With the needs of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right now a central priority in family, domestic and sexual violence policy in Victoria and nationally, there has been a concomitant increase in funding and a shift in focus: from research *about* young people’s experiences, perspectives and needs to research *with* and *by* young people. As a result, an emerging body of literature demonstrates that children and young people who experience family violence hold unique expertise regarding their own lives, offering critical insights into what happens to them, what they need to feel safe and supported and to heal and recover. This literature shows that co-producing knowledge with children and

young people is not only feasible but profoundly valuable. A series of recent reports, including *Unseen and Unheard* (Connelly, 2024), *Silence and Inaction* (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a), *Voices for Change* (Dimopoulos et al., 2024), *Unsafe and Unseen* (Melbourne City Mission and RMIT, 2025) and *Seeking Safety in their Own Right* (Fitz-Gibbon, 2025b) present a stark account of systemic failure as experienced and articulated by young people.

Collectively, these projects highlight that children and young people continue to navigate a fragmented web of services that position them at the margins of the family violence system. Support services are consistently described as ‘not fit for purpose’: adult-centric, under-resourced and poorly equipped to meet their needs. Young people typically describe services as difficult to navigate or influence. Too often, the systems designed to support safety and recovery fail to recognise children and young people’s agency, their knowledge about what keeps them safe and their right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Instead of providing safety and support, responses risk further entrenching harm.



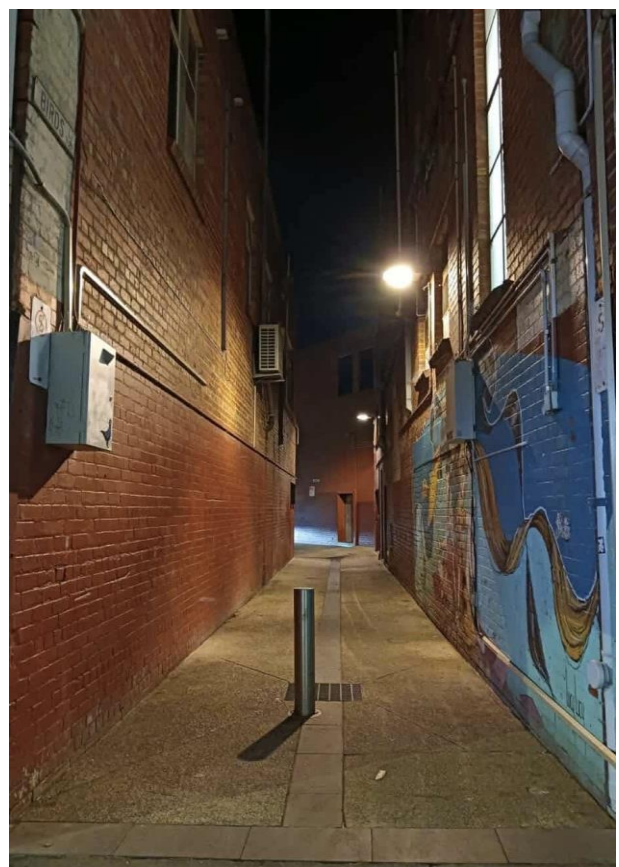
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Children, young people and family violence crisis response

In Australia, family violence crisis accommodation refers to government funded short term supported housing (variously referred to as domestic and family violence shelters, emergency accommodation, women’s shelters or refuges). Emerging from grassroots feminist activism of the 1970s, these services have played a critical role in supporting women to escape violent male partners (McNicol, 2024). Today, crisis accommodation remains a cornerstone of Victoria’s family violence response system, providing immediate support for people afraid of or at risk of serious risk of harm. It operates within a statewide multi-agency model, where responsibility for crisis response is shared across services including for children and young people.

However, like many aspects of the family violence system, funding, policies and practices in crisis response still primarily operate to provide women safety and support, and by extension, their children. Yet, two key points are increasingly clear: 1) many women escaping violence do so with their children (Safe Steps, 2025), and 2) children and young people have distinct needs that cannot be met simply as an adjunct to their mothers' safety. Even in resource-constrained environments, these needs must be explicitly recognised and responded to in service design and delivery.

It is also important to recognise that many children and young people affected by family violence do not engage with specialist family violence services. Instead, they may come into contact with other parts of the service system, particularly homelessness services (Council to Homeless Persons, 2025). This is often because family violence may not be identified as the primary presenting issue, or because young people themselves do not define their experiences in these terms (Corrie & Moore, 2021; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025b; Melbourne City Mission & RMIT, 2025). As a result, homelessness services frequently act as a first point of contact for young people seeking safety, even when family violence is a central factor in their housing instability.



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About this project

This report presents findings from a study focused on children and young people seeking safety from family violence. Two key research questions guided the work:

1. What is known about children and young people's engagement with Safe Steps crisis accommodation services?
2. What are children and young people's experiences and perspectives of seeking and using crisis accommodation in response to family violence?

The project employed mixed methods, participatory and creative approaches to better understand the experiences, needs and priorities of this group. By embedding participatory methods and privileging lived and living experience, the project aimed to generate findings that inform policy and service design that are not only responsive, but accountable to children and young people.

About Safe Steps

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre (hereafter referred to as 'Safe Steps') is Victoria's statewide 24/7 family violence crisis response service. It aims to increase help-seeking and provide effective, evidenced based interventions for people seeking help and support for family and domestic violence. Operating for more than 45 years, Safe Steps is a critical first point of contact for people afraid of, experiencing and escaping family violence. As the first point of contact for many victim-survivors, Safe Steps manages Victoria's frontline telephone, webchat and email services, crisis accommodation facilities, clinical supervision and expertise and the statewide Family Violence Accommodation Register. Demand for services is consistently high: in the 2024/25 financial year alone, Safe Steps responded to approximately 130,000 contacts relating to family violence and provided approximately 31,000 nights of crisis and emergency accommodation, offering safety to around 90 victim-survivors of family violence each night. Despite this reach, one of the key gaps that Safe Steps have identified is in service provision for children and young people. Partnering on this project provides an opportunity to address that gap, bringing together practice-based expertise and research to generate new insights and evidence that can strengthen responses for children and young people seeking safety from family violence.

Research design and approach



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Study One: Practice responses for children and young people in crisis accommodation

Study One employed a qualitative case file review methodology to identify cases (families) and extract and analyse data about children and young people accessing Safe Steps family violence crisis accommodation (inclusive of supported short term and emergency accommodation options e.g., hotels, motels). Although a larger scale quantitative analytic approach was originally planned, this was not feasible in practice. Like other parts of the specialist family violence sector, Safe Steps uses the Specialised Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP) to record data about service users. While this system can produce descriptive data at the 'client' level, more complex or large-scale quantitative analyses concerning children and young people are not feasible due to how data are recorded. As such, a case file review was adopted as the most robust and appropriate method to explore the profiles of and practice responses for children and young people within the current data environment. This approach has previously been used to explore practitioner engagement with children in the context of family violence crisis support (Bastian et al., 2023).

Procedure

Case selection and data extraction were undertaken collaboratively and iteratively with a practitioner from Safe Steps, allowing the research team to understand the process of gathering and recording information from and about children from the perspective of those who do it. The role of the practitioner was particularly important because data are collected at the level of the adult client, with children typically documented within that client's profile. For research purposes, this case structure and the absence of a specific data 'flag' for children made the process of identifying relevant case files, and extracting data about children, complex.

To support this process, a researcher from the team was based on site at Safe Steps over several months, working alongside a practitioner who selected cases according to agreed criteria. The practitioner's role was to locate, open and navigate the case files so that the researcher did not have direct access to the broader client database, administrative or other organisational records. Oversight of this process was jointly held by a senior member of the Safe Steps leadership team (who was also on-site) and the lead researcher from the University of Melbourne, who assumed overarching responsibility for practitioner involvement, data access protocols and adherence to ethical requirements.

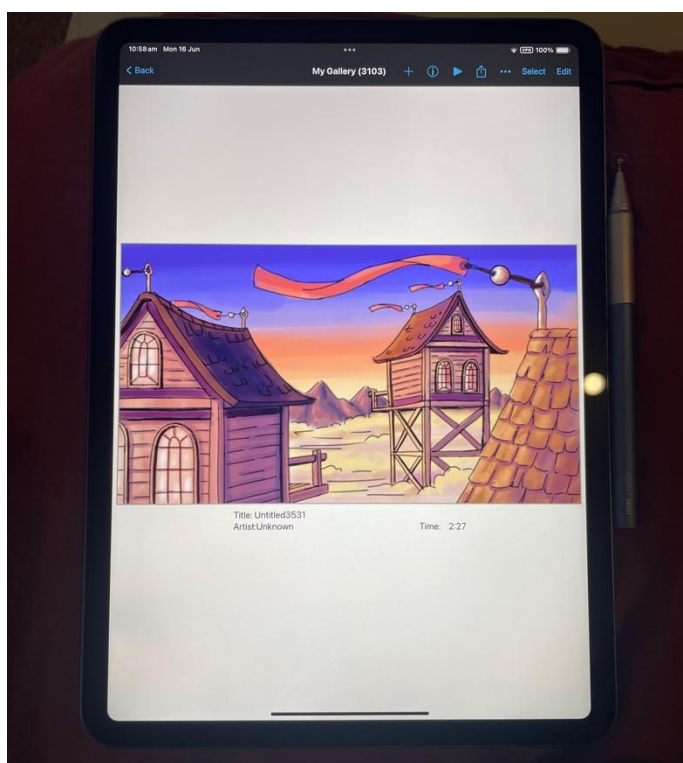
Cases were selected based on practice knowledge of recent cases (2023-2024) in which a parent or carer had accessed crisis accommodation and support services with at least one child. Eligibility was restricted to 'closed' cases (i.e., families who were no longer receiving a crisis accommodation service response). Once eligible case files were identified, they were reviewed with relevant information extracted into a data extraction form that was developed and refined over the course of reviewing files. All data were de-identified prior to being recorded. The following broad categories of information were captured in the form: socio-demographic characteristics, relationships and experiences of violence, referral pathways and housing and practice responses.

Data analysis

Qualitative data from case notes were analysed thematically. Although the data were primarily qualitative, any quantitative data extracted through the collection instrument (e.g., demographics) were summarised descriptively to provide an overview of the cohort. This combined approach enabled both a descriptive profile of children accessing crisis accommodation and an exploration of practice responses.

Ethical Considerations

This study and permission to access Safe Steps administrative data was approved by The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 27807). Additionally, the researcher undertaking the case file review completed site-specific governance and approvals processes, including relevant background checks and training, to ensure compliance with organisational privacy, confidentiality and data-handling requirements. Additional safeguards were implemented to protect client privacy and data security, including on-site data access, de-identification of records and protocols to prevent the extraction of identifiable information from the service environment.



Photograph and digital artwork by Ashely. Used with permission

Study Two: Young people's experiences of family violence crisis response

Study Two was a collaborative, arts-based study exploring young people's experiences of family violence and seeking safety. This study discusses the experiences of young people aged 19-29 at the time of participating in the study, and our use of the term 'young people' reflects this age range. However, the findings also speak to the experiences of younger groups as participants frequently reflected on experiences from their childhood and earlier periods in their youth; their lives often shaped by extended histories of family violence.

In the study, young people were invited to engage in a combination of photography, art making, writing, reflection and discussion according to their capacity, interests and preferences (Lee, 2024a, 2024b; Nunn, 2022). This approach was based on a methodology known as 'photovoice', which is a participatory visual methodology that aims to facilitate flexible, collaborative and reflective inquiry processes well suited to engaging with young people (Coffey 2023, Vaughan & Khaw 2021). Unlike more 'traditional' qualitative approaches to gathering data (e.g., interviews, focus group discussions), 'photovoice' allows for greater agency and ownership of processes and outcomes.

Similar to other arts-based and participatory methodologies, 'photovoice' is based on the principle that participants are experts in their own lives and experiences and aims to platform participants' expertise in research processes and outputs (Wang & Burris, 1997). Thus, young people in this study often used their expertise to guide the direction or form of research activities, as described in more detail below.

A commitment to anti-extractive research

In documenting young people's experiences, we were guided by a commitment to anti- or non-extractive research. This means prioritising young people's perspectives not as data to be taken and used (extracted), but as insights that inform shared understanding and a platform to action. Our approach was guided by the principles of reciprocity, respect, relational accountability and mutuality: positioning young people as knowledge holders and collaborators, rather than subjects of inquiry (Fox, 2013; Swartz, 2011).

Procedure

Recruitment

Recruitment for this study was a gradual and varied process. In light of the sensitive nature of the research topic, the study was advertised discreetly through practitioner networks in family violence, homelessness and community services. As a result, all participants were connected to the research team via caseworkers, with the exception of two participants who learned of the study through colleagues. Often, caseworkers passed on young people's contact details or in some cases their signed consent forms, with their permission. While the involvement of caseworkers provided a useful support for young people who may not have felt comfortable to reach out to the research team by themselves, it also re-produced patterns of 'referral' pathways, appointments and expectations of compliance that often shape young people's experience of services.

To ensure that young people had an opportunity to make an informed decision about their involvement in the study, the researcher (Meg) contacted each young person with a phone call where they clarified the voluntary nature of the study and emphasised that their decision around participation would not affect their relationship with the service that had connected them to the study.

After providing more information about the research and inviting young people's questions (where there were 'no wrong or silly questions'), prospective participants were invited to suggest a time and place for an initial meeting where they could talk more about the project. At the end of this meeting, they could decide whether or not to sign the consent form, in the knowledge that they would be free to leave the study at any point with no explanation required. Ultimately, all young people who came for an initial meeting chose to participate in the study.

All but one participant expressed a preference to meet in person rather than online. Some suggested meeting locations while others preferred to choose from options suggested. Libraries were generally preferred, so all

meetings occurred in libraries except where libraries were not open or accessible to young people on the day of meeting. In two instances, Zoom or phone calls were used instead.

Meg met with participants individually, in pairs or groups of three according to participants' preferences. While originally, one or two larger groups had been planned for the study, this was not appropriate for two main reasons. First, participants were geographically dispersed between the outer eastern and western suburbs of Melbourne and regional Victoria. They were highly mobile, with many moving residences or travelling to visit family during the period of research. It was not logistically viable to arrange for in-person group meetings across these distances and mobilities. Second, several participants expressed a preference for individual or paired research activities. This was due to anxiety around interacting with new people and concerns around the safety of sharing personal experiences in an unfamiliar group setting.

Research activities

Participants met with the researcher three or four times each, depending on availability and preferences, and were supported to engage in a range of creative activities both during and between meetings, including photography (using their own phones), art making, writing, reflection and discussion. This approach aimed to foster trust, safety, recognition and understanding between participants and the researcher. In connection with these aims, Meg sought to mitigate how she was potentially positioned as simply another worker in a long line of workers or authorities that young people must engage with (and perform for) when accessing services. This was achieved by taking a flexible, relatively informal and collaborative approach to engaging with participants (Lee, 2024a; Stride et al, 2022). By prioritising human connection with young people - being curious and interested in their lives, interests, perspectives and needs - Meg aimed to foster a safe space which could be understood by participants as outside of the service system; somewhere they could be themselves.

The research approach was flexible by allowing young people to set the terms of their engagement, where possible (Fox, 2013). Participants were invited to nominate where they wanted to meet, when and how often, and what kinds of activities they wanted to do as part of the study. Libraries were preferred by some participants who regularly accessed them as safe spaces with free-to-use facilities where they could seek respite from unsafe or unstable housing, while others preferred libraries simply for their central location. Wherever possible, activities were designed around participants' schedules and daily rhythms to accommodate their preferences. This approach enabled the participation of young people with caring responsibilities, disability, changeable housing situations, limited access to communication technologies and/or transportation. While participants gave some input about general areas and days where they could meet, they often preferred Meg to do the work of finding and choosing suitable meeting places, suggesting appropriate timeframes and activities.

Participants were reimbursed for their time with \$120 gift vouchers following each meeting. This amount equated to approximately \$60 per hour, including travel time for participants, many of whom relied on infrequent public transportation services or spent time driving to collect co-participants (e.g. co-parents, siblings) who depended on them for transportation.

Research activities were relatively informal, with the aim of fostering a comfortable space where participants felt able to express themselves and just be, without self-monitoring or feeling pressure to perform a certain way. Typically, research meetings happened in library meeting rooms (or sometimes a quiet corner of the library), around a table with soft low-fi music, water and snacks. Meg also provided writing and drawing materials, a colouring book and some sensory objects (e.g., plush toys, 'squishies' [similar to stress balls]) that she invited participants to interact with as they wished.

Participants were invited to take photographs and to focus on the parts of their experience they felt were important to them and that they wanted to share, with a view for suggesting what needed to change in the existing service

systems around children and young people seeking safety from family violence. Overall, most participants used photography, and many also used writing and visual art to express their experiences and perspectives.

In subsequent meetings, participants brought photographs (on their phones) to share and discuss. Depending on participants' interests, mood and energy levels, a range of activities was offered during meetings such as drawing over existing photographs, reflective writing about photographs or experiences, mind-mapping or art making. Sometimes, young people had plenty to say about the artwork, photographs or writing they had brought to each meeting and Meg simply listened, occasionally prompting with questions about their perspectives on crisis accommodation services and systems.

Data analysis

Data analysis was not a single step but an ongoing, reflexive process that unfolded alongside and after the research activities. It was grounded in the visual, creative and narrative materials that young people produced and chose to share and through discussions about the work they had produced. Analysis also involved listening back over discussion recordings, creating and reading transcripts, attending to *how* experiences and ideas were communicated - with which emotions - as well as *what* was said (Coffey, 2022). Through these processes, certain themes emerged interconnectedly, with some weightier, more recurrent, more emotionally laden and/or more elaborated, than others.

Thus, through their choices, artistic and verbal expression and emphasis, participants shaped the analysis. Once identified, themes were developed inductively and iteratively through cycles of coding, reflection, and revisiting the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). In this way, analysis was layered: shaped first by participants' voices and decisions, and then by the researchers' interpretive work. The inductive approach ensured that themes connected directly to young people's perspectives, reflecting their priorities and lived realities in their own terms.

Once preliminary data analysis was complete, we convened a workshop with practitioners and policy stakeholders to reflect on the findings and generate insights for service and system reform.

Ethical considerations

This phase of the project and permission to engage with young people in this study was approved by The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 28211). Several measures were taken to ensure the safety, transparency and value of the research project to all involved, and to manage any risks to participant privacy and wellbeing.

First, a distress protocol was adopted, with clear procedures for how to respond to participant distress, including assisting a young person to contact a mental health support service if appropriate. Second, public libraries were identified as suitable sites for research activities as they provided a range of relevant facilities (bathrooms, private study or consultation rooms, tea and coffee amenities and children's play areas) alongside free parking and a community-based environment. Importantly, their proximity to where participants lived enhanced their suitability by reducing barriers to participation.

Third, to safeguard participant privacy, participants were invited to select their own pseudonyms for use in the research and were consulted about the use of their quotes, images and creative works. The researcher discussed with each participant how their work might be used - for which audiences, in what formats and in which settings - before inviting them to identify any content they preferred to exclude from the study findings. The researcher also made a practice of 'checking in' with participants about how they were feeling throughout the study. At times, participants chose to speak 'off the record;' these unrecorded exchanges provided a foundation of mutual respect and recognition on which trust and the research relationship could be built (Merinyo & Willemsen, 2021).

Findings

Study One: Practice responses for children and young people in crisis accommodation



Photograph by Siena. Used with permission

This section presents findings from the qualitative case file review. Data were drawn from 30 case files, each representing a family seeking safety from family violence. Family circumstances were generally complex, and the case notes were often extensive, with some files containing up to 300 entries. Depending on the complexity of the case, reviewing and extracting data ranged from one to five hours. This was also due, in part, to gaps and inconsistencies in where and how information was recorded about children. As a result, and to protect the privacy of children, young people and families, the findings reported here reflect high-level information only, covering socio-demographic characteristics, relationships and experiences of violence, referral pathways and housing and practice responses.

Socio-demographic information

Across the 30 case files, case notes referenced 82 children, with family sizes ranging from one to six children. Most families included either two or three children (66%). Of the 82 children mentioned in the case files, 75 were recorded as having stayed in crisis accommodation, indicating that for several family groupings siblings were separated. In some instances, this reflected arrangements prior to crisis accommodation, with some siblings (or stepsiblings) in foster care, living independently and/or overseas. In other cases, separation appeared to have occurred because of the need for crisis support, with some older siblings temporarily placed (or choosing to reside with) with a relative (e.g., a grandparent or aunt) or a neighbour instead moving into crisis accommodation.

Among the 75 children in crisis accommodation, ages ranged from seven weeks to 19 years, with a median age of seven years. Approximately half the children identified as having a culturally and linguistically diverse background, either through being born overseas or speaking a language other than English at home. Two children identified as Aboriginal.

Corresponding with the age profile of children, most were enrolled in primary school (prep to year 6; 60%) with a further 15% at secondary school (years 7 to 12). Approximately 20% were in early childhood education programs (kinder or childcare). Although only a small number of school-aged children were not enrolled in school at the time of accessing crisis accommodation, case notes frequently described disrupted participation including school refusal, low attendance, missed terms or transfers between schools linked to family violence, mobility and housing insecurity. Case notes revealed that children and young people themselves expressed concern about missing school and being forced to change schools due to relocation.

Relationships and experiences of violence

Among the 75 children who accessed crisis accommodation, all were accompanied by their mother, whose ages ranged from 22 to 58 years. Several women were pregnant at time of seeking crisis accommodation. In most cases, the person using violence was the child's father: their mother's current or former partner. Over half the families were living with the person using violence at the time they entered crisis accommodation. Around a quarter of women (26%) had previously engaged with specialist family violence services, including crisis accommodation.

Case notes indicated that most children had direct experiences of violence including physical assault. In several families, case notes described weekly or routine experiences of physical violence: sometimes framed by the person using violence as 'discipline.' Some older children reflected on a history of violence stretching back to early childhood. Verbal and emotional abuse was also widespread and was frequently described in case notes as being used to intimidate children or to coercively control mothers through their children. A small number of files noted serious issues of bullying and violence at school.

In some case notes there was evidence of coercive control persisting for children while in crisis accommodation, with perpetrators using children as conduits to maintain control over the family. This included direct messaging through social media to pressure children to provide information about the family's whereabouts and/or return home.

All children had witnessed violence against their mothers, including verbal abuse, threats of violence, intimidation and physical assault. Children's exposure to violence was described as frequent, normalised, ongoing and severe, impacting children's emotional wellbeing.

While most case files reflected complex family circumstances, some files indicated significant additional layers of complexity related to violence. For example, several women reported violence and risk of harm to their children from multiple perpetrators, sometimes concurrently, including by a current or former partner, another relative (e.g., brother), or another known person (e.g., neighbour or friend).

Referral pathways

Across the 30 case files, women and their children accessed crisis accommodation through a variety of referral pathways including the Orange Door network. Police involvement was common. Referral to crisis support was frequently triggered by a significant incident including, for example, hospitalisation for serious injury, but also in response to child safety concerns. Hospital social workers were a source of referrals, particularly when children required medical attention.

A smaller number of referrals came via services such as the Salvation Army and InTouch (a provider of specialist services, programs and responses to family violence in migrant and refugee communities). These pathways demonstrate the central role of statutory and frontline services in linking women and families to crisis accommodation, with fewer referrals via informal networks or self-directed help-seeking.

Twenty-seven of the 30 case files included information on length of stay, with a range of between three to 46 days. A typical stay was for around three weeks (median 22 days). Families placed in emergency accommodation options, such as hotels or motels (due to lack of capacity in supported options) stayed for between three days and one week.

Pathways out of crisis accommodation were inconsistently documented. Where information was available (17 of 30 case files), exits mostly reflected planned and supported transitions including relocation to refuges, return to private residences with additional safety planning and security modifications (e.g., cameras), and in one case, relocation overseas. There were a small number of unplanned departures noted in the case files where families left crisis accommodation without notice.

Housing

Housing instability, both prior to entering and following crisis accommodation, was a recurring feature across the 30 case files, shaping the options available to women and their children and influencing their pathways out of crisis services. Housing arrangements prior to entering crisis accommodation varied considerably across families. Many women and children were living with the person using violence, either in private rental properties, their own homes or properties owned or leased by the perpetrator's family. In several cases, the person using violence was the primary leaseholder or mortgage holder, creating additional barriers for women and children to secure safe housing. Some children had already been in temporary arrangements before entering crisis accommodation, having stayed with grandparents, siblings or friends. A few families had experienced periods of homelessness together.

Case notes indicated that for children, housing instability meant disrupted routines, missed school, fear of losing belongings and difficulty feeling settled. For mothers, it meant navigating complex negotiations with landlords, real estate agents, housing services or family members, often under immense stress. Together, these experiences shaped how children and mothers understood crisis accommodation: as another stop in a long journey of seeking safety.

Practice responses

Once children entered crisis accommodation, services took on a central role in recording and maintaining their information and assessing and responding to their specific safety, health and wellbeing needs. Safe Steps practitioners were central to this process, providing day-to-day practice responses and coordination. The case files reveal a snapshot of this work, which included - in addition to the expected services such as family violence counselling, safety planning and risk assessment - organising prescriptions, arranging general practitioner and paediatrician appointments, coordinating referrals for maternal and child health check-ups, facilitating x-rays, maintaining National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) services and supports and in some cases initiating NDIS assessments.

Children were generally able to continue receiving care from their healthcare practitioners while in crisis accommodation. Safe Steps practitioners adopted flexible, trauma-informed strategies to ensure safe access to essential healthcare and therapeutic interventions, particularly for children with disability. Case notes documented the need for innovative approaches sometimes including when perpetrators knew the location of health and social care providers or clinics, creating safety risks. Some appointments were arranged in parks rather than at clinics to enable children to maintain critical care routines in safe environments.

Case notes showed crisis accommodation can act as a critical point of preventive health care and early intervention for women and children who may struggle to access services in the community due to cost, and other complexities in the context of family violence. For example, practitioners routinely asked about the vaccination status of children in crisis accommodation. For families without immunisation records, or for those who were not up to date (sometimes due to migration or COVID-19 pandemic-related disruptions), case workers contacted maternal and child health services and local councils to arrange appointments.

Study Two: Young people's experiences of family violence crisis response

This section presents findings from the participatory arts-based study in which young people creatively represented their experiences of seeking safety from family violence. Consistent with participatory approaches, we invited young people to share their journeys without predefined parameters. While our recruitment materials referenced '*young people between the ages of 16 and 25 with prior experiences of crisis accommodation in response to family violence*' we allowed young people to share their journeys to safety with us whatever that might look like. This approach also accords with findings from Study One which highlighted that children and young people have complex histories of violence, seeking safety in various ways: formally, informally, alone, with siblings or with a parent. The findings therefore reflect lived realities and understandings of crisis accommodation, rather than service-defined categories.



Photograph by Miss Chatterbox. Used with permission

Participants

Nine young people were involved in this study. Some participated individually while others participated together with siblings, carers or co-parents, reflecting how their lives were part of interdependent social support networks including caregiving relations, intertwined experiences and aspirations. Their experiences emerged at the intersection of circumstances, relationships, and resources including shifting housing situations; their own health (including mental health) and disability, as well as that of the people they cared for; access to material and intangible resources like money, transportation, time, supportive relationships and recognition.

Most (seven) participants were aged between 19-25, however two older participants (aged 25-29) were also included following a decision to extend the age-range due to recruitment challenges. Half the young people described themselves as coming from white European or British Australian backgrounds, while two described Italian backgrounds and one came from a Pasifika background. One young person identified as Aboriginal. Five preferred she/her pronouns, two preferred they/them pronouns, and two preferred he/him pronouns.

The young people involved came from a range of geographic locations, with four describing growing up in rural or regional areas in Australia or overseas. During the study, five young people lived in the mid-outer suburbs of Melbourne, three lived in regional and rural western Victoria, and one lived between rural and metropolitan Victoria. Several young people moved residences during the study.

Further details of the participants involved in this study are included below. The ways in which young people connected with the study, as well as their purpose and priorities for participating, varied considerably. So too did the ways they shared their lives and experiences: some spoke at length about past experiences, including experiences of violence, while others focused more on the recent past and their hopes for the future. This diversity is reflected in the participant descriptions that follow. Pseudonyms chosen by each young person have been used to protect participant privacy.

Ashley & Bean

Siblings Ashley and Bean loved making art and going for walks in nature. They suggested libraries as a meeting place because libraries had offered them a place of safety since childhood; a place where they could 'just be.'

Ashley connected with the research project as a way to continue her advocacy for change in a system that couldn't and didn't help her and Bean, who she cared for full-time. Ashley also worked part-time. Bean studied entertainment and design.

Growing up in Melbourne, Ashley and Bean had been placed in state care as children, separated from each other and their siblings. They described struggling to create a safe home for themselves their whole lives. Since leaving care, they had moved between various forms of temporary and crisis accommodation, homelessness, shared accommodation with an older sibling, and 'the abusive situation' at their mother's house.

Although living apart from each other now, they spent most days together, travelling to places where they felt safe. Ashley found some respite from caring for Bean by visiting her sister, who lived with her partner. Ashley felt a sense of guilt that she had failed, this time, to secure safe housing for both herself and Bean.

Frankie

Frankie took 2025 as his year to put himself out there following a period of 'staying home.' The ACCESS project was one of the new things he tried, alongside getting a gym membership and landing his first job.

Frankie very much spoke about his experiences, decisions and priorities in connection with his mother, with whom he had a close interdependent relationship. He had been unwillingly separated from his mother and placed with extended family as a small child, growing up in a home where he had no bedroom and slept in a communal living area.

For Frankie, having his own space, having privacy and being able to see his mum when he chose- indeed, living with her in Melbourne- were all important freedoms he gained when he turned 18.

In contrast to other participants in this study, Frankie emphasised the freedoms that crisis accommodation (where he stayed with his mother) afforded him, and he had few suggestions for improvement. However, his perspective brings into focus the powerful role of the child protection system in shaping, or indeed, determining, the homes and accommodation to which children in the system have access.

Miss Chatterbox

Miss Chatterbox was a passionate advocate for hearing and supporting children and young people with experiences of family violence. She regularly created art (poetry, photography, painting) and enjoyed being able to draw on this practice for the ACCESS project. She was studying nursing.

Miss Chatterbox grew up in Melbourne, in a home that she did not realise was 'not ok' until she was in her late teens. She described the epistemic, embodied, psycho-emotional challenges of internally denouncing all she had ever known, as the essential (but invisible) first step to leaving. She built a chosen family around herself after leaving her parents and being forced to leave her younger siblings during her early 20s.

During the study, she was living in a private rental in Melbourne. She hoped that her younger siblings would reach out to her, as she had encouraged them to do.

Siena, Grace & Madz

Siena, Grace, and Madz all lived in the same town and sometimes met as a group, in pairs or individually depending on their availability. All three came to the study through caseworkers, however Siena and Grace knew each other from childhood.

Like many young people in this study, despite describing disappointing interactions with service providers, this group brought a great sense of generosity and patience (alongside subterranean expectations) in their understanding of service systems. They understood that the problems were structural and no one individual deserved the blame for their poor experiences.

Grace

Grace was experimenting with a range of strategies to help process her emotions and deepen her self-understanding, including journalling and reflective writing. She described how, as someone living with Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, depression and anxiety, she struggled to maintain her mental health in crisis accommodation settings. She was receiving professional mental health support.

Grace had recently sought support from family and domestic violence services (not for the first time) to leave an abusive relationship. She was living in secure women's accommodation around the corner from her ex-partner's family, while working towards cutting off contact with her ex-partner. Grace saw her relationship with her mother as a key source of support and potential intervention if she needed help escaping a violent situation.

Madz

Highly skilled in information technology, cyber security and business administration, Madz was looking for employment in this area during this study. They faced challenges getting work in the regional Victorian town where they lived and lacked transportation to relocate to another town that offered them employment opportunities.

Similar to Mr Pickles and Kingsley, Madz also faced judgement for their tattoos and piercings. Madz had relocated away from their family and social networks, including their children and co-parent, following challenges with substance abuse.

Siena

Siena was completing university study in community services with the aim of working with people dealing with addiction. She expressed great faith that family violence systems can be improved to better fit the diverse needs and circumstances of those who need them.

Siena shared her experiences as both a perpetrator of violence against her parent as a young person struggling with substance abuse, and a victim of domestic violence.

She came to the study as a single mother who had been sober for years and escaped an abusive relationship. She was living in regional Victoria, in the town where she grew up. She maintained a relationship with her mother which she saw as an important source of support for herself and her children.

Mr Pickles & Kingsley

Mr Pickles and Kingsley adored their young daughter and wanted to make sure she had a better start in life than they did. They brought her with them to our meetings, which meant our interactions were structured around her needs.

The co-parents shared their experiences as young parents trying to create a safe space for their family and a sense of meaning in their interwoven lives. Incredibly punctual to research activities and always equipped for a wide spectrum of baby-related situations, in many ways they embodied the type of subjects favoured by neoliberal service structures underpinned by orderliness, appointment-keeping and conformity.

However, based on their experiences, they understood that they may be negatively judged by service providers, landlords or real estate agents because of their young age as parents and their physical appearance including tattoos, piercings and hairstyles.

Both had a connection to regional or rural places as Mr Pickles grew up in rural NSW and Kingsley maintained close support networks in regional Victoria, where she lived for some time during the study.

Kingsley and Mr Pickles chose to focus on their recent experiences accessing crisis accommodation as young parents for this study. They described a sense of powerlessness, anxiety and claustrophobic constant surveillance associated with fortnightly inspections while they were in unsafe crisis accommodation with their infant daughter. Kingsley also shared that she had grown up in a violent home and lost her mother to family violence at a young age.

Key Themes

The experiences and perspectives shared by young people in this study were diverse and complex. They pointed to an urgent need for structural reform to support specialist family violence and other services to better support children and young people, while also recognising the need for more service-level changes. Overall, their insights can be understood through three overarching themes:

Recognition

Being Seen, Heard and Respected

Building Safer Futures



Artwork by Miss Chatterbox. Used with permission

This theme explored two overlapping concepts around a lack of recognition. First, that it can be difficult for children and young people to recognise 'home' as violent when it may be all they have ever known and, second, the way in which services and systems often exclude children and young people whose experiences do not align with adult framings of violence such as intimate partner violence.

This report explores the theme of recognition predominantly through the works and artwork of Miss Chatterbox and Ashley, who had conducted prior reflection, research and advocacy on this topic and brought extensive knowledge and expertise. Unlike Miss Chatterbox and Ashley, most other young people in the study had not yet been able to access the time and space for such reflection. Nonetheless, the theme of recognition was echoed across many participants' stories, in comments about the ways people did or did not 'see [them]' as young people (Madz, Mr Pickles, and Kingsley), and family violence services designed without young people in mind.

Recognising home as violent

Reflecting on her own childhood experiences, Miss Chatterbox observed that for children and young people growing up with family violence, their needs and their possibilities for accessing services are profoundly shaped by the reality that such violence is all they have ever known. While she recognised that some changes had occurred in service delivery since she was a child, she understood from her work as an advocate and educator in the family violence space that there continued to be a dearth of social and structural recognition of children and young people's experiences of violence. For Miss Chatterbox, the support of peers and mentors at university helped her begin to recognise her home as violent, and her life as 'not ok.' She described,

'that moment for me, realising that my life had been a very different reality, or that I'd been lied to for 21 years. I felt like someone had knocked the wind out of me. ...I was coming to the consciousness of... what had actually been going on in my home?'

Later, she elaborated:

'It was kind of a multi-step process... [One day] I was just watching and observing my family's interactions with one another. And I went oh, that's not- That's not OK. And then it was like, "Ohh. That's been going on for quite a while". And then it was another realisation of, "Ohh, that's actually abusive and that's not a safe thing.'

Reflecting on her own lived experience through her experience as an Early Childhood Educator, Miss Chatterbox pointed out how children are brought up to respect adults as arbitrators of right and wrong, and of the truth. This social reality has significant implications for the way adults understand the experiences of young victim-survivors of family violence, including how it can affect their long-term ability to trust their own perceptions, seek help and self-advocate.

Miss Chatterbox found the ocean (as depicted in her artwork below) to be a useful metaphor for the complex and deep-seated emotions around her experiences of family violence that limited her capacity to proactively access the help she needed. She spoke about feeling deep distress, dissociation and rage while living at her parents' house even after she came to trust that what she had experienced was violence. And even though she knew she had to leave, it was 'like crossing an ocean' in part because no child wants to leave their parents.



Artwork by Miss Chatterbox. Used with permission

'it was, you know, about two years of me living there, knowing what was going on and trying to get them to change because children don't want to leave their parents, no matter how old you are. It's so against the grain because it's so... Ingrained in our DNA that we need our family. And I think society has also brought us up in believing that's an integral part of identity.'

Services not recognising young people's experiences of family violence

The barriers children and young people faced in feeling able to claim family violence as their experience, and work towards safer futures, were compounded by a lack of recognition or validation from service providers. Speaking about her experiences seeking safety with her sibling Bean, Ashley said:

'[the family violence services had] never seen a case like [Bean], and they didn't know how to help because they... usually get mothers escaping with their children or women on their own escaping, so they don't usually get young people who are experiencing violence from traditionally who would be like the protective parent.'

...[If you're by] yourself, they can't help you. Yeah, like you basically have to be in an intimate partner violence situation to really get any real help from these services.'

Ashley shared the photograph of her car (below), describing it as *'a place of refuge for me.'* It was also a place where Ashley and her sibling Bean could be together, given services were unable to support them as siblings.

Indeed, all young people in the study expressed, to some extent, that family violence services were intended for women escaping violent partners and gaining the help of such services was difficult for people experiencing something *'different.'* They also identified a lack of awareness (or openness to recognising) different types of violence and violent situations, beyond the scope of intimate partner relationships, among service providers. For some, this was the main reason they sought support from homelessness services rather than family violence services.

As Ashley explained:

'People don't know what's happening for any of these young people because they're not reporting it because they're accessing homelessness services. But every young person that I've met in homelessness services, maybe aside from one or two, are homeless because of family violence. And we just don't... there's no real support around it.'



Photograph by Ashley. Used with permission

Being seen, heard and respected



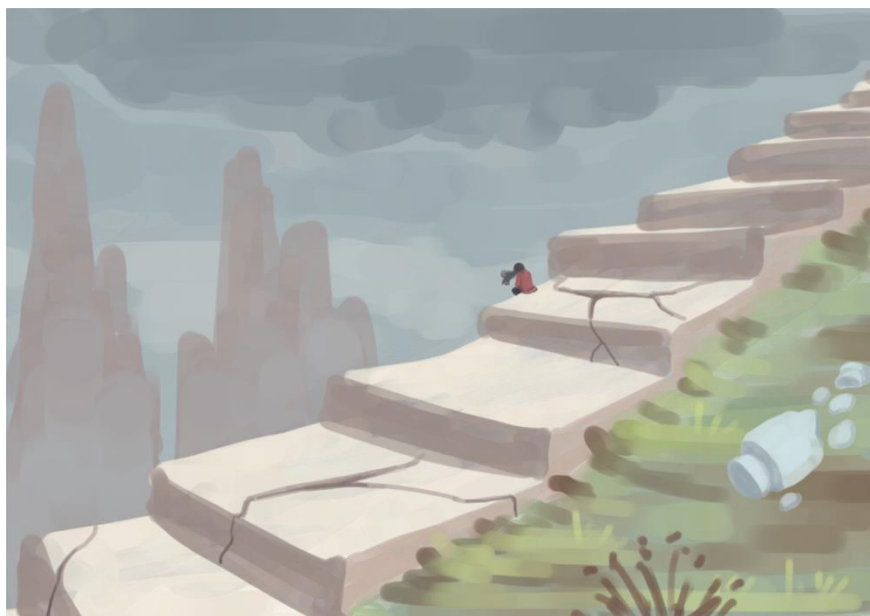
Photograph by Ashley. Used with permission

Young people in the study often expressed gratitude for the help and support they had received from family violence, homelessness and other services and were reluctant to criticise. However, it was often apparent that their lack of criticism came, at least partly, from low expectations around being treated with respect. Low expectations meant young people expected very little from their interactions with service providers and accepted judgment and discrimination as par for the course.

While emphasising they were grateful for the help they received, all young people expressed disappointment or disheartened acceptance of how the system made them feel: as though their lives were just another case to manage. A consistent theme underlying their comments was that the system was ‘system-centric’; driven more by its own processes and requirements than the needs and humanity of those it is supposed to support. And this was particularly the case when it came to young people, who were often excluded from the system because they didn’t fit, or had to constantly work against ‘double standards’ to maintain their place in the system.

Such 'double standards', as Ashley and Bean discussed, included requirements that they study full time to access homelessness accommodation, after receiving 'no help' from family violence crisis services. Others, including Grace, Mr Pickles and Miss Chatterbox, spoke about limiting, intrusive or controlling conditions they experienced as young people accessing crisis accommodation (both with and without a parent), which they felt may not apply the same way to adult victim-survivors. Some participants had been left with the sense that they had been held up against system requirements and been found lacking; unworthy of help or even an audience. This happened as a result of bureaucratic processes and care-less interpersonal interactions that centred on concepts of 'eligibility', 'requirements' and 'conditions' placed on help for young people (e.g. requirements to complete full-time study or job applications to retain accommodation through youth homelessness services). These factors, particularly the conditional nature of recognition and support, dominated their experiences with service providers and eroded their hopes of being heard.

Ashley's artwork below encapsulates this concept of system-centricity.



Artwork by Ashley. Used with permission

Talking about the artwork, she said:

'You're just like constantly trying to climb these steps to get to safety, which is like housing and stability, but you're just this tiny little person... it's just impossible, honestly, you just keep walking and walking, walking.'

...technically there is stuff there that's supporting you to get there, but it's not very good and it doesn't really help you. ...[My] last experience [in 2024], it was like pushing ...almost a year ...and then in the end we couldn't get anything.

And so I'd have to go back to the family violence situation. ...it just didn't matter ...it didn't matter how much we went the right way. We did the right thing. We contacted all the services. We did all of the things that were, you know, were expected of us as people who were experiencing, like homelessness from family violence. But the system just didn't. It couldn't and didn't help us.'

For those who had interacted with family violence services as children, their possibilities for feeling heard or able to trust services were further undermined by precedents of being acted upon, sometimes against their will, by these services. In some cases, such interactions had resulted in them being relocated far from people with whom their lives and wellbeing were entwined (e.g. nonviolent parents, siblings) or living in extended family households without capacity to house them. Thus, their initial experiences with family violence services were characterised by powerlessness, (imposed) voicelessness, and even harm, which made any return to these same services painful or stressful at best and (re)traumatising at worst.

Bean, Ashley's sibling, commented on feelings of helplessness and systems that go nowhere, a theme they explored through photography, digital artworks and discussion:

'Trying to find a place and ...everything is like the same....Because no matter which area I go to it just feels like nothing changes so....every direction that I go always ends up in the same spot.'



Digital artwork by Bean. Used with permission

Siblings Bean and Ashley had been placed in foster care and state care, separated as children. Bean later elaborated about feelings of powerlessness and a lack of control that characterised their ongoing interactions across family violence and homelessness services and explored this theme through the digital artwork below, explaining:

'people making decisions without... without even asking us or like basically just. ...It's like everyone's talking. And then, like, you're not even in on it. Like to do it [what is asked of you]. When you go into a service like, you don't really get a choice in anything...

And that's kind of like being in the shadow. It's kind of like being like in the dark, kept being kept in the dark.'



Digital artwork by Bean. Used with permission

Broader themes about powerlessness, a lack of control and even surveillance were discussed or alluded to by most young people in this study. While they valued the shelter provided by crisis accommodation in the few years prior to the study, co-parents Mr Pickles and Kingsley did not describe their accommodation as a place of safety. Rather, they described a place of constant surveillance, shadowed by the threat of losing their temporary place in an unforgiving system:

'[they told us] oh, you're [inaudible] you can only stay there for, a year'. It's like, how do they expect you're gonna get up on your feet and everything in a year? That's... why we were like determined to get another house. Cos like, you don't wanna leave it to the end and be like, oh, sorry, you gotta get out. That's what they said they said, once the year's up, that's bow bowwww [sound effect].' — Mr Pickles

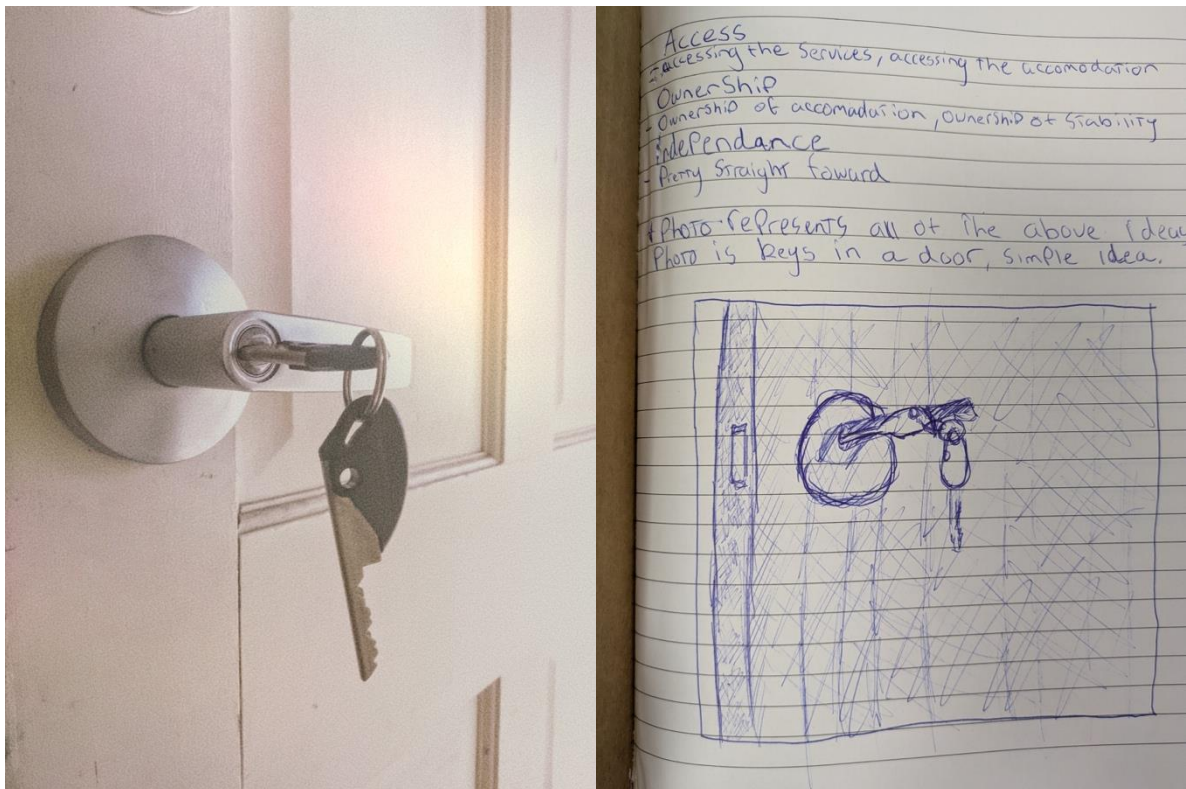
Mr Pickles explained how these threats and intrusions made it difficult to breathe in the place the young family was trying to make (but prevented from making) a secure home:

'you gotta be there all the time just to make sure they don't do that [housing inspections]. You don't want someone going through all your stuff while you're not there...

Like sometimes they [crisis accommodation providers will] just drive by and message you later about something. It's like, right, well, you know, clearly you're keeping tabs on us.

...Privacy has been a bit. Taken away... like they basically are being like surveillance... [Checking up on you is] fair enough. ...But like on a casual constant basis [is not ok.] Because you still need your time to, you know. To breathe and all that.'

Madz brought together some of these ideas in their summary of three key priorities: access, ownership and independence. On the positive side, Madz felt immense gratitude and relief to have access to their own accommodation through homelessness services. They valued feeling that they had ownership and control over their home, which felt relatively secure for Madz. However, Madz's feeling of security was undermined by the power service providers had to monitor them and as they described, try to 'kick [them] out' after one year was up. Madz's photograph and accompanying reflection represents all of these ideas:



Photograph, sketch and reflection by Madz. Used with permission

'Access: *accessing the services, accessing the accommodation. **Ownership;** ownership of accommodation, ownership of stability. **Independence:** pretty straightforward'*



Photograph by Asheya. Used with permission

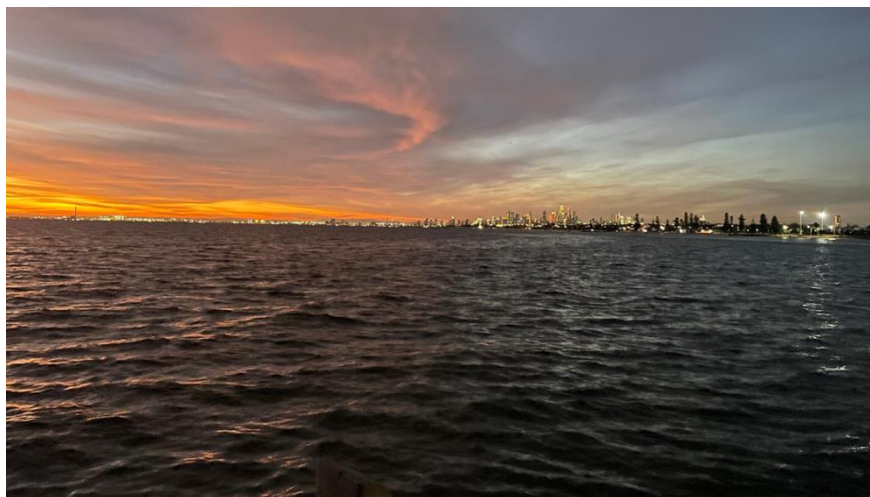
Much like a puzzle piece, young people described the helpfulness of services as being shaped by its relationship to other resources and supports. As a group, they had distinct needs regarding the physical location of family violence and other services. Proximity to trusted adults, key supports, health services and public transport infrastructure, as well as distance from perpetrators of violence and those who enable it, had a powerful influence on young people's ability to use crisis accommodation to build safer futures. This was a complex and dynamic process, differing for each individual and often shaped or constrained in different ways. At times, crucial supports and sources of danger were located in the same places, complicating young people's efforts to navigate safety.

Grace lived in regional Victoria and valued the security of the women's accommodation she had accessed through family violence services. However, she felt conflicted because living there placed her around the corner from the family of her abusive former partner. She felt unable to relocate to alternative housing because it would take her too far from her mother, whose support she deemed essential to her overall and mental health. Grace did not have a car.

Madz relocated to a different regional town to remove themselves from social circles that could jeopardise their sobriety. However, this move also isolated them from their co-parent and children, as well as from positive supports and professional networks. Madz did not have access to a car.

Ashley had a car, which she and Bean travelled to places where they could find safety and reconnect with themselves. At times, they lived in Ashley's car when services were unable to assist them. However, their geographic mobility did not align with the homelessness service system, where eligibility is often restricted by locality. Many services turned them away because they did not reside in the same area, despite having no fixed address. Ashley shared the photo below and recalled:

'[Bean and I would] just drive for a while and find places and sit there in the car and look at the scenery. Get out for a bit...'



Photograph by Ashley. Used with permission

Indeed, being able to move freely to or from different places was frequently raised as something that was very important, especially among those living in regional areas.

Young people also described informal supports including spaces, places, people and relationships as essential to building a safer and healthier future. They shared many of the things that had helped them during or since their time in crisis accommodation. Finding moments of peace, having space to breathe and developing a sense of purpose through meaningful relationships with siblings or children emerged as centrally important in enabling them to imagine and work towards this safer future.

Ashley, for example, was recovering from a period of mental ill-health and needed time to 're-centre' herself. She found this in walking, expressed through her photography:

'The walking track [photo] is about trying to re-centre myself. Like, like after all that's happened, trying to find a place where I can actually focus on my wellbeing and focus on how things have impacted me and take a bit of control back'

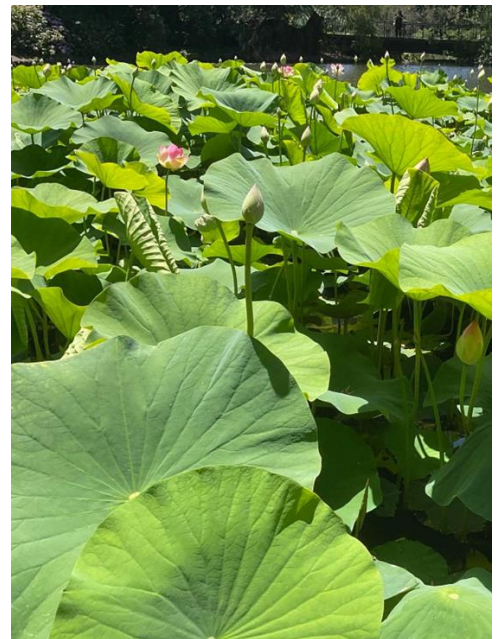


Photograph by Ashley. Used with permission

Ashley's sibling, Bean, was one of several young people who found creative and physical practices, geographic mobility, material resources and more-than-human (animals, plants, places) supports were all part of a multifaceted journey to recovery.

As Bean reflected:

'This is the Melbourne Botanic Gardens, when it was Lotus season... [Ashley and I would] just go there and draw and stuff when we had nothing to do... Yeah, it's really nice there. [We'd] go and chill out there'



Photograph by Bean. Used with permission

Frankie, who was placed with relatives when he was six years old, had slept on a couch until he moved in with his mum at age 18.

'I've been living sleeping on couches for as long as I can remember'

Frankie chose to share a picture of his bed (below) as a way to illustrate his first experience of a stable and personal space – it was his safer future.

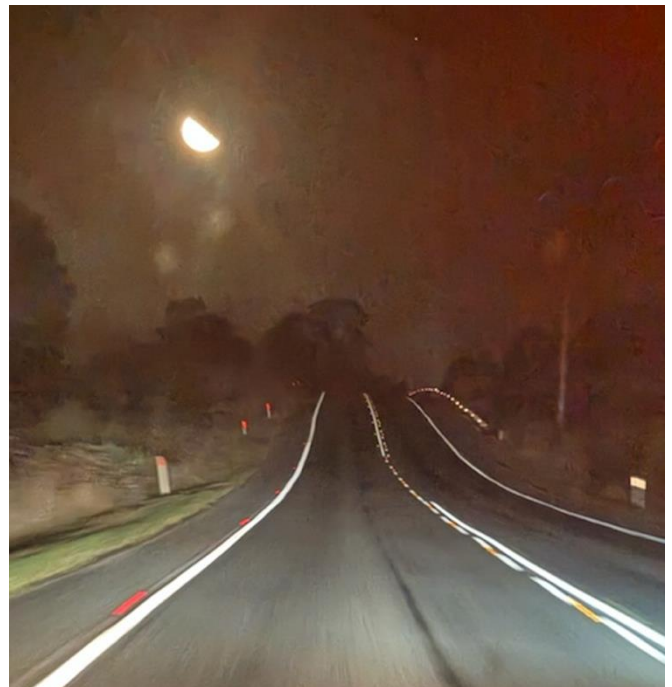


Photograph by Frankie. Used with permission

Imagining a better system

Over the course of the study young people were encouraged to ‘imagine a better system’ of family violence crisis response, which revealed ‘imaginings’ quite different from the reality they experienced. Many young people in the study expressed a desire for service systems that were person- or human-centric rather than system-centric, aligned with their own priorities of healing, recovery and health as a foundation for better futures. They wanted services that listened to them, rather than constantly directing or pressuring them, and that allowed space and time to breathe. While many aspired to be productive workers or full-time students in the future, they wanted to be respected as whole people in the meantime, rather than judged for not yet meeting these expectations. Others, still, recognised that they would probably never be able to meet expectations of full-time work due to caring responsibilities and chronic health conditions. Across their various experiences and perspectives, young people in this study collectively articulated a vision for alternative service systems that centred their needs, voices and agency. This ‘imagining’ is encapsulated in Kingsley and Mr Pickles’ photograph of a road that might yet lead somewhere hopeful, and Ashley’s description of a system fundamentally oriented around:

‘getting to a point where you're in recovery. So you know, like things like access to mental health support, that isn't just a counsellor that doesn't know half the things that you're talking about. ... Providing support around other family members that [you have caring responsibilities for] being able to have someone kind of like step in and be like, “what can I provide you that will lighten the load for you to you know, take care of this individual so that you can focus on your recovery.”’



Photograph by Kingsley and Mr Pickles. Used with permission

Discussion

This project brought together two distinct studies that provided complementary sources of insight including a case file review and a participatory arts-based project to shed light on the experiences of children and young people seeking safety from family violence. We concluded the arts-based project with a workshop with practitioners and policy stakeholders to reflect on the findings and generate insights for service and system reform.

In summary

Study One: The case file review underscored that children and young people make up a substantial part of the work undertaken in Safe Steps family violence crisis accommodation services. Families entered services with layered histories of violence and trauma, resulting in cascading consequences for children across relationships, schooling and health and wellbeing. Practitioners responded with flexibility and innovation, coordinating a wide range of practice responses that extended well beyond risk assessment and safety planning to encompass preventive care, disability- and health-related assistance and support. At the same time, systemic constraints, such as limited housing pathways, restricted what could be achieved. These findings position crisis accommodation as both a critical site of early intervention and a reflection of broader structural gaps.

Study Two: The collaborative, arts-based study added depth and nuance to what was gleaned from service data by centring young peoples lived and living experience. Young people highlighted that processes of recognising their own experiences of violence, and recognition by services was not straightforward. Many described their experiences of family violence as all-encompassing, shaping their everyday worlds and making it difficult to understand and name what they had experienced as violence. This lack of recognition was compounded when services overlooked or minimised their needs, leaving young people feeling unseen and unheard. The importance of services that validate children and young people's experiences and provide language, space and respect for their perspectives and priorities was clear. Their creative contributions illuminated some of the ways in young people envision building safer futures for themselves and the people they care for.

In the workshop that followed, young people's perspectives strongly resonated with practitioners and policy stakeholders. At the same time, the workshop surfaced tensions around the boundaries placed on children and young people's agency within services, pointing to the need for careful consideration of how young people's participation, autonomy and recognition are enacted in practice.

Policy and evidence context: with and by young people

Project findings strongly align with national and Victorian policies which emphasise the need to recognise children and young people as victim-survivors and help seekers *in their own right*, and to listen to their lived experiences in shaping service responses to family violence (for example, Department of Social Services, 2022; Victorian Government, 2025). Along with a steadily growing evidence base, the findings reinforce the urgent need for systems and services that interact with children and young people seeking safety to reflect their distinct circumstances and priorities and recognise their agency and rights. The findings also highlight a deep and persistent chasm between policy intentions and the realities of how services engage and respond to children and young people.

This is not intended as a criticism of practitioners working to support this cohort. The young people involved in Study Two were acutely aware of where the key barriers lay - they understood that no one individual was to blame for the failings of systems. It is also important to acknowledge that policy is a critical driver of practice change, and in Victoria, a suite of reforms implemented over the past decade has substantially reshaped the family violence service landscape. The rollout and ongoing implementation of the

Child and Young Person-focused MARAM practice resources is one such example, and this initiative may not have been in place when participants in Study Two engaged with family violence services.

Critical questions nonetheless remain. Tailored risk assessments represent only a small fraction of the ‘seismic shift’ required for children and young people to feel supported, valued and heard when seeking safety from family violence. Although beyond the scope of this study to explore, project findings do point to a particular concern that risk assessment processes - absent of wider service design changes - may inadvertently reinforce young people’s perceptions of a system that is system-centric: driven more by its own processes and requirements than by the needs of those it is intended to support.

This project, along with several other recent reports (Campbell et al., 2025; Connelly, 2024; Dimopoulos et al., 2024; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2023; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025a; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025b), demonstrate both the opportunities and challenges inherent in operationalising current policy that is striving to ensuring they are *truly* person-centred and responsive to children and young people’s distinct circumstances and priorities.

Strengths, challenges and limitations

A key strength of the project was the use of a participatory, visual methodological approach which enabled young people to creatively express their experiences and feelings related to family violence and seeking safety. By drawing from photovoice and other creative approaches, young people were able to express their experiences and feelings in ways that were meaningful to them, reflecting the strategies that many already used to manage safety and wellbeing. The study also highlighted the significance of everyday places as sites of safety; for example, young people identified libraries, natural places such as beaches, and public gardens as spaces where they felt safe while living with family violence. These insights demonstrate the value of research approaches that build on young people's existing practices and safe spaces, rather than imposing external frameworks for participation.

As an in-depth qualitative inquiry, the study aimed to provide rich, detailed insights into the nature of participants' experiences and perspectives. Study Two was thus intentionally small, consistent with participatory arts-based research, where intensive interpersonal processes often necessitate small sample sizes. Findings are not intended to be generalisable to the

broader population (Nunn, 2022; Vaughan & Khaw, 2021; Wang & Burris, 1997). Rather, the findings are illustrative of key experiences of young people seeking safety and offer a unique depth of understanding made possible through collaborative and creative research processes.

An additional strength, and limitation, of the study was its engagement with participants in an older youth age bracket who were able to reflect on both recent and past experiences. It is a strength because this age group is often overlooked in research on young people's experiences and identified in some service settings as a gap (Melbourne City Mission & RMIT, 2025). Young people over the age of 18 frequently have complex histories of violence: from abusive parents, in early intimate relationships and in other contexts, that may not fit the typical or 'stereotypical' profile for family violence support. A limitation, however, is that the study captured fewer perspectives from children and younger people, meaning that the experiences and needs of these age groups are less represented in the findings.

It is also important to note that the relevance, safety and accessibility of services is different for different children and young people, particularly in the context of family violence where in various ways, services may be inaccessible to First Nations people and

and people with certain migration backgrounds. While this topic was beyond the scope of this study, it will be important to consider in future research.

Additional limitations emerged in the context of the case file review, which was restricted to 30 files from one provider of crisis accommodation services (Safe Steps), and was further constrained by data operating systems and process in which children and young people were not easily identifiable. This represents both an important finding and a potential limitation. Critically, the difficulty of identifying children and young people as distinct 'clients' within service data highlights a paradox in which data infrastructure lag behind policy commitments to recognise children and young people in their own right. Additionally, while the study's collaboration with the practitioner who supported file selection was a significant strength, this close involvement may also have introduced selection bias, as the files available or chosen may not reflect the diversity of children's experiences or practice responses across crisis accommodation services.

Insights and priority actions

Across both studies, a picture emerged of crisis response, and other services where children and young people seek safety from family violence, as sites of both possibility and constraint. For many families, crisis accommodation provided an important bridge to (temporary) safety and a critical hub for early intervention and essential supports for children. For young people, responses to crisis in the context of family violence offered glimpses of the support needed but also carried risks of continued disconnection, misrecognition and feelings of inadequacy.

Insights generated from the project, therefore, speak to the need for multi-level action to bring policy intentions to acknowledge children and young people as victim-survivors of family violence in their own right, into alignment with practice.

Insights from **Study One** - the case file review - clustered around three interconnected issues in need of attention, particularly in relation to data, systems and gaps, and their intersection with complexity, (in)visibility and resourcing.

Data systems

In Safe Steps current data system (SHIP) - which is used across the family violence and other service sectors - information about children is typically recorded *within* an adult client (or non-offending parent) case file. While this approach to data recording and case management is used across many other parts of the family violence system, it limits the visibility of work undertaken with and for children. Additionally, information about children is captured primarily through text-based case notes, that are both extensive and subject to gaps and inconsistencies. While administrative systems that support service delivery should not be critiqued for their capacity to support research, these limitations carry practice and resourcing implications.

In this project, for example, 30 case files represented 30 family units but equated to practice responses for approximately 105 individuals (30 adults and 75 children). Without reliable ways of capturing this work at the child level, these specific service responses are not consistently identified, visible or 'counted' within existing systems. As a result, the scale of practitioner resourcing remains largely invisible, echoing findings from previous research in this space (Bastian, 2025).

Working with data platforms that can flexibly capture families as a unit while also recording children's need for support as

distinct from their parent - rather than requiring one approach at the expense of the other - would improve the visibility of children's experiences, better reflect practice workloads and support alignment with policy. We recommend as a priority action that crisis accommodation:

- **invest in 'fit-for-purpose' data systems** (which may include enhancing the capacity of the existing system) that explicitly support policy intentions to recognise children and young people as victim survivors and service users in their own right (rather than being subsumed under adult or family records), thereby enabling the full extent of crisis accommodation practice responses for children, young people and families to be made visible and counted.

Resourcing

Across the project components, findings also reflected prior research that children and young people's experiences of violence are complex (Campbell et al., 2025; Corrie & Moore, 2021; Council to Homeless Persons, 2025; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025; Safe Steps, 2025), with distinct needs that cannot be met by treating them as an adjunct to their mothers' safety. On the ground, practice responses are clearly attuned to this complexity, with case notes from Safe Steps crisis accommodation

services illustrating practitioners' deep engagement with children and young people including as a site of early intervention. In this context, early intervention refers to actions that support children's safety, development, health and wellbeing in a family violence context.

As such we additionally include as a priority action to:

- **recognise crisis accommodation as a site of early intervention** for children and young people, not just as a temporary accommodation stop. While practices in crisis accommodation are already deeply engaged in supporting children's safer pathways out of violence, crisis accommodation is not currently resourced to fully realise this potential.

Insights from **Study Two** - the participatory arts-based study – clustered around the themes of recognition, (in)visibility and agency. The following recommended priority actions emerged from young people's reflections on their living and lived experience.

Recognition of violence

While the experiences shared by young people in Study Two were diverse, there were several commonalities including perspectives that align with recent research about young people and family violence (Corrie & Moore, 2021; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025). For those who had grown up in violent homes, violence was an inherent and normalised part of the life. Thus, as children, they were often unable to recognise, problematise or articulate what was happening to them as family violence. When referring to the circumstances that led them to seek safety from violence, young people in this study described overarching 'situations' in which they were (or had been) embedded. Young people's framing of violence as an all-encompassing 'situation' highlights the challenges they face in recognising violence.

In a society where children are taught that their parents are their safe people who protect them from harm (which comes from outside the home), and parents (especially mothers) are positioned as authorities on their children's wellbeing, external information and supports are essential for children and young people to understand their situation as violent, and know they are entitled to seek help. This means that pathways to service access begin far before children and young contact the service: they begin in supports and education beyond the family.

Miss Chatterbox suggested that greater education around family violence, and the presence of trusted adults (i.e., teachers, extended family), and friends can provide crucial support in this process. Like others in the study, she also pointed to a need to build social awareness that family violence services are not just for women; they can also be for children and young people. Thus, our recommended priority action is to:

- **develop youth-led resources about family violence**, ensuring their perspectives and experiences shape the content and approach. These resources should support children and young people to understand what is happening to them as violence and provide information about their rights and available supports. Some young people in this study recommended that these resources be made available in the ‘everyday spaces’ that children and young people occupy (e.g. educational settings at all levels, libraries, sports and community settings).

The resources should also include guidance to practitioners (e.g. educators at all levels) working with children and young people on how to support young victim-survivors, particularly during processes of coming to understand their experiences in terms of family violence.

Recognition by services: Being seen, heard and respected

Historically, the specialist family violence service system has not been designed to support children and young people as victim-survivors ‘in their own right.’ Despite policy intentions to recognise children and young people as such, significant challenges remain. Criticism of these services often focuses on their ‘adult-centric’ nature, highlighting how the needs of adults (primarily women) tend to take precedence over those of younger people (Dimopoulos, 2024).

While our study also observed this dynamic, a more consistent theme was that young people perceived services were ‘system-centric:’ designed primarily around the needs, rules, structures and convenience of the service system itself, rather than the needs and experiences of the people it is meant to support. This ‘system-centric’ approach was described by young people as limiting their sense of agency, contributing to feelings of powerlessness, and in some cases even replicating their experiences of coercive control through monitoring and surveillance. By contrast, a person (or young person)-centred system starts from the perspective of the person’s needs, strengths and circumstances, and then designs responses around those while prioritising flexibility, agency and meaningful participation.

As noted by workshop participants and reflected by young people in the study, the workshop also highlighted tensions around the boundaries placed on children and young people's agency within services. This points to the need for careful consideration of how young people's participation, autonomy and recognition are enacted in practice. We recommend therefore to:

- **integrate people with lived and living experience of family violence into service design and delivery** (in family violence and homelessness services) to bridge gaps between young people and services and increase engagement and human-centred design. While this can involve utilising 'peer worker' models, it should also involve ensuring that people with lived experience of family violence are included as staff (at all levels) and board members across services. Including a diversity of staff with lived experience can help ensure that services, as a whole, are designed and delivered in ways that feel safer and more relevant to young people seeking safety.

Building safer futures

Young people involved in this study were remarkable, in many ways. While recalling the countless instances in which services and systems had let them down, they understood that problems were structural and no one individual deserved blame for their poor experiences. They demonstrated remarkable generosity, patience, resilience, resourcefulness and clarity in identifying what could meaningfully improve safety, support, recovery and healing outcomes, both for themselves and for other young people in the future.

They emphasised the importance of crisis accommodation being connected to other supports, accessible, in safe locations and responsive to individual circumstances. Young people articulated a strong desire for person-centred services and systems: services where they are seen, heard and respected. Creative practices, everyday places and spaces were identified as important strategies in their safety journeys, as well as connections to people with whom their lives and wellbeing were entwined (e.g. nonviolent parents, children, siblings).

Echoing previous (aspirational) recommendations from research in this space (Connelly, 2025; Dimopoulos, 2024; Fitz-Gibbon, 2025), effectively enacting the priority actions emerging from this project calls for **seismic shift in the design and delivery of services for children and young people** experiencing family violence, ensuring they are *truly* person-centred and responsive to children and young people's distinct circumstances and priorities. Such a fundamental shift would involve the development of services that can listen well to those who access them, taking as their starting point the needs and priorities of young people rather than the systems in which they are embedded. This shift can only be achieved by a genuine and meaningful commitment to youth and lived experience leadership to co-design policy and practices

Conclusion

This project provides new insights into the experiences of children and young people seeking safety from family violence. It highlights the complexity of their journeys, their resilience and resourcefulness and the critical gaps in systems designed to support them. By centring young people's voices, the study underscores the importance of designing services and policies that are responsive, inclusive and attentive to their needs, agency and aspirations. Ultimately, the findings point to the need for systemic change that enables safer, more supportive and empowering environments for all children and young people affected by family violence.



Photograph by Kingsley. Used with permission

A final note

In recent years, a growing number of reports have documented the experiences, insights and priorities of children and young people affected by family violence. Young people have spoken with clarity and courage about what needs to change. It is essential that their contributions are met with meaningful action, and we echo recent calls that their contributions to system reform ‘cannot be left to gather dust.’ (Gilfeather-Spetere & Watson, 2024). Continuing to ask young people to share their experiences without ensuring that these insights lead to tangible improvements risks causing further harm. The challenge now is not to gather more evidence, but to act on what children and young people have already told us.



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