

FAIR: Family Violence Affecting Children and Young People from Immigrant and Refugee Backgrounds

BACKGROUND

FAIR is a participatory mixed methods study developed to identify and understand the needs of children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds affected by domestic and family violence (DFV). Children from migrant and refugee backgrounds face a range of compounding structural and interpersonal factors that exacerbate risks and impacts of DFV, and limit help-seeking.

Structural factors that create barriers to help-seeking include systemic racism; fear of child removal by statutory services following disclosure of DFV; fear of being detained in immigration detention centres; and visa implications for families who hold temporary visas. Depending on visa type, families may also be ineligible for public health care and access to social services including crisis accommodation.

These factors have been found to contribute to fear and distrust amongst migrant and refugee communities towards the service system that responds to DFV. **FAIR aims to generate much needed evidence to strengthen service system responses to children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds affected by DFV.**

METHODS

The study comprised of the following components that used a range of qualitative, quantitative and creative methods:



Convened two advisory groups: Youth Lived-Experience Advisory Group & Stakeholder Advisory Group



Interviews with migrant mothers about the impacts of DFV on their children (n=16)



A scoping review of evidence on migrant and refugee children's experiences of DFV and accessing services



Interviews with young people about experiences of DFV during childhood (n=10)



Interviews with key stakeholders including social workers, psychologists, child protection practitioners, lawyers, and police (n=22)



A digital storytelling project with young people (n=8)



Quantitative analysis of linked child protection data to understand trajectories of care for children from migrant and refugee backgrounds

KEY FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM MIGRANT BACKGROUNDS AFFECTED BY DFV DURING CHILDHOOD

Young people affected by DFV during childhood emphasised **the service system was not attuned to the needs of children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds**. The six key themes generated from interviews with young people were:

- Children and young people's experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence;
- Intersectional discrimination influences how children experience violence and engage with services;
- Children and young people have limited trust in the service system;
- How children and young people manage their own safety in the context of DFV;
- Trajectories of care for children within the service system;
- Young people's perspectives on how the service system can be strengthened.

Young people reported **experiencing multiple types of DFV that included physical violence, intimate partner violence, coercive control, emotional abuse, sexual violence, financial abuse, stalking, and transnational abduction**. People who used this violence against children included fathers and father-like figures, mothers and siblings. Some young people also stated that they had experienced DFV from multiple family members. In response to violence, young people reflected that they initially tried to manage their own safety and the safety of their siblings before disclosing DFV to someone outside of their family. Following experiences of DFV, young people shared a range of health and social needs to support recovery: **fostering social connection; mental health support; tools to navigate stigma and shame; and activities to build self-confidence**. Many young people discussed how having clear educational and career goals helped them stay focused and foster emotional wellbeing. One young woman had experienced Islamophobia from services and from university staff during her undergraduate degree. She shared that she was motivated to complete her law degree because she wanted to be a "hijabi lawyer" – an image she knew would challenge those who held racist beliefs about Muslim women. Other young people had leadership aspirations and were involved in youth leadership programs for state and federal governments, and not-for-profit organisations.

Systemic racism and other forms of discrimination were found to influence children and young people's engagement with services. For refugee background children and international students in particular, socio-economic status impacted how they accessed services, as well as how they sought safety during and after DFV. A young person who came to Australia on an international student visa to escape violence from her parents reported lying on their visa application that they had financial support from their family. **Limited financial resources meant they were unable to prioritise their mental health. Because of their temporary visa status, the young person was not covered by Medicare so had to disengage from therapy due to the cost**. Another young person, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, described comprehensive involvement with child protection, family services and the legal system, yet they never received a referral to a mental health service. It wasn't until they were an adult and living independently that they began to see a therapist. Having to fund their therapy out of pocket whilst trying to complete their university degree led to feelings of resentment and contributed to financial stress.

These experiences contributed to young people's limited trust in formal services. They felt that children's voices were ignored by services; children were not believed when they reported DFV; and violence was considered a private family issue. **Children and young people only sought support from services once DFV had reached critically high risk**. One young person, who became a DFV practitioner following their own experiences, shared that in their professional role they commonly saw migrant young people report DFV only once it had reached a **"stage of lethality"**.

KEY FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Interviews with stakeholders provided evidence on how the service system supported migrant and refugee children affected by DFV. The eight key themes generated from the interviews were:

- Challenges in responding to the needs of migrant and refugee children;
- Barriers for migrant and refugee families accessing services;
- System pressures and limitations;
- Systemic racism and the role of cultural humility;
- The relationship between migration and domestic and family violence;
- Working with migrant and refugee men and boys who use violence;
- Children and young people's experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence;
- Systemic solutions needed to strengthen current responses.

Stakeholders shared that **children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds felt overwhelmed by the complexity of the system and found it difficult to access support for DFV**. When mothers accessed services, interactions were felt to be more effective if the mother had a caseworker to advocate on their behalf. Without one-on-one support, there was concern that migrant families would “miss out” and not understand certain processes. This was especially concerning when families were involved with child protection services and the justice system. These systems were described as “alienating” and “scary” for migrant families.

When sexual violence against children had occurred, mothers were often left to make sense of complex legal processes alone, with minimal English language proficiency and knowledge of Victorian legal systems. To minimise confusion, child counsellors felt they were required to step in and provide case management to the mother and child reducing the time available to address concerns such as child mental health. Despite recent reforms to promote cross sector collaboration, children were still reported to be linked to up to 14 different services at one time, contributing to migrant families' sense of being overwhelmed.

There were considerable challenges to prioritising migrant and refugee children's safety in the context of DFV. Stakeholders shared that most children who were reported to child protection experienced some form of DFV at home. Despite this, child protection responses were described as not being trauma informed and lacking nuance when it came to responding to different patterns of DFV. Child protection services were also under considerable strain and were reported to be experiencing a 40% staff vacancy rate in Victoria. System pressures on child protection services affected practitioners' trust in the reporting process. Many stakeholders emphasised individual child protection workers could be incredible in their role, but systemic issues meant they were so overloaded that “blunt responses” to child safety concerns had become the norm.

KEY FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH MOTHERS FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

Mothers who had experienced DFV provided their perspectives on how DFV had affected their children, and how children responded to DFV. They also reflected on their experiences of accessing the DFV service system. Five key themes were identified:

- Descriptions of family violence and responses to abuse;
- Families' experiences of coercive control;
- Barriers to children's safety and wellbeing;
- Enablers of children's safety and wellbeing;
- Key gaps in service response including access to information and crisis support.

Findings from research with migrant mothers identified that the main perpetrator of family violence was the mother's male intimate partner. Children themselves often tried to stop the abuse and support their family's safety, wellbeing and healing. Coercive control was a prominent type of DFV discussed by mothers. They noted that violence was not always overt, sometimes it was subtle and controlling. Men's control isolated mothers which limited children's social connections to family and community. Mothers also reflected on children experiencing fear and stress that restricted children's play and self-expression. Services did not have comprehensive knowledge of how DFV used by fathers impacted their children. Practitioners who understood coercive control and used a whole-of-family approach were found to enable safety and wellbeing for migrant and refugee background families.

RESEARCH OUTPUTS

The FAIR project has published a suite of digital stories created by young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds about their experiences of DFV and accessing the service system. You can watch them [here](#). We have also published:

- Tarpey-Brown, G., Kirwan, J., Wise, S., Alisic, E., Vaughan, C., & Block, K. (2024). **Domestic and Family Violence Affecting Children and Young People from Culturally and Racially Marginalized Migrant Backgrounds in Australia: A Scoping Review of Child Experiences and Service Responses**. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(5), 3872–3886. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241265386>
- Barrese, A., Tarpey-Brown, G., Block, K. (2025). **Caring for culturally and racially marginalised migrant children and young people experiencing family violence: Service provider perspectives** [Manuscript submitted for publication].
- Kirwan, J., Vaughan, C., Block, K. (2025). **“Hidden victims” - Family violence affecting children from culturally and racially marginalised migrant backgrounds: Perceptions and experiences of mothers**. [Manuscript submitted for publication]

NEXT STEPS

Data analysis for the FAIR project will be completed in December 2025. Over the next 6 months, we will be working on producing several resources. These will include a project report with recommendations, and several academic journal articles that will focus on:

- Insights from interviews with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds about childhood experiences of DFV
- Stakeholder perspectives on system responses to children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds affected by DFV
- A co-authored paper with young people who participated in the digital story project that details the digital storytelling process and highlights the benefits and challenges involved when co-creating research
- Findings from quantitative analysis of linked data from Victorian child protection and DFV services that maps the trajectories of care for children from migrant and refugee backgrounds



If you would like more information about the project, please scan the QR code or contact Associate Professor Karen Block (keblock@unimelb.edu.au). The FAIR project is funded by the Brian M. Davis Charitable Foundation.