

2 January 2023

Safety through violence prevention

Q Shelter has previously written to the State Government to suggest upstream measures to improve the pipeline of housing supply while also reducing the number of people vulnerable to housing need and homelessness.

Recent tragic events have prompted us to write again to offer some suggestions about a pathway to prevention. While measures to address crime once it has happened are necessary, we are committed in our role as a peak organisation to focusing on solutions that prevent such crimes occurring in the first place.

The impact of adverse childhood experiences

Q Shelter is aware of significant research in the field of neuroscience demonstrating that children who are exposed to adverse events such as abuse, domestic and family violence, neglect, and other traumas, acquire significant vulnerabilities including cognitive impairment (Heckman 2008; Nelson et al 2020). Children who are exposed to repeated trauma, particularly early in life, have much poorer outcomes including lower participation in education and employment, higher vulnerability to substance use, poorer physical and mental health, and greater engagement with emergency and corrective services.

There is also research establishing a link between adverse childhood experiences and homelessness. One report that examined 24 studies across the United States of America, the UK and Canada showed prevalence rates of physical and sexual abuse in childhood among homeless people were many times higher than the general population (37% physical abuse and 32% sexual abuse compared to 4-16% and 5-10% respectively) (Lui et al, 2021). As housing programs funded by the State have focussed more and more on housing people with high and very high assessed needs, the provision of community housing and specialist homelessness services has been at the front-line responding to the longer-term impacts of these acquired vulnerabilities.

Q Shelter's proposals for policy and investment

Q Shelter is concerned about the growing number of people with high levels of vulnerability who require social housing solutions.

As such, our policy proposals during 2022 included approaches to working with families, children, and young people through intensive and preventative interventions with flow-on impacts that reduce exposure to adverse events, support high quality primary attachments, and improve engagement with education, employment, and community life.

Our policy submission in 2022 included a recommendation focussed on intensive support programs for vulnerable families during pregnancy and the early years. This included an active goal for such programs to reduce children's exposure to adverse events which measurably impact their emotional, psychological, and cognitive development. We have included an extract from that policy submission as an attachment.

Q Shelter also provided input to the Mental Health Select Committee¹ which outlined:

- Models of intensive early support for children and families to prevent exposure to adverse events and increase wellbeing outcomes
- Evidence of enduring cognitive impacts from exposure to adverse events including cognitive disabilities, greater risk of social and economic exclusion, and brain changes that cause greater aggression among other impacts. The types of adverse events, the length and intensity of exposure, and the developmental stage of the child all effect the seriousness of those impacts. Exposure to adverse events impacts neurobiology including decreased brain volume

A policy and investment framework to improve individual and community level outcomes

We know the Queensland Government already invests in a range of family support programs, and support services focussed on the needs of families, children, and young people, and these are commended.

Consistent with our submission to the Queensland Government in 2022, we are writing to offer any assistance in considering a policy and investment response to the prevention of children and young people emerging from exposure to adverse events into behaviours that cause harm to themselves and/or harm to the broader community.

We genuinely consider that these responses will also help to reduce the number of people with complex needs and extreme vulnerability leading to an increased risk of homelessness and probable reliance on high-subsidy housing products in later life.

There are various high quality prevention programs that show an increased return on investment compared to later-life programs trying to address vulnerability at an older age. Our views reflect evidence from the [Nurse Partnership Program](#) and the [Abcedarian Program](#), both of which have been replicated in Australia and have been the subject of rigorous evaluation.

Q Shelter considers investment in evidence-based programs such as these is important. Investment in stand-alone programs will not be enough however without an integrated way of working across Federal and State agencies, and the community services sector to improve the early identification of vulnerable families during pregnancy and very early in the life of children. This requires careful system design with clear protocols for identifying and responding to vulnerable families. A shared and agreed approach to assessment and intervention from touchpoints such as health systems, emergency services, child protection services and a wide range of community services providing individual and place-based support is needed.

There are many ways that people interact with government and non-government agencies to highlight the importance of high-quality integration across inputs such as:

- Income support
- Emergency services
- Corrective services

¹ See attached letter and an evidence paper led by Charles Nelson from Harvard Medical School that has informed our suggestions.

- General health services including GPs, hospitals and maternal health services
- Mental health services
- Child protection services
- Youth justice
- Education
- Family support services
- Specialist homelessness services and housing providers
- Community and neighbourhood centres.

Designing a system-level response inclusive of policy settings, investment in additional services, and high-quality integration of interventions across systems is vitally important if we are to identify highly vulnerable children and prevent their exposure to adverse childhood experiences therefore reducing later life impacts for individuals and communities.

We think there is an important role for research to understand through data matching how people are engaging with various systems and how those systems respond to their needs. There is an opportunity to embed research to understand the difference that future interventions make, particularly in the context of system-level reform and integration.

Attachment: Resources and background

Abcedarian Program

- [Abcedarian Program](#)
- [Sparling, J; Ramey, L and Ramey CT \(2021\) Mental Health and Social Development Effects of the Abcedarian Approach in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18\(13\)](#)

Nurse Family Partnership Program:

- [Nurse Family Partnership research trials and outcomes](#)
- [Nurse Partnership Program](#)
- [Nurse Family Partnership Program](#)

Heckman, J (2022) [Invest in Early Childhood Development: reduce deficits, strengthen the economy](#) on Heckmanequation.org accessed 30 December 2022.

[Herzog, J and Schmahl, C \(2018\) Adverse childhood experiences and the consequences of neurobiological, psychosocial and somatic conditions across the lifespan in *Front Psychiatry*, Volume 9.](#)

[Koh, K and Montgomery, AE \(2021\) Adverse childhood experiences and homelessness: advances and aspirations, *The Lancet*, Sept 29, 2021.](#)

[Lui M, Luong L, Lachaud J, Edalati H, Reeves A and Hwang S \(2021\) Adverse childhood experiences and related outcomes among adults experiencing homelessness: a systematic review and meta analysis in *Lancet Public Health* 6\(11\).](#)

[Nelson, C \(2020\) Adversity in childhood is linked to mental and physical health throughout life in *BMJ* 371:m3048.](#)