

3 December 2024

### **Submission to the Making Queensland Safer Bill**

Q Shelter is a statewide peak body working to ensure every Queenslander has a home.

We are concerned that this Bill will worsen safety in our communities as children experience the negative impacts of incarceration without adequate investment in very early preventative support.

Q Shelter is concerned that these experiences will further harm children who are already vulnerable while doing nothing to prevent violence and the associated impacts on the broader community.

We have previously written to the Queensland Government to propose significantly more investment in prevention programs that reduce the level of exposure that children and young people experience to adverse events. There is a strong correlation between early exposure to adverse events and the intersection with child protection and corrections systems. Q Shelter considers the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and later life homelessness as extremely important to understand as a basis for designing interventions that will succeed.

A truly preventative approach requires very early identification of families at risk and the availability of high-quality, intensive support to ensure that children are safe and supported.

Incarcerating children and sentencing them as adults may further traumatise young people may worsen anti-social behaviours because of the known impacts of incarceration including further offending, greater disengagement from family, school and other social connections.

Q Shelter is very concerned about the welfare of children and young people under these arrangements. We are also aware that children and young people who are exposed to adverse events early in life are more likely to be vulnerable to complex homelessness in later life. We clearly want to prevent life experiences that harm children and that lead to lives of preventable disadvantage and vulnerability requiring costly interventions that are less effective.

We acknowledge and are concerned about the experiences of people who are the victims of crime. Children involved in anti-social behaviours including violence have also often witnessed violence or experienced violence in their families or communities. The dichotomy between offenders and victims of crime does not acknowledge the likelihood that children involved in the criminal justice system are very often victims of crime themselves. Because of a lack of preventative support to engage positively, participate in education and experience a positive and nurturing environment, a greater likelihood of anti-social behaviours emerges.

We are deeply concerned about the over-representation of First Nations children in child protection and criminal justice systems. These laws may further increase incarceration rates among First Nations Children without addressing any of the root causes through genuine reforms to address systemic racism, higher rates of chronic disease, lower educational attainment levels, greater homelessness, lower homeownership rates and lower levels of economic participation.

## **Adverse childhood experiences, behavioural issues and homelessness**

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 since 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 submissions have included 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 that measurably impact their emotional, psychological, and cognitive development.

Q Shelter also provided input to the Mental Health Select Committee<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

## **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.

Queensland needs 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 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
- 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.

#### Contact

Q Shelter can be contacted via Jackson Hills, Acting CEO by emailing [Jackson.hills@qshelter.asn.au](mailto:Jackson.hills@qshelter.asn.au) and on [REDACTED].

Thank you for considering our views. We know there is an opportunity to adopt leading world practices where children are protected and supported, where they are less likely to be exposed to adverse events and where they do not need to be incarcerated because of robust prevention and early intervention.



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## References

1. [Extract from Q Shelter's 2022 Policy and Investment Submission. The whole document is available at this link.](#)

## Other information

### 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.](#)