Safe at Home Meta-Evaluation

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“Safe at home” programs are broadly defined as interventions or strategies that aim to keep certain women and children in independent accommodation of their choice after leaving a violent relationship, thereby reducing the risk of further abuse. This type of response was initially developed to better hold perpetrators accountable for their violence, as well as to counter the socially unjust expectation that victims need to enter specialist homelessness services while the perpetrator remains in the family home.

Program mapping demonstrates that most jurisdictions in Australia and several other countries have implemented “safe at home” initiatives to mitigate the homelessness and safety impacts of domestic violence on women and their children. However, many of these “safe at home” programs are relatively new and only some have been evaluated.

The state of knowledge paper identified four pillars underpinning “safe at home” responses which provide a conceptual platform for developing and implementing “safe at home” strategies:

- a focus on maximising women’s safety using a combination of criminal justice responses, legal provisions to exclude the perpetrator from the home, proactive policing, safety alarms and home security upgrades;
- a coordinated or integrated response involving partnerships between local services;
- “safe at home” as a homelessness prevention strategy which ensures that women are informed about their housing options before the time of crisis, at separation, and to maintain housing in the longer term; and
- explicit recognition of the importance of enhancing women’s economic security.

These four conceptual pillars were evident across the 20 evaluations included in the meta-evaluation. However, emphasis on one or more pillars varied among the evaluations and the interventions focused on different pillars at different times.

The evaluations indicated that a key feature of “safe at home” programs is an integrated response at either the sector or local agency level because women’s needs after leaving a violent relationship frequently require a coordinated approach. Maximising women’s safety and homelessness prevention were also universally noted, and one or the other was reflected as the predominant pillar, as follows:

- Integrated criminal justice strategies focusing on safety by managing perpetrator risk via protection orders and ouster/exclusion provisions.
- “Safe at home” programs focusing explicitly on women staying in accommodation with or without protection orders and ouster/exclusion provisions to address safety concerns.

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Enhancing women’s economic security is an emerging area of research and practice response that recognises the importance of women being able to mitigate post-separation poverty.

Overall, the meta-evaluation showed that there is no shared agreement of what constitutes a “safe at home” program or initiative. Very few of the evaluations attempted to define the meaning of “safe at home”, and the purpose and aims of the evaluations differed across jurisdictions. This means that identifying what is “good practice” from the included “safe at home” evaluations was not straightforward and can be highly contested.