RESEARCH IMPACT CASE STUDY - ADVANCING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH
CATHY HUMPHREYS

Title of Case Study: INTEGRATING CHILD PROTECTION AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INTERVENTIONS TO PROVIDE ‘WHOLE FAMILY’ RESPONSES WHEN FAMILIES EXPERIENCE DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

1. CONTEXT
There is growing international understanding of domestic and family violence, its impact on children, and the need to integrate child protection and domestic violence responses so that relationships between mothers and children can be strengthened, not further damaged, by interventions. Yet services remain fragmented: fathers are not held responsible for their violence, and mother-blaming is still evident, especially in child protection systems. There is a need for more evidence on the multi-agency, holistic family approaches that can be contextualised for each family, effective interventions with children, and the role and responsibilities of abusive fathers in reparation with children. These are three areas where Prof Humphreys and her colleagues have pursued ground-breaking research.

2. SUMMARY OF IMPACT
Improved professional understanding of a problem leads to new approaches. The research program has been an important element of raising awareness about the effects of domestic violence on children and the need for interventions that enhance family relationships affected by domestic violence. Research has led to the development of policies and practice frameworks that better integrate child protection and DFV assessments, interventions, and models of interagency collaboration.

3. RESEARCH UNDERRPINNING IMPACT
Professor Humphreys leads two main programs of research, one focusing on out-of-home care and the other on children and domestic violence. This case study focuses on the latter area, which spans more than 12 years and seven main research projects.

1. Safer Families, 2017-2022. Funded by NHMRC. This is a large scale, multi-element research project with a number of partners. The aim is to generate new knowledge from evidence—reviews of studies, data from following families over time and trials of health and community programs. This will assist health and family services to identify domestic and family violence early, tailor responses to individuals’ experiences and to specific communities, develop and evaluate programs customized to mothering and fathering where there is domestic violence, and to better integrate child protection and domestic violence responses.

2. Fathers, domestic violence and intervention challenges, 2013-2017. ARC Linkage grant. Aimed at improving the parenting experience of children whose fathers have used domestic and family violence. It brings together researchers from multiple universities, a consortium of 23 nongovernment organisations, and governments from Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. The project spans the areas of inclusive fathering, men who use violence and Aboriginal healing and time-out programs. Utilising an action research framework, it aims to set standards and guidance for practice in working with men where there is DFV to improve the parenting experience of children and the safety of women.

3. Safety and resiliency at home: voices of children who live with fear, 2009-2012. ARC Linkage grant. This project involved qualitative interviews with children and their mothers drawn from a sample in primary care. Findings led to the development of policy guidelines for primary health care professionals working with children living with domestic violence. It also highlighted the issues which create both vulnerability and resilience in children living in these challenging circumstances.

4. I-Decide Safety Decision Aid 2013-2016. ARC Discovery Grant. This project was led by Professor Kelsey Hegarty with Humphreys as a CI on the project. In this randomised controlled trial, women who have experienced abuse or fear of a partner in the previous 6 months were randomised to receive either the I-DECIDE website or a comparator website (basic relationship and safety advice). I-DECIDE is a free online program developed by the research team. It uses tailored responses, motivational interviewing and non directive problem solving tools to help women develop an action plan that meets their needs (see http://www.decide.org.au/). The research found that I-DECIDE assists women to identify abuse and seek out support. The researchers recommended that I-DECIDE could be easily incorporated into the community sector and health and family case settings, providing an alternative to formal services for women not ready or able to acknowledge abuse and access specialised services.

5. Domestic and family violence and parenting: mixed method insights into impact and support needs, 2015-2017. ANROWS grant. With the aim of providing supportive care for mothers experiencing DFV and their children as an alternative to reporting all DFV to child protection services, this research used a mixed-methods approach to explore the impact of DFV on parenting, the methods and behaviours used by perpetrators to disrupt the mother–child relationship, and interventions used to strengthen and support a healthy mother–child relationship. It recommended that programs are needed with a DFV focus that provide victims of abuse with more intense and targeted therapy, psychotherapeutic interventions with combined mother–child sessions.

6. Pathways and Research In Collaborative Inter-Agency working (PATRICIA project), 2015-2017. ANROWS grant. This research sought to identify models of interagency working to improve support pathways and practice frameworks. It involved five strands (knowledge, pathways, case diables, perpetrator accountability, and action research) across four Australian States with numerous collaborators. It found that while working together towards similar goals for families seems a logical way of improving processes to reduce fragmentation, gaps, overlap, and redundancies in service provision, there is insufficient evidence that these changes improve outcomes for children and families. The PATRICIA Project used the action research process (including extensive file case reading) to generate new knowledge about the child protection–domestic and family violence interface and then translate this knowledge into a framework for practice (https://doi.org/10.4636/1.official.2015-2017.123456789/). Specifically it found that strong collaborations between organisations need to provide the foundation for multi-agency risk assessment and differentiated referral pathways for children living with DFV, and that families who do not meet the threshold for a child protection investigation can be diverted to a community organisation for assistance.

7. Stacey Project: Safe & Together Addressing Complexity, 2018-2019. DSS grant. The Safe and Together approach to CHIL welfare provides case reading tools and other mechanisms that enable practitioners from statutory and non-statutory backgrounds to reach agreement on how best to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children living with DFV. This project will examine the effectiveness of family violence reforms in Victoria.
4. DETAILS OF IMPACT

Approach to impact: Prof Humphreys states that the overall question during her research program is ‘What difference does this research make?’ The research goes beyond understanding the impact of domestic violence on children to consider what to do about the problem of how to inform policy and advocacy within the sector. In addition to extensive publications in professional and peer review journals, Prof Humphreys has engaged with state governments and several millions of dollars in research funding, and have demonstrated their interest in implementing research findings through policy changes, new service delivery models and practitioner training.

The Multi-Agency Triage Project in the NE region of Melbourne is an example of the recommendations from the Family Violence Royal Commission, Victoria. Appropriates to reference and advisory groups recognise the expertise of Prof Humphreys in domestic violence research and provide them the necessary tools to implement policy and practice.

5. ENGAGEMENT

A strength of Prof Humphreys’s research program is the enduring, committed relationships she and her team have established, especially with government agencies and NGOs, demonstrating the value of the research to policy and practice development. These agencies have committed substantial funds to the Child and Family Social Work Schools and have engaged and ongoing contact with children. Scientists and practice for implementation and engagement with children on the Domestic Violence and Child Protection Project for 5 years funded by the Victoria Department of Human Services. The Australian Association of Social Work developed accreditation requirements with the Western Integrated Family Violence Partnership, Evaluation of a model of Safe at Home for women and children experiencing domestic violence.

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6. RESEARCH INCOME

Approximately $8 million worth of funding has been attracted through grants and tenders associated with over 30 different projects of differing scope, size and duration, seven 3-year projects totaling $5,732,000 related to child protection and DFV are listed for this case study.

Prof Humphreys was appointed The Alfred Felton Chair of Child and Family Welfare, established in 2006 and funded for 5 years by the Alfred Felton Trust. It was the first chair of its kind in Australia.

The research program has been a major influencer.

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Impact on public policy: Examples of inputs to public policy are:


