



NOWHERE TO TURN FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Documenting the journeys of children
and young people into refuges

REPORT SUMMARY



women's aid
until women & children are safe

Report author

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Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the children and young people who provided artwork and interview data for this report, and who shed light on their experiences of fleeing domestic abuse. We would also like to thank the women and children who were supported by the NWTA project, as well as other services listed on On Track, who provided the data that this report draws on. Many thanks to Nottinghamshire Women's Aid and Wycombe Women's Aid for supporting this research.

We are very grateful to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for continuing to fund the No Woman Turned Away (NWTA) project. This funding has provided additional support for women and children who have faced barriers and structural inequalities to accessing a refuge, and detailed monitoring of the journeys of survivors seeking safety from domestic abuse.

Many thanks to the NWTA specialist practitioners Garima Jhamb, Michelle Ruse, Mingma Seely, and Sue Westwood for the vital support they have given to survivors, and for their expertise in informing the research throughout the project. Thanks also to Lisa Johnson, Manager of Direct Services at Women's Aid, and the direct services team for their invaluable contribution to the project.

Thank you to Katie Smith, Data Business Manager at Women's Aid, and Sarah Davidge, Research and Evaluation Manager, for all their invaluable input and support. Thanks also to Sarika Seshadri, Head of Research, as well as the wider team at Women's Aid for their support.

Dedication

This report is dedicated to the children and young people whose journeys while seeking safety from domestic abuse are documented in this report.

All names and identifying features used in the report have been changed to protect survivors' anonymity.

Published by: Women's Aid Federation of England, a registered charity in England & Wales (1054154) and a company limited by guarantee in England & Wales (3171880). PO Box 3245, Bristol, BS2 2EH

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Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. Over the past 45 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

We are a federation of nearly 180 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. We provide expert training, qualifications and consultancy to a range of agencies and professionals working with survivors or commissioning domestic abuse services, and award a National Quality Mark for services which meet our quality standards. We hold the largest national dataset on domestic abuse, and use research and evidence to inform all of our work. Our campaigns achieve change in policy, practice and awareness, encouraging healthy relationships and helping to build a future where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated.

Our support services, which include our Live Chat help service, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), the national Domestic Abuse Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

Introduction and methodology

Nowhere to Turn for Children and Young People brings together original research findings on children and young people's experiences and needs during their family's search for a safe space to live after fleeing domestic abuse. The report is linked to Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away (NWTA) project, which provides dedicated support to help women overcome barriers and structural inequalities which can prevent them from accessing a refuge space. Of the 243 women who engaged with the NWTA project and finished their support between 12th January 2019 and 11th January 2020¹, approximately half (123 women; 50.6%) were fleeing with at least one child.

While it is important to acknowledge that young people can experience domestic abuse in their own romantic relationships, *Nowhere to Turn for Children and Young People* focuses on those children and young people fleeing with their mother.

The report draws on the following data sources:

- ▶ Statistical data and case studies on the women and children supported by the NWTA project who ended their support between 12th January 2019 and 11th January 2020.
- ▶ National data collected by 57 organisations in England pertaining to children and young people who ended their support with accommodation-based domestic abuse services between 1st April 2019 and 31st March 2020.
- ▶ Snapshot data of all domestic abuse services in England listed on Women's Aid's online services directory Routes to Support on 1st May 2020.
- ▶ Interviews with and artwork provided by children and young people aged 11 to 17 which focus on their experiences whilst their family was searching for a safe space to live (for further demographic data and limitations, please see the main report, found at: www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away).

¹ See *Nowhere to Turn 2020: Findings from the fourth year of the No Woman Turned Away project*. Available here: www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away

Part 1: “An upsetting life”

The journeys of children and young people into refuge

Our research revealed that children and young people often had to deal with a host of practical and emotional difficulties when fleeing an abuser, and that families with children have a range of specific support needs when attempting to access a refuge space.

“A million feelings”

Impact on emotional wellbeing

Several participants told us that they had been “scared” in the family home, and their journeys into refuge created a host of additional emotions for them. Many children and young people spoke about having to negotiate their confusion and anger about what was happening, their desire to protect their mother from their own feelings, their complicated feelings towards the perpetrator, and feeling relieved once they had found a place of safety.

Some of the participants spoke about the lack of control that they sensed during their journeys and some wished that they had had access to more information. One participant told us the following:

“I didn’t know where I was going and what’s going to happen.”

Saying goodbye to “everything we knew”

Leaving friends, family and schools

For children and young people, fleeing domestic abuse often meant leaving their friends, their extended family, and their school behind. Almost half (47.4%) of children and young people in refuges are of compulsory school age (5 to 15 years old)², and children and young people who had to leave home



² This is based on national On Track data.

because of domestic abuse often faced significant disruption to their education. The upheaval of their education, as well as their associated social lives, featured in many of our interviews with children and young

people. Participants expressed how difficult it was to leave “everything [they] knew” (Shannon; see images on page 4), and many showed incredible strength in adapting to new situations.

“Everything was in different places”

Living transient lives

Table 1 below shows where families with children who were supported by the NWTB project this year stayed while searching for a refuge space.

Our interviews with children and young people offered further insight into these temporary solutions and what staying in different places felt like to children and young people in reality. For example, children and young people told us how they slept on the floor of family member’s houses or in hotels several weeks before moving to a refuge.



Table 1: Where did women fleeing with children stay while waiting for a refuge space*

	Number of women	Percentage out of total number of women fleeing with children (out of 123)
Spent time sofa-surfing	49	39.8%
Spent time in emergency accommodation	14	11.4%
Paid to stay in a hostel/B&B/hotel	7	5.7%
Spent time sleeping rough (including using 24h spaces to sleep, or living in her car)	2 (only in one case with her child)	1.6%

* We were not necessarily aware of where women were staying and not all women are represented here. Some women stayed in more than one type of temporary accommodation. We did not always collect information on whether children were staying with their mother at this time.

“It was hard to live with £20 a week”

Children and young people’s financial struggles

The themes of financial difficulties and a lack of adequate food and clothing featured heavily in some of the children’s and young people’s accounts.

One participant, Leah, told us that early on in the week she was worried about not having enough to eat later in the week. She drew the crying face on the right “because it was hard to live with £20 a week”. She also went without a present on her birthday because her mother could not afford it. She received a small birthday gift once her mother had received more money from the social worker the following day.



Supporting each other and meeting professionals

Nowhere to Turn for Children and Young People clearly demonstrates the importance of the bond between children, their mothers and other non-abusive family members, who protect and support each other through the most difficult times. In addition, although professionals were often absent in children and young people’s narratives, some participants told us how they valued the

support of professionals who took them and their needs seriously. For example, we heard from our participants how they valued being supported by the specialist children and young people’s (CYP) workers once they were in a refuge (see main report for more information in CYP workers, at www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away).

Part 2: Available services and additional barriers

Refuge vacancies and services for children and young people

Refuge spaces for families with children

Children and young people make up more than half of those who live in a refuge³ (13,787 children vs 11,489 adult women). However, as can be seen in **Table 2**, only some of the available refuge spaces on Routes to Support are suitable for families.

Table 2: Refuge vacancies available by number of children

Number of children	% of vacancies posted
Woman with one child	59.5%
Woman with two children	43.0%
Woman with three children	15.1%
Woman with four or more children	4.6%

In addition, Routes to Support data shows that only 79.8% of refuges are currently able to accommodate male children aged 14 or under, and 49.4% of refuges are available to male children aged 16 or under. Only 19.4% of refuges are able to accommodate male children aged 17 or over.

Dedicated services for children and young people

Routes to Support snapshot data shows that 86.7% of refuges are running at least one dedicated children and young people (CYP) service. As can be seen in **Table 3 (over page)**, 32.3% of refuges employ a dedicated CYP worker.

The fact that not all refuges are able to offer dedicated services for children and young people (often due to lack of funding) is concerning. In addition, while 45 (36.6%) of the women fleeing with children supported by the NWTA project last year had contacted social services, we found that 15 of these (33.3%) had had negative experiences with them, including eight cases of refusal to accommodate families.

³ *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Annual Audit*; available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/the-domestic-abuse-report>

Table 3: Dedicated services for children and young people (CYP) in refuges

Service	Number of refuges	% of refuges
Dedicated emotional support	101	38.4%
Outings/activities/play sessions	98	37.7%
Individual support	88	33.5%
CYP worker	85	32.3%
Advocacy	59	22.4%
Play therapy	54	20.5%
Support group	52	19.8%
Mentoring	28	10.6%
CYP counselling	26	9.9%
Family support worker	7	2.7%
Art therapy	2	0.8%
Refuges with a dedicated CYP service	228	86.7%
Total number of refuges	263	

Additional barriers and structural inequalities

While *Nowhere to Turn for Children and Young People* highlights that the journeys into refuges are difficult for many children and young people, some families fleeing domestic abuse face additional barriers and structural inequalities when trying to access a safe space to live.⁴

Children and young people's ties to the local area: Contact arrangements, family support, and schools

Many women who are fleeing the perpetrator with their children face the challenging task of navigating their search around childcare and any child contact arrangements with another parent. In cases where child contact has been ordered by the courts, survivors may be put in a position when they have to choose between their own and their child's safety and breaking court orders.

46 out of the 123 (37.4%) women with children supported by the NWTa project in the year 2019 to 2020 had ties to their local area. Only 5 out of the 46 (10.9%) women who were fleeing with children, who had ties to their local area, and who were supported by the NWTa project, were able to find suitable refuge accommodation.

Families with no recourse to public funds

Only a very small proportion of refuges consider referrals from families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), and even in these services this is dependent on a number of factors. While 4% of vacancies listed on Routes to Support during the year 2019-2020 were open to those with NRPF, in practice acceptance may depend on the woman having funding in place from the destitute domestic violence (DDV) concession, or agreed funding from another statutory service such as child services.

⁴ Further information on barriers and structural inequalities to finding refuge provision can be found in our previous *Nowhere to Turn* reports, available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away/>

Structural racism

Although our data shows that 34.2% of all children and young people in refuges are from Black and minoritised backgrounds, outside of London there is very limited provision of specialist 'by and for' refuge services for Black and minoritised women and children. Black and minoritised 'by and for' providers continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged by cuts, with funding approaches not sufficiently considering the need and value of 'by and for' provision for Black and minoritised women and children.^{5,6,7}

Other additional barriers and structural inequalities

Children and young people may also be disadvantaged in their search for a refuge space in other ways. For example, Routes to Support snapshot data shows that only 0.9% of refuge spaces are currently fully wheelchair accessible. Other children and young people who face additional discrimination, structural inequalities and barriers to support include, for example, those who have mental health support needs or whose mother has mental health support needs (see full report for further information, available at www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away).

Despite the great efforts of the NWTAs specialist practitioners, only 24 out of the 123 families with children (19.5%) who were supported by the NWTAs project between 2019 and 2020 were eventually accommodated in a suitable refuge. Those who face multiple disadvantages are even less likely to find suitable refuge accommodation.⁸

“Rise above the storm”

The significance to children and young people of finding refuge accommodation

Nowhere to Turn for Children and Young People shows that while there is systemic inequality in refuge provision, those young people who are accommodated in a suitable refuge benefit significantly from the safety and support that they receive there, especially when specialist CYP workers are available. The picture below was drawn by our participant Jade to convey to other children and young people that there is hope for a life beyond “the storm” of domestic abuse.



⁵ Specialist 'by and for' refuge provision for Black and minoritised women and children is especially underfunded for Black African and African Caribbean women. This is often driven by an assumption that women without the need for same-language support do not require or benefit from culturally literate support. Instead, it is assumed that their needs can be easily 'assimilated' or met by providers that are not 'by and for' services for Black and minoritised women and children.

⁶ See Imkaan (2018) for further information: <https://bit.ly/33PRx9L>

⁷ See also Imkaan's paper on violence against women and girls and Covid 19 on Black and minoritised women and girls, available here: <https://bit.ly/3hQB5LI>

⁸ See our Nowhere to Turn series, which is available here: www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away

Conclusion

Nowhere to Turn for Children and Young People offers an in-depth analysis of children and young people's journeys into refuge, their needs during this time, the support available to them, and the barriers and structural inequalities that they may face. We heard how during their journeys into safety children and young people often live transient lives; many are exposed to financial difficulties; and almost all are required to navigate a host of complicated emotions around the abuse, leaving their family and friends, and taking a step into the unknown. We saw the strength which many children and young people show in adjusting to new lives, new schools, and new situations.

This report highlights the importance of listening to children and young people's needs and in tailoring professional responses around their lived experiences. However, listening to children's voices is not enough; rather there is a need to explore the ramifications of what children are telling us and how we use this knowledge (James 2007). Whilst there is currently insufficient specialist support available to children and young people on their journeys to safety, this report is testament to the insight that children and young people can offer when they are given a platform to do so.

Scared
dissapointment
overwhelmed
anxious
hurt
not knowing
what will
happen next
unset

Recommendations

1. Recognise children and young people as survivors of domestic abuse in their own right and reflect the reality of their experiences

- ▶ The Children's Act (1989) must be amended to better reflect children's and young people's experiences of domestic abuse and our enhanced understanding of what domestic abuse is, making clear that coercive control constitutes 'harm to children'.
- ▶ Meaningfully consult children and young people when planning any changes in the sector which may affect them.
- ▶ Develop and publish specific statutory guidance on teenage relationship abuse.

2. Provide funding for child survivors of domestic abuse

- ▶ Ensure that support for children and young people is an integral part of funding of specialist domestic abuse services, including refuges and specialist services such as 'by and for' organisations for Black and minoritised women and children, and fully accessible services.
- ▶ Fully fund the statutory duty in the forthcoming domestic abuse bill to ensure demand for specialist CYP support in refuges is met (see Women's Aid's report *Funding specialist support for domestic abuse survivors* for estimated costs⁹).
- ▶ Deliver national oversight of the statutory duty to ensure the national network of refuges is able to support all children and young people. This includes capital investment in dispersed accommodation to ensure families with teenage sons can access refuge.

3. Provide support for young migrant survivors

- ▶ Through the domestic abuse bill widen eligibility of the destitute domestic violence (DDV) concession/domestic violence rule (DVR), and in this way ensure access to public funds for all survivors of domestic abuse.
- ▶ Introduce specific statutory guidance for local authorities in meeting duties relating to Section 17 of the Children's Act (1989) to migrant families escaping domestic abuse, including access for families to sufficient money for food and clothing whilst waiting for a refuge space.

⁹ Funding specialist support for domestic abuse survivors (2019), available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/funding-specialist-support-for-domestic-abuse-survivors/>

4. Ensure support for children and young people from schools and professionals

- ▶ Ensure that professionals in statutory agencies, especially those working with children and young people, have sufficient knowledge on the impact of domestic abuse on children and young people and their needs when searching for a safe space to live. This must include listening carefully to children and young people to determine their needs.
- ▶ Services and other providers must work together to ensure teenage boys can be accommodated safely with their mothers, and in this way can continue to access support from their mothers and siblings.
- ▶ The Department of Education must ensure that children and young people in refuges have priority access to school places.
- ▶ The Department of Education must ensure that young survivors of domestic abuse receive additional support with their school work after being forced to move.

▼ Image by Sebastian

