

Women's Refuges in CPTED: Responding to Evolving Crime Patterns

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Women's refuges are a practical application of CPTED principles that warrant immediate central consideration in contemporary crime prevention, yet are under-examined in mainstream CPTED literature.

This repositioning to make women's refuges central to CPTED is necessary because the crime landscape has shifted: domestic and family violence now represents an increasing proportion of the overall crime burden as traditional property crimes continue their multi-decade decline.

CPTED Policy Responses Required

It is important that CPTED frameworks now explicitly address domestic and family violence with principles specific to intimate partner violence prevention and response.

Traditional CPTED has focused primarily on public space and property crime, but the changing crime profiles require expansion of scope.

It is similarly important that Urban Planning policy and Urban Design includes women's women's refuge capacity as infrastructure using evidence-based density standards. The Istanbul Convention establishes a baseline standard of one family place per 10,000 population. This provides a quantitative planning benchmark: a city of 500,000 would require capacity for 50 families, while a city of 100,000 would require capacity for 10 families. In 2023-24, Australian specialist homelessness services assisted approximately 109,000 clients who had experienced domestic and family violence, indicating the scale of required capacity relative to population.

Purpose-built women's refuge design is needed rather than continued reliance on retrofitted existing housing.

It is important that evidence-based design standards inform women's refuge design and funding. There are Australian design guidelines for women's refuges with nine principles that provide a template developed through research and practice. Investment should reflect data showing domestic violence now represents an increased proportion of the overall crime burden, with resources allocated proportionate to the documented scale of these crime types.

Women's Refuges: CPTED Design Principles

Women's refuges operationalize CPTED principles with necessary adaptations for gender-based violence occurring in domestic settings.

Refuges require security measures including phones, panic buttons, security bars, controlled gates, and 24-hour supervision, balanced against creating an environment resembling a home rather than a fortress. Spatial design supports health, recovery, and well-being, extending beyond crime prevention to trauma recovery.

A key function is supporting personal re-education for women and children to enable them to choose and live a new life without violence, requiring spatial design that accommodates learning activities, counselling sessions, skills training, and child development support. These adaptations are necessary because traditional CPTED principles—natural surveillance, access control, territorial reinforcement, and maintenance—were developed primarily to address street crime, burglary, and public space offenses when CPTED originated around 1960.

Research on trauma-informed design for domestic violence shelters confirms alignment between evidence and design principles including safety, privacy, dignity, flexibility, accessibility, and therapeutic space. Australian design guidelines formalized

nine principles: safety, privacy, dignity, flexibility, accessibility, emphasis on children, sustainability, therapeutic space, and sense of home.

The Shifting Crime Burden

Domestic violence now occupies a substantially increased proportion of total crime as property offenses decline. Between 1993 and 2022, property crime rates in the United States dropped 59%, with burglary declining by 75%. In Australia, motor vehicle theft declined by 57% and burglary by 49% between 2001 and 2009. I

This proportional shift is accompanied by elevated absolute levels of domestic violence. In 2021, domestic violence incidents in the United States reached 10.5 million cases, a 20.7% increase from 2015. In Australia, 43% of recorded murders in 2024 were related to family and domestic violence, with 81% of female domestic homicide victims killed by an intimate partner.

Current statistics underestimate the true scale. Death review processes have identified that deaths initially classified as accidents or suicides are increasingly being reclassified as homicides upon review. The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network's systematic review reveals that in one-third of domestic/family homicide incidents, there was a recorded history of domestic violence between the victim and offender.

The Gendered Nature of Domestic Homicide

Domestic violence deaths are predominantly gendered, with women comprising approximately 75% of fatal victims. Intimate partners are responsible for nearly 50% of female homicides and 10% of male homicides in the United States. In Australia, 1 in 4 women has experienced violence, emotional abuse, or economic abuse by a cohabiting partner since age 15, compared to 1 in 14 men experiencing violence from an intimate partner.

Australia's domestic homicide rate relative to total homicides is higher than that of the United States, despite lower absolute rates. That is, Australia's domestic violence deaths represent a higher proportion of total homicides, indicating domestic violence as a more dominant crime concern relative to other crime types. These patterns are supported by Australian data showing that a 2021 national survey found 1 in 3 men (35%) reported using intimate partner violence, up from 1 in 4 (24%) in 2013-2014.

Conclusion

Women's refugees represent CPTED principles applied to intimate partner violence and have now emerged as a central consideration in crime prevention theory, practice, and

investment. It is important that policy and practice responses are now proportionate to the documented scale of these crime types.

The crime prevention field has documented success in reducing property crime through environmental design. As burglary rates decline and intimate partner violence rates remain elevated or increase in some jurisdictions, similar attention and resources are warranted for domestic and family violence given its proportional increase in the overall crime profile.

CPTED Training

More details in the ICA-approved certified online Class-A CPTED training starting 24 November at the Design Out Crime and CPTED Centre. See,

<https://designoutcrime.org/index.php/cpted-training/register-now-ica-class-a-certified-online-cpted-training-6-weeks-3-hours-per-week-starting-24-november-2025>

References

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Other Sources:

This article synthesizes evidence from: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Council on Criminal Justice; CDC National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey; Australian Bureau of Statistics; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Australian Institute of Criminology; Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network; Council of Europe Istanbul Convention (Article 23 - shelter standards); UN Women; peer-reviewed research on trauma-informed design; and architectural case studies of purpose-built refuge facilities.