



# **Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Child Support Program**

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Australian Men's Health Forum Inc. ABN 31 209 049 926  
PO Box 741 Richmond NSW 2753 AUSTRALIA  
Phone: +0414 950 902 Email: [admin@amhf.org.au](mailto:admin@amhf.org.au) Website: [amhf.org.au](http://amhf.org.au)

*The peak national forum promoting a social approach to male health and wellbeing*

## **Australian Men's Health Forum**

The Australian Men's Health Forum (AMHF) is the national peak forum for a social determinants approach to the health of men and boys. We are an alliance of organisations, service providers, plus individual men and women, actively engaged and interested in addressing the physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual, educational, social, spiritual, sexual and relationship needs of men and boys in Australia.

Further details are available at

[http://www.amhf.org.au/storage/AMHF\\_Web\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.amhf.org.au/storage/AMHF_Web_Brochure.pdf)

## **Summary**

This submission covers the following issues:

- The cost of establishing a second home following separation
- The cost of supporting a second family
- The frustration of men, who are paying child support, but have inadequate access to their children
- There not being any sanctions, including withholding child support, when the access to children is obstructed, despite being ordered by the Family Court.
- The resulting depression and other health problems that arise in some men due to these factors
- The worst case scenarios are suicide, family violence and sometimes even murder of the ex-partner and/or children
- The lack of support services for these men
- The changes made to no longer having specific support services for men, but having generic family services, has resulted in a 30% reduction in such services for men

## **The cost of establishing a second home following separation**

A couple that separate experience considerable costs when a second home has to be established. The accommodation must be more than a one bedroom flat when children are involved.

Where there were already financial problems, which may have been a factor in leading to the separation, the provision of a second home with sufficient bedrooms for children, may be almost impossible.

Many men attempt to do the "right thing" by their children and ex-partner by leaving the family home and then find it very difficult to provide adequate housing for themselves and their children.

The child support payments should not commence until suitable accommodation for both parents has been established.

A low cost alternative, where there is no conflict, is for them to live separately under the same roof at least until suitable alternative arrangements can be made.

A major problem is that many people are not aware of this being a viable option. Part of the problem is that there are virtually no information and support services for men. This is expanded on in the final section of this submission.

### **The cost of supporting a second family**

Where a person starts a second family, there is often perceived to be an inferior loading afforded to the costs of raising the children in this family. This creates tension and stress.

The formula used to calculate the child support payments needs to ensure that all children are treated equally.

### **Access to Children**

Inadequate access to children is often a major frustration for one parent, who, in the majority of cases, is the father.

This frustration is intensified, when a parent is paying child support, but has inadequate access to their children.

As mentioned above, not having suitable accommodation to be able to have children either live with, or at least sleep over with, one parent can be a major barrier.

The problem of inadequate access is greatly increased when there are no sanctions, including withholding child support payments, when the access to children is obstructed, despite being ordered by the Family Court.

### **Health Issues**

The factors outlined above may result in depression and other health problems.

It is not uncommon for men to lose their job as a result of these problems. In addition to the impact that this has on the man's health and well-being, plus his dire financial situation, there is no money to pay child support.

In addition to addressing the systemic causes outlined above, it is important that men have access to support services, which are discussed below.

### **Suicide and Violence**

A very small minority of men react to their situation with extremely serious outcomes.

The worst case outcomes are suicide, family violence and sometimes even murder of the partner and/or children

Some men internalise their frustration and feel helpless to be able to change their situation and eventually take their own lives. Some of these are recorded as suicides, while others are recorded as accidents, such as motor vehicle crashes.

There is a need to investigate both the suicides and accidents to see what could have been done to avoid them.

A university could be contracted to investigate the causes of death of child support payers to find out the extent to which issues relating to the family court and child support contributed to these deaths and to develop strategies for preventing them

Some other men become extremely angry and resort to violence against their ex-partner. In a few rare instances this results in the murder of their ex-partner and/or their children.

There is a need to monitor the instances of family violence among Child Support Agency clients and develop strategies for reducing it. This should include protective strategies for the victim and changing the behaviour of the perpetrator. A university is probably best placed to undertake this work.

A thorough review of all murder cases should be undertaken by the coroner to see whether there were any systemic factors arising from the family court or the child support agency.

### **Support Services for Men**

As mentioned several times above, there is a need for support services for separating couples.

Unfortunately there is a lack of support services for men in general and particularly for fathers with relation to family law and child support issues.

The former Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs previously funded programs specifically for men and fathers under, initially, the Men and Family Relationships Program and later the Men and Vulnerable Families Program. This was replaced by the generic Family Support Program.

The intention was that services for fathers would continue to be provided as part of the Family Support Program. However, the reality is that the program largely caters for mothers and children.

Since this change resulted in no longer providing funding for specific support services for men, there has been a 30% reduction in such services for men and fathers.

Without services directed to men, it is unlikely that there will be improvements in either the safety and welfare of women and children, or the health and wellbeing of men.