

Restricted, Resilient, Resourceful

► Legal help-seeking among single-parent renters

This summary presents key findings and recommendations from research led by Tenants Victoria in partnership with the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, funded by a Victoria Law Foundation Knowledge Grant.

The full report is available at: tenantsvic.org.au/single-parent-report

Why we spoke to single parents

Everyone deserves timely access to support for their legal issues. This support should be delivered in a way that is accessible and, when necessary, tailored to their specific situation. However, the demand for free legal services often outweighs capacity to assist help-seekers, making it difficult for people to access the support they need.

For many single parents renting in Victoria, deciding which pathway to take when addressing a rental or related legal problem often means overcoming additional challenges, including limited resources, time, and access to suitable housing options.

Single parents are consistently identified in legal need surveys¹ as experiencing higher rates of legal problems that are often multiple and persistent, while also being more likely to have their legal needs unmet.

Tenants Victoria service data also shows that single parents who access our service:



Report lower levels of satisfaction with our services compared to other renters



Access our services at a lower rate



Are overrepresented in matter types more likely to affect housing security, including family violence, rent arrears, and notices to vacate

In response, Tenants Victoria spoke directly with single parents to better understand how legal, community and government services in the renter support sector can respond to their legal and related service needs.

¹Coumarelo, C., Macourt, D., People, P., McDonald, H. M., Wei, Z., Iriana, R. & Ramsey, S. (2012). Legal Australia-wide survey: Legal need in Australia. Law and Justice Foundation.
<https://lawfoundation.net.au/legal-australia-wide-survey-legal-need-in-australia-2012/>

McDonald, H. M. & Ohri, E. (2023). In brief: How single parents experience the law in Victoria. Victoria Law Foundation.

What we did

We interviewed 19 single parents renting in Victoria who had experienced a rental legal problem in the past 5 years.

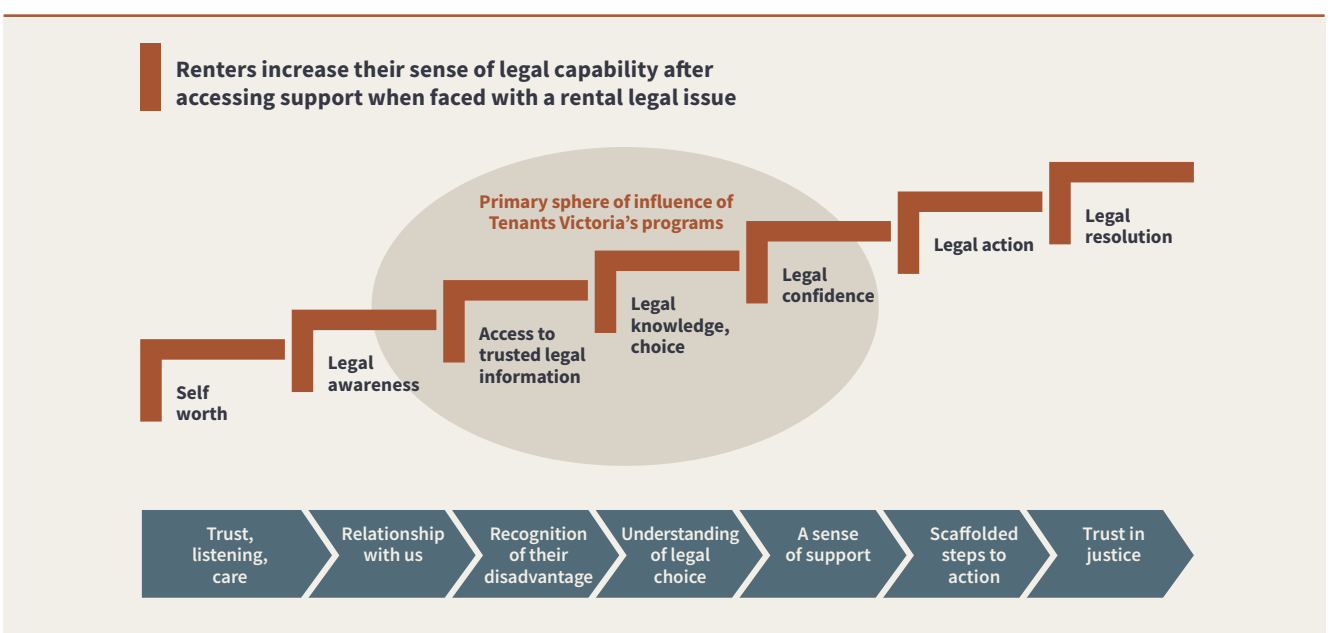


A legal capability framework guided the development of interview questions and our approach to analysing the findings.

The framework is based on the idea that renters can strengthen their legal capability after receiving support from legal services (Figure 1).

However, our research found that the journey to legal resolution for renters is not as linear as these steps would suggest.

Figure 1.
Legal Capability Theoretical Framework – Tenants Victoria



The 6 stages identified in the help-seeking journey

Tenants Victoria identified 6 stages in the help-seeking journeys of single parents.

Stage 1: Finding a rental property

Single parents face serious challenges attaining safe, secure and affordable housing



Single parents felt:

- **Afraid to assert their rights** as renters for fear of having to re-enter the market
- **Disadvantaged in the application process**, due to concerns that real estate agents and landlords may view them as less desirable tenants
- **Under immense pressure to present as ideal tenants** to secure housing in a competitive rental market
- **Compelled to accept homes with serious maintenance issues** due to limited options
- **Restricted in seeking cheaper housing options** as they needed to stay close to schools, community support networks, or public transport

“... I’ve lined up and have walked through and known that I’m applying against double income earners... how on god’s earth do I compete against these people? How do I get a house?”

- *Sylvie, a sole parent of one child

Recommendations

- **Provision of increased social housing stock by the Victorian Government** on an ongoing basis to match the national average proportion of total housing stock, to better meet the demand for low-income single-parent households
- **Legislation of a ‘fairness formula’ to regulate rent increases** to ensure more certainty for renters in the private rental market and fairness across the rental sector
- **Exploration of long-term lease options**, similar to commercial leases, to provide additional security for single-parent households with school-age children
- **Implementation of a standardised method for information collection** during the application process

Stage 2: Managing relationships with landlords, real estate agents, and housing providers



Landlords, real estate agents, and/or housing providers with an open and supportive approach can reduce the need for single parents to start a help-seeking journey

Single parents told us that:

- **When they had open and respectful communication with real estate agents and/or landlords, it reduced their anxiety**, improved their confidence to address basic rental issues, and minimised the need for formal legal action to resolve minor problems
- **Maintenance or modification requests were frequently denied, ignored, or not properly addressed**, potentially affecting – or already having affected – the health and safety of themselves and their children
- **Limited financial resources or alternative affordable housing options** meant that at times they had to remain in unsafe housing conditions

“[I’m] hesitant to keep pushing [for a repair issue to be addressed], because then they put the rent up or they move you on... you’re forced into making compromises around your quality of life or your quality of dwelling.”

- *Bronwyn, a sole parent of 2 children

Recommendations

- **Promoting a culture shift among real estate agents and/or landlords** through a licensing and training program that includes information to counter preconceived notions around the viability of single parents as tenants
- **Increased mandatory compliance processes** for landlords and housing providers to ensure that they are meeting their repair and maintenance responsibilities

Stage 3: Experiencing a rental legal problem



Single parents weigh up multiple factors before deciding how to address their problem

We found that single parents were:

- **Often contending with multiple legal problems**, related to both renting and non-rental legal issues
- **Hesitant to raise a rental legal problem** due to a lack of power in the rental market and limited resources or time to engage with legal processes
- **More confident in taking action where they had existing self-advocacy skills**, community supports, legal literacy skills and system navigation experience



Seventeen single parents had experienced **3 or more** legal problem types



95% of participants had experienced a repair or maintenance problem



53% of participants reported legal problems not related to renting

We identified 5 help-seeking styles



1. Active – Quick to engage a legal, community or government service for information or advice



2. Independent – Would prefer to do desktop research themselves, look at the information on a service website, or use self-help tools



3. Informal – Tend to reach out to friends, family, or online groups for advice on a legal problem



4. Avoidant – See legal problems, legal services and legal systems as something to avoid, often due to a negative experience navigating the legal sector



5. Hybrid – Most common style, shifting between active, independent, informal and avoidant help-seeking

“It’s really hard to come up against the system when I have no, I mean, I know legally I have rights and whatever, but to go against the system with no money and no support ... it’s hard for tenants to push for the maintenance and push for the things when their lease might not get renewed ... there’s cracks in the walls now, there’s [a] little bit of mould in the bathroom, there’s leaky taps ... I can’t be bothered.”

- *Erin, a single parent with 2 children living with her

Stage 4: Seeking help



Long wait-times and limited capacity at service entry points can result in frustration, increased stress, and delays in addressing issues

Single parents in this research identified:

- **The need to modify their help-seeking behaviours** as limited capacity and delays at service entry points conflicted with their caretaking responsibilities
- **That having to repeatedly ‘knock on the door’ of services to get help** is particularly frustrating when the problem is complicated, time-sensitive, or one of multiple problems
- **That current service delivery models are particularly challenging** for help-seekers who are not positioned to choose where, how or when they receive support

“... you need that immediate response instead of sort of waiting for someone to eventually send you an e-mail with some generic information... you need to talk to someone.”

- *Eliza, a sole parent of one child

Recommendations

- **Provide more accessible and timely support** to help renters understand and navigate the system, including an intake process that combines an assessment of an individual’s challenges, structural barriers and the legal problem
- **Extended service accessibility through longer phone-line hours**, an online booking system for appointments or callback times, and an online chat function on service websites to allow single parents to contact services at a time that suits them
- **Establish a central intake point and/or a standardised intake process** for free legal services to streamline access for people entering the system at different points. This would reduce people seeking support from services they are not eligible for, and better assist those with multiple legal problems
- **Develop an online service directory** for renters who are confident to self-refer, providing information about free legal and related non-legal services, including eligibility criteria

Stage 5: Navigating legal, community and government services



People whose legal problems are not eligible for free legal assistance and those with multiple or time sensitive issues have difficulty finding the help they need

We identified that single parent respondents:

- **Displayed strong self-advocacy skills**, often developed out of necessity through repeated engagement with services and legal processes
- **Cited instances of being redirected to numerous services**, having to repeat their story, and occasionally still not finding the help they need. They described this form of service engagement as stressful, time consuming and exhausting
- **Highlighted that a hard-to-penetrate rental support system** is problematic for those with a diminished capacity to self-advocate or who are hesitant to access support during a rental crisis. This includes those who may lack the necessary time, skills or resources to navigate multiple services to get the help they need
- **Stressed the need for service workers to recognise how difficult it can be for single parents** to strategise, absorb information, and take steps to address rental legal problems that could place their housing security at risk
- **Identified that past challenges when addressing a legal problem made them feel hesitant** to engage with legal services to address their current or future rental legal problems

“I self-referred myself because I didn’t have a support organisation telling me where to go ... it was just self-referral spending hours on the phone with different numbers, having to repeat my story numerous times, sometimes getting rejection.”

- *Leia, a single parent of one child

Recommendations

- **Services utilise a co-design approach** with renters to develop easy-to-understand educational materials, templates, and guides on managing rental problems, and on how to engage with legal systems and legal processes
- **Provide follow-up information** to strengthen the capacity of renters to remember and apply information during stressful times. This may include follow-up check-ins for renters experiencing severe stress or complex challenges
- **Introduce a lived experience role in services**, such as a single parent who rents, to provide tailored support to single parents
- **Reduce referral roundabouts** by establishing a common source of truth for renting support services supported by good systems for warm referrals

Stage 6: Help-seeking outcomes



Taking a multidisciplinary approach is beneficial, especially when renters are hesitant to engage in formal legal proceedings

- **The varied help-seeking outcomes among single parents** in this study highlight the need for services to help renters address factors that make them hesitant to engage in legal processes
- **Single parents are feeling the burden of responsibility for taking legal action** in a housing system where they feel disempowered
- **Avenues for reaching an outcome** were impacted by the rental issue and capacity to engage



Eight single parents described instances where they **took no action** to address a rental legal problem



Thirteen single parents described instances where they raised an issue with their landlord, real estate agent or housing provider but, if it was not acted on, they **did not push it further**



Five single parents described instances where they spoke to someone at a legal, community or government service and then **chose not to take further action**



Eleven single parents described instances where they **resolved a legal problem directly with their landlord, real estate agent or housing provider**, after seeking information online, speaking to friends and family, or contacting a legal, community or government service for advice



Seven single parents described instances where their **legal problem went to VCAT**

- **Legal resolution is not always accessible or appropriate.** Service providers should continue to move away from focusing solely on legal resolution as the goal of service provision
- **Services need to embrace a multidisciplinary approach** that places the renter's needs at the centre and helps single parents to solve their renting problems using a range of strategies that they feel comfortable with

“I wanted to go to the tribunal about it [to challenge a rent rise] and I thought about it, but I was dealing with so many other financial issues that I kind of just let it slip.”

- *Mary, a single parent of one child

Recommendations

- **Build increased awareness and understanding among renting support workers** of the individual, environmental and structural barriers that can affect the ability of single parents to engage with their rights as renters. For example, by developing and undertaking training about single-parent renters and their specific needs
- **Strengthen multidisciplinary collaboration**, connecting legal services with allied supports to assist renters with legal or related non-legal problems
- **Continued investment** to better meet the demand for assistance for rental legal problems and related service needs of renters. For example, expanding funding for more non-legal positions in legal services (i.e. social workers, financial counsellors, and system advocates/navigators) to enable an integrated service approach
- **Further development of peer support programs** to foster greater community connection and knowledge-sharing among single parents

Core finding

Legal capability tends to fluctuate among renters over time due to intersecting individual, environmental and structural factors that enable or restrict their ability to engage with their rights as renters, take on legal information, and take legal action.

Existing service practices that help improve legal knowledge, confidence and literacy are instrumental in aiding the development of skills needed to address rental legal problems. However, services should go further – by placing greater emphasis on acknowledging, accommodating and combatting external factors through a multidisciplinary approach that addresses complex and interconnected legal, financial, health and housing issues.



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