

A Sustained and Strategic Focus on People Using Violence

Submission to the South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence



Acknowledgement of country

No to Violence acknowledges First Nations Peoples across these lands; the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters. We pay respect to all Elders, past, present and emerging. We acknowledge a deep connection with country which has existed over 60,000 years. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded, and this was and always will be First Nation's land.

About No to Violence

No to Violence (NTV) is Australia's largest peak body for organisations and individuals working with people using violence to end family violence. We provide support and advocacy for this work, which includes but is not limited to, Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs), case management, individual counselling, policy development and advocacy, workforce development, and research and evaluation.

NTV delivers a range of frontline services, including the Men's Referral Service (MRS), Brief Intervention Service (BIS), Men's Accommodation and Counselling Service (MACS), and the Family Advocacy and Support Service (FASS). We also provide a range of training for the specialist family violence workforce, including a Graduate Certificate in partnership with Swinburne University, as well as professional development for workforces who come into contact with people using family violence. NTV is a leading national voice and plays a central role in the development of evidence, policy and advocacy to support the work to end people's use of family violence.

As a pro-feminist organisation, the safety and dignity of women and children is at the centre of everything we do. It is by ending people's use of violence that families can have happier, safer and more fulfilled lives.

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Key points

- We will not end domestic, family and sexual violence without a strong, sustained and strategic focus on people using violence. **No to Violence strongly recommends that the South Australian government follow other jurisdictions' lead and develop a dedicated strategy focussed on people using violence.**
- **Government and service systems operate in disjointed and siloed ways.**– This is a major barrier to identification and accountability of people using violence.
- Shared responsibility for motivating behaviour change and accountability of people using violence needs to be embedded in policy architecture and activated through system and service responses. Doing so creates a **'web of accountability'**.
- Relying on justice system data and responses to inform understanding of people using violence paints an incomplete picture. This **misses the majority of people using violence who never come to the attention of the justicesystem.**
- **People are using violence come from all age groups, income brackets, cultural backgrounds, family types and sexualities.** We need a diverse range of service modalities to respond to the diverse range of people using violence. Service responses should be centred around flexibility, trust and relationship-building.

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The burden for ending family violence lies with people using violence

All jurisdictions are united to end family violence in a generation – the goal underpinning the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.¹

Ending family violence requires building on legacies of previous work and seek to strengthen responses. There must be a recognition of, and response to, gaps in service provision and systemic responses. One of the most significant gaps preventing Australia reaching its goal of ending family violence in a generation is the lack of sustained focus on people using violence. The South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence is an important, potentially nation-leading, opportunity to focus on preventing those who are using, or at risk of using violence from acting. **No to Violence strongly recommends that the South Australian government develop a dedicated strategy focussed on people using violence.**

No to Violence is the largest national peak body for organisations and people who work with people using violence. Our members hold enormous wisdom about what works to facilitate accountability and behaviour change for people using violence. No to Violence seeks to centre practitioner wisdom and counteract the chronic underutilisation of these learnings in policymaking.

People using violence are free to continue causing harm in the current system

We must shift the burden from victim-survivors and place it firmly on people who use violence. This requires courage to do things differently.

Practitioners work with people using violence is grounded in feminist therapeutic practice – a proud tradition operating over the last four decades.² This practice brings together a focus on the structural factors shaping all of our lives with the ways our choices influence our interpersonal relationships.³ In doing so, practice frameworks recognise all victim-survivors deserve to live safe and dignified lives, which fulfilling and safe relationships are a key part of. Practitioners use a range of tools to improve communication, relationship and emotional regulation skills while also holding people using violence in view of systems to curtail their violence.⁴

This work is underpinned by a commitment to the safety of victim-survivors, shifting the spotlight away from what victim-survivors are or are not doing to keep themselves safe to focus on who is causing harm. For too long, victim-survivors have carried the burden of navigating complex and siloed systems. They are forced to repeat their stories over and over, while also needing to learn a different

¹ Department of Social Services (2022) [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032](#).

² See Evans et al. (2005) [Feminism and Feminist Therapy: Lessons from the past and hopes for the future](#).

³ See Magnet and Diamond (2010) [Feminist Pedagogy Meets Feminist Therapy: Teaching feminist therapy in Women's Studies](#) and discussion in Wendt et al. (2019) [Engaging Men Who Use Violence: Invitational narrative approaches](#), drawing on Alan Jenkins' influential approaches to engaging men using violence.

⁴ See for example Wendt et al. (2019) [Engaging Men Who Use Violence: Invitational narrative approaches](#).

set of rules and requirements for each system.⁵ Our focus on victim-survivors and lack of attention on people using violence directly communicates to those using violence that they are free to continue causing harm. In some cases, the choice to use violence is affirmed by systems – people using violence receive implicit and explicit approval of their actions.⁶ This approach allows people using violence, predominantly men, to shy away from scrutiny and escape accountability.⁷

Creating a well-functioning web of accountability is government’s responsibility

Ensuring people using violence are held accountable for the harm that they have caused requires systems and services work well independently and with each other.⁸ Jurisdictions are embedding a shared responsibility for motivating behaviour change and accountability within family violence policy architecture – referred to as the *web of accountability*.⁹ These strategic plans make it clear that holding people using violence accountable requires that mainstream services, specialist family violence services and all parts of government systems recognise their role in responding to people using violence. **Government is the steward of this system. Responsibility for ensuring systems function well rests with government.**

At a service level, specialist practitioners build the capability of people using violence to take responsibility for their actions and commit to change.¹⁰ Practitioners co-examine narratives with people who choose to use violence to support them to achieve their goals without using violence to realise them. This practice reinforces that using violence is a choice and that violence is antithetical to safe and fulfilling relationships. Practitioners’ work to facilitate accountability and behaviour change risk being undone when government responses and other parts of the service system instead reinforce justifications used to continue using violence.¹¹

⁵ See for example Victims of Crime Commissioner (2023) [Silenced and Sidelined: Systemic Inquiry into Victim Participation in the Justice System](#).

⁶ See for example Women’s Legal Services (2018) [“Officer She’s Psychotic and I Need Protection”: Police misidentification of the ‘primary aggressor’ in family violence incidents in Victoria](#).

⁷ All major datasets consistently find that the majority of domestic, family and sexual violence is committed by men. See for example, Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) [Personal Safety Survey](#).

⁸ Chung et al. (2020) [Improved Accountability: The role of perpetrator intervention systems](#). See also Queensland Government (2024) [Broadening the Focus: Queensland’s strategy to strengthen responses to people who use domestic and family violence](#).

⁹ Attorney-General’s Department (2023) [National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence](#); Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2023) [Monitoring Victoria’s Family Violence Reforms: Service response for perpetrators and people using violence within the family](#); Queensland Government (2024) [Broadening the Focus: Queensland’s strategy to strengthen responses to people who use domestic and family violence](#).

¹⁰ Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2024) [Engaging in Change: A Victorian study of perpetrator program attrition and participant engagement in men’s behaviour change programs](#) and Vlasis et al. (2017) [Family and Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programs: Issues paper of current and emerging trends, developments and expectations](#).

¹¹ No to Violence hears from service providers that disconnections between government processes can give people using violence the impression that their behaviour is sanctioned. See other examples provided throughout this submission on how this occurs in policing practices and other systemic approaches. See also similar findings in Ailwood et al. (2022) [Beyond Women’s Voices: Towards a victim-survivor-centred theory of listening in law reform on violence against women](#); Helps (2024) [“She Tells Me I’m Pushy” is More Likely than](#)

A person using violence who is sent a strong message from systems that their choice to use violence is unacceptable is motivated by an external force to take responsibility for their actions and commit to change. System responses motivate behaviour change when those responses are timely and mutually reinforcing.¹² The impetus to taking accountability for those engaged in interventions often comes from systems.¹³ Contact with police, restricted access to children or conditions of an intervention order can motivate changes that lead people to stop using violence.¹⁴ However, far too many people are able to continue using violence when systems are focused on compliance of victim-survivors and reinforce violence supportive narratives.¹⁵ **A system that punishes victim-survivors and ignores people using violence is a fundamentally broken system.**

Reforming the justice system to improve responses to people using violence is crucial but is not a panacea. Reliance on justice system responses to people using violence risks baking in the status quo where too many people using violence are emboldened to continue, or escalate, their abuse.¹⁶ We must urgently employ a range of mutually reinforcing responses across all aspects of government and service systems.

There is no one “type” of people using violence

People using violence are not a homogenous group. Their experiences are diverse. People using violence may also be victim-survivors of domestic, family and/or sexual violence, inclusive of interpersonal and institutional harm.¹⁷ In these cases, more than one type of response is necessary in recognition of the harm caused and the need for recovery and healing efforts.

Important lessons can be learned from past approaches to people using violence where the harm they caused went unacknowledged. Processes such as the Yoorook Commission, apologies to victims of

[the Man Directly Admitting to Being Pushy’: Practitioners’ Views on Screening and Assessing Risk of Intimate Partner Sexual Violence](#); Morgan et al. (2023) [You Can’t Pour From An Empty Cup: Strengthening our service and systems responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who experience domestic and family violence](#); Waling et al. (2023) [‘I’m not going anywhere near that’: Expert stakeholder challenges with boys and young men regarding sexual consent.](#)

¹² See for example Vlasis et al. (2017) [Family and Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programs: Issues paper of current and emerging trends, developments and expectations.](#)

¹³ Chung et al. (2020) [Improved Accountability: The role of perpetrator intervention systems.](#)

¹⁴ Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2024) [Engaging in Change: A Victorian study of perpetrator program attrition and participant engagement in men’s behaviour change programs.](#)

¹⁵ See for example issues explored in Minter et al. (2021) [“Chuck Her on a Lie Detector”: Investigating Australians’ mistrust in women’s reports of sexual assault](#) and Reeves et al. (2023) [Incredible Women: Legal systems abuse, coercive control, and the credibility of victim-survivors.](#) See also examples of missed opportunities to institute meaningful systemic reform within recent coronial inquests, as outlined in [No to Violence’s 2023 submission on the Coercive Control Amendment Bill.](#) No recommendations to improve system responses to DFSV were made in any relevant recent coronial inquests.

¹⁶ See recent media coverage of two family violence homicides in [Western Australia](#) and recent coronial inquiries in the [Northern Territory](#). See also Commissioner for Equal Opportunity (2016) [South Australia Police Review](#); Commission of Inquiry Into Queensland Police Service Responses to Domestic and Family Violence (2022) [A Call for Change](#); Law Enforcement Conduct Commission (2023) [Review of NSW Police Force Responses to Domestic and Family Violence Incidents](#); Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2014) [Independent Review of Victoria Police](#) and [coverage of the 2019 review](#) into LGBTI discrimination in Victoria Police.

¹⁷ See also, [The Australian National Research Agenda to End Violence against Women and Children, 2023–2028](#) for an overview of emerging research insights and priorities relevant to people using violence who are also victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence.

harmful government policy agendas including for forced child removals, police violence, and other institutional abuse, and redress schemes for victims of violence and exploitation continue to show us the myriad of ways violence shapes lives.¹⁸ These important processes have helped to make an increased range of violence visible to more people.

Truth telling and other important similar processes show over and over again that far too many people using violence have been able to continue to do so without accountability.¹⁹ Acknowledging the diverse experiences of victim-survivors and people using violence, including where these experiences overlap, is crucial for improving government responses to people using violence. **Enhancing shared understandings about the diverse range of people using violence enables us to develop a more diverse range of tools to better respond to all people using violence.**

Current, dominant understandings of people using violence have been shaped by their interactions with the criminal justice system.²⁰ Most major datasets used to inform system responses rely on data from police and courts – painting a woefully incomplete picture of who uses violence and the forms of violence used. The embedded presence of police in areas where more marginalised people live contributes to a view that these communities are inherently more violent than others.²¹ Unfortunately, current policing approaches, situated within broader systemic government methods, have damaged community trust in the integrity of policing and capability to respond effectively to domestic, family and sexual violence.²²

Between 68-79% of intimate partner violence is never reported to police.²³ Victim-survivors choose not to report violence to police for varied reasons. Mistrust in all aspects of systems but especially police and courts highlight that many victim-survivors *feel and are unsafe* when engaging with the justice system and adjacent government systems.²⁴ This means there are great numbers of people using violence who never come to the attention of police. Requiring victim-survivors engage with a system that makes them feel unsafe has not improved knowledge and responses to people using violence.

¹⁸ See discussion in Carlson et al. (2024) [What works? A qualitative exploration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing programs that respond to family violence](#) and Morgan et al. (2022) [New Ways for Our Families: Designing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practice framework and system responses to address the impacts of domestic and family violence on children and young people](#)

¹⁹ For example, the 2012 [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#).

²⁰ Major datasets rely on police and courts data, e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024) [Recorded Crime](#). See also Chung et al. (2020) [Improved Accountability: The role of perpetrator intervention systems](#).

²¹ See for example Flemington and Kensington Community Legal Centre (2015) [The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same: Report of the FKCLC Peer Advocacy Outreach Project on racial profiling across Melbourne](#).

²² The Productivity Commission collects data on community confidence in police, recording steady decreases across Australia since 2016. See Productivity Commission (2022) [Report on Government Services: Police Services](#). See also Australian Capital Territory Government (2024) [Sexual Assault \(Police\) Review Report](#).

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) [Personal Safety Survey](#). See also the Australian Bureau of Statistic [Personal Safety Survey](#)- 151,400 South Australian women (or 22%) have experienced sexual assault – **a rate 19 times higher than was reported to police**. No to Violence's 2024 [submission on South Australia's sexual assault and consent laws](#) discussed this issue.

²⁴ See for example, Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2021) [Monitoring Victoria's Family Violence Reforms Accurate Identification of the Predominant Aggressor](#).

Dominant understandings about people using violence and the types of violence they use has also been shaped by the types of violence recognised within the criminal code.²⁵ Until recently, domestic, family and sexual violence was understood primarily as physical violence and the impact of the underpinning dynamic of coercive control was missing. Efforts to update our understanding of domestic, family and sexual violence that rely on its conceptualisation within the criminal justice system is a slow and siloed approach, showing only part of the picture.

The diverse range of people using violence requires a diverse range of responses

Diverse experiences necessitate *diverse* responses. People are using violence come from all age groups, income brackets, cultural backgrounds, family types and sexualities.²⁶ While the majority of people using violence are men, all people are influenced by harmful gender norms and are capable of causing harm to others.²⁷

There are a range of types of interventions with people using violence operating across Australia and internationally. The most recent mapping exercise of the interventions offered nationally was published in 2015.²⁸ States who were leading the way on working with people using violence have since invested further in commonly used interventions – Men’s Behaviour Change Programs and residential-based interventions.²⁹ Funding under the National Plan also promises to drive a more diverse range of service modalities through the Innovative Perpetrator Response fund.

We need to understand the full range of interventions available and, critically, the gaps in existing service provision. As the largest national peak body for people and organisations working with people using violence, we see critical service provision gaps in

The interventions that we believe require further investment are:

- Therapeutic one-to-one counselling and other trauma responsive modalities
- First Nations led and healing-focused programs
- Holistic and whole-of-family approaches
- Targeted programs to meet the needs of marginalised people and communities including people from LGBTIQ+ communities, men from culturally and racially marginalised communities, and men with complex factors that overlap with their use of violence such as cognitive impairment and childhood experiences of trauma.
- Residential-based interventions
- Embedded interventions, including those that are co-located with police and other key systems
- Multi-agency and cross-sectoral collaborative approaches, including across substance misuse, mental health and other allied sector approaches.

²⁵ South Australia has acknowledged this by signing onto the [National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence](#), alongside all other jurisdictions.

²⁶ See Boxall et al. (2022) [The “Pathways to Intimate Partner Homicide” Project: Key stages and events in male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide in Australia](#); Flood et al. (2022) [Who Uses Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence, How, and Why?](#) and Gray et al. (2020) [Developing LGBTQ Programs for Perpetrators and Victims/Survivors of Domestic and Family Violence](#).

²⁷ All major datasets consistently find that the majority of domestic, family and sexual violence is committed by men.

²⁸ Mackay et al. (2015) [Perpetrator Interventions in Australia: Perpetrator pathways and mapping](#).

²⁹ Victoria has invested significantly in Men’s Behaviour Change Programs while Western Australia has supported long-term residential accommodation-based approaches.

availability of appropriate, targeted interventions for people with specific needs related to their experiences of past interpersonal and institutional violence, including for marginalised people and communities who may not be best served by mainstream approaches – instead requiring service responses centred around flexibility, trust and relationship-building.³⁰

All interventions for people using violence benefit from flexible and tailored service provision options. This enables service providers to provide the *right* interventions at the *right* time to the *right* person.³¹ Working more effectively with people using violence requires people using violence are in view of systems and that systems and services work together to collectively hold them accountable. Doing so creates the conditions that make behaviour change possible – clearing away barriers to engagement, working alongside-victim-survivor services to centre victim-survivor safety and dignity, while drawing on the expertise of skilled practitioners across a range of allied sectors.³² Government have the power to design service contract terms that would enable best-practice service provision, and in doing so, make room for innovative approaches.

Realising the vision of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022-2032)-ending family violence- requires every jurisdiction has a dedicated strategy for working with people using violence across prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing. Great work has begun across the country to develop strategies to coordinate approaches to working with people using violence, support the work already underway, and pave the way for innovative approaches to emerge.³³ In 2024, Queensland was the first state to release a ‘Strategy to Strengthen Responses to People Using Violence’. New South Wales is developing a similar strategic approach. Given the dearth of strategic direction governing these responses, other jurisdictions are expected to swiftly follow Queensland’s lead and develop similar strategies.

Strengthening South Australia’s system requires a strategic approach

The South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence has enormous potential to provide a roadmap to an innovative vision for South Australia’s future. Such a vision would join up efforts, align workstreams within long-term strategic plans, and advocate to provide the broader DFSV sector with the resources they need to embed learnings and continue to innovate.

The risks of maintaining the status quo are too great. As other jurisdictions move forward with a sustained and strategic focus on people using violence, South Australia risks enforcing a levelling-down

³⁰ Carlson et al. (2024) [What works? A qualitative exploration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing programs that respond to family violence.](#)

³¹ No to Violence consistently receives this feedback from service providers across the country. See also Vlasis et al. (2017) [Family and Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programs: Issues paper of current and emerging trends, developments and expectations.](#)

³² Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2024) [Engaging in Change: A Victorian study of perpetrator program attrition and participant engagement in men’s behaviour change programs](#); Wendt et al. (2019) [Engaging Men Who Use Violence: Invitational narrative approaches.](#)

³³ See for example, Queensland Government (2024) [Broadening the Focus: Queensland’s strategy to strengthen responses to people who use domestic and family violence.](#) See also Day et al. (2019) [Evaluation Readiness, Program Quality and Outcomes in Men’s Behaviour Change Programs](#) for discussion of the need for sector coordination, and Vlasis et al. (2017) [Family and Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programs: Issues paper of current and emerging trends, developments and expectations. Perth, Australia: Stopping Family Violence.](#)

effect if it chooses to continue subjecting victim-survivors to a compliance lens instead of placing this focus where it belongs- squarely with the people using violence.³⁴ Information held by child protection, family law, child support, and social services are not being utilised. Instead, systems operate within their separate siloes, potentially duplicating efforts and dialling up the intense focus on what victim-survivors are or are not doing to protect themselves and their children.³⁵

Shifting responsibility for ending domestic, family and sexual violence towards people using violence cannot be achieved through existing responses that rely on the criminal justice system to drive accountability and behaviour change.³⁶ Doing so means reaching beyond focus on people using violence who are more likely to come to the attention of police - obscuring the violence of those who are able to escape accountability, either by weaponising gaps in current system responses or simply escape identification because they do not fit the profile of people using violence generated by incomplete criminal justice system data.³⁷ This way of working is disjointed and misses opportunities to build more complete pictures of the scope and scale of violence used.³⁸ Moreover, it risks entrenching and accelerating impacts of interpersonal and institutional violence. This is particularly acute for marginalised people and communities, especially Aboriginal peoples.³⁹

A system focused squarely on the people using violence would build on the strengths of service providers' collaborative approach – bringing together data from across systems and enabling flexible cross-sectoral responses to people using violence. It would identify missed opportunities to intervene much earlier, before violence escalates, and give the broader domestic, family and sexual violence sector the best possible chance to hold people using violence accountable, create the conditions needed for behaviour to change, send a message to all victim-survivors that they are seen, and show the broader community that domestic, family and sexual violence is unacceptable.

No to Violence has been working across the country to assist government efforts to respond more strategically and intensively to people using violence by developing dedicated strategies for working with people using violence.⁴⁰ We are ready to assist South Australia in similar ways, alongside our peak body colleagues, including Embolden, and the broader domestic, family and sexual violence sector.

³⁴ See also [Embolden's submissions to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence](#).

³⁵ See for example Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission (2024) [Yearly Report to Parliament](#).

³⁶ See also Battams et al. (2021) [Reducing Incarceration Rates in Australia Through Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Crime Prevention](#).

³⁷ See Reeves et al. (2023) [Incredible Women: Legal Systems Abuse, Coercive Control, and the Credibility of Victim-Survivors](#); Women's Legal Services (2018) ["Officer She's Psychotic and I Need Protection": Police misidentification of the 'primary aggressor' in family violence incidents in Victoria](#). See also National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book (2023) [Systems Abuse](#).

³⁸ See for example See Boxall et al. (2022) [The "Pathways to Intimate Partner Homicide" Project: Key stages and events in male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide in Australia](#) and Flood et al. (2022) [Who Uses Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence, How, and Why?](#)

³⁹ South Australian data regarding police proceedings against Aboriginal people is not nationally comparable. See methodology of [Australian Bureau of Statistics' Recorded Crime dataset](#). Despite data discrepancies, research indicates that Aboriginal victim-survivors are being misidentified as the person using violence. See ANROWS (2020) [Accurately Identifying the "Person Most in Need of Protection" in Domestic and Family Violence Law: Key findings and future directions](#).

⁴⁰ See Queensland Government (2024) [Broadening the Focus: Queensland's strategy to strengthen responses to people who use domestic and family violence](#).