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Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 1 provided a brief overview of the development of services and changes to law, practice and policies in the area of violence against women. Much has been achieved in each of these areas, but there is no room for complacency. There is a need to remain vigilant so as not to lose the gains of the past and to further improve justice for women who are victims of violence. To gauge the impact of reforms and trends in attitudes and organisational responses, it is vital to monitor and evaluate levels of reported offences, service use, and legal processes related to violence against women. Despite increased activity towards developing data collections, there is a continuing state of inconsistency between data collections and a lack of national indicators. This means that there has been a tendency to rely on overseas research and policy initiatives to inform developments in Australia, without a critical and detailed examination of what is happening already within this country.

Research Priorities

The review of Australian research shows that there have been many studies on issues relating to violence against women, but they add up to only an incomplete picture. Many of the earlier studies, especially those which evaluated the impact of legislation, should be duplicated or built upon, and complemented by studies that focus on contemporary issues of concern. The service sector, research organisations, and policy advisers should work together to develop the best means of collecting information that is useful and relevant to their requirements and that will cross sectoral boundaries. Strategies should be developed which provide information on trends and on the current situation through:

- replications of earlier surveys and studies;
- analysis of routine statistical collections;
- evaluations of new initiatives.

To facilitate future research, there is the need to assess various methodologies, and the kind of information they produce. In particular, the following are viewed as fruitful and practical examples of evaluations which should be conducted:

- methods of evaluation for services, training and prevention programs;
- longitudinal research designs, for example of case studies;
- tracking models.

Through the review of Australian research and consultations with many people with knowledge of the issues, of which the VAWIP workshop constituted one part, topics were identified as priorities for research. They are listed below under three headings: violence against women, domestic violence and sexual assault:

Violence Against Women

- Women's fear of violence;
- the risk of violence and abuse where relationships exist other than of an intimate nature (for example where a fiduciary relationship exists);
- women's help-seeking strategies;

Violence against Women

- experiences of key communities (NESB, indigenous, rural and disabled women) their contact or lack of contact with the justice system;
- forms of victimisation experienced by younger women;
- effect of the “reporting climate” on official figures for violence against women;
- interaction between domestic violence and sexual assault.

Domestic Violence

- Community attitudes;
- the impact of legislative changes;
- the impact of training of key personnel and the creation of specialist units;
- court proceedings and outcomes for domestic assaults and breaches of protection orders;
- models of integration and coordinated responses;
- perpetrator programs;
- the merits of special courts and alternative mechanisms for dispute resolution;
- the effects on children of witnessing domestic violence.

Sexual Assault

- Community attitudes;
- the impact of legislative changes;
- the impact of training of key personnel and the creation of specialist units;
- evaluation of support services;
- attitudes and experiences of key justice personnel;
- programs for sex offenders;
- prosecution and sentencing.

Routine Data Collections

Statistical data on violence against women has the potential to improve service provision and inform policy and legislative reform, but there is the need to work towards a national perspective by coordinating and improving data. The first step for VAWIP was to ascertain data availability and to identify impediments to the task of improving and coordinating data.

Much work is already under way in Commonwealth, state and territory organisations including, for example, the key work of the National Centre for Crime and Justice

Statistics and at the state level, several initiatives to coordinate data across agencies and to track offenders. Further work needs to complement these activities. By encouraging the sharing and coordination of information, the quality and availability of data on violence against women will be greatly improved.

Statistical data is an invaluable part of monitoring changes and highlighting deficiencies in responses to violence. Descriptions of major collections were provided in the report and examples of data from the collections indicate the potential for analysis. Inconsistencies were found between agencies in the way data were collected and categorised and the kind of information kept in the collections. Reasons for these differences were described in the final section. The job of coordinating data involves at least the following series of tasks:

- expanding the national audit or compendium of data sets;
- the identification of gaps in the data sets;
- the development of core sets of data items and definitions;
- the development of guidelines for minimum data sets.

In relation to data analysis, which can apply to any data collection be it a national or state collection, the following priorities were identified:

- further analysis of criminal justice data for national figures;
- risk factors and demographic profiles of offenders and victims;
- accessing and analysing data on key communities.

With respect to the coordination of data, a pressing priority is for:

- the creation of a national database on protection orders.