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Abstract | Police in Australia are seeing increased reporting of family, domestic and sexual violence, while facing greater pressure to secure positive outcomes for victims. Improvements in the training police receive in responding to this violence have been identified as critical to broader efforts to reduce it. This study reviews published Australian and international research on police training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence.

The last few decades have seen a significantly expanded focus on family, domestic and sexual violence as part of police training. This, along with several notable training innovations, have underpinned a shift in police training needs from more basic concerns around correct procedure and knowledge of the law, to more advanced concerns including recognising and investigating coercive control and identifying primary aggressors. Overall, police are receptive and responsive to training, but certain types of training, particularly those with strong practical and problem-solving components, hold more promise.

Police training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence

Christopher Dowling

Frontline police in Australia spend a significant portion of their time responding to reports of family, domestic and sexual violence (Law Enforcement Conduct Commission 2023; Queensland Government Statistician's Office 2021). While this has long been the case (Loison 1992), growing societal acknowledgment of the severity of violence against women and children (eg Department of Social Services 2022), along with increases in the reporting of it to police (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023) have seen police attention to this problem further intensify. Recent inquiries into how police respond to this violence, often spurred by high-profile incidents of (usually lethal) violence and shortcomings in the police and criminal justice handling of cases (eg Justice and Community Safety Directorate 2023; Law Enforcement Conduct Commission 2023; Queensland Audit Office 2023; Queensland Government 2022; Victorian Government 2016), are also prompting initiatives to improve police responses.

Celebrating
50 years

Consequently, police in Australia are now in the difficult position of having to respond to a greater number of family, domestic and sexual violence reports, while also devoting greater attention to each report and securing positive outcomes—preventing recidivism, protecting victims, and achieving prosecutions and convictions—for a greater proportion of these reports. To help overcome the obvious challenges in achieving these higher standards, increasing emphasis has been placed on improving the training police receive in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence. Importantly, Australia's *National plan to end violence against women and children 2022–2032* (Department of Social Services 2022) identifies the insufficient or inadequate training of frontline workers, including police, as a key structural barrier to reducing this violence.

Efforts to improve police training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence must be evidence-informed so that real knowledge and skill gaps are targeted; lessons are effectively learned, translated into practice and retained; and training schemes are adapted to the organisational and operational realities of contemporary police agencies. To this end, the current report summarises existing research on this topic. It builds and expands on a review undertaken by Dowling and colleagues in 2018 to address the following questions:

- What are some of the existing and innovative modes of delivery for police training and development in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence?
- How receptive are police to different kinds of training and development in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence, and what factors influence this?
- What barriers and considerations should be accounted for in the implementation of police training and development in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence?
- How effective is police training and development in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence at improving the attitudes and behaviours of police, and what factors influence this?

Search strategy

The term 'training' is used in this report to refer to a wide range of programs that focus on developing the knowledge and skills of police recruits and sworn officers in responding effectively to family, domestic and sexual violence, as well as attitude change. However, the focus is on training for police dealing with this violence in an operational capacity (ie as first responders and/or investigators).

A two-stage literature search strategy similar to that used in the original review (Dowling et al. 2018) was implemented. The first stage involved searching for relevant research and other resources using standard search terms (Box 1) across a number of academic and 'grey' literature databases (Table 1). Search terms adopted a similar structure and included similar terms to those used in the original review, but with additions to reflect the broader focus on other forms of family, domestic and sexual violence. The exact search term structure was modified to suit the unique search options and functions of each database. The search was undertaken in May 2023.

Box 1: Search terms

("Domestic Violence" OR DV OR "Domestic Assault" OR "Abuse" OR "Intimate Partner Violence" OR IPV OR "Spous* Violence" OR "Spous* Assault" OR "Marital Violence" OR "Battered Wom*" OR "Conjugal Violence" OR "Dating Violence" OR "Sex* violen*" OR "Sex* abus*" OR "Sex* assault" OR "Sex* offen*" OR "Rape" OR "Indecen*" OR "Molest*" OR "Stalk*" OR "Harass*" OR "Coercive control" OR "Emotional abuse" OR "Financial abuse" OR "Family Violence" OR FV OR "Family and domestic violence" OR FDV OR "Domestic and family violence" OR DFV OR "Sibling violence" OR "Elder abuse" OR "Child abuse")

AND

("Polic*" OR "Law Enforce*" OR "Investigat*" OR "Criminal justice")

AND

(Train* OR "Course*" OR "Teach*" OR "Workforce development" OR "Staff development" OR "Professional development" OR "Educat*" OR "Program*" OR "Class*" OR "Seminar*" OR "Academy" OR "Attitud*" OR "Belie*" OR "View*")

Table 1: Literature databases

SocIndex

Australian Criminology Database (CINCH)

JV Barry Library Catalogue

ProQuest

Criminal Justice Abstracts

US National Criminal Justice Reference Service

UK Home Office (current and archived publications)

Canadian Policing Research Catalogue

Center for Problem-Oriented Policing

Google Scholar

The second stage involved targeted searches of policing journals, along with informal follow-up searches. Research was also sought less systematically on police training and education generally, and on broader adult education and training methods, to provide further substance to the review.

Research published between 1980 and early 2023 was included, although critical work outside of this period has also been examined. Only English-language documents written in, or with a substantial focus on, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, United Kingdom and Canada were reviewed. While the focus was on published empirical research, other publicly available documents (eg training manuals and materials, strategic and policy documents) have also been included where required. No methodological inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied. Literature search results were cross-checked against those of the search undertaken for the original review. All sources included in the original review were also located as part of the search undertaken for this review, and have all been included.

Importantly, the literature yielded, while comprehensive, is not exhaustive, and given the nature and breadth of the research questions, a systematic review was not possible. Nevertheless, this search strategy was designed to facilitate an accurate representation of the current state of the evidence.

Police training: Background and context

The broader training that police receive serves as important context for any examination of police training in family, domestic and sexual violence. While efforts to ensure some level of consistency in police training across Australia are being undertaken (eg by the Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency and Australian Institute of Police Management), police training in Australia is still largely managed at the state and territory level. There is also variation within and across the other countries examined in this report. The following discussion does not examine the nuances of each or the differences between them. Rather, the focus is on the core characteristics that run across them.

Historically, the training of police recruits adhered to what has been described as a paramilitary or apprenticeship model (Birzer 2003; Birzer & Tannehill 2001; Bloss 2004; Bopp & Schultz 1972; Forcese 1992; Hill 1995; Neyroud 2011; Rogers & Wintle 2021). Recruits initially spent a few weeks to months at a training academy (often residential), where they undertook classroom instruction focusing heavily on criminal law and police powers, physical training, and practical sessions in fieldcraft (eg firearms, dangerous driving and defensive tactics) and police procedures (eg traffic stops and crime scene investigation) (Birzer 2003; Birzer & Tannehill 2001; Bradford & Pynes 1999; Bradley 1996; Cowley 2011; Neyroud 2011; Rogers & Wintle 2021; Vodde 2011). Training was designed and led almost solely by senior police officers, and heavily emphasised rote learning methods involving the delivery of required information, and the demonstration of required behaviour, to largely passive students for memorisation and repetition. Trainers enforced regimes of strict discipline and socialised recruits into the formal command hierarchies and cultures of police agencies. Subsequent to this, recruits undertook further development as probationary or provisional officers working in the field, where they observed and practised policing under the mentorship of senior officers, before being sworn in as fully inducted police officers. Additional training was also required to move into investigative and other specialist roles.

While this basic model of police training persists, the past 40 years have also seen significant reforms driven by a growing recognition of the complexity of the problems that police confront, greater diversity in the communities they serve, and changing public expectations around the role they play (Belur et al. 2020; Blumberg et al. 2019; Bradford & Pynes 1999; Bradley 1996; Cordner & Shain 2011; Déverge 2016; Holdaway 2017; Miles-Johnson 2023; Miles-Johnson & Pickering 2018; Paterson 2011; Rogers & Wintle 2021; Shipton 2011; Vodde 2011). These changes can be summarised as follows:

- Professionalisation—many countries have sought to incorporate tertiary education and qualifications into their police recruit and other training programs. In Australia, police recruits now graduate with a diploma or associate degree (or credits towards one), while police executives increasingly possess formal management and leadership qualifications, including Masters of Business and Public Administration, and similar diplomas and graduate certificates.
- Increasing emphasis on ‘softer’ skills—recruit training has expanded to include topics such as communication skills, cultural awareness, and civics and social studies, while an increasing number of police executives have also undertaken courses relevant to leadership and management, including financial and people management, data-driven decision-making, and strategic thinking.
- Greater diversity and flexibility in training modalities—training has increasingly come to incorporate more interactive and student-centred methods which aim to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. While training is still led by police, others such as academics, legal and criminal justice professionals, service providers and advocates have become more involved in training design and delivery. Remote, online and part-time options have become available to recruits and sworn officers.

More fundamentally, much has been written over the past two decades on the teaching and learning philosophies that underpin police training. Broadly, this work argues that there is a greater need for police training to draw on *andragogical* concepts and methods (Belur et al. 2020; Birzer 2003; Bloss 2004; Chappell 2005; Vodde 2011). Andragogy makes a clear distinction between the learning styles of children and adults, emphasising the latter as self-directed learners who benefit more from problem-solving exercises that draw and build on their existing knowledge, than lectures and demonstrations. Problem-based learning, which stems from andragogy, involves learning through exercises that allow students to develop, discuss and reflect on solutions to real or hypothetical problems (Belur et al. 2020; Cleveland & Saville 2007; Shipton 2011; Werth 2011). These problems should be directly relevant to their profession or vocation, and mirror those encountered as part of their everyday work. They should also be *ill-structured*, meaning complex, capable of being solved in multiple ways, and of a difficulty that exceeds students’ knowledge and skillset. Public source material indicates that, while many elements of police training still make extensive use of instructional rote-learning methods, there has been some incorporation of andragogical and problem-based learning concepts (Audit Office of NSW 2022; Cammerino 2021; Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) 2015, 2019; Queensland Audit Office 2023; Queensland Government 2022; Shipton 2011; Victoria Police nd).

Existing and innovative practices for training police in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence

Throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, police recruits received little if any academy training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence (Carrillo 2021; Eigenberg, Kappeler & McGuffee 2012; Tong 1984). Their understanding of how to respond was instead formed during their time as probationary or provisional officers, and heavily influenced by more senior officers and broader organisational cultures and norms. This started to change in the 1970s, when dedicated sessions on violence in domestic settings, which included instruction on the nature and dynamics of this violence, response options and simulated practice scenarios, became more widespread in recruit training (Belknap 1990; Comley 1989; Filan 1978; Loison 1992; Trojanowicz & Belknap 1986). In Victoria, for example, by the early 1990s police recruits were receiving five 40-minute sessions of training on the 'theoretical aspects of family violence' (Loison 1992: 12), along with training in methods of intervening, protection orders, and referring to other agencies (Loison 1992). While the development of specialised training for police recruits in responding to sexual violence has generally lagged behind that of family and domestic violence training, broader training in interviewing and managing vulnerable victims also became more common.

The 1980s and 1990s also saw a proliferation of specialist domestic and family violence police units tasked with undertaking further investigative and enforcement activity in especially serious and challenging cases, liaising with other services, and providing on-the-job, refresher and updated training for frontline officers (Australian Law Reform Commission & NSW Law Reform Commission 2010; Breci 1989; Daly 2011; Friday et al. 2006; Plotnikoff & Woolfson 1998). These units are also often staffed by police officers who themselves have received advanced training in responding to domestic and family violence on top of the training received by all general duties officers. Operating alongside these units are longer-standing specialist sexual assault investigation units, which over time have become staffed by police investigators who have similarly received advanced training in the interviewing and care of victims, forensic investigative techniques and liaising with other services (Dalton et al. 2022; Westmarland et al. 2012).

Public source information indicates that training in how to respond to domestic and family violence is now a core component of police recruit training programs across English-speaking countries (Cammerino 2021; HMIC 2015, 2019), including Australia (Audit Office of NSW 2022; Queensland Audit Office 2023; Queensland Government 2022; Victoria Police nd) while follow-up training for sworn officers, including specialised police units with advanced training, is also common. Significant and ongoing reforms to legislation, policy and operational procedures also necessitate frequent refresher training (HMIC 2015, 2019). Broadly, this training aims to build understanding of the nature, causes and impacts of violence; knowledge of a range of enforcement responses (eg arrest, investigation, protection orders) and support-based responses (eg victim and perpetrator referral); and applied skills in implementing these responses. Further, and consistent with the broader trends in police recruit training, training in family, domestic and sexual violence now emphasises ‘softer’ skills in communication and engaging with members of vulnerable communities, including Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBT+ communities. Finally, there is greater recognition of the intersection of sexual violence and domestic and family violence, which have historically been, and to some extent continue to be, the focus of separate specialist branches in many Australian (and international) police agencies.

Innovations over the past 20 years, outside of expanding to cover new topics, have focused on increasing the realism and immersiveness of simulated scenarios for practising applied skills, incorporating outside experts—victims and advocates, researchers, service providers, and legal and medical professionals—into training delivery, and expanding online training. More realistic domestic and family violence scenarios have been designed to further challenge recruits and officers in responding to a wider range of incidents under more threatening and stress-inducing conditions, making lessons more transferable to the field. The new Victoria Police Family Violence Centre of Learning, a dedicated facility for training and education in family and domestic violence, includes a mock residential setting with design features such as multiple entry and exit points, hidden compartments where weapons could be concealed, and physical obstructions to test quick and effective decision-making (Foreground Architecture 2019). Advances in knowledge of effective interviewing techniques have also been operationalised into advanced training for investigators, particularly those who specialise in sexual violence and abuse. This training typically includes mock interviews that allow police to apply and improve the skills being taught (Tidmarsh, Powell & Darwinkel 2012; Westera et al. 2019).

The involvement of victims, advocates, service providers and other experts in police training can be contentious (more on this below), although it is becoming more prevalent (Blaney 2010; Ewin, Bates & Taylor 2020; HMIC 2015, 2019; Huisman, Martinez & Wilson 2005; Stanko & Hohl 2018). Their involvement, even in training designed and led by senior officers, has been promoted as a way of bringing an ‘outsiders’ perspective that can contribute to cultural change within police agencies, and combat outdated attitudes and practices (HMIC 2015). They can also assist in clarifying understanding of referral services, court processes, and investigative standards and procedures (Blaney 2010; Ewin, Bates & Taylor 2020; HMIC 2015, 2019; Luna-Firebaugh et al. 2002; O’Sullivan, Roberts & Skoog 1994).

Outside of recruit training, there have historically been a number of obstacles to delivering ongoing and refresher training to police officers (Dichter et al. 2011; Ewin, Bates & Taylor 2020; Mazerolle et al. 2018; NSW Ombudsman 2006; O’Sullivan, Roberts and Skoog 1994; Plotnikoff & Woolfson 1998; WA Ombudsman 2003). Most importantly, this training typically involves time away from operational and administrative duties. The coordinated delivery of in-person training across multiple policing areas can also be resource-intensive, involving either large numbers of officers travelling to a single location or trainers travelling to many locations. Decentralised delivery models, such as train-the-trainer models, have been proposed to overcome these difficulties, although high staff turnover and internal movements often mean that this training must still be run regularly to account for the steady stream of untrained officers. Online training has proliferated to allow for the regular, widespread and near simultaneous delivery of training to officers across entire agencies, and, as stated, has also become more prevalent in some recruit training programs (Audit Office of NSW 2022; Mazerolle et al. 2018). While arguably less appropriate for introducing and refining applied skills or complex concepts, it has been used to build and update knowledge, especially in relation to rapidly changing legislation, policies and procedures (HMIC 2015).

Training needs of police in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence

There is an extensive evidence base on police performance in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence, including their knowledge and skill gaps. Importantly, any discussion of the training needs of police in relation to this violence should be contextualised with some understanding of the role they play in addressing it (Dowling, Boxall & Morgan 2021). As gatekeepers to the criminal justice system, police are critical to initiating enforcement actions against perpetrators (eg arrest, bail opposition, verbal warnings and temporary separation), supporting other legal actions such as protection orders, and undertaking investigations in support of criminal charges and prosecution. While pressure has grown in recent years to respond more intensively to family, domestic and sexual violence, frontline officers and investigators still have some discretion in which actions they take, how to investigate, and whether to pursue charges. In exercising this discretion, police make decisions based on their assessment of the severity of the violence, the likelihood of further violence, and the likely difficulty and outcome of an investigation, all of which require knowledge of the dynamics of violence, operational procedures, justice processes and best-practice investigative methodologies (Miles-Johnson 2022). Additionally, police are now expected to proactively refer victims and perpetrators to services that can address any health and social welfare concerns that underpin violence, and to liaise regularly with these services (Domestic Violence NSW 2022; Fraser, Saxton & Jaffe 2023; NT Government 2022). This requires an ability to recognise and assess these concerns, along with knowledge of local service ecosystems.

Older studies point to insufficient knowledge of legislation and operational procedures, poor awareness of services and referral processes, and a preference for mediational responses over enforcement actions to protect victims as priority training targets for police (Belknap 1990; Commonwealth Secretariat 1988; Hatty 1989; Loison 1992; Pastoor 1984; Plotnikoff & Woolfson 1998; Swanton, Walker & Wilson 1988). They also point to problematic attitudes among police, including that family, domestic and sexual violence is a private matter and not ‘real crime’, that victims can and should just leave, that some victims are actually willing participants in sex because of what they wear or how they act, and that sometimes men ‘lose control’ and should not be blamed for violence (Belknap 1990; Breci 1989; Comley 1989; Hatty 1989; Huisman, Martinez & Wilson 2005; Loison 1992; Pastoor 1984). Fortunately, while recent research has continued to identify these knowledge and skill gaps to some degree (Domestic Violence NSW 2022; Douglas 2019; Fraser, Saxton & Jaffe 2023; Gillespie 2013; Goodman-Delahunty & Crehan 2016; HMIC 2015; Meyer & Reeves 2021; Miles-Johnson 2022; Segrave, Wilson & Fitz-Gibbon 2018) a comparison with older research also suggests that there has been significant improvement (see also Carrillo 2021; El Sayed et al. 2022; Fleming & Franklin 2021; Gover, Pudrzynska & Dodge 2011; Maple & Kebbell 2020; McPhedran, Gover & Mazerolle 2017; Myhill 2017; Page 2010; Parratt & Pina 2017).

Without discounting the importance of continuing to address these lingering knowledge and skill gaps, recent research suggests that the following currently constitute priority training needs for police:

- Recognising and investigating non-physical violence. As acknowledgment of the ongoing and patterned nature of abuse has grown, and the dynamics of coercive control have become better understood, police, victims and other stakeholders have identified a pressing need for enhanced training to recognise the markers of this abuse outside of physical violence and to undertake effective investigations of it (Barlow et al. 2020; Douglas 2019; El Sayed et al. 2022; HMIC 2019; Myhill 2017; Myhill & Johnson 2016; Nancarrow et al. 2020; NT Government 2022; Saunders, Prost & Oehme 2016). This includes technology-facilitated forms of abuse such as online stalking and harassment, and image-based sexual abuse (Powell & Henry 2018).
- Working with victims who have been traumatised or who have suffered other negative mental health effects, both to support improvements in their wellbeing and to more effectively work with them in the context of criminal investigations (Angiolini 2015; Domestic Violence NSW 2022; Fleming & Franklin 2021; HMIC 2019; Miles-Johnson 2022; Salter et al. 2020; Segrave, Wilson & Fitz-Gibbon 2018; Westera et al. 2023). This includes undertaking interviews to obtain information that can be used to support criminal charges.
- Distinguishing ‘primary aggressors’ and defensive parties in incidents of bi-directional violence (Domestic Violence NSW 2022; Nancarrow et al. 2020; NT Government 2022).
- Cultural awareness. The over-representation of Indigenous people among perpetrators and victims of family, domestic and sexual violence, coupled with the growing ethnic and cultural diversity of Australia, point to the need to prioritise further training in awareness of, and sensitivity to, cultural and linguistic differences (Domestic Violence NSW 2022; Goodman-Delahunty & Crehan 2016; Nancarrow et al. 2020).

Implementation and effectiveness of police training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence

Police are generally supportive of training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence (Cunneen 2010; HMIC 2019; Horwitz et al. 2011; Miles-Johnson 2022; Moore, Rosales & Akins 1991; Plotnikoff & Woolfson 1998; Stalnaker, Shields & Bell 1993; Sutton & Hatty 1988; Tidmarsh 2016; Victorian Government 2016), particularly more senior police and those with some training already (Breci 1989; Gover, Paul & Dodge 2011; Toon et al. 2005). Research suggests that they have a particular preference for practical, in-person training that focuses on bolstering knowledge or skills they use day-to-day, including evidence gathering, investigative interviewing, and understanding of service availability and referral processes (Audit Office of NSW 2022; Campbell et al. 2020; Cromack 1995; Ewin, Bates & Taylor 2020; HMIC 2015; Knowles 1996; Miles-Johnson 2023; O'Sullivan, Roberts & Skoog 1994; Poerio 1991; Sutton & Hatty 1988; Toon et al. 2005). This training focuses on learning outcomes that, in theory at least, directly contribute to improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness with which officers can do their jobs, while providing the opportunity to practise specific skills, and clarify their understanding of more complex concepts and processes. While online and paper-based training initiatives (eg brochures and information sheets) are viewed more negatively, their utility in providing updates and refresher training on legislation, policies and procedures is recognised (HMIC 2015; O'Sullivan, Roberts & Skoog 1994).

In terms of delivery, research shows that police preferences depend on the nature of the training and who is seen to be sufficiently authoritative in the area. They generally indicate a preference for training delivered by other officers, particularly where it focuses on improving job-specific skills and knowledge (Blaney 2010; Huisman, Martinez & Wilson 2005; Luna-Firebaugh et al. 2002; Plotnikoff & Woolfson 1998). However, they also see the value in training delivered by others, including legal and medical professionals, and service providers, where it is focused on matters specific to their areas of expertise (Ewin, Bates & Taylor 2020; Plotnikoff & Woolfson 1998). Importantly, while preferences for training focused on modifying attitudes are more variable across police, research suggests that they generally see the value of victim-survivors telling their stories, and explaining how police can help them, as part of this training (Blaney 2010; HMIC 2015; Huisman, Martinez & Wilson 2005).

Findings suggest that training in interviewing and evidence-gathering (Darwinkel, Powell & Tidmarsh 2013; HMIC 2019; Holmes & Headley 1995; Islam & Mazerolle 2022; Lathan et al. 2022; Lonsway, Welch & Fitzgerald 2001; Parratt & Pina 2017; Powell & Cauchi 2013; Reckdenwald, Fernandez & Mandes 2019; Ruff 2012; Storey et al. 2011; Tidmarsh 2016; Tidmarsh, Sharman & Hamilton 2023; Whetstone 2001), and in legislation, policies and procedures (Brennan et al. 2021; Campbell et al. 2023; Johnson 2010; Oehme, Prost & Saunders 2016; Police and Crime Standards Directorate 2006; Reckdenwald, Fernandez & Mandes 2019; Russell & Sturgeon 2019), are effective in improving officers' understanding and confidence in these areas, and their self-reported application of lessons. Greater variation is evident in research evaluating training to change attitudes. Some studies suggest that this training has positive outcomes for self-reported attitudes (Campbell & Lapsey 2021; Campbell, Lapsey & Wells 2020; Darwinkel, Powell & Tidmarsh 2013; Franklin et al. 2020; Lathan et al. 2019; Tidmarsh 2016), and others find mixed impacts or none (Blaney 2010; Fleming & Franklin 2021; Lathan et al. 2022; Loeb 1983; Lonsway, Welch & Fitzgerald 2001; Newmark, Harrell & Adams 1995; Parratt & Pina 2017; Sleath & Bull 2012; Smith, Wilkes & Bouffard 2016; Smithey, Green & Giacomazzi 2002, 2004). These findings are generally consistent across officers of different ages, genders, levels of education, ranks and years of experience, suggesting that responsiveness to training does not vary significantly by demographics or time on the job (Campbell & Lapsey 2021; Campbell, Lapsey & Wells 2020; Toon et al. 2005).

However, this says little about what elements of training (eg its length, delivery, format, target audience) are important. Much of the research in this area gives only surface-level detail on the training it examines, which makes answering this question difficult. As a result, there have been few efforts to extract an overarching narrative of what works and how from this research (but see Belur et al. 2020). Another limitation is the lack of research on whether training leads to actual improvements in practice, including increases in arrests or the proportion of cases proceeding to prosecution or conviction, or reductions in police injury. While some studies have reported positive impacts (Breci & Simons 1987; Brennan et al. 2021; Buchanan & Hankins 1983; Newmark, Harrell & Adams 1995; Reckdenwald, Fernandez & Mandes 2019; Ruff 2012; Scott 2005), others report no impact (Friday et al. 2006; Smithey, Green & Giacomazzi 2002). This, coupled with the mixed findings of research on training and attitude change, further highlights the importance of delving into what elements of training best facilitate learning, changes in practice and lesson retention.

A careful reading of the literature on andragogy and problem-based learning can be drawn on to extract higher-level lessons on what works, how and why in police training for responding to family, domestic and sexual violence. Specifically, it suggests that training that involves a significant practical component exposing learners to problems they need to independently navigate, such as mock interviews, hypothetical cases or role-played callouts, is more effective. This is borne out in the research referenced above on training in evidence gathering and investigative skills in particular, which typically involve these practical components. Additionally, research has shown that on-the-job training (Victorian Government 2016), training that clearly connects the concepts and knowledge being taught with practical and problem-solving scenarios (Belur et al. 2020; Miles-Johnson 2023), and training that allows police to reflect on their performance in such scenarios (Belur et al. 2020) improve learning and retention. Fortunately, many of the current training needs identified above, including in relation to patterns of abuse and coercive control, trauma-informed methods of working with victims, and identifying primary aggressors, arguably lend themselves well to a problem-based learning approach centred on tackling ill-structured problems.

The applicability of problem-solving and practically-oriented training to achieving attitude change is less obvious. However, research does tentatively suggest that efforts to address problematic attitudes among police may be more successful if undertaken as part of such training, or where attitude change can be connected with officers' day-to-day work. For example, training in the interviewing of sexual assault victims that addresses misconceptions around certain victim behaviours, and improves understanding of trauma-informed practice, has been shown to reduce the acceptance of problematic and victim-blaming attitudes (Campbell, Lapsey & Wells 2020; Darwinkel, Powell & Tidmarsh 2013; Franklin et al. 2020; Lathan et al. 2019). Additionally, training that emphasises the investigative importance of some historically minimised forms of abuse (eg strangulation and stalking) has been shown to increase appreciation of their severity alongside more physically injurious forms of violence (Reckdenwald, Fernandez & Mandes 2019). These and other studies (Breci 1989; Islam & Mazerolle 2022; Rich & Seffrin 2012) also hint at the importance of attitude change as a precursor to, and mechanism for, the development, retention and application of skills. However, the findings here are inconsistent, with other studies suggesting that problem-solving and practically-oriented training programs do not always lead to attitude change, even where there are improvements in knowledge and skills (Klein 2008; Lathan et al. 2022; Lonsway et al. 2001; Smith, Wilkes & Bouffard 2016). This could point to the difficulty in clearly linking attitudes with practice, and to the greater challenges involved in changing attitudes generally compared with behaviour.

Research also highlights additional concerns pertaining to the implementation of problem-solving and practically-oriented training. Given its deviation from elements of more traditional modes of police training, its implementation can require significant reform to curricula and the upskilling of trainers, who need to pivot away from ‘teaching’ and take more hands-off roles as guides and facilitators. This can prove challenging, particularly where trainers are not convinced of the benefits, and some have been shown to quickly revert to older training methods (Chappell 2005; Lettic 2015; Shipton 2011). This can be further exacerbated by the additional time and effort required to run such training compared with more teacher-driven modes of instruction, which impart lessons in a quicker and less intensive (but less effective) manner (Shipton 2011). It is also important to reiterate that problem-solving and practically-oriented training will not always be appropriate, such as for refresher or updated training on legislation and policies, and if misapplied could lead to the unnecessary expenditure of resources for minimal additional benefits.

Finally, research has consistently highlighted the following implementation concerns regarding police training in family, domestic and sexual violence generally. As noted, there have been long-standing difficulties balancing ongoing and refresher training for sworn officers with their operational and administrative duties, and this has largely driven the proliferation of online modes of training (Ewin, Bates & Taylor 2020; HMIC 2015; Oehme, Prost & Saunders 2016; Plotnikoff & Woolfson 1998). Importantly, this training in particular has been shown to be important to combatting training fade, and strengthening the retention of lessons learned in recruit and early training over the long term (Campbell & Lapsey 2021; Campbell, Lapsey & Wells 2020; Campbell et al. 2023; Ewin, Bates & Taylor 2020; Luna-Firebaugh et al. 2002). Relatedly, while there have been significant improvements in the attitudes of police regarding family, domestic and sexual violence, formal training can still clash with outdated responses that continue to be used in the field, and organisational cultures that continue to ingrain problematic perspectives and practices, leading to a deterioration in lessons learned over time (Loison 1992; Plotnikoff & Woolfson 1998). This points to the importance of ensuring the buy-in of police agencies, and particularly their executives, to training to ensure that lessons will be reinforced, rather than weakened, through officers’ day-to-day work (Belur et al. 2020; Johnson 2010; Stanko & Hohl 2018).

Summary and conclusion

Police training has seen significant reform over the last 40 years as policing becomes more professionalised, and the nature of training adapts to meet the needs and expectations of a changing society. This has permeated into the training that police undergo in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence. Aside from receiving significantly more emphasis, recent innovations in training have sought to incorporate more immersive and realistic practical components to hone skills, and to involve a wider variety of trainers outside of policing who are better placed to speak authoritatively on certain topics and contribute to broader cultural change within agencies. Online training has also proliferated to better facilitate the frequent refresher training police now require in the rapidly evolving legislative and policy landscape of family, domestic and sexual violence.

The priority knowledge and skill gaps of police in relation to family, domestic and sexual violence appear to have shifted over time, likely a result of these significant improvements in training. Poor understanding of legislation and basic procedures, a lack of awareness of services and referral processes, and a preference for mediational over enforcement responses appear to have given way to more advanced concerns such as recognising and investigating patterns of abuse and coercive control, trauma-informed practices with victims, and identifying primary aggressors. The further development of communication skills and cultural awareness to respond effectively to reports involving Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBT+ people has also been emphasised. Research suggests that these knowledge and skill gaps should be emphasised in efforts to further reform and strengthen police training in family, domestic and sexual violence.

Encouragingly, research shows that police at all levels and across all major demographic groups are generally supportive of training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence, particularly where it is clearly connected to their day-to-day jobs and where it is delivered by those perceived to be authoritative on the topics being taught. Furthermore, research shows that this training often has positive effects on self-reported understanding, confidence and application. However, few studies have sought to tease out the specific elements of training that facilitate successful learning, translation into practice, and retention. This is important to explaining some of the mixed findings that have emerged in research in this area, particularly in relation to the effects of training on actual practice (eg arrests, charges and prosecutions) and attitudes.

Fortunately, the broader police training research literature, particularly that examining andragogy and problem-based learning, can be used to derive some explanation of what works and how in training on family, domestic and sexual violence. It suggests that successful training programs incorporate significant practical components that expose learners to difficult problems they need to independently navigate, such as mock interviews, hypothetical cases or role-played callouts. This is indeed borne out in the empirical research reviewed. Furthermore, while its applicability to achieving attitude change is less obvious, research does tentatively suggest that efforts to address problematic attitudes may be more successful if undertaken as part of such training, or where attitude change can be clearly connected with officers' day-to-day work. However, research points to a number of potential implementation issues with this training, most critically a lack of motivation and capability in trainers. Other implementation concerns with training more broadly, including resourcing, the balancing of ongoing and refresher training with operational and administrative duties, and the potential clash with wider agency practices and cultures, are also noted.

This review summarises the evidence regarding police training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence. Improved training for police and other frontline workers is an important component of Australia's current strategy for reducing this violence. An evidence-informed understanding of training needs and best practice is critical to effectively empowering police in their work, and improving the safety of victims.

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