



Australian Government
Australian Institute of Criminology

CRIME & JUSTICE RESEARCH 2025

Edited by Rick Brown



Australian Institute of Criminology

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Introduction

This volume provides a snapshot of recent research published by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC). Each year, the AIC produces around 50 research outputs, many of which are released in the Institute's publication series. These include peer reviewed Research Reports and *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* papers, as well as Statistical Reports, Statistical Bulletins and Research in Practice papers—all of which provide insight into contemporary issues faced by the community and the criminal justice system in Australia. Fourteen studies are included in this volume, covering issues as varied as Indigenous justice; domestic, family and sexual violence; online sexual exploitation of children; violent extremism; serious and organised crime; and corrections. These themes reflect the AIC's focus on reducing crime and promoting justice by improving evidence-based policymaking, with research examining some of the most pressing crime and justice issues affecting Australia.

Chapter 1 presents the results from the first study published under the AIC's Indigenous Justice Research Program, which explores approaches to reducing the over-representation of First Nations people in the criminal justice system. This study involved a secondary analysis of the 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey to explore the factors that contribute to the arrest of First Nations individuals. It shows that risk factors for arrest (apart from being young and male) include illicit drug and alcohol use, psychological distress and being a member of the stolen generation (personally or through a relative). In contrast, having completed school, having an income in the top four deciles and having a permanent home reduced the risk of arrest. This study identifies some of the policy issues that could reduce the criminal justice system over-representation of First Nations people.

Chapter 2 used a novel research design to estimate the proportion of the population who have been proceeded against by police for a family and domestic violence offence. Based on a data linkage exercise that connected the New South Wales birth registry with police recorded offence data, the study showed that approximately six percent of people born in New South Wales had been proceeded against by police for a family and domestic violence offence by age 37. This rose to almost 10 percent for men. However, offending was highly concentrated, with just 1.2 percent of people born in New South Wales responsible for more than half of recorded family and domestic violence offences.

Chapter 3 explores domestic and family violence victim-survivors' perceptions and experiences of police use of body-worn cameras in police call-outs and legal proceedings. The study showed that victim-survivors were supportive of body-worn cameras being used. However, they raised a number of concerns, including that the victim-survivor could be misidentified as the primary aggressor and that perpetrators may manipulate the situation to minimise their role and make themselves appear blameless.

Chapter 4 examines the use of alternative reporting options for sexual assault, based on focus groups and interviews with victim-survivors and support service staff. There was significant support for alternative reporting mechanisms, which offer a means of reporting when victim-survivors are not ready to report to the police and which allow them to maintain control over their report. However, there were concerns that these reports could become a 'dead end' as those receiving the information could not investigate or take the matter further. The experience of reporting could also be distressing, due to the amount of information sought and the terminology and language used in the forms. This highlights the importance of trauma-informed approaches to reporting sexual violence.

Through a review of the literature, chapter 5 examines best practice in police training for responding to family, domestic and sexual violence. It documents some notable training innovations, with a general shift in police training needs from more basic topics around correct procedure and knowledge of the law, to more advanced training in recognising and investigating coercive control and identifying primary aggressors. Overall, police were found to be receptive and responsive to training, with approaches that included a strong practical and problem-solving component felt to be the most promising.

Chapter 6 builds on previous AIC research on fixated individuals and on pathways to intimate partner homicide to propose a domestic violence threat assessment centre to address the one-third of intimate partner homicides that involve fixated perpetrators. Building on existing fixated threat assessment centres, the approach would triage the most serious threats using a multi-agency risk assessment process. Those individuals presenting the highest risk could then be subject to intensive surveillance and case management to prevent an escalation in harm towards their former partners.

Addressing the online sexual exploitation of children continues to be a priority research theme for the AIC. Chapter 7 analyses the prevalence of viewing online child sexual abuse material (CSAM) among Australian adults. It finds that 4.7 percent of online Australian adults had viewed CSAM in the previous year, and 0.8 percent had done so intentionally. Those who were aged 18–34 years, who were living with disability, who were currently serving or had previously served in the military or who spoke a language other than English at home were more likely than others to have intentionally viewed CSAM.

Chapter 8 examines online sexual exploitation of children from the perspective of those who are asked to share images of their children by individuals they meet online. Reporting the results of a survey, the authors show that 2.8 percent of online Australian adults had been asked to facilitate child sexual exploitation. These requests were more likely to be received by those who had shared a photo of or information about children publicly online. Among those who had shared information publicly online, requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation were more often received by men, younger individuals, linguistically diverse individuals, individuals with disability, and those who had experienced other sexual or violent harms online.

Chapter 9 documents seven principles designed to guide the development and implementation of initiatives to prevent CSAM offending. This was based on a large-scale review of the literature and consultation with international experts. The principles include the use of advertising campaigns, confidentiality and anonymity, an empathetic and non-judgemental approach, accessibility, training and support, tailored programs, and evaluation.

Chapter 10 presents research involving interviews with individuals who protested in opposition to public health measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews explored the motivations for participating in protest activity. Protesters were motivated by strong personal grievances based on perceived negative experiences and deterioration of their or their family's personal circumstances. For many respondents, these grievances were shaped by and amplified by adherence to conspiratorial ideologies and sovereign citizen beliefs. The combination of grievances and conspiratorial beliefs fostered mistrust and strong anti-government sentiment. For many, the government response to the protests had steeled their resolve and made them more determined to protest.

Chapter 11 reports on a study that tested the validity and reliability of a risk assessment tool designed for violent extremist offenders, the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment—Version 2 Revised (VERA-2R). By analysing information available on 50 convicted extremist offenders, the study found differences in risk profiles between individuals who were and were not violent. The VERA-2R was found to have good interrater reliability but low predictive validity. While the VERA-2R correctly identified 57 percent of violent extremists as high risk, it also classified 31 percent of non-violent extremists as high risk.

Chapter 12 examines community perceptions of corruption by public officials in Australia. Based on a survey of the community undertaken just before the launch of the National Anti-Corruption Commission, the study found that a sizeable minority of respondents (30–38%) believed that over half of all politicians and people working in government institutions were involved in corruption. Younger, unemployed and First Nations respondents perceived higher levels of corruption, as did respondents with lower levels of education and those living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Perceptions of corruption were associated with diminished levels of perceived legitimacy of public officials, highlighting that perceived corruption and legitimacy in government often go hand-in-hand.

Chapter 13 examines motives for joining outlaw motorcycle gangs, based on interviews with former members. The study found that gang members were usually recruited through existing social networks following a lengthy recruitment process, supported by formal mechanisms including sponsorship by existing members and the enforcement of prospect or nominee periods. Motivations for joining outlaw motorcycle gangs included notoriety and profit, and the brotherhood and camaraderie of affiliating with like-minded peers. Often these motivations intersected with feelings of social isolation and disconnection from other family and peer networks.

The final chapter presents the findings from a study that examined the use of video visitation in Australian prisons and its role in maintaining father–child relationships. Video visitation had significant benefits for fathers, children, children’s carers, and corrective services. However, video visits were most beneficial as a complement, not alternative, to contact visits.

This volume provides an insight into the work currently undertaken by the AIC to support the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Over its 51 years of service, the AIC has completed more than 1,900 crime and justice research studies and these are all available on its website (www.aic.gov.au).



Dr Rick Brown
Deputy Director
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1. Towards an understanding of Indigenous arrest

Don Weatherburn, Michael Doyle,
Teagan Weatherall and Joanna Wang

Introduction

We know a great deal about the characteristics that put non-Indigenous people at risk of contact with the criminal justice system (for a recent review, see Ellis, Farrington & Hoskin 2019). There is also a growing body of research on victims of violence in Australian Indigenous communities (see, for example, Buxton-Namisnyk 2022). Research studies on the correlates of Indigenous offending and contact with the criminal justice system, however, are few and far between. This is unfortunate because, while one might expect to see some similarity between the factors associated with non-Indigenous and Indigenous offending, the developmental, social, economic and cultural experiences of those who have been colonised and dispossessed of their land are likely to be very different from those of the colonisers and their descendants (Homel, Lincoln & Herd 1999).

The Indigenous imprisonment rate in Australia is 16 times the non-Indigenous rate of imprisonment. The starting point for any understanding of the high rate of Indigenous contact with the criminal justice system, in Australia or elsewhere, is the original trauma of colonisation and dispossession (Heart et al. 2011; Krieg 2009; Makwana 2019; Menzies 2019). The early stages of dispossession in most colonial settings typically involved a combination of massacre, murder and disease (Hunter & Carmody 2015; Rowley 1972). In Australia, however, the damage did not end there. Dispossession gave way to mass imprisonment (Finnane & McGuire 2001), the forced relocation of whole communities from their traditional lands and onto reserves (Finnane 1997), the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997) and the gradual exclusion of Indigenous Australians from mainstream employment (Anthony 2007). The legacy of these traumatic experiences is a high level of stress among those directly affected by the events just described, and among subsequent generations.

Data from the 2018–19 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019) reveals that, after adjusting for differences in age structure between the two populations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are 3.6 times more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to have reported alcohol and drug related problems; 2.5 times more likely to have cited the stress of not being able to get a job; 1.9 times more likely to have reported the death of a family member or friend; 1.7 times more likely to have reported mental illness; and 1.4 times more likely to have said that in the previous year serious illness had been a stressor for them, their family and/or their friends.

Criminologists have long known that personal stressors greatly increase the risk of involvement in crime, particularly when the source of the stress involves an injustice, is highly distressing and is associated with feelings of powerlessness (Agnew 2001). Being a member of the stolen generations—that is, having been removed from one’s family as a child and placed in an institution or adopted by a non-Aboriginal family—magnified the trauma resulting from colonisation and dispossession. De Maio et al. (2005) found that being a member of the stolen generation was linked with a doubling of the risk of arrest, a 150 percent increase in the overuse of alcohol, a doubling of the risk of experiencing betting and gambling problems, and a 150 percent increase in the risk of contact with the Mental Health Services of Western Australia. These effects were not limited to members of the stolen generation. The children of caregivers who were forcibly removed from their families have also been found to be more likely to experience emotional and behavioural difficulties and to consume alcohol and other drugs at levels twice those of Aboriginal children whose primary caregivers had not been forcibly removed from their families.

It is common for people to respond to stress by self-medicating with alcohol or other drugs (Sinha 2008). The high levels of drug and alcohol use among Indigenous Australians were likely a response to the stress and trauma they suffered and continue to experience. However, this substance use brought its own set of problems. Alcohol consumption increases the risk of violent behaviour among people who are frustrated or angry (Corman & Mocan 2015; Duke et al. 2018; Exum 2006). Psychostimulants such as cocaine and methamphetamine, if used frequently and over a long period, have a similar effect (McKetin et al. 2020). Dependent drug users often resort to income-generating crime (eg robbery, burglary, drug dealing) to fund their drug consumption (Corman & Mocan 2000; Wish & Johnson 1986). In the case of Indigenous Australians, simply being intoxicated is often enough to attract the attention of police, especially if it is accompanied by what police view as offensive language or behaviour, or a failure to comply with police directions.

Young men in every culture are prone to displays of aggression and risk-taking (see, for example, Sitter & Hautala 2016). This increases the likelihood of hostile contact with police, who tend to view young people as a problem to be managed rather than as citizens deserving of respect and support (Richards, Cross & Dwyer 2018). The hostile relationship between Indigenous Australians and the police is partly a reflection of this but is greatly exacerbated by a shared oral history of indiscriminate murder, forced removal, abduction, harassment and police brutality. Much of this harassment and brutality was and is directed at Aboriginal youth (Bonney 1989; Broadhurst 2002; Cunneen 2001; Green 2019; Jochelson 1997; Karskens 2010; Rowley 1972; Sentas & Pandolfini 2017; Weatherburn 2006). The result is an undercurrent of fear and hostility towards police that puts Aboriginal men at heightened risk of arrest for even minor breaches of the law.

Human behaviour is as much a product of an individual’s social environment as it is of their personal characteristics. Children exposed to family violence are more at risk of becoming violent themselves as adults (Herrenkohl, Jung & Lee 2017). Young people whose attachment to parents is broken, weak or absent are more likely to associate with delinquent peers (McGloin & Thomas 2019; Weatherburn & Lind 2001). Constant harassment by police, coupled with high levels of poverty and other stressors, can sometimes spill over into a riot, resulting in high levels of arrest (Weatherburn 2006). Young Indigenous Australians grow up in an environment marked by high rates of contact with police, high levels of domestic violence, widespread drug and alcohol use, low rates of school completion and high rates of unemployment. Exposure to these conditions inevitably fosters a devaluation of or hostility towards non-Aboriginal social norms and laws.

If this were all there was to say about the forces pushing Indigenous Australians into the criminal justice system, one would expect the vast majority to end up arrested. In fact, the majority of Indigenous Australians are neither arrested nor prosecuted (Skrzypiec & Wundersitz 2005; Weatherburn & Ramsey 2018). One of the factors that limits Indigenous Australians' rate of entry into the criminal justice system is that, despite the legacy of colonisation and dispossession, most Indigenous Australians are 'socially embedded'—that is, strongly attached to a network of family and friends and actively involved in community activities. Control theories in criminology have long emphasised the protective effect of having strong social ties to institutions, such as one's family, peer group, school or community groups (Gottfredson 2003).

Employment and income also reduce the likelihood of involvement in crime. In his analysis of the relationship between wages and self-reported involvement in income-generating crime using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Grogger (1998) found that, on average, a 10 percent increase in wages reduces participation in crime by 1.8 percentage points. Similar results have since been obtained by Machin and Meghir (2004). Studies of the relationship between unemployment and crime also highlight the importance of employment in preventing involvement in crime (Altindag 2012; Raphael & Winter-Ebmer 2001; Weatherburn & Schnepel 2016). Although the high rate of Indigenous unemployment is a topic of frequent discussion, around half of the working age Indigenous population is in paid employment. The available evidence suggests that employment for Indigenous people reduces the likelihood of involvement in crime.

Education is another vital protective factor (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell & Horwood 2002). We would expect lower rates of contact with the criminal justice system among those who are better educated if only because it means access to a wider variety of jobs and a better income. Education, however, arguably does more than this. As with income, employment and social embeddedness, education greatly increases the opportunity costs of involvement in crime or conflict with police. Chapman et al. (2002), in a study of trends in burglary in New South Wales, found that school completion rates and employment were both negatively associated with crime even after controlling for a wide range of other important factors. Similar results have been obtained in other more recent studies (eg Hjalmarrsson, Holmlund & Lindquist 2014; Lochner 2020). In 2018–19, around 66 percent of Indigenous Australians aged 20–24 years had completed Year 12 or its equivalent. Improving Year 12 completion rates is another way of reducing Indigenous contact with the criminal justice system.

Police have considerable discretion in how they respond to what they see as a violation of the law. Because a disproportionate number of Indigenous Australians are homeless, suffering from a mental illness or living on the streets, they are more likely to experience police intervention than someone who behaves in a similar manner at home or lives in an area rarely visited by police (McNamara et al. 2021). Indigenous Australians, for example, are over-represented among those arrested for offensive behaviour by a factor of 4.4 in New South Wales, 11.2 in Queensland, 27 in South Australia and 10 in the Northern Territory. This suggests that any adequate explanation for the high rate of Indigenous arrest should make provision for the fact that those who have a permanent residence or who live in an area rarely visited by police are less at risk of arrest than those who are homeless or live in areas regularly patrolled by police.

The current study

Approval to conduct the current study was given by the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee on 29 June 2022 (application no. HC220348).

Data source

The analysis is conducted using data from the 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), a nationally representative stratified multistage national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders designed to collect information on a range of demographic, social, environmental and economic characteristics. Further details concerning the survey can be found in the explanatory notes section of the survey report (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in the study is the probability of having been arrested in the previous five years. This was estimated from the weighted proportion of survey respondents answering, 'yes' to the question: 'In the last five years have you been arrested by police?'

Covariates

Respondents were classified into five age groups: 15–20, 21–30, 31–40, 41–50 and 51+. The NATSISS asks respondents 25 questions dealing with stressors experienced over the preceding 12 months (eg mental illness, overcrowding at home, not being able to get a job, losing a job, being bullied or harassed, being a witness to violence, experiencing violence or violent crime). Preliminary investigation revealed that most of the individual measures of stress were rendered insignificant after controlling for psychological stress (Kessler et al. 2002). The single exception was membership of the stolen generation, which remained significant even in the presence of the Kessler score. We opted, therefore, to use the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale rather than including separate measures for each of the 25 stressors. Responses to the Kessler scale were grouped into two categories: low/moderate (coded 0) and high/very high (coded 1) and the resulting variable named *Kessler group*.

Two stolen generation measures were employed. The first, *Stolen generation (personal)*, measures whether the respondent was a member of the stolen generation. The second, *Stolen generation (relatives)*, measured whether the respondent's relatives were members of the stolen generation.

To measure substance use, we combined two variables measuring, respectively, alcohol and drug use in the previous 12 months. This variable takes the value 1 if the respondent reported having used neither drugs nor alcohol, 2 if the respondent reported alcohol but not drug use, 3 if the respondent reported drug use but not alcohol use, and 4 if the respondent reported both alcohol and drug use. Information on the existence of neighbourhood problems was captured using a variable (labelled *Neighbourhood problems*) that asked respondents whether they were aware of any neighbourhood problems, coded 1 if they said yes and 0 otherwise.

We measured exposure to arrest using two variables. The first (*Permanent home*) is coded 1 if the respondent reports that they have never experienced being without a home and 0 if the respondent reports otherwise. The second (*Lives in a remote area*) captures whether the respondent lives in a remote community and is coded 1 if the response is 'yes' and 0 otherwise. Being socially embedded was measured using two variables. The first captures whether the respondent is married, coded 1 if they are and 0 otherwise. The second (*Number of confidants*) measures the number of friends or family outside the household the respondent feels they can confide in. This variable is coded 0 if the answer is either none or only one or two and 1 if the answer is three or more.

Respondents were grouped into two categories based on their income decile. The first category, coded 0, consists of those whose income at the time of the survey was in the first six deciles of income. The second, coded 1, consists of those whose income at the time of the interview was in the top four deciles of income. The final construct, school completion, was coded 1 if the respondent had completed school and 0 otherwise. Table 1 lists each variable included in the study and its coding.

Table 1: Variables and their coding

Variable name	Coding	Interpretation
Sex ^a	1	Male
	0	Female
Age group	1	15–20 years
	2	21–30 years
	3	31–40 years
	4	41–50 years
	5	51+ years
Stolen generation (personal)	1	Yes
	0	No
Stolen generation (relatives)	1	Yes
	0	No
Kessler group (psychological distress)	1	High/very high
	0	Low/moderate
Drug use in last 12 months	1	Yes
	0	No
Alcohol use in last 12 months	1	Yes
	0	No
Permanent home	1	Yes
	0	No
Lives in a remote area	1	Yes
	0	No
Married	1	Yes
	0	No
Number of confidants (three or more)	1	Yes
	0	No
Income in the top four deciles	1	Yes
	0	No
School completion	1	Yes
	0	No
Arrested in the past five years	1	Yes
	0	No
Imprisoned in the last five years	1	Yes
	0	No

a: The variable 'sex' in the NATSISS only takes on two values: 'male' and 'female'.

Analysis

We begin by providing a frequency table of the variables included in the study. We then report the results of fitting a logistic regression model to the data to determine which variables are independently associated with risk of arrest. To illustrate the strength of the relationship between each variable in the model and risk of arrest, we then computed the marginal effects of each covariate, holding the other variables constant at their mean value. Finally, we plot the predicted probability of arrest as a function of age, substance use and alcohol use. All analyses were conducted on weighted data using Stata.

Results

Sample description

Table 2 provides summary statistics for the variables included in the model. All are well represented, and few variables have missing values. Where data is missing, the proportion of data missing is comparatively small. The level of disadvantage is severe. More than 20 percent of respondents reported experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress, more than 70 percent said they have problems in their neighbourhood, more than 40 percent have at some stage been without a permanent home and only 17 percent have completed school. Around 15 percent reported having been arrested in the preceding five years.

Table 2: Sample characteristics				
Variable	Frequency (n)	Weighted %	Missing (n)	Missing (%)
Arrested in last five years				
No	5,981	85.47		
Yes	1,036	14.53		
Imprisoned in last five years				
No	6,775	96.85		
Yes	237	3.15		
Sex				
Female	6,049	50.97		
Male	5,129	49.03		
Age group				
15–20	906	13.31		
21–30	1,501	15.68		
31–40	1,351	11.45		
41–50	1,267	10.63		
51+	6,153	48.92		
Substance use in last 12 months				
No drug or alcohol use	1,592	22.69		
Alcohol but not drug use	2,964	46.76		
Drug but not alcohol use	287	4.75		
Drug and alcohol use	1,499	25.43		

Table 2: Sample characteristics (cont.)				
Variable	Frequency (n)	Weighted %	Missing (n)	Missing (%)
Kessler group (psychological distress)			67	0.60
Low/moderate	4,622	78.73		
High/very high	2,333	21.27		
Stolen generation (personal)			197	1.76
Yes	729	9.83		
No	6,096	90.17		
Stolen generation (relatives)			197	1.76
Yes	2,894	47.33		
No	3,278	52.67		
Neighbourhood problems			184	1.65
No	1,632	29.15		
Yes	5,206	70.85		
Permanent home				
Yes	2,971	41.28		
No	4,051	58.72		
Lives in a remote area				
No	7,190	79.06		
Yes	3,988	20.94		
Marital status				
Married	3,127	58.17		
Not married	3,895	41.83		
Number of confidants				
Fewer than three	3,652	55.53		
Three or more	3,370	44.47		
School completion				
No	5,391	83.37		
Yes	1,631	16.63		
Income			526	4.71
Decile 6 and below	4,245	64.98		
Decile 7 and above	2,251	35.02		
State or territory				
New South Wales	1,683	31.19		
Victoria	1,197	7.27		
Queensland	1,969	28.68		
Western Australia	1,694	12.74		
South Australia	1,080	5.55		
Tasmania	1,198	3.75		
Northern Territory	1,947	9.91		
Australian Capital Territory	410	0.91		

Bivariate analysis

Table 3 shows the bivariate relationships between each covariate and the risk of arrest.

Table 3: Bivariate correlates of Indigenous arrest			
	Arrested in past five years?		p-value
	No (%)	Yes (%)	
Sex			<0.001
Female	90.06	9.94	
Male	78.78	21.22	
Age group			<0.001
15–20	87.09	12.91	
21–30	79.15	20.85	
31–40	80.09	19.91	
41–50	83.11	16.89	
51+	93.83	6.17	
Substance use in last 12 months			<0.001
No drug or alcohol use	93.08	6.92	
Alcohol but not drug use	88.19	11.81	
Drug but not alcohol use	79.44	20.56	
Alcohol and drug use	71.85	28.15	
Kessler group (psychological distress)			<0.001
Low/moderate	88.07	11.93	
High/very high	79.59	20.41	
Stolen generation (personal)			<0.001
No	86.23	13.77	
Yes	77.64	22.36	
Stolen generation (relatives)			<0.001
No	87.58	12.42	
Yes	82.47	17.53	
Neighbourhood problems			<0.001
No	88.65	11.35	
Yes	84.18	15.82	
Permanent home			<0.001
No	79.36	20.64	
Yes	89.55	10.45	
Lives in a remote area			<0.001
Yes	81.43	18.57	
No	87.36	12.64	

Table 3: Bivariate correlates of Indigenous arrest (cont.)			
	Arrested in past five years?		p-value
	No (%)	Yes (%)	
Marital status			<0.001
Married	83.76	16.24	
Not married	87.07	12.93	
Number of confidants			<0.001
Fewer than three	82.43	17.57	
Three or more	88.28	11.72	
School completion			<0.001
No	83.44	16.56	
Yes	91.17	8.83	
Income			<0.001
Decile 6 and below	82.70	17.30	
Decile 7 and above	89.51	10.49	
State or territory			<0.001
New South Wales	88.44	11.56	
Victoria	86.06	13.94	
Queensland	86.35	13.65	
Western Australia	79.49	20.51	
South Australia	82.57	17.43	
Tasmania	90.09	9.91	
Northern Territory	83.40	16.60	
Australian Capital Territory	88.21	11.79	

All variables are significantly associated with the outcome, so all are included in the multivariate model described below.

Multivariate analysis

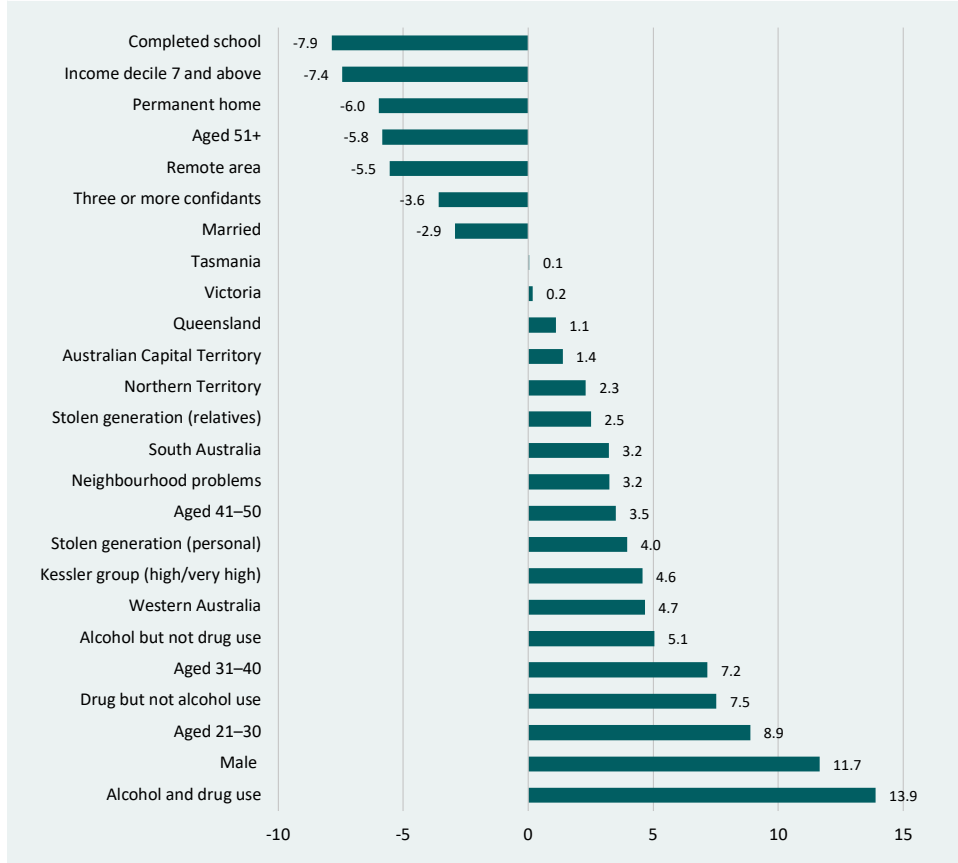
Table 4 shows the results of the logistic regression analysis. The reference categories for the variables in the model are only shown for multi-category variables (ie 15–20 is the reference category for age group; NSW is the reference category for state or territory). In all other cases the reference category is a person without the listed characteristic. For example, the reference category for ‘married’ is an unmarried person. All the covariates are significant, and all have the expected effect. The narrow confidence intervals indicate that the effects are precisely estimated. After adjusting for other variables in the model, the odds of arrest for males are more than three times higher than for females. The odds of arrest peak at age 21–30, before declining with age. By age 51+, the odds of arrest fall below those in the reference age group: 15–20. All have odds ratios greater than one (indicating a higher risk of arrest).

Table 4: Logistic regression model of arrest				
Arrested in last five years	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
Male	3.069	<0.001	2.565	3.672
Age group (vs 15–20)				
21–30	2.149	<0.001	1.581	2.921
31–40	1.893	<0.001	1.375	2.606
41–50	1.403	0.041	1.014	1.941
51+	0.456	<0.001	0.323	0.644
Substance use in last 12 months (vs no alcohol or drug use)				
Alcohol but not drug use	1.813	<0.001	1.392	2.363
Drug but not alcohol use	2.282	<0.001	1.497	3.478
Alcohol and drug use	3.739	<0.001	2.835	4.930
Kessler group (high/very high)	1.529	<0.001	1.276	1.832
Stolen generation (personal)	1.427	0.009	1.093	1.863
Stolen generation (relatives)	1.273	0.016	1.046	1.548
Neighbourhood problems	1.366	0.008	1.086	1.718
Permanent home	0.563	<0.001	0.468	0.677
Lives in a remote area	0.587	<0.001	0.470	0.734
Married	0.755	0.002	0.630	0.905
Three or more confidants	0.708	<0.001	0.590	0.850
Completed school	0.469	<0.001	0.370	0.595
Income in decile 7 and above	0.489	<0.001	0.400	0.599
State or territory (vs New South Wales)				
Victoria	1.167	<0.001	0.696	1.492
Queensland	1.215	<0.001	0.802	1.561
South Australia	1.469	<0.001	0.943	1.977
Western Australia	1.358	<0.001	1.111	2.159
Tasmania	1.076	0.042	0.685	1.475
Northern Territory	1.337	<0.001	0.888	1.775
Australian Capital Territory	1.319	<0.001	0.661	2.001
Constant	0.070	0.000	0.037	0.105

The strongest risk factor is drug and alcohol use. The odds of arrest for those who have used both drugs and alcohol in the last 12 months are more than 3.7 times higher than for someone who has used neither drugs nor alcohol in the previous 12 months. Strong effects can also be seen for psychological distress (odds ratio: 1.6), being a member of the stolen generation (odds ratio: 1.4) and having relatives who are members of the stolen generation (odds ratio: 1.3). The odds of arrest are higher for those who have neighbourhood problems (odds ratio: 1.4) and, somewhat surprisingly, for those who live in any state or territory other than New South Wales. The strongest protective effect is that associated with completing school (odds ratio: 0.5). However, the odds of arrest are also substantially lower for those who have always had a home, those who are in the top four deciles of income and those who live in a remote area.

To provide a more intuitive picture of the main results, we calculate the marginal effects of key factors on the predicted probability of arrest. To calculate the marginal effect of a factor, say sex, we first use the model to estimate the probability of arrest for each person on the assumption that everyone is female (all other covariates being held at their actual values). We then estimate the risk of arrest for each person on the assumption that everyone is male (all other covariates being held at their actual values). This gives us two predicted risks of arrest for each person in our sample. The marginal effect of sex is the difference between the average risk of arrest if everyone in the sample were male and the average risk of arrest if everyone was female (with all other features of the two samples held constant at their actual values).

Figure 1: Marginal effects of all covariates on risk of arrest (percentage points)



It is clear that (apart from age and gender), the four strongest influences on risk of arrest are:

- alcohol and drug use in the previous 12 months (which increases the risk of arrest by 13.9 percentage points);
- drug but not alcohol use over the previous 12 months (which increases the risk of arrest by 7.5 percentage points);
- alcohol but not drug use over the previous 12 months (which increases the risk of arrest by 5.1 percentage points); and
- having a high or very high level of psychological distress (which increases the risk of arrest by 4.6 percentage points).

Turning to the protective factors, compared to the typical respondent, completing school reduces the risk of arrest by 7.9 percentage points. The three other strongly protective factors are:

- having an income in the top four deciles (which reduces the risk of arrest by 7.4 percentage points);
- having a permanent home (which reduces the risk of arrest by 6.0 percentage points); and
- living in a remote area (which reduces the risk by 5.5 percentage points).

These are effects averaged over the full sample. In a logistic regression model, however, the effect of any given factor depends on the value of other factors in the model. Figure 2 shows the marginal effect of substance use on the risk of arrest for respondents in each age group.

This analysis indicates that the four strongest influences on risk of arrest are:

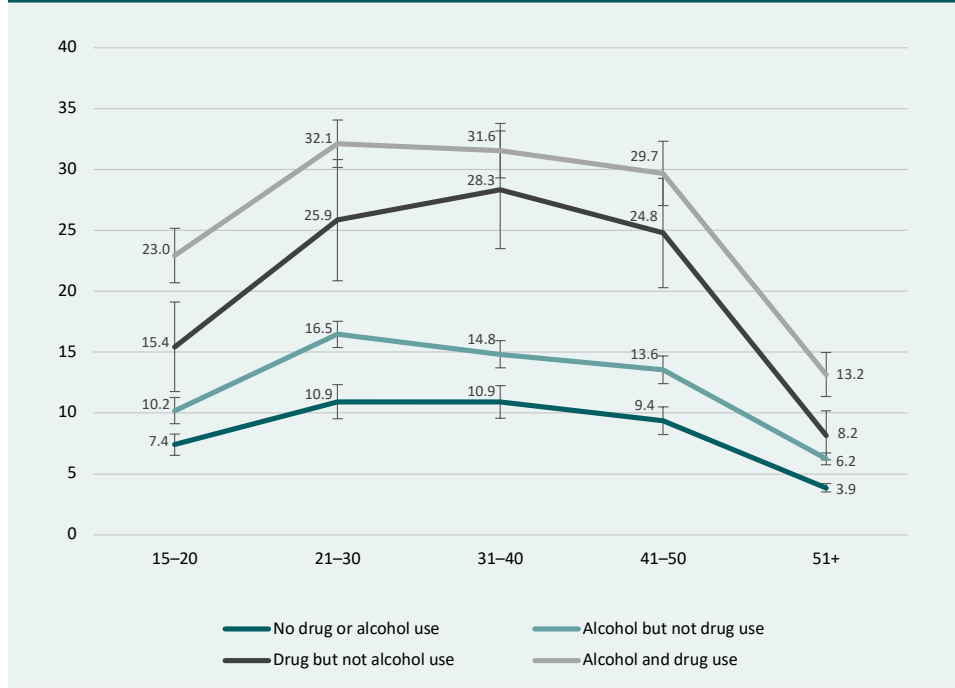
- alcohol and drug use in the previous 12 months (which increases the risk of arrest by 12.2 percentage points);
- drug but not alcohol use over the previous 12 months (which increases the risk of arrest by 8.2 percentage points);
- alcohol but not drug use over the previous 12 months (which increases the risk of arrest by 6.2 percentage points); and
- having a high or very high level of psychological distress (which increases the risk of arrest by 4.6 percentage points).

Turning to the protective factors, compared to the typical respondent, completing school reduces the risk of arrest by 11.2 percentage points. The three other strongly protective factors are:

- having a permanent home (which reduces the risk of arrest by 7.3 percentage points);
- having an income in the top four deciles (which reduces the risk of arrest by 6.5 percentage points); and
- living in a remote area (which reduces the risk by 6.2 percentage points).

Marginal effects show how much a factor increases or reduces a risk but do not provide information on the absolute size of that risk. We use the logistic regression model to calculate the risk of arrest. The vertical bars show the 95 percent confidence intervals around the point estimates.

Figure 2: Predicted risk of arrest by age and substance use (%)



Note: Includes 95% confidence intervals

The bottom curve shows the effect of age on the predicted risk of arrest for someone who has in the past 12 months used neither illicit drugs nor alcohol. There is a slight rise in risk between age 15–20 and 21–30. The risk then remains stable until the ages 41–50 years, then drops sharply for those aged 51 and over. The pattern across age groups for those who have used alcohol but not illicit drugs in the previous 12 months is much the same, but the risk of arrest is higher in every age group by an amount ranging from 5.6 percentage points (at age 21–30) to 2.3 percentage points at age 51 and over. Using illicit drugs but not alcohol produces a marked upward shift in the risk of arrest at all ages. An estimated 15 percent of those aged 15–20 have been arrested in the past five years, rising to 25.9 percent at age 21–30 and peaking at 28.3 percent at age 31–40. The top curve shows the risk of arrest for those who have consumed both illicit drugs and alcohol in the previous 12 months. The risk of arrest rises from 23.0 percent in the age group 15–20, and to 32.1 percent in the age group 21–30. It then remains near this level before declining sharply after age 51.

Membership of the stolen generation and age also interact. Figure 3 shows the predicted probability of arrest as a function of age and membership of the stolen generation.

Figure 3: Predicted risk of arrest by age and membership of the stolen generation (%)



Note: Includes 95% confidence intervals

Being a member of the stolen generation increases the risk of arrest regardless of a respondent’s age. Among those aged 15–20, the risk of arrest is more than twice as high for those who are members of the stolen generation (27.3%) than for those who are not (11.8%). It remains much higher for members of the stolen generation in the later age groups, shrinking only among those aged 51 or over. Even at this age, however, the risk of arrest (11.1%) remains twice as high for those who are members of the stolen generation as for those who are not (5.3%).

Discussion

The findings reported are consistent with our conjecture that the risk of Indigenous arrest is influenced by two opposing sets of factors. On the one side are factors that increase the risk of arrest, including exposure to psychological stress, being a member of the stolen generation (or having a relative who is a member), having used drugs and/or alcohol, and living in a crime-prone neighbourhood. On the other side are protective factors, such as being socially embedded, having a permanent home, living in a remote area, having a higher income and having completed school.

The explanation we have outlined might appear to ignore the influence of many other important factors, such as mental illness, overcrowding at home, not being able to get a job, losing a job, being bullied or harassed, experiencing racism, experiencing or witnessing violence, and being able to get support in a time of crisis. It is important to remember, however, that the influence of these factors is captured by variables that are in the model. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale captures the influence of almost all stressors other than membership of the stolen generation. Participation in sporting, social or community activities captures the influence of being able to find support in a time of crisis (94% of those who said they participated in sporting, social or community activities also said they could get support in a time of crisis from someone outside the household). It also captures willingness to provide social support.

The two most important risk factors in the model are substance use and psychological stress. We saw the magnitude of the effect of substance use in Figure 2. After adjusting for a wide range of other factors, Indigenous Australians who reported using drugs and alcohol were observed to be more than four times more likely to have been arrested than Indigenous Australians who reported not having used drugs or alcohol in the preceding 12 months. We see this effect even more convincingly demonstrated in the results of interventions designed to reduce alcohol and drug use, whether they involve treatment (Darke, Lappin & Farrell 2019), increases in the price of alcohol (Chikritzhs, Stockwell & Pascal 2005) or reductions in alcohol availability (d'Abbs & Togni 2007; Margolis et al. 2011; Nepal et al. 2020). Such interventions provide unmistakable evidence that, when alcohol consumption decreases, violence (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) falls with it.

The remaining factors in the model, though less influential, are nonetheless important. The true effect of being a member of the stolen generation (or having a relative who is a member) is probably larger than it appears, if only because some of its effects are probably captured by other variables, such as substance use and stress. The neighbourhood effect is a reminder that crime prevention is a whole-of-community challenge, not one to be addressed solely through programs focused on individuals. The protective effects of being in a relationship, completing school, earning a decent income and being actively involved in community life, though unsurprising, are nevertheless extremely important. The variables relating to exposure to arrest (having a permanent home, living in a remote area) speak to the vulnerability of those who choose to live or are forced to live in public places.

These observations are, of course, based on a cross-sectional survey and must therefore be regarded as conjectures in need of more thorough testing before they can be accepted. The NATSISS, unfortunately, was not designed to identify the causes of Indigenous arrest. We have no way of sorting out the causal order of events. The variables we have posited as causes and effects are almost certainly far more entangled than we have allowed. These problems, nonetheless, must be weighed against the strong empirical evidence supporting our claim that factors like stress, substance use, delinquent peer influence, employment and income do affect the likelihood of involvement in crime and the risk of contact with the criminal justice system. Until better data emerge, the NATSISS data are the best we have on which to base policies to reduce the rate of Indigenous arrest.

If the results of the current study are accepted at face value, it is clearly imperative to tackle the problem of Indigenous drug and alcohol use, since this would have an immediate effect on rates of Indigenous contact with the criminal justice system. Alcohol use can be reduced by increasing its price or reducing its availability. Unfortunately, there is little public support in Australia for increasing the tax on alcohol (Livingston, Callinan & Wilkinson 2019) or reducing liquor licence trading hours (Weatherburn 2022). Another obvious approach is to increase the availability of Indigenous-led drug and alcohol treatment services. However, as Peter d'Abbs (2011) has pointed out, governments that are willing to change regulations governing the sale of alcohol are often much less energetic when it comes to finding the resources for treatment and rehabilitation centres.

All Australian governments recently committed themselves to reducing Indigenous juvenile imprisonment by 15 percent and adult imprisonment by 30 percent by 2030 (Joint Council on Closing the Gap 2020). Without a better understanding of the factors bringing Indigenous Australians into contact with the criminal justice system, that goal is unlikely to be achieved. This study has made a modest contribution to that understanding using the limited national data available. The evidence base for Indigenous justice policy, however, would be far stronger if Australian governments invested in a national longitudinal survey of child development that included questions about Indigenous contact with police.

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Conflicts of interest

None to declare.

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2. Prevalence of recorded family and domestic violence offending: A birth cohort study

Jason Payne and Anthony Morgan

A significant number of Australians, especially women, will be a victim of domestic and family violence in their lifetime. According to the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2023) Personal Safety Survey, 27 percent of women and 12 percent of men had been a victim of violence by an intimate partner or family member since the age of 15. The consequences of this violence to victim-survivors, such as economic insecurity, poor physical and mental health and homelessness, as well as the effects on children, are substantial (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024). While there is recent evidence of declines in victimisation (ABS 2023) and a longer term downward trend in domestic homicide (Miles & Bricknell 2024), there continues to be serious concern about the ongoing threat to the safety of victim-survivors and the need to increase the visibility and accountability of perpetrators.

Many Australian studies have sought to better understand domestic violence offenders (perpetrators who have had contact with the criminal justice system), offending and reoffending, drawing almost exclusively on administrative data measuring physical violence among mostly adult offenders (see Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019). This research has shown that most offenders are men, that offending is concentrated in lower socio-economic communities, that alcohol use by offenders at the time of the offence is common, that prior offending and reoffending is common, and that domestic violence offences and harm are concentrated in a relatively small group of offenders (Hulme et al. 2019). Outside of criminal justice data, researchers have tended to rely on data from victimisation surveys to identify perpetrator characteristics (Diemer 2015; Morgan & Boxall 2022). There are some exceptions to this, including a recent survey of young people about their self-reported perpetration of adolescent family violence (Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2022).

Despite the large body of research into domestic and family violence, much less information about the prevalence of perpetration is available, especially for Australian samples (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024). There is, as Flood et al. (2022) note, no national data on perpetration. We know that the rate of recorded domestic and family violence offending is 382 offenders per 100,000 persons aged 10 years and over, and that domestic and family violence offenders account for one-quarter of all offenders proceeded against by police (ABS 2024). However, these data cannot be used in isolation to measure the population-level prevalence of violence, which makes it impossible to determine the scale of the problem. Measuring perpetration in population samples is also necessary to identify risk and protective factors that can be targeted for prevention, for which there is considerable international evidence (Clare et al. 2021; Costa et al. 2015; Curtis et al. 2023). While there is extensive evidence on the risk factors for repeat domestic violence, owing largely to risk assessment studies, there is much less Australian data on risk factors for the perpetration of family and domestic violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024).

There are different methods of measuring perpetration, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Self-report studies are viewed as the best method of capturing different types of abuse (ie not just physical abuse) and are not limited to violence reported to authorities; however, the methods used in these surveys are often criticised for focusing on acts of violence and not accurately capturing the effects of that violence on the victim-survivor (Flood et al. 2022). These surveys can provide more detailed information about the victim-survivor, the perpetrator and the abuse (often at significant cost) but can also be hindered by non-response, recall and social desirability biases (Morgan & Boxall 2024). This is particularly relevant to efforts to measure perpetration, although recent experience has shown it is possible, even for highly sensitive topics (see Doherty & Dowling 2024 for a recent study of sexual violence perpetration). A review of more than 100 studies by Desmarais et al. (2012) reported a prevalence of physical intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships of 24.8 percent, but noted most studies were from the United States and that estimates varied widely due to differences in sampling methods and survey design.

Longitudinal surveys are important as well, because they help overcome the pitfalls of cross-sectional data collection. They are not limited to measuring prevalence at a single point in time and can show how violence varies over the life course. They can also identify both distal and proximal factors related to offending and the temporal order of that relationship. Longitudinal surveys of family and domestic violence are growing in number (Verbruggen et al. 2022; Verbruggen, Maxwell & Robinson 2022), but there are challenges associated with maximising representativeness and minimising attrition.

Studies that use administrative data, including criminal justice data, are common because the data are routinely collected and therefore accessible at relatively low cost. Birth cohort studies, which link data from birth registries with criminal justice data to measure the prevalence of recorded offending, are common in criminology (Huizinga, Esbensen & Weiher 1994; Payne, Brown & Broadhurst 2018; Stanger, Achenbach & Verhulst 1997; Weatherburn & Ramsey 2018). Some of these have used an accelerated longitudinal design, joining data from multiple birth cohorts to examine the prevalence of criminal behaviour (see Huizinga, Esbensen & Weiher 1994). Farrington (2015) describes the accelerated longitudinal design as a unique and important strategy for overcoming the problems often present in standard, single-cohort studies, especially where the research aims to explore the longitudinal nature of new or emerging criminological issues for which data are incomplete. To the best of our knowledge, this approach has not been used to measure the prevalence of domestic violence offending and is an important strategy for accommodating the relatively recent use of domestic violence specific offence codes and flags in police records.

In this study we use officially recorded data from New South Wales for three birth cohorts and apply an accelerated longitudinal design to estimate the proportion of people who have been proceeded against for a domestic violence offence by their mid-30s. We argue this is an important first step in building a clearer picture of domestic violence perpetration and an immediate solution to the absence of population-level prevalence estimates.

Method

Data sources

The data for this study are based on offences recorded by the NSW Police Force for individuals who were proceeded against by police and who were born in one of three NSW birth cohorts (1984, 1994 and 2004). Consistent with the approach of Hua, Baker and Poynton (2006) and then Payne, Brown and Broadhurst (2018), the three birth cohorts were identified from the records of the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. These included:

- 83,328 persons born in New South Wales in 1984;
- 89,373 persons born in New South Wales in 1994; and
- 86,235 persons born in New South Wales in 2004.

The names and dates of birth for each person in these cohorts were then cross-matched with the Reoffending Database maintained by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR). Where there was a match, information about the offence was extracted, including the age at arrest and gender of the person involved and the offence types, date, outcome and whether it had been flagged as a domestic violence offence.

For the purpose of this study, we relied on whether an individual had been proceeded against by the NSW Police Force by way of some sort of legal action. Legal actions include referral to court, criminal infringement notices, cautions and other infringement notices. This means there may not have been an official outcome that substantiated the offence (although we also report on proven offences in the *Results* section below). We therefore refer to 'alleged offenders' when describing people who have been proceeded against by police. All unique offence counts are included in this study, meaning that, where an alleged offender was apprehended and charged with multiple counts of the same offence, these were recorded as separate offences.

To identify an offence as involving family or domestic violence, we relied on the flag used by the NSW Police Force to record an offence as a domestic violence offence. This flag was first introduced in 2007. In accordance with the *Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007* (NSW), a domestic violence offence is one in which there is a domestic relationship between the alleged offender and victim. This includes current and former intimate partners, parents, children, siblings and other relatives, other household members, carers and, in the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a member of their extended family or kin. We use the term 'family and domestic violence' to reflect the broad range of domestic relationships captured within this definition.

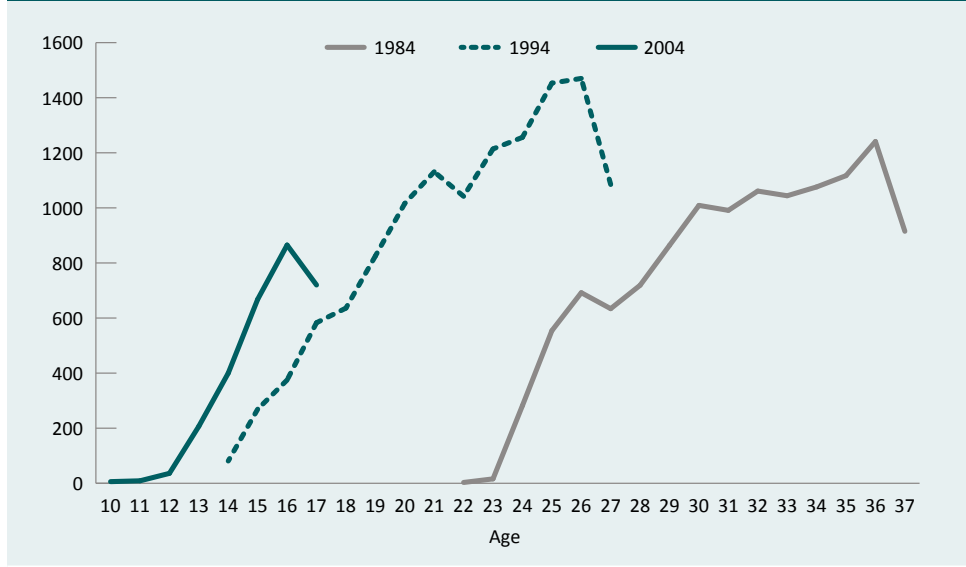
Analytic approach

We began by identifying all of the offences flagged as domestic violence for which individuals in the birth cohorts had been proceeded against and the date on which these offences were committed. From this we were able to calculate the prevalence of recorded offending relative to the population count. In the absence of cohort-specific mortality and migration rates (see *Limitations* section), the population denominators in this study (ie the total number of people born in NSW in each cohort year) were treated as constant.

However, it was not possible to observe any single cohort for the entire period of interest. Our time series for each cohort was constrained by both left and right censoring. Besides the normal constraints associated with the availability of historical criminal history data, left censoring occurred due to the domestic violence flag being implemented by NSW Police Force only in 2007 and, once it was implemented, being applied with varying consistency. This means that a complete history of recorded domestic violence offending from age 10 (the age of criminal responsibility) was not available for all persons in the dataset. Relatedly, the fact that we have data on people born in 1984, 1994 and 2004, and data were extracted in January 2024, means the data were also right censored. There is an age limit up to which we can observe each cohort, and this varied according to when they were born. Overall, because of the limits of historical crime data and the timing of the domestic violence flag’s implementation, we could only estimate the prevalence of offending up to age 37.

This is reflected in Figure 1, which summarises the total number of recorded family and domestic violence offences, by age and birth cohort. For the oldest cohort, born in 1984, data were available on recorded family and domestic violence offences between the ages of 22 and 37 (inclusive). For the 1994 cohort, data were available for ages 14 to 27 and, for the youngest cohort (born in 2004), data were available for ages 10 to 17. This means there was some overlap between the cohorts. However, it is also apparent that the number of recorded offences is much lower for the older cohort in these overlap periods. These coincide with the introduction of the domestic violence flag by NSW Police Force and represent the initial implementation period, when it was likely not being applied consistently.

Figure 1: Annual recorded family and domestic violence offence count for all years, by age and birth cohort (n)

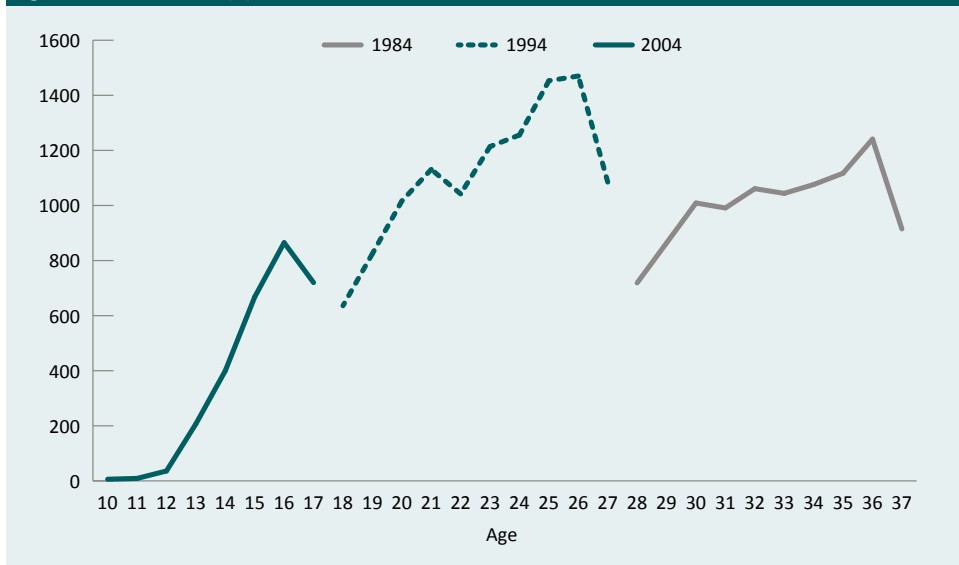


Note: The decrease in offence counts in the last year of the time series for each cohort is largely due to the delay in reporting and in legal action by police for offences that were committed towards the end of the final year of observation. While we could address this issue by interpolating between the series with an adjusted estimate, we chose to limit our analysis to those individuals for whom data were available. This means our estimate of cumulative prevalence may be slightly lower than it would have been if we had observed each cohort for longer.

Source: NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW BOCSAR [computer file]

For this reason, we limited our analysis to the youngest cohort with data for each year between ages 10 and 37. This is illustrated in Figure 2. We extrapolated data from the three cohorts to generate an ‘accelerated’ longitudinal design. This is a well-used methodology that makes it possible to span a much wider age range in less time than would be possible with a single cohort longitudinal design (Farrington 1991; Raudenbush & Chan 1992). This generated offence counts for each year based on the youngest cohort, which for each overlap year has the most reliable data. Offending from age 10 to 17 years was based on the 2004 cohort, offending from age 18 to 27 years was based on the 1994 cohort, and offending from age 28 to 37 years was based on the 1984 cohort. We used this as the basis for estimating the prevalence of recorded family and domestic violence offending, as well as the analysis that follows.

Figure 2: Annual recorded family and domestic violence offence count for study sample, by age and birth cohort (n)



Source: NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW BOCSAR [computer file]

Limitations

The limitations of criminal justice data, particularly when it comes to measuring domestic violence, have been widely acknowledged. Most victim-survivors do not report the most recent incident to police (Morgan, Boxall & Payne 2022; Voce & Boxall 2018). The incidents that are reported to police are usually more serious and involve physical violence (Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016), meaning other forms of abuse are often not reflected in police recorded crime data (Flood et al. 2022). While steps are being taken to rectify this issue, including through the criminalisation of coercive control (Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2023), it means that we are unable to measure the true prevalence of all family and domestic violence. We are careful therefore to refer to our estimates as being the prevalence of *recorded* family and domestic violence.

There are also limitations associated with the use of an accelerated longitudinal design. The most significant is that it may lead to biased estimates due to cohort effects. That is, a factor may impact the cohorts differently, which means we cannot aggregate the data. Importantly, the three cohorts in our study were all observed over the same time period. This means that any changes to family and domestic violence policy, legislation or practice, or social or environmental conditions that influence the likelihood of offending or the propensity of victim-survivors to report to police, would have applied to all three cohorts equally. However, the fact they were born 10 years apart means there may be important influences early in life which differ between the cohorts and which might have shaped their offending trajectory in a way that biases our estimates for the group as a whole. We know, for example, there have been significant shifts in attitudes to family and domestic violence, which might be particularly influential during a person's formative years. We cannot be certain that the offending trajectory of the youngest cohort in the sample will follow that of the older two cohorts. The additional investment in preventing family and domestic violence among school-aged children in recent years may reduce future perpetration of violence, meaning we would overestimate rates of offending later in life. However, there is no empirical evidence of this that we can use to adjust our estimates. Conversely, efforts to raise awareness of family and domestic violence as a crime and to reform criminal justice responses may increase the propensity of young people to report to police in the future, meaning we would underestimate the rate of offending in later years.

Even with the accelerated longitudinal design, we can only measure the prevalence of recorded offending to age 37. Data from the ABS show that, in 2022–23, 38.1 percent of alleged offenders proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence in New South Wales were aged 40 years or over (ABS 2024). Some of these may be first-time offenders; however, we have no way of measuring this using existing data. Our oldest cohort—people born in 1984—were selected on the basis that it is possible to measure their entire criminal history from age 10 (for all offences, only not family and domestic violence offences). It may be possible to expand the sample to older cohorts; however, the reliability of this information and whether it can be used as part of the same accelerated longitudinal design requires further examination.

We also note that, because the domestic violence flag applies to any incident involving an alleged offender and victim where there is a domestic relationship, we are only able to provide an overall estimate of family and domestic violence, rather than being able to disaggregate into sub-categories. Data from BOCSAR suggest that slightly over half of all recorded incidents flagged by the NSW Police Force as domestic violence involve intimate partner violence victims (54%), while family violence accounts for 36 percent of victims (NSW BOCSAR 2024). Though it is likely the pattern will be similar among the birth cohorts in this study, it is also true that the offender–victim relationship will likely vary at different ages.

The accelerated longitudinal design and lack of cohort-specific mortality at the individual level means we could not account for mortality of individuals in the dataset. Similarly, we were unable to account for individuals who may have moved interstate. We know from health data that a significant minority of individuals from one state will have a health record in another jurisdiction (Boyd et al. 2015), and there is evidence of offence mobility among some offending populations (Dowling & Morgan 2021). Accounting for mortality and mobility would reduce the denominator used to estimate offending rates, meaning the age-specific rates of offending presented in this chapter are likely to be conservative.

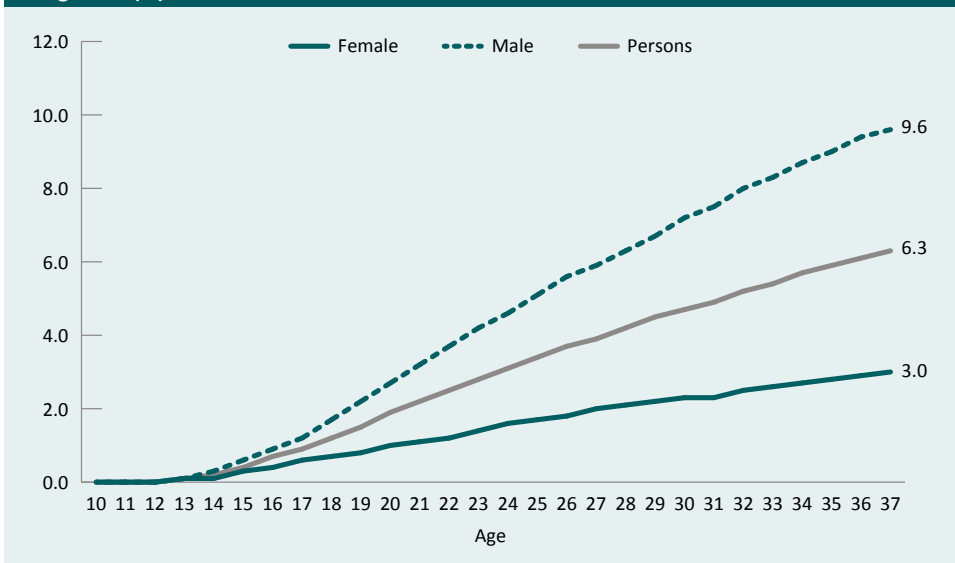
Results

Prevalence of recorded offending

The cumulative prevalence of recorded offending—the proportion of persons proceeded against for a family or domestic violence offence every year until age 37—is presented in Figure 3. This shows that, by age 18, 1.2 percent of persons born in New South Wales were proceeded against for at least one family and domestic violence offence. By age 25, this increased to 3.4 percent. By age 37—the end of our time series—6.3 percent of all persons had been proceeded against for at least one family and domestic violence offence.

Males were more likely to have been proceeded against for a family or domestic violence offence than females at every age. By age 18, 1.7 percent of males born in New South Wales had been proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence, compared with 0.7 percent of females. The gap widened by age 25 (5.1% vs 1.7%) and, by age 37, 9.6 percent of males born in New South Wales had been proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence. This is equivalent to around one in 10 men and more than three times the rate for females. One in 33 females born in New South Wales (3.0%) had been proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence by age 37.

Figure 3: Cumulative prevalence of recorded family and domestic violence offending, by age and gender (%)



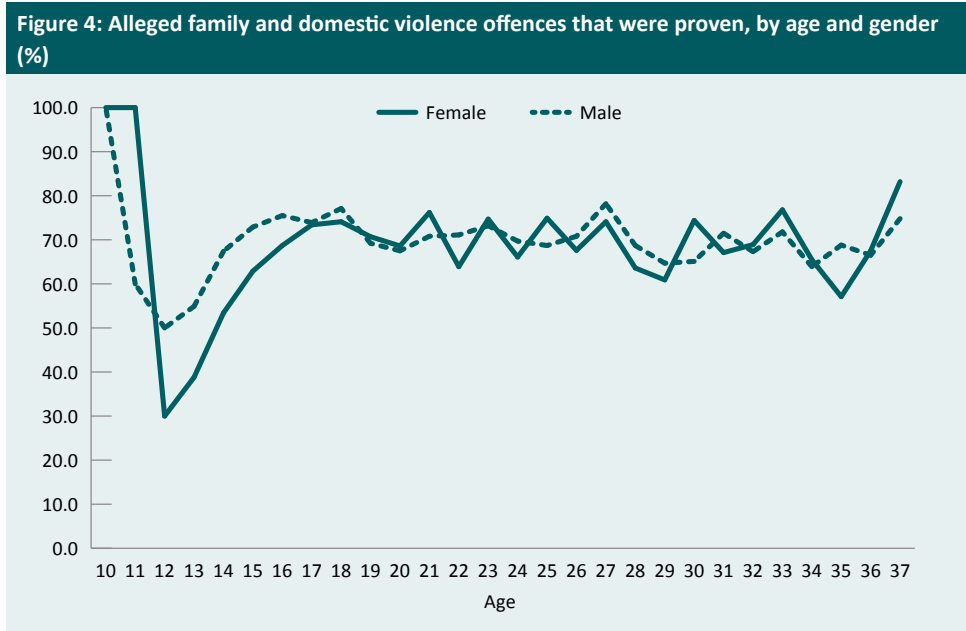
Note: Data are extrapolated from three birth cohorts as follows: 1984 (28–37 years), 1994 (18–27 years) and 2004 (10–17 years)

Source: NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW BOC SAR [computer file]

Proven offences

In this study we used police proceedings as our principal measure of whether a person had a recorded history of family and domestic violence. We did this because we know there is attrition in the criminal justice system for family and domestic violence offences, which impacts some victim-survivors and offence types more than others (McPhee et al. 2022). Nevertheless, we also analysed data on court outcomes to determine whether the offences were proven. Proven offences are those for which there was an official outcome that substantiated the offence. This usually involves the recording of a formal conviction. Importantly, an alleged offender may have multiple offences, some of which were proven and some of which were not (for a range of reasons).

Results are presented in Figure 4. This shows there was considerable fluctuation before age 18, due in large part to the small number of offences but also the different criminal justice response to young offenders. From age 18, the rate at which offences resulted in a proven outcome remained relatively stable, with an average of 69.5 percent of all offences resulting in a proven outcome. This was relatively similar for both males and females born in New South Wales.

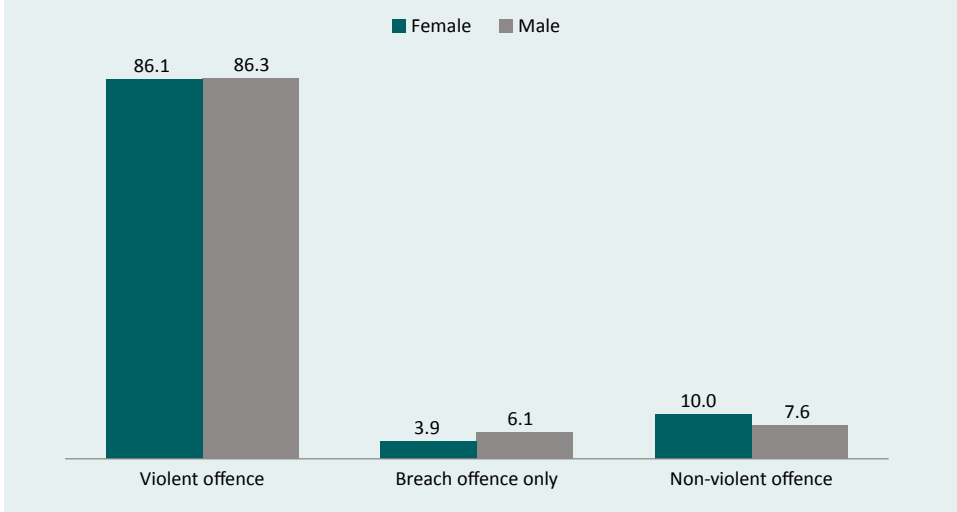


Source: NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW BOCSAR [computer file]

Offence types

We categorised all offences that were flagged as family and domestic violence using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ABS 2011) and then identified those offences that involved some form of physical violence (Divisions 1 to 5). We then identified breach offences and non-violent offences (ie anything that was not a physically violent or breach offence, such as property damage) and categorised individuals according to whether they had violent offences, breach offences (but no violent offences) or other non-violent offences (no physically violent or breach offences). The results are presented in Figure 5. Most people born in New South Wales who were proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence had at least one physically violent offence (86.3%). This was true for both males (86.3%) and females (86.1%). Relatively few males (6.1%) and females (3.9%) had been proceeded against for a breach offence without also having an offence involving physical violence (5.5% of all people proceeded against).

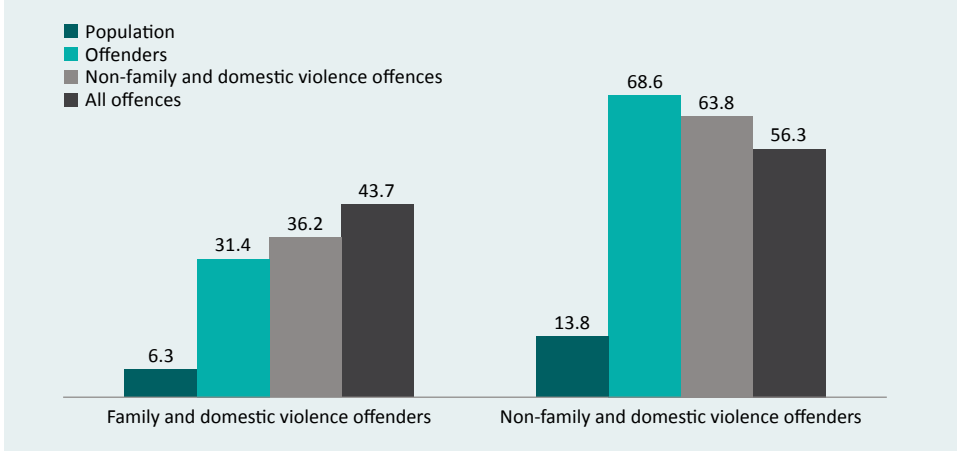
Figure 5: Persons proceeded against by police for a family and domestic violence offence, by gender and offence type (%)



Source: NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW BOCSAR [computer file]

As well as analysing the types of family and domestic violence offences, we also analysed non-family and domestic violence offending. We did not limit this analysis to individuals proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence. Instead, we measured the extent to which alleged family and domestic violence offenders were also responsible for non-family and domestic violence offences recorded by police and compared this with alleged offenders proceeded against for non-family and domestic violence offences recorded by police (Figure 6). We found that, despite accounting for just 6.3 percent of individuals born in New South Wales, and only 31.4 percent of individuals proceeded against for any type of offence, people who had a recorded history of family and domestic violence were responsible for nearly half of all domestic and non-domestic offences (43.7%) by people born in the same year.

Figure 6: Alleged non-family and domestic violence offences, by whether individuals were proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence (%)

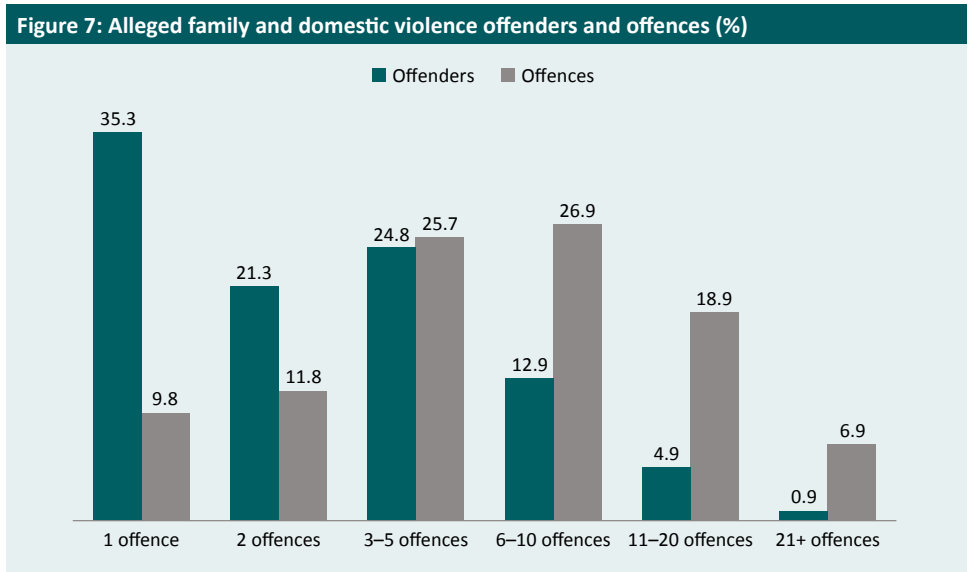


Source: NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW BOCSAR [computer file]

Offence concentration

Research has shown that family and domestic violence offending, like other offence types, is heavily concentrated among small groups of offenders and victim-survivors (Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019). We measured the extent to which recorded family and domestic violence offences in New South Wales were concentrated among people who had been proceeded against for at least one offence (Figure 7). Importantly, the accelerated longitudinal design will produce modest underestimates of reoffending and offending concentration because data are not available for those aged over 37. Any measure of concentration is therefore probably on the lower end of the true reoffending rate.

Nevertheless, our results show that around one-third of people proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence had only one offence. Nearly one in five (18.7%) had six or more offences and they were responsible for 52.7 percent of all offences by people born in New South Wales in the same year. Females were more likely than males to have been proceeded against for one family and domestic violence offence (45.8% vs 32.0%). Females with six or more offences (10.9%) were responsible for 39.6 percent of all recorded family and domestic violence offences involving a female born in New South Wales. Males with six or more offences (21.1%) were responsible for 55.7 percent of all recorded family and domestic violence offences involving a male born in New South Wales and 45.4 percent of all recorded family and domestic violence offences by people born in New South Wales.



Source: NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW BOCSAR [computer file]

Because this is a birth cohort study, we can extrapolate the findings to the entire population. The results suggest that 1.2 percent of people born in New South Wales were responsible for over half of all recorded family and domestic violence offences by people born in the same year (52.7%). Further, because they were responsible for many more offences than females, 2.0 percent of males born in New South Wales were responsible for 45.4 percent of all recorded family and domestic violence offences by people born in the same year.

Discussion

In this study we used officially recorded data from New South Wales for three birth cohorts to estimate the proportion of people who had been proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence by their mid-30s. We estimate that 6.3 of people born in the same year will have been proceeded against by police for a family and domestic violence offence by age 37. This is equivalent to around one in 15 people born in New South Wales being subject to legal action for family and domestic violence. Most these offences were substantiated.

The prevalence of recorded offending was much higher for males than for females, with nearly one in 10 males and one in 33 females born in New South Wales proceeded against by police by age 37. This is consistent with the wider body of evidence from police data sources (ABS 2024; Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019). While survey data tend to find gender symmetry in self-reported perpetration, especially physical abuse (Desmarais et al. 2012), official data sources reflect the difference in the severity of physical violence involving male and female offenders (since more serious violence is more likely to be reported; see Voce & Boxall 2018). We know that there are important qualitative differences in the drivers and severity of offending by female and male perpetrators which are not reflected in these findings (Boxall, Dowling & Morgan 2020).

The vast majority of perpetrators had at least one violent offence, meaning that the prevalence of recorded violence cannot be explained by the use of protection orders (known as apprehended domestic violence orders in New South Wales) and associated breaches, which occur in a minority of cases (see Poynton et al. 2016). Despite concerns about the potential net-widening effect of protection orders, and the role that technical breaches might play in increasing contact with the criminal justice system (Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018), the vast majority of individuals proceeded against by police had at least one non-breach offence.

We also found that family and domestic violence offending, like other offence types, was heavily concentrated among a relatively small group of alleged offenders. Less than one in five people who were proceeded against by the NSW Police Force for a family and domestic violence offence—equivalent to a little over one percent of people born in New South Wales—were responsible for more than half of all recorded family and domestic violence offences recorded by the cohort. Most of these offences involved a male offender—2.0 percent of men born in New South Wales accounted for 45.4 percent of all family and domestic violence offences. These individuals should be prioritised for intervention. Significant work has been invested in developing methods for identifying those people at risk of offending and repeat offending (Morgan et al. 2020), and these results emphasise the importance of this approach and of continuing to refine these risk assessment methods.

Further, we estimated that individuals who were proceeded against for a family and domestic violence offence accounted for almost half of all offences by people in the cohort. We know that domestic violence offenders tend to be generalist offenders (Dowling, Morgan & Boxall 2021; Weatherburn & Rahman 2018) and that many of the risk factors for domestic violence offending are also risk factors for violent and other offending more generally (Costa et al. 2015). There is a strong argument for identifying and targeting those people who commit domestic violence, especially early in their offending trajectory, not only to reduce violence against intimate partners and family members but to prevent crime more generally.

We note the limitations of relying on police recorded crime data to measure the prevalence of offending. The actual rate of offending—especially for non-physical violence—is likely to be much higher than we have measured in this study. We know the majority of victims do not report the most recent incident to police (Morgan, Boxall & Payne 2022), especially where it involves a current partner (ABS 2017), but this varies according to offender, victim and incident characteristics (Voce & Boxall 2018). This is true for violence between intimate partners as well as other forms of family violence, such as reporting by adult victims of adolescent family violence (Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2022). Police will not proceed against an offender for all incidents reported to them and perceptions of the efficacy of the police response can discourage subsequent help-seeking (Douglas 2019; Segrave, Wilson & Fitz-Gibbon 2018). Further, what we have measured in this study mostly relates to physical forms of domestic violence. State and territory governments are increasingly moving towards criminalising coercive control on the basis that these behaviours are frequently overlooked in the criminal justice system (Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2023). What this means is that the prevalence of domestic violence offending in the general population, especially non-physical forms of violence, is likely to be much higher than we estimate in this study. This study nevertheless offers an initial insight into the problem that could be supplemented by well-designed perpetrator surveys, which would better capture under-reported forms of violence.

Measuring the population-level prevalence of perpetration—whether using administrative or self-report data—is an important step towards building a clearer picture of who perpetrates domestic and family violence and why. Further research could expand on this work by linking other administrative data sources relating to child protection, education, health and employment to measure factors related to the onset and persistence of domestic and family violence. This has been done extensively for other crime types using Australian data (eg Ogilvie & Kisely 2022). It would add to the international evidence base—and provide data specific to the Australian context—on risk and protective factors for domestic violence. While there is likely to be significant benefit to a prospective longitudinal survey to measure self-reported violence, linking administrative sources will generate important insights in the shorter term.

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3. How police body-worn cameras can facilitate misidentification in domestic and family violence responses

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Introduction

Police body-worn camera (BWC) technologies—a video recording device attached to an officer’s vest, cap or sunglasses (Axon 2017)—have been widely adopted internationally (Iliadis et al. 2022; Miranda 2021; Vakhitova et al. 2022), and increasingly so in domestic and family violence (DFV) policing contexts. In Australia, BWCs were variously introduced in Australian jurisdictions from 2015, including in Queensland (Queensland Police Service 2015). In New South Wales, BWCs were introduced across some police commands in 2015 to facilitate the admissibility of pre-recorded evidence (as evidence-in-chief, in whole or in part; Procopis 2018). Prior to this, however, New South Wales was already using hand-held devices, also known as ‘mobipols’, to take digitally recorded evidence-in-chief in DFV incidents (see Simpson 2021). Following the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016), Victoria piloted BWCs in DFV cases. Policy and practice shifts led to the uptake of BWCs in other Australian states, including Western Australia (trialled in 2016 for six months and deployed to all frontline officers by June 2019; see Clare et al. 2021); the Northern Territory (widely disseminated in 2017 following 2016 pilots); Tasmania (trialled in 2018 and expanded in 2019; see Tasmania Police 2018); South Australia (commenced implementation in 2016 and completed rollout by 2017); and the Australian Capital Territory (in 2022).

To date, research has identified mixed results on the utility, benefits and risks of BWC deployment in DFV cases. Some research with police participants has found that BWCs are generally effective in enhancing frontline responses, including for victim-survivors (Katz et al. 2014; Lum et al. 2020; McCulloch et al. 2020; Morrow, Katz & Choate 2016; Owens, Mann & Mckenna 2014). Other research has highlighted that, given the incident-based and visual focus of the medium, there is a risk that the effects of violence (such as trauma) may be misinterpreted and there is the potential for misidentification of the primary perpetrator to occur (Harris 2020; Iliadis et al. 2022; Vakhitova et al. 2022). The impacts of misidentification may result in criminalisation of victim-survivors for other offences, removal of their children or convictions for perjury if there is deviation from recorded footage in court statements (Iliadis et al. 2023). Despite the potential of BWC technology to improve frontline responses to DFV, Australian research on BWC use in DFV contexts or DFV-focused initiatives is scant, and victim-survivors have largely been overlooked in research to date. Responding to this knowledge gap, this chapter draws on a survey of 119 victim-survivors to provide a deeper understanding of whether and how the presence of BWCs affects victim-survivors’ perceptions of and experiences with police in frontline responses.

Background

'Misidentification' refers to a victim-survivor being falsely identified as a primary aggressor (perpetrator) by police (Reeves 2021). In the United States, reviews have considered how pro-arrest, mandatory arrest and dual arrest policies and 'pro-prosecution' cultures may contribute to or facilitate misidentification (Goodmark 2021: 18; Larance & Miller 2017). In Australia, research has investigated how the risk of misidentification is heightened for some cohorts, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (Nancarrow, Thomas & Ringland 2020), and found that 'poor' police practices, and limited understandings of DFV, are contributing factors in misidentification processes (Nancarrow, Thomas & Ringland 2020; Reeves 2021).

Research further suggests that, beyond misidentification, victim-survivors can also be disadvantaged when they do not behave as expected by police, resulting in them being viewed as less credible (Ask 2010). Here, it is key to emphasise that trauma (both neurological and psychological) may impact the expression and regulation of emotion (and dissociation), concentration, recall and memory, reasoning and communication (Harris 2020). Trauma can present as reactions that result from sympathetic hyperarousal and parasympathetic hypoarousal states (Corrigan, Fisher & Nutt 2011). Hyperarousal can produce typical fear responses, such as crying, shaking and anger, whereas hypoarousal can result in numbed and 'shut down' responses (Corrigan, Fisher & Nutt 2011). These are all responses that could be displayed by victim-survivors when encountering police during a DFV incident.

Research shows that trauma is under-detected and not well understood by state agents (Franklin et al. 2020; Salter et al. 2020) and that police officers may judge such responses as disproportionate to DFV victimisation, with women more likely to be believed when they show what are perceived as 'proportional' signs of despair and sadness (Bollingmo et al. 2008). Deviations from 'expected' responses are said to both lower a victim-survivor's credibility (Rose, Nadler & Clark 2006) and result in their misidentification (Harris 2020).

Misidentification can likewise result from state agents misreading women's actions, including their reaction to violence, such as violent resistance (Hester 2012; Johnson 2010; O'Dell 2007). Women might not classify their actions as self-defence to officers at the time (Harris 2020; Larance & Miller 2017), and research has found that perpetrators can wound themselves in an effort to portray women as violent, or as having initiated the violence (Dichter 2013; Miller 2005). Central to recognise, too, is perpetrators' image management. This includes their ability to excuse, deny and justify their actions, and manipulate officers into thinking that they are the victim or the woman is acting 'irrationally' (Bancroft 2002; Ferguson 2021). In these instances, women have expressed concern about how they are perceived in BWC footage (Harris 2020).

Conceptual framework

This project was underpinned by feminist critiques of police and legal responses to DFV. Feminist theories acknowledge how the law and state agents have contributed to the subordination of women who allege violence. These perspectives challenge assumptions about women, gender and DFV perpetration and redefine the law to empower women's autonomy, agency and control (Carmody & Carrington 2000). Conceptualising this project from a feminist perspective is critical because research consistently shows that dominant representations of DFV are characterised by empirically false narratives about what violence against women 'looks' like and the contexts in which it manifests (Harris 2020). These narratives, which mostly centre on acts of physical violence, can dilute victim-survivors' experiences of other harms (Harris & Woodlock 2022). State responses to DFV have long been criticised for undermining victim-survivors' credibility and discouraging them from help-seeking and responding to DFV (Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016). A feminist-informed framework was therefore vital in this study.

Methodology

This chapter presents the findings from a larger project that examined how DFV victim-survivors perceive and experience BWC technology and whether BWCs can reduce the negative impacts associated with state responses to DFV (Iliadis et al. 2024). The project received ethical approval from Deakin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (number: 2019-297). A mixed-method research design was used. Phase one involved an anonymous online national survey of 119 victim-survivors. Phase two involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 14 victim-survivors. In this chapter, we present the survey findings focused on the misidentification of primary aggressors.

Data collection

Participants were recruited with assistance from the Women's Services Network and Women's Legal Services Queensland, who disseminated the survey to victim-survivor members via internal agency news bulletins and social media. We do not know how many victim-survivors were invited to complete the survey because the victim support sector facilitated survey recruitment via their networks of victim-survivor advocates. Because the survey was disseminated via their social media networks as well, it is impossible to determine how many victim-survivors would have been exposed to the survey and/or received a personal invitation to participate.

A total of 119 participants started the survey, of which 108 answered the survey completely. Of those who did not finish the survey, the rate of completion ranged from 73 percent to 90 percent. The data collection took place between 18 June 2021 and 22 February 2022. Participants were informed that their participation was anonymous and that they could withdraw from the survey at any time without providing a reason. The survey was pilot tested by a DFV agency and modified based on its feedback.

The online survey instrument was designed using Qualtrics and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Informed by a mixed-method research design, it featured both closed- and open-ended questions. While some questions asked victim-survivors to reflect on their experiences with BWCs, the survey also included perception-based questions, so that victim-survivors who had not experienced BWCs were also eligible to participate. Responses were analysed against participants' sociodemographic characteristics, including age, gender, state or territory of residence, and language spoken at home. Pseudonyms were applied to open-ended responses, such as 'P001' for 'participant number 1'.

Analysis

In this study we sought to examine how victim-survivors perceive and experience BWC technology. To this end, statistical and qualitative analyses were undertaken. First, we conducted an exploratory data analysis, including univariate statistics for each variable of interest, and an analysis of bivariate relationships between the variables. The quantitative analyses were undertaken using R for Windows, version 4.2.1 (R Core Team 2021; a language and environment for statistical computing), and R Studio, version 22.07.1 + 554.pro3 (RStudio Team 2020). Descriptive statistics were calculated using Base R; the plots were produced using the packages *tidyr*, *plyr*, *ggplot2* and *tidyquant*.

A thematic content analysis was then applied to the open-ended responses. Microsoft Excel was used to code these responses, first descriptively, then interpretatively, before overarching themes were identified (King, Horrocks & Brooks 2019). Double-coding was used to improve the validity of the findings (see Iliadis et al. 2024 for methodology and analysis details).

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in light of some limitations. Firstly, the survey distribution was facilitated by an organisation located in Queensland (Women’s Legal Services) and the Women’s Services Network, Australia’s peak body for specialist women’s domestic and family violence services. While other organisations were invited to offer recruitment assistance, these two agreed to help. However, this resulted in survey sample bias because respondents living in Queensland were over-represented. Additionally, the study solely relied on an online survey, rendering it a non-representative sample.

Results

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the survey sample analysed in this study.

Variable	<i>N</i>	%
Age (μ , <i>SD</i>)	42	10.3
Gender		
Woman (female)	109	92.0
Man (male)	7	5.9
Non-binary	1	0.8
Other	2	1.7
Residence		
Qld	65	54.6
NSW	19	16.0
Vic	18	15.1
Tas	7	5.9
ACT	3	2.5
WA	3	2.5
SA	3	2.5
NT	1	0.8
Primary ancestry		
Australian	50	42.0
English	40	33.6
German	4	3.4
Indian	3	2.5
Indigenous Australian	3	2.5
Language spoken at home		
English	106	89.1
Spanish	4	3.3
Other	9	7.6

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Participants averaged 42 years of age (ranging from 21 to 69 years). Those identifying as women accounted for nearly 92 percent of the total sample ($n=109$). Only seven participants identified as men (5.9%) and one (0.8%) as non-binary. Two participants (1.7%) described their gender identity as 'gender-queer' and 'transgender woman', respectively. Most participants resided in Queensland ($n=65$, 54.6%), New South Wales ($n=19$, 16.0%), Victoria ($n=18$, 15.1%) and Tasmania ($n=7$, 5.9%). There were fewer participants living in the ACT ($n=3$, 2.5%), Western Australia ($n=3$, 2.5%), South Australia ($n=3$, 2.5%) and the Northern Territory ($n=1$, 0.8%).

Participants mostly identified their primary ancestry as Australian ($n=50$, 42%) or English ($n=40$, 33.6%), followed by German ($n=4$, 3.4%), Indian ($n=3$, 2.5%) and Indigenous Australian ($n=3$, 2.5%). Two participants (1.7%) identified as each of Chinese, Irish, Scottish, Dutch and Spanish. One participant (0.8%) identified as each of Filipino, Greek, Polish, Russian, Guinean, Hispanic and Swedish. The language most commonly spoken at home was English ($n=106$, 89%), followed by Spanish ($n=4$, 3.3%). Other languages spoken included Hindi, Swedish, Mandingo, Odia, Russian, Polish, German and Tagalog.

Experiences with police body-worn cameras

Thirty-seven (31%) participants had encountered BWCs in a DFV call-out, 19 (15%) reported not having experienced BWCs to the best of their knowledge and five (4%) indicated that they were not sure if they had encountered BWCs. Of those who had encountered a BWC, 13 had only one experience (35%), seven had two experiences (19%) and the rest had three or more encounters ($n=17$, 46%). This suggests that almost one-third of our sample ($n=37$, 31%) had encountered BWCs on one or more occasions.

Participants who had firsthand experience with BWCs mostly felt that the technology was beneficial, with an average score of 5.21 ($SD=2.21$) on a 7-point Likert scale (1='strongly disagree', 4='neither agree nor disagree', 7='strongly agree'). On a 7-point Likert scale using the same measurement as above, participants involved in a DFV incident that was not recorded also generally agreed that it would have been beneficial to have BWCs present, with an average score of 5.27 ($SD=1.54$). The standardised mean difference between the scores of those with and without firsthand experience was not statistically significant.

Only three participants (8.1%) said that police explicitly asked for their permission to record the incident (1 Qld, 2 NSW), while nine (24.3%) stated that they did not (all Qld). A further 40 percent ($n=15$) reported that the police did not ask for their permission, and instead notified them that the scene was being recorded (1 ACT, 1 SA, 1 Vic, 6 NSW, 6 Qld). The rest did not know or could not remember ($n=10$, 27%).

The impacts of BWCs

On average, participants were supportive of the use of BWCs in response to DFV, with an average score of 5.86 ($SD=1.51$) on a 7-point Likert scale (1='extremely unlikely', 4='neither likely nor unlikely', 7='extremely likely'). However, while generally supportive of their use, just over 32 percent ($n=38$) raised concerns about BWC applications in DFV incidents.

To gain insight into the potential consequences of BWC use, participants were asked about the likelihood that BWCs would result in victim-survivors being identified as abusers. Participants were somewhat concerned about this possibility, with a median score of 5.29 ($SD=1.95$) on the same 7-point Likert scale as above.

Misidentification of the primary aggressor

Our thematic analysis of 26 (21.8%) open-ended responses provided insight into how and why victim-survivors perceive that BWCs could lead to misidentification of the primary aggressor. Four key themes arose, which we discuss below.

'Ideal victim' constructions

Participants expressed concern about how they would be perceived and responded to as a result of the BWC footage. As one participant noted, 'Victims are expected to be calm and rational during an incident or it may result in the footage being used against victims' (P008). Another shared that this had happened in their case:

It [the BWC footage] was used against me as I didn't say the right words such as 'I need help' or 'I am fearful'. Despite calling the police myself under extreme stress, I was unable to say these words to their liking, giving them the opportunity to turn the events on me. (P057)

Another participant similarly described being 'hysterical and misunderstood' in the BWC footage when her perpetrator made it look like she was responsible for initiating the abuse upon police arrival (P005).

Use of force (violent resistance and self-defence)

One participant described how they were 'painted as a neurotic female, [who was] paranoid [and] overreacting', and expressed concern that, as a result, the footage 'could be used inappropriately out of context' (P012). This fear was realised by several other participants, who stated:

The officer didn't know what she was doing and then proceeded to record me and tell me that I was in the wrong, that she had evidence and my reaction was being recorded ... [which I thought was] disgusting. (P106)

Not all domestic violence is visible and the victim can be mistaken as the abuser in these moments as they are triggered and acting out of survival responses. Then used as evidence, it does not show emotional and verbal abuse, the control and manipulation and coercion. (P069)

Perpetrator image management

Some participants cautioned that perpetrators can seek to manage their image and deny, minimise, excuse or justify their behaviours (see Bancroft 2002), which can skew police impressions and subsequent interpretations of BWC footage:

The abuser often puts on a show for cameras. They could be nice as pie and make it seem like it was the person who was abused that was at fault. It could also make the abuser more angry that the police have been involved and make it more dangerous for their victim. (P022)

Perp[etrators] are clever ... The perp[etrator] turns police against you and they [the police] don't believe you. The footage only damaged my case, as the assault by [the perpetrator] was done before they got there ... so only my reaction [was] recorded. [The footage was] useless and detrimental to me. (P005)

As a victim, I understand that the high level of stress often makes the victim look like the perpetrator. While the real perpetrator can turn off their distress and act cool and calm and continue to point the blame at the victim. (P081)

Another participant identified perpetrator strategies in relation to image management and manipulation specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

... the victim could be wrongful[ly] accused; that has happened in Indigenous communities in [the] Northern Territory; the coercion, control and manipulation isn't seen, just the person triggered melting down. Predators can use this as a control tool. (P069)

In one example, a participant noted some benefits of BWCs in instances where perpetrators deflect police attention on them and frame the victim-survivor as the primary aggressor:

I was strangled by my ex-partner ... and called the police for help. He lied to the police and claimed I stabbed him with a pair of scissors, which I did not. Because he had a 'wound' and stitches in his hand (which I believe were self-inflicted), the police arrested and charged *me* [emphasis added] for assault occasioning grievous bodily harm ... The video from the body camera they took at my home ... actually came in handy because when they questioned him ... I had footage of the constable putting words into his [the ex-partner's] mouth, which I later questioned in court. (P066)

In this example, the victim-survivor noted the benefits of the footage, insofar as it allowed their victimisation experience to be validated, and avoided their criminalisation as the aggressor. However, this was not the experience or perception of all participants:

My abuser could swing wildly between meek and accommodating to aggressive and violent. I'm sure a camera might capture a tiny misleading snapshot of how he behaves. What happens if the camera records him ... saying something as if he's the victim—what chance will I ever have of convincing anyone else that he's lying when there's footage? (P078)

Police knowledge and training

Participants noted that BWC footage can be 'a good tool but only part of the toolbox' (P098) for strengthening evidential cases and risk assessment processes. However, they also observed that the utility of BWCs is reliant on police training, as one participant explained:

I think it [BWC footage] can be beneficial as it provides concrete proof of what the perpetrator and victim have said and can be used in evidence. Often the perpetrator will later downplay the scenario but the recording is proof for the victim. However, unless the officers present are trained in DV [domestic violence], behaviours displayed by the victim can be misconstrued and used against them. (P086)

Another claimed:

My concerns are in relation to how police understand and interpret the evidence captured on BWCs which can misidentify the primary perpetrator or collude with the primary perpetrator. Especially in the context of intersectional issues, such as the presence of alcohol and other substances; the unwillingness and/or fear of the victim to be seen to invoke the police. There is still a need to gather evidence, especially the history of DFV, to assess and manage risk. (P014)

One participant recounted their experiences of being 'scared' when police attended a DFV call-out, while their husband was 'calm' (P095). This participant stated that they were worried about 'how the reality of the situation would be captured on a camera' and interpreted by 'untrained police' (P095). Another participant cautioned that 'police can sometimes not see injuries or recognise trauma responses or indicators of strangulation at incidents' (P117).

The training and understanding of the police who are at the call-out was also reflected on by another participant:

The skill level of police and the DFV sector is important, as [are] general community attitudes and beliefs about DFV. BWCs will not compensate for an unskilled workforce or community and police bias. A BWC ... tends to capture the 'after' and victim's responses, which can be misunderstood by law enforcement. (P014)

In a similar vein, another participant observed:

BWCs are only as good as the officers wearing them. Training needs to occur and officers and police districts need to be open to reviewing decisions and changing them in line with coercive control patterns, and who is most in need of protection. (P116)

Discussion

The victim-survivor participants in this study identified some benefits of BWCs (see also Iliadis et al. 2024). For instance, some described how the BWC footage could document their abuse and provide tangible evidence of the incident, or part of it, to the police. This could therefore lead to recognition and validation of their victimisation. Consequently, some victim-survivors believed that BWCs could be a useful addition to operational police practice, particularly in informing regulation and risk-assessment processes, because the footage was said to strengthen evidence collection of DFV at call-outs. However, participants stated that these benefits could only be realised if officers were adequately trained to identify, recognise and understand DFV and its effects, as well as how perpetrator image-management occurs. Thus, some victim-survivors expressed concerns that BWC footage could contribute to or increase the likelihood of misidentification of the primary aggressor, especially where officers are not trauma-informed.

Mirroring the findings of prior research, which show that victim-survivors need to maintain an ‘appropriate’ veneer of victimhood to have their experiences of abuse recognised and validated by state agents (Bollingmo et al. 2008), the victim-survivors in this study raised concerns about how their reactions at the scene might later be interpreted. In particular, they feared that officers’ failure to recognise the effects of trauma and how it manifests could lead to assumptions about how ‘credible’ victim-survivors ‘should’ behave in DFV situations, and this might even result in misidentification.

If police training and education includes modules on trauma and a trauma-informed lens is adopted in practice, then victim-survivor reactions would be understood as visual evidence of trauma and the effects of DFV. However, as the participant statements show, women are not confident that state agencies currently recognise this. Indeed, as some accounts detail, this can result in women being misidentified as primary aggressors. This is particularly concerning for some communities, such as First Nations women, who are already over-represented in charge and arrest rates (Nancarrow, Thomas & Ringland 2020). Research has found that women worry that their use of force—whether as resistance or reactive or protective violence—will be misread and result in misidentification (see also Harris 2020; Johnson 2010; Reeves 2021). Similar concerns were raised in our study.

At the forefront of participants’ minds was not only how they were viewed—at the scene and in footage—but also how perpetrators were viewed. Crucial here is understanding and recognising the false narrative that perpetrators may create, including by self-harming and suggesting that they have been attacked (Dichter 2013; Miller 2005). Additionally, perpetrators will commonly deny, minimise and justify their actions, as well as manipulate police (and others who view footage, such as in courtrooms), which participants felt could result in misidentification. Our findings thus provide further support for training police in perpetrator strategies (Ferguson 2021) and how perpetrators can manipulate their image and recruit allies and sympathisers.

Our findings also highlight that there are risks and unintended consequences of using BWCs in DFV policing. Mitigating these relies on the capacity of police to understand and identify ongoing patterns of DFV within the broader contexts in which it occurs. Trauma-informed training is essential if this is to occur.

Future directions and recommendations

Our findings are of direct benefit in informing the development of policy responses around BWC use in DFV contexts. The findings also have strong potential to inform police and judicial practice in Australian states and territories (and international jurisdictions) that lack experience with BWC use in DFV-specific applications or are seeking to review the impact of this technology and their policing of DFV. Further, the findings can support DFV stakeholders who assist victim-survivors and provide an evidence base to inform policy and guidelines around the use and operation of BWCs, to determine whether this technology is meeting its intended objectives as a response to the problem of DFV.

We urge future research to prioritise victim-survivor voices in considering the merits and risks of BWCs. Their lived experience and expertise offer key insights and lessons about BWCs and justice responses.

We hope that justice agencies are attentive to the issues raised by victim-survivors and heed their words of caution and recommendations in reviewing BWC applications and DFV policy and practice. In particular, we advocate for a trauma-informed lens to be adopted, particularly in police training. Connected to this, greater awareness of perpetrator strategies and presentations is critical, and should be incorporated into police education programs. Finally, understanding the ways that victim-survivors use force—as resistance, reactive or protective force, and self-defence—is vital. It is clear that DFV victim-survivors are frequently being misidentified as the primary aggressor, and many in this study either had been misidentified themselves or shared their concern about the likelihood of this occurring. But if there is heightened recognition of the impacts of DFV perpetration and perpetrators' manipulative strategies, then the interpretation of the behaviour of both victim-survivors and perpetrators in call-outs and BWC footage will be manifestly different, and the likelihood of misidentification reduced.

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4. Alternative reporting options for sexual assault: Perspectives of victim-survivors

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Introduction

In recent years, reports of sexual violence to policing jurisdictions around Australia have increased 30 percent (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020). In New South Wales alone, sexual assaults recorded by police jumped 65 percent between March 2020 and March 2021 (Fitzgerald 2021). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found a 13 percent increase in police-recorded victims across Australia in 2021 (ABS 2022). Despite the trends in policing data indicating increases in sexual assault reporting, sexual assault remains significantly under-reported. The 2016 Personal Safety Survey (ABS 2017), for instance, shows nine out of 10 female victim-survivors subjected to sexual assault by a male perpetrator did not report the most recent incident to police (87%). A substantial body of feminist research has investigated the challenges associated with formally reporting sexual assault to criminal justice agencies that contribute to consistently low reporting rates nationally and internationally. To address the problem of under-reporting, policing jurisdictions in Australia and overseas have begun developing alternative reporting options for sexual assault victim-survivors.

Anonymous and confidential reporting options refer to written-response interviews that take the form of a self-administered survey (Hope et al. 2013). These informal reports do not constitute an official statement but have the potential to support intelligence gathering and crime mapping. In Australia, anonymous informal reporting options are available in New South Wales (the Sexual Assault Reporting Option, or SARO), Queensland (the Alternative Reporting Option, or ARO) and the Australian Capital Territory (for non-recent sexual assault). Victoria does not have any informal reporting options directly associated with police, but in 2012 the Sexual Assault Reporting Anonymously (SARA) website tool was developed by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault. The purpose of SARA was to provide victim-survivors with the opportunity to disclose their experience, be heard, access services and prevent further harm to others. De-identified SARA reports were also provided to police for gathering intelligence (Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault 2018).

Anonymous reporting tools or platforms are important mechanisms for gathering intelligence, reducing crime rates, increasing reporting and connecting victim-survivors to support services (Heydon & Powell 2018). To date, however, little research has examined the efficacy of anonymous reporting options for the police, victim support services and victim-survivors. In this chapter, we examine victim-survivors' knowledge of and experiences using alternative reporting options, drawing on data collected from a broader study investigating the purpose, use and potential of anonymous and confidential reporting options for victim-survivors of sexual assault. Specifically, we draw on data collected from focus groups with victim-survivors located across Australia, supplemented with data from interviews with support service workers who also participated in the broader research project. Police participants were also interviewed for this project and their contributions are documented in the main report (Heydon et al. 2023) and forthcoming publications. Given the dearth of knowledge and evaluations of alternative sexual assault reporting options, as well as the increased numbers of victim-survivors seeking alternative platforms to disclose their experiences, the research provides much-needed insights into alternative reporting options from the perspective of Australian victim-survivors.

The first section of the chapter presents a brief overview of literature on traditional and alternative reporting of sexual assault. The second section describes the aims and method of the current study, and the third section presents the key findings of the research together with a discussion of their implications. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practice and policymaking.

Literature review

The under-reporting of sexual offences is a significant criminal justice issue. There are complex and valid reasons why victim-survivors choose not to report, including shame and humiliation, fear of police, and retaliation from the perpetrator (Heenan & Murray 2006; Jordan 2008; Rich & Seffrin 2012). Victim-survivors often report negative encounters with police and the criminal justice system, which some scholars describe as a 'secondary victimisation' (Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2020; Taylor & Gassner 2010) or a 'second rape' (Spencer et al. 2018). Rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes shape victim-survivors' perspectives and actions, leading them to downplay their experience as 'not serious enough' to report, or they may blame themselves (Tidmarsh & Hamilton 2020). Barriers to formal reporting can be particularly salient for certain groups who have had previous negative or violent experiences with the police and who lack access to services, such as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning and other non-heterosexual and non-cisgender) communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, sex workers, those living in rural areas, people with disabilities, and people in prison (see, for example, Mitra-Kahn, Newbiggin & Hardefeldt 2016; Mortimer, Powell & Sandy 2019; Taylor & Gassner 2010).

The deficiencies of formal reporting have led to a shift towards informal reporting options. Internationally, there has been significant growth in the development and use of informal reporting options, including in social media spaces (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2020) and digital applications (Liu 2018), and institutional reporting mechanisms associated with the military, universities and the police. For example, since 2005, the US Department of Defense has provided confidential and unrestricted informal options for reporting sexual offences between military personnel (Carson & Carson 2018; Friedman 2007; Rosenstein et al. 2018). Also in the United States, 76 percent of colleges and universities offer confidential reporting options for victim-survivors, with 75 percent of institutions providing completely anonymous reporting options (Richards 2019). Informal reporting options are also starting to be used in Australian universities. In addition to the anonymous and informal options outlined earlier, which are hosted by police and sexual assault services, some Australian universities now host informal reporting options for victim-survivors, witnesses and first responders.

To date, little scholarly attention has been paid to the efficacy of anonymous and informal sexual assault reporting options. Despite their growing use, we identified only three studies examining the impact of alternative reporting on victim-survivors. In the first study, Heffron et al. (2014) spoke to sexual assault nurse examiners, who mentioned that many victim-survivors in crisis do not feel emotionally or physically ready to make a formal report to the police, and therefore it was vital that they had alternative options to record their experience, to seek out a supportive community, and to get help and information. In the second study, Loney-Howes, Heydon and O'Neill (2022) analysed summary level data derived from reports made to a digital reporting tool operated by an Australian rape crisis centre. Their analysis suggests that informal reporting options could offer a positive and timely alternative for victim-survivors. They also found that reports were sufficiently detailed to support the police in crime mapping and intelligence gathering. In the third study, Obada-Obieh, Spagnolo and Beznosov (2020) noted that victim-survivors have concerns about the privacy and security of the data they might share using a third-party reporting platform, especially regarding the traceability of information shared and their anonymity. Victim-survivors in this study also raised concerns about the misuse of personal information by third parties and not having access to support when completing an online form.

The current study

This study was the first of its kind to examine anonymous sexual assault reporting options associated with and administered by law enforcement or victim support services. The research aimed to investigate user experiences and the therapeutic potential of informal reporting mechanisms. (We also documented the role of alternative reporting options in crime mapping and how informal, confidential disclosures might improve police intelligence and rates of formal reporting to police. For this aspect of the research, see Heydon et al. 2023.)

The research was guided by the following overarching research question: What is the purpose, use and potential of alternative sexual assault reporting options? This question was supported by the following sub-questions:

- Why do victim-survivors use alternative reporting options?
- What are the experiences of victim-survivors who use alternative reporting options?
- Do victim-survivors proceed to make a formal report to police after using the alternative reporting option?

Method

The research design was underscored by a feminist methodology (see Hesse-Biber 2007), centring the perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors of sexual violence gathered through focus groups, alongside interviews with support service workers. Ethics approval for focus groups and interviews was sought from and granted by RMIT University and the University of Wollongong human research ethics committees. Five focus groups were held with 21 sexual violence victim-survivors. Focus groups are a commonly used method for evaluating and planning services (see, for example, Smith, Scammon & Beck 1995). They are qualitatively different to individual interviews because they allow discussion between group members and differences of opinion or inconsistencies between participants to be explored, leading to more nuanced understandings. When a supportive group environment is fostered, focus groups are an effective method for encouraging participants to discuss sensitive topics, particularly as members hear experiences that are similar to theirs and feel a sense of 'safety in numbers' (Frith 2000; Kitzinger 1994). Discussion between group members also allows the researchers to better understand what language and frameworks participants use to describe their experiences (Kitzinger 1994).

Participants were recruited via fliers shared on social media, as well as by our partner organisations and their key contacts. Recruitment criteria required that participants: were over 18 years old, had experienced sexual violence as an adult, were currently residing in Australia, and were comfortable participating in an online focus group with other people to discuss alternative reporting options. The recruitment flier included a link to our project website, where potential participants could read more about the project and focus groups and could express interest in participating through an email link. When we received an expression of interest, we emailed potential participants the participant information sheet and some questions to clarify their eligibility to participate. Once a participant was deemed eligible, and they confirmed their interest after reading the information sheet, we sent them a link to a site where they could elect their preferred focus group date and time.

All 21 participants identified as female, except for one, who identified as female/genderqueer. Participants were aged between 22 and 51, with eight participants identifying as heterosexual, 11 identifying as bisexual, pansexual or queer, and two choosing not to disclose their sexuality. The majority of participants ($n=16$) identified as Caucasian, White, Anglo, Irish or European. Three participants identified their ethnicity as Black, one as Tamil Malaysian and one as biracial.

Focus groups were run on Zoom using a password-protected link available only to focus group participants and the research team. Each focus group was run by two researchers, with safety measures in place to enhance the wellbeing of participants (see Heydon et al. 2023 for details). Focus groups ran for two hours, and participants were provided a \$100 voucher to compensate them for their time. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by OutScribe Transcription. The research team then de-identified the transcripts and gave participants a pseudonym, then thematically coded the transcripts using NVivo 12 software (Braun & Clarke 2006). The coding scheme was developed taking into consideration the research questions and dividing an initial coding scheme into three high-level codes—experiences, impacts and reflections—with sub-codes under each of these three codes. Due to the interpretive nature of the coding scheme and the small sample used to generate initial insights into an under-explored topic, we used double-coding to ensure we were conceptually engaging with the data in a similar way, and to agree on ways to interpret the data if any discrepancies arose (O'Connor & Joffe 2020).

In addition to focus groups with victim-survivors, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant staff in sexual assault support services ($n=14$). Semi-structured interviews allowed for a reciprocal engagement with a pre-determined set of thematic questions between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bryman 2012). Questions were open-ended with prompts to assist both the interviewer and interviewee to explore a particular idea, phenomenon or experience in depth (Bryman 2012). Interviews were determined to be the most appropriate method for collecting data from support workers, because they could be open and honest about their experiences and views. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Interviews ran for 60 minutes and covered a range of questions about the participant's organisational engagement with anonymous reporting of sexual assault. The interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim by OutScribe Transcription. The research team then de-identified the transcripts and assigned a codename to each participant according to their role within their organisation. Interviews were coded using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006) using NVivo 12 software. The coding scheme was developed taking into consideration our research questions, and three researchers coded two interviews to ensure they were interpreting the data similarly. Sub-codes were then developed based on the common themes that emerged in each primary code.

In both the focus groups and interviews, participants were asked about their use of alternative reporting options, the reporting process and their impressions of or responses to specific forms currently in use or formerly in use in Australia or overseas. This included the SARO form used by the NSW Police Force and the SARA form formerly used in Victoria and hosted by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault.

Results and discussion

Why do victim-survivors use alternative reporting options?

Drawing on focus group discussions with 21 victim-survivors and 14 semi-structured interviews with support service workers, we identified five key reasons why victim-survivors of sexual violence use, or may prefer to use, alternative reporting options:

- because of fear or intimidation associated with formal reporting;
- to regain power and control;
- to document their experiences;
- to protect the community; and
- to gain access to support services.

Fear or intimidation of formal reporting

In our focus groups with victim-survivors, only two out of 21 participants had used an alternative reporting option, both having used the SARO in New South Wales; however, other victim-survivors said that they would have used one if they had known it was available. Of the two participants who had used alternative reporting, Bonnie (FG1) said she used the SARO because she did not want to make a formal police report. She was in a relationship with the person who assaulted her, she understood the 'high level of proof that's required to convict someone of sexual assault' and she knew she would 'need a lot of evidence' and that her case would have been 'complex and difficult to establish'. Bonnie was also having difficulties recognising the experience as sexual assault and she did not want to be questioned by police.

Bonnie said she felt the SARO was a 'safer way' of making some form of report where she felt 'somewhat in control of the situation' and she was 'reassured to know that it wouldn't go any further'. Bonnie said she thought it was a good tool for 'encouraging people who wouldn't necessarily report otherwise because it's a less intimidating way of doing so'. Similarly, Quinn (FG2), who had also used the SARO, said 'the thought of going to the police station is terrifying for most victims, so the fact that you can do something online from the safety of your own home, that's definitely a positive there'.

Regaining power and control

Support workers noted that victim-survivors use alternative reporting options as a means of regaining power and control after being subjected to sexual violence. Support workers felt that alternative reporting options provided victim-survivors an 'in-between' or 'third' option when they wanted to do something but were too scared or not ready to go to police:

It's more probably when they're in that tussle between, "I feel I should do something, but I don't want to. I'm overwhelmed with the idea of going to police, but it just doesn't feel right to do nothing". It's kind of the third option, or the other option in those scenarios ...
(Vic support worker 1)

Most focus group participants held poor perceptions of the police, with many having had negative firsthand experiences of formal reporting. There was a common perception among victim-survivors that, once they make a formal report, their case will be out of their hands. Some victim-survivors felt that an informal reporting option would be a way to maintain control over the reporting process. Having more reporting options was seen as an important way victim-survivors could regain some control, power and autonomy:

... when you're assaulted, like it just takes away all of your autonomy and you're like I don't have any ... I have no say in what's happening, everything's been taken away from me, and like you can't even report it on your own terms, it's on the police's terms. And with [an informal reporting] form, at least you can take a miniscule amount of power back and try and be like, at least I can control how to report it. (Maggie FG5)

Documenting experiences

Another important reason victim-survivors were attracted to the idea of an informal reporting option was that it allowed them to tell their story on their own terms, in their own time and in a comfortable space. They compared this to formal reporting, where they thought they would need to finish the police statement in one go, often in an uncomfortable environment, with police officers whom they may not feel safe with.

In a sense it did feel kind of a relief to have that on the page and you know it's going somewhere, like a database or a record, that's kind of another perspective. It's nice to have it out there a little bit.

... in some ways it did feel a little validating to be asked that in questions and to write down details. (Bonnie FG1)

Community protection

Victim-survivors and support service participants suggested another key reason why victim-survivors use alternative reporting options is as a form of community safety, protecting other people from the perpetrator.

Some victim-survivors in our focus groups also discussed the potential for an alternative reporting option to form a database where repeat offenders could be identified, allowing police to contact survivors only if someone else made a report about the same offender. This would not only protect others but also create 'power in numbers' if criminal charges were laid:

... a lot of people's experiences or motivations to report is to protect others from experiencing harm. I think that's a really common desire to not have that happen to anyone else ... If there was a circle back option, I think I would find that really comforting to know that there was power in numbers almost, that it was actually contributing to something more. (Violet FG1)

Access to support

Finally, victim-survivors use alternative reporting to access support. For example, victim-survivor SARO reports allow victim-survivors to access victim support services and victim recognition payments. When SARA was in operation, support workers made follow-up calls to all reporters who left contact details to see if they wanted further support.

Participants also reflected that victim-survivors used alternative reporting options to inform support workers about their experiences without expressing this directly or verbally. Some victim-survivors used alternative reporting options to formally acknowledge what happened beyond the therapeutic setting, even if they did not plan to take the report further. Using alternative reporting thus made the process much more formal than just talking to a counsellor. For some victim-survivors, 'putting it out there' (Vic support worker 4) gives them closure on what happened and enables them to make decisions about their next steps. One support worker indicated that 'clients had found [SARA] very, very empowering and very, very helpful', especially the 'option of support and acknowledgement, but without pressure to go any further' (Vic support worker 1).

Summary

In summary, while most victim-survivors said that they wanted more options than either reporting to police or doing nothing, they had differing views about how alternative reports should be used, who should host the platform, and what outcomes they desired after submitting an alternative report. Some wanted their experiences to be counted and reflected in sexual assault statistics so that adequate services could be provided, while others wanted it to serve more of a purpose, such as forming a database so repeat offenders could be identified. Some victim-survivors saw alternative reporting as a pathway to making a formal report, yet others wanted the platform to sit completely outside of the criminal justice system. While there were diverse views on what purpose an alternative reporting system should serve and how it should be run, victim-survivors resoundingly agreed that there needed to be alternative pathways for sexual assault victim-survivors to report their experiences, stressing that any alternative reporting option needs to be trauma-informed and well designed.

What are the experiences of victim-survivors who use the alternative reporting option?

As noted above, only two victim-survivors in our focus groups had used an alternative reporting option. In this section, we describe their experiences as well as the expert knowledge and experiences of key stakeholders who recounted to us, second hand, what victim-survivors' experiences were. In addition, as we showed focus group participants the different alternative reporting options, we elicited their views on what it might have been like for them, hypothetically, to complete those forms.

Regarding the two participants who had completed an alternative reporting form, Bonnie (FG1) said that she found writing down her experience somewhat validating, and she was relieved to know her story was recorded in some form. Quinn (FG2), who had also used the SARO, had a more negative experience:

[The SARO form was] just so brutal and long-winded and yeah, I didn't like it, didn't like it. And then [to] find out that it didn't do anything, I was like "great, why did I do that?"

Both Bonnie and Quinn expressed similar disappointment and frustration that the SARO did not have further scope beyond collecting their reports, describing it as a 'dead end' and 'high-level census data', rather than something that could hold the perpetrator to account. Support service workers from Victoria expressed similar concerns about the SARA and suggested victim-survivors were confused about what they were actually achieving by submitting a SARA. While SARA was marketed as a reporting tool, support service workers perceived it more as a disclosure tool. This was not clearly communicated to victim-survivors:

I think that the tool looked like a disclosure tool but some of the questions, or some of the positions around, "That we may share this information", I can't even remember what it said exactly, but the sharing of the information with the police suggest[ed] that it's a reporting tool ... And so, again, it's like, "well, do survivors know that?" (Vic support worker 5)

Given that the nature, purpose and use of SARA was unclear, one support worker suggested that SARA operated as 'reporting for the sake of reporting' and that it simplified the processes associated with reporting sexual assault:

I guess just reporting for the sake of reporting, it's not fair to the victim survivor. They don't know that that's what's happening. They don't understand the system. They don't understand what happens, and we don't often [either]. It's complicated and convoluted. They just think they're telling the right people if you call something reporting. (Vic support worker 3)

Support workers expressed similar concerns about the lack of appropriate responses after a victim-survivor submits a report. As one support worker from Brisbane said, if nothing happens afterwards it could lead victim-survivors to feel further disempowered:

... the frustration is to feel like you're going to report and nothing will happen, because ... what's really traumatic about reporting is the experience, again the lack of control you experienced once when you were assaulted ... So, taking the decision to go and tell your story and nothing will come out of that complaint, it's again a reminder for victims that they have no control over this, that there's nothing they can do, and that they better just be silent, they better just be ignored. (Qld support worker 1)

Understanding the nature of the form and potential outcomes is crucial to ensuring victim-survivors are fully informed. Victim-survivors may experience significant emotional distress while filling in alternative reporting forms and must be given clear and concise information about what will happen with their report.

When shown the forms in the focus groups, the other victim-survivors found the SARO form too confronting. For instance, Julia (FG3) had considered making a SARO report but decided not to after finding out ‘they don’t really do anything with it apart from put it in the system, and then it does nothing, it just sits there’. She also found the questions on the form ‘very confronting’.

Many support workers suggested that the language and terminology used in the form can create negative experiences for victim-survivors. For example, one participant suggested that the questions were ‘a bit cold’ and could make victim-survivors ‘feel a little bit like you’ve done things wrong, you know, or if you didn’t attend a hospital or something like that’ (NSW support worker 5). In other words, the experience might cause victim-survivors to feel there is a ‘correct’ process they should have followed after being sexual assaulted, such as attending a hospital or medical practitioner immediately, when in reality few victim-survivors take this path.

Support workers felt the length of SARO might also be challenging for victim-survivors. One suggested that victim-survivors completing the forms would potentially need to ‘go away and come back to it multiple times’ (Vic support worker 2). The length of the form may ultimately result in victim-survivors not completing it. As a support worker from New South Wales remarked, ‘the more steps you put into that process, the higher the chance is that they’re not going to make it. They’re going to drop off’ (NSW support worker 3).

Support workers also described the emotional experiences of victim-survivors completing an alternative reporting form, with some suggesting the SARO form could be ‘quite shocking to read’ (NSW support worker 5), or that completing the form is ‘daunting’, ‘draining’ and ‘overwhelming’ for victim-survivors (NSW support worker 4; NSW support worker 2; Vic support worker 5). Other support workers described the experience of completing SARO as ‘triggering’ and ‘near impossible for a victim to complete’, and that it was more onerous to complete a SARO than an application for victim services (NSW support worker 3). Some were particularly concerned about younger and vulnerable community members filling out the form alone.

To mitigate retraumatisation, some support workers said that they use alternative reporting tools during counselling sessions with victim-survivors. For instance, one support worker said that she often fills out the form on behalf of her clients with their consent, while another said she always does the form with the victim-survivor.

Support workers also indicated that completing alternative reporting forms may provide victim-survivors with some insight into the experience of making a formal report and may help to ease the anxiety or intimidation victim-survivors feel about going to the police. However, victim-survivors also clearly wanted their report to be meaningful in some way and not just sit in a database. As Ruth (FG5) said, ‘I need to know that it accomplishes something, that there’s a reason I’m doing this.’

Do victim-survivors proceed to make a formal report to police after using the alternative reporting option?

The two victim-survivors in our focus groups who had used an alternative reporting option did not go on to make a formal report to the police afterwards. Nonetheless, during the focus group discussions, some participants thought that alternative reporting may be a pathway to making a formal report, a way to ‘dip your toe in’ (Aubrey FG2) to the formal reporting process and have more control over when, how and whether to start the formal reporting process.

While our data do not show whether victim-survivors go on to make formal reports to the police after completing informal reports, support workers mentioned examples of police following up (or not following up) on informal reports. For instance, one support worker said it was 'rare' that the police would follow up on the alternative report, while others said that police sought to contact victim-survivors quite frequently when they had located an offender. Two workers thought follow-ups were likely only when a serial offender was identified (NSW support worker 7 & Vic support worker 5). Importantly, following up on alternative reporting can only be possible if victim-survivors choose not to remain anonymous.

While some victim-survivors wanted a system that flagged repeat perpetrators, as explored earlier, proceeding to a court case and criminal charges was not necessarily the outcome they wanted. Some victim-survivors desired other forms of accountability. Indeed, many victim-survivors saw alternative reporting platforms as an alternative to police reporting altogether, rather than a pathway to making a formal police report. There was a strong desire among focus group participants for alternative mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable outside of the formal justice process. This view was informed by victim-survivors' negative experiences of reporting to the police, and a desire for other options for accountability and justice that are less onerous for victim-survivors. As Josie (FG4) said:

The justice system is just one path, or the criminal system is one pathway, but it's not what everyone wants ... It is a very stressful, emotionally exhausting, long, drawn out process that not everyone wants. Why are there not other options? Why is there just one option or way forward?

Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter presents the perspectives of sexual assault victim-survivors on how alternative options for reporting might be used. These perspectives are represented directly, as quotes from victim-survivors who participated in focus groups, and indirectly as commentary on reporting processes from support service staff who participated in interviews. In both cases, participants were presented with examples of alternative reporting forms, including the current SARO, run by the NSW Police Force, and the now-discontinued SARA, previously operated by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault in Victoria. Participants were also asked open-ended questions about both alternative reporting options and formal police procedures for making a complaint.

The findings represent valuable new insights into the relatively recent phenomenon of alternative reporting options for sexual assault from the victim-survivor perspective. As alternative reporting is becoming increasingly popular across a range of settings, including university campuses, military bases, public transport and workplaces, it is vital to investigate what victim-survivors think about the option to report their experiences informally.

The findings show that victim-survivors are not all in agreement about some procedural aspects of alternative reporting options. We found that there were conflicting data relating to participants' beliefs about how police use the forms, whether a report needed to be processed by police at all and whether making an informal report was a pathway to making a formal police report. Participants were unclear whether police used the information from alternative reports in investigations and whether police would or should follow up with the reporter. Whereas victim-survivors who had used the SARO seemed to be clear that they did not expect the form to be anything other than a 'dead end', support workers were concerned that victim-survivors would expect more concrete results. Importantly, there were mixed opinions about where any alternative reporting option should be located, or who should host such a scheme. This was apparent from responses from victim-survivors who supported alternative pathways to perpetrator accountability outside the justice system.

However, there was consistency in participants' contributions about the need for an alternative to the formal complaints process, and also about what the form should look like. Participants agreed that it should be trauma-informed and not too long, that it should use clear and non-invasive questions and language, and that it should provide clear options for future contact. In practice, though, the opacity of police and legal procedure meant that the victim-survivors were suspicious or critical of the way that alternative reports might be used by the justice system. Victim-survivors stressed that alternative reporting options must avoid reproducing the problems with formal reporting, such as by removing a victim-survivor's autonomy from the reporting process.

These findings lead to several overarching conclusions, which can usefully contribute to recommendations for improving current reporting options and developing future schemes:

- Victim-survivors of sexual violence, and those who work with them, want alternative reporting options.
- Clear information must be provided to potential users and stakeholders about the role, purpose and use of data collected through the reporting forms, including in investigations and any future contact with police and support services.
- There must be an opportunity for the user to indicate how they want their data to be used.
- Reporting forms must be trauma-informed and designed according to the expressed preferences of victim-survivors.
- Further research is needed to identify the needs of diverse communities that may require access to an alternative reporting option but are not adequately served by mainstream services.
- Extensive user experience testing in a safe and trauma-informed environment must be undertaken before implementing the alternative reporting scheme.
- Users must be given clear explanations of the processes associated with alternative reporting tools, including what the tool can and cannot do and when to expect follow-up contact if requested by the user.

There are significant limitations to our research in that we consulted only a small number of victim-survivors. Our research findings cannot be generalised to all the diverse communities who might require access to an alternative reporting option, and as the fifth recommendation above suggests, further research must be undertaken to identify the needs of those communities not adequately served by mainstream services. This includes communities such as LGBTQ+ people, culturally and linguistically diverse people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those with disabilities, those living in institutional care settings, and young people.

This chapter has presented findings from research with victim-survivors and support services to prioritise the voices of those most affected by reporting schemes. While other findings from our broader research project provide greater detail about the investigative or therapeutic impacts of informal or alternative reporting of sexual violence, we hope that this chapter will assist policymakers and administrators to respond first and foremost to the needs of victim-survivors when creating alternative reporting pathways.

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5. 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.

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 & Keibell 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; Stalaker, 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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6. Targeting fixated individuals to prevent intimate partner homicide: Proposing the Domestic Violence Threat Assessment Centre

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Introduction

Considerable recent public debate has focused on preventing intimate partner homicide (IPH). Despite concerns about the threat to victim safety, relatively few programs have been specifically designed to prevent homicide. This chapter explores whether and how a model designed to intervene with fixated individuals—Fixated Threat Assessment Centres (FTACs)—could be applied to the prevention of IPH.

Incidence of intimate partner homicide in Australia

IPH is one of the most common forms of homicide in Australia, with the murder or manslaughter of an intimate partner comprising almost a quarter of all homicides recorded by state and territory police between 1989–90 and 2022–23 (Miles & Bricknell 2024). Women are the victims in three-quarters of these incidents. Since the early 1990s, there have been 1,667 female victims of IPH, or an average of 49 women killed each year by their current or former intimate partner. The rate of IPH against women decreased overall by 66 percent during the 34-year period to 2022–23 and current rates of IPH are among the lowest recorded (Miles & Bricknell 2024). Yet IPH remains the most prevalent homicide threat for Australian women. Almost six in 10 women victims of homicide in Australia each year are killed by their intimate partner and this proportion has persisted as the overall homicide victimisation rate for women has decreased.

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children's *First action plan 2023–27* targets a 25 percent reduction in female victims of IPH per year. Further reductions in IPH require examination of the growing body of analysis on the circumstances precipitating the homicide of an intimate partner and, specifically, the identification of intervention options for those at highest risk of perpetrating lethal violence.

Box 1: Who are fixated threats?

Fixation refers to an intense preoccupation with an individual, place or cause pursued to an excessive or irrational degree (Mullen, Pathé & Purcell 2009). Fixated threats who pose a significant risk to community safety may warrant multi-agency intervention and ongoing monitoring. Most research on fixated threats focuses on aspects of their demographics, behaviours and motivations, including the incidence of criminal offending. For example, research suggests that fixated individuals who pose an escalating concern for violence commonly have criminal records (46%, Gill et al. 2021; 88%, Riddle et al. 2019; 90%, Scalora et al. 2020), as well as high rates of prior contact with mental health services (55%, Gill et al. 2021; 86%, Riddle et al. 2019). Additionally, some individuals have interactions with both police and mental health services independently prior to being identified as fixated (75%, Riddle et al. 2019).

Fixated Threat Assessment Centres

In 2013, the first FTAC outside of Europe was established in Queensland, Australia. Modelled on the approach pioneered in the United Kingdom in 2006, the Queensland FTAC brought together law enforcement and health services to assess and manage the threat posed by lone-actor fixated individuals (Pathé et al. 2015). In August 2017, the Australia New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee agreed to introduce FTACs into practice, an agreement that was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in October of the same year. FTACs provide a model for identifying, assessing, triaging and intervening with fixated individuals, specifying the use of assessment tools, triage processes, stakeholders and support mechanisms required in interventions. The core innovation of the FTAC was collaboration and co-location between police, mental health and other relevant stakeholders to assess the risk posed by an individual in the community and, where appropriate, to develop a multi-agency management strategy to reduce the risk of violence.

Box 2: What makes the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre model unique?

FTACs are situated among a suite of countering violent extremism initiatives. They fill a critical gap by providing a service at the intersection of law enforcement and mental health, with the goal of introducing a therapeutic intervention during an acute phase of risk for fixated individuals. The management of these individuals is supported by intensive surveillance and interagency intelligence sharing, principally provided by law enforcement. While policing and security entities play a critical role, the prevention approach of FTACs relies on collaboration and information sharing between a range of law enforcement, health, social welfare and community organisations.

Several features are common across FTACs implemented in Australia and overseas:

Referral process

FTACs receive referrals from a diverse range of sources. FTACs were originally intended to receive referrals from individuals in prominent public positions, who had become aware of increasingly fixated individuals. These may include members of parliament or their offices, protective personnel, or communications staff. Referrals may also be made internally by police and mental health services.

Multi-agency collaboration to support risk and threat assessment

A key aspect of the FTAC is the co-location of police, mental health practitioners and other stakeholders. This co-location arrangement breaks down barriers to quick information sharing, allowing a multi-agency approach to assessing the threat posed by a fixated individual using information immediately available from a range of agencies.

Surveillance and case management

Once a case is accepted for management by an FTAC, the individual is continuously monitored and assessed, to identify escalation and whether immediate intervention may be required. This aspect of the FTAC features law enforcement leveraging intelligence data and assisting mental health engagement with individuals who may pose a risk. The collaborative nature of the FTAC facilitates ongoing and immediate information sharing as cases are managed in the community.

Mental health support

While law enforcement surveillance is key to ensuring the safety of the community, treatment from community services is facilitated by the mental health arm of the FTAC. These supports are central to reducing the threat posed by fixated individuals. In the event of a sudden escalation, the co-location of staff means this information can be transferred immediately to law enforcement for intervention, depending upon need.

The research on fixated threats establishes important behavioural risk factors that may signal escalating risk of violence, such as harassment, stalking, threats or aggression (Adams et al. 2009; James et al. 2016; Pathé et al. 2016). Fixated threat research discriminates between those who approach the target of their fixation and those who do not (Eke et al. 2014; James et al. 2010; Meloy et al. 2011; Scalora et al. 2002; van der Meer, Bootsma & Meloy 2012). Those who approach the target of their fixation pose a greater threat than those who either do not approach or attempt to communicate from a distance. Factors such as mental health (James et al. 2008; Scalora et al. 2002), motivation (James et al. 2010; McEwan et al. 2012) and a history of criminal justice contact or violence (Eke et al. 2014) are often used to differentiate between those who approach the target and those who attempt to communicate but do not approach.

Box 3: What role do grievances and extreme-overvalued beliefs play in fixation?

A grievance refers to an individual believing they have been subject to an injustice, generating feelings of outrage, desperation and at times a sense that they have been victimised (Pathé et al. 2018). Harden and colleagues (2019) found that grievances played a role in IPH, particularly when they emerged from the end, or anticipated end, of a relationship. The function of these grievances was at times complex. For example, a refusal to reconcile a relationship could arise as a standalone grievance, but it may also heighten other grievances.

Extreme-overvalued beliefs are rigid views that may be held by an individual or shared by others in an ideological or subcultural group. These beliefs feature an intense emotional commitment, at times supporting the use of violence (Rahman et al. 2020). Rahman et al. (2019: 2) described extreme-overvalued beliefs as a 'driver of fixation responsible for violence motivated by political, religious, racial, sexual or other shared ideologies, often fuelled through online interaction'. Those with extreme-overvalued beliefs are similar to fixated individuals but tend to function relatively normally in public-facing parts of their life, meaning they may not attract the attention of community mental health services or law enforcement.

Links between homicide perpetrators and fixated threats

There is growing recognition of the significance of coercive control in intimate partner violence (Stark 2007). Coercive control refers to the pattern of behaviours that results in the micro-regulation of the lives of victim-survivors (Stark & Hester 2019). Perpetrators of coercive control are frequently motivated by the desire to dominate and control their intimate partner (Johnson 2010) often by using physical, emotional, psychological, financial and social forms of abuse. These behaviours are commonly reported by victims of intimate partner violence (Boxall & Morgan 2021), while coercive control features among almost all cases of IPH examined by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network (2022). In some cases, this pattern of controlling behaviour can become so serious that it escalates to behaviours typical of fixated individuals, such as stalking and harassment.

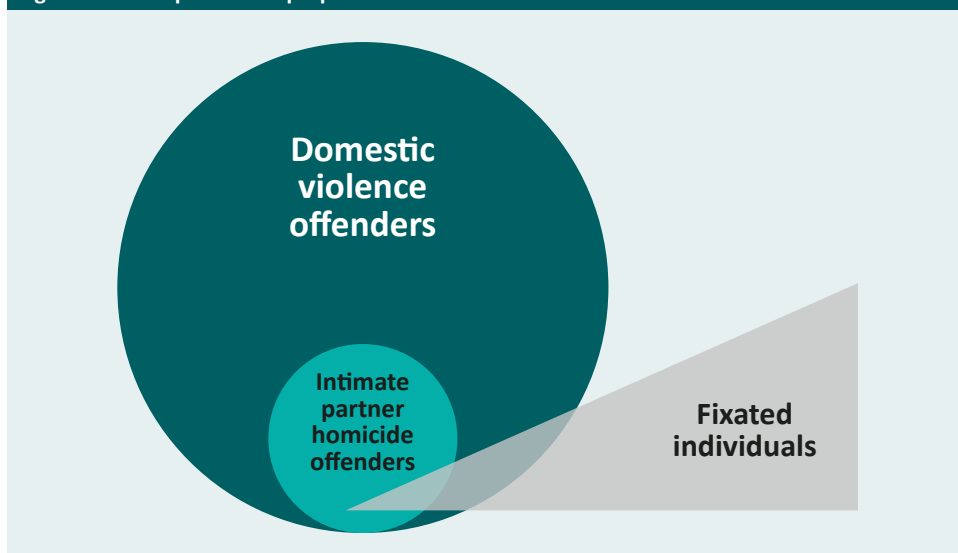
In the context of IPH, separating from an intimate partner, or attempting to end a relationship, may be an important component of grievance development (Monckton-Smith 2020), particularly in circumstances where the victim finds a new partner or where children are involved (Cooper, Pathé & McEwan 2022). There is a risk that a violent partner will escalate the violence, including by using lethal violence, in an attempt to maintain or reassert their control (Monckton-Smith 2020).

In 2022, the *Pathways to intimate partner homicide* project found that roughly one in three cases of IPH featured a perpetrator who demonstrated elements of fixation towards their victim (Boxall et al. 2022). In this report, fixated perpetrators were typically functional in public-facing areas of their life, but their relationships were characterised as controlling. Grievances among perpetrators of domestic violence (DV) or IPH could be conceptualised as misplaced feelings of injustice or victimhood emerging from a relationship ending or their former partner establishing a new relationship. Grievances often coincided with changes in perpetrator behaviour, including the monitoring and stalking of victims, both offline and online. These grievances intensified, alongside their escalating behaviour, before the perpetrators used extreme forms of violence, typically as a means of re-establishing control. The principal point of escalation among fixated IPH perpetrators was when a relationship was ending.

Recent research provides a strong rationale for viewing a significant proportion of IPH perpetrators as motivated by grievance (Cooper, Pathé & McEwan 2022) and as fixated upon their victim. However, it is also notable that when focusing on perpetrators who are generally driven by a grievance, IPH perpetrators emerge as a core group. For example, in a recent study of grievance-fuelled perpetrators in Australia over a 10-year period, around one-quarter were found to be IPH perpetrators (Corner & Taylor 2023). Those who are motivated by grievance should be considered high risk for severe violence against a current or former intimate partner and, as a result, the overarching framework guiding threat assessment for fixated or grievance-motivated violence may also apply to high-risk domestic violence perpetrators (Clemmow et al. 2020). Law enforcement or health agencies in isolation will rarely have the information needed to identify these perpetrators as they escalate toward violence. However, while individual agencies may struggle to identify and manage these individuals, the multi-agency FTAC model may provide a translatable solution.

The relationship between fixated individuals, DV and IPH is represented in Figure 1. Fixated individuals are involved in some cases of IPH, while many fixated individuals do not perpetrate DV of any kind. There is also a group—the size of which is unknown—of fixated individuals who perpetrate DV but do not go on to commit IPH (possibly because their fixation is targeted at people other than their intimate partners).

Figure 1: Overlap between perpetrators



The role of mental health

The relationship between mental health and DV, including IPH, is complex, and whether declining mental health is a direct cause of the abuse is contested. There is evidence that a significant minority of perpetrators have underlying mental health issues and that threats of suicide and self-harm may be higher among homicide offenders than among those who do not escalate (Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019). According to Boxall et al. (2022), 42 percent of the fixated individuals presented with mental health issues. Further, these fixated individuals demonstrated a range of other cognitive and behavioural risk factors related to their use of violence, with IPH the outcome of a complex interplay of individual and situational factors.

Could an adapted FTAC model work for high-risk domestic violence perpetrators?

Increased visibility of perpetrators

When cases are managed by individual agencies such as police or community health alone, those motivated by grievance may initially present as lower risk and appear to undergo successful diversion to existing agencies. This is because each agency may have only part of the story detailing the true degree of risk that the fixated individual poses. The FTAC model could potentially be applied to a range of violent crimes where intelligence sharing is needed, including stalking, terrorism and murder. This model adapts detection and referral pathways, enables data and intelligence sharing, and strengthens collaboration between health services and police. By moving beyond conventional criminal justice information sources and including health services, opportunities for informed risk assessment may improve. For example, Mitchell (2020) showed that, among a sample of psychiatric inpatients, 55 percent of those who made a threat while an inpatient escalated to violence in the community within 24 hours, demonstrating how information sharing between mental health services and police can be instrumental in intervening prior to violence.

Improved surveillance of perpetrators in the community

There are behaviours which may signal escalating fixation that are difficult for police and mental health services to detect. These including stalking, which is particularly difficult to detect when it is technologically facilitated and when police are not proactively seeking information on an individual. However, there is evidence that online and offline stalking is often present prior to IPH. In many cases, the male perpetrator's involvement in stalking was a unique risk factor in the pathway to the lethal violence occurring (Boxall et al. 2022). The example of stalking is important; police or mental health services may not be able to detect incidents of stalking, but victim-survivors are often able to report that they are experiencing stalking by a current or former intimate partner. Ultimately this supports the importance of additional referral pathways and of information beyond that held by law enforcement or mental health services in isolation being used in determining the risk of escalation among fixated DV perpetrators. The additional pathways and collaboration between sectors inherent in this operational model would improve the surveillance of perpetrators in the community, creating opportunities for threat assessment and prevention.

Intensive support for perpetrators during periods of heightened risk

Humphreys and Healey (2017) noted that responses to reporting often depended on service capacity at the time and that there was difficulty accessing help through conventional reporting pathways. Similarly, there were differences in how perpetrators could be processed into intervention services during periods of heightened risk. The FTAC model allows intervention to help reduce the risk of violence; however, it also creates an opportunity for intensive support to de-escalate perpetrators during the periods of greatest risk.

What could a Domestic Violence Threat Assessment Centre look like?

To increase the visibility of DV perpetrators who engage in escalating fixated or grievance-motivated behaviours, we propose an alternative approach to managing DV offenders who present an unacceptable risk of violence, based on the FTAC operating model. The Domestic Violence Threat Assessment Centre (DVTAC) would broaden existing referral pathways and establish new pathways, allowing community services assisting victim-survivors to identify cases they believe to be high risk for violence. The DVTAC could gather information held across agencies and sectors and deploy a focused intelligence-led policing approach to better assess fixated and grievance-motivated individuals for risk of perpetrating severe forms of DV, including IPH. The centre could then have the capacity to use immediate intervention and monitoring of individuals considered high risk.

Referral of perpetrators who make threats to kill

The primary referral sources for a DVTAC could include law enforcement (both local and interstate), mental health services, community DV agencies, community legal services, and those involved in family law matters. Staff from these organisations could refer individuals suspected to be at risk of serious DV offending or, in the case of community DV services, people they believe to be at serious risk of harm. Key criteria for the initial referral may include recent separation, evidence of stalking (online or in person), ongoing child custody or financial disputes, ongoing court cases in which the perpetrator is out on bail, and a recent application for a protection order. Importantly, an individual must have made threats to kill their partner or children or shown other behaviours characteristic of the fixated threat profile described by Boxall et al. (2022). Community members are also a vital source of referrals for a DVTAC. These individuals could notify police or mental health, community or legal services of someone they believe poses an escalating threat. Members of these agencies who receive concerns from the community would refer the individual at risk of escalation for assessment by DVTAC staff, who are able to make a more intensive assessment using multi-agency information holdings.

Multi-agency risk and threat assessment

At present, indicators of escalating risk may only be visible to individual agencies. Similarly, the information available to community victim-survivor support services may not be available to either mental health services or law enforcement. This example demonstrates the importance of information sharing in forming a full picture and facilitating immediate intervention. The DVTAC aims to build a bridge between these services, enabling a multi-agency assessment approach to allow active and timely assessment and intervention, significantly increasing the visibility of perpetrators. Notably, multi-agency assessment is not a new concept, and existing frameworks and approaches could be adapted to best suit the DVTAC model.

Intensive surveillance and case management

The DVTAC introduces a focused intelligence-led policing approach to assess the risk of severe violence. Upon identifying a high-risk individual, case management and mental health support may be implemented to de-escalate the risk of offending during the acute period, and to facilitate longer term behaviour change. This approach also has the capacity to help victim-survivors out of high-risk environments, by assisting them to draw on existing services, such as the Leaving Violence Program, which offers financial support, safety planning and help to address any experiences of technology-enabled abuse.

DVTAC analysts would undertake risk assessment of the individual referred using available local, interjurisdictional and interagency intelligence; information on mental health service contacts; and information supplied by community DV services. Having assessed the risk posed by the perpetrator, DVTAC analysts could then produce intelligence products for police describing the nature of the escalating behaviour against a current or former intimate partner. These products would contribute to decision-making regarding whether an intensive policing and/or mental health response is required to protect the victim-survivor from serious harm during high-risk periods.

Multi-agency intervention and monitoring for perpetrators and victim-survivors

Where an individual is considered high risk, DVTAC staff would develop and implement appropriate interventions, which may feature an intensive policing response where the risk is extremely high, or a collaborative policing and mental health approach. The DVTAC would continue to monitor and manage the perpetrator until the risk of serious DV has de-escalated and the matter can be transitioned to appropriate community and mental health services. Where an individual does not meet the threshold for management by the DVTAC, they may be referred on to other services as required. Where law enforcement or community agencies have further concerns, these individuals may be referred back to the DVTAC for re-assessment.

How does the DVTAC differ from the FTAC?

The DVTAC differs from the FTAC as it focuses specifically on the prevention of IPH, while the FTAC deals with individuals who are fixated on public figures, such as politicians. As such, risk assessment processes and associated interventions delivered by the DVTAC could be tailored to the unique characteristics of DV offending and risk. For example, while the FTAC engages with those who are fixated on public figures, who they are unlikely to have any real-world contact with, the DVTAC would engage with perpetrators who may have ongoing and regular contact with victim-survivors because of child custody arrangements and legal processes. As such, the DVTAC would have a strong focus on monitoring perpetrators while they are in the community, as well as safety planning with victim-survivors.

Limitations to the FTAC model

Risk and threat assessment

While reasonably accurate methods exist for assessing whether a perpetrator is high risk for repeated DV perpetration, methods for assessing the risk of IPH are less developed (Graham et al. 2021; van der Put, Gubbels & Assink 2019). This is a pivotal distinction: while assessing the risk of repeated perpetration is possible, assessing the likelihood of escalation to homicide is not. While this caveat illustrates the complexity in understanding the behaviour of IPH perpetrators, it also supports the potential benefit of a focused, intensive and collaborative approach to assessing the threat posed by DV perpetrators, which brings together a range of information sources and expertise. The FTAC model is uniquely placed to assess the risk of escalation to serious violence among perpetrators, in the absence of a reliable actuarial risk assessment tool. It is also possible that bringing together information from different sources, as we propose, may allow for the future design of a risk assessment instrument for IPH perpetration.

A further, pivotal consideration of the model is whether a perpetrator may escalate in response to intervention by authorities. Any intervention model must consider the possible outcomes of intervening and put procedures in place to mitigate the risk that making contact with a perpetrator will lead to escalation.

The focus on mental health

Collaboration between police and mental health professionals is at the centre of the FTAC model. However, mental health is not the only driver of IPH and, as this chapter has already made clear, is only one potential intervention point. A decision would need to be made as to whether a DVTAC retains a focus on mental health—and therefore only responds to individuals who present with underlying mental health issues—or whether the primary intervention is behaviour change more generally.

Capacity

The intensity of the FTAC model and focus on fixated individuals means that it supports a relatively small number of clients at any one time. Consideration would need to be given to how this model can be adapted to the prevention of IPH, given the constraints of existing risk assessments and the number of DV perpetrators who have contact with police and other referring agencies. Stringent eligibility criteria would be required to ensure that the surveillance and intervention components of the FTAC model are not diluted to accommodate a larger number of potential clients.

Summary

The DVTAC offers a multi-agency approach, intensively targeting DV perpetrators who may be at high risk of escalation to IPH. However, it is important to note that research in this area is exploratory. While we believe that the DVTAC is a promising model, it does not deal with the whole problem of IPH, and we do not suggest that it could replace or otherwise supersede any existing approaches to addressing DV perpetration. Rather, the DVTAC offers a complementary and additional approach focusing on an important group of DV perpetrators who may escalate to IPH. This group is difficult to target, and these perpetrators likely go unseen by individual agencies until they escalate to serious violence. On the evidence currently available, a small scale, rigorously evaluated trial of a DVTAC model is reasonable. This service has the potential to improve the visibility of perpetrators who are high risk for IPH by enhancing referral pathways from community services, ultimately improving the safety of women in the community.

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7. Prevalence of viewing online child sexual abuse material among Australian adults

Rick Brown

Introduction

Internationally, reports of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) have grown rapidly in recent years. The US-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2023) received almost 32 million CSAM reports from electronic service providers in 2022, representing a 47 percent increase since 2020. CSAM is available through a wide range of outlets, including (among others) websites, forums, peer-to-peer networks, file-storage sites and social media sites (Brown 2022). This has led to what Wortley (2012) called supply-side demand, with the increasing availability fuelling an increase in consumption of CSAM. However, relatively little is known about the nature and extent of that demand.

Previous estimates of the proportion of the population viewing CSAM have varied due to differences in sampling, survey design and questioning. A survey of 1,902 17–20-year-old males (mean age of 18 years) in Sweden examined the prevalence and frequency of pornography use, finding that 97.8 percent had viewed pornography at least once (Svedin, Åkerman & Priebe 2011). Among the questions asked about pornography use, respondents were asked whether they had ever viewed pornography involving sex between adults and children aged under 15 years.

Of the 1,861 respondents who had ever viewed pornography, 4.6 percent reported they had ever viewed material involving sex between adults and children. This was more prevalent for those viewing pornography frequently (more or less daily; 17.0%) compared with others who had viewed pornography less frequently (3.1%; Svedin, Åkerman & Priebe 2011). Reanalysis of this survey data by Seto et al. (2015) calculated a prevalence estimate for the entire sample and not just those reporting having ever viewed pornography. Using the same definition of CSAM (having ever viewed pornography involving sex between adults and children aged under 15 years), 4.2 percent reported having viewed such material.

In a survey of 8,718 German men aged 18 to 89 years, respondents were asked whether as adults they had ever watched pornographic depictions of children to get sexually aroused, with 2.2 percent of respondents reporting they had (Dombert et al. 2016). Using an online panel survey, Seigfried-Spellar and Rogers (2013) surveyed respondents aged 18 years and over in the United States about their internet pornography use. Of the 630 surveyed, 502 (80%) were women and 128 (20%) were men. Respondents were asked if they had ever viewed pornographic materials featuring individuals under the age of 18 years. The prevalence of viewing such material was found to be higher for men ($n=16$, 12.5%) than for women ($n=17$, 3.4%).

In Australia, a recent online panel survey of 1,945 men aged 18 years and over examined a range of issues associated with child sexual abuse perpetration (Salter et al. 2023). The survey asked respondents whether they had knowingly and deliberately viewed pornographic material containing people below the age of 18, finding that 2.5 percent of respondents reported having done so.

Characteristics of CSAM consumers

CSAM consumers are often described as being heterogeneous, coming from a diverse range of backgrounds (Prichard & Spiranovic 2014; Shelton et al. 2016). However, there are some recurring characteristics that can be identified from previous studies (Brown & Bricknell 2018). CSAM consumers typically have been found to be male (Prat & Jonas 2012; Seigfried-Spellar 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell 2011), white/Caucasian (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015; Navarro & Jasinski 2015) and single (Babchishin, Hanson & Hermann 2011; Navarro & Jasinski 2015; Price, Lambie & Krynen 2015; Seigfried-Spellar 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell 2011). CSAM consumers have also been found to have typically completed a higher level of education than other sexual offenders (Armstrong & Mellor 2016; Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015; Faust et al. 2015; Seto et al. 2012) and to have a higher income level (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015). They often have no parental responsibility (Brown & Bricknell 2018) and are less likely than contact child sexual offenders to live with children (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015; Seto et al. 2012).

Evidence in relation to age appears mixed, with some studies finding that CSAM consumers tend to be younger than other types of child sexual offenders (Aslan & Edelmann 2014; Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015; Seto & Eke 2005). Other studies have found that CSAM consumers are more likely to be older than other offenders (Brown & Bricknell 2018; Faust et al. 2015).

There is also contradictory evidence about the employment status of CSAM consumers. While some researchers have found the majority of CSAM consumers are employed (Clevenger, Navarro & Jasinski 2016; Tomak et al. 2009; Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell 2011), a meta-analysis of the literature found that online sexual offenders were more likely to be unemployed compared with both the general population and with offline sexual offenders (Babchishin, Hanson & Hermann 2011). However, a subsequent meta-analysis found that offline sexual offenders were more likely than online sexual offenders to be unemployed (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015).

In terms of criminal justice involvement, Dowling et al. (2021) noted that CSAM offenders were less likely to have previous convictions than other types of child sexual offenders. In their systematic review of the literature, Babchishin, Hanson and Hermann (2011) estimated that just 12 percent of online child sexual offenders had a prior criminal conviction, substantially lower than for contact child sexual offenders. Babchishin, Hanson and VanZuylen (2015) similarly found that contact child sexual offenders had higher rates of prior offending than online child sexual offenders.

This study set out to explore these issues in further detail. It aimed to provide an estimate of the prevalence of CSAM consumers in the general population and to identify the demographic characteristics of such offenders.

Methodology

Sample

This study used data from a survey that was primarily designed to explore the political and social attitudes and beliefs of Australians. The survey was administered by Roy Morgan Research on behalf of the Australian Institute of Criminology, and fieldwork was undertaken between 3 November and 6 December 2022. The survey targeted individuals aged 18 years and over who were signed up to receive survey invitations through online panels accessed by the survey company. Non-probability proportional quota sampling was used to ensure the sample was broadly reflective of the spread of people living in Australia. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population, stratified by age, sex and usual place of residence. Following data cleaning to remove poor quality responses and duplicates, the data were weighted by age, sex and usual place of residence to ensure they were broadly proportional to the Australian population. Additional weights corrected for education level and internet and social media use. The final sample comprised 13,302 respondents who completed the survey. All results presented in this chapter are based on weighted data.

Measures

The survey included two questions that could be used to estimate the prevalence of CSAM consumption. The first asked, 'In the last year, have you encountered sexually explicit material of people who are or look under the age of 18 online (whether unintentionally or otherwise)?' Respondents could answer with 'yes', 'no', 'don't know', or 'prefer not to say'. Those responding 'yes' were asked the follow-up question, 'Did you encounter this sexually explicit material of people who are or look under the age of 18 by mistake?' Again, respondents could answer with 'yes', 'no', 'don't know', or 'prefer not to say'. Individuals were coded as having consumed CSAM if they had encountered such material (answering 'yes' to the first question) and had not done so by mistake (answering 'no' to the follow-up question).

Limitations of the study

This study has a number of potential limitations. The survey design involved the use of a non-random sample selected through online panel membership. As a result, it is not possible to extrapolate to the wider population. In addition, while the quota sampling and subsequent weighting took into account a range of demographic factors, it is also possible that those who sign up to participate in online panel surveys differ from the general population in ways that have not been addressed. However, this may be partially offset by the fact that the survey captured data about online behaviour among those who were more likely to be computer literate.

The measures of CSAM consumption used in this study provide a conservative estimate of the issue. They exclude those who may have viewed CSAM by mistake, having come across it unintentionally, as this study was interested in the prevalence of individuals who were motivated to view CSAM. It also has a relatively narrow temporal frame of reference, focusing on CSAM consumption in the past year, rather than at any time. Most previous studies have used a more expansive temporal frame of reference. In this study, a one-year temporal frame was used because it aligned with the temporal frame for other questions asked in the survey. Both of these factors—the definition of CSAM consumption and the temporal frame—are likely to lead to underestimation of the scale of CSAM consumption in this study when compared with most previous studies.

The current study was also unable to account for differences in the regularity with which individuals viewed CSAM intentionally. There may well be important differences between those who viewed CSAM once or twice and those who viewed it on a regular basis. The binary nature of the questions asked (ie viewed or not) did not account for nuances associated with the extent of CSAM consumption.

Results

Most respondents reported they had not encountered sexually explicit material of children over the past year. Of the 12,756 survey participants who provided a 'yes' or 'no' response to this question, 595 (4.7%) indicated they had encountered such material. There were also 546 individuals (4.1% of the entire sample of 13,302) who provided a 'don't know' or 'prefer not say' response to this question and were excluded from further analysis. Among the 595 individuals who had encountered CSAM, most ($n=462$, 77.7%) encountered it by mistake. There were 101 respondents who reported they had not encountered it by mistake and were therefore categorised as having intentionally viewed CSAM. This gives an overall prevalence estimate for intentionally viewing CSAM of 0.8 percent (101/12,724 who provided a response). Note that there were also 32 individuals (5.4% of those who had encountered CSAM) who provided a 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say' response to the secondary question on intentionality and were excluded from further analyses, although they become relevant later when interpreting the results. Excluding the 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say' responses was a conservative approach given that it was unclear whether these were socially acceptable responses given by those who had intentionally viewed CSAM, or were responses from those who had not viewed such material but were uncomfortable answering the questions.

Differences in demographic factors

Bivariate analyses explored the prevalence of viewing CSAM across a range of demographic variables. Most of the variables were selected based on prior evidence from studies of CSAM prevalence, including gender, age, racial/ethnic origin (addressed here by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, place of birth and language background), relationship status, living with children, education, employment, income, and criminal justice involvement. The survey also offered an opportunity to explore variables that have received less attention in previous studies, including having served in the military, living with disability and sexuality. Table 1 shows the distribution of each demographic variable within the sample and the proportion of each group that had intentionally viewed CSAM in the past year. Variables associated with intentionally viewing CSAM were examined using Pearson's chi square test. There was a significant difference between gender groups, with males more likely to intentionally view CSAM (1.1%) than females (0.6%). While non-binary and other genders were included, none reported having intentionally viewed CSAM.

Statistically significant differences in the intentional viewing of CSAM were also found for the following variables:

- age (1.3% of 18–34 year olds compared with 0.6% of those aged 35 years and older);
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background (3.6% of Indigenous respondents compared with 0.7% of non-Indigenous respondents);
- language most often spoken at home (1.9% of those who most often speak a language other than English at home, compared with 0.7% of those who most often speak English at home); and
- disability (1.7% of those with any disability compared with 0.7% of those with no disability).

Table 1 shows there was no statistical difference in the proportion reporting intentionally viewing CSAM based on place of birth, sexuality, relationship status, or living with children.

Table 1: Demographic variable distribution of survey responses and prevalence of intentionally viewing CSAM (weighted $n=13,302$)

	Variable distribution		Prevalence of intentionally viewing CSAM		
	n^a	%	n	% ^b	χ^2
Gender					
Male	6,470	48.6	65	1.1	**
Female	6,770	50.9	36	0.6	
Non-binary	62	0.5	0	0	
Age					
18–34 years	3,847	28.9	47	1.3	***
35+ years	9,455	71.1	54	0.6	
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander					
Yes	362	2.7	12	3.6	***
No	12,836	97.3	88	0.7	
Place of birth					
Australia	10,347	78.0	74	0.8	ns
Overseas	2,919	22.0	27	1.0	
Language most often spoken at home					
English	12,576	94.8	88	0.7	***
Other	695	5.2	13	1.9	
Living with disability					
Yes	1,708	13.0	27	1.7	***
No	11,423	87.0	72	0.7	
Sexuality					
Heterosexual	12,019	91.5	92	0.8	ns
LGB+	1,112	8.5	9	0.8	
Relationship status					
Single	2,971	22.5	28	1.0	ns
Married/in a relationship	8,385	63.4	62	0.8	
Separated/divorced/widowed	1,862	14.1	11	0.6	
Living with children					
Yes	4,887	36.9	40	0.9	ns
No	8,357	63.1	61	0.8	

Chi-square significance: *** $p<0.001$, ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$, ns= $p\geq0.05$

a: The demographic distributions n will not necessarily sum to 13,302 (the original sample size) due to missing data

b: The percentage intentionally viewing CSAM excludes those who responded with 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say' to the questions about whether they viewed CSAM in the past 12 months. This denominator will be different for each variable

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Differences in education, employment and income

Bivariate analyses also explored a range of education, employment and income variables (Table 2). There were no statistically significant differences in the proportion of respondents intentionally viewing CSAM in terms of education level, employment status or income level. However, there was a statistically significant difference based on military service. Those who were currently serving, or who had previously served, in the military were more likely to have intentionally viewed CSAM (2.8%) than those who had never served in the military (0.6%).

Table 2: Education, employment and income variable distribution of survey responses and prevalence of intentionally viewing CSAM (weighted n=13,302)					
	Variable distribution		Prevalence of intentionally viewing CSAM		
	n ^a	%	n	% ^b	χ ²
Highest education level					
Below year 10	237	1.8	3	1.4	ns
Year 10/11/TAFE or equivalent	5,456	41.2	36	0.7	
Year 12	2,313	17.5	19	0.9	
Degree	5,203	39.2	42	0.9	
Other	49	0.4	0	0	
Employment					
Employed full-time	5,592	42.5	43	0.8	ns
Employed part-time/casual	2,757	21.0	22	0.8	
Not in the workforce	4,808	36.5	34	0.7	
Serving/served in the military					
Yes	1,202	9.1	31	2.8	***
No	12,055	90.9	69	0.6	
Income					
Less than \$18,201	1,618	13.3	12	0.8	ns
\$18,201–\$45,000	3,222	26.5	24	0.8	
\$45,001–\$120,000	5,663	46.6	33	0.6	
\$120,001–\$180,000	1,207	9.9	14	1.3	
Over \$180,000	446	3.7	6	1.3	

Chi-square significance: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05, ns=p≥0.05

a: The n for the education, employment and income distributions will not necessarily sum to 13,302 (the original sample size) due to missing data

b: The percentage intentionally viewing CSAM excludes those who responded with ‘don’t know’ or ‘prefer not to say’ to the questions on whether they viewed CSAM in the past 12 months. This denominator will be different for each variable

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Criminal justice involvement

Criminal justice involvement was examined based on whether respondents had ever been arrested, charged, summonsed, convicted or had any findings of guilt for a criminal offence. Separate questions were asked about whether this had occurred under the age of 18 years (as a juvenile) or when they were 18 years or older (as an adult).

Table 3 shows there was a statistically significant difference between those who had criminal justice involvement as a juvenile compared with those who did not. While 2.4 percent of those with criminal justice involvement as a juvenile had intentionally viewed CSAM, 0.7 percent of respondents without such involvement had done so. Similar results were found for adult criminal justice involvement. While 1.6 percent of those with adult criminal justice involvement had intentionally viewed CSAM, 0.7 percent of those without adult criminal justice involvement had done so.

Table 3: Criminal justice involvement variable distribution of survey responses and prevalence of intentionally viewing CSAM (weighted $n=13,302$)

	Variable distribution		Prevalence of intentionally viewing CSAM		
	n^a	%	n	% ^b	χ^2
Criminal justice involvement as a juvenile					
Yes	450	3.4	11	2.4	***
No	12,753	96.6	89	0.7	
Criminal justice involvement as an adult					
Yes	1,063	8.1	16	1.6	**
No	12,131	91.9	83	0.7	

Chi-square significance: *** $p<0.001$, ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$, ns= $p\geq 0.05$

a: The criminal justice involvement distributions n will not necessarily sum to 13,302 (the original sample size) due to missing data

b: The percentage intentionally viewing CSAM excludes those who responded with 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say' to the questions on whether they viewed CSAM in the past 12 months. This denominator will be different for each variable

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Multivariate analysis of factors related to intentionally viewing CSAM

The bivariate analysis so far has identified eight variables that would appear to be associated with intentionally viewing CSAM: gender, age, military service, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, language most often spoken at home, living with disability, criminal justice involvement as a juvenile and criminal justice involvement as an adult. To account for interactions among these variables, logistic regression modelling was undertaken to identify the strength of each factor in explaining intentional viewing of CSAM when controlling for each of the other factors.

The model presented in Table 4 identifies five variables that were associated with intentionally viewing CSAM. These were age, military service, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, language most often spoken at home and living with disability. Being aged 18–34 years, serving or having served in the military, being from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, speaking a language other than English most often at home and living with disability each increased the likelihood of viewing CSAM intentionally, controlling for all other factors in the model. Given the relatively low prevalence of intentionally viewing CSAM, the analysis presented in Table 4 was repeated applying rare event logistic regression (King & Zeng 2001), using the `relogit` command in Stata 16.1. This approach identified the same set of five variables as statistically significant. The choice was made to use the standard logistic regression analysis (as shown in Table 4) as this allowed predictive probabilities to be calculated (see Figure 1) which was not possible using rare event analysis.

Table 4 also shows that gender and the two criminal justice involvement variables were not statistically significant when controlling for the other variables in the model. The lack of statistically significant differences by gender is interesting, given that males are typically found to be more likely to consume CSAM than females (Prat & Jonas 2012; Seigfried-Spellar 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell 2011), although it should be noted that the significance level only marginally falls outside the conventional $p < 0.05$ threshold.

Table 4: Logistic regression model for variables associated with intentionally viewing CSAM (weighted $n=12,346$)

Independent variables	Coefficient	Significance	95% confidence interval
Gender—male (vs female) ^a	0.45	0.060	-0.02, 0.92
Age—18–34 years (vs 35+ years)	0.65	0.003	0.22, 1.08
Serving/served in the military (vs no military service)	1.09	<0.001	0.57, 1.60
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (vs non-Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)	0.99	0.008	0.26, 1.73
Language most commonly spoken at home—Other (vs English)	1.01	0.001	0.40, 1.63
Living with disability (vs no disability)	0.77	0.003	0.26, 1.27
Criminal justice involvement as a juvenile (vs no criminal justice involvement as a juvenile)	0.49	0.310	-0.45, 1.42
Criminal justice involvement as an adult (vs no criminal justice involvement as an adult)	0.37	0.345	-0.40, 1.14
Constant	-5.85	<0.001	-6.24, -5.46

a: The non-binary/other gender category was removed from the analysis as it produced a coefficient of 0 (due to there being no observations of CSAM being intentionally viewed)

Note: Goodness of fit for binary response models: $F(9,12337)=0.58, p=0.8164$. Non-significant result suggests the model was a good fit

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

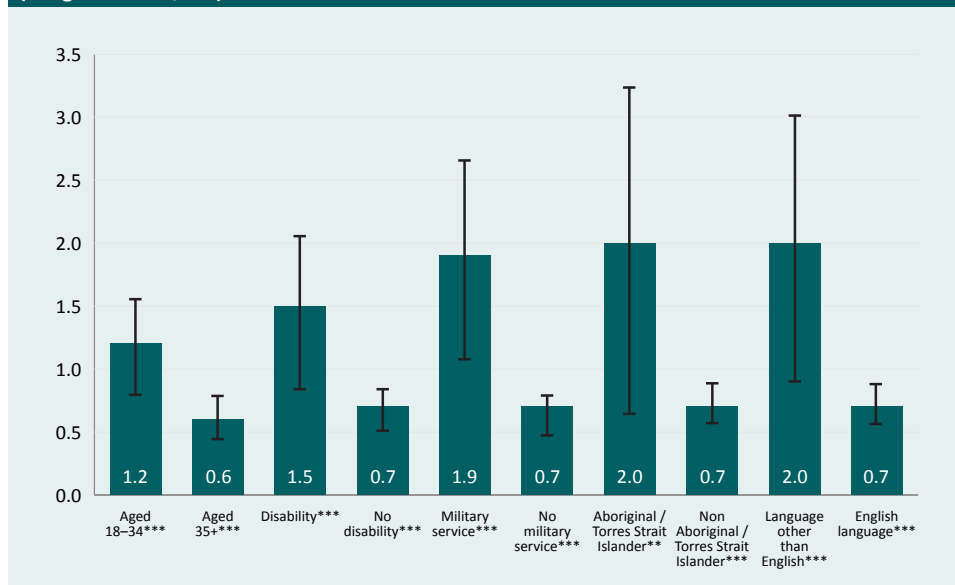
One possible explanation for this finding could be that males who viewed CSAM were more likely to answer ‘don’t know’ or ‘prefer not say’, thereby being excluded from the analysis presented in Table 4. Analysis of adjusted residuals in bivariate analyses when ‘don’t know’ or ‘prefer not say’ were included showed that these answers were more likely for those who were male, who were aged 18–34 years, who were gay/lesbian, who were single, who were serving or had served in the military, who were from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, who most often spoke a language other than English at home and who had criminal justice involvement as an adult. However, further multivariate analysis (using logistic regression) to determine which variables influenced whether respondents answered ‘don’t know’ or ‘prefer not to say’ to either of the CSAM questions indicated that just two variables were relevant. Gender (particularly being male) and relationship status (particularly being single) were associated with ‘don’t know’/‘prefer not to say’ responses. Given that both being male and being single are frequently identified in the literature as being associated with CSAM consumption, this may suggest (although it cannot be confirmed from the data available) that respondents falling into these demographic groups were more likely to respond ‘don’t know’/‘prefer not to say’ when they had in fact intentionally viewed CSAM.

The lack of statistical significance associated with the criminal justice involvement variables is more difficult to explain. There would appear to be an interaction effect between serving or having served in the military and prior criminal justice involvement, with statistically significant bivariate associations for both juvenile and adult criminal justice variables. When an interaction between juvenile criminal justice involvement and military service was included in the logistic regression model and these results were compared with those from the original model shown in Table 4 (using a likelihood ratio test) no statistically significant difference was shown between the models. However, including an interaction between adult criminal justice involvement and military service improved the model to a level approaching statistical significance ($p=0.07$). The lack of significance for criminal justice involvement variables shown in Table 4 may therefore be partly explained by military service being a stronger explanatory variable.

Predicted probabilities

Predicted probabilities provide a means to estimate the likelihood of an outcome in one group compared with another (Muller & MacLehose 2014). They can be calculated following a logistic regression model and they control for other variables in the model. As the scores are standardised between 0 and 1, these can be interpreted in a similar way to percentages. Figure 1 shows the predicted probability of intentionally viewing CSAM for each of the five variables found to be statistically significant in Table 4.

Figure 1: Predicted probability of intentionally viewing CSAM by selected variables (%) (weighted $n=12,346$)



Note: Includes 95% level confidence intervals

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Where age was concerned, 1.2 percent of those aged 18–34 years were predicted to have intentionally viewed CSAM compared with 0.6 percent of those aged 35+ years. Among respondents living with disability, 1.5 percent were predicted to have intentionally viewed CSAM compared with 0.7 percent of those with no disability.

The next highest predicted probability related to those with military service, with 1.9 percent predicted to have intentionally viewed CSAM compared with 0.7 percent of those that had not served in the military. The next highest predicted probability was associated with those who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 2.0 percent of whom were predicted to have intentionally viewed CSAM compared with 0.7 percent for respondents who did not identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. The final (and equal highest) predicted probability was associated with individuals who most often spoke a language other than English at home, 2.0 percent of whom were predicted to have intentionally viewed CSAM. This compared with a predicted probability of 0.7 percent of those who mostly spoke English at home. It should be noted that the results for respondents who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders and those who mostly spoke a language other than English at home need to be treated with caution due to the relatively large confidence intervals shown in Figure 1. The confidence intervals for those identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders overlap with the confidence intervals for those from other backgrounds; this means one cannot be entirely certain that the predicted probabilities between these two groups are in fact different. This variable was therefore excluded from further discussion below.

Examining the percentage point difference between each set of predicted probabilities shows that the greatest difference was for those who mostly spoke a language other than English at home (1.3 percentage point difference). This was followed by serving/having served in the military (1.2 percentage point difference). These percentage point differences equate to their predicted probabilities being more than double those of others not represented in those groups. Individuals living with disability were 0.8 percentage points more likely to intentionally view CSAM than those with no disability (also reflecting a predicted probability more than double that of people without disability). The margin was smallest for age, with a 0.6 percentage point difference between those aged 18–34 years and those aged 35+ years (although even here the predicted probability for those aged 18–34 years was almost double that of their older counterparts).

Conclusion

This study examined the prevalence of viewing CSAM in a large sample of respondents to a survey on the diversity of political and social beliefs in Australia. CSAM consumption was measured in response to two questions: the first asked about whether the respondents had in the previous year accessed material of a sexual nature involving individuals who appeared to be under the age of 18; the second question asked whether this material had been viewed by mistake. The results indicate that intentionally viewing CSAM (as defined in this study) is relatively rare. Overall, 4.7 percent of respondents had encountered CSAM in the previous year. Just 0.8 percent of respondents had intentionally viewed CSAM. These rates of CSAM consumption are lower than those found in previous studies, which have ranged from 2.2 percent to 4.6 percent. This disparity will partially be a result of the temporal framing of the questions asked, with previous studies focusing on ever having viewed CSAM, while this study asked about viewing CSAM in the past year. The focus on intentionality of CSAM viewing will also have contributed to a lower estimate in the current study.

Certain groups were more likely to have viewed CSAM intentionally in the past year. These included individuals who mostly spoke a language other than English at home (predicted probability of 2.0%), those who were serving or had served in the military (predicted probability of 1.9%), individuals living with disability (predicted probability of 1.5%) and those aged 18–34 years (predicted probability of 1.2%).

The finding that those who spoke a language other than English at home were more likely to view CSAM would appear to be contrary to previous studies, although this is subject to definitional differences. Previous studies have been more concerned with race/ethnicity, and have found that individuals from white/Caucasian backgrounds were more likely to view CSAM in societies that were also predominantly white/Caucasian. This suggests further investigation is required to understand why this pattern may differ in Australia.

Regarding the findings about individuals living with disability, there is evidence to suggest that individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (which would be covered by the disability definition used in this study) may be more likely to view CSAM (Marinos & Whittingham 2020; Sugrue 2017). Possible reasons for this include a desire to connect with individuals on a similar emotional or intellectual level, difficulty correctly estimating the age of individuals in material of a sexual nature, and difficulty recognising facial expressions such as fear or pain (Allely, Kennedy & Warren 2019).

Viewing of CSAM by those serving or having served in the military has not previously been addressed in prevalence studies of this kind. However, a qualitative study of pornography use noted that CSAM consumption may have resulted from the prolific availability of adult pornography in the military (Garman 2021).

The findings support previous research that has shown CSAM offenders tend to be relatively young, or at least younger than other sexual offenders (Aslan & Edelmann 2014; Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015; Seto & Eke 2005). However, of all the significant findings, being aged between 18 and 34 years did not increase the predicted likelihood of CSAM consumption as much as other factors.

Equivocal results were found for those identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. While this factor was found to be significantly related to CSAM consumption in the logistic regression modelling, the wide confidence intervals associated with the predicted probabilities (where overlap existed between those who did and did not identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders) mean these findings need to be treated with caution.

While previous studies have found differences in employment status and educational level between CSAM offenders and other child sexual offenders, this study found no statistically significant difference in these characteristics based on bivariate analyses. Similarly, no differences were found between those on different income levels.

Previous research has also shown that men and those who are single are more likely to view CSAM, yet neither were found to be statistically significant in this study. There were indications that this could have been due to respondents failing to answer the questions truthfully, preferring instead to answer with 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say' when asked about CSAM. This remains conjecture but it is nevertheless an important consideration for the way these questions are asked in future studies.

Although some previous studies have suggested that CSAM offenders are heterogeneous, the current study clearly identifies differences across a number of demographic variables. However, it remains unclear to what extent this may reflect differences in online behaviours. Indeed, it is possible that those most likely to encounter CSAM intentionally visit different kinds of websites to others, or are more likely to have distorted cognition that justifies CSAM consumption (Babchishin et al. 2018). This highlights the need for further analysis of these potentially important factors to understand the reasons why some people consume CSAM while most do not. There may also be important differences between those who intentionally view CSAM on one occasion and those who do so repeatedly. This study was unable to differentiate these groups, and this highlights an area for further investigation.

These findings also identify opportunities for targeting and tailoring interventions to address the viewing of CSAM. From an institutional perspective, there may be benefit in exploring prevention and treatment interventions aimed at military service personnel and veterans. This could, for example, include the use of website blocking and pop-up messages used on organisational IT systems (Hunn et al. 2023).

It may also be possible to tailor online treatment programs to address CSAM viewing (Gannoni et al. 2023) to specific ethnic groups, including making material available in multiple languages. Ultimately, the viewing of CSAM will be tackled most effectively by preventing its distribution in the first instance. The significant increases in reported CSAM observed in recent years will need to be addressed primarily through an increased and sustained effort by electronic service providers to prevent the uploading and distribution of such material held on their servers. This would have a universal impact, regardless of which demographic groups are most vulnerable to CSAM consumption.

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8. Prevalence and predictors of requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation on online platforms

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Introduction

With the proliferation of social media, individuals across the globe are increasingly taking to online platforms to share various aspects of their personal lives. An increasingly common practice is that of ‘sharenting’—the act of sharing details about parenting and children’s lives online (Romero-Rodríguez et al. 2022; Steinberg 2017). Indeed, a recent study of 493 parents of young children in the United States found that most parents who were active on social media shared photos of their children online and felt comfortable doing so (Amon et al. 2022). While such practices offer individuals the chance to remain connected with family and friends, among other benefits (Auxier et al. 2020; Briazu, Floccia & Hanoch 2021; Ní Bhroin et al. 2022), sharing personal information and photos of children online may place some children at risk of exploitation and harm (Lavorgna, Tartari & Ugwudike 2022).

Individuals with a range of motivations can take advantage of the information shared by parents about their children online (Williams-Ceci et al. 2021). Parents themselves recognise that there are several risks associated with sharing photos of children online, expressing concerns regarding digital ownership, fraud, privacy and safeguarding issues (Auxier et al. 2020; Briazu, Floccia & Hanoch 2021). Particularly concerning is the potential for such information and material to be obtained by offenders and used to facilitate child sexual exploitation (CSE)—for example, offenders may groom parents or guardians to create or distribute child sexual abuse material (CSAM) (Teunissen et al. 2022).

There is a lack of empirical research into the relationship between sharenting and requests for facilitated CSE. There is, however, evidence to suggest that some individuals with pre-existing relationships with children, such as parents or guardians, may be approached online by other adults to facilitate CSE (Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021; Salter et al. 2021; Teunissen et al. 2022; WeProtect Global Alliance 2021). Moreover, research suggests that a significant proportion of CSE involves parents or guardians producing and distributing material of their own children or children they have access to (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017; Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021; Salter et al. 2021). For example, among 82 cases of CSAM production and distribution by parents and/or parental figures, Salter et al. (2021) identified three ‘types’ of parental CSAM producers: the male offender who exploits his own children, the male offender who forms a relationship with a woman and exploits her children, and the biological mother who produces CSAM of her own children at the request of men she knows in person or online. This raises the possibility that sharing information regarding one’s access to children online (eg posting photos of or information about children), especially on public platforms (eg public social media profiles, dating sites), may place individuals at increased risk of receiving requests for facilitated CSE. Indeed, CSE is becoming increasingly prevalent on social media and other online platforms. A recent report found that Meta, who owns Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp, accounted for 93 percent of 21.7 million CSE reports received by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (Teunissen & Napier 2022).

There is therefore an urgent need to identify how such material is being obtained, and how and where contact may be established between offenders and facilitators of CSE. A recent survey revealed that dating apps and websites are one such online platform where requests may be made for facilitated CSE (Teunissen et al. 2022). Of 9,987 respondents living in Australia, 12.4 percent had received requests to facilitate the CSE of their own children or children they had access to. The present study aimed to extend this research by investigating whether requests to facilitate (ie arrange or assist in the production of) CSE occur across other online platforms, including social media services. The research additionally aimed to identify any characteristics or behaviours—namely, sharing photos of or information regarding children online—that may increase the likelihood of receiving requests for facilitated CSE.

Methodology

The present study was conducted as part of a larger online national survey examining the online experiences of Australian adults. The survey was administered to 5,304 Australians aged 18 years and over by WhereTo Research between 11 and 29 November 2022. Respondents were recruited from three online non-probability-based convenience survey panels (Octopus Group, Pure Profile, and Research Profile), with quotas (based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data) placed on gender, age, location (state and regionality), socio-economic status, labour force participation, educational attainment and cultural diversity. Following completion of the larger survey, all respondents were recontacted via email and/or messages sent via the online panel between 23 December 2022 and 25 January 2023 with a series of questions regarding facilitated CSE. The response rate was 76 percent, resulting in a sample of 4,011 respondents for the present study. Online informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to completion of the larger survey and the follow-up survey. This research was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Measures of sharenting

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had engaged in ‘sharenting’ in the last 12 months. Specifically, respondents were asked whether, in the last 12 months, they had shared a photo online of a child in their care, or of another child they knew. Respondents could select multiple responses from the following:

- No;
- Yes, on a dating site;
- Yes, on a private social media profile or post;
- Yes, on a public social media profile or post;
- Yes, by direct messages to a single person;
- Yes, by direct message in a group chat;
- Yes, somewhere else; and
- Prefer not to say.

Respondents were also asked whether ‘you mention or share that you are a parent, carer, or have a close relationship with a child or children on any of your public profiles? This includes dating profiles and other social media profiles’. Respondents could select ‘Yes’, ‘No’, or ‘Prefer not to say’.

For analyses, requests for facilitated CSE were first compared among respondents who reported that they had shared a photo of or information regarding children online to those who had not done so. We subsequently disaggregated the former group of respondents to compare those who had publicly shared a photo of or information regarding children online (on a dating site, on a public social media post, or on other public profiles) to those who had shared photos privately only (on a private social media post, by direct message to a single person, or by direct message in a group chat).

Measures of facilitated child sexual exploitation

The focus of the present study was on adult respondents receiving online requests to facilitate (arrange, assist) the sexual exploitation of children they had access to (hereafter referred to as 'requests for facilitated CSE'). Specifically, respondents were asked about their experiences in the last 12 months of someone online:

- asking them for sexual images of a child/children they knew;
- pressuring them for sexual images of a child/children they knew;
- asking questions of a sexual nature about a child/children they knew; or
- offering payment for sexual images of a child/children they knew.

Respondents could select multiple of the above response options, or 'None of these' or 'Prefer not to say'.

Sample demographics

For sample demographic characteristics, see Table 1. There was a relatively even split of men (51.0%) and women (48.6%) respondents, though few respondents were non-binary or gender diverse (0.4%). The largest proportion of respondents were aged between 35 and 54 years (40.9%), with a relatively even split of 18- to 34-year-olds (31.0%) and people aged 55 years and over (28.1%). Most respondents identified as straight (89.3%), with one in 10 (9.6%) identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, unsure/questioning or another non-heterosexual orientation (LGB+). The sample included people with disability (18.7%), linguistically diverse people (ie respondents who reported speaking a language other than English at home; 20.2%), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (2.0%).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of survey respondents (n=4,011)

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Men	2,044	51.0
Women	1,948	48.6
Non-binary and gender diverse	17	0.4
Prefer not to answer	2	0.0
Age (years)		
18–34	1,245	31.0
35–54	1,639	40.9
55+	1,127	28.1
Sexual orientation		
Straight	3,583	89.3
LGB+	386	9.6
Don't know	10	0.2
Prefer not to answer	32	0.8
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	81	2.0
Linguistically diverse	810	20.2
Disability	749	18.7

Note: Men includes 2,041 cis men and 3 transgender men; women includes 1,945 cis women, 1 transgender woman, and 2 sistergirls (see below). The 'Non-binary and gender diverse' category includes 14 non-binary respondents and 3 who use a different term for their gender to those listed in the survey. LGB+ includes those respondents who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual, or unsure/questioning, as well as those who indicated that they use a different term. Disability includes those respondents who reported experiencing any physical, intellectual, cognitive, emotional or other conditions, challenges or disabilities that have lasted, or are likely to last, for at least six months.

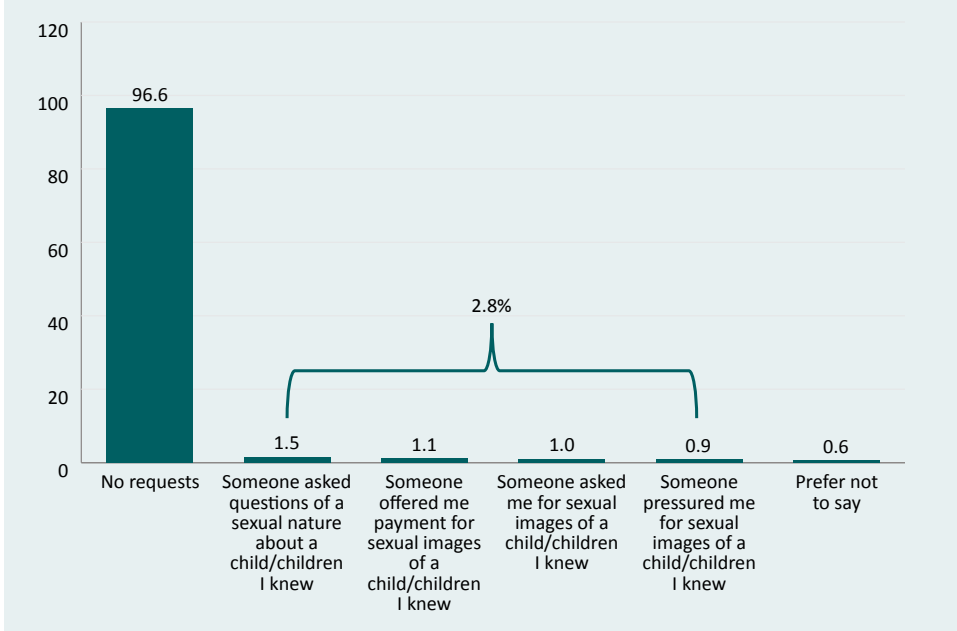
'Sistergirl' is a culturally specific term used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe gender diverse people who have a female spirit and take on female roles in the community (TransHub 2021). However, this word can be used differently depending on a person's location, country, and nation. In this study, we grouped sistergirls with women in our data as the term is commonly used by trans women. Any sistergirls who participated in the study and who wish to have their data grouped with a gender category other than women may contact the authors. In future studies, eSafety will include a question in surveys that allows participants to select which gender category they would like their data to be grouped under, in addition to our current questions that capture participants' gender.

Results

Of 4,011 respondents, 111 (2.8%) had experienced at least one request for facilitated CSE online in the last 12 months:

- 60 participants (1.5%) were asked questions of a sexual nature about children they knew;
- 44 participants (1.1%) were offered payment for sexual images of children they knew;
- 40 participants (1.0%) were asked for sexual images of children they knew; and
- 38 participants (0.9%) were pressured for sexual images of children they knew (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Prevalence of requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation



Respondents who reported sharing a photo of or information about children online ($n=2,123$) were significantly more likely to have received requests for facilitated CSE (4.8%), compared to respondents who had not shared a photo of or information ($n=1,863$) regarding children online (0.6%; $\chi^2(1)=62.73$, $p<0.001$; Table 2). Sharing a photo of or information regarding children online was associated with a significantly increased likelihood of being asked questions of a sexual nature about children, as well as being asked, pressured or offered payment for sexual images of children (Table 2).

Table 2: Requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation, by sharing photos of or information regarding children online

		Shared a photo of or information about children online						Chi-square (χ^2)
		Yes		No		Total		
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	
Any requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation	Yes	4.8	100	0.6	11	2.8	111	62.73***
	No	95.2	2,005	99.4	1,848	97.2	3,853	
Someone asked me for sexual images of a child/ children I knew	Yes	1.8	38	0.1	2	1.0	40	28.48***
	No	98.2	2,067	99.9	1,857	99.0	3,924	
Someone pressured me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	1.7	36	0.1	2	1.0	38	26.71***
	No	98.3	2,069	99.9	1,857	99.0	3,926	
Someone asked questions of a sexual nature about a child/ children I knew	Yes	2.6	55	0.3	5	1.5	60	36.38***
	No	97.4	2,050	99.7	1,854	98.5	3,904	
Someone offered me payment for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	1.8	38	0.3	6	1.1	44	19.77***
	No	98.2	2,067	99.7	1,853	98.9	3,920	
Total		100.0	2,105	100.0	1,859	100.0	3,964	

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

Note: Table counts, percentages and significance tests exclude participants who preferred not to answer

When broken down by whether information or photos were shared publicly (ie on a dating site or public social media post; $n=1,448$) or privately (ie on a private social media post or via direct message; $n=644$), only the former was associated with a significantly increased likelihood of having received a request for facilitated CSE (Table 3; $\chi^2(2)=115.23, p < 0.001$). Of those respondents who reported publicly sharing online a photo of or information regarding children they knew, 6.6 percent had received at least one request for facilitated CSE. Conversely, 0.9 percent of respondents who had only shared a photo privately and 0.6 percent of respondents who had not shared a photo or information of children anywhere online had received a request for facilitated CSE.

Table 3: Requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation, by public vs private sharing of photos of or information regarding children online

		Shared a photo of or information about children publicly online		Shared a photo of children privately only		Have not shared a photo or information online		Total		χ^2
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	
Any requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation	Yes	6.6 ^a	94	0.9 ^b	6	0.6 ^b	11	2.8	111	115.23***
	No	93.4 ^a	1,338	99.1 ^b	637	99.4 ^b	1,848	97.2	3,823	
Someone asked me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	2.5 ^a	36	0.3 ^b	2	0.1 ^b	2	1.0	40	50.35***
	No	97.5 ^a	1,396	99.7 ^b	641	99.9 ^b	1,857	99.0	3,894	
Someone pressured me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	2.5 ^a	36	0.0 ¹	0	0.1 ^b	2	1.0	38	56.46***
	No	97.5 ^a	1,396	100.0 ¹	643	99.9 ^b	1,857	99.0	3,896	
Someone asked questions of a sexual nature about a child/children I knew	Yes	3.6 ^a	52	0.5 ^b	3	0.3 ^b	5	1.5	60	66.62***
	No	96.4 ^a	1,380	99.5 ^b	640	99.7 ^b	1,854	98.5	3,874	
Someone offered me payment for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	2.6 ^a	37	0.2 ^b	1	0.3 ^b	6	1.1	44	43.84***
	No	97.4 ^a	1,395	99.8 ^b	642	99.7 ^b	1,853	98.9	3,890	
Total		100.0	1,432	100.0	643	100.0	1,859	100.0	3,934	

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

Note: Values in the same row not sharing the same superscript letter are significantly different at $p < 0.05$. Table counts, percentages and significance tests exclude participants who preferred not to answer. Tests are adjusted for all pairwise comparisons within a row of each innermost sub-table using the Bonferroni correction

1: This category is not used in comparisons because its column proportion is equal to zero or one

Subsequent analyses examined sociodemographic correlates of requests for CSE among those respondents who had publicly shared online a photo of or information regarding children. Of those respondents who had publicly shared online a photo of or information regarding children they knew, men were significantly more likely than women to have received a request for facilitated CSE (Table 4). Notably, 10.3 percent of men who had publicly shared online a photo of or information about children they knew had received at least one request for facilitated CSE, compared to 3.2 percent of women who had done so ($\chi^2(1)=30.00, p<0.001$).

Table 4: Requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation received by respondents who had publicly shared photos of or information regarding children online, by respondent gender

		Gender						χ^2
		Men		Women		Total		
		%	n	%	n	%	n	
Any requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation	Yes	10.3	70	3.2	24	6.6	94	30.00***
	No	89.7	611	96.8	724	93.4	1,335	
Someone asked me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.0	27	1.2	9	2.5	36	11.07***
	No	96.0	654	98.8	739	97.5	1,393	
Someone pressured me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.3	29	0.9	7	2.5	36	16.03***
	No	95.7	652	99.1	741	97.5	1,393	
Someone asked questions of a sexual nature about a child/children I knew	Yes	5.6	38	1.9	14	3.6	52	13.98***
	No	94.4	643	98.1	734	96.4	1,377	
Someone offered me payment for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.6	31	0.8	6	2.6	37	19.88***
	No	95.4	650	99.2	742	97.4	1,392	
	Total	100.0	681	100.0	748	100.0	1,429	

***statistically significant at $p<0.001$

Note: Table counts, percentages and significance tests exclude non-binary and gender diverse participants and participants who preferred not to answer

While a higher percentage of LGB+ individuals who had publicly shared a photo of or information about children they knew had received at least one request for facilitated CSE (10.6%) compared to straight individuals (6.2%), this difference was not statistically significant. Cell sizes were too small to compare specific types of requests for facilitated CSE across sexual orientation.

Of those respondents who had publicly shared online a photo of or information regarding children they knew, requests for facilitated CSE overall were significantly higher among 18- to 34-year-olds (11.6%) compared to 35- to 54-year-olds (4.9%) and those over 55 years (2.7%; $\chi^2(2)=28.13, p<0.001$; Table 5).

Table 5: Requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation received by respondents who had publicly shared photos of or information regarding children online, by respondent age

		Age group								χ^2
		18–34 years		35–54 years		55+ years		Total		
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	
Any requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation	Yes	11.6 ^a	52	4.9 ^b	35	2.7 ^b	7	6.6	94	28.13***
	No	88.4 ^a	398	95.1 ^b	686	97.3 ^b	254	93.4	1,338	
Someone asked me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	5.3 ^a	24	1.4 ^b	10	0.8 ^b	2	2.5	36	21.59***
	No	94.7 ^a	426	98.6 ^b	711	99.2 ^b	259	97.5	1,396	
Someone pressured me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.4 ^a	20	1.8 ^b	13	1.1 ^{a,b}	3	2.5	36	10.31**
	No	95.6 ^a	430	98.2 ^b	708	98.9 ^{a,b}	258	97.5	1,396	
Someone asked questions of a sexual nature about a child/children I knew	Yes	6.7 ^a	30	2.8 ^b	20	0.8 ^b	2	3.6	52	19.48***
	No	93.3 ^a	420	97.2 ^b	701	99.2 ^b	259	96.4	1,380	
Someone offered me payment for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.9 ^a	22	1.5 ^b	11	1.5 ^{a,b}	4	2.6	37	13.85***
	No	95.1 ^a	428	98.5 ^b	710	98.5 ^{a,b}	257	97.4	1,395	
Total		100.0	450	100.0	721	100.0	261	100.0	1,432	

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, **statistically significant at $p < 0.01$

Note: Values in the same row not sharing the same superscript letter are significantly different at $p < 0.05$. Table counts, percentages and significance tests exclude participants who preferred not to answer. Tests are adjusted for all pairwise comparisons within a row of each innermost sub-table using the Bonferroni correction

When considering linguistic diversity, respondents who had publicly shared online a photo of or information regarding children they knew and spoke a language other than English at home were significantly more likely (9.4%) than those who spoke only English at home (5.7%) to have

8. Prevalence and predictors of requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation on online platforms

received at least one request for facilitated CSE ($\chi^2(1)=5.89, p<0.05$; Table 6). This effect was driven by significantly more linguistically diverse individuals being offered payment for sexual images of children they knew (4.1%), compared to those who only spoke English at home (2.1%).

Table 6: Requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation received by respondents who had publicly shared photos of or information regarding children online, by language spoken at home

		Do you speak a language other than English at home?						χ^2
		Yes		No		Total		
		%	n	%	n	%	n	
Any requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation	Yes	9.4	32	5.7	62	6.6	94	5.89*
	No	90.6	308	94.3	1,030	93.4	1,338	
Someone asked me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	3.2	11	2.3	25	2.5	36	0.95
	No	96.8	329	97.7	1,067	97.5	1,396	
Someone pressured me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	3.2	11	2.3	25	2.5	36	0.95
	No	96.8	329	97.7	1,067	97.5	1,396	
Someone asked questions of a sexual nature about a child/children I knew	Yes	4.4	15	3.4	37	3.6	52	0.78
	No	95.6	325	96.6	1,055	96.4	1,380	
Someone offered me payment for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.1	14	2.1	23	2.6	37	4.17*
	No	95.9	326	97.9	1,069	97.4	1,395	
Total		100.0	340	100.0	1,092	100.0	1,432	

*statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Note: Table counts, percentages and significance tests exclude participants who preferred not to answer

Respondents who had publicly posted online a photo of or shared information regarding children they knew and reported lived experience of disability were also at a significantly increased likelihood of receiving at least one request for facilitated CSE (11.6%), compared to individuals without disability (5.4%; $\chi^2(1)=13.62, p<0.001$; Table 7). This effect was driven by those with disability being significantly more likely than those without disability to be pressured for sexual images of children they knew and to be offered payment for sexual images of children they knew.

Table 7: Requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation received by respondents who had publicly shared photos of or information regarding children online, by disability status

		Have you experienced any physical, intellectual or cognitive, emotional or other conditions, challenges or disabilities that have lasted, or are likely to last, for at least six months?						χ^2
		Yes		No		Total		
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	
Any requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation	Yes	11.6	31	5.4	62	6.5	93	13.62***
	No	88.4	237	94.6	1,091	93.5	1,328	
Someone asked me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.1	11	2.2	25	2.5	36	3.30
	No	95.9	257	97.8	1,128	97.5	1,385	
Someone pressured me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.9	13	2.0	23	2.5	36	7.18**
	No	95.1	255	98.0	1,130	97.5	1,385	
Someone asked questions of a sexual nature about a child/children I knew	Yes	4.5	12	3.4	39	3.6	51	0.75
	No	95.5	256	96.6	1,114	96.4	1,370	
Someone offered me payment for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	4.5	12	2.2	25	2.6	37	4.57*
	No	95.5	256	97.8	1,128	97.4	1,384	
	Total	100.0	268	100.0	1,153	100.0	1,421	

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, **statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, *statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Note: Table counts, percentages and significance tests exclude participants who preferred not to answer

There was evidence of a pattern of vulnerability across different types of online harms. Respondents who had publicly shared online a photo of or information regarding children they knew and had experienced other violent or sexual online harms were significantly more likely to have received any requests for facilitated CSE (8.3%) compared to those respondents who had not experienced other violent or sexual online harms (2.2%; $\chi^2(1)=17.36$, $p < 0.001$; Table 8).

Table 8: Requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation received by respondents who had publicly shared photos of or information regarding children online, by experience of other violent/sexual online harms

		Experienced other violent or sexual online harms						χ^2
		Yes		No		Total		
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	
Any requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation	Yes	8.3	85	2.2	9	6.6	94	17.36***
	No	91.7	942	97.8	396	93.4	1,338	
Someone asked me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	3.2	33	0.7	3	2.5	36	7.25**
	No	96.8	994	99.3	402	97.5	1,396	
Someone pressured me for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	3.1	32	1.0	4	2.5	36	5.37*
	No	96.9	995	99.0	401	97.5	1,396	
Someone asked questions of a sexual nature about a child/children I knew	Yes	4.7	48	1.0	4	3.6	52	11.28***
	No	95.3	979	99.0	401	96.4	1,380	
Someone offered me payment for sexual images of a child/children I knew	Yes	3.2	33	1.0	4	2.6	37	5.72*
	No	96.8	994	99.0	401	97.4	1,395	
Total		100.0	1,027	100.0	405	100.0	1,432	

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, **statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, *statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Note: Table counts, percentages and significance tests exclude participants who preferred not to answer. Other violent or sexual online harms category includes respondents who indicated that they experienced one of the following at least once in the past 12 months: they received repeated unwanted messages or online contact from someone other than cold calling/marketing; someone electronically tracked their location or monitored their movements using technology without their consent; they received threats online or electronically of real-life harm or abuse; someone threatened to share private photos of them online or electronically; private (nude/semi-nude/sexual) photos/videos of them were shared online or electronically without their consent; a private (nude, semi-nude, sexual) photo/video of them was taken without their consent (eg via a webcam); they were sent unwanted inappropriate content online (eg porn or violent content); they were touched in a way they did not like online via haptic touch (ie while using a haptic suit); someone created a sexually explicit avatar or image of them to interact with and did not have their consent; someone attempted to groom them; they were exposed to a virtual space that was sexually graphic; they were threatened; they were exposed to environments that they did not feel comfortable in; or they were exposed to a scene depicting abhorrent violent material, terrorist events or other traumatic events

All predictors that were significant in bivariate analyses, other than linguistic diversity, remained significant when included in a logistic regression model predicting having received any requests for facilitated CSE over the past 12 months (Table 9). The model provided a good fit to the data, according to the Hosmer and Lemeshow test ($\chi^2(8)=9.24, p=0.322$). In particular, men were almost four times more likely than women to have received a CSE request, and the odds of having received a CSE request decreased with age. Additionally, respondents who had a disability had more than twice the odds and those who experienced other online harms had three times the odds of having received a CSE request.

Table 9: Logistic regression analyses predicting having received any request for facilitated child sexual exploitation, among respondents who had publicly shared photos of or information regarding children online

Predictor	B	SE	OR	95% CI for OR	p
Men (vs women)	1.30	0.25	3.68	2.25, 6.02	<0.001
Age group (vs 18–34 years)					
35–54 years	-0.90	0.24	0.41	0.26, 0.65	<0.001
55+ years	-1.59	0.43	0.20	0.09, 0.47	<0.001
LGB+ (vs straight)	0.27	0.35	1.31	0.66, 2.59	0.438
Language other than English spoken at home (vs English)	0.33	0.24	1.39	0.87, 2.23	0.170
Disability (vs none)	0.79	0.25	2.20	1.36, 3.55	0.001
Experienced other online harms (vs did not)	1.10	0.36	3.01	1.48, 6.14	0.002
Constant	-4.05	0.41	0.02		<0.001

Note: Table 9 shows the results of a logistic regression model, predicting having received any request for facilitated child sexual exploitation in the past 12 months, with no being the reference category. Only respondents who reported having shared photos of or information regarding children publicly online were included in the model. Non-binary and gender diverse participants and those who responded 'Prefer not to answer' or 'Unsure' to any variable were excluded from analyses. The model therefore included $n=1,411$

Discussion

The present study examined demographic characteristics and online behaviours associated with having received requests for facilitated CSE online in the 12 months until January 2023. Specifically, we examined whether 'sharenting' practices (that is, sharing photos of or information regarding children online) may be associated with an increased likelihood of receiving requests for facilitated CSE, especially if the photos or information were shared publicly (ie on public social media profiles and dating sites). We found that, across the entire sample, 2.8 percent of respondents had received at least one request for facilitated CSE online in the past 12 months. Respondents who indicated that they had publicly shared photos of or information regarding children online were significantly more likely to have received requests for facilitated CSE, compared to those who had shared photos or information privately or not at all. Among those respondents who had shared a photo of or information about children publicly online, requests for facilitated CSE were significantly higher among men, individuals aged 18–34 years, linguistically diverse individuals, individuals with disability, and those who had experienced other sexual or violent harms online.

Though few other studies have examined demographic characteristics associated with receiving requests for facilitated CSE, our findings align with recent research by Teunissen et al. (2022), which examined the prevalence of requests for facilitated CSE among users of mobile dating apps and websites. In line with the present findings, Teunissen et al. (2022) found that men were significantly more likely than women to receive requests for facilitated CSE. Notably, however, research examining the characteristics of CSAM cases perpetrated by parents suggests that men may also be more likely to instigate, perpetrate and distribute CSAM (Salter et al. 2021). While the present study did not obtain information regarding the gender of perpetrators of facilitation requests, or the outcome of requests, collectively these findings suggest that CSE prevention interventions aimed at men should include initiatives that target third-party requests for CSE facilitation.

The present findings also showed that younger people, linguistically diverse individuals, individuals with disability, and those who had experienced other sexual or violent online harms may be particularly vulnerable to receiving requests for facilitated CSE, indicating that targeted preventative efforts may be warranted for these subgroups. Another study that surveyed users of mobile dating apps similarly found that younger people, linguistically diverse individuals and individuals with a health condition or disability were significantly more likely to receive requests for facilitated CSE from other dating app users (Teunissen et al. 2024). Future research is required to determine why these subgroups may be especially at risk of receiving requests for facilitated CSE.

The present study has important implications for users of online platforms, as well as for online platforms themselves. Specifically, we found that respondents who had shared photos of or information regarding children publicly online were significantly more likely to have received requests for facilitated CSE, compared to respondents who had shared photos of children privately online, or not at all. Given that it has become common practice for parents to share photos of their children online (Amon et al. 2022; Bartholomew et al. 2012), concerted education efforts are needed to warn not just parents and guardians but all those who interact with children of the potential harms associated with publicly sharing photos of or information regarding children online. If posting photos on private rather than public online platforms can reduce the risk of receiving requests for facilitated CSE, as the present findings suggest, this is a simple change that parents, guardians and others in a caregiving role could make.

Online platforms also have a responsibility to mitigate harms and to warn users of the risks associated with particular online behaviours. For example, while Facebook, Instagram and TikTok prohibit the posting of material that sexually exploits or could lead to the sexual exploitation of children, there are no specific provisions regarding the posting of photos or information regarding children in general (Lavorgna, Tartari & Ugwudike 2022). Similarly, dating apps such as Tinder and Bumble do not allow the posting of profile photos of unaccompanied or unclothed children, yet this does not prevent users from posting profile photos of themselves with children or sharing that they have children. Given the present findings, showing that merely posting photos of or information regarding children publicly online was associated with an increased likelihood of receiving requests for facilitated CSE, there is a need for online platforms to inform users of this risk. For example, online platforms could implement safety by design features, whereby a user receives a warning message upon attempting to upload a photo of or information regarding children to a public site. Indeed, warning messages have been shown to effectively reduce the online distribution of CSAM (Prichard et al. 2022).

The present results should be interpreted in the context of several limitations. First, the study was cross-sectional, and thus we are unable to infer causality from the findings. The relationship between sharing photos of children online and receiving requests for facilitated CSE may be driven by individuals sharing photos of children *after* they had received requests for facilitated CSE, rather than before. Future longitudinal research is required to determine the direction of this effect. The observational nature of the data also means that there may be additional demographic or behavioural variables other than those measured contributing to or accounting for the relationships observed. In particular, the relationship between younger age and increased likelihood of receiving requests for facilitated CSE may be because the younger respondents may have had younger children. Indeed, offenders may be able to directly access pubescent children to groom online via social media to obtain self-generated CSAM (Quayle et al. 2014; Whittle et al. 2013; Winters, Kaylor & Jeglic 2017). However, offenders who are interested in pre-pubescent children may have to contact and facilitate access and CSE via other adults who have contact with younger children (ie parents and guardians; Seto et al. 2018). Additionally, younger people may spend more time online, which may increase their risk of encountering online harms, such as requests for CSE. Future research is required to form a more comprehensive picture of how CSE is occurring and how CSAM is being procured, obtained and distributed online. Specifically, research should examine who is making requests for facilitated CSE, how those making requests are identifying individuals with access to children, which platforms those making requests are using to meet and interact with recipients of these requests, and the actions taken by recipients in response to these requests. Finally, specific survey findings for First Nations and trans and gender-diverse people were not separated out from the main data collected. This was due to the small sample size for each group. As a result, our findings are unable to reflect the experiences of these groups.

Conclusion

The present results show that online platforms are being used to request facilitated CSE, with 2.8 percent of respondents indicating that they had received at least one request for facilitated CSE online in the 12 months until January 2023. Considering Australia's population aged 18 and over, this could indicate that a substantial number of people are being approached online every year with requests for facilitated CSE. Respondents who had publicly shared photos of or information regarding children online were especially likely to have received requests for facilitated CSE, suggesting that educational initiatives and platform changes are required to minimise the risk of harm. Preventative measures targeted towards those who may be more vulnerable to receiving these requests, including men, younger people, linguistically diverse individuals, individuals with disability, and those who have experienced other online harms, are also warranted.

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9. Guiding principles for developing initiatives to prevent child sexual abuse material offending

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Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offending—broadly defined here as the viewing, sharing and production of material (eg images, videos) depicting the sexual abuse of a child—is a global crime that is flourishing with ongoing advances in technology. Encryption and anonymisation techniques make it difficult for law enforcement to identify offenders (Virtual Global Taskforce 2024). In 2022, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s (NCMEC’s) CyberTipline received over 31 million reports of CSAM globally, an increase of almost 10 percent from the previous year (NCMEC 2022). In 2021, the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) received 32,126 reports from the NCMEC and 853 reports from members of the Australian public (ACCCE 2022). Each report can relate to multiple images and/or videos of children being sexually abused.

The availability of CSAM on the internet, coupled with the difficulty in identifying offenders, has led to an increasing need for initiatives that prevent CSAM offending. This includes initiatives aimed at individuals who have offended (known and unknown to police) and individuals who may be at risk of offending. To ensure the development and implementation of successful prevention initiatives that reduce harm to children, it is important to identify factors associated with best practice in this area.

Several recent large-scale reviews have described prevention initiatives that target CSAM offending and provided recommendations to support prevention efforts (eg Di Gioia & Beslay 2018; Gannoni et al. 2023; INHOPE 2020; Perkins et al. 2018; World Health Organization 2022). Recommendations include focusing on early intervention, having adequate funding, conducting rigorous research and evaluations, and catering to the diverse populations that seek help (eg those who have offended, those who have not offended but are worried about their sexual thoughts or their behaviour towards children; Di Gioia & Beslay 2018; INHOPE 2020; Perkins et al. 2018). Despite these reviews, there remains little available guidance for practitioners on how to design, deliver and implement initiatives that are likely to be effective in preventing CSAM offending.

Many CSAM-only offenders and contact sexual offenders share similar characteristics (Paquette, Fortin & Perkins 2020). However, studies also suggest CSAM-only offenders can differ from contact offenders on a range of characteristics, including reoffending rates (Dowling et al. 2021; Hirschtritt, Tucker & Binder 2019; Prichard & Spiranovic 2014) and personal and offending characteristics (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015; Henshaw, Ogloff & Clough 2018). Such research has helped inform several initiatives developed specifically for CSAM-only offenders (eg Henshaw et al. 2020). As such, it has been suggested that existing initiatives that aim to prevent contact sexual offending may not be appropriate for CSAM offending (eg Henshaw, Ogloff & Clough 2018; Ly, Dwyer & Fedoroff 2018; Merdian et al. 2020). It is therefore important to identify principles that can aid the development of successful prevention initiatives tailored to CSAM offending.

Aims and methodology

This chapter provides an overview of principles to guide the development and implementation of initiatives that aim to prevent CSAM offending. The principles were derived from:

- a review of research on the implementation and effectiveness of prevention initiatives that target CSAM offending; and
- input from an international expert advisory group.

This study follows from a larger review that examined the implementation and effectiveness of initiatives aiming to prevent CSAM offending—for a more detailed overview of the methodology, see Gannoni et al. (2023). This study consolidates the evidence relating to initiatives that aim to prevent CSAM offending, as either a primary or secondary goal. For example, some initiatives may focus primarily on contact sexual offending but nevertheless aim to prevent CSAM offending. It purposely does not capture a large body of evidence on the effectiveness of prevention initiatives for sexual offending or child sexual abuse more generally.

Scope

In this chapter, we define *prevention initiative* as an initiative aimed at preventing CSAM offending across primary, secondary and tertiary prevention levels, although most literature and knowledge identified relate to the latter two. According to Smallbone, Marshall and Wortley (2008) and based on a public health approach:

- primary prevention refers to wide-scale initiatives targeting whole populations aimed at preventing offending from occurring in the first place;
- secondary prevention refers to initiatives targeting groups that are at greater risk of offending, aimed at preventing offending; and
- tertiary prevention refers to initiatives targeting individuals with known offending aimed at preventing reoffending. Traditionally, tertiary prevention strategies in Australia are implemented by the criminal justice system after an offence has occurred.

Given the breadth of prevention initiatives for CSAM offending, we focused on studies that examined helplines, therapeutic treatment and psychoeducation, online self-management courses, and education and awareness campaigns. Studies were excluded if they examined the following:

- initiatives based solely on technology;
- law enforcement operations or investigations for detection;
- law reform or legislative approaches;
- initiatives focused on victims only; or
- initiatives that target traffickers or facilitators.

While the above initiatives play an important role in preventing CSAM offending, they fall outside the scope of the current study.

Literature search

We conducted a literature search, in collaboration with the Australian Institute of Criminology's JV Barry Library, to canvass academic and grey literature databases. We limited the search to literature published after 2000, ensuring a focus on relevant and up-to-date information. Studies were included if they contained information about initiatives designed to prevent CSAM offending implemented in Australia, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, the United Kingdom or the United States. These jurisdictions were chosen due to their publicly announced funding and attention given to CSAM offending prevention, as well as their comparability with Australia (eg similar legal systems).

We conducted searches of 12 major databases—the Australian Institute of Criminology’s JV Barry Library Catalogue, the Australian Criminology Database (CINCH), SocINDEX, E-Journals, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Violence & Abuse Abstracts, ProQuest Criminal Justice Database, PubMed, ERIC, Eradicating Child Sexual Abuse (ECSA) Interventions Database and Google Scholar—using the following search terms:

- victim: (child*) AND
- CSAM offending: (porn* OR image* OR erotic* OR exploit* OR material OR indecent OR sex* OR abuse OR csem OR cem OR cse OR csam OR csa) AND
- intervention: (prevent* OR intervent* OR treat* OR program* OR educat* OR strat*) AND
- measure: (effect* OR impact* OR consequence OR evaluat* OR exam*).

We supplemented this search with further searching of relevant journals, grey literature sites, sites of relevant government departments and key program websites.

International expert advisory group

We established the CSAM Offending Prevention Project Advisory Group (Project Advisory Group). This group comprised international stakeholders with knowledge and expertise in CSAM offending prevention. We asked members to identify evaluations, research and other best practice material on initiatives that aim to prevent CSAM offending (particularly unpublished material), and to identify best practice principles for developing initiatives that aim to prevent CSAM offending.

Members included: Annette Cassar (European Commission); Daniel Rothman (Forensic Psychological Services—Ellerby, Kolton, Rothman & Associates); Donald Findlater (Stop It Now! UK and Ireland/Lucy Faithfull Foundation); Elizabeth Letourneau (Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, John Hopkins University); Klaus Beier (Institute of Sexology and Sexual Medicine, Charité—Universitätsmedizin Berlin); Kirk Vette (Safe to talk); Matt Tyler (Jesuit Social Services); Melissa Stroebel (Thorn); and Tina Gulliver (WellStop).

Anna Pawula, Antonio Labrador-Jimenez, Laurent Beslay, Rosanna Di Gioia (all at the European Commission) and Lorraine Smith (Stop It Now! UK and Ireland/Lucy Faithfull Foundation) also contributed to the group.

Studies included in the analysis are presented in the *References* section, marked with an asterisk. Where relevant, supplementary material was also included if recommended by the Project Advisory Group or identified during the literature search.

Limitations

There was variation across the studies in the terminology used to refer to CSAM (eg child pornography, child exploitation material, indecent images of children). Several studies that examined CSAM offending used more general terms such as ‘explicit sexual material’ or ‘abuse material’. Despite using a range of search terms to encapsulate CSAM offending, it is possible that some studies may not have been captured in the current study due to lack of specificity.

It should be noted that while CSAM offenders do not fit one specific profile (see Brown 2023), some of the principles described in this report may only apply to specific offending behaviours and/or groups of individuals in relation to CSAM (eg adults versus young people, online-only offending versus online and offline offending). Where possible, we have highlighted where a principle is only appropriate for a specific group of individuals or offending behaviours.

Results

We identified seven principles to guide the development and implementation of initiatives that aim to prevent CSAM offending, informed by a literature review and input from an international expert advisory group. These principles are derived from literature primarily examining secondary prevention and/or tertiary prevention initiatives. A one-size-fits-all approach is not advocated. Rather, we suggest these broad, overarching principles can contribute to the success of initiatives that aim to prevent CSAM offending:

- Principle 1—Use of advertising campaigns;
- Principle 2—Confidentiality and anonymity;
- Principle 3—Empathetic and non-judgemental approach;
- Principle 4—Accessibility;
- Principle 5—Training and support;
- Principle 6—Tailor programs according to the client group; and
- Principle 7—Evaluation.

Separate icons are used in this report to indicate which levels of prevention relate to each principle (see Figure 1). It is acknowledged that application of these principles may differ in different countries or jurisdictions. Further, secondary prevention efforts may sometimes serve as tertiary prevention, such as when a person has already abused a child.

Figure 1: Levels of prevention



Principle 1: Use of advertising campaigns

Consultations with members of the Project Advisory Group and prior reviews (eg Di Gioia & Beslay 2018; Di Gioia et al. 2022) highlight the importance of raising awareness of prevention initiatives, among both potential clients and their support circles (ie those who may have a role in supporting program participation, such as carers and partners). This is particularly relevant for individuals at risk of offending and those who may have engaged in offending but are not known to police. It is also important to raise awareness among professionals who may play a role in referring relevant individuals. This may include social workers, teachers, general practitioners, law enforcement and mental health practitioners.

Promotion

Research indicates that initiatives should be promoted through multiple appropriate communication channels, such as online, TV, posters, radio, billboards and print media. For example, Troubled Desire—a web-based intervention app for people attracted to children, including those who have engaged in CSAM offending or contact sexual offending—recruited 4,161 potential clients over 2.5 years via the internet (websites, social media, warnings in CSAM internet searches), TV, posters on public transport and billboards (Schuler et al. 2021). Online advertising may be especially appropriate for those engaged in CSAM offending, given such individuals tend to have greater access to the internet than contact sexual offenders (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015). Further, an evaluation of the CSAM deterrence campaign associated with the Stop It Now! helpline (UK) for people struggling with their sexual thoughts or behaviour regarding children found that most clients became aware of the helpline via online advertisements on news websites or Google, and via pop-up messages that appeared when the individual searched for help or terms indicative of CSAM (Coase, Feechan & Whítear 2020).

Messaging

Information and language used in advertising campaigns should be appropriately targeted to maximise uptake and ensure such campaigns attract appropriate clientele. If a program's clientele includes individuals concerned by their sexual thoughts regarding children (but who have not offended), advertising campaigns should make it clear that individuals can contact the initiative even if they have never offended. For example, phrases that describe the target audience as 'people attracted to children' should be avoided, unless this is part of the eligibility criteria. Instead, broader language that captures a range of behaviours, such as 'people concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviour towards children' or 'people concerned about their use of sexual images of children', is relevant to a larger audience and a more diverse range of individuals who may conceptualise their thoughts or offending in varying ways (see, for example, Beier 2016; Henry 2020).

Research on advertising campaigns for CSAM offending prevention initiatives indicates that confidentiality, anonymity and the professionalism of the program should be clearly communicated (Beier 2016; Beier et al. 2009). Campaigns should avoid provoking feelings of shame and judgement, and should aim to evoke a sense of hopefulness (Beier 2016; Coase, Feechan & Whítear 2020; Henry 2020). For example, the Stop It Now! helpline (UK) incorporated anonymous case studies to emphasise the relief felt when seeking help, which attracted notable numbers of individuals to the website (Coase, Feechan & Whítear 2020). Further, research using interviews with men who have viewed CSAM highlights the importance of prevention initiatives in providing information regarding education around legality, consequences, accountability and access to confidential help to prevent online offending (Bailey et al. 2022).

Principle 2: Confidentiality and anonymity

Given the high levels of internalised shame and stigma associated with having a sexual interest in children (Levenson & Grady 2019), it is important that clear assurances of privacy and confidentiality are communicated to clients to allow them to talk openly. Further, individuals who have offended but are not known to police may be hesitant to seek help for fear of legal consequences and being identified as having engaged in illegal activities (Parks et al. 2020). Research indicates that confidentiality and anonymity are fundamental to the success of initiatives aimed at such individuals (Beier 2016; Brown et al. 2014; Coase, Feechan & Whítear 2020; Engel et al. 2018; Grant et al. 2019; Henry 2020; Konrad, Amelung & Beier 2018; Levenson & Grady 2019). Online initiatives that offer anonymous help may be particularly relevant and appealing to people seeking help to prevent or stop online offending (Coase, Feechan & Whítear 2020).

Appropriate policies

Policies around confidentiality and anonymity of clients should be consistent with legislation in the relevant jurisdiction, particularly regarding circumstances in which legal protection cannot be guaranteed due to mandatory reporting obligations. For example, practitioners may be required to report child sexual abuse (eg Australian Institute of Family Studies 2023; Government of Canada 2021; US Department of Health & Human Services 2015). In such instances, initiatives aimed at individuals concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviour regarding children often inform clients that confidentiality is assured except if there are concerns about the immediate safety of a client or other individual. In these situations, police or crisis workers may be contacted. Where possible, clients should be informed that they have the option to remain anonymous.

Transparency

As well as being anonymous, prevention websites should provide clients with detailed information on their legal rights regarding privacy and data, including what information is being collected and how it is being stored. Research suggests there should be transparency for clients around how confidentiality and anonymity are maintained (Beier 2016; Henry 2020). One example of this is Troubled Desire in Germany, where clients participate anonymously via a series of online self-help psychoeducation modules. Information on the program website (Troubled Desire 2020) states that each client has a randomly generated cryptic ID, that IP addresses are not stored, and that only session cookies are used. When a client starts a new session, they are provided with a randomly generated ID number, which they can use to return. This allows clients to repeatedly engage with online help modules at their own pace, over an extended period, without the concern of being identified (Troubled Desire 2020).

Principle 3: Empathetic and non-judgemental approach



One of the most significant barriers that prevents individuals concerned about their sexual interest in children from seeking help is the fear of (or actual) negative judgement from practitioners or others (Henry 2020; Levenson & Grady 2019). Many individuals with a sexual interest in children internalise the stigma and negative rhetoric about child sexual offenders, including the belief that they cannot be rehabilitated, which may deter them from seeking help (Levenson & Grady 2019; Shields et al. 2019). Therefore, adopting an empathetic and non-judgemental approach is important for ensuring that individuals participate in and successfully complete interventions.

Language

An empathetic approach is essential to encourage clients to initiate and maintain contact with initiatives, and this tone should be communicated in campaigns and promotional material for the initiative (Beier 2016; Coase, Feechan & Whítear 2020). Program staff should avoid blaming or humiliating clients for having a sexual interest in children. Where harmful behaviour is identified, staff should encourage clients to take responsibility for their behaviour, while maintaining first-person language. For example, staff should refer to someone's use of CSAM, rather than labelling someone a 'CSAM offender' or 'perpetrator'. The Stop It Now! UK and Ireland (nd) website, for instance, states: 'We help people worried about their own sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviour towards children'. In this way, practitioners are supporting the safety and wellbeing of their clients (Tran et al. 2018), rather than 'scaring them away'.

Attitude of staff

Staff should be empathetic, approachable and respectful, while having a clear ethical stance about the harm of offending and about taking personal responsibility. Young people who attended treatment programs in New Zealand for harmful sexual behaviour (Geary, Lambie & Seymour 2010; Lambie et al. 2007) reported that they valued therapists who were understanding, caring, encouraging, challenging and supportive, respectful, non-judgemental and trustworthy, and who showed a genuine interest in them as individuals. Such qualities have also been cited as crucial by adult clients of Stop It Now! (Brown et al. 2014; Coase, Feechan & Whitear 2020) and Prevention Project Dunkelfeld (a therapeutic treatment intervention for those who fear they may engage in CSAM offending and contact sexual offending; Beier 2016). Several researchers and practitioners in the area recommend that clinical training protocols should offer guidance on counselling individuals with offending and/or sexually harmful behaviours in a manner that is ethical, competent and empathetic (Geary, Lambie & Seymour 2010; Lambie et al. 2007).

Principle 4: Accessibility

Low cost

Where possible, initiatives should be free, low-cost, or subsidised for socio-economically disadvantaged individuals. A recent review of various initiatives that aim to prevent online child sexual abuse internationally noted the need for increased funding to improve program access, particularly among socially and economically disadvantaged populations (Perkins et al. 2018).

Multiple modes

Access should be available through multiple modes of communication—such as online chat, phone, email and in person—to provide clients with options about how they wish to engage with the initiative. This may include online self-help and other alternative methods that do not involve any direct contact with professionals. Critically, because of the significant barriers to help-seeking (eg fear of judgement, consequences; Henry 2020; Levenson & Grady 2019), initiatives should provide options for individuals to access services. This may mean enabling individuals to access anonymously where appropriate. For example, the underlying default setting for some servers is to retain IP addresses, and this may need to be disabled.

Availability

Initiatives should ensure that resources are available to the largest number of users possible. For example, if a helpline is available during the day only, an accompanying website should be created. This ensures that individuals needing immediate assistance can access some help, rather than waiting for business hours. Moreover, phone and online platforms should allow the program to be accessed from any location, circumventing the well-documented barrier of distance to treatment sites, which can hinder help-seeking among this population (Engel et al. 2018). For example, some prevention initiatives (eg Troubled Desire 2020; Stop It Now! UK and Ireland) have online self-help resources that are available 24/7 and can be easily accessed from any location in the world.

Capacity to meet demand

To ensure clients can access the program, it is crucial that programs are sufficiently resourced to meet the demand for the program. A large-scale survey (Perkins et al. 2018) of staff members from online child sexual abuse prevention programs found that staff often felt overwhelmed and inundated by the high numbers of potential clients who contact the programs. As such, it is important not to advertise too widely before the initiative is adequately resourced. It is also necessary to set reasonable expectations of staff (eg client contacts/hours, caseload limits) to reduce burnout.

Principle 5: Training and support

In addition to having an empathetic and non-judgemental approach, program staff should be supported with appropriate training, frameworks, knowledge and skills to ensure clients receive high-quality, professional care. Research into individuals who have a sexual interest in children indicates that many would consider treatment if they were assured that staff had expertise in the area (Beier 2016). Similarly, feedback from the Stop It Now! helpline (Brown et al. 2014) highlights the importance of the quality of information provided and the skills, empathy and attitude of staff.

Programs with direct and indirect contact with help-seekers should develop formal induction training courses for new staff and regular refresher training for existing staff. Such training policies have been implemented as part of the previously operating Internet Sex Offender Treatment Program (I-SOTP, UK), which required staff to complete training to ensure that they had the necessary knowledge, competencies and abilities (ECSA 2017; Middleton, Mandeville-Norden & Hayes 2009). Similarly, phone operators for Stop It Now! (UK) are required to have an existing broad knowledge of child protection and sexual abuse issues, and are supervised by child protection experts and practitioners (ECSA 2021). Operators complete specific helpline training prior to commencement, and are offered ongoing training on specific issues such as mental health, child development, and the role of social services in responding to child sexual abuse (ECSA 2021).

Principle 6: Tailor programs according to the client group

Initiatives should be developed to cater to the needs of different client groups, including young people, Indigenous people, those with cognitive disability, and those who specifically engage in CSAM offending (rather than those who engage in, or also engage in, contact sexual offending). Perkins and colleagues (2018) surveyed program providers from multiple online child sexual exploitation interventions in the United Kingdom and internationally. Program staff reported a need for more targeted support for young people, those who are culturally and linguistically diverse, and those who have different intellectual and learning needs (Perkins et al. 2018).

Risk, need and responsivity

According to the risk–need–responsivity (RNR) model (ie a model where the risks and needs of an individual guide the selection of appropriate interventions), treatment should be tailored to suit the different needs, learning styles, and levels of risk among clients (Bonta & Andrews 2017). This principle is evident in the Stop It Now! model, in which different tiers of support are available for different clients. All callers can access counselling and information through the main helpline, but callers with more complex issues and higher levels of assessed risk are channelled to a second stage. At this stage they are offered either a call-back or a face-to-face meeting with a specialist practitioner, depending on the country in which they are based (Eisenberg et al. 2014).

Young people

Research emphasises the importance of developing prevention interventions specifically tailored to the needs of young people with harmful sexual behaviours (Quadara et al. 2020; RCIRCSA 2017). The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) noted that it is inappropriate to draw on the research into characteristics and behaviours of adult sexual offenders when managing children (including young people) with harmful sexual behaviour.

Two reviews of initiatives for young people with harmful sexual behaviours in Australia and New Zealand stressed the importance of family involvement (where appropriate) for the following reasons:

- being isolated from one's family because of harmful sexual behaviour can jeopardise the young person's ability to address their behaviour through treatment;
- a large proportion of harmful sexual behaviour is intra-familial, and therefore treatment can benefit victims and other family members;
- young people with harmful sexual behaviour often experience trauma such as neglect and exposure to family domestic violence, which can also be addressed during treatment; and
- it can reassure young people that their family still accept and support them despite their offending (Geary, Lambie & Seymour 2010; Macgregor 2008).

The above considerations are mainly relevant to face-to-face initiatives that address harmful sexual behaviour among young people. However, consultations with members of the Project Advisory Group highlight the importance of developing CSAM-focused prevention initiatives that cater specifically to the needs of young people (eg Inform Plus Young People, which is an educational program specifically for young people who have engaged in harmful or inappropriate online behaviour, such as viewing CSAM; Lucy Faithfull Foundation 2024). There is emerging evidence that young people are engaging with CSAM and harmful adult pornography online (Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valonen 2021; Napier 2023), and to address this behaviour, anonymous online programs or phone hotlines may also be helpful. This is because young people may not feel comfortable speaking with their family about harmful material they have viewed online, and require an avenue to get help in a safe and confidential environment. Like face-to-face programs, online initiatives should be tailored specifically to the needs of young people.

Indigenous clients

Initiatives that work with Indigenous clients should incorporate culturally appropriate language and elements into the program. Where possible, initiatives should provide clients with the option to work with an Indigenous staff member, who can integrate cultural customs, values and principles into their treatment content. The New Street Adolescent Service for children with harmful sexual behaviour aims to recruit Indigenous counsellors at each of its locations. An evaluation of the program found that 87 percent of Indigenous young people had ceased their harmful behaviour at completion of the program (KPMG 2014). Feedback from Indigenous Māori clients attending tertiary treatment programs in New Zealand (Geary, Lambie & Seymour 2010; Lambie et al. 2007) emphasised the importance of having enough time at the beginning of treatment to establish rapport, communicating in culturally appropriate ways, and highlighting the Māori presence in the agency through displays of Māori artwork. Further, an evaluation of Safe to talk, a multi-channel (phone, webchat, text messaging) national sexual violence helpline in New Zealand, highlighted the importance of using culturally appropriate language and, where possible, referring individuals to Māori-specific services and providers (Malatest International 2019).

Clients with cognitive disability

There are currently very few initiatives aimed at preventing CSAM offending that cater to the needs of people with cognitive disability (Gannoni et al. 2023). Although the evidence on prevalence remains unclear, research has consistently emphasised the unique treatment needs of contact sexual offenders with cognitive disability (Cohen & Harvey 2015; Frize et al. 2020; Lindsay 2016). While more research is required on CSAM offending among those with cognitive disability, it is likely that these individuals also have their own specific treatment needs, and initiatives should be developed to meet these needs.

CSAM-only offending

Many CSAM-only offenders and contact sexual offenders share similar characteristics (Paquette, Fortin & Perkins 2020). However, prior research also suggests those who engage in CSAM-only offending can differ from those who engage in contact sexual offending on a range of characteristics, including reoffending rates (Dowling et al. 2021; Hirschtritt, Tucker & Binder 2019; Prichard & Spiranovic 2014) and personal and offending characteristics (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen 2015; Henshaw, Ogloff & Clough 2018). Such research suggests that traditional sexual offender programs may not address the intervention needs of CSAM offenders and that a more tailored approach is needed. For example, the Child Pornography Offender Risk Tool (CPORT) is a recently developed risk assessment tool designed specifically for online offenders (see Seto & Eke 2015).

In their review, Gannoni et al. (2023) noted that more research is needed to determine the impact of many prevention initiatives on CSAM offending. However, they found little evidence to suggest initiatives aimed at contact sexual abuse are effective in reducing CSAM offending, while initiatives specifically aimed at CSAM offending showed some promising results for this offence type.

Principle 7: Evaluation

There is a limited (although growing) body of evidence on the implementation and effectiveness of initiatives that aim to prevent CSAM offending (Gannoni et al. 2023). This is likely because many of the initiatives are in their early stages of implementation and evaluation. This body of evidence is hampered by several methodological limitations, such as small sample sizes, lack of control groups and short follow-up periods. Prior reviews have also noted the need for large-scale and robust treatment outcome evaluations (eg Di Gioia & Beslay 2018; Di Gioia et al. 2022; INHOPE 2020; Paquette, Fortin & Perkins 2020; Perkins et al. 2018; World Health Organization 2022). Not only is this information important for developing understanding of ‘what works’, but monitoring and evaluation activities can also assist in identifying program activities that are not having the intended impact, and why.

The absence of control groups is a common limitation of sex offender treatment evaluation research, and a difficult one to overcome due to the ethical concerns surrounding withholding treatment to eligible offenders to create control groups (Gannoni et al. 2023). Some studies have instead used a placebo control group (Lätth et al. 2022) or a matched control group comprising individuals who were eligible but did not participate in the treatment (eg Bates et al. 2013). It is important for researchers to learn from such studies and develop methods of obtaining an adequate control group in evaluations. This way, more rigorous research can be conducted on both the implementation and outcomes of initiatives for CSAM offending.

Summary

Based on a review of the literature, and input from an international expert advisory group, we have described seven principles to guide the development and implementation of initiatives aiming to prevent CSAM offending. Consideration was given to describing how these principles can enhance prevention initiatives for individuals who have offended (known and unknown to police) and individuals who may be at risk of offending, complementing the important work of law enforcement.

Initiatives that aim to prevent CSAM offending are likely to be most successful when tailored to meet the individual needs and circumstances of this group. This includes consideration of effective and targeted advertising campaigns, providing confidential and anonymous support where appropriate, ensuring practitioners have an empathetic and non-judgemental approach and are provided with adequate training and support, and ensuring programs are easily accessible. Initiatives need to adhere to the mandatory reporting laws of the relevant jurisdiction and be transparent with clients about doing so. Finally, the development of prevention initiatives should incorporate the unique treatment needs of young people, Indigenous clients, and those with cognitive disability, and embed monitoring and evaluation frameworks and activities.

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10. Grievances and conspiracy theories as motivators of anti-authority protests

Timothy Cubitt, Anthony Morgan and Isabella Voce

Recent protest activity in Australia has related to a range of political and social causes, including climate change, women's rights, pandemic-related government policies, and a range of ideological movements. While peaceful protests were held in parts of the country, some resulted in arrests, fines and violence (ABC News 2021; Bavas & Nguyen 2021). Over time, fringe and conspiratorial rhetoric increased across social media (De Coninck 2021) and began featuring more prominently in anti-authority 'freedom' protests (Khalil & Roose 2023). While the public health measures have ceased, these freedom protests—and related social movements—have persisted. Conspiratorial and far-right actors have become increasingly prominent among anti-government or anti-authority protests.

People participate in protests for a range of reasons. However, for the majority, it may be distilled down to one core factor: a grievance (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011). These can include experiences of inequality, feelings of deprivation, feelings of injustice, a perceived moral injury, or a sudden change of circumstances (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2009, 2010). However, the motivation to act on this grievance by protesting is often dependent on a series of associated factors, such as how similar a protest cause is to the core concerns of an individual (Simon et al. 1998; Sturmer & Simon 2004), how closely an individual identifies with the underlying beliefs of a protest group (Sturmer & Simon 2004), and what are known as instrumental factors. Instrumental factors relate to a transaction: protesters experience a grievance, are motivated to protest in an effort to correct that specific grievance, and seek to stimulate a material change in circumstances (Klandermans 1984). While instrumental factors may be resolved quickly, by improving employment rights or increasing pay (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011), emotional factors such as shared group anger are more likely to persist over time (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011).

Grievances that are underpinned by ideological beliefs are often based on a perception that a situation is incompatible with or has violated fundamental individual values, and that the only way to resolve that grievance is to protest. And, while protests motivated primarily by instrumental factors often recede, protests motivated by personal, group-based or ideological factors are more likely to persist.

Conspiratorial views and anti-authority protest

Protests relating to pandemic public health measures, including anti-lockdown, anti-vaccination and anti-vaccine mandate protests, differed from other protest activity because of their links with the anti-government freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023). These protest movements presented an opportunity for exploitation by groups who intended to promote anti-government sentiment, often interlinked with far-right or conspiratorial ideologies, with the intention of increasing division within the community (McGowan 2021; Pantucci 2022; Roose 2021; Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2022). Anti-authority protests across the COVID-19 period were seemingly characterised by the strong grievances of participants that, in some cases, resulted in threats or incitement of violence towards high-profile politicians and government officials (ASIO 2022; Butler 2022; McKenzie & Lucas 2021).

Protest activity across the COVID-19 period was unique because it brought together groups of individuals, with little else in common, who shared a disapproval of government policy. Importantly, these protests also featured more extreme elements of anti-authority causes (Roose 2021; Wilson 2022), resulting in moderate protest attendees being exposed to extreme ideas, including a range of conspiracy beliefs. This was not unique to Australia, with many of these more extreme groups having a presence at freedom protests around the world (McGowan 2021; Roose 2021).

Conspiracy beliefs can be differentiated from other beliefs by five unique features. Conspiracy theories typically oppose a publicly accepted understanding of events, describe malevolent or forbidden acts, attribute responsibility to individuals or groups rather than systems, are more prone to falsity than other beliefs, and have the potential to misrepresent current events or develop new alternative realities among social groups (Douglas & Sutton 2023). Although each respective feature may be present among groups who hold other beliefs, for those who believe in conspiracy theories, each feature tends to be present. However, it is important to note that conspiratorial beliefs do not exclude the possibility that an individual simultaneously adheres to other ideologies.

Conspiratorial beliefs are associated with alienation from political groups (Jolley & Douglas 2014), while decreasing public support for government policies (Douglas & Sutton 2015; Jolley & Douglas 2014). They offer a unifying narrative and cohesive force against a common enemy and reduce ambiguity in such a way that followers can easily reject alternative worldviews (Bartlett & Miller 2010; Basit 2021). They are also associated with extremist groups and endorsement of political violence (Van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollet 2015; Vegetti & Littvay 2022). To date, research has relied on social media posts (Khalil & Roose 2023; Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2022) to provide insight into the relationship between the attitudes and behaviour of individuals. However, less is known about the role that belief in conspiracy theories plays in shaping grievances and motivating protesters (Bertuzzi 2021), especially in the Australian context. Given that they remain a feature of more recent protest activity (Elias 2023), this is an important gap. This study sought to better understand the motives for participating in protests and the influence of conspiratorial beliefs in shaping grievances among a sample of individuals who protested in opposition to pandemic-related public health policies.

Method

The sample for this study was drawn from a larger survey of more than 13,000 online Australians about their social and political beliefs conducted in late 2022. The survey asked respondents if they had ever participated in protest activity, with a follow-up question asking whether they had participated in protest activity between January 2020 and undertaking the survey. Respondents who reported that they were involved in protest activity specifically relating to government COVID-19 policies within the three years prior to undertaking the survey ($n=185$) were then asked whether they would be willing to undertake follow-up online questioning, in which a moderator posed questions and prompts to respondents, to better understand their protest activity. Nearly half agreed to participate ($n=90$, 49%). After recruitment, interviews were undertaken with 35 participants (39% of those who consented) with the intention of understanding the motivations, perceptions and experiences of those who had protested government policies and regulations relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because respondents may have participated in multiple protests during the observation period, the moderated interview was focused on the most recent protest. While all interview participants identified that they had protested against government COVID-19 regulations, there were eight respondents who had most recently protested in support of other causes. These included improved pay and workers' rights, women's rights and climate change. We limited our analysis to individuals whose responses specifically related to protests against COVID-19 public health measures ($n=27$).

Half of the sample were male (52%, $n=14$), 44 percent ($n=12$) said they had a university education, and the majority were under the age of 50 (63%, $n=17$). At the time of undertaking the survey, more than half of respondents had at least part-time or casual employment (59%, $n=16$) and were in a relationship (67%, $n=18$); 56 percent of respondents ($n=15$) said they had never participated in an in-person protest before January 2020, while the remainder were repeat protesters. Respondents were also asked whether they considered themselves to be progressive, centrist or conservative in relation to social-change movements. The majority of respondents reported being either conservative (37%, $n=10$) or centrist (33%, $n=9$). Progressive views on social change were less common (15%, $n=4$), while a further four respondents did not know which way they leaned on social-change issues. Interviews were undertaken using an interactive, text-based online platform managed by Roy Morgan Research.

Given the nature of the data and focus of the research, this study adopted a phenomenological approach to understanding the experiences of individuals who protested against COVID-19 regulations and their reasons for protesting (Burns et al. 2022). This approach focused on how they perceived the introduction of the regulations, their motivations for protesting, and their views of government and police. The semi-structured questionnaire included a series of open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their views and experiences, with some additional prompting from the moderator. We adopted an inductive approach to identify the most common themes to emerge from the online interviews. As this was a written interview, we have presented the written responses verbatim, retaining grammatical and spelling errors.

Limitations

While most participants were forthcoming, requiring relatively little prompting, some (including those individuals who were approached but did not participate) may have been reluctant to share information about their protest involvement, or provide detailed information about their honest views or beliefs. This is because of both the focus of the research and the fact that the online interviews were conducted on behalf of an Australian Government agency (and many participants held strong anti-government views). Conversely, using a confidential online platform—which ensured the identity of participants was unknown to the moderators—may have helped to increase participation, but also limited our ability to explore issues in depth. It should also be noted that, as with any qualitative research, we cannot comment on the presence or absence of a causal relationship between conspiratorial ideologies, misinformation and anti-authority sentiment. Further, we are cautious about generalising beyond the sample of individuals who participated in the research.

Results

While the reasons for attending protests varied between individuals, each participant described a grievance as their core motivation. These grievances were associated with a negative consequence, to either themselves or someone close to them, emerging from COVID-19 public health policies. These could be described as either personal grievances or altruistic grievances. Participants who were motivated to protest by personal grievances wanted changes after feeling aggrieved at how they had been treated. Participants who reported altruistic grievances were more focused on the impact of regulations on their wider community and described a duty to protest against government powers to stimulate change that would benefit a wider group.

Perceived negative consequences of public health policies

Respondents all described the negative consequences of public health policies as a reason for attending protests. Some of these consequences were real, while others were clearly shaped by conspiratorial narratives that had been spread online.

Vaccination mandates in certain settings were a source of significant personal grievance, particularly where restrictions prevented respondents from visiting family members. This was connected to a perceived loss of rights:

With the subsequent onset of c-19, several of what I believed were my rights were taken away, including visiting my dying mother, my only family in Australia bar a distant cousin I barely ever see, in her residential care facility ... At a point during c-19, vaccinated family members were permitted to take UNvaccinated residents offsite to public places, bring them back to the facility, where they were returned to general population until/if they became symptomatic. Meanwhile, I was officially informed to not enter the facility property at all. (Participant 26, first-time protester)

Personal grievances sometimes extended to the treatment of family, indicative of shared grievances. For example, some protested in response to the treatment of their family because of their vaccination status. However, there was little concern for whether this was a more widespread issue:

My parents invited me to take part in the protests. I saw the ways in which they were treated by their family and their Church due to not being vaccinated and it was appalling. (Participant 31, repeat protester)

Other participants argued that the measures introduced were unreasonable because, in their view, they were not supported by evidence.

I lost friends and some family relationships over my refusal to be vaccinated or wear a mask in their presence. I refused on scientific, medical and crucially on ethical grounds. (Participant 27, first-time protester)

You do not lock healthy people inside and isolate them from friends and family for their health. You do not force people to wear masks which all the professionals advised are totally useless ... You do not tell them to stay indoors away from fresh air, sunshine and exercise. (Participant 6, first-time protester)

Once the research from various government agencies indicated that prescribed treatments were not fully tested and had side-effects. For example, the compulsory wearing of masks, when all the data indicated that mask wearing was largely ineffective in preventing the spread of COVID. (Participant 7, repeat protester)

I knew that vaccines go through a 10 year testing period and that the COVID vaccine skipped several steps in development. I was concerned about potential side effects especially considering I planned on starting a family and did not want to take any chances with fertility. (Participant 31, repeat protester)

Similarly, another protester described how their partner had lost their job after refusing to get vaccinated, and so became increasingly engaged in protest activity to try and prevent others from experiencing the same outcome. This is a good example of an instrumental motivation:

My wife was communicating with many nurses in the same predicament: jab or job. We discussed and researched the issue often. Protest rallies were being organized via social media. My wife was attending regularly since she was now unemployed ... It was clear this was not just ignorance or incompetence but vindictive punishment for non-compliance and I decided it was time to give up my weekends as well and attend the protests with her. (Participant 19, first-time protester)

Participating in the social movement had also come at a perceived personal cost, and this only served to amplify the grievance and motivate participants to stay involved:

This movement has cost me my career and another job and it almost cost me my family, I was also made a second class citizen for a period of time where I was not welcomed in many places in my community, the price of my stance on these issues has been heavy yet I regret nothing and was even willing and ready to pay a much higher cost than what I had paid and will continue to support these causes at the risk of losing more than I already have. (Participant 16, first-time protester)

Many first-time protesters—people who had never protested before the pandemic—held strong personal grievances, which translated into strong anti-government sentiment. They described how they or their family had suffered as a consequence of public health policies, such as by losing a job or income, losing ties to family or friends, or experiencing health effects from the vaccination:

My cousin's girlfriend, who I was pretty good friends with, no longer speaks to me, I also haven't spoken to my sister since she got jabbed, this was kind of my fault, as I just didn't know what to say to her, I was so upset when I found out, I cried. We were on the same page for a long time, I just couldn't believe that she would do that just to keep a shitty job at [redacted]. My daughter lost a very well paying job in management due to job mandates. My friends brother, who was fit and healthy suffered a stroke and died from the job, as did my son's father in law. (Participant 15, first-time protester)

Among those who did not report a personal grievance, motivations were framed as more altruistic in nature—to help rein in government power and to aid the wider community.

I feel proud to be a part of something during protesting and also defiant as i feel i am against the odds and after a protest I feel a great sense of satisfaction at having done what i believe is the right thing to do for the great Australian community and the community I live in. (Participant 16, first-time protester)

There was a belief among some of these protesters that they had wider community support for their activism, and that protesting had increased their support:

In a few instances people questioned whether or not the pandemic was false and congratulated the protesters for standing up for freedom of choice. (Participant 12, repeat protester)

The wider community is typically represented in the media as being against our cause. However, I believe that there is a silent majority who do support us. I am aware of many people who believe that our protests are futile and consequently do not attend rallies against lockdowns. They believe that we are powerless to bring about positive change on the causes we are fighting for. As time went on, and protesting lockdowns was allowed by the authorities, the rallies intensified and were normalised. I think that this saw our protest movement more widely accepted by the wider community. (Participant 31, first-time protester)

These participants did not point to a singular event or grievance as the source of their motivation; rather, they described more abstract concerns, often referencing social media or messaging applications. Those whose grievance was framed as altruistic often reported learning about pandemic regulations online, consistent with the hybrid online and offline movement that characterised the freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023):

I learnt about the whole pandemic law by reading the online newspaper and what it was and what it entailed. I also googled generally about this proposed pandemic law. Once I read about this proposed law and the power that [politician] will have I was quite angry. I thought I had to do something. So I decided to go to the protest. I learnt about the protest from Telegram. I joined a group called Melbourne freedom rally. It had liked minded individuals like my self who were against lock downs , the mandatory covid vaccine , and the pandemic law. There was alot of discussion about the negative aspects of the pandemic law in this group. The group was telling dates and times of where the protest will be. So I ultimately joined the protest. (Participant 1, repeat protester)

There was a perception among protesters motivated by more altruistic grievances that government policy was causing significant societal damage and increasingly impinging on people's freedoms, which was a common theme and reflects the link with the broader freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023).

In my mind the issue was too important to ignore, and I felt that no action in respect to this issue would allow and lead to further infringements on our rights from multiple levels of government. I saw the issue as the government actively pushing in order to see how far they could go with regard to infringing rights and the level of compliance they could achieve. If nobody stood up to this it would have been a green light to the government to press forward with further restrictions on freedoms. (Participant 24, first-time protester)

When freedoms and human rights are denied under our Australian constitution, regardless of the reason people protest I will always support protect and protest to maintain the validity of the rights of all people ... I will maintain my rights under the Australian Constitution for all Australians. (Participant 12, repeat protester)

This group were also more likely to report conspiratorial views. Their calls to protest to protect their freedoms, and the common language underpinning these narratives, reflected a group-based anger behind an emerging ideological movement.

Endorsement of conspiratorial views and sovereign citizen ideology

Conspiratorial narratives and misinformation shared online appeared to contribute to perceptions of the effects of public health policies—grievances reported by participants—and these narratives were sometimes indistinguishable from one another. Even when they were not central to their grievance, or their motive for protesting, conspiratorial views were common. However, these beliefs existed on a continuum. Some participants described how their rights were being eroded, while others took a more extreme view. Participants who reported concerns about the validity of the vaccine development often paired them with fringe conspiratorial beliefs about censorship by the mainstream media:

When there were scientists and industry professionals talking about some of the concerns they had/have about this experimental vaccine rollout, these people were censored and cancelled by the mainstream media. So many people I spoke to didn't even realise they were participating in a vaccine trial, and it's understandable, because all people heard on the nightly news from government officials is that the vaccines are safe and effective. (Participant 29, repeat protester)

Participants who referenced conspiracy theories also discussed engaging with alternative media sources. While participants rarely described the exact nature of the content, examples included reinterpretation of medical reports on unmoderated social media platforms, and alternative perspectives of vaccination programs on well-known podcasts. These participants were typically seeking information that was not readily available from mainstream media to support their concerns about vaccination and government regulations:

It is obvious the grip of big pharma's financial constraints on the media is still firm, as well as government threats of disciplinary action. However, talking points such as the extraordinary VAERS [Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System] reports, and excess deaths being higher than they should be, are gaining traction, helped by censorship free platforms such as Rumble. Influential podcasters such as Joe Rogan and Russel Brand, with millions of followers, are talking openly about the data now and the censorship by platforms such as YouTube is easing. (Participant 19, repeat protester)

However, some protesters reported a wider range of conspiratorial views. Rather than being framed as concerns, these participants reported certainties that required immediate action. They often referenced not being heard, or listened to, and the need to engage in protest activity to increase awareness of the conspiracy:

Researching independently away from the MSM [mainstream media], the blatant lying by gov agencies and the lack of a measured response—rather than the knee jerk panic rubbish that occurred. I was aware from late 2019 when the suspicious out breaks in Wuhan were dramatically dramatized by the Chinese, and it just rolled on from there, every so called alternate theory has been now proven correct! (Participant 35, repeat protester)

Conspiratorial narratives were not limited to the pandemic; rather, the beliefs about COVID-19 were situated within wider conspiracies:

Agenda 21/30 depopulation through the vaccine. These “vaccines” are neither safe or effective. Already seeing the results ... Then total control over the remaining population through Smart Cities which restricts your movement (walking or cycling) of 15–20 minutes of your residence. All in the name of “Climate Change”. The WEF [World Economic Forum] are open about their plans. (Participant 11, first-time protester)

While participants reported conspiratorial views surrounding vaccine development, the media and government, some reported adhering to elements of the sovereign citizen ideology. Sovereign citizen beliefs range from the passive rejection of government authority to incidents of violence in support of their cause:

The government does not listen to the people, they are a service corporation listed with the United States Security Exchanges Commission NOT a proper government of and by the people and haven't been since 1973 ... Freedom means I choose what I do NOT government, government serves the people NOT the other way around otherwise we are slaves. (Participant 4, first-time protester)

For some, sovereign citizen ideology was accompanied by endorsing violence in support of their movement. These participants suggested the government was actively working against its citizens, with reference to conspiracy theories focusing on monetary policy, immigration and globalisation:

It's full on war and our treasonous govt is working for the enemy the UN and World Economic Forum they are extremely evil organisations working for the social elite. They have stolen our money and are now in control. I think eventually it will come to civil war. The people against the govt. It will be a bloody battle, many lives will be lost, however in the end [it] will be good freedom for all. (Participant 21, first-time protester)

Not all anti-authority protesters held these extreme views. Some participants reported that they were not aware of the conspiratorial views (or the strength of those views) that they were endorsing by attending the protest until after they had become involved:

There was no room for intelligent discussion or critical thinking. You were either in or out. A sheeple in a muzzle or one of them. I was neither and the anti-vax beliefs really didn't sit well with me. So there I was, in a crowd of chanting protesters, clutching my mask in hand, wondering what on earth they thought would be achieved. My reasons for being there were based around the lack of extensive clinical studies and what could be potential adverse outcomes as a result—remember thalidomide. Others there seemed to truly believe the vaccine was a means for world dominance. (Participant 2, first-time protester)

Anti-government sentiment

Unsurprisingly, given the link between conspiratorial beliefs and anti-government sentiment (Douglas & Sutton 2015; Jolley & Douglas 2014), many of the interview participants expressed strong anti-government views. Like conspiratorial beliefs, anti-government sentiment was expressed on a continuum from dissatisfaction with the public health response to extreme views. While participants disagreed with the decisions made by government, some acknowledged that, at least in the beginning, these decisions may have been well intentioned. However, as these public health policies persisted, dissatisfaction and the response to protests grew and the motivation to protest increased:

... they got in too deep on the issue. They began by locking the public down for two weeks during early 2020. Instead of returning things back to normal after a short time and simply admitting that they were wrong, they dug in and continued with lockdowns ...

They seemed to be more upset as our rallies grew in number. The way that the [politician] outright dismissed our cause was great evidence of this. Instead of remarking at how huge the opposition against him was, he thanked 'all those who made the right decision and got vaccinated.' This was a weak move and it made him look scared and intimidated. Such responses motivated me to rally even harder and oppose him even more strongly. (Participant 31, repeat protester)

Some participants reported a duty to protest when they believed that human rights were not being upheld, describing how the government response to the pandemic was inconsistent with their views about how a democratic government should operate, believing that COVID-19 policies impeded their freedoms:

I grew up in a free country. Tens of thousands of young Australians died in wars fighting for those freedoms and I do not intend on surrendering those freedoms to a bunch of uneducated unelected bureaucrats blindly following flawed orders that we[re] detrimental to [u]r physical and mental health (Participant 6, first-time protester)

Removing vaccination mandates and lockdown policies was seen as an implied endorsement of the decision to protest:

The government has acted like an authoritarian government with its lockdowns, vaccine mandates, mandatory restrictions on people having to sign in to visit a shop for 30 seconds, self loathing daily press conferences, and name calling people who do not have as much faith in the vaccine as they do ... Thankfully I no longer need the government policy to shift as the world has now found out the vaccine was a waste of time, money, and looks like it has more chance of doing harm than good. This has caused most governments in the world to drop their mandates ... I have not attended other protests before. It was the unique issue of the government overreach by the [politician] government. (Participant 5, first-time protester)

As a consequence, many participants called for the government to be held accountable for their decisions. A perceived lack of accountability led to feelings of anger:

I'm angry because the government will always hide behind what they did and never been held accountable, angry because it didn't have to be this way, angry because our local politicians only represented the ones who agreed with them. (Participant 18, repeat protester)

We feel abused. There will be an undertone of this in society until justice is done, and those in power are made accountable ... Some want nothing less than jail time for any found guilty of fraud or negligence, or those that facilitated censorship ... I hope the past few years will someday be taught in history classes alongside the atrocities of the Soviet Union, Maoist China and Nazi Germany. (Participant 19, first-time protester)

More extreme anti-government sentiment was clearly rooted in conspiratorial ideologies:

Governments motives? They just do as they're told. Pretty much every country on earth following the same agenda? All puppets, whose strings are being pulled by the same people. All heading toward the same goal. New World Order, The Great Reset, call it what you will, I believe the curtailing of freedoms etc ... that happened during the pandemic has brought us closer to this end. (Participant 15, repeat protester)

Conspiratorial narratives were also present in how protesters characterised the government's response to protests and the use of violence by police. This had steered their resolve to continue to protest:

The government was evil they were shooting LRADs [long-range acoustic devices] into the crowds. I got radiation burns that have left a permanent scar. As the 2030 agenda rolls out the govt are getting more and more aggressive for example in Melbourne they sprayed rubber bullets into the crowd, knocked over elderly ladies. I did not attend the Melbourne one but I watched some live footage. The mainstream media propagandized the event as usual with lies and fake news ... We have a lot to lose we must stand up to evil no matter what the cost ... They are not getting control of Australia. (Participant 21, first-time protester)

Myself personally and many of those within the cause that I spoke to while this was happening found that even after this response from the police and government, it was more important than ever to further protest. The response did nothing but add fuel to the fire and strengthen the resolve of protesters. (Participant 24, first-time protester)

Relatedly, participants with more extreme conspiratorial views reported that protest activity and resistance to government authority would persist. While they suggested the wider public may move on and forget about the effects of public health measures, participants who endorsed more conspiratorial narratives around COVID-19 regulations were adamant that they would remain vigilant to future government and police action and would be willing to continue their activism:

The mass public with their gold fish memory, the events that occurred over the past 3 years will fade for them as they settle back into normal life [but] the awakened ones, they will not forget and will be watching for the next wave of control to appear. (Participant 35, repeat protester)

Discussion

Many anti-authority protesters were motivated by strong personal grievances based on perceived negative experiences, and the deterioration of their or their family's circumstances. Others were motivated by the belief that they were protesting on behalf of the wider community. These respondents were protesting because they wanted to influence public health policies, which they perceived as eroding their rights and freedoms or having a harmful effect on society. For many respondents, these grievances were shaped or amplified by adherence to conspiratorial ideologies, including sovereign citizen beliefs. These shared beliefs led to joining the social movement and protesting (Simon et al. 1998; Sturmer & Simon 2004).

Protesters who endorsed extreme conspiratorial views reported that, although COVID-19 regulations had eased, their beliefs and grievances persisted, reflecting the notion that shared anger, fuelled by grievances, was likely to persist over time (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011). This is important given that the development of an ideology may emerge from perceptions that fundamental rights or values have been violated (Klandermans 2004; van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011). The grievances and shared anger that motivated protest activity appeared to foster mistrust and strong anti-government sentiment, rooted in conspiratorial beliefs, developing in some cases into a persistent anti-authority ideology. This was central to the emergence of the freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023) and attracted concern from security agencies at the height of the pandemic (ASIO 2022).

These interview findings are supported by research measuring vulnerability to radicalisation among anti-authority protesters. Morgan, Cubitt and Voce (2024) found that anti-authority protesters experienced more risk factors and fewer protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation than those who protested prior to the pandemic or in support of other movements. Importantly, the majority of their sample endorsed conspiratorial beliefs and reported support for values often linked with sovereign citizen ideology. Together, these findings point to an emerging and persistent anti-authority ideology that is rooted in conspiratorial views and vulnerable to cognitive and behavioural radicalisation.

Of course, anti-authority protest—when it does not contravene public health orders—is a legitimate and legal form of political dissent and an important feature of a functioning democracy. Extreme or radical views rarely result in violence. Similarly, while some protesters reported grievances alongside extreme conspiratorial views as their motivation, others attended protest activity to connect with a community who shared concerns about the efficacy of public health measures. Restricting the ability of the public to express dissent towards government, or support for different causes, has been found to further marginalise these groups and create greater grievance (Peucker 2021). Morgan, Cubitt and Voce (2024) demonstrate the heterogeneity among anti-authority protesters, many of whom neither endorsed violence nor showed an unusual degree of vulnerability to radicalisation to violence. While many of the participants in this study reported persistent conspiratorial views and a motivation for action, others said that the strong beliefs held by others deterred them from further engagement in protest. Emerging research into the role of conspiracy theories has used samples drawn from online forums to compare people who express violent intentions with those who do not (Vergani et al. 2022). While the data used in this study contained limited information about the violent intentions of respondents, similar comparative approaches to analysing community samples may help better understand the link between conspiratorial beliefs and violent intentions.

Understanding the motivations of anti-authority protesters, and the grievances that underpin their action, is pivotal to shaping a government response. Recently, the ASIO Director-General noted the nuanced distinction between extreme views and violent extremism (ASIO 2023). To shape an appropriate and tailored response, it is therefore essential to understand the factors motivating anti-government activism, in this case by those who hold conspiratorial beliefs. Government responses to conspiratorial groups should be guided by a robust understanding of the motivations, grievances and associated factors underpinning their beliefs. This research provides important context to the reasons for protest action and the spectrum of grievances and beliefs that motivated anti-authority protest during the pandemic.

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11. Testing the application of violent extremism risk assessment to individuals who have radicalised in Australia: The case of the VERA-2R

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Introduction

A key aim of violence risk assessment is to evaluate the propensity that a person will act in a dangerous way and then to develop strategies to mitigate or manage those behaviours (Borum 2015; Hart & Logan 2011). One approach to violence risk assessment is the use of the structured professional judgement (SPJ) framework. SPJ is defined as an analytical method used to understand and mitigate the risk of interpersonal violence posed by individual people that is discretionary in essence but relies on evidence-based guidelines (Hart & Logan 2011). SPJ has been widely adopted for the assessment of terrorist offenders and extremist violence risk (Logan & Lloyd 2019). One violent extremism risk assessment tool adopting the SPJ approach is the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment—Version 2 Revised (VERA-2R; Pressman et al. 2018).

The VERA-2R is used in Australia across correctional and community settings. It is used to inform assessments of individuals subject to Commonwealth terrorist offender preventative legislation, such as continuing detention orders (ie High Risk Terrorist Offender scheme, or Division 105A of the Criminal Code). It is in this context that the use of the VERA-2R has come under intense scrutiny and debate (Corner & Taylor 2023b; Cubitt & Wolbers 2023; Independent National Security Legislation Monitor 2023). The general consensus is that more research is needed on the VERA-2R and its application to violent extremists in Australia (Corner & Taylor 2023b; Cubitt & Wolbers 2022).

Given the influence of violent extremism risk assessment on decisions relating to pre- and post-detention, the management of extremist offenders and the forms of assistance provided to them, it is important that any tool provide valid and reliable assessments of risk. Briefly, validity as it pertains to violence risk assessment relates to whether an instrument (ie a specific tool) measures what it purports to measure. This includes, for example, whether a risk assessment tool can predict the risk of offending. Reliability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency of the tool in reaching risk judgements. This includes if there is consistency between assessors when it comes to their assessments of risk—termed interrater reliability (for more detail on specific validity and reliability criteria, see Groth-Marnat & Wright 2016: 117; Singh 2013).

There are debates and disagreements about approaches and methods to measure the validity and reliability of risk assessment tools (Singh 2013). This research does not set out to conclude whether the VERA-2R is more or less valid or reliable than other available violent extremism risk assessment tools. The aims of this project are:

- to examine whether the VERA-2R can help understand the types of factors that characterise violent extremists in Australia;
- to assess if the VERA-2R can discern between different risk levels in relation to violent and non-violent individuals; and
- to undertake a series of tests examining the interrater reliability and predictive validity of the VERA-2R.

In this chapter we have provided a summary of the main results. Readers should refer to Cherney and Belton (2024) for more detail.

Violent Extremism Risk Assessment—Version 2 Revised

The VERA-2R is designed to capture contextual factors and risk indicators relevant to violent extremism as shown in Table 1 below (Pressman et al. 2018). The VERA-2R framework comprises 34 factors across five domains. Four of these domains reflect indicators of risk: *Beliefs, attitudes and ideology* (BA); *Social context and intention* (SCI); *History, action and capacity* (HAC); and *Commitment and motivation* (CM). A fifth domain, *Protective and risk mitigating* (P), considers protective factors. Eleven *Additional indicators* that capture background characteristics are also included (Pressman et al. 2018).

Table 1: VERA-2R domains and indicators

Beliefs, attitudes and ideology (BA)

- BA 1 Commitment to ideology that justifies violence
- BA 2 Perceived grievance and/or injustice
- BA 3 Dehumanisation of designated targets associated with injustice
- BA 4 Rejection of democratic society and values
- BA 5 Expressed emotions in response to perceived injustice
- BA 6 Hostility to national identity
- BA 7 Lack of empathy and understanding for those outside one's own group

Social context and intention (SCI)

- SCI 1 Seeker, user or developer of violent extremist materials
- SCI 2 Target for attack identified (person, group, location)
- SCI 3 Personal contact with violent extremists (informal or social context)
- SCI 4 Expressed intention to commit acts of violent extremism
- SCI 5 Expressed willingness and/or preparation to die for a cause or belief
- SCI 6 Planning, preparation of acts of violent extremism
- SCI 7 Susceptibility to influence, control or indoctrination

History, action and capacity (HAC)

- HAC 1 Early exposure to violence-promoting, militant ideology
- HAC 2 Network of family and friends involved in violent extremism

Table 1: VERA-2R domains and indicators (cont.)
HAC 3 Violent criminal history
HAC 4 Strategic, paramilitary and/or explosives training
HAC 5 Training in extremist ideology in own country or abroad
HAC 6 Organisational skills and access to funding and sources of help
Commitment and motivation (CM)
CM 1 Motivated by perceived religious obligation and/or glorification
CM 2 Motivated by criminal opportunism
CM 3 Motivated by camaraderie, group belonging
CM 4 Motivated by moral obligation, moral superiority
CM 5 Motivated by excitement and adventure
CM 6 Forced participation in violent extremism
CM 7 Motivated by acquisition of status
CM 8 Motivated by a search for meaning and significance in life
Protective and risk mitigating (P)
P 1 Reinterpretation of the ideology
P 2 Rejection of violence as a means to achieve goals
P 3 Change in concept of the enemy
P 4 Participant in programmes against violent extremism
P 5 Support from the community for non-violence
P 6 Support from family members, other important persons for non-violence
Additional indicators
CH Criminal history
CH 1 Client of the juvenile system/convicted for non-violent offence(s)
CH 2 Non-compliance with conditions or supervision
PH Personal history
PH 1 Violence in family
PH 2 Problematic upbringing and/or placed in juvenile care
PH 3 Problems with school and work
MD Mental disorder
MD 1 Personality disorder
MD 2 Depressive disorder and/or suicide attempts
MD 3 Psychotic and schizophrenic disorder
MD 4 Autism spectrum disorder
MD 5 Post-traumatic stress disorder
MD 6 Substance use disorder

When applying the VERA-2R, users are required to score each indicator listed in the four main risk domains (BA, SCI, HAC and CM) according to the ratings of 'high', 'moderate', and 'low'. For the indicators listed in the *Protective and risk mitigating* domain (P), users are required to score them in reverse, in that low scores indicate the absence of a protective factor. When it comes to the *Additional indicators*, they are rated as either 'present' or 'absent'. The authors of the VERA-2R state that a range of information sources should be used when applying the VERA-2R. If no information relating to a particular indicator is present, then it should not be rated. Drawing on this information and the use of SPIJ, VERA-2R users are advised to interpret the weighting of the indicators to arrive at an overall risk assessment and case formulation. The authors of the VERA-2R state that this does not comprise a numerical score relating to a risk level. In the VERA-2R manual this overall risk score is stated as either low, moderate or high, and it is also suggested that an alternative approach can include low, low-moderate, moderate, moderate-high or high risk ratings. For more detail on the VERA-2R scoring method, refer to Cherney and Belton (2024); de Bruin et al. (2022); and Pressman et al. (2018).

Project methodology

Methods

The research sample for this project was selected from the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA) database. The PIRA captures data on individuals who have radicalised in Australia from 1985 to 2022. PIRA draws on a range of open sources and includes individuals who adhere to Islamist, far-right, far-left and single-issue ideologies. Based on assessments of the reliability of collected source materials and according to a codebook (see Belton & Cherney 2023), individuals in PIRA are coded across 122 variables relating to background, demographics, group affiliation and contextual information. Data are first qualitatively captured and then transferred into quantitative indicators. It is this mix of data that was used to conduct VERA-2R assessments on the selected sample. There are limitations in using open-source materials to compile profiles of individuals who have radicalised to extremism, relating to impartiality, accuracy and completeness. There can be potentially missing information, for instance, compared with closed sources or psychological evaluations that may include information related to risk assessment. However, open sources can be just as detailed as information derived from closed sources—for example, police files (Gill et al. 2019). For more detail on the PIRA database including inclusion criteria, coding framework and interrater reliability, see Belton, Cherney and Zahnw (2023).

Sample and data

VERA-2R risk assessments were completed on a total of 50 cases captured in the PIRA sample, consisting of individuals who had participated in a range of terrorism-related acts. This sample size was chosen to limit assessor fatigue. We chose cases with the largest number of data sources and the most reliable information to enhance the accuracy of the assessments by minimising the possibility of missing data. To identify PIRA cases, they were first ranked according to the number of sources used, then by those with available court data (eg sentencing transcripts), which is considered to be the most reliable form of open-source data. On average, cases were compiled using 29 separate data sources ($SD=13.04$), with 88 percent ($n=44$) having available court data.

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The above selection process resulted in a sample comprising 37 violent and 13 non-violent individuals ($N=50$). Violent extremists in PIRA are defined as individuals who attempted or actually engaged in ideologically motivated behaviour intending to cause harm, injury or death. To be considered violent, there had to be clear evidence of operational plans that were aimed at engaging in violent acts. Those considered to be non-violent were individuals who came to hold radical views, who did not engage in violent action but who did undertake non-violent activities motivated by an extremist ideology (eg financing a terrorist organisation or viewing, compiling and disseminating extremist material). Hence the categorisation of 'violent' includes those conducting violent acts themselves and individuals who engaged in preparatory acts of violence. Existing studies have made similar definitional distinctions between violent and non-violent extremists when analysing comparable datasets (see Becker 2019; Schuurman & Carthy 2023).

The inclusion of non-violent extremists ensured the sample represented individuals from a range of backgrounds who participated in ideologically motivated behaviours that are not always characterised by violence. This sample was selected to ensure the data as closely as possible reflected the variation and complexity of risk profiles and hence varying levels of risk based on behavioural outcomes. Islamist and far-right aligned individuals were included to further ensure the data captured a range of ideological motivations. Most cases, however, were aligned with Islamist or jihadist ideologies (88%), with only six far-right cases included (12%).

Coding VERA-2R indicators

Qualitative information in the PIRA database was used to measure the VERA-2R risk indicators as being either low, moderate or high. PIRA data were manually assessed against the VERA-2R risk domains. Identical to what is stated in the VERA-2R manual, specific indicators for the domains *Beliefs, attitudes and ideology* (BA), *Social context and intention* (SCI), *History, action and capacity* (HAC), *Commitment and motivation* (CM) and *Protective and risk mitigating factors* (P) were scored—ie coded—on a rating scale as 0=low, 1=moderate, or 2=high. The remaining 11 *Additional indicators* were scored on a dichotomous scale as 1=present or 0=absent.

Both authors attended a three-day official training course conducted by the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs on the practical use and application of the VERA-2R risk assessment tool and were given copies of the manual authored by Pressman and colleagues, and assessor forms that are used in the field. Scoring practices were informed by the VERA-2R manual and this training, and guidelines detailing specific instructions, parameters and explanations for scoring each of the VERA-2R indicators. To ensure that the assessments closely reflected how the VERA-2R is applied and used in practice, the authors liaised with VERA-2R trainers and other users to clarify the correct scoring of indicators. Both the first and second author assessed the sample of 50 extremists separately and blind. Once the ratings for all indicators for each profile were completed, a final risk judgement rating was given. Both authors gave either a final rating of *low*, *moderate* or *high*.

Results

Reliability testing of the VERA-2R

The level of consistency among ratings of the VERA-2R was examined through a range of analysis to test for interrater reliability. This was analysed using four measures: percentage agreement, Cohen's kappa, Krippendorff's alpha and intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC). We only report results from the ICC here because it is considered a more robust measure of interrater reliability (for a full explanation of all the measures of reliability and results from each measure, see Cherney & Belton 2024). The ICC was examined using a two-way random effects model and absolute agreement type. The interpretation of ICCs was based on critical values for single measures. Interpretations of the ICC value follow Koo and Li (2016) based on 95 percent confidence intervals of ICC values, where <0.50 is considered poor, 0.50 to 0.75 moderate, and 0.75 to 0.90 good, with values >0.90 rated as excellent. It has been pointed out that an ICC of 0.61 is desirable and commonly reported for established tools (Douglas & Reeves 2010), but ICC values above 0.75 are preferred (Vincent et al. 2012).

Across all the VERA-2R domains (including risk and protective domains and additional indicators) the mean ICC value was 0.86, indicating good interrater reliability. Overall, the average amount of agreement across these categories can be considered good (Koo & Li 2016). Tables 2 to 5 below present the mean ICC values for the four major VERA-2R risk domains as well as the ICC values for each risk indicator. The ICC values for risk judgement ratings between assessors indicated good reliability (0.83, 95% CI [0.72, 0.90], $p<0.001$). Out of the four major risk domains, *Beliefs, attitudes and ideology* (BA) received the highest level of overall interrater reliability (ICC=0.87). All indicators showed good to excellent interrater agreement (see Table 2).

Table 2: ICC values for beliefs, attitudes and ideology VERA-2R indicators

Beliefs, attitudes and ideology (BA)	ICC	95% CI
Mean domain BA	0.87	
BA 1 Commitment to ideology that justifies violence	0.83***	0.48, 0.83
BA 2 Perceived grievance and/or injustice	0.98***	0.96, 0.98
BA 3 Dehumanisation of designated targets associated with injustice	0.88***	0.79, 0.93
BA 4 Rejection of democratic society and values	0.87***	0.78, 0.92
BA 5 Expressed emotions in response to perceived injustice	0.90***	0.82, 0.94
BA 6 Hostility to national identity	0.85***	0.74, 0.90
BA 7 Lack of empathy and understanding for those outside one's own group	0.78***	0.64, 0.87

***statistically significant at $p<0.001$

Note: $N=50$. 95% CI=95% confidence interval. ICC=intraclass correlation coefficient

Three of the seven indicators in the *Social context and intention* (SCI) domain demonstrated excellent interrater reliability and two had good interrater reliability (Table 3). However, this domain also demonstrated the poorest levels of interrater agreement for a single indicator. The indicator *Susceptibility to influence, control and indoctrination* (SCI 7) showed poor agreement (ICC=0.45). ICC values for the variable *Seeker, user or developer of violent extremist materials* (SCI 1) presented as having moderate interrater agreement. The average amount of agreement across these indicators can be classified as good (ICC=0.81; Table 3).

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Indicators relating to *History, action and capacity* received the second highest level of overall interrater agreement (Table 4). The indicator with the lowest agreement between raters, *Training in extremist ideology in own country or abroad* (HAC 5), still demonstrated moderate interrater reliability (ICC=0.71).

Table 3: ICC values for social context and intention VERA-2R indicators

Social context and intention (SCI)	ICC	95% CI
Mean domain SCI	0.81	
SCI 1 Seeker, user or developer of violent extremist materials	0.63***	0.43, 0.78
SCI 2 Target for attack identified (person, group, location)	0.94***	0.90, 0.97
SCI 3 Personal contact with violent extremists (informal or social context)	0.89***	0.81, 0.94
SCI 4 Expressed intention to commit acts of violent extremism	0.94***	0.89, 0.96
SCI 5 Expressed willingness and/or preparation to die for a cause or belief	0.83***	0.72, 0.90
SCI 6 Planning, preparation of acts of violent extremism	0.96***	0.92, 0.97
SCI 7 Susceptibility to influence, control, indoctrination	0.45***	0.08, 0.68

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

Note: $N=50$. 95% CI=95% confidence interval. ICC=intraclass correlation coefficient

Table 4: ICC values for history, action and capacity VERA-2R indicators

History, action and capacity (HAC)	ICC	95% CI
Mean domain HAC	0.82	
HAC 1 Early exposure to pro-violence, militant ideology	0.80***	0.66, 0.88
HAC 2 Network of family and friends involved in violent extremism	0.92***	0.86, 0.95
HAC 3 Previous criminal violence	0.84***	0.72, 0.90
HAC 4 Strategic, paramilitary and/or explosives training	0.82***	0.67, 0.89
HAC 5 Training in extremist ideology in own country or abroad	0.71***	0.53, 0.82
HAC 6 Organisational skills, access to funding and sources of help	0.80***	0.67, 0.88

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

Note: $N=50$. 95% CI=95% confidence interval. ICC=intraclass correlation coefficient

The *Commitment and motivation* (CM) domain had the lowest average interrater reliability (ICC=0.80). The indicator *Motivated by acquisition of status* (CM 7) incurred the lowest ICC value, indicating moderate agreement, and this was bordering on poor reliability (ICC=0.55). One possible reason for this result relates to gaps in the data sources used to conduct assessments and that it is potentially a highly subjective domain given its focus on motivations. Hence it leads to greater variation in the judged relevance and intensity of certain indicators. Further commentary on this indicator is provided in the main report (see Cherney & Belton 2024).

Table 5: ICC values for commitment and motivation VERA-2R indicators

Commitment and motivation (CM)	ICC	95% CI
Mean domain CM	0.80	
CM 1 Motivated by perceived religious obligation and/or glorification	0.92***	0.86, 0.95
CM 2 Motivated by criminal opportunism	0.87***	0.78, 0.92
CM 3 Motivated by camaraderie, group belonging	0.74***	0.57, 0.84
CM 4 Motivated by moral obligation, moral superiority	0.76***	0.60, 0.85
CM 5 Motivated by excitement and adventure	0.85***	0.75, 0.91
CM 6 Forced participation in violent extremism	1.00***	1.00, 1.00
CM 7 Motivated by acquisition of status	0.55***	0.32, 0.71
CM 8 Motivated by a search for meaning and significance in life	0.68***	0.49, 0.80

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

Note: $N=50$. 95% CI=95% confidence interval. ICC=intraclass correlation coefficient

Patterns across VERA-2R risk domains

A combined dataset was created to assess risk patterns across the sample. That is, the two VERA-2R datasets of the same 50 cases that had been rated by both authors were combined into one dataset to allow for various forms of statistical analysis. This final dataset only included the four major risk domains (BA, SCI, HAC and CM) and the additional indicators. A defaulting system was created to minimise bias in the data (see Cherney & Belton 2024 for more detail).

In summary, the sample contained 50 extremists who were mostly male (94%) and between 15 and 50 years old ($M=25.96$, $SD=8.86$). A large portion were first or second generation immigrants (78%, $n=39$). At the time of their offending, just under half were married ($n=22$), 42 percent had not completed their high school education, and 10 percent had enrolled in tertiary education. Individuals in the sample were suspected of, or convicted for, a variety of ideologically motivated activities. This included espousing extremist rhetoric online, compiling and disseminating extremist materials, financing a terrorist organisation, facilitating overseas travel, logistical support such as procuring weapons, and conspiring or planning a domestic terrorist attack. Seventy percent ($n=35$) were formally charged and convicted of a terrorism-related offence.

The most common risk factors among the sample were associated with beliefs, attitudes and ideology; specifically, indicators that measured grievances (BA 1, BA 2 and BA 5) all received high ratings in over 66 percent of cases. Risk indicators relating to social networks, which in the VERA-2R are captured across two domains, were also reported as high (HAC 2: 64%, $n=32$; SCI 3: 68%, $n=34$). Measures of intent such as expressing the intention to commit, or planning, acts of violent extremism were also high (see Figure 2). This suggests that the *Beliefs, attitudes and ideology* (BA) and *Social context and intention* (SCI) domains appear to dominate risk factors associated with a sample of Australian extremists.

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Results show some factors were less common and, in some cases, not present. Early exposure to militant ideologies and motivations relating to criminal opportunism and excitement and adventure were rare across the sample. There were no instances where individuals were judged as being forced to participate in extremism (CM 6; see Figure 4). Low prevalence of indicators seemed to cluster in the *Commitment and motivation* (CM) domain (see Figures 1 to 5 below). The most common additional indicators were related to problematic upbringings or being placed in juvenile care and issues with school or work. Substance abuse and mental disorders were evident. This indicates unstable personal backgrounds, with mental disorders present in the sample (see Figure 5).

Figure 1: Distribution of indicators across low, moderate and high risk ratings for beliefs, attitudes and ideology VERA-2R domain (N=50)

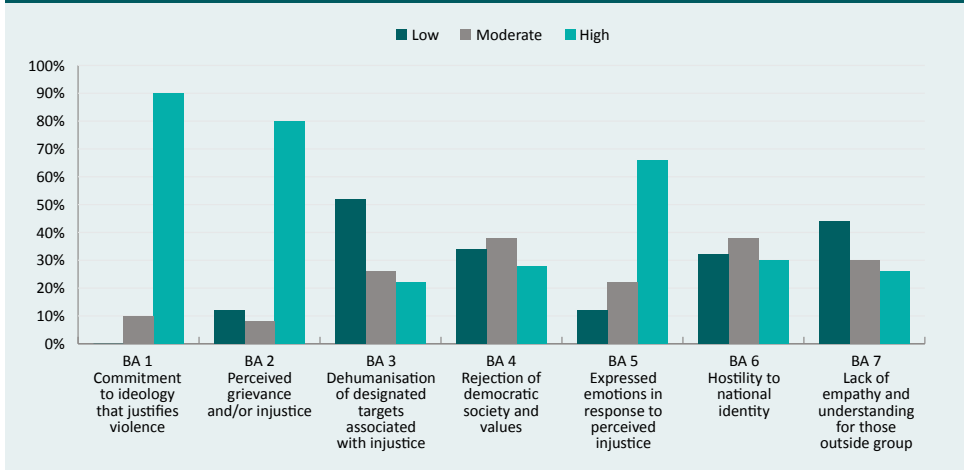


Figure 2: Distribution of indicators across low, moderate and high risk ratings for social context and intention VERA-2R domain (N=50)

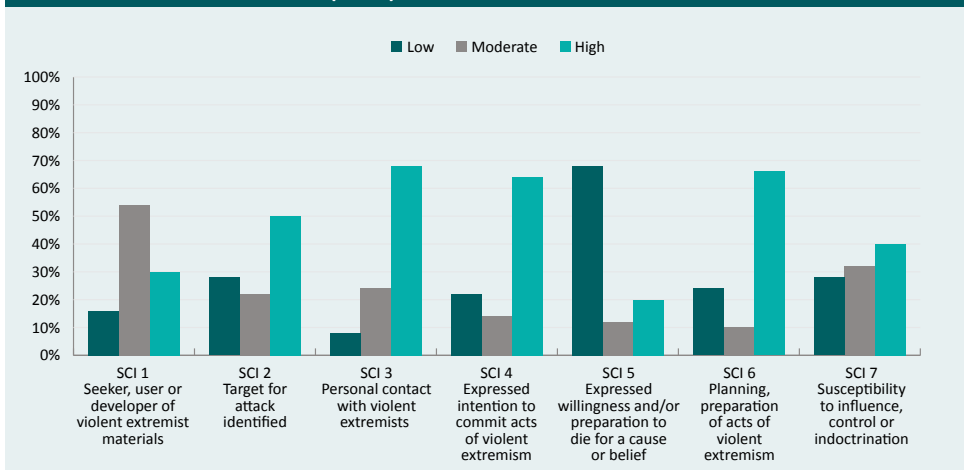


Figure 3: Distribution of indicators across low, moderate and high risk ratings for history, action and capacity VERA-2R domain (N=50)

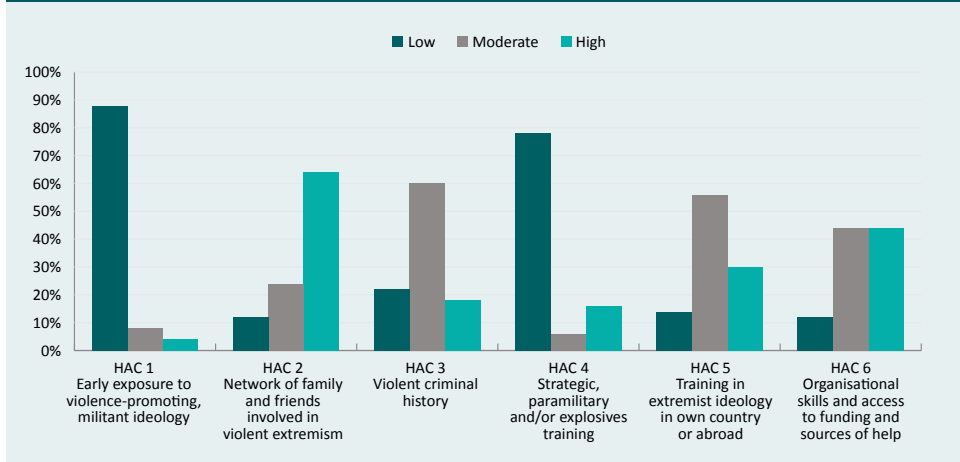
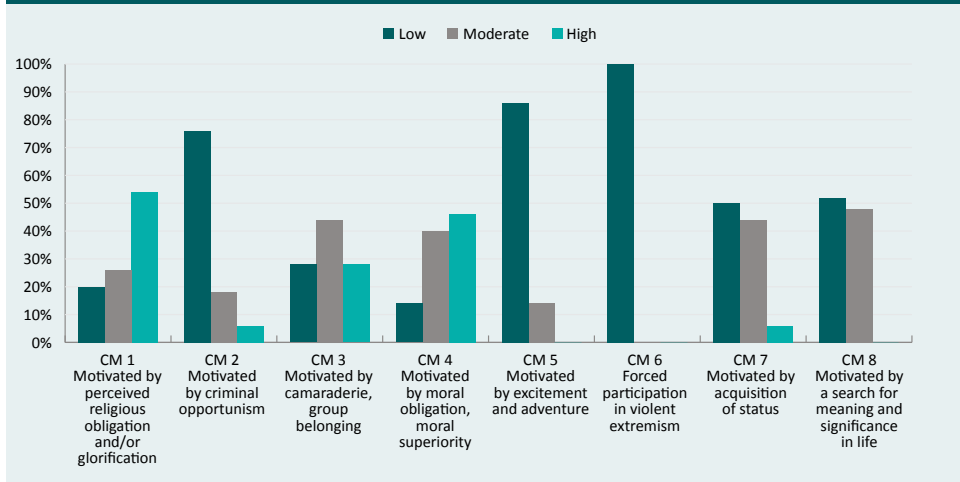
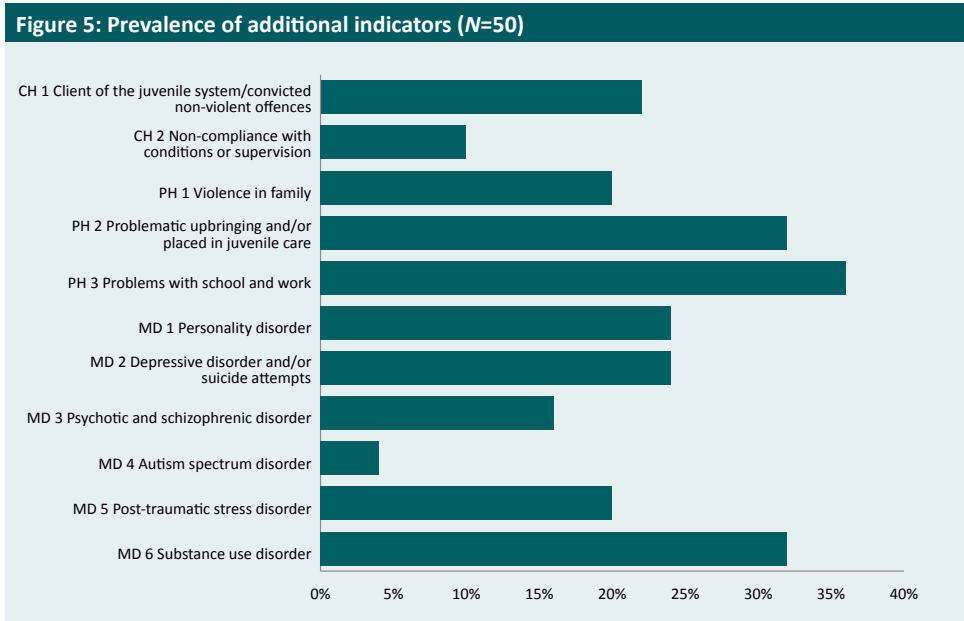


Figure 4: Distribution of indicators across low, moderate and high risk ratings for commitment and motivation VERA-2R domain (N=50)



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VERA-2R indicators across violent compared with non-violent extremists

A chi-square test was used to determine the association between risk indicators for the four major VERA-2R domains and the two groups of extremists. For cell frequencies fewer than five, Fisher’s exact test was reported instead of chi-square. Phi coefficients were calculated as a measure of effect size and were interpreted as 0.10=small, 0.30=medium and 0.50=large. Results from analysis (Table 6) show four indicators to be associated with violent extremists, all of which were part of the *Beliefs, attitudes and ideology* domain. Violent extremists were more likely to have a perceived grievance ($p=0.033$, $\phi=0.342$) and express emotions in response to these grievances ($p=0.033$, $\phi=0.342$), compared with those who were classified as non-violent. Violent extremists were also more likely to dehumanise designated targets associated with perceived injustice compared with non-violent individuals ($p=0.050$, $\phi=0.296$). Compared with non-violent extremists, individuals who were categorised as violent demonstrated hostility towards a national identity ($p=0.050$, $\phi=0.278$).

Non-violent extremists were significantly more likely to have received paramilitary or explosives training ($p=0.023$, $\phi= -0.346$) than those who were classified as violent. Upon closer inspection of the data, it was found that those who received training were involved in facilitating overseas travel, and producing and disseminating terrorist manuals, and were leaders of terrorist organisations.

Table 6: Major risk VERA-2R indicators association with violent and non-violent extremists

VERA-2R domain risk indicators	Violent (n=37)		Non-violent (n=13)		Sig (p)
	n	%	n	%	
Beliefs, attitudes and ideology indicators (BA)					
BA 1 Commitment to ideology that justifies violence	37	100.0	13	100.0	
BA 2 Perceived grievance and/or injustice	35	94.6	9	69.2	*
BA 3 Dehumanisation of designated targets associated with injustice	21	56.8	3	23.1	*
BA 4 Rejection of democratic society and values	25	67.6	8	61.5	
BA 5 Expressed emotions in response to perceived injustice	35	94.6	9	69.2	*
BA 6 Hostility to national identity	28	75.7	6	46.2	*
BA 7 Lack of empathy and understanding for those outside one's own group	22	59.5	6	46.2	
Social context and intention indicators (SCI)					
SCI 1 Seeker, user or developer of violent extremist materials	30	81.1	12	92.3	
SCI 2 Target for attack identified	28	75.7	8	61.5	
SCI 3 Personal contact with violent extremists	34	91.9	12	92.3	
SCI 4 Expressed intention to commit acts of violent extremism	30	81.1	9	69.2	
SCI 5 Expressed willingness and/or preparation to die for a cause or belief	12	32.4	4	30.8	
SCI 6 Planning, preparation of acts of violent extremism	29	78.4	9	69.2	
SCI 7 Susceptibility to influence, control or indoctrination	29	78.4	7	53.8	
History, action and capacity indicators (HAC)					
HAC 1 Early exposure to violence-promoting, militant ideology	5	13.5	1	7.7	
HAC 2 Network of family and friends involved in violent extremism	33	89.2	11	84.6	
HAC 3 Violent criminal history	29	78.4	10	76.9	
HAC 4 Strategic, paramilitary and/or explosives training	5	13.5	6	46.2	*
HAC 5 Training in extremist ideology in own country or abroad	32	86.5	11	84.6	
HAC 6 Organisational skills and access to funding and sources of help	32	86.5	12	92.3	

Table 6: Major risk VERA-2R indicators association with violent and non-violent extremists (cont.)

VERA-2R domain risk indicators	Violent (n=37)		Non-violent (n=13)		Sig (p)
	n	%	n	%	
Commitment and motivation indicators (CM)					
CM 1 Motivated by perceived religious obligation and/or glorification	30	81.1	10	76.9	
CM 2 Motivated by criminal opportunism	8	21.6	4	30.8	
CM 3 Motivated by camaraderie, group belonging	28	75.7	8	61.5	
CM 4 Motivated by moral obligation, moral superiority	32	86.5	11	84.6	
CM 5 Motivated by excitement and adventure	7	18.9	0	0.0	
CM 6 Forced participation in violent extremism	0	0.0	0	0.0	
CM 7 Motivated by acquisition of status	20	54.1	5	38.5	
CM 8 Motivated by a search for meaning and significance	20	54.1	4	30.8	

*statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Note: Due to the small sample size the original 3-point scores for risk indicators (0=low, 1=moderate, 2=high) were converted into a single dichotomous variable measuring the presence or absence of a risk indicator variable (0=absence, 1=presence), where presence equates to moderate (1) and high ratings (2), and absence equals low (0) ratings

Predictive validity of the VERA-2R

As recommended in the literature, the validity of the VERA-2R was tested using a range of performance indicators: sensitivity and specificity, positive predictive values (PPV), negative predictive values (NPV) and receiver operating characteristic area under the curve (AUC) (Singh 2013).

To perform the four validity tests—sensitivity and specificity, positive predictive values, and negative predictive values—the final risk judgement ratings (low, moderate and high) were converted into a dichotomous outcome variable (high risk vs low risk). This was because these types of tests require a dichotomous indicator (Singh 2013). To meet this requirement we converted what was a 3-point judgement into a dichotomous measure, where 0=low risk and 1=high risk. We decided to combine low and moderate ratings into a low-risk category, and high ratings would represent the high-risk category. This allowed a base threshold for predictive validity to be produced. While categorising individuals who had moderate risk ratings as low (rather than moderate and high being combined), this possibly underestimates the level of risk for some offenders. However, it was decided this was more appropriate than combining moderate and high-risk categories to ensure our approach was conservative. There was an equal distribution between the categories of high risk (n=25, 50%) and low risk (n=25, 50%).

Sensitivity and specificity

Sensitivity and specificity tests are regarded as the simplest indicator to measure the predictive validity of an instrument (Singh et al. 2013). Scores calculate the proportion of individuals who engaged in violent acts and who were judged to be at high risk (sensitivity) and the proportion of individuals who engaged in non-violent acts who were judged to be at low risk (specificity). The results of tests of sensitivity showed that the VERA-2R had a sensitivity value of 57 percent. That is, 57 percent of violent extremists were judged as high risk. The tests for specificity found a value of 69 percent, indicating that 69 percent of non-violent extremists were correctly identified as low risk during assessments.

Positive and negative predictive values

Two additional performance indicators are positive predictive values (PPV) and negative predictive values (NPV), which measure high and low risk calibration (Singh 2013). These estimate the likelihood of the VERA-2R tool correctly predicting an outcome—in this instance, that someone who was assessed as high risk was violent (PPV), and that someone who was assessed as low risk did not offend violently (NPV). In this study, the former includes preparatory acts of violence (see above distinction between violent and non-violent extremists as captured in the sample). A PPV of 84 percent showed that, of the extremists classified as high risk using the VERA-2R, 84 percent were violent. The NPV showed that, among those assessed as low risk, 36 percent of cases were non-violent. That is, of the individuals who were categorised as low risk, 36 percent did not commit an act of violent extremism. It should be noted that these values are influenced by base rates. PPV and NPV rely heavily on the distribution of the outcome variable, which in this study was whether extremists were violent or non-violent. In our study, violent offending base rates were higher than non-violent offending base rates.

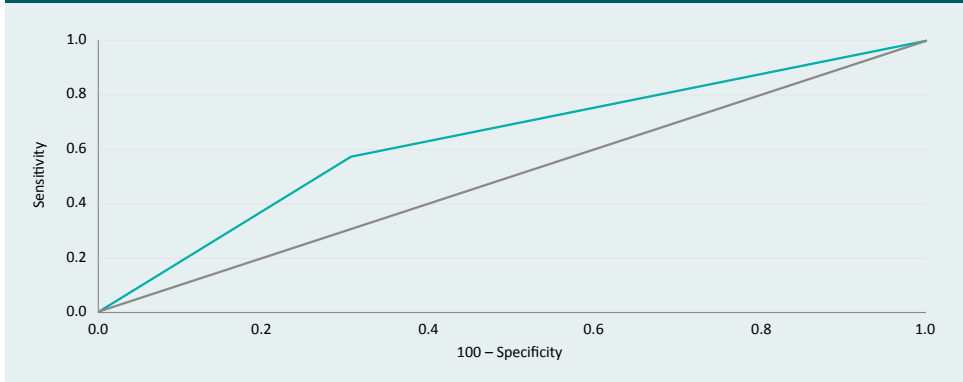
Area under the curve

The receiver operating characteristic analysis is another method of testing for predictive validity (Singh et al. 2013). It assesses the predictive accuracy of a tool by providing what is termed an area under the curve (AUC) statistic. It requires a dichotomous outcome (here violent vs non-violent extremist behaviour) and categorical risk judgements (Singh et al. 2013). Simply put, the AUC estimates the probability that a randomly selected violent individual received a higher risk classification on the VERA-2R than a randomly selected non-violent individual.

Consistent with the previous analysis, we converted risk judgements into a dichotomous value where VERA-2R judgements of low and moderate = 0 and high-risk judgements = 1. AUC values of >0.80 are considered 'excellent', 0.70 to 0.79 are regarded as 'acceptable' and 0.60 to 0.69 rated as 'weak'. For violence risk assessments, AUC values over 0.70 are considered 'moderate' while values over 0.75 are 'good' (Geraghty & Woodhams 2015). Risk classifications were measured using a dichotomous low vs high risk rating (see Figure 6). The AUC value here was 0.630 (95% CI [0.455, 0.805]), and the outcome was not significant ($p>0.1$), indicating the VERA-2R had poor predictive validity.

Caution should be taken when interpreting the AUC as it does not perfectly determine when a risk assessment tool is accurate enough to make practically useful distinctions between violent and non-violent subgroups (Mossman 2013). It should be noted that small sample sizes (less than 200) can impact the accuracy of the result (Singh 2013). Hence, when interpreting the validity test, readers should keep in mind the low power of small sample sizes such as the one employed in this study.

Figure 6: Area under the curve analysis for VERA-2R risk ratings (low vs high)



Conclusion

The results from this study show that the VERA-2R had good interrater reliability. The ICC values for interrater reliability indicated consistency in risk judgements and in the assessment of available information. This provides evidence that the VERA-2R can lead to consistent judgements, particularly when undertaken by people trained in administering the tool. However, a different result may have been achieved with a larger and more varied number of assessors. It should be pointed out that a minority of specific indicators demonstrated moderate and low interrater reliability. One reason for this may relate to the ambiguity and overlap surrounding some indicators (see Cherney & Belton 2024).

When using the VERA-2R domains to map trends across the sample, the results showed that some indicators do not seem to be associated with an Australian extremist cohort. This included, for example, early exposure to militant ideologies (HAC 1), motivation related to criminal opportunism (CM 2) or forced participation in extremism (CM 6). Among the sample, certain indicators were prevalent pertaining to the presence of grievances and the influence of social networks. Both factors have been identified in the international and Australian literature as playing a role in radicalisation to violent extremism (Bright, Whelan & Harris-Hogan 2020; Corner & Taylor 2023a; LaFree et al. 2018). Based on whether someone is violent or non-violent, particular risk factors can vary according to the VERA-2R, with violent individuals in the sample having a clustering of factors in the *Beliefs, attitudes and ideology* (BA) domain. This related to grievances and a sense of injustice, dehumanisation, emotional expressions in response to perceived injustice, and hostility to a national identity. It is perhaps the presence of these risk factors that help these individuals overcome inhibitions relating to the use of violence and provide justifications for violent action and are hence more pronounced. This is relevant to scenario planning in relation to the case management of extremist offenders and the need to weight particular factors as being more important to violent outcomes and for them to be the focus of intervention work.

Our analysis indicates the VERA-2R tool has some capacity to delineate between levels of risk but was not necessarily predictive. That is, our analysis showed differences in VERA-2R risk indicators associated with violent and non-violent individuals, with violent individuals demonstrating specific behavioural and motivational traits. However, the predictive validity of the VERA-2R was found to be low. This result must be interpreted with caution because of our sample size. Also, any debate and conclusion made about the predictive validity of the VERA-2R needs to be qualified by the challenges faced in predicting extremist offending and reoffending given its low base rate in Australia and the absence of data on recidivism. It also needs to be prefaced with a consideration of factors that influence engagement in, and disengagement from, violent extremism. This requires tools and approaches that focus not only on risks but also on individual needs and that aim to promote behavioural change relating to disengagement from violent extremism.

Acknowledgements

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12. Community perceptions of corruption by public officials

Alexandra Voce, Anthony Morgan and Timothy Cubitt

Corruption is characterised by the misuse of power and authority by public officials and can include a wide range of behaviours such as bribery, nepotism, fraud and embezzlement (Graycar & Prenzler 2013). Corruption, whether actual or perceived, has a range of harmful effects, including on inequality, service delivery, tax revenue, economic growth and even the environment—effects that are hardest felt by the most disadvantaged and marginalised sections of the community (De Vries & Solaz 2017; UK Department for International Development 2015). International evidence points to a relationship between corruption and the perceived legitimacy of public officials. Corruption within government can erode the public's confidence and trust in political institutions, which in turn diminishes the community's belief in the legitimacy of the political system (Erlingsson, Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson 2022; Seligson 2002). Perceived legitimacy is essential to effective governance: when a government is viewed as legitimate it is more likely to be stable, effective and widely supported (Dix, Hussmann & Walton 2012).

Recorded instances of corruption among Australian public service (APS) officials have been rare. In the 2021–22 financial year, 138 APS employees were found to have breached their Code of Conduct (APS Commission 2022a). In the 2022 APS Employee Census, three percent ($n=3,645$) of employees reported that they had witnessed another public service employee engage in potentially corrupt behaviour in the previous 12 months (APS Commission 2022b). According to an older survey, less than one percent of Australians had personally observed, or had a family member observe, corrupt behaviour among public officials in the past five years (McAllister, Pietsch & Graycar 2012).

However, *perceptions* of corruption are quite different. In this same 2012 survey, political parties and the federal government were rated as corrupt by 37 percent and 32 percent of respondents respectively, while levels of confidence in these institutions were low (McAllister, Pietsch & Graycar 2012). More recently, in a survey of 1,204 Australian adults conducted as part of the 2020 Global Corruption Barometer, two-thirds of respondents believed that corruption was a problem in government, while there were similarly poor perceptions of the ability of both Commonwealth and state and territory governments to handle corruption (Transparency International 2020).

Globally, Australia is among the least corrupt nations. The Corruption Perceptions Index is an annual measure of perceived public sector corruption across 180 countries and territories based on surveys of businesspeople and experts (Transparency International 2022). The index rates each country on a scale from zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Between 2012 and 2021, there was a decrease in Australia's score (from 85 to 73) and international ranking (from 7th to 18th); however, Australia's performance on this index improved in 2022 (with a score of 75 and ranking of 13th).

Recent increases in perceived corruption by public officials may relate to the enormous social, political and economic changes prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bonotti & Zech 2021). Emerging research supports a relationship between declining political trust and perceived legitimacy during the pandemic, particularly among people who believed healthcare responses to be ineffective or controversial (Eichengreen, Saka & Aksoy 2022; Weinberg 2022; Weingart, van Schalkwyk & Guenther 2022).

In late 2022, the Australian Government introduced legislation to establish an independent National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), with broad jurisdiction to investigate corruption in the Commonwealth public sector. The NACC commenced operation in July 2023. It is important to understand community perceptions of corruption among public officials prior to commencement of the NACC. This chapter therefore provides a baseline measure of perceived corruption. Further, given the harmful consequences of corruption (De Vries & Solaz 2017; UK Department of International Development 2015), the chapter also examines community perceptions of corruption and its relationship with the perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions.

Method

Sample

This research used data from a large sample of online Australians surveyed about their political and social beliefs. The survey collected, among other things, information about respondents' perceptions of politicians and government institutions, including the extent to which they are involved in corruption and whether they act with honesty and integrity, consider the views of the community in decision making, and treat people fairly and with respect.

The survey was conducted by Roy Morgan Research between 3 November and 6 December 2022. Respondents were recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source panel and a panel managed by PureProfile. The survey was sent to members of these panels aged 18 years and over who had voluntarily joined to receive incentives in exchange for completing surveys. Proportional quota sampling was used to ensure the sample was broadly reflective of the spread of people living in Australia. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population stratified by age, sex and usual place of residence, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics population data (ABS 2023a). Participants were first recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source survey panel, which comprises individuals recruited through a rigorous clustersampled, face-to-face survey approach. The majority of respondents (58.7%) were drawn from this panel. The raw completion rate for invitations sent to this panel was 7.1 percent; however, 78.3 percent of respondents who opened the invitation and who were eligible to participate in the research went on to complete the survey. Poor quality responses and duplicates were removed from the final sample.

The survey took respondents an average of 23.8 minutes to complete. The final sample size was 13,302 respondents. The data were weighted by age, sex and usual place of residence to ensure the data were representative of the spread of the Australian population. Additional random iterative method weights were applied to correct for education level and internet and social media use. All of the findings presented in this chapter are based on weighted data.

Given the focus of the study, the sample was limited to respondents who answered at least one of the two questions about the perceived level of corruption of politicians and government institutions ($n=11,304$). Of those who were excluded (15.0% of eligible sample; $n=1,998$), most responded 'don't know' ($n=1,916$), whereas a small number of respondents chose not to answer the corruption questions ($n=82$).

Respondents who answered the corruption questions differed from those who did not in their gender ($F=114.04$, $p<0.001$), age ($F=41.32$, $p<0.001$), educational attainment ($\chi^2=27.37$, $p<0.001$), geographic remoteness ($F=5.78$, $p=0.003$), employment status ($F=48.38$, $p<0.001$), relative socio-economic disadvantage/advantage ($F=7.42$, $p<0.001$), and likelihood of being born outside of Australia ($F=9.58$, $p=0.002$). Further analysis revealed that these differences were likely due to different levels of interest and engagement with politics. Respondents who did not answer questions about corruption among public officials were significantly less likely to agree with the statement that they often talked with family about politics (29.1% vs 42.9%; $F=63.55$, $p<0.001$) or that they often talked with friends about politics (26.6% vs 40.6%; $F=71.07$, $p<0.001$). They were also much less likely to say they were quite interested or very interested in politics (19.6% vs 38.0%; $F=94.0$, $p<0.001$).

Characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Fifty-one percent of respondents were male and 49.0 percent were female. One-third (29.3%) of respondents were aged 18–34 years, 49.9 percent were aged 35–64 years, and 20.8 percent of respondents were aged 65 years or over. First Nations respondents accounted for 2.8 percent of respondents, and one in five respondents were born outside of Australia (21.5%). Two in five respondents (40.6%) had been to university. The majority of respondents were living in metropolitan areas (73.3%), while 23.3 percent were living in regional areas and 2.6 percent in remote areas. Around one-third of respondents (36.8%) lived in the least disadvantaged postcodes according to the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (ABS 2023b), while 16.8 percent lived in the most disadvantaged postcodes. Two-thirds of respondents (65.3%) were employed, while 4.3 percent were unemployed at the time of completing the survey. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (70.6%) reported being at least moderately interested in politics.

Table 1: Sample characteristics (n=11,304)

Gender ^a	%	n	Employment status ^e	%	n
Male	51.0	5,708	Employed	65.3	7,285
Female	49.0	5,492	Other	30.4	3,390
Age in years	%	n	Unemployed	4.3	475
18–34	29.3	3,296	Socio-economic dis/advantage^f	%	n
34–64	49.9	5,621	Quartile 1 (most disadvantaged)	16.8	1,871
65+	20.8	2,336	Quartile 2	20.2	2,254
Remoteness^b	%	n	Quartile 3	26.2	2,927
Major city	74.5	8,320	Quartile 4 (least disadvantaged)	36.8	4,112
Regional	23.0	2,568	Born outside of Australia^g	%	n
Remote	2.5	283	No	78.5	8,814
Education level^c	%	n	Yes	21.5	2,416
Year 12 or lower	30.7	3,442	Interest in politics^h	%	n
Vocational training	28.6	3,207	Not at all interested	10.4	1,160
University degree	40.6	4,543	Not very interested	18.9	2,112
First Nations^d	%	n	Moderately interested	32.6	3,641
No	97.3	10,879	Quite interested	21.0	2,347
Yes	2.6	296	Very interested	17.0	1,897

a: Excludes respondents who listed gender as 'other' (n=2) or 'non-binary' (n=51), due to the small number of respondents

b: Geographic remoteness ratings are derived from the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia classification (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2021), which is based on postcode data. Excludes 68 respondents who did not provide a valid postcode

c: Excludes respondents who responded 'other' (n=34), 'don't know' (n=3) or 'prefer not to say' (n=15)

d: Excludes respondents who responded 'don't know' (n=21) or 'prefer not to say' (n=54)

e: Currently employed includes respondents who are working full-time, part-time or who are semi-retired. 'Other' employment status includes respondents who are studying full time, home makers, unable to work due to illness, retired, or seasonal workers. Excludes respondents who answered 'don't know' (n=4) or 'prefer not to say' (n=32)

f: Quartiles derived from scores on the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (ABS 2023b). The index is based on postcode data to indicate people and households living in areas of greater disadvantage (lower scores) or greater advantage (higher scores). Excludes 75 respondents who did not provide a valid postcode

g: Excludes respondents who answered 'don't know' (n=5) or 'prefer not to say' (n=17)

h: Excludes respondents who answered 'don't know' (n=47) or 'prefer not to say' (n=37)

Note: Some percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Main variables of interest

Perceived corruption among public officials was measured using two questions. Respondents were first asked the proportion—on a scale from 0 to 100—of Australian politicians that they believed were involved in corruption. They were then asked the same question about government institutions. Responses were recorded in increments of 10 percent (ie 0%, 10%, 20% and so on). To analyse differences between respondents in perceived corruption and its relationship with perceived legitimacy, we recoded this variable to range from zero to 10.

To measure perceived legitimacy, participants were asked how often they believed politicians and government institutions ‘act with honesty and integrity’, ‘consider the views of everyday citizens in their decision-making’, ‘treat everyday citizens with fairness and equality’ and ‘treat everyday citizens with dignity and respect’. Response options on these subscales included never (1), occasionally (2), sometimes (3), mostly (4) and always (5). These ordinal scales were converted to a continuous variable for analysis (Sullivan & Artino 2013). All four legitimacy subscales shared statistically significant correlations (ranging from 0.66 to 0.80, $p < 0.001$) and had excellent internal consistency for perceived legitimacy among politicians ($\alpha = 0.91$) and government institutions ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Responses across the four legitimacy subscales were combined into one composite rating to create a comprehensive and multi-dimensional measure of perceived legitimacy that could be used as the outcome variable in regression analyses. Combining multiple scales into one measure can also produce more accurate statistical analyses by minimising any item-specific measurement error (Boateng et al. 2018). Average legitimacy ratings for politicians were created by calculating the mean across the four politician subscales, and average legitimacy ratings for government institutions were created by calculating the mean across the four government institution subscales. Average legitimacy ratings were only generated for respondents who answered at least three of the four subscales for politicians ($n = 11,134$) or government institutions ($n = 11,144$). Including respondents who did not answer one of the four questions maximised the sample size, without meaningfully altering the findings when compared to a composite rating where those with any missing responses were excluded (based on sensitivity checks performed with regression analyses; see note under Figure 4).

Analyses

All analyses were undertaken using weighted data. To assess whether different sociodemographic categories were associated with mean differences in respondents’ levels of perceived corruption, an adjusted Wald test was used with a Bonferroni correction (in which the p -value was divided by the number of comparisons being made). Multiple linear regression was used to examine whether higher levels of perceived corruption were associated with lower levels of perceived legitimacy for both politicians and government institutions. These models estimated the linear relationship between the independent variable (perceived corruption) and the outcome variable (perceived legitimacy) while controlling for potentially confounding variables.

Separate regression models were estimated for politicians and government institutions and included sociodemographic variables that have been associated with political legitimacy in prior research. These include gender, age, Indigenous status, geographic remoteness, employment status, highest level of education level, relative socio-economic disadvantage, and whether the respondent was born overseas (Meyer et al. 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2022). We also included a variable that measured respondents’ level of interest in politics. We began by estimating regression models for both politicians and government institutions with main effects only. We then re-estimated these models with interaction effects between corruption and other variables that were significant in the main effects model. This allowed us to assess whether the relationship between corruption and perceived legitimacy varied according to other respondent characteristics.

Limitations

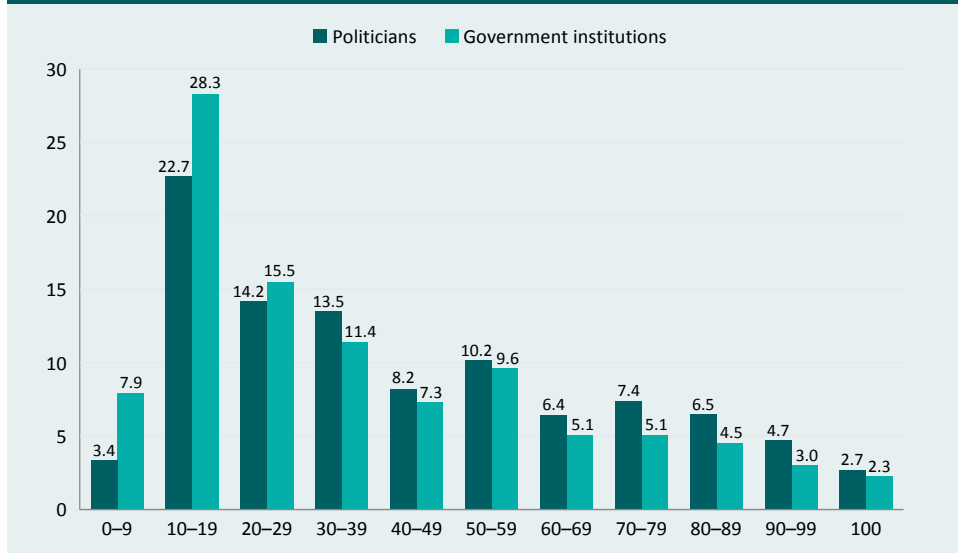
Several key limitations must be acknowledged. While the sample is large and representative of the spread of the Australian population according to key demographic characteristics, proportional quota-based sampling is a non-probability sampling method and we are cautious not to generalise the results. Additionally, the questions in the survey were broad in focus, meaning the responses reflect generalised perceptions of corruption and legitimacy rather than being specific to certain levels of government, organisations or individuals. The cross-sectional nature of these data means we cannot infer causal relationships between perceptions of corruption and perceived legitimacy. Although previous research suggests that exposure to corrupt behaviour contributes to a deterioration in perceived legitimacy (Erlingsson, Jónsdóttir & Kristinnsson 2022), it is also possible that the perceived legitimacy of public officials influences community perceptions of corruption (UK Department for International Development 2015). While extensive data were collected, there are likely other unmeasured confounding factors associated with both perceptions of corruption and perceived trust or legitimacy (Melgar, Rossi & Smith 2010).

Results

Perceived corruption among public officials

Corruption ratings were based on the estimated proportion of politicians or people working in government institutions believed to be involved in corruption, with higher ratings indicating greater perceived corruption (Figure 1). Respondents most commonly reported that they believed between 10 and 19 percent of politicians (22.7%) and those working in government institutions (28.3%) were involved in corruption. Approximately two in five respondents (38.0%, $n=4,143$) believed that at least 50 percent of politicians were involved in corruption. For government institutions, nearly one-third (29.6%, $n=3,144$) of respondents believed that over 50 percent of those working in government institutions were involved in corruption. When expressed as a mean rating, the average level of perceived involvement in corruption was 3.87 (out of 10; $SD=2.74$) for politicians and 3.23 (out of 10; $SD=2.65$) for government institutions, and there was a strong correlation ($r=0.82$, $p<0.001$) between these ratings.

Figure 1: Respondent estimates of the proportion of politicians and people working in government institutions involved in corruption ($n=11,304$) (%)



Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

We then analysed corruption ratings for politicians (P) and government institutions (GI) to determine how they varied according to the characteristics of respondents (Table 2). Female respondents recorded significantly higher ratings of perceived corruption than male respondents for both politicians (3.97 vs 3.76; $F=15.08$, $p<0.001$) and government institutions (3.39 vs 3.06, $F=36.04$, $p<0.001$). The perceived level of corruption for politicians ($F=407.45$, $p<0.001$) and government institutions ($F=475.39$, $p<0.001$) varied by age group, with younger respondents reporting higher ratings of perceived corruption. Respondents aged 18–34 years ($P=4.69$; $GI=4.19$) reported higher perceived corruption compared to those aged 35–64 years ($P=3.88$; $GI=3.13$), who in turn reported higher corruption ratings than those aged 65+ years ($P=2.70$; $GI=2.07$).

First Nations respondents reported significantly higher levels of perceived corruption than non-Indigenous respondents for politicians (5.36 vs 3.82; $F=64.12$, $p<0.001$) and government institutions (4.99 vs 3.18; $F=86.63$, $p<0.001$). Perceived level of corruption among politicians ($F=74.72$, $p<0.001$) and government institutions ($F=61.44$, $p<0.001$) also varied by employment status. Unemployed respondents ($P=4.53$; $GI=3.90$) reported higher levels of perceived corruption than employed respondents ($P=4.04$; $GI=3.37$) and those with 'other' employment status ($P=3.37$; $GI=2.78$). Perceived level of corruption for politicians ($F=48.89$, $p<0.001$) and government institutions ($F=95.59$, $p<0.001$) was also associated with a respondent's level of education. Respondents with a university level education ($P=3.56$; $GI=2.81$) reported lower levels of perceived corruption than respondents with a Year 12 level of education or below ($P=4.16$; $GI=3.65$) or vocational training ($P=4.01$; $GI=3.38$) as their highest level of educational attainment.

Whether respondents lived in an area of relative socio-economic disadvantage or advantage was also associated with their perceived level of corruption among politicians ($F=17.06$, $p<0.001$) and government institutions ($F=24.36$, $p<0.001$). Respondents who lived in areas of highest advantage (quartile 4, $P=3.63$; $GI=2.95$) reported lower levels of perceived corruption among both politicians and government institutions compared with respondents living in areas of less advantage, including quartile 1 ($P=4.12$; $GI=3.60$), quartile 2 ($P=4.00$; $GI=3.31$), and quartile 3 ($P=3.94$; $GI=3.29$). Finally, perceived corruption varied according to the respondent's level of interest in politics. More specifically, as interest in politics increased, the level of perceived corruption among both politicians ($F=80.84$, $p<0.001$) and government institutions decreased ($F=86.35$, $p<0.001$). The level of perceived corruption was lowest among respondents who were very interested in politics ($P=3.33$; $GI=2.71$), and highest among those respondents who were not at all interested in politics ($P=5.24$; $GI=4.63$).

Table 2: Mean corruption ratings, by respondent characteristics

		Politicians		Government institutions	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Gender	Male	3.76	2.72	3.06	2.62
	Female	3.97	2.76	3.39	2.67
Age in years	18–34	4.69	2.46	4.19	2.50
	35–64	3.88	2.82	3.13	2.67
	65+	2.70	2.47	2.07	2.20
First Nations	No	3.82	2.80	3.18	2.63
	Yes	5.36	2.80	4.99	2.82
Geographic remoteness	Major city	3.84	2.72	3.21	2.64
	Regional	3.90	2.83	3.23	2.68
	Remote	4.19	2.68	3.53	2.53
Employment status	Employed	4.04	2.72	3.37	2.63
	Unemployed	4.53	2.64	3.90	2.61
	Other	3.37	2.74	2.78	2.65
Highest level of education	Year 12 or below	4.16	2.53	3.65	2.51
	Vocational training	4.01	2.50	3.38	2.39
	University degree	3.56	2.96	2.81	2.79
Relative socio-economic disadvantage (quartiles)	Quartile 1 (least advantaged)	4.12	2.80	3.60	2.69
	Quartile 2	4.00	2.72	3.31	2.60
	Quartile 3	3.94	2.74	3.29	2.68
	Quartile 4 (most advantaged)	3.63	2.70	2.95	2.60
Born outside of Australia	No	3.85	2.72	3.21	2.63
	Yes	3.95	2.83	3.29	2.75
Interest in politics	Not at all interested	5.24	2.77	4.63	2.70
	Not very interested	4.18	2.55	3.53	2.46
	Moderately interested	3.72	2.62	3.06	2.47
	Quite interested	3.56	2.70	2.89	2.59
	Very interested	3.33	2.89	2.71	2.88

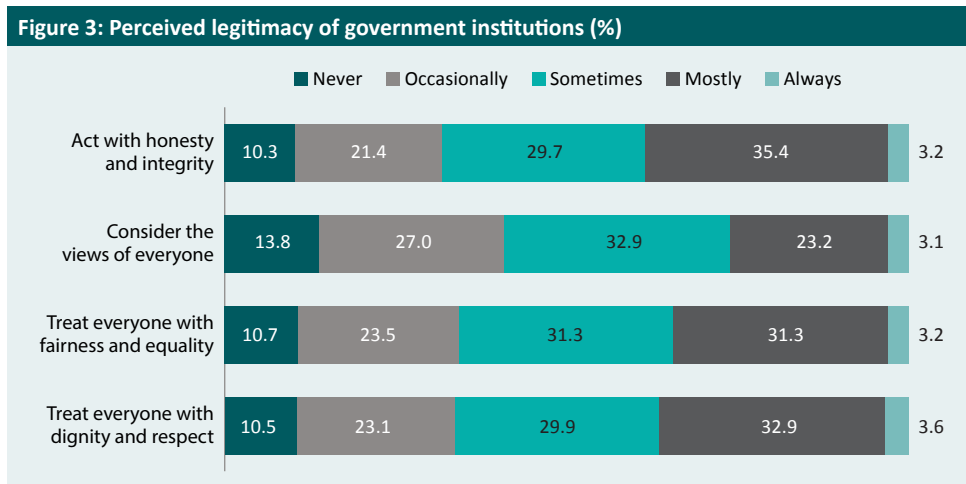
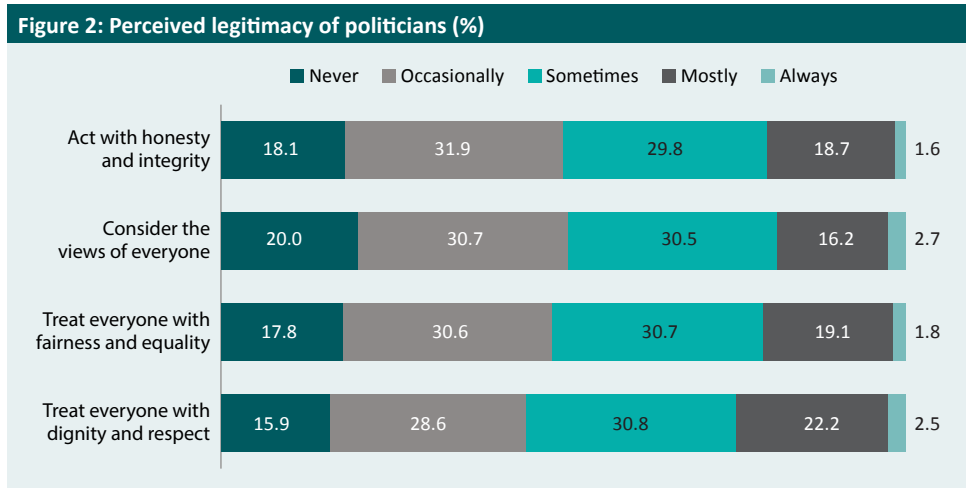
Note: *SD*=standard deviation. Differences between groups reported in text were all statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Perceived legitimacy of public officials

Ratings describing the perceived legitimacy of politicians were similar across the four subscales (see Figure 2). Approximately half of the respondents believed politicians either ‘never’ or only ‘occasionally’ act with honesty and integrity (50.0%), consider the views of everyday citizens (50.7%), treat everyday citizens with fairness and equality (48.4%), or treat everyday citizens with dignity and respect (44.5%).

As shown in Figure 3, approximately one-third of respondents believed representatives of government institutions either ‘never’ or only ‘occasionally’ act with honesty and integrity (31.7%), consider the views of everyday citizens (40.8%), treat everyday citizens with fairness and equality (34.2%), or treat everyday citizens with dignity and respect (33.6%). When these subscales were converted into an overall rating of perceived legitimacy, the average rating was 2.57 (out of five; *SD*=0.93) for politicians and 2.91 (out of five; *SD*=0.93) for government institutions, and there was a strong correlation ($r=0.81, p<0.001$) between these ratings.



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

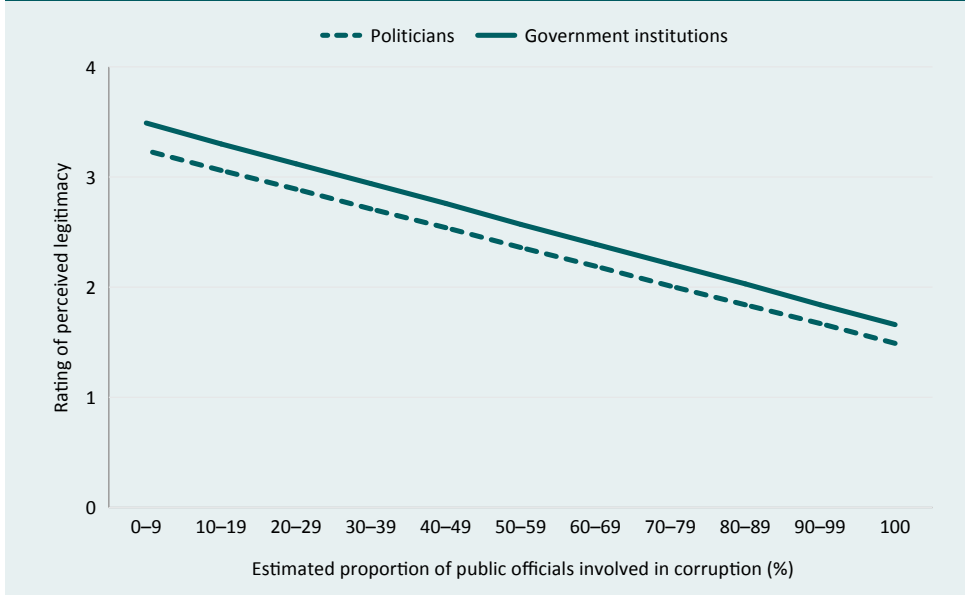
It is possible to draw several conclusions from this stage of the analysis. First, a significant minority of respondents believed that most public officials are involved in corrupt behaviour. This was especially true among respondents who are more likely to experience social exclusion (O'Donnell 2022)—younger, female and First Nations respondents, respondents who were unemployed, and respondents who were living in low socio-economic areas. Respondents who were less interested in politics also had higher levels of perceived corruption, suggesting perceived corruption may lead to disengagement. Finally, similar to perceived corruption, a sizeable proportion of respondents believed public officials never or only occasionally acted with integrity, considered everyone's views, treated people fairly or treated everyone with respect—suggesting perceived legitimacy was low.

Relationship between perceived corruption and perceived legitimacy

To establish whether perceived corruption and legitimacy were related to one another, the next stage of the analysis involved estimating two multiple linear regression models with the perceived legitimacy of politicians and the perceived legitimacy of government institutions as the dependent variables. Both models included perceived corruption (among politicians and government institutions, respectively) as an independent variable, along with sociodemographic characteristics and the level of interest in politics. This allowed us to measure the relationship between perceived corruption and perceived legitimacy of public officials, controlling for the potential confounding effect of these other variables.

There was a statistically significant relationship between perceived corruption among politicians and the perceived legitimacy of politicians ($B = -0.17, p < 0.001$). The same was true for government institutions ($B = -0.18, p < 0.001$). As perceived corruption increased, the perceived legitimacy of public officials declined (and vice versa). This is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows the predicted score (out of five) for the perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions at each level of perceived corruption, having controlled for other variables in the model. Among respondents who reported that less than 10 percent of politicians were corrupt, the predicted perceived legitimacy score was 3.24. Among respondents who believed 50–59 percent of politicians were corrupt, the predicted perceived legitimacy score was 2.36. Similar estimates were produced for government institutions (3.49 and 2.57), respectively.

Figure 4: Overall rating of perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions, by level of perceived corruption (predictive margins)



Note: Predictive margins were estimated based on the coefficients for the variable perceived corruption in a main effect only regression model where perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions was the dependent variable. Model 1 (Politicians): $F(19,13283)=247.73, p<0.001, R^2=0.316, \text{constant}=2.99 (2.92-3.07)$. Model 2 (Government institutions): $F(19,13283)=203.33, p<0.001, R^2=0.322, \text{constant}=3.33 (3.25-3.41)$. As a sensitivity check, this analysis was repeated for the sample of respondents who provided answers on all four legitimacy subscales, with near identical findings

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

We then examined whether the relationship between perceived corruption and legitimacy was moderated by other known characteristics of respondents. Several independent variables besides perceived corruption were associated with the perceived legitimacy of public officials. Gender, age, Indigenous status, employment status, education level, relative socio-economic disadvantage and whether the respondent was born overseas were all associated with the perceived legitimacy of politicians. Similarly, age, Indigenous status, education level, relative socio-economic disadvantage and whether the respondent was born overseas were all associated with the perceived legitimacy of government institutions. The respondent’s level of interest in politics was also a strong, statistically significant predictor of perceived legitimacy in both models (respondents who were more interested in politics had higher levels of perceived legitimacy).

To examine whether these variables moderated the relationship between corruption and perceived legitimacy, the regression analysis was then repeated, with the inclusion of interaction terms for these variables. The results from these models are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Linear regression predicting overall rating of perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions

		Model 1: Politicians Coefficient (95% CI)	Model 2: Govt institutions Coefficient (95% CI)
Corruption		-0.15 (-0.17, -0.13)***	-0.16 (-0.18, -0.13)***
Gender	Male	Baseline	Baseline
	Female	0.07 (0.02, 0.12)**	-0.01 (-0.05, 0.01)
Age	18–34	-0.20 (-0.27, -0.12)***	-0.13 (-0.20, -0.06)***
	35–64	Baseline	Baseline
	65+	0.09 (0.02, 0.16)*	0.03 (-0.03, 0.08)
First Nations	No	Baseline	Baseline
	Yes	0.03 (-0.21, 0.28)	0.005 (-0.19, 0.20)
Geographic remoteness	Major city	Baseline	Baseline
	Regional	-0.01 (-0.06, 0.03)	-0.005 (-0.06, 0.07)
	Remote	0.01 (-0.08, 0.11)	0.11 (-0.06, 0.28)
Employment status	Employed	Baseline	Baseline
	Unemployed	-0.001 (-0.07, 0.07)	-0.01 (-0.05, 0.03)
	Other	-0.04 (-0.21, 0.13)	-0.03 (-0.13, 0.06)
Education level	University	Baseline	Baseline
	High School	-0.08 (-0.15, -0.01)**	-0.16 (-0.22, -0.10)***
	Vocational training	0.04 (-0.02, 0.10)	-0.02 (-0.07, 0.04)
Born overseas	No	Baseline	Baseline
	Yes	-0.07 (-0.13, -0.004)*	0.004 (-0.05, 0.06)
Relative socio-economic dis/advantage (quartiles)	Quartile 1 (least advantaged)	-0.04 (-0.12, 0.04)	-0.01 (-0.09, 0.07)
	Quartile 2	0.04 (-0.03, 0.12)	-0.03 (-0.10, 0.04)
	Quartile 3	-0.002 (-0.07, 0.06)	-0.009 (-0.07, 0.05)
	Quartile 4 (most advantaged)	Baseline	Baseline
Interest in politics	Not at all	Baseline	Baseline
	Not very	0.22 (0.09, 0.35)***	0.28 (0.15, 0.40)***
	Moderate	0.43 (0.30, 0.55)***	0.41 (0.29, 0.52)***
	Quite	0.46 (0.33, 0.59)***	0.42 (0.30, 0.54)***
	Very	0.51 (0.38, 0.64)***	0.37 (0.25, 0.50)***
Corruption × gender	Male	Baseline	–
	Female	0.01 (-0.02, 0.002)	–

Table 3: Linear regression predicting overall rating of perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions (cont.)

		Model 1: Politicians Coefficient (95% CI)	Model 2: Govt institutions Coefficient (95% CI)
Corruption × age	18–34	0.05 (0.04, 0.07)***	0.04 (0.03, 0.06)***
	35–64	Baseline	Baseline
	65+	-0.03 (-0.05, -0.01)***	-0.02 (-0.04, -0.06)**
Corruption × First Nations	No	Baseline	Baseline
	Yes	0.03 (-0.01, 0.07)	0.03 (-0.005, 0.07)
Corruption × geographic remoteness	Major city	–	Baseline
	Regional	–	-0.01 (-0.03, 0.003)
	Remote	–	-0.03 (-0.08, 0.02)
Corruption × employment status	Employed	Baseline	–
	Unemployed	-0.01 (-0.03, 0.002)	–
	Other	-0.01 (-0.04, 0.02)	–
Corruption × education level	University	Baseline	Baseline
	High school	-0.01 (-0.03, 0.004)	-0.01 (-0.03, 0.009)
	Vocational training	-0.03 (-0.04, -0.01)***	-0.03 (-0.05, -0.01)***
Corruption × socio-economic dis/advantage	Quartile 1 (least advantaged)	0.003 (-0.01, 0.02)	-0.008 (-0.03, 0.01)
	Quartile 2	-0.02 (-0.03, -0.001)*	-0.003 (-0.02, 0.02)
	Quartile 3	-0.01 (-0.02, 0.005)	-0.009 (-0.03, 0.008)
	Quartile 4 (most advantaged)	Baseline	Baseline
Corruption × born overseas	No	Baseline	Baseline
	Yes	0.03 (0.01, 0.04)**	0.02 (0.007, 0.04)**
Corruption × interest in politics	Not at all interested	Baseline	Baseline
	Not very interested	-0.01 (-0.03, 0.01)	-0.02 (-0.05, 0.002)
	Moderately interested	-0.02 (-0.04, 0.003)	-0.03 (-0.05, -0.002)*
	Quite interested	-0.02 (-0.04, 0.005)	-0.03 (-0.05, -0.001)*
	Very interested	-0.02 (-0.04, 0.008)	-0.01 (-0.04, 0.02)

***statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, **statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, *statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Note: 95% CI=95% confidence interval, Baseline=reference category. For categorical variables, the largest group was selected for baseline category. Regression model for politicians (Model 1): $F(35,13267)=162.11$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2=0.329$, constant=2.89 (2.76–3.02), $n=10,425$. Regression model for government institutions (Model 2): $F(34,13268)=136.39$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2=0.332$, constant=3.25 (3.12–3.37), $n=10,251$

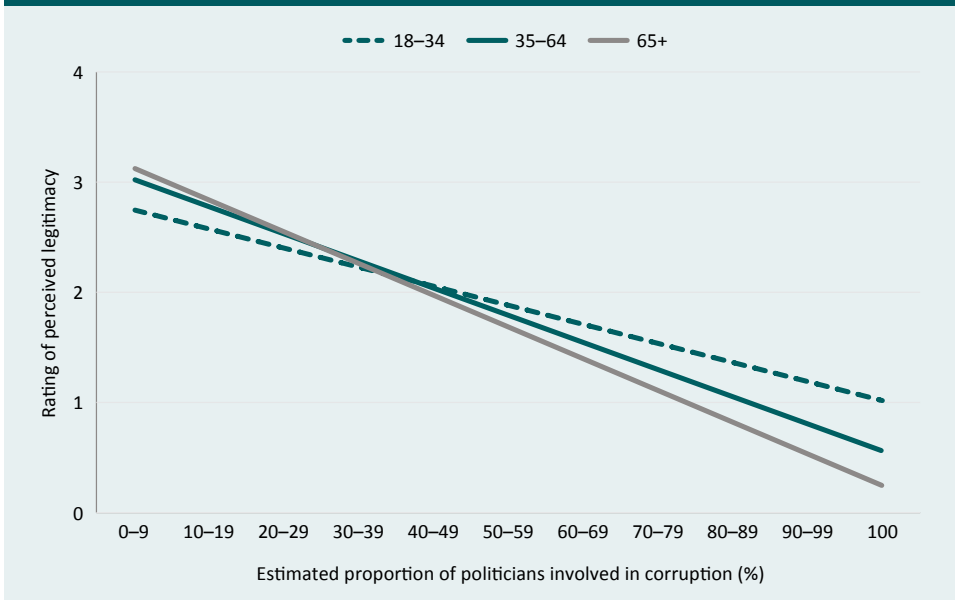
Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

There were several statistically significant interactions. We can show the moderating effect of these variables on the relationship between perceived corruption and legitimacy by estimating the predictive margins. We first show the predicted score for legitimacy of politicians at each level of corruption, according to the age of the respondent (Figure 5). This shows that, in terms of the perceived legitimacy of politicians, the perceptions of older respondents were more susceptible to the level of corruption. That is, there was a sharper decline in the level of perceived legitimacy of politicians among older Australians when the level of corruption increased. While older respondents (aged 35 years and over) perceived politicians as more legitimate than younger respondents when they thought the level of corruption was low, they had more negative perceptions than younger respondents when they thought corruption was more prevalent.

Next, we report the predicted score for legitimacy of government institutions at each level of corruption, according to the respondent's level of interest in politics (Figure 6). This shows that the level of perceived corruption by government institutions had the largest effect on the perceived legitimacy of those institutions among respondents who were moderately or quite interested in politics. Their views of the perceived legitimacy of government institutions were much closer to those of respondents who were not at all interested in politics—who had the poorest perceptions of government institutions—when they believed corruption was more common.

Finally, the relationship between corruption and legitimacy also varied according to whether or not the respondent was born overseas and their level of education. The level of perceived corruption among both government institutions and politicians had a larger effect on the perceptions of respondents who were born overseas. When perceived corruption was low, they had similar views to respondents born in Australia. When perceived corruption was high, they rated the legitimacy of public officials much lower. The same was true of respondents who said vocational training was their highest level of education, relative to people who had a university or high school education.

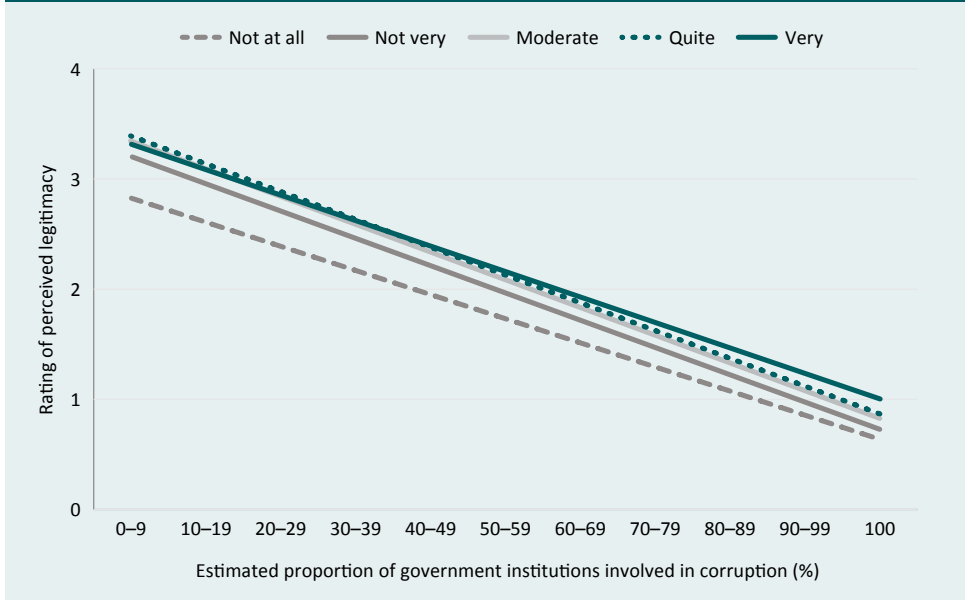
Figure 5: Overall rating of perceived legitimacy of politicians, by level of perceived corruption and respondent age in years (predictive margins)



Note: Predictive margins were estimated based on the coefficients in the regression models presented in Table 3.

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Figure 6: Overall rating of perceived legitimacy of government institutions, by level of perceived corruption and respondent interest in politics (predictive margins)



Note: Predictive margins were estimated based on the coefficients in the regression models presented in Table 3.

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Discussion

The aim of this study was to measure community perceptions of corruption among public officials, including politicians and government institutions, prior to the commencement of the NACC. While it was most common for respondents to say they believed that fewer than one in five politicians and government institutions were involved in corruption, a sizeable minority of respondents believed that over half of all politicians (38.0% of respondents) and government institutions (29.6% of respondents) were involved in corruption.

These results are consistent with prior work that has found a large proportion of people believe there is corruption in government (McAllister, Pietsch & Graycar 2012). We can only speculate as to the reasons for these perceptions. Direct evidence and personal experiences of corruption are rare among the general public (McAllister 2013; McAllister, Pietsch & Graycar 2012). McAllister (2013) showed that subjective judgements of corruption have a much greater impact on the public’s confidence in political institutions than personal direct experience of corrupt behaviour. McAllister points to the considerable publicity generated when high-profile scandals occur involving alleged corruption among prominent politicians and officials. The intense, ongoing media coverage such scandals attract creates a public perception that corruption is widespread in government (McAllister 2013). Certainly, this survey was conducted in the midst of public hearings of the Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, which has since made referrals to the NACC. Various other high-profile scandals involving public officials were also widely reported during the second half of 2022.

Perceptions of corruption were associated with diminished levels of perceived legitimacy of public officials. Respondents who perceived there to be higher levels of corruption were less likely to report that politicians or government institutions acted with honesty and integrity, considered the views of citizens, treated citizens with fairness and equality or treated citizens with dignity and respect. We cannot be sure of the direction of this relationship—perceived corruption may erode people’s perceptions of the legitimacy of public officials, or the belief that public officials do not operate with integrity, fairness, inclusivity or respect may lead people to believe that they are involved in corrupt behaviour (UK Department for International Development 2015). Evidence does show that exposure to corruption within a political system may contribute to reduced confidence and trust in the government, which in turn reduces the perceived legitimacy of that government (Erlingsson, Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson 2022; McAllister 2013; Seligson 2002). Research by Dix and colleagues (2012) found legitimacy may be reduced when citizens believe that corruption has created an unequal distribution of and access to resources. That is, corrupt public officials are seen to allocate resources in a way that is exclusionary and prioritises their own self-interest above the needs and expectations of citizens. In fact, one of the strongest predictors of trust in government is whether citizens feel they have access to government resources and services that they find personally useful (Job 2005).

A perceived lack of access to resources or support may explain why certain sociodemographic groups were more likely to perceive public officials as corrupt. Perceptions of corruption were higher among groups that are more likely to experience disadvantage and marginalisation in society. In particular, young, unemployed and First Nations respondents, those with lower educational attainment, and those who live in socio-economically disadvantaged areas were more likely to perceive public officials as corrupt, consistent with international research (Melgar, Rossi & Smith 2010). In Australia, these groups often have limited access to services and fewer work or education opportunities, conditions which can generate feelings of political, social and economic discontentment (Dix, Hussmann & Walton 2012; Dijkstra, Poelman & Rodríguez-Pose 2019). The survey used in this study was conducted during a period of growing cost-of-living pressures, exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which may have amplified these feelings. Recent data show that these groups continue to feel that social, economic and political opportunities are not shared equally and remain disengaged from political processes (O’Donnell 2022). The effects of corruption—which include compounding inequality—are felt most strongly by these groups. The results highlight the importance of taking steps to reduce social exclusion.

While certain sections of the community were more likely than others to perceive public officials as corrupt, the impact of the level of perceived corruption on the perceived legitimacy of public officials varied between groups. It had a bigger impact on certain subsections of the community (at least among the large sample of the population surveyed in this study). The views of older respondents in particular were heavily (and negatively) influenced by the extent of perceived corruption, as were the views of respondents who were born overseas and respondents with vocational training as their highest level of education. It is possible these groups feel they are particularly impacted by the corrupt behaviour of public officials. Our finding that the views of respondents who were moderately interested in politics were also impacted more than people who were either more interested or less interested in politics reflects the effect of corruption on people’s engagement in the political process. Further work analysing why the views of certain groups are influenced more than others, and the consequences of this, would help inform effective responses.

The current study supports the implementation of strong and visible anti-corruption measures in government. Prior evidence suggests that political legitimacy may deteriorate when corruption among public officials is not effectively regulated or investigated (Dix, Hussmann & Walton 2012). In addition, legitimacy can be strengthened when governments are seen to take credible action to prevent corruption (McAllister 2013). Indeed, there is robust support for such oversight among the Australian public. In 2022, the Australian Election Survey asked a nationally representative sample of voters ($n=2,508$) whether they would support or oppose a national body to investigate claims of government corruption (Cameron et al. 2022). Ninety-four percent of respondents supported the introduction of such a reform, while just six percent were opposed. Similarly, most respondents to the survey used in our study believed there to be at least some level of corruption among public officials. Of course, increasing the perceived legitimacy of government may also help to reduce perceived corruption. Further work—including longitudinal research—may help determine the direction of this relationship between perceptions of corruption and the perceived legitimacy of government.

Belief that public officials are involved in corrupt conduct can erode community confidence and trust in political institutions and may undermine the democratic process. Our findings suggest that Australians view corruption as a serious issue, and these views are stronger among certain groups within the community. Crucially, this study provides a baseline measure of perceived corruption and perceived legitimacy of public officials directly prior to the establishment of the NACC in mid-2023. There is high-quality evidence that increasing the risk of detection and the consequences of corrupt behaviour is effective in reducing public sector corruption, particularly when delivered as part of a suite of responses (Mugellini et al. 2021). However, the design and implementation of these measures have been shown to be crucial to their success (UK Department for International Development 2015). Increased accountability for corrupt conduct by public officials may over time help improve community perceptions of the extent of corruption and contribute to more trust and confidence in politicians and government. Simultaneously, efforts to improve community perceptions of public officials and the extent to which they operate with honesty, integrity, inclusivity and respect may also go some way towards addressing the level of perceived corruption, particularly in circumstances where no such corrupt behaviour exists.

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13. Motives and pathways for joining outlaw motorcycle gangs

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Outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs) are exclusive and careful in selecting their members (Lauchs, Bain & Bell 2015). While OMCG recruitment has received limited empirical research, some aspects have been explored in biographical accounts (eg Langton 2018) and media reports (eg Robinson 2009). These accounts suggest that OMCGs recruit through networks of friends and family, and also target men in the community and prisons with a demonstrated aptitude for violence or running relevant businesses, such as tattoo shops and motorcycle mechanics (Langton 2018). Members spend several years passing through an initiation process, referred to as a prospect period (or a nominee period for clubs originating in Australia), before they are given full membership and the right to vote and wear club patches and colours (Lauchs, Bain & Bell 2015). During this time, a prospect or nominee is sponsored by a fully patched member, who acts as his mentor and disciplinarian (Robinson 2009). OMCGs also have 'hangarounds' and 'friends of the club', who can socialise with patched members and attend the clubhouse on a casual basis but who have not expressed the desire or taken steps to become a member (Langton 2018).

While there has been limited research focused on recruitment into OMCGs, there is extensive research on recruitment into other criminal groups, including street gangs and organised crime groups (OCGs). Given the age profile of gang members, who are much younger than OMCG members (Morgan, Dowling & Voce 2020), gang recruitment is usually understood using developmental frameworks (Klein & Maxson 2006) which emphasise the influence of family, school and neighbourhood factors (Dong, Gibson & Krohn 2015; Raby & Jones 2016). Street gang recruitment occurs through immediate social connections in local settings, where gang members and non-members are repeatedly exposed to one another (Densley 2015). Status and notoriety are important in gang recruitment and membership (Wood & Alleyne 2010). The real and perceived advantages of gang membership can include protection, power, status, a sense of identity, friendship, excitement, opportunities to generate illicit profit and access to drugs (Wood & Alleyne 2010). To ensure the trustworthiness of new members, screening of prospective members and having existing members vouch for them are important features of the recruitment process (Densley 2012).

Organised crime research, while not as extensive as gangs research (Calderoni et al. 2022a), is also relevant. Studies on recruitment into organised crime have highlighted several mechanisms, including:

- relationships with friends and family (the latter including cases of intergenerational continuity);
- work settings, which can offer criminal opportunities or allow offenders to congregate;
- leisure activities and locations where people can meet;
- negative life events, such as financial setbacks or debt, which can expose individuals to criminal opportunities; and
- deliberate recruitment by criminal groups (Kleemans & de Poot 2008; Kleemans & van Koppen 2020).

All of these mechanisms reflect the importance of social opportunity structures (Kleemans & de Poot 2008). In forming criminal networks, OCGs must balance the dual need for trust—which may be present in existing ties or be developed over time—and for criminal associates who have the capabilities their illicit enterprise needs (eg inclination for violence and criminal behaviour, competence in specific illegal business activities, the capacity to avoid police detection, and the ability to adhere to a code of silence; Calderoni et al. 2022b, 2020; van Koppen 2013). Financial motives play an important role in an individual's decision to join (Calderoni et al. 2020).

While OMCGs share similarities with OCGs and other gangs, they are also distinct, and it is not clear which aspects of recruitment into these other groups might be relevant (or not) to OMCGs. In contrast to OMCGs, street gang and OCG membership is comparatively fluid and short-lived, clear hierarchies and formal processes are rare (except in certain groups, like mafias), and individuals drift in and out of the network (Dong, Gibson & Krohn 2015; von Lampe & Blokland 2020). Similar to mafias (Calderoni 2012), OMCGs are defined by rigid, hierarchical structures and clearly defined membership boundaries which enforce commitment to the club and make mobility far more difficult (Lauchs, Bain & Bell 2015). Street gang membership is understood within developmental frameworks because it generally occurs in adolescence (Klein & Maxson 2006), whereas OMCG recruits are adults (Blokland et al. 2019). Criminal background and skills play a key role in recruitment to OCGs (Calderoni et al. 2022b) because these groups exist to commit profit-motivated crime.

Crime by street gangs is more symbolic in nature—it serves to maintain the collective identity of the group, to protect territory, and to build and maintain reputation (von Lampe & Blokland 2020). Not all OMCG members, chapters and clubs are involved in crime (at least recorded crime; Morgan, Dowling & Voce 2020), particularly organised crime (Lauchs 2018), but crime by OMCGs can be either profit-motivated or symbolic in nature (von Lampe & Blokland 2020). For example, serious acts of public violence may serve to maintain the reputation of a club, and that reputation might be necessary to maintain control over a criminal market.

Given the high rates of offending among OMCG members (Morgan, Dowling & Voce 2020) relative to non-OMCG members (Blokland et al. 2019; Morgan, Cubitt & Dowling 2023), particularly among younger members (Voce, Morgan & Dowling 2021), as well as the high rates of co-offending between members (Bright et al. 2022), there are obvious potential benefits in stopping individuals from joining clubs. Noting the differences between OMCGs, other gangs and OCGs, research into recruitment into OMCGs specifically is necessary for the development of programs aimed at preventing or disrupting recruitment.

Method

This study aimed to better understand the pathways through which men are recruited into OMCGs and their motivations for joining.

Sample and interviewing process

In 2014, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) introduced a formal disassociation process for OMCG members, where former members can inform police that they have cut ties with an OMCG and sign a statutory declaration describing their efforts to disengage. When this is supported by intelligence, QPS formally records that the member has disassociated. When police intelligence shows a member has left an OMCG but they have not formally declared this, they are recorded as ex-members. At the commencement of data collection, there were 195 formally disassociated members and over 300 ex-members recorded in the available dataset.

Individuals who had formally disassociated from an OMCG or were recorded as ex-members based on police intelligence were approached by an experienced member of the QPS Organised Crime Gangs Group to participate in a research interview in person or by telephone. For safety reasons, the interviewer was a sworn officer who has extensive knowledge of OMCG culture. The officer was provided with training and support by researchers from the QPS and the Australian Institute of Criminology. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, confidential, and not related to any police operation or investigation. Former members were excluded if they had outstanding criminal matters, or if participation in the research would pose a risk to the interviewer or interviewee. The research was approved by the AIC's Human Research Ethics Committee and the QPS Research Committee, and strict security and confidentiality measures were implemented around data collection, storage and analysis procedures.

Seventy-one former OMCG members were invited to participate in an interview. Nineteen declined to participate. While interviews were undertaken with 52 former OMCG members, this study examines the transcripts of 39 participants from 13 clubs who consented to their interview being recorded, de-identified and transcribed. The average age of interview participants was 48 years (range=25–66), while the average age of participants when they first joined an OMCG was 31 (range=19–54). At least seven of the former members had been an office bearer, meaning they had a leadership role in the club (such as president, vice president or treasurer). The average length of time spent in an OMCG was nearly seven years (mean=6.6; median=5.5; range=0.2–17.0 years), with membership periods spanning from the early 1970s to 2020. Importantly, there was a relatively equal distribution of recruitment dates among former members, with eight first joining an OMCG prior to 2001, 16 joining between 2001 and 2010, and 14 joining after 2010.

Analysis

This study used a phenomenological approach which focused on the lived experiences of the former members and explored their explanations of how and why they became members. The semi-structured interview included questions about how the participant first became involved with their gang, the key members involved in their recruitment, the factors influencing their decision to join, and their broader life circumstances during the process of becoming a member. In this chapter we focus primarily on how and why former members joined an OMCG, rather than their views about how or why other members became involved, though we draw attention to emerging trends in recruitment. Interviews were analysed in a principally descriptive manner, with an inductive approach used to identify the most common themes to emerge in the interviews.

Limitations

Several limitations of the data must be acknowledged. While participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, confidential, and not related to any police operation or investigation, some may have withheld information for fear of implicating themselves or others in criminal activity. However, this was mitigated by the trust and rapport built by the police interviewer with participants, in addition to the explicit directive not to mention any criminal activity. The findings may not reflect the views of current members or the views of ex-members who did not agree to participate. As this is a sample of former OMCG members, it may over-represent those with negative perceptions of both their period as members and how OMCGs have changed over time. Young men, especially those recruited into OMCGs in recent years, were not well represented in the sample.

Results

Pathways to recruitment

Social networks

Consistent with the literature on recruitment into street gangs (Densley 2015; Wood & Alleyne 2010) and OCGs (Calderoni et al. 2022b), OMCG recruitment typically occurred through informal social networks. The vast majority of participants were recruited through friends, current and former work colleagues, family members, social motorcycle riding clubs and associates. Some men were recruited by fellow veterans, while others were recruited through the businesses that they regularly attended as customers. These contacts either were OMCG members themselves or introduced the participant to OMCG members.

I was living with my stepdad at the time, and he had mates who were part of a club that came over all the time, so I hung out with them and it just went from there. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

Long-time friend [recruited me], we'd been in the Veterans together, and he'd joined that club. (Participant who joined in the late 2000s)

This guy who went to high school with me, his father was a [OMCG name]. I had a little to do with him growing up ... So this guy was used to initiate conversation with another friend of mine, who I'm closer with, and do drugs with, and just through friendship really, and that's how he got to me, he was the link between me and the head honcho. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

Once participants came into contact with club members, they typically spent a significant amount of time, sometimes years, establishing a relationship with members of that club. The interviewees were frequently motorcycle enthusiasts who spent time with the club as a 'hangaround', casually joining in social rides and attending clubhouse parties.

I'd hung around about 2 years before [joining]. (Participant who joined in late 1990s)

I'd hung around them forever, so [I knew] pretty much all of them ... I'd have a beer with them after work all the time. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

Rather than accepting membership as soon as the opportunity arose, some participants explained that they remained hangarounds for a significant time so that they could consider the implications of membership or wait for the right time in their life to join.

I'd been around the club and other clubs for so long ... But I'd been hanging around that one for about 20 years ... I had people that I knew in the club for many years that had suggested [I join] multiple times over 20 years, and due to circumstances in my life at the time, it just fitted to join. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

It's not a decision you take lightly, you know, you hang around for a while, drink at the bar, and eventually someone says hey, why don't you become a nom, see if you love us and we love you. (Participant who joined in the late 2000s)

In a handful of cases, the participant wished to become a member and actively pursued known members to gain access.

A [tradesperson] I knew at the time, he was in, so I chased him and tried to join through him. (Participant who joined in the late 2000s)

It was a guy I looked up through a publication, I had seen these articles and read these stories. (Participant who joined in the early 2000s)

I met him through the internet. I commented on something he posted, on a page. And he contacted me, and then [name] contacted me and it went from there. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

The prospect or nominee period

Consistent with the OMCG literature (Lauchs, Bain & Bell 2015), participants were formally offered a path to OMCG membership through commencing a nominee or prospect period, which ranged from around 12 months to several years. Participants described this trial period as a way for the club to get to know them and vice versa, and to set mutual expectations for membership before making the commitment.

I did 2 years as a nom, I earned my patch ... I mean, it's a timely process. It had just been suggested, but the same as everybody else, there's that initiation period that gives you and them the chance to consider membership. So I thought I've got a foot in the door pretty quickly, but joining was a drawn out process. (Participant who joined in the late 2000s)

When you're a prospect, it's a chance for the club to look at you and for you to look at the club, and if you don't like it you can leave as a prospect on good standing, but after that it becomes tougher. (Participant who joined in the late 2000s)

During this time, nominees or prospects were mentored by the full member who nominated them for membership. It was the role of the full member who sponsored the nomination to ensure the prospective member understood the values, traditions and expectations of the OMCG. One participant, when asked who recruited him, said:

A work colleague, and he became my sponsor. You need to have been a full patch member for 5 years to sponsor. (Participant who joined in late 2000s)

Another participant described his experience as follows:

I shit you not, I walked into the clubhouse one day, by myself, and I just went back every Friday after that, [a current member] liked me from the get-go, and then me and him became inseparable, from that I started spending time at the bike shop, when I wasn't working, and it just went from there. Then one day he offered me to prospect up, offered to be my sponsor. (Participant who joined in late 2000s)

Sponsors also served as disciplinarians who enforced club rules.

The way they do it, is two people vote you in and they sponsor you, they call them your mum and dad, so if you fuck up you're gonna get your ass kicked by mum and dad, usually mum worse than dad. (Participant who joined in the early 2000s)

Alternative recruitment pathways

Several other scenarios emerged as pathways to membership. Some participants did not have to undertake a prospect or nominee period because they had previously been a fully patched member of another club.

Over two years I was treated as a guest by the club, didn't even have to prospect 'cause I had a patch from my last club. Just slipped into it. (Participant who joined in the late 2000s)

In a few rare instances, participants were given full membership immediately without the requirement to undergo any nominee period, or were offered membership after only just meeting the OMCG members. While participants suggested these fast-tracked processes with relaxed recruitment standards were generally targeted at younger, newer members (see also Dowling et al. 2021), there was often an indirect relationship (ie club members knew the recruit through someone else), so there was likely still some way for clubs to assess the new member's trustworthiness.

Got my colours [membership] straight away ... Only just met [the man who recruited me], he was the Vice President but met him through a guy I'd known for 20 years. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

In some cases, participants were actively pursued by the club for recruitment because of their reputation. Deliberate recruitment is also a feature of OCGs (Kleemans & de Poot 2008).

I followed my [family member] ... he was already a member. Apparently they were looking for me. They had been looking for me for about three months prior to him telling me ... because the sergeant-at-arms knew who I was and what type of fella I was. He was looking for a fighter, someone who could stand their ground. (Participant who joined in the mid-2010s)

Related to this, it was common for those who had left a club to be approached by other clubs as potential recruits. Contrary to the perception of strict loyalty to one club for life, there were examples of clubs working proactively to recruit former members who had left other clubs on the basis of their reputation, skills and connections.

I was in another one previously ... had a two-year gap and joined the last one ... Some club hopper wannabee, he was a friend of mine, he got me into both clubs. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

I actually joined back up in jail ... [an old friend] held a national position in the club, so he said when you get out I'll make sure you've got colours waiting for you again. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

Several former members in the sample had been recruited while in prison. Prison was recognised as a common setting for recruiting new members (see also Dowling et al. 2021 for further discussion).

I mean some of the clubs, are throwing colours out there. The modern clubs coming in now, are trying to grow, and are just throwing colours out there, you don't earn them, and they're the ones that will be trouble, 'cause there's a lot of recruiting in prison. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

Like prison rec yards are a breeding ground. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

Motives for joining

Brotherhood and camaraderie

When former members were asked about the factors that influenced their decision to join, the most common reason was their perception that the club would be a brotherhood of like-minded men who had similar interests in riding motorcycles and socialising and having parties.

... friendship, riding motorcycles, group of guys having a good time, and knowing a group of guys had your back. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

I made the decision to join, went to a few parties, couple of people I went to school with joined clubs, and I was into bikes, and hung out at the club house for a bit of fun ... Fun, just wanted to get on a bike, ride with the boys. (Participant who joined in the early 2000s)

Participants often described their chapters as being like a family and said that the club made them feel respected or valued. Many interviewees had developed strong friendships with other club members, characterised by trust and loyalty, and several sustained those friendships even after leaving the club. This supports the findings from Harris' (2015) interviews with Australian OMCG members, which emphasised belonging, support and attachment.

... the brotherhood, a family-like atmosphere, having parties ... you get together and laugh, joke, have barbecues. (Participant who joined in the late 2000s)

I was looking for camaraderie, brotherhood. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

For some, a negative life event like a relationship breakdown led to their decision to seek out brotherhood and social connection in the club.

Due to circumstances in my life at the time, it just fitted to join [the club] ... the so-called brotherhood and family, I'd lost both my parents, had no family in Australia, and felt quite isolated. (Participant who joined in the mid-2010s)

At the time I had no friends to ride around with ... The major thing was my father, he used to beat us up all the time, and that got to me a little bit, I still carry it with me, and I became a bit of an introvert, and then I met these guys, and it seemed like the club was like a group of brothers, and it sucked me in, I had nothing else in my life, I was going through a bad marriage, so yeah. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

For others, the desire for social connection reflected longer term feelings of isolation and rejection arising out of childhood experiences of abuse and neglect.

I used to be a street kid. I wasn't looking for family, but these guys turned out to be like a family, they talked me into it, and put some pressure on me, until I came around. I didn't know how to ride a bike before I joined, they taught me how (Participant who joined in the mid-1990s)

I was looking for a family, some good mates I could hang it, ride with. I felt lost and like this is where I needed to be ... I was the black sheep in my family. My father made me feel that way. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

Just my history, childhood history. I was abused from the age of 5 or 6 ... That went right through to later on in years. A lot of things happened that made me anti-establishment. (Participant who joined in the mid-1990s)

Conflict and protection

For a smaller number of participants, joining an OMCG offered them protection, either in prison or in the community, usually from rival OMCGs. One participant explained that he had been long-term friends with members of an OMCG, who stuck up for him when a rival OMCG started bullying his social motorcycle club. Similarly, another participant explained that he needed backing from an OMCG when a rival gang was harassing him.

One of the guys that I know that had been in the club for about 20 years. And I also had a good rapport with a couple of the other guys ... We had a social bike club. And that social club was being pushed around by the one percenters, being told to stop doing shows and rides and stuff. And basically we thumbed our nose at them. This one club decided to take another club out, who was giving that social club a hard time, I thought well, I'm into this ... I just got sick and tired of these bikies, thugs, trying to lord it over women and social clubs. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

At the time I was going through some troubles with another club. They offered some assistance. Basically I'd just closed a business, 'cause another club was harassing me ... and I just thought nah, this is gonna be easier if I'm in another club, and they're just not gonna come near me. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

Another participant joined an OMCG while incarcerated in response to being threatened by a rival gang. While he had familial connections to an OMCG, he was reluctant to join but did so to protect his business (which he later lost on being kicked out of the club).

Through my whole career I was like, don't join them ... then while I was in prison, the club came in and said we're taking your [business] off you. And I didn't know what to do ... some guys in another club, and it was the same club I worked for a while before over in [another state], and they came to me and said join up with us, we'll make sure you don't lose your [business] ... So I felt like I had no other choice. (Participant who joined in the early 2010s)

Offers of protection are not unique to OMCGs, also occurring in street gangs (Esbensen, Deschenes & Winfree 1999). It is one way in which clubs coerce men to join and stay in the club and can act as leverage through which newer members can be exploited.

Notoriety, money and outlaw lifestyles

Participants identified notoriety, status and illicit financial profit as common motivations for new recruits (see Dowling et al. 2021). Newer members were described as chasing a lavish lifestyle, with expensive cars, jewellery, parties and women, which is how some current members portray themselves.

I think the older blokes tell the younger ones about the glory and action, they brainwash these kids into thinking they'll have women throwing themselves at them, they'll get looked after and get to drink all the time, they get told a lot of bullshit, and these kids just go for it. (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

It's the ultimate ego stroke. It's just a bunch of guys who haven't grown up ... And, I mean, you walk into pubs and people, are like, afraid, but then you smile at them and they want to buy you a drink. So it's just a massive ego stroke ... (Participant who joined in the mid-2000s)

This, one participant argued, was an important focus for efforts to prevent recruitment into OMCGs.

Kill the Rockstar image. If you kill the Rockstar image you'll kill it. (Participant who joined in the early 2000s)

Only a few of the participants explicitly stated that these were motivating factors in their own decision to join. It is noteworthy that most of these former members were recruited to OMCGs in the last decade.

Just the party lifestyle, the women, the drugs, the bikes, the gold, it all just looked good ... (Participant who joined in the mid-2010s)

I never had anything to do with [the club] until I started hanging round the pub and they were, you know, they had the bar to themselves, free drinks, no one going near them, women hanging off them, you just see the good side of them. (Participant who joined in the late 2000s)

... yeah just the family, I didn't have a family, and it was just about being accepted and having a family. And the benefits of income without having to work for it ... I was kidnapped by a rival club ... so after that my family were afraid of repercussions from that club, so they cut ties with me to protect themselves, and left me on my own, so I looked for a club for a brotherhood, and to be with people like me. (Participant who joined in the mid-2010s)

This final example illustrates the fact that former members had often joined for more than one reason—whether that was the attraction of the brotherhood, significant life events and personal circumstances, a need for protection, or the appeal of the outlaw lifestyle.

Discussion

Based on interviews with former OMCG members in Queensland, this chapter has highlighted motives for joining and pathways into OMCGs that are common across clubs. This research has shown that, while there are elements of both street gang and OCG recruitment which are similar, neither is fully consistent with OMCGs, meaning that we can draw upon—but not rely on—evidence from these areas when considering how to prevent recruitment.

Findings from this study reflect the important role of social ties, which is consistent with recruitment into OCGs and street gangs (Kleemans & van Koppen 2020). OMCG recruitment often occurs through existing social networks, with many participants explaining that they met the club through established networks of men with similar interests, and casually spent time with club members on social rides and attending clubhouse events before they became members themselves. While there were examples of individuals pursuing clubs and known members, and members pursuing potential recruits on the basis of their reputation or history in other clubs, most former members described a process that was largely opportunistic. Initial contact occurred in a variety of settings, including private residences, work settings, licensed premises and, in some cases, prison. Prison has emerged as a common setting for recruiting newer members—perhaps unsurprisingly given that up to half of OMCG members have served time in prison (Morgan, Cubitt & Dowling 2023).

The findings reflect the importance of selection processes that help build trust and loyalty. The lengthy, drawn out process described by interview participants is consistent with the perception that OMCGs are traditionally highly selective. The rigid, hierarchical structures and clearly defined membership boundaries that characterise OMCGs (Lauchs, Bain & Bell 2015), which differentiates them from OCGs and street gangs, mean that joining an OMCG takes, on average, substantially longer than joining other criminal groups—longer, for example, than the average of two years youths spend in total as members of street gangs (Pyrooz 2014). The amount of time spent as hangarounds, and then as prospects or nominees, provides an opportunity for the club to screen potential members. The prospect or nominee period is designed to ensure the trustworthiness, suitability and quality of potential new members, with sponsors vouching for them and shouldering some responsibility for their recruitment (Densley 2012). There were cases where these requirements were relaxed, including for people who had previously left other clubs, largely because these individuals offered resources or capabilities that would benefit the club. This reflects the balance between trust and capability in choosing members, as with OCGs (see van Koppen 2013). It was also evident that, for many, the decision to join an OMCG was a considered one, preceded by an extended period of building rapport, trust and friendship with existing members.

Overall, recruitment was driven by a combination of different factors. Brotherhood, camaraderie, a shared passion for motorcycles and other mutual interests were the most commonly cited factors enticing men into OMCG membership. Some participants described how joining a club was motivated by personal circumstances (recent or historical) which exacerbated their feelings of isolation and need for group belonging. Wider gang research has similarly emphasised the importance of developmental factors (Dong, Gibson & Krohn 2015; Thornberry et al. 2003), while both gang and OCG research has highlighted the role of stressful life events (Eitle, Gunkel & Van Gundy 2004; van Koppen 2013). Threats and intimidation from rival gangs were less common factors compelling participants to seek protection through OMCG membership. As is the case with gang research (Densley 2015), motives can be understood as being a combination of push and pull factors. Certain factors might lead an individual to seek belonging in some sort of group, while other factors will make that group—in this case, an OMCG—an attractive option. Both are relevant to understanding and preventing recruitment.

Less common among former members was the desire for notoriety or profit. This is despite these same individuals having provided evidence of shifting OMCG membership practices in Australian clubs, characterised by higher turnover, faster recruitment and relaxed entry requirements and membership standards, as part of a broader cultural shift within some clubs (Dowling et al. 2021). This may be because former members were unwilling to disclose their criminal motives or criminal networks in an interview, or because they tended to be older, more traditional members. It may also be because, like many individuals who have desisted from offending, they have forged a new identity and narrative about their involvement in OMCGs that focuses less on their violent, antisocial or criminal behaviour (Bersani & Doherty 2018). It is also plausible that, while brotherhood and camaraderie is the dominant motive for joining, aspects of the outlaw lifestyle are still desirable (and these elements are probably interrelated).

These findings highlight several opportunities to prevent men from joining OMCGs. Street gang prevention programs, which often focus on school or family-based interventions and aim to intervene early to prevent young people becoming involved in gangs (Howell 2010), may have little immediate relevance to OMCGs because of the very different age profiles of new members. Prevention programs like these may help to prevent some young people from joining clubs when they are older, but it would be difficult to ensure they are appropriately targeted at prospective gang members. A recent study showed that OMCG members accounted for just one percent of 12,000 male offenders in New South Wales proceeded against for the first time in a particular 12-month period (Morgan, Cubitt & Dowling 2023). That said, age-appropriate interventions which address the push factors underlying some members' decision to join an OMCG, targeted at individuals at risk of joining, may have some effect.

As camaraderie and brotherhood is a common motive for recruitment, anti-recruitment campaigns could show the reality of gangs, which have shifted from loyal groups of like-minded men with shared values to groups of self-interested individuals looking to use the club to build their own status and profit financially (Densley 2015; Dowling et al. 2021). These programs could also counter the perceived attraction of OMCGs by drawing attention to the negative consequences of membership, such as imprisonment, family conflict and neglect, the loss of external friendships, mental health issues and barriers to finding or retaining employment (Boland et al. 2021). Enforcement activity targeting senior members of OMCGs, where they are involved in directing serious crime, may also undermine the appeal of clubs and reduce recruitment (Calderoni et al. 2022b).

Irrespective of the approach adopted, resources should be targeted at those men who are already part of the wider social network of OMCGs, such as their friends, families, associates and work colleagues. A recent study estimated there were fewer than 6,000 members nationally (Morgan, Dowling & Voce 2020). Only a proportion of these men are recruited in any given year, meaning that the pool of men who are at risk of being recruited into OMCGs is relatively small, though likely to be concentrated in certain areas and groups. Given the status of OMCGs as priority targets, and the significant investment in task forces targeting OMCGs, club members are well known to law enforcement, as are nominees and, to a lesser extent, hangarounds (Cubitt & Morgan 2022). While the opportunistic nature of social networks makes identifying high-risk settings in the community challenging, it may be possible to disrupt efforts of known members to recruit in prison, which former members identified as a setting for active, expedited recruitment to rebuild member numbers.

Finally, the length of time it takes nominees to become OMCG members provides a window within which police or other agencies may intervene to dissuade them from joining. This might involve targeting these individuals as early as possible with anti-recruitment messages. Alternatively, it might mean assisting them with the types of services provided as part of the new OMCG Exit Program in Queensland, which offers tailored job skills programs, mentoring, employment opportunities and health services for former members wanting to end their involvement with OMCGs (see Boland et al. 2021). This may help discourage young men from taking the next step in the pathway to become a fully patched member, particularly when they are weighing up the decision to join.

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14. Video visitation in Australian prisons: Perspectives on father–child contact

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, correctional centres across Australia enacted emergency public health measures to reduce the risk of disease transmission. These measures included cessation of professional and social contact visits with people in correctional centres, who typically have poorer health than the public on a range of measures that may correlate with the severity of COVID-19 outcomes (Payne & Hanley 2020). The unprecedented public health changes created the potential for conflict among the overarching objectives of corrective services to create a ‘safe, secure and humane custodial environment’ (Productivity Commission 2023). Visitation is a core strategy for achieving both safe and humane custodial settings (McCarthy & Adams 2017). Facilitating the connection between people in correctional centres and their families and friends in the community has a range of positive effects for everyone (Folk et al. 2019). Consequently, video visitation was developed and disseminated in Australian correctional centres. This chapter highlights the benefits and challenges of video visitation from the perspectives of corrective services in six Australian jurisdictions, New South Wales fathers in prison, caregivers of children with a father in prison, and two support services.

Parents in prison

The data on the number of parents in prison is poor quality and not routinely made publicly available. Estimates suggest that around half of the men in prison are parents (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015). Separation from family, and in particular children, is a major concern for most people in correctional centres. Given that the number of adult prisoners in Australia is currently approaching 42,000, with males (93%) making up the large majority of the Australian prison population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023), family separation affects a significant number of people. Existing research on parents in prison is largely US-based, and highlights mother–child separation. As the large majority of parents in prison are men, it is important to consider how the father–child relationship is maintained via family contact options.

Family visitation has broad and deep benefits for different groups: it can help people in prison to cope with separation (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken 2002), may improve family relationships and mental health, and appears to result in less disruptive behaviour in correctional centres (De Claire & Dixon 2017; Harris & Landreth 1997; McLeod & Bonsu 2018; Shlafer & Poehlmann 2010). Moreover, the positive effects linked to visitation last over time: family visits are associated with reduced recidivism, higher rates of reunification of family household post-release (Wilson & Koons-Witt 2021), and better social adjustment during imprisonment and after release (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken 2002). Visitation may somewhat buffer negative impacts for children with a parent in prison (Hayes et al. 2018; Schubert et al. 2016). However, fathers in prison and their children require significant support to maintain a positive relationship through separation (Bartlett & Trotter 2019).

Video visitation

The use of video visitation in correctional centres dramatically increased following the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions and subsequent suspension of in-person visits worldwide. In Australia, research suggests that most families with an incarcerated parent had some form of contact, primarily via phone or videoconferencing, during lockdown restrictions; however, the quality and accessibility of this contact has been critiqued (Minson & Flynn 2021). A survey of 84 caregivers of children with an incarcerated parent in Australia found that 60 percent reported problems maintaining contact during lockdown restrictions (Minson & Flynn 2021). Accessibility issues have arisen in contexts where facilities implemented ad-hoc lockdowns where all visitations were suspended. The majority of the survey participants considered the quality and accessibility of visits pre-COVID-19 restrictions to be good despite frequent reports of long distances between homes and prison facilities. During COVID-19 restrictions, however, caregivers reported that children had less contact with their parent, which had detrimental impacts on their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their incarcerated parent. Specifically, while uptake in video visits was described positively as a communication mode allowing parents to read a story to their child or participate in a bedtime routine, the overall consistency and availability of contact was less frequent and secure. This finding has been replicated in studies investigating video visitation across the world. This may be partially attributable to the advent of video visitation largely occurring in tandem with visiting restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led, in some jurisdictions, to the haphazard adoption of video visitation practices.

There is emerging evidence that video visits can be inferior to contact visits for some children, though benefits remain. Minson and Flynn (2021) explored the implications of COVID-19-related impacts on children with an incarcerated parent in Australia and the United Kingdom via surveys and interviews with families. The authors reported that the lack of face-to-face contact was found to be particularly difficult for pre-verbal and non-verbal children and removal of physical contact was detrimental for young children and children with disability. However, the reduced time and cost involved in video visits, the privacy afforded by video visits, and the capacity for incarcerated parents to engage with children in their everyday routines, including bedtime, were reported by families and caregivers as positive aspects of video visitation.

Problems with video visits are often attributed to lack of access to video visits at prison facilities, lack of support at home (with technology and education or training on how to use video visits), prison policies and implementation practices that restrict visiting times or initiate unexpected lockdowns, and poor quality control of video visit or conferencing applications. The challenges faced by families engaging in video visitation have led some researchers to condemn the transition to video visitation as detracting from the benefits (psychological wellbeing, facility security and reduced recidivism) derived from in-person visitation (see Bou-Rhodes 2019; Fulcher 2014; Murdoch & King 2020). However, many studies investigating the impacts of video visitation point to benefits for children and families (see Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan 2020; Minson & Flynn 2021).

The present study

The aim of the present study was to understand the perceptions, experiences and ongoing feasibility of video visitation between fathers in prison and their children. The study used a mixed methods design that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Conducted in two stages, corrective services in six Australian jurisdictions, fathers in two NSW correctional centres, caregivers of their children, and community organisations supporting families separated by imprisonment in New South Wales were interviewed about their perceptions of the benefits, challenges and limitations of video visitations as well as how they compared to other modes of contact. These qualitative data were supplemented by document and quantitative data analysis on the uptake of video visits.

Stage 1 of this study reports on data from:

- 19 video or telephone interviews with corrective services staff from five Australian jurisdictions (ACT, NSW, Qld, SA, WA) and a written response to the interview questions from one jurisdiction (Vic);
- corrective services data records about the uptake of video visitation (NSW and WA); and
- corrective services policy (ACT, NSW, Qld, SA, Vic and WA) and/or research documents (ACT and NSW) about video visitation.

Stage 2 of this study reports on data from:

- 27 interviews with fathers in prison from two publicly-operated correctional centres in New South Wales;
- 17 interviews with caregivers of children with fathers in these two correctional centres;
- six interviews with support workers from two NSW community organisations that support children and families who have a family member in prison.

Ethical approval to conduct the research was provided by the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council and approval or ethics review was obtained from all participating corrective services. The research was supported by an Aboriginal Reference Group comprising Aboriginal cultural advisers with expertise in or experience of culturally safe research, and/or working with Aboriginal people in prison. Fathers in prison were introduced to the research project via posters displayed in communal areas in multiple languages. Fathers signalled interest in participation to staff, who notified the research team. The risk of coercion was managed in interviews with fathers in prison, and staff in corrective services and community organisations, by self-identification for prospective participation and a pre-interview verbal and written briefing highlighting that participation was voluntary, questions could be skipped and the interview could stop at any time.

Results

Overall, there was strong support for video visits and a clear desire for this option to continue to be offered alongside in-person visits. While participants acknowledged that in-person visits were preferable overall, for a wide range of reasons, video visits were considered an excellent complement to visitation modalities. The reasons for this position were myriad, including consideration of the child and carers' wellbeing, pragmatic considerations such as travel time and cost, fathers' mediated access to the child and family's social worlds, and equitable access for visitors overseas or interstate, and those with low mobility or disability. The most commonly reported benefit was that the quality of the relationship between the father and child was enhanced by the visual dimensions of the visit.

Relationship quality

Participants from every group discussed relationship quality as one the major benefits of video visits. Quality was derived from establishing, consolidating or deepening a relationship between the father and child or, less commonly, the father and the child's carer in the community.

If I didn't have the video visit, I wouldn't really have any relationship. (Father 25)

Relationship quality was closely connected to fathers' access to the social world of the child via the audiovisual medium. Unlike in-person visits, during a video visit the child could show, and in turn the father was able to see, the spaces the child inhabits, their toys, pets, awards, and other meaningful items and this was a powerful connector.

In the AVL [audiovisual link] they can show that person their ... 'look at my wall, look at my award', you know, they can help that person see the work they've been doing, or they can see the room or ... they can show them they have painted the house. So, I think it has a connection to the home, which, you know, is a bonus, because that person inside hasn't seen maybe that home or whatever they're showing them in a long time, so I suppose it brings that connection to them to the home. (Service provider 3)

Visual access had two impacts on the father: it allowed him to feel part of the child's life by being up to date and familiar with the things that are important in the child's world and to celebrate important events and milestones. These include birthdays and developmental changes. One carer mentioned that they organised events like blowing out candles on a birthday cake around the times that video visits were scheduled. Another carer described how video visits enabled the child's father to observe some of his 'firsts' but it also provided useful conversation topics to build or deepen the connection.

Carers and fathers stressed how important it was for children to actually see their father. Particularly for young children, video visits enabled some engagement with their father, including pre-verbal infants who could recognise their father.

He can put a face to the name, to the voice, so he can understand who I am. So, if I didn't have the video visits with him, it'd be a lot harder for him to understand who I was. (Father 14)

Fathers mentioned that children could be more themselves on the video visits compared to in-person visits as the in-person visits come with more restrictions. Moreover, fathers said it was very challenging for young children to visit in person as they would get bored or run around, and the video visits offered them an opportunity to talk for a short period and then continue with their normal activities.

They're happy, they're comfortable, they're not shy, they actually want to talk to you. It's not like they have to stay there and talk to you. They can run off and come back. (Father 4)

Similarly, carers acknowledged that children do not necessarily know what to do on video calls and can lose interest quickly. Particularly for young children with limited attention spans, they have the ability to leave and return to the video visit, without having to stay in one spot.

Carers shared the ways that children took charge of the interactions and integrated the father into their play.

Because, I guess, the good thing about doing them on the video is that she just takes him wherever she goes. If she's finished playing with her activities, she's like, 'Okay, we're done now', and she goes on. They go on to the next thing, you know, and it's like he'll be on the trampoline with her. (Carer 11)

Carers used a range of strategies to facilitate a positive video visit. Some caregivers planned ahead to organise activities that would maximise interactions. One caregiver said that the father and child both enjoy a particular kind of lolly, and she always has a packet ready so that they can eat the same snack together.

[The father] really loves those snake lollies, yeah, so every visit that we've done via video I always have a packet here. That way [the child is] eating them with [the father]. (Carer 3)

Like in-person visits, video visits were not always positive experiences and there were times when difficult issues could not be resolved in the time allowed, which is typically shorter than in-person visits.

Visits and motivation for change

Retaining the connection between fathers and children and caregivers not only maintained or improved the quality of those relationships but also provided the father in prison with motivation to keep going and self-manage behaviour. In this regard, both video and in-person visits were highlighted.

We get families, and the one that's quite beautiful actually is we get a young man that hasn't spoken to his mum in 15 years. Now, on the video chat [they are] able to see each other and talk to each other clearly. So that there changes people's lives. It gives a person a reason to keep going. Jail can be quite daunting at times, and it can be quite lonely, it can be quite monotonous, but just that interaction over the internet can make somebody go and say, 'It is all worth it in the end and I'm gonna keep going'... Yeah, that was huge; there was not a dry eye in the house. (Qld staff 4)

It makes me feel like I'm not so much in jail, not as taken away from the world, like throw away the key, locked in a dungeon feeling ... There is hope. I'm gonna be home soon ... Makes me happier to be in prison. (Father 21)

You're opening their eyes to a life they once had, that they now have a realisation that 'I f**ed up and I'm in here, and I can't do it, and maybe I need to start reinventing myself so I can get back to it.' (SA staff 2)

Self-management by people in prison to retain privileges, including visitation, was also mentioned by a number of staff participants.

... they know if they screw around too much they could lose that privilege ... it's called self-management; they know if there's a prisoner gonna go and screw up then they're gonna lose one of their privileges, they'll self-manage themselves and there's nothing wrong with that. (SA staff 2)

While the research design underpinning these data did not include measures of release impacts, participants were asked to reflect on whether video visits might have a post-release impact on the father, child and family. Participants unanimously recognised the positive potential of video visitation, and this is supported by the existing literature on in-person visitation benefits (Wilson & Koons-Witt 2021).

We talk about recidivism and people being able to reintegrate back into society; they have a better chance of success when they maintain those community connections, so if a person is completely cut off it's obviously much more difficult. (NSW staff 1)

Practical arrangements

All participants reported that video visits were often preferable to in-person visits because video visits eased practical concerns such as travel distance, travel costs and the challenges of the prison environment. For people in prison from countries other than Australia, or who had family members overseas, this contact was the only way the distance could be bridged. Some carers did not have a drivers licence so driving to the prison was not an option and video visits filled this gap. Other families would have to travel long distances for a brief visit.

It would have been a six-hour drive each way for a 30-minute visit. Now I couldn't do that to three kids. (Carer 14)

The cost associated with visiting for some families meant that the carer was faced with difficult choices about how to best use limited family resources. In turn, this had an emotional impact on the father in prison.

I love seeing them and they love seeing me, but I felt guilty. Like I said, they'd go without fun stuff all week to come visit me. (Father 25)

Video visits enabled routine interaction, allowing the father to be part of the household to some extent. As previously discussed, this facilitated a quality relationship but also, pragmatically, carers appreciated the flexibility of video visits and how they could be integrated into daily life.

Children are penalised sometimes when children play sport; you know, if they're in something on a Saturday ... well then, they can't come ... So then they don't get to see their parents. (Service provider 3)

Carers were able to have conversations and involve fathers in parenting decisions.

Just because you are incarcerated, right? It does not mean that you are not still a parent, and that you are not still valued in that child's life. You can still parent from behind bars. (Carer 14)

Prison environment

For carers, fathers and service providers, the most notable aspect of the prison environment was its effect on the wellbeing of the child. Video visits were valued by the fathers who said they did not like their children coming into the correctional centre. This was particularly relevant for fathers with young children who worried about their children running off or getting upset, which in turn made the visit stressful. Fathers were also not keen on showing children their life in prison and sometimes children did not know their father was in prison.

I didn't really like them coming in, because jail, there's a lot of bad people in here. And if something happens on a visit, where it has in the past, I don't want the kids to see that because my kids had never seen me do anything, and they've never seen my bad side. (Father 23)

For children with a disability, visits to the prison may be particularly challenging. Several fathers who had children with autism indicated that in-person visits were challenging for their children and video visits were more suitable.

For corrective services staff, the most salient issues relating to the prison environment were the reduction in contraband and the positive effect on behaviour and atmosphere. Participants referred to wellbeing in a range of ways and highlighted both the child's and father's wellbeing. The wellbeing of the caregiver was much less commonly discussed. In the context of video visitation, child wellbeing considerations took several forms. First, it prevented the harms to children associated with in-person visits via screening and security procedures. The security process of prisons was described as being onerous and challenging for many children. It involved lining up and waiting, with children often becoming bored and restless. Particularly during the era of COVID-19 restrictions, carers and children often had to test prior to entering the correctional centre.

The screening process that happens for in-person visits could be quite daunting for children. On the other hand, video visits might be easier on some children than having to go through the screening process at prison. You know, it's, it's a frightening, frightening experience ... sniffer dogs ... pat-down searches, so that can be quite devastating for some children. (Service provider 2)

Several carers pointed out that the prison environment could be distressing for children. Reasons included the institutional setting and the presence of other inmates.

He was actually being taken to the jail for the visits. He prefers the video calls because being in that environment in the jail ... he was really quite scared at the other inmates around. And yeah, so he actually prefers the video calls. (Carer 14)

While acknowledging that nothing replaced the opportunity for a hug in a face-to-face visit, all carers emphasised that video visits contributed to the wellbeing of their child.

I've dealt with the trauma that comes from kids visiting their fathers in jail. It's not the best place for a child to see its father. They come home with sometimes chips on their shoulders. They come home sometimes devastated that dad can't leave that area, so they come home sometimes crying and stuff like that. So, trauma comes in many different styles, and visiting personally can bring out those traumas or make those traumas happen. So, there's another [way that video visitation] is good. (Qld staff 4)

The reduction in contraband was one of the benefits of video visits most commonly cited by corrective services staff across all jurisdictions. In turn, reduced access to contraband, and particularly illicit substances, meant a safer correctional centre for both staff and prisoners.

Other good benefits that we found, while they stopped physical visits and went to e-visits, was drugs and contraband coming in: it essentially stopped. That's where we get a lot of stuff coming in and that, essentially, went to zero during that time. So it made a huge difference there for the security of the prison, definitely a big benefit. (WA staff 1)

Restricting in-person visits was perceived to constrict opportunities for people in prison to use standover tactics to coerce visitors into bringing contraband into correctional centres, and reduced arguments between people in prison and visitors.

There's been a massive reduction in the introduction of contraband. That's one of the key [areas] that's been really good. People haven't been pressured and assaulted and threatened to bring stuff in with a family member ... there's none of that peer pressure no more. (SA staff 5)

Barriers and challenges to video visits

Physical contact

One of the clear highlights of in-person visits repeatedly identified across participant groups was non-verbal communication, particularly physical affection including the opportunity to hug and hold children and loved ones. In this regard, video visits were lacking, and were considered a 'next best thing' when in-person visits were not an option, or to relieve some of the pressure of only attending visits in-person.

I'm very thankful these video things come about, but nothing is like in-person ... hugs and getting to see him grow—you can't see how tall he gets ... the difference or energy when you can hug him and hold him is different to the video ... So it makes a difference, but contact visits will always be the best visits, I believe, for family in general. (Father 24)

However, there were some contingencies during physical distancing where contact was significantly reduced or disallowed and this disadvantage of video visits was moderated. Similarly, people in prison required to have non-contact visits only were not able to share affection with their family members, reducing the gap between in-person and video visits.

Technical barriers

For the majority of participants, technical barriers related to the video dropping out due to reception problems. In many cases, the reception issues were considered to have largely improved since video visitation was established and therefore was considered a mild inconvenience rather than a major technical issue. However, one of the two prison sites in New South Wales and some of the rural and remote regions in the other jurisdictions were identified as having ongoing reception problems.

It just freezes heaps, like I will be frozen or they will be frozen and most of the time it happens but it depends where you are in the room, I guess 'cause it mustn't pick-up. (Father 1)

Major drawbacks relate to poor internet connectivity. Connectivity and application outages have resulted in a lag to video calls, which causes frustration to the visitor cohort and family/friends, and calls being cancelled. (Vic, written response)

Less commonly, corrective services participants reported that the technical challenges were occurring on the visitors' side of the contact due to problems accessing suitable devices or connecting to the internet. This barrier may be more likely to impact people living in rural and remote communities.

That was a bit of a negative, actually ... for families that didn't have internet reception or mobile phone or an iPad or whatever it was. And again, we're talking probably a very small [group], but it would have affected our Aboriginal cohort and population a lot more than anyone else. (SA staff 4)

The other thing is ... remoter areas have limited 3G and 4G capability. A lot of the remote areas, including here, they're still on 3G. A lot of them will be out of range and not able to do it. (WA staff 1)

While the large majority of NSW correctional centres use the same video visit system, there are some exceptions (private prisons) as well as variation in the number and length of video visits across individual correctional centres. This lack of consistency was identified as a potential source of frustration for some visitors.

It would be really nice if there was consistency across the system as well. And not having different systems in different prisons, because people do get moved around a lot. And so then, every time that most in custody get moved to a new centre, the family has to familiarise themselves with how it all works at the new centre and get used to the technology and work out how it all works and that's really stress-inducing for some people. (Service provider 1)

Overall, carers in New South Wales were satisfied with the booking system and the ease of organising visits. While the platform was identified as easy to use, there were issues with accessing visits. Several carers noted that the video visits were released in the very early hours of the morning, which was difficult. Limitations on available times were also a concern, which could be exacerbated by family conflict or poor communication. With only one visit available per week, some carers noted that the father's other family members 'book from underneath me' (Carer 3) and that they did not know if the visit was already booked until they logged in.

Some participants expressed concerns about the privacy of video visits, as they could hear other calls in progress and vice versa. For this reason, many preferred having video visits in AVL suites where possible, though it should be noted that the lack of privacy generally in video visits mirrored face-to-face experiences.

Everyone has a booth. I was in a cell, in a small room, whatever ... more privacy. We see each other, we see the front ... but you can't talk loud here. You need to be quiet 'cause if there's four of us talking, we can't hear, no one can hear the other ... most of the time, I need to grab my ears, listen, repeat myself a couple of times. That's the only thing here: just more privacy, so we can be more loud. (Father 26)

Security and compliance

The security concerns that presented barriers to the introduction of video visits in many jurisdictions pre-COVID-19 were not realised in the data. Incidents of rule breaking were reported but they were largely characterised as minor infractions, as opposed to security risks, and were not commonly detected. There was a general view among corrective services participants that access to any visit modality was important and this was speculated to be a disincentive to rule breaking. Despite the reportedly low rate of rule breaking, safety, security and rule compliance remained lively concerns.

I mentioned [earlier] people flaunting different parts of their body. When people got used to it [video visits], it didn't happen. So I was surprised how people responded to it, very quickly coming into line with how the government wanted it to operate ... Everybody decided they will follow the rules and they wanted that visit regardless. (Qld staff 4)

They walk past from behind you and they'll stop and they'll listen for a couple seconds and walk off, but they didn't really worry very much. Unless you put someone on a visit that wasn't meant to be on there, they'd say something, but otherwise it's all right. (Father 14)

One of the ways in which this was managed was via the careful monitoring of visitors, particularly with regard to existing orders which prevented contact with particular people including family members, current or former partners or children. In this way, video visits mirrored in-person visits. However, one carer noted that she was verbally abused during a video visit in front of her children, and expressed concerns about whether the visits were adequately monitored. Like all contacts, video visits have the potential to be used as a coercive tool and this important issue warrants further research.

Summary and conclusions

On the whole, widespread uptake of video visitation in prisons is a positive outcome emerging from the challenging experience of the pandemic. Although this research focused on fathers' experiences, the results may be more broadly applicable to all parents in prison. The challenges of family separation are experienced by mothers and fathers. Moreover, there was congruence in the perceived benefits and limitations of video visits across the diverse sample of fathers in this research, indicating shared perceptions and experiences.

The use of video visitation technology has been met by corrective services with enthusiasm and goodwill, largely viewed as an opportunity for innovation in a setting that has historically been slow to introduce change. Key messages that emerged from the research are as follows.

A window into the child's world

Video visitation enables incarcerated fathers to enter the social world of their child in ways never before possible. Through video chats, fathers can be 'present' virtually for milestones and special events. They can share interactions with their child while the child remains in the comfort of their own home, supporting the child's emotional regulation as compared to the potentially stressful prison setting. Fathers can see things in the child's environment, such as a new pet, or a new home, with a depth that could not be captured by photographs. This new level of access can enable fathers to be more attuned to what is happening in their children's lives, strengthening their capacity to parent their children and maintain their emotional relationship. However, it is important to stress that video visits are a complement to and enhancement of, rather than a replacement for, in-person visits, which enable essential physical touch and interaction.

Father engagement in video visitation

Some fathers are able to engage in child-focused ways during video visits and take on their child's perspective. However, others found interactions more challenging. Fathers could be supported to prepare for the visits to enable meaningful interactions—for example, by thinking through beforehand what they would like to talk about with their children. Carers also encouraged fathers to be mindful of their moods before going into the visit as this can impact the quality of the visit. As video visits develop in the future, opportunities to connect visits with other parenting-focused initiatives, such as creative story writing and reading, should be explored to achieve compound benefits.

Balancing safety and privacy

Given the newness of video visitation, issues are arising which require policy attention. One significant concern that emerged from the research is the potential for coercive control. Corrective services will need to balance the desire for privacy with the need to monitor the potential for abusive or otherwise unsafe interactions.

Providing equitable access

The research uncovered some issues around equitable access to video visitation, related to booking policies as well as availability of technology. A 'first come, first served' policy for booking video visitations meant that, in large extended family networks with complex dynamics, slots for video visits could be dominated by one person, while another was unable to book a visit. In situations where there are different carers of a father's children (who may not communicate with each other), a quota system could allow each child a minimum number of monthly visits with their father. There are also issues with access to video visitation technology, which relies on internet connection and may not be available to families in remote areas.

To date, the focus of corrective services has been on what we term 'Video visitation 1.0'—ensuring that incarcerated people can see and communicate with their loved ones. Now that the pandemic has subsided, and it is clear that video visitation will continue going forward, corrective services are turning to the question of how else video visitation can be used, especially around procedures for in-cell technology use. We suggest that this evolution to 'Video visitation 2.0' should centre on how video visitation can be more effectively use to support quality contact that can strengthen and enhance relationships between prisoners and their families, especially children.

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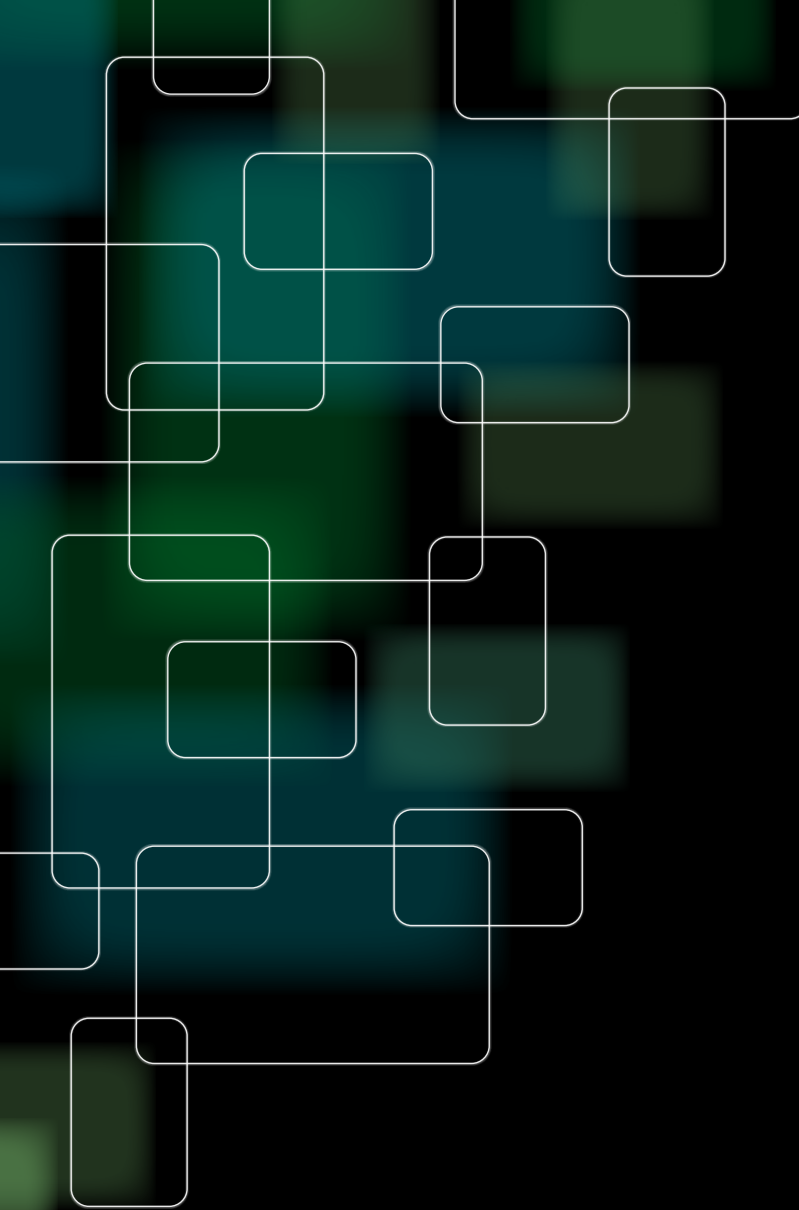
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