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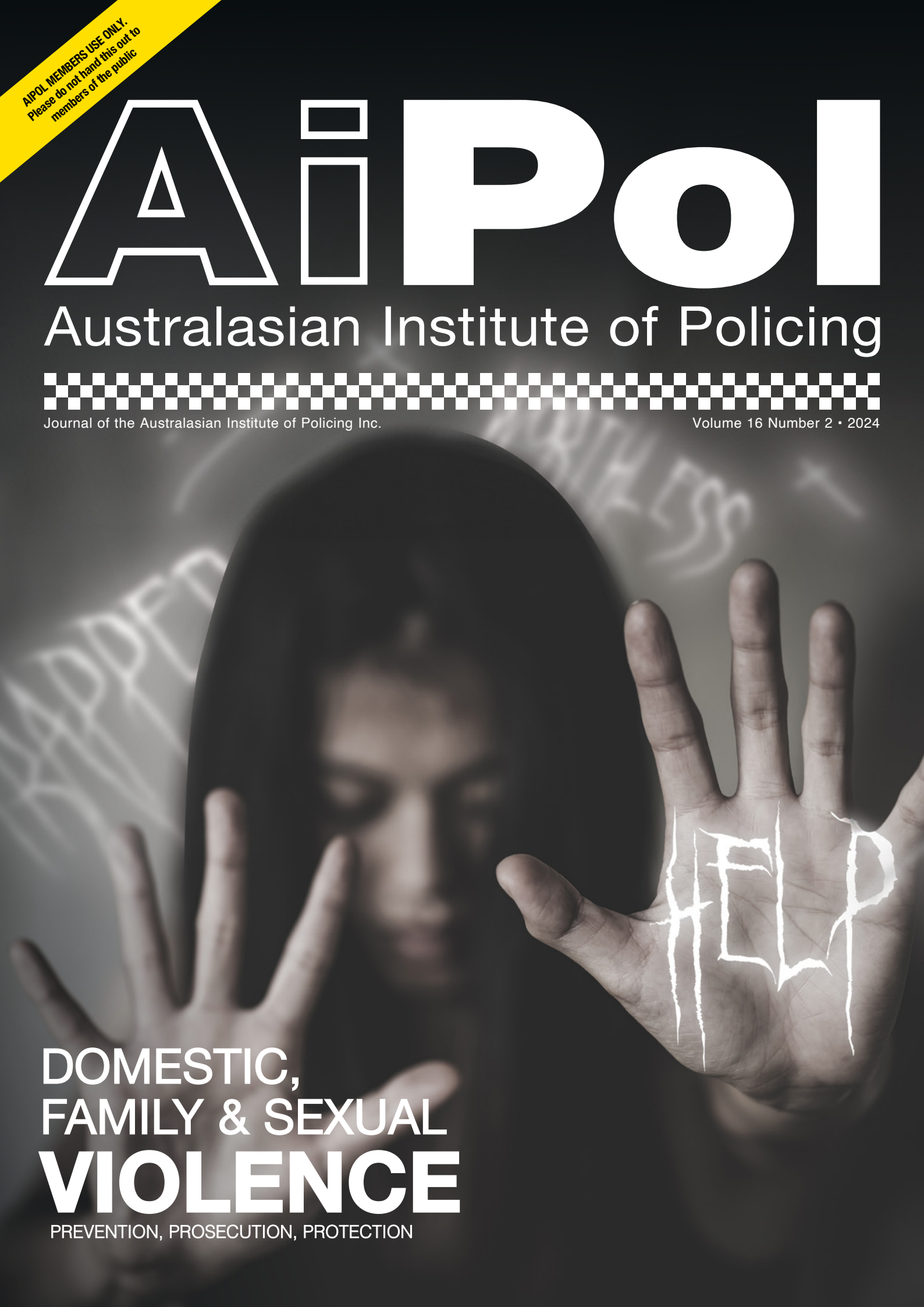


Journal of the Australasian Institute of Policing Inc.

Volume 16 Number 2 • 2024

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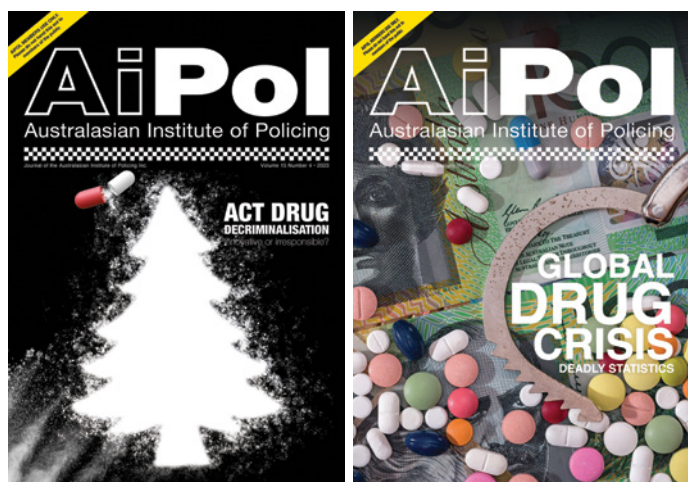


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# Editorial

## DR AMANDA DAVIES

Editor, Senior Researcher at the Charles Sturt University



***“One in four had experienced emotional abuse, while one in six had experienced economic abuse.”***

Welcome to the June 2024 issue. This issue focuses on the current Australian domestic and family violence crisis dominating political, policing, health and media discussions, to name a few, Australia wide and offers a condensed collection of valuable research contributing to understanding the current state of this crisis. Whilst we are not the only country experiencing an upsurge in domestic and family violence it has taken sustained and significant effort on behalf of individual citizens, community groups, police and other related agencies to bring the issue to front and centre of priorities for state and federal governments, highlighted also by the irrepressible tragedy and trauma experienced by victims, their families and the frontline officers responding to and managing domestic and family violence incidents.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported in 2023, one in six women, since the age of 15, had experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or previous cohabiting partner. One in four had experienced emotional abuse, while one in six had experienced economic abuse. First Nations women, as well as women from migrant and refugee communities, experience higher levels of domestic violence. As of April 2023, 14 women had died and by April 2024, 25 women had died of gender-based violence (11 more women died of family violence

compared to the same period in 2023). These statistics are potentially only the tip of the iceberg, in respect of the extent of gender-based violence, due in part to the under reporting (influenced by a range of factors). The article here by Professor Rick Sarre, offers further insight into the recent history of domestic and family violence, particularly intimate partner violence and the what the statistics reveal in respect of the disparity in First Nations victims.

There is recognition of the valuable work that has been undertaken across a range of organisations, both government and non-government to tackle this burgeoning area of crime and as released in the media, the National Cabinet in April 2024, has committed to a range of strategies to stop violence against women. A key theme emanating, not only from the National Cabinet commitment, also from communities and agencies working to stop the gender-based violence, is the recognition that the problem will take a whole of community commitment to resolve domestic and family violence including gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.

The article by Anastasia Powell offers a comprehensive deconstruction of the April 2024 National Cabinet strategies and highlights the comment by the first Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner

calling for an evidence-based best practice approach to refine actions for addressing gender-based violence.

There are multiple areas associated with this Australia wide crisis that are connected to the work of police and as the article by Christopher Dowling from the Australian Institute of Criminology indicates, the approach by police begins with education and training. The article is insightful in presenting the approach to training in this area for police in Australia and importantly the view of the officers towards such training.

Whilst it is not possible to include articles to cover all areas that connect with the problem of domestic and family violence (there will be a further issue devoted to these), the final two articles in this edition bring forward the challenging and complex circumstances of the impact of such violence on children. Here, also is another example of the need for a whole of community, including the respective government and non-government agencies to work together to address the nuanced far-reaching impact of domestic and family violence, gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.

This edition has sought to bring to readers a sample of articles that speak to some of the current issues associated with addressing this societal crisis, building support for those on the frontline managing the reality of this area of crime.

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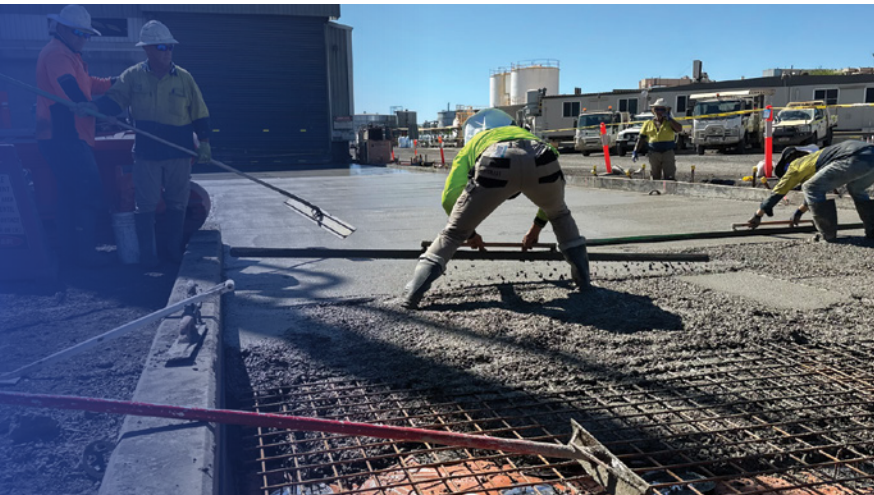
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# President's Foreword

## JONATHAN HUNT-SHARMAN

President, Committee of management, Australasian Institute of Policing



***“This is not about me. It isn’t even just about my daughter. It is about a system so flawed and broken that it enables creatures of that ilk to freely walk the streets and carry on with their heinous behaviour unfettered. Kirra is by far not the only one to have befallen this fate, although she is the only death [the alleged offender] has caused, that I am aware of. After she was murdered, I begged the police to put [the alleged offender] away before [the alleged offender] hurt someone else. They didn’t. [The alleged offender] went on to destroy the lives of two further women, and they are only the ones who have come forward. How many are there that we DON’T know about?”***

The above comment is from a distraught mother still awaiting justice for the loss of her only child, who was murdered in July 2014, leaving her daughter’s four (4) young children without their loving mother.

In May 2015, when Kirra’s aunt was informed that Police had made the decision to take no further action she wrote:

***“I am writing to express my absolute disgust with the [Retracted] Police following the decision to take***

***no further action in the death of Kirra [Retracted]. We have sat back for eight months to ‘allow the police to do their job’. It is now obvious that they were never interested in the case, and have chosen to totally ignore the history of [ the alleged offender]. He has managed to beat what is obviously a very poor system. I often wonder how some people sleep at night, because it’s something I haven’t been able to do for 8 months. Every time I shut my eyes, I see Kirra’s bruised face and ask how no-one can be held to account.”***

For many years, Kirra’s mother doggedly pursued further police investigation, participated in a Podcast series ‘Beenham Valley Road’ with the episodes running from April 2019 to November 2019. Kirra’s mother then participated in the ABC Australian Story ‘Beenham Valley Road’ in September 2020. Kirra’s mother even publicly called for a Coronial Inquest, which eventually occurred.

During the Coronial Inquest vital evidence was ascertained. As a result of the Coronial Inquest the alleged offender was charged in July 2022 with Kirra’s murder, eight (8) years after she suffered horrific fatal injuries.

During the recent Committal Hearing the Autopsy Report was again produced in evidence. It identified that there were 105 signs of recent injury and that Kirra had died from severe damage to her brain due to lack of oxygen or blood flow due to the head injury. Expert Opinion was given that there was evidence of blows to the back of the head on both sides, as well as bruising on the right and left side of her face and forehead, which implied multiple blows.

Now, ten (10) years on, in late April 2024 the alleged offender has been committed to Trial. Of course there will be further delays. The outcome of a Trial may take a further three (3) years, probably then followed by an Appeal process, if the alleged offender is convicted.

How long should Kirra’s mother wait for justice? How long should any mother, father, family member, loved one wait for justice? This is a story that is sadly repeated over and over.

The above comments places the human touch to what police sadly view as just another Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence case. Many of which sit along side an extensive ‘pile’ of other serious criminal investigation matters sitting on the desk of the overworked Detective.

*continued on page 6*





On the other side of the coin, we hear from Police practitioners, who are frustrated that alleged Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence offenders obtain bail almost before the police have completed their paperwork. Of course, where the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence offender breaches bail and commits further violent offences, including causing death to the original victim, the Police officers themselves question the very judicial system that they are trying to enforce.

Police officers often are also disheartened when these offenders are convicted and the sentences imposed are viewed by them as inadequate, and even when adequate, where the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence prisoner later receives parole or reduced sentence, to then go on to reoffend.

I believe we can all agree with Kirra's mother that:

***"... It is about a system so flawed and broken that it enables creatures of that ilk to freely walk the streets and carry on with their heinous behaviour unfettered".***

The Australasian Institute of Policing (AiPOL) does pride itself on providing factual evidence rather than journalistic exaggeration. We also give praise

when praise is due. Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence is not a new issue and we should not ignore the facts surrounding it and what has been done to reduce such violence in our community.

Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence, as can be seen from the raw comments above, are emotive, extremely sad and totally unacceptable in our society. More needs to be done, however that doesn't mean that there has not been significant commitment and proven successes in the past. Those people that have achieved positive change should not be vilified now because more areas of improvement are needed.

#### **It is a fact that:**

- Experience of partner violence remained relatively stable for both men and women between 2005 through to 2016, however between 2016 and 2022, the proportion of women who experienced partner violence decreased from 1.7% in 2016 to 0.9% in 2022. (ABS 2023c)<sup>1</sup>
- There has been a decrease in the proportion of women who had experienced violence by any intimate partner (also includes current or previous boyfriend, girlfriend and date) between 2016 and 2022, from 2.3% in 2016 to 1.5% in 2022 (ABS 2023c)<sup>2</sup>

- There has been a decrease in sexual harassment of both men and women between 2016 and 2022 from 17% to 13% for women and from 9.3% to 4.5% for men.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2020-21 the rate of domestic homicides was 0.3 per 100,000. The domestic homicide rate has halved since 1989-90, with an overall decrease of 56%.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2022-23 homicide incident rate in Australia of 0.87 per 100,000 was 4% higher than the previous year. However, it still represented a 52% reduction in homicide incidents since the statistical program began in 1989-90.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2022-23, 16% of homicide incidents were intimate partner homicides (IPH) and 89% of these were perpetrated against a female victim aged 18 years or over. The findings of the AIC Homicide in Australia 2022-23 Statistical Report, confirm through state and territory police offence records and coronial records that female IPH increased by 28%, from 0.25 homicides per 100,000 in 2021-22, to 0.32 per 100,000 in 2022-23.<sup>6</sup>
- The rate of women killed by an intimate partner has decreased by 66% over the past 34 years.<sup>7</sup>
- In 2022-23, 90 percent (n=208) of homicide incidents were cleared at the

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey 2021-22

2. IBID

3. IBID

4. Bracknell 2023 Homicide in Australia 2020-21 Australian Institute of Criminology

5. Australian Institute of Criminology Deputy Director Dr Rick Brown- AIC Media Release 30.04.2024



time of reporting. Ninety-five percent of these incidents (n=198), or 85 percent of all homicide incidents recorded in 2022–23, had been cleared by charge. The offender died prior to arrest (excluding legal intervention) in four percent (n=8) of cleared incidents and the homicide incident was cleared by other means (including legal intervention) in one percent (n=2). Data shows 90% of cases have been resolved through the justice system (Police, Prosecutors and the Courts).<sup>8</sup>

- In 2022-23 Only 10 percent of homicide incidents were not "cleared"(meaning cases where an offender has yet to be identified, a suspect has not been charged, or a person is declared missing and police believe it is linked to foul play).<sup>9</sup>
- Ninety-one percent (n=8,460) of homicide incidents between 1989–90 and 2022–23 have been cleared.<sup>10</sup>
- Since their establishment in 2010 and 2016, respectively, the Domestic Violence Death Review (DVDR) Teams annually report to Parliament in NSW and QLD and have made a total of 197 recommendations. This includes 122 recommendations made by the NSW DVDR and 75 recommendations made by the QLD DVDR.<sup>11</sup>

- As of September 2023, the NSW and QLD governments have formally and publicly responded to 187 of the 197 DVDR recommendations made to the two governments. The majority of these recommendations were "accepted" (QLD language) or "supported" (NSW language) (N= 128, 68.4%), or accepted/ supported "in principle" (N= 41, 21.9%). This means that in total, 90.4% of recommendations (N= 169) were initially accepted/supported or accepted/supported in principle by the two governments. A further nine recommendations were partially accepted/supported (N= 9, 4.8%). Therefore, taken together, 95.2% of all DVDR recommendations received whole, in principle or partial acceptance/support by 'those two governments (N= 178).<sup>12</sup>

On 5 May 2024 the Opposition Leader, Peter Dutton, backed calls for a Royal Commission into Domestic Violence. However, the Albanese Government has pushed back on the call for a Royal Commission instead stating that the ***National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*** is the appropriate course of action.

The difficulty with conducting a Federal Royal Commission is that Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence is largely a problem that

needs to be fixed by States/Territories and the mechanisms to do so already exist within those jurisdictions. This is an implementation problem not a recommendation problem. So what is the answer?

The recommendations from the independent study by Buxton-Namisnyk & Gibson (2024) provides a logical alternative to a Royal Commission and provides an excellent practical approach to deliver outcomes, compared to a revised 'national plan' which is largely focused on coordination of policy frameworks across jurisdictions.

The independent study found that despite high levels of initial government acceptance of DVDR recommendations there remains a considerable implementation gap. The researchers considered implementation barriers, have suggested improvements to recommendation monitoring and have identified areas for future research.

**Most importantly the researchers found that, for various reasons, in contrast to the QLD and NSW governments' combined stated position that 37.6% of DVDR recommendations have been implemented, their analysis of implementation materials identified that only 16% of DVDR**

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*continued on page 8*

6. IBID

7. Australian Institute of Criminology National Homicide Monitoring Program

8. Australian Institute of Criminology National Homicide Monitoring Program Report 2023 pg 6

9. IBID

10. IBID

11. Buxton-Namisnyk, E., & Gibson, A. (2024). The contribution of domestic and family violence death reviews in Australia: From recommendations to reform? *Journal of Criminology*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/26338076231223580>

12. IBID



**recommendations have been implemented. Similarly, their analysis revealed that almost a quarter of DVDR recommendations have not been implemented at all (24.9%), which contrasts with the combined stated position of the two governments that only 5% of DVDR recommendations have not been implemented.<sup>13</sup>**

The researchers only examined NSW and QLD, however one can assume that approximately the same gaps in implementation apply across all States, Territories and the Federal Government.

### **The Australasian Institute of Policing recommends:**

**That the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV) Commission<sup>14</sup>, in addition to promoting coordinated and consistent monitoring and evaluation frameworks by all governments, specifically:**

- undertake independent and critical monitoring of all DVDR recommendations made across Australian jurisdictions;
- engages with DVDRs, government agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders to ensure that the implementation of DVDR recommendations are assessed against the outcomes DVDRs anticipate;
- ensures that DVDR recommendations are, in fact, implemented and where they are not implemented, publicly report on the reasons for non implementation; and
- that it report to the National Cabinet at least annually on the status and implementation of DVDR recommendations made across Australian jurisdictions.

### **In conclusion**

It should be noted that Police intervention and action in Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence cases is at the highest level of intervention involving Police, Prosecutors and the Courts and in its nature is largely reactive than proactive. There clearly is downstream resources needed to provide services to address contributing issues such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and individuals experience of trauma, together with the negative 'learnt' experience from historic Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence. An area we will explore further in a future edition of AiPOL.



13. IBID

14. The Commission commenced as an Executive Agency for the purposes of the Public Service Act 1999 (PS Act) on 1 July 2022, and as a listed non-corporate Commonwealth entity on 1 November 2022. The Commissioner commenced in her role on 1 November 2023



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# Family Domestic and Sexual Violence Summary - Australian Institute of Health & Welfare

## What is family, domestic and sexual violence?

Family violence is a term used for violence that occurs within family relationships, such as between parents and children, siblings, intimate partners or kinship relationships. Family relationships can include carers, foster carers and co-residents (for example in group homes or boarding residences).

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Domestic violence is a type of family violence that occurs between current or former intimate partners (sometimes referred to as intimate partner violence).

Both family violence and domestic violence include a range of behaviour types such as:

- physical violence (for example, hitting, choking, or burning)
- sexual violence (for example, rape, penetration by objects, unwanted touching)
- emotional abuse, also known as psychological abuse (for example, intimidating, humiliating).

Coercive control is often a significant part of a person's experience of family and domestic violence. It is commonly used to describe a pattern of controlling behaviour, used by a perpetrator to establish and maintain control over another person.

Sexual violence can take many forms, including sexual assault, sexual threat, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, and image-based abuse (NASASV 2021). However, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey (PSS) uses a narrower definition of sexual violence, including only sexual assault and sexual threat, with sexual harassment and experiences of abuse in childhood reported separately (ABS 2023b).

Other forms of violence that can occur within the context of family and domestic violence include: stalking and elder abuse, with the latter occurring where there is an expectation of trust and/or where there is a power imbalance (Kaspiew et al. 2019).

### How common is family, domestic and sexual violence?

The ABS PSS provides an estimate of the number of Australians who have been victims of family, domestic and sexual violence. While every experience of family, domestic or sexual violence is very personal and different, it is most common for this type of violence to be perpetrated against women, by men. There is currently no national data on the proportion of Australians who have perpetrated family, domestic and sexual violence.

The most recent PSS was conducted between March 2021 and May 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic (ABS 2023b). Because of some changes to the survey methodology in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some 2021–22 data are only available for women, including some time series.

## According to the 2021–22 PSS:



**1 IN 6**  
WOMEN



**1 IN 18**  
MEN



**1 IN 5**  
WOMEN



**1 IN 16**  
MEN

In 2021–22 had experienced **physical and/or sexual violence** by a current or previous cohabiting partner since the age of 15

2021–22 had experienced sexual violence since the age of 15



**1 IN 6**  
WOMEN



**1 IN 13**  
MEN



**1 IN 4**  
WOMEN



**1 IN 7**  
MEN

In 2021–22 had experienced **economic abuse** by a current or previous cohabiting partner since the age of 15

In 2021–22 had experienced **emotional abuse** by a current or previous cohabiting partner since the age of 15

### Physical and/or sexual family and domestic violence

Results from the 2021–22 PSS show that an estimated 3.8 million Australian adults (20% of the population) reported experiencing physical and/or sexual family and domestic violence since the age of 15. It is estimated that of all Australian adults:

- 11.3% (2.2 million) had experienced violence from a partner (current or previous cohabiting)
- 5.9% (1.1 million) had experienced violence from a boyfriend, girlfriend or date
- 7.0% (1.4 million) had experienced violence from another family member (ABS 2023c).

Experiences of partner violence in the 12 months before the survey (last 12 months) remained relatively stable for both men and women between 2005 and 2016. However, between 2016 and 2021–22 the proportion of women who experienced partner violence decreased from 1.7% in 2016 to 0.9% in 2021–22. There was also a decrease in the proportion of women who had experienced violence by any intimate partner (also includes current or previous boyfriend, girlfriend and date) between 2016 and 2021–22, from 2.3% in 2016 to 1.5% in 2021–22 (ABS 2023c).

### Partner emotional abuse and economic abuse

According to the 2021–22 PSS, an estimated 3.6 million Australian adults (19% of population) had experienced emotional abuse at least once by a partner since the age of 15. The proportion of women (23% or 2.3 million) who had experienced emotional abuse was higher than men (14% or 1.3 million). Estimates of partner emotional abuse in the 12 months before the survey have changed over time:

- the proportion of women who experienced partner emotional abuse was stable between 2012 and 2016, but decreased from 4.8% in 2016 to 3.9% in 2021–22
- the proportion of men who experienced partner emotional abuse increased from 2.8% in 2012 to 4.2% in 2016 before decreasing to 2.5% in 2021–22 (ABS 2023c).

It was also estimated that 2.4 million Australian adults (12% of the population) had experienced economic abuse by a partner since the age of 15, with the proportion of women (16%) who had experienced this type of abuse around double the proportion of men (7.8%) (ABS 2023c).

### Sexual violence

The 2021–22 PSS estimated 2.8 million Australians (14% of the population) experienced sexual violence (occurrence, attempt and/or threat of sexual assault) since the age of 15. It is estimated that of all Australian adults:

- 13% (2.5 million) had experienced sexual violence by a male
- 1.8% (353,000) had experienced sexual violence by a female (ABS 2023c).
- Of all women: 11% (1.1 million) experienced at least one incident of sexual violence by a male intimate partner since the age of 15
- 2.1% (203,000) experienced at least one incident of sexual violence by a male family member since the age of 15
- 11% (1.1 million) experienced at least one incident of sexual violence by another known male since the age of 15
- 6.1% (605,000) experienced at least one incident of sexual violence by a male stranger since the age of 15 (ABS 2023c).

In the 12 months before the 2021–22 PSS, it is estimated that 1.9% of women experienced sexual violence. This does not represent a change from 2016 (ABS 2023c).

*continued on page 12*



**Table 1: Intimate partner violence<sup>(a)</sup> experienced by women in Australia during the first 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic**

	Physical violence	Sexual violence	Emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours
Overall prevalence of intimate partner violence <sup>(b)</sup>	9.6%	7.6%	32%
Experienced intimate partner violence for the first time <sup>(b)</sup>	3.4%	3.2%	18%
Reported that intimate partner violence had increased in frequency or severity <sup>(b, c)</sup>	42%	43%	40%

- (a) Violence from a person the respondent had a relationship with during the previous 12 months. This includes current and former partners, cohabiting, or non-cohabiting.  
(b) Of women aged 18 years and older who had been in a relationship longer than 12 months.  
(c) Of women who had a history of violence from their current or most recent partner.

**Source: Boxall and Morgan 2021.**

Based on the 2021–22 PSS, around 1 in 8 (13% or 1.3 million) women and 1 in 22 (4.5% or 427,000) men had experienced sexual harassment (see Glossary) in the last 12 months. This represents a decrease from 2016 for both women (previously 17%) and men (previously 9.3%) (ABS 2023c).

### Other forms of violence and abuse

Violence exists on a spectrum of behaviours. The same social and cultural attitudes underpinning family, domestic and sexual violence are at the root of other behaviours such as stalking. Technology can facilitate abuse and has become an important consideration in these types of violence.

Stalking is classified as unwanted behaviours (such as following or watching in person or electronically) that occur more than once and cause fear or distress and is considered a crime in every state and territory of Australia (ABS 2023b). Based on the 2021–22 PSS, 1 in 5 (20% or 2.0 million) women and around 1 in 15 (6.8% or 653,000) men had experienced stalking since the age of 15 (ABS 2023c).

Preliminary findings from the 2022 Australian eSafety Commissioner's adult online safety survey of around 4,700 Australians aged 18–65 years, indicate that:

- 75% of those surveyed had a negative online experience in the 12 months prior to the survey, an increase from 58% in 2019
- 18% of those surveyed said their location had been tracked electronically without consent, an increase from 11% in 2019

- 16% of those surveyed said they received online threats of real-life harm or abuse, an increase from 9% (Office of the eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Due to the opt-in nature of the survey, these results may not be generalisable to the broader Australian adult population.

### Family, domestic and sexual violence during the COVID-19 pandemic

The impacts of a pandemic can be wide-ranging with people experiencing different circumstances depending on their situation. Situational stressors, such as victims and perpetrators spending more time together, or increased financial or economic hardship, can be associated with increased severity or frequency of violence (Payne et al. 2020). It is also possible that increased protective factors, such as access to income support, time away from a perpetrator, or increased social cohesion, could suppress violence (Diemer 2023). Pandemics can also affect help-seeking and individual responses to violence, meaning support services have to adapt their delivery to new circumstances.

We continue to learn about the impact of the emergency phase of the COVID-19 pandemic on family, domestic and sexual violence, with some different patterns observed between research, drawing on a variety of data sources and methods, and national population prevalence data (Diemer 2023).

Results from the PSS showed that between 2016 and 2021–22 there was a decrease in the number of women

experiencing physical and/or sexual partner violence in the 12 months before the survey, and a decrease in women and men experiencing partner emotional abuse. The rate of sexual violence for women remained stable.

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) conducted an online survey of women's experiences of violence during the first 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. While not comparable with the PSS, the survey of more than 10,000 women found that the pandemic coincided with first-time and escalating intimate partner violence for some women (Table 1). However, given this is a cross-sectional survey, a causal relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and women's experiences of intimate partner violence cannot be established (Boxall and Morgan 2021).

### What influences family, domestic and sexual violence?

Social attitudes and norms shape the context in which violence occurs. The National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) shows that in Australia, between 2009 and 2021, there was a positive shift in attitudes that reject gender inequality and violence against women. There was also an improvement in understanding of violence against women.

The NCAS indicated that in 2021 Australians, on average, had:

- higher understanding of violence against women compared to previous survey years (2009, 2013 and 2017)

- higher rejection of attitudes supportive of gender inequality compared to previous survey years
- improved attitudes towards sexual violence compared to 2017
- improved attitudes towards domestic violence compared to 2009 and 2013 (Coumarelos et al 2023).

While results were generally encouraging, some findings were concerning and highlight areas for improvement, select findings are summarised below.

### Attitudes towards violence against women and gender inequality

Of all NCAS respondents in 2021:

- 25% believed that women who do not leave their abusive partners are partly responsible for violence continuing
- 34% agreed it was common for sexual assault accusations to be used as a way of getting back at men
- 23% believed domestic violence is a normal reaction to day-to-day stress
- 19% agreed that sometimes a woman can make a man so angry he hits her without meaning to
- 15% agreed that there is no harm in sexist jokes
- 41% agreed that many women misinterpret innocent remarks as sexist (Coumarelos et al. 2023).

### Understanding of violence against women

Of all NCAS respondents in 2021:

- 31% did not know that women are more likely to be raped by a known person than a stranger
- 41% did not know where to access help for a domestic violence issue
- 43% did not recognise that men are the most common perpetrators of domestic violence
- 24% did not recognise that women are more likely than men to suffer physical harm from domestic violence (Coumarelos et al. 2023).

### Who is at risk of family, domestic and sexual violence?

Family, domestic and sexual violence occurs across all ages and demographics. However, some groups are at greater risk than others and/or may experience impacts and outcomes of violence that are more serious or long-lasting.



### Children

Children are at greater risk of family, domestic and sexual violence.

According to the 2021–22 PSS, about 1 in 8 (13% or 2.6 million) people, aged 18 years and over, witnessed violence towards a parent by a partner before the age of 15. A higher proportion of people had witnessed partner violence against their mothers (12%, or 2.2 million) than their fathers (4.3%, or 837,000) (ABS 2023a).

The PSS also collects some information from adults about the nature and extent of violence experienced before and since the age of 15. The 2021 Australian Child Maltreatment Study surveyed people aged 16 years and over about experiences of maltreatment as a child. Of people surveyed, around:

- 3 in 10 (29%) had experienced sexual abuse by any person
- 3 in 10 (31%) had experienced emotional abuse by a parent or caregiver
- 1 in 11 (8.9%) had experienced neglect by a parent or caregiver
- 2 in 5 (40%) had experienced exposure to domestic violence (Haslam et al. 2023).

### Child protection services

In Australia, state and territory governments are responsible for providing child protection services to anyone aged under 18 who has been, or is at risk of being, abused, neglected or otherwise harmed, or whose parents are unable to provide adequate care and protection. In 2021–22:

- Almost 178,000 Australian children (31 per 1,000) came into contact with the child protection system.
- Infants aged under one were most likely (38 per 1,000) to come into contact with the child protection system and adolescents aged 15–17 were the least likely (26 per 1,000).
- Emotional abuse, including exposure to family violence, was the most common primary type of abuse identified for children with substantiated cases (substantiations) (57% or 25,900 children). Neglect (21% or 9,400 children) was the next most common primary type of abuse substantiated, followed by physical abuse (13% or 6,100 children) and sexual abuse (9% or 4,000 children).
- Similar proportions of girls and boys were the subjects of substantiations for physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. However, girls (12%) were more likely to be the subjects of substantiations for sexual abuse than boys (5%) (AIHW 2023a).

The rate of children who were the subject of notifications has increased from 44 per 1,000 in 2017–18 to 49 per 1,000 in 2021–22. However, the rate of children who were the subject of substantiations remained fairly stable in the 5 years to 30 June 2022.

Data on child protection services during the first 7 months after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (March to September 2020) can be found in Child protection in the time of COVID-19.

*continued on page 14*

**Table 2: Proportion of men and women who experienced violence or abuse from a partner since the age of 15, by type of violence or abuse, 2021–22**

	Women (%)	Men (%)
Physical and/or sexual violence from a partner	16.9	5.5
Physical violence from a partner	14.9	5.3
Sexual violence from a partner	6.2	n.p.
Emotional abuse from a partner	22.9	13.8
Economic abuse from a partner	16.3	7.8
<b>n.p. not published</b> <b>Note:</b> Where a person has experienced both physical and sexual violence by a cohabiting partner, they are counted separately for each type of violence they experienced but are counted only once in the aggregated total.		<b>Source: ABS 2023c.</b>

## Women

More women than men experience family, domestic and sexual violence. Table 2 shows the proportion of people aged 18 and over who experienced violence from a partner since the age of 15.

Women's exposure to violence differs across the age groups. The 2021–22 PSS found that the prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence by a cohabiting partner (partner violence) among women declined with age. One in 39 (2.6%) women aged 18–34 experienced partner violence in the 2 years before the survey, compared with 2.2% for those aged 35–54 and 0.6% for those aged 55 and over (ABS 2023a).

The prevalence of sexual violence by any perpetrator among women also decreased with age. One in 8 (12%) women aged 18–24 experienced sexual violence in the 2 years before the survey, compared with 4.5% of those aged 25–34, 2.5% of those aged 35–44, 1.9%\* for those aged 45–54 and 0.5%\* of those aged 55 and over (ABS 2023e).

Note that estimates marked with an asterisk (\*) should be used with caution as they have a relative standard error between 25% and 50%.

## Other at-risk groups

Other social and cultural factors can also increase the risk of experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence. In some cases, these factors may overlap or combine to create an even greater risk. Additional factors that can increase the risk of violence include remoteness and socioeconomic area of residence, disability, sexual orientation,



**2 IN 5**  
WOMEN



**2 IN 5**  
MEN

**In 2021–22 who had experienced previous partner violence since the age of 15 did not seek advice or support.**

gender identity and cultural influences. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) women are particularly at risk and have much higher rates of hospitalisation because of family violence.

## What services or support do those who have experienced family, domestic and sexual violence use?

Responses to family, domestic and sexual violence are provided informally in the community and formally through justice systems, and treatment and support services.

The 2021–22 PSS found that there were differences in propensity to seek help, advice or support following partner violence depending on partner status and victim sex:

- 1 in 2 (45%, or 78,100) women who had experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a current partner did not seek advice or support about the violence.
- 2 in 5 women (37% or 574,000) and 2 in 5 men (39% or 166,000) who had experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a previous partner did not seek advice or support about the violence (ABS 2023a).

Data for men about seeking advice or support about current partner violence are not available (ABS 2023a).

The 2021–22 PSS collected detailed data from women about the most recent incident of sexual assault by a male that occurred in the last 10 years. Of the estimated 737,000 women who had experienced sexual assault by a male in the last 10 years:

- more than 2 in 5 (44% or 324,000) did not seek advice or support after the most recent incident
- 92% (680,000) said the police were not contacted (ABS 2023e).

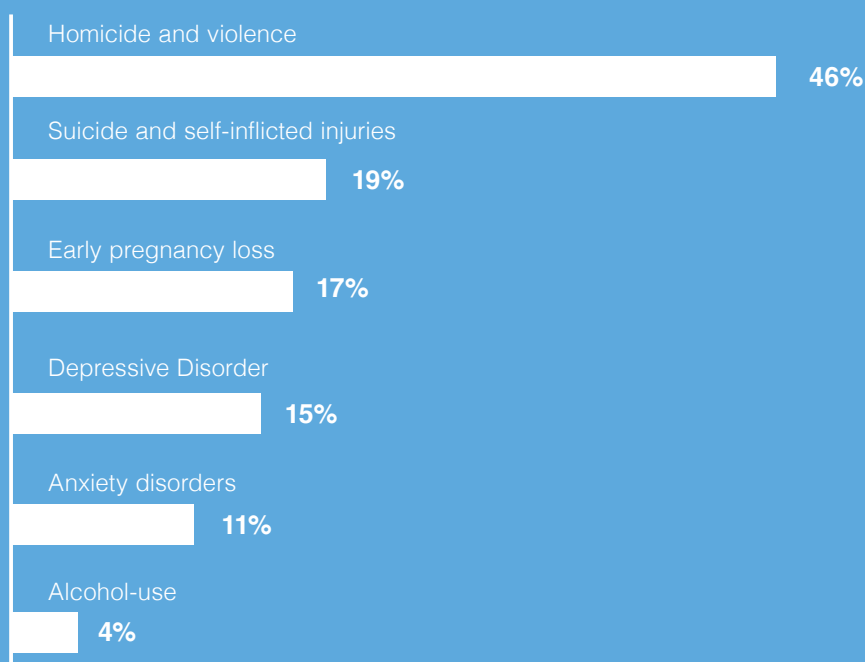
## Police responses

When an incident of violence is reported to police by a victim, witness or other person, it can be recorded as a crime. The ABS collects data on selected family, domestic and sexual violence crimes recorded by police. In 2022:

- More than 1 in 2 (53% or 76,900) recorded assaults were related to family and domestic violence (excluding Victoria and Queensland), a 6.1% increase from 72,500 in 2021.
- One in 3 (33% or 71) recorded murders were related to family and domestic violence (ABS 2023d).



**Figure 1: Total burden attributable to intimate partner violence, 2018**



**Note:** Burden estimated in females only.

**Source:** AIHW 2021a.

Since 2011, the number of sexual assault victims recorded by police has increased each year. It is unclear whether this change reflects an increased incidence of sexual assault, an increased propensity to report sexual assault to police, increased reporting of historical crimes, or a combination of these factors. Of all 2022 police-recorded sexual assaults, 69% were reported to police within one year (ABS 2023d).

#### Homelessness services

People accessing specialist homelessness services (SHS) may need support due to family and domestic violence. Data cannot currently distinguish between victims and perpetrators of violence.

In 2022–23, SHS agencies assisted around 104,000 clients (38% of all SHS clients) who had experienced domestic and family violence.

Of these clients:

- 3 in 4 (75% or 78,200) were female; and of the 20,500 clients aged 25–34, more than 9 in 10 (91% or 18,700) were female (AIHW 2023b)
- about 1 in 13 (7.7% or 8,100 clients) were living with disability (AIHW 2023c).

Of clients aged 10 and over who had experienced domestic and family violence:

- about 4 in 10 (42% or 34,200) also had a current mental health issue
- over 1 in 8 (12% or 9,400) had problematic drug and/or alcohol use (AIHW 2023b).

#### Hospitalisations

Hospitals provide health services for individuals who have experienced family, domestic and sexual violence.

The family and domestic violence assault hospitalisations presented here are those where the perpetrator is coded as a family member (Spouse or domestic partner, Parent, or Other family member) in the hospital record. As information on cause of injury (such as assault) is not available in national emergency department data, family and domestic violence assault hospitalisations do not include presentations to emergency departments and underestimate overall hospital activity related to family and domestic violence. These hospitalisations also relate to more severe (and mostly physical) experiences of family and domestic violence.

In 2021–22, 3 in 10 (32% or 6,500) assault hospitalisations were due to family and domestic violence

Of all family and domestic assault hospitalisations in 2021–22:

- 73% (4,700) were for females and 27% (1,700) were for males
- 63% (4,100) had the perpetrator reported as a spouse or domestic partner
- 37% (2,400) had the perpetrator reported as a parent or other family member.

#### 1800RESPECT

1800RESPECT is Australia's national telephone and online counselling and support service for people affected by family, domestic and sexual violence, their family and friends and frontline workers. In 2020–21, 1800RESPECT responded to 286,546 telephone and online contacts. (These numbers include every contact to the service including disconnections, pranks and wrong numbers).

#### What are the consequences of family, domestic and sexual violence?

##### Burden of disease

Burden of disease refers to the quantified impact of living with and dying prematurely from a disease or injury.

The Australian Burden of Disease Study 2018 estimated the impact of various diseases, injuries and risk factors on total burden of disease for the Australian population. For females aged 15–44, intimate partner violence was ranked as the fourth leading risk factor for total disease burden, and child abuse and neglect was the leading risk factor. Child abuse and neglect was ranked third for males in the same age group (AIHW 2021a).

In 2018, intimate partner violence contributed to:

- 228 deaths (0.3% of all deaths among females) in Australia
- 1.4% of the total burden of disease and injury among Australian females.

Figure 1 shows the estimated total burden attributable to intimate partner violence for females in 2018 by disease/health problem/injury. For example, it shows that almost half (46%) of all homicide and violence burden amongst females was attributable to intimate partner violence.

*continued on page 16*



In 2018, child abuse and neglect contributed to:

- 813 deaths (0.5% of all deaths) in Australia
- 2.2% of the total burden of disease and injury.

Figure 2 shows the estimated total burden attributable to child abuse and neglect in 2018 by disease/health problem/injury.

#### Long-term health impacts

Findings from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health demonstrated that women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse were more likely to have poor general health and to experience depression and bodily pain, compared with those who had not experienced sexual abuse during childhood (Coles et al. 2018). Women who had experienced childhood sexual or emotional or physical abuse had higher long-term primary, allied, and specialist health care costs in adulthood, compared with women who had not had these experiences during childhood (Loxton et al. 2018).

#### Deaths

Between 1 July 2020 and 30 June 2021, the AIC's National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) recorded 78 domestic homicide victims from 76 domestic homicide incidents (see Glossary). Data from the NHMP are from police and coronial records (Bricknell 2023).

Of all domestic homicide victims, 58% (45) were female. Of all female

victims of domestic homicide, 56% (25) were killed by an intimate partner. For male victims of domestic homicide, 39% (13) were killed by an intimate partner (Bricknell 2023).

In 2020–21, the rate of domestic homicides was 0.3 per 100,000. The domestic homicide rate has halved since 1989–90, with an overall decrease of 56 per cent (Bricknell 2023).

A report, Examination of hospital stays due to family and domestic violence 2010–11 to 2018–19, found that people who had a family and domestic violence hospitalisation were 10 times as likely to die due to assault, 3 times as likely to die due to accidental poisoning or liver disease, and 2 times as likely to die due to suicide, as a comparison group (AIHW 2021b).

**Figure 2: Total burden attributable to child abuse and neglect, 2018**

Anxiety disorders

27%

Suicide and self-inflicted injuries

26%

Depressive disorders

20%

**Source:** AIHW 2021a.

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# We're all feeling the collective grief and trauma of violence against women – but this is the progress we have made so far

It has been a particularly distressing start to the year.

April 26, 2024

**ASHER FLYNN, ANASTASIA POWELL**

theconversation.com

There is little that can ease the current grief of individuals, families and communities who have needlessly lost a loved one to men's violence in recent weeks.

A spate of cases involving women dying, allegedly at the hands of men, in the Ballarat region. The shocking case of Molly Ticehurst, allegedly murdered by her ex-boyfriend in central west New South Wales. The fact so many of the victims of the violence at Bondi Junction were women.

It is clear there is a collective grief across our nation. The headlines express our shared hurt and disbelief that women continue to lose their lives to men's violence against them. This weekend, a National Rally Against Violence will urge governments to take more assertive action to end gender-based violence in our communities.

So what's being done – and are we making any progress?

## What is being done?

At this time, it is appropriate we seek to ease our individual and collective grief.

It is a time for expressing our respect for the women who have lost their lives, and for renewing our commitments that we will not stand by and do nothing while women continue to be harmed.

We have not been standing in silence.

Australians have been – and will continue – taking action to end gender-based violence.

Every Australian government has committed to policy action to address violence against women. The second National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022 to 2032), is building on the progress made over the past ten years.

This plan emphasises prevention and early intervention, as well as improving support for victim-survivors and justice responses. There is also a focus on recovery and healing.

For the first time, there is a specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan to address violence against women and children in First Nations communities.

The Commonwealth government has also committed to centring Aboriginal women's leadership in the development of a standalone National Plan for First Nations women.

Across our communities, workplaces are implementing new policies and programs to prevent sexual harassment and to promote equity and respect at work.

The media, too, are reporting with greater sensitivity and respect for victim-survivors of violence.

Universities are embarking on a program of policy, services and cultural change to address sexual violence and harassment.

More and more schools are delivering on respectful relationships education with children and young people.

From sports clubs to faith communities, to licensed venues and public spaces, there is a heightened awareness of family and sexual violence, and the role we all have to play in responding to and preventing it.

Our national data is telling us that these shared efforts are starting to show impact in our communities. Of course, zero preventable deaths should be our goal.

But the data from the Australian Institute of Criminology's National Homicide Monitoring Program does show a continuing decline in rates of intimate partner homicide, in particular.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey, the most accurate measure of self-reported experiences of all forms of personal violence in Australia, also shows some promising trends. It shows the 12-month rate of family violence may have reduced in some states, while remaining the same in others.

## What more needs to be done?

There is so much policy and program work that Australia has committed to – but much is still in its infancy of implementation.

Police and justice systems in several states have been reviewing policies and practices that have too often failed to protect women's lives.

Accountability of men who choose to use violence is critical – but there is also

*continued on page 20*



a need for more work with men who want to change their behaviour, and for early intervention programs to prevent men's violence from escalating.

We also urgently need funding for recovery and healing services for victim-survivors.

It is unacceptable that many of those experiencing lasting trauma and other impacts of family and sexual violence face a lack of affordable, accessible, trauma-informed support beyond a situation of dangerous crisis.

It has been less than ten years since we have had a national framework to guide evidence-based strategies to prevent the violence before it occurs. Addressing the underlying drivers of gender-based violence goes hand-in-hand with our response efforts, if we want to see lasting change.

### Impact on survivors

The recent headlines on gender-based violence have also undoubtedly affected remaining victim-survivors.

For some, hearing about these recent cases may add to existing trauma. It can prompt an unnerving sense of unsafety; a feeling of endless risk that too often women are left to navigate largely on their own.

Others may feel the time is right to disclose their own experience of violence to a friend or family member, or contact a helpline like 1800 RESPECT.

If you find yourself responding to a disclosure of violence, remember your initial response can have a lasting impact.

Now, more than ever, she will need to be listened to without blame or judgement. She will need to be believed, and she may need some support to connect with specialist support services.

Many men too, will no doubt be reflecting on what needs to be done to end this violence. There is a particularly important role for non-violent men to play in speaking out against gender-based violence and helping break these patterns.

We must not lose heart, but rather accelerate the progress we have begun to make.

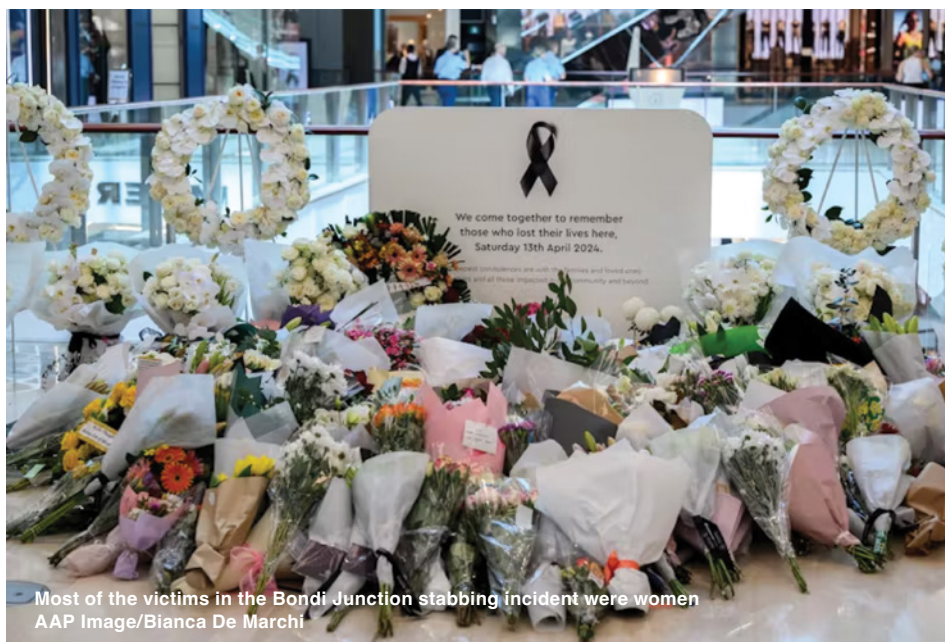
We must continue to take action if we are to fulfil our shared commitment to an Australia where women – and indeed, all of us – live free from all forms of violence.



AAP Image/Con Chronis



Australians have been – and will continue – taking action. AAP Image/Con Chronis



Most of the victims in the Bondi Junction stabbing incident were women  
AAP Image/Bianca De Marchi



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# New homicide statistics show surge in intimate partner killings – and huge disparity in First Nations victims

The rate of women killed by their partners in Australia grew by 28% from 2021–22 to 2022–23, according to new statistics released today by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC).

April 29, 2024

**RICK SARRE**

Author, theconversation.com



A rally to a call for action to end violence against women in Canberra on April 28. Lukas Coch/AAP

There were 34 women killed in intimate partner incidents in the financial year 2022–23, which is the equivalent of 0.32 per 100,000 people. The year before, the rate was 0.25 such homicides per 100,000.

Historically, the rate of women killed by their partners has been on the decline since the late 1980s and early 1990s. It has decreased by 66% over the past 34 years, according to the AIC.

However, the uptick in the homicide rate last year – coupled with the sharp rise in women killed in the first four months of 2024 – are cause for mounting concern for all Australians.

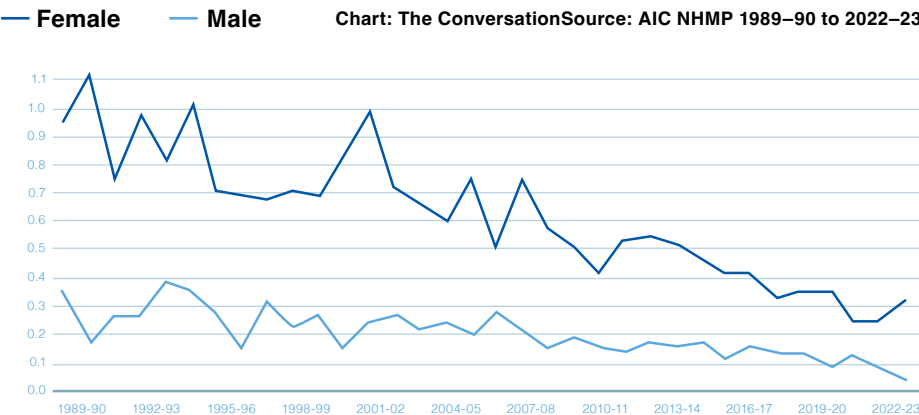
## Historically low overall homicide rate

The AIC released two reports on statistics emerging from its National Homicide Monitoring Program, a database that has been in operation since July 1989.

The institute reports 232 overall homicide incidents were recorded by

## Rates of intimate partner homicide by victim sex

Based on rate per 100,000 population aged 18 years and over, 1989–90 to 2022–23



Australian state and territory police between July 1 2022 and June 30 2023, which resulted in 247 homicide victims.

The Australian homicide rate (0.87 deaths per year per 100,000 population) remains historically low. There has been a 52% reduction in homicide incidents

since 1989–90, indicative of a long-term downward trend in unlawful killings.

The report reveals police, prosecutors and courts are doing a good job, with 90% of cases being resolved through the

*continued on page 24*



Rates of intimate partner homicide by victim sex

Indigenous			Non-indigenous		Total
	Number	Rate Per 100k	Number	Rate Per 100k	Number
Male	35	7.65	133	1.04	168
Female	14	3.07	58	0.45	72
Total	49	5.36	191	0.74	240

Excludes three male and three female victims whose Indigenous status was not stated or unknown and one victim whose sex and Indigenous status was not stated or unknown. Data presented refer to an individual's sex (ie sex characteristics) rather than gender (ie 'social and cultural identity, expression and experience'; ABS 2021). This reflects the definitions in the data provided by the source organisations and from the NCIS

**The Conversation  
Source: AIC NHMP  
2022–23**

justice system. That is, only 10% of homicide incidents in 2022–23 were not “cleared,” meaning cases where an offender has yet to be identified, a suspect has not yet been charged, or a person is declared missing and police believe it’s linked to foul play.

A closer look at the figures

There are important features of the latest data that require further examination.

First, there is a significant gender disparity: in 2022-23, 87% of homicide offenders were male, while 69% of homicide victims were male. Predominantly, men are killing men.

And while men were most likely to be killed by a friend, acquaintance or some other person who was not a family member, women were more likely to be killed by a former or current partner (49% of all victims).

There is also a massive First Nations disparity in terms of victims and offenders.

Forty-nine of the homicide victims in Australia identified as First Nations (35 men and 14 women) – that is, 20% of victims.

The homicide victimisation rate of Indigenous men was more than seven times higher than non-Indigenous men at 7.65 per 100,000 people, compared to just 1.04 per 100,000. The disparity does not change with gender. The homicide rate was 3.07 per 100,000 for Indigenous women, compared with 0.45 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous women.

Of the 260 homicide offenders in 2022–23, 28% identified as First Nations.

These statistics merit repeating.

First Nations people (3.8% of the population) comprised 20% of victims and 28% of perpetrators in homicide cases. That is an unacceptable state of affairs, which should be causing policymakers enormous concern.

Also noteworthy was that the recent rise in the homicide rate is mirrored in the domestic and family violence data found in police reports.

The number of people reporting sexual assaults has continued to increase over the past five years. According to the 2024 report of the Productivity Commission, the rate of victimisation in sexual crimes in 2022 was 124 per 100,000 population. In 2016, the rate was 95 per 100,000.

**Why statistics require the right interpretation**

From a criminologist’s perspective, there are a few things to bear in mind when considering these statistics.

The first is that interpretations of official crime data always require caution. There are various reasons for this:

- much (if not most) crime is not reported to police or discovered by police
- there are biases in the criminal justice system (especially when it comes to police discretion)
- definitions of crime and counting rules and methods will differ according to jurisdiction
- the data are usually generalised across state and territory jurisdictions, rather than presented as pertaining to specific cities, towns and regions.

Moreover, long-term trends are often ignored in the rush to analyse short-term crime rate fluctuations.

Having said that, homicide figures are usually the most accurate when tracking crime trends, given the obvious nature of the crime. So, making policy based on these data should be easier, one would think.

But this is not always the case.

We need to bear in mind the impact of the institutional responses we are likely to offer when interpreting the data.

For example, how do we reduce or eliminate the seemingly unrelenting number of murders perpetrated by men against their intimate partners? How do we reduce or eliminate the massive disparity of violence affecting some Indigenous communities? One might think the best response is to arrest more people and lock more people up for longer.

Such an approach should, however, be a last resort. We need to recognise that every dollar spent in criminal justice services is a dollar that’s not spent on women’s shelters, education programs for young men on the importance of respect for women, and programs to improve the living standards and educational and employment opportunities for those who identify as First Nations. That’s where our dollars ought to be spent.

A decade ago, the American criminologist Elliott Currie talked about the importance of allocating resources designed to bring about what he referred to as “transformative intervention.” This involves:

Helping people to move beyond the individualistic, often exploitative, often uncaring cultural orientations [...] and to begin to relate differently to themselves, to those around them, and to the larger community (and the planet): to nurture alternative ways of looking at the world and their place in it that [...] will be less violent, less predatory and less exploitative.

Such a transformation is something we need to take into account here in Australia as a matter of priority.



# Your Vision, My Creation.

\* Graphic Designer based in Melbourne.



## A Special Tribute

On behalf of everyone in the South West and across Australia.

Thank you for your tireless efforts in protecting, defending and supporting our valued way of life.

**NOLA MARINO MP**  
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR FORREST



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## TO OUR POLICE OFFICERS & THEIR FAMILIES

Thank you for your  
hard work, sacrifice and  
dedication to the community

**Edmond Atalla MP**  
MEMBER FOR MOUNT DRUITT



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and dedication to the  
community"



**MARK DREYFUS MP**  
Federal Member for Isaacs  
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# National Cabinet has committed to a range of strategies to stop violence against women, but has it done enough?

Violence against women is not a women's problem to solve, it is a whole of society problem to solve; and men in particular have to take responsibility.

May 1, 2024

## ANASTASIA POWELL

Author, theconversation.com

Those were the words of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese as he reported on the outcomes of today's National Cabinet meeting on gender-based violence.

This is a crucial moment.

It's not the first time Australian government leaders and senior officials have met to discuss strategies to address violence against women. But it's the first time the National Cabinet has met specifically to commit to greater action. Seen in recent protest marches across the country, there's a lot of public demand for rapid change.

Out of today's meeting there is a renewed commitment for "national unity", across all governments, towards the shared mission to end gender-based violence.

We know why this mission continues to be urgent.

At least 28 women have died, allegedly at the hands of men's violence, so far this year. And many more women are living with the harms of men's violence all across the country.

One in four women have experienced violence by an intimate partner or family member since the age of 15. One in five women have experienced sexual violence and one in five women have experienced stalking. While we seem to be making progress in reducing 12 month prevalence rates of intimate partner violence, our Personal Safety Survey also indicates the rates of sexual violence and stalking have not been changing. It's clear we need more action.

### What came out of National Cabinet?

The biggest announcement from today's meeting is a new federal government investment of A\$925 million over five years to permanently establish the Leaving Violence Program. This is to be included in the upcoming budget and builds on the existing pilot scheme. The scheme delivers up to \$5,000 in crisis support for women leaving violent relationships, as well as risk assessments and access to support services.

There was also a big focus on online measures to combat online harms and to reduce the exposure of children and young people to violent and misogynistic content. This included commitments to new laws banning sexualised "deepfake" images, as well as a review of classifications to reduce exposure to violent sexualised content. And \$6.5 million will be committed to pilot age assurance technologies to restrict children's exposure to inappropriate content, including violent pornographic material.

The government will also bring forward a review of the Online Safety Act and fast-track already proposed anti-doxing laws. The aim of these steps is to protect victims from online harms, including the non-consensual disclosure of their personal information.

The prime minister also highlighted several existing federal government commitments. These included the funding commitments to women's homelessness and housing services

and funding increases for the eSafety Commissioner. Also mentioned was the next phase of the national Stop It At the Start campaign, which is due to be released mid-year and will focus on how to have preventative conversations with young people around their attitudes and behaviours.

Importantly, there is an agreement for National Cabinet to meet again on violence against women next quarter and to report back on progress made and crucial next steps. The states and territories also agreed to collaborate and share their own best-practice evidence and initiatives.

### What further changes might be on the horizon?

To end gender-based violence we need to do everything we can. We need a range of short, medium and long-term actions. The outcomes of the National Cabinet meeting today indicated some further areas earmarked for ongoing discussion.

There were suggestions of the need for greater harmonisation of laws between states and territories. This is vital if we are to ensure women have equal protections and justice mechanisms in place no matter where in Australia they live. What was not mentioned, however, was the need for adequate resourcing of specialist police, legal and court services to support access to justice for victims of family and sexual violence.

There was also mention of improved information sharing between states





and territories to promote greater accountability for repeat violent perpetrators. This is not a straightforward area, but there are good examples of coordinated system responses that show when and how the sharing of information might be vital for women's safety.

Workforce issues were also referred to, with an urging for a more rapid rollout of the federal government's existing commitment of 500 extra domestic and family violence support workers. If you speak with these support services, it is clear they are under high demand from victim-survivors. There are often unacceptable wait lists. The extra workers are much needed, but it will also take accessible and affordable training to extend this specialist workforce.

Albanese also highlighted both the effectiveness of respectful relationships education in schools and the need for a national approach to respectful relationships education across the country. To date, both Victoria and Queensland have led the way in this work but certainly we need to scale-up our prevention efforts with young people if we want to end gender-based violence for the next generation.

### Delivering on the National Plan

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022 to 2032) and its first action plans already identify a shared roadmap across prevention, early intervention, response,

and recovery. Each of these four priority areas are crucial to a holistic strategy to end gender-based violence.

And for the first time, we have a stand-alone Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander action plan with an already-announced federal government commitment for a National Plan for First Nations women. This is especially vital in light of the over-representation of First Nations women experiencing violence.

Delivering on these strategies must continue to be a priority. The National Plan has been developed over many years of research evidence, consultation, as well as both sector and lived-experience expertise. And it is arguably world-leading in its comprehensive approach.

But as Micaela Cronin, Australia's first Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner, remarked today:

***No plan in such a complex area can be a "set and forget plan".***

It's vital we draw on evidence-based approaches and best practice as we continue to refine our actions to address and prevent gender-based violence. This includes addressing

the gender inequality and intersecting inequalities that drive violence against women. And also directly addressing the reinforcing factors that can contribute to violence and its escalation, such as prior experiences of violence, drug and alcohol misuse, problem gambling and poverty.

There is also a pressing need for governments to continue to work collaboratively to coordinate action and adequate investment across all levels of government. This is not the time to play politics between parties.

No Australian government has yet solved this problem. Every Australian government can and should do more to advance women's safety.

Perhaps the most important outcome from today's National Cabinet meeting is not just a renewed national commitment on action to end gender-based violence, but an Australia that will hold all governments to account on delivering their promises.

The National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line – 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) – is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for any Australian who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault.

# Police training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence

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).

## CHRISTOPHER DOWLING

Australian Institute of Criminology

### No. 689

**Abstract** | Police in Australia are seeing increased reporting of family, domestic and sexual violence, while facing greater pressure to secure positive outcomes for victims. Improvements in the training police receive in responding to this violence have been identified as critical to broader efforts to reduce it. This study reviews published Australian and international research on police training in responding to family, domestic and sexual violence. The last few decades have seen a significantly expanded focus on family, domestic and sexual violence as part of police training. This, along with several notable training innovations, have underpinned a shift in police training needs from more basic concerns around correct procedure and knowledge of the law, to more advanced concerns including recognising and investigating coercive control and identifying primary aggressors. Overall, police are receptive and responsive to training, but certain types of training, particularly those with strong practical and problem-solving components, hold more promise.

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.

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

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

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*")

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 &

*continued on page 30*



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

*continued on page 32*

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

on legislation, policies and procedures is recognised (HMIC 2015; O'Sullivan, Roberts & Skoog 1994).

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

Findings suggest that training in interviewing and evidence-gathering (Darwinkel, Powell & Tidmarsh 2013; HMIC 2019; Holmes & Headley 1995; Islam & Mazerolle 2022; Lathan et al. 2022; Lonsway, Welch & Fitzgerald 2001; Parratt & Pina 2017; Powell & Cauchi 2013; Reckdenwald, Fernandez & Mandes 2019; Ruff 2012; Storey et al. 2011; Tidmarsh 2016; Tidmarsh, Sharman & Hamilton 2023; Whetstone 2001), and in legislation, policies and procedures (Brennan et al. 2021; Campbell et al. 2023; Johnson 2010;

Oehme, Prost & Saunders 2016; Police and Crime Standards Directorate 2006; Reckdenwald, Fernandez & Mandes 2019; Russell & Sturgeon 2019), are effective in improving officers' understanding and confidence in these areas, and their self-reported application of lessons. Greater variation is evident in research evaluating training to change attitudes. Some studies suggest that this training has positive outcomes for self-reported attitudes (Campbell & Lapsey 2021; Campbell, Lapsey & Wells 2020; Darwinkel, Powell & Tidmarsh 2013; Franklin et al. 2020; Lathan et al. 2019; Tidmarsh 2016), and others find mixed impacts or none (Blaney 2010; Fleming & Franklin 2021; Lathan et al. 2022; Loeb 1983; Lonsway, Welch & Fitzgerald 2001; Newmark, Harrell & Adams 1995; Parratt & Pina 2017; Sleath & Bull 2012; Smith, Wilkes & Bouffard 2016; Smith, 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

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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.



# “Kids are in the middle of it” – Child protection practitioners reflect on indicators of coercive control and situational couple violence

May, 2024

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**Abstract** | How relevant is differentiating between coercive control and situational couple violence in statutory child protection practice with families experiencing domestic and family violence?

In this small scale self-selected qualitative study we interviewed six Australian child protection practitioners and asked them to consider four fictional vignettes, two containing indicators of high levels of coercive control and two containing indicators of situational couple violence. We asked participants to reflect on whether the vignettes represented the kind of situations they encounter in practice and how they would be likely to respond.

Participants indicated that both coercive control and situational couple violence were common in their practice and that each of these violence types presented challenges. They highlighted a range of priorities and challenges for meeting the needs of children in families experiencing violence who come to the attention of statutory child protection authorities. Further, they noted the need to acknowledge the impact on children and young people when neither parent or caregiver can parent in a non-violent and safe manner.

Child protection practice frameworks should address the risk of harm to children and young people posed by situational couple violence, and not just coercive control.

Full Article:  
<https://shorturl.at/hxEHP>

## 1. Background

Domestic and family violence (DFV) is a common concern in families involved with statutory child protection systems. DFV itself can cause risk and harm to children and young people and there are also significant links between DFV and other forms of child maltreatment. Studies have found that in families involved with child protection services both DFV and child abuse and neglect are identified in between 30 % and 60 % of cases (Coulter and Mercado-Crespo, 2015, Henry, 2018, Holmes et al., 2019, Humphreys and Healey, 2017, Lawson, 2019).

Child protection departments in many countries including Australia, the U.S.A and the U.K have been implementing practice frameworks and models that aim to improve practice with families where DFV presents risk to children and young people by adopting a coercive-control based understanding of DFV which aims to keep children safe with non-offending parents (Holmes et al., 2019, Humphreys and Healey, 2017, Humphreys et al., 2020, Mandel, 2014, Mandel and Wright, 2019). Coercive control is a form of DFV in which the perpetrator controls and dominates the victim in multiple areas of day-to-day life, resulting in the victim having limited autonomy, being afraid of the perpetrator, and often going to significant lengths to placate the perpetrator in order to keep themselves and/or their children safe (Johnson, 2008, Stark, 2007). Coercive control does not always involve physical violence but even in the absence of physical violence it can result in serious harm and can be a predictor of intimate partner homicide (Myhill and Hohl, 2019, Stark, 2007). Researchers who have been influential in defining coercive control have argued that this form of DFV is different to violence between partners that arises out of conflict, both in the motivations of the perpetrator and the impacts it has

on the victim (Johnson, 2008, Stark, 2007). Violence between partners that arises from mutual conflict without accompanying coercive control has been referred to as ‘situational couple violence’ (Johnson, 2008) or ‘couple conflict’ (Stark, 2007). In this paper we will use the term ‘situational couple violence’. Both coercive control and situational couple violence are harmful and can involve serious violence (Stark, 2007), but the key differences are that in situational couple violence the victim maintains day-to-day autonomy, is less likely to be afraid of the perpetrator (although they may be afraid during incidents of physical violence), is less likely to feel they need to placate the perpetrator, and is less likely to feel they need help to stay safe or to leave the relationship (Johnson, 2008; Leone et al., 2007; Leone et al., 2014; Stark, 2007). Situational couple violence is also more likely to involve mutual physical violence, and by definition involves mutual conflict, whereas coercive control is more likely to be one-directional and, if the victim uses violence, this is likely to be in self-defence or to resist the perpetrator’s control (Johnson, 2008, Stark, 2007). Situational couple violence is also less likely to persist following separation, whereas coercive control may result in increased risk to victims and children after separation (Hardesty et al., 2016, Katz et al., 2020). Lastly, where coercive control is primarily perpetrated by men against women, situational couple violence is perpetrated at similar rates by both men and women, although women are still more likely to suffer serious injury and harm than men (Johnson et al., 2014).

The movement in child protection systems toward a coercive-control and perpetrator accountability based understanding of DFV has occurred in the context of critiques that have identified a tendency of child protection systems to place undue blame on



mothers who are victim-survivors of DFV for failing to protect their children, including substantiating neglect against such mothers, even in the absence of other allegations of child abuse or neglect (Hartley, 2004, Johnson and Sullivan, 2008, Mandel and Wright, 2019). Researchers have pointed out that child protection systems, both historically and currently, may interpret the unwillingness of mothers/DFV victims to leave abusive relationships as a failure to protect children, when in fact leaving such relationships may place women and children at greater risk of harm (Thiara & Humphreys, 2017). They have also argued that most mothers who are victims of DFV go to significant efforts to protect their children, but that child protection systems may not recognise these or may even interpret them as being abusive (Humphreys and Healey, 2017, Mandel and Wright, 2019). For example, a mother might use harsh discipline to control children's behaviour in order to placate a perpetrator of DFV who may react with violence if children do not behave in the way the perpetrator wants. To counter these very real issues, researchers have argued for approaches that encourage child protection practitioners to partner with mothers/victims of DFV and to shift their focus to the perpetrator's use of coercive control in order to increase the safety of children and young people in families impacted by DFV (Healey et

al., 2018, Humphreys and Healey, 2017, Humphreys et al., 2020, Mandel, 2014, Mandel and Wright, 2019).

Research indicates that the focus on coercive control in child protection practice has led to improvements and is well received by practitioners (Humphreys et al., 2020, Mandel and Wright, 2019). Nevertheless, there has been growing recognition in research outside the sphere of child protection that DFV is complex, and that an understanding of DFV based solely on coercive control might not capture or address all DFV, due to some DFV being situational in nature rather than being characterised by use of power and control (ANROWS policy brief, 2021, Johnson et al., 2014, McKay et al., 2022, Myhill, 2017, Myhill and Hohl, 2019, Nancarrow et al., 2020, Ross, 2011). Some researchers have suggested that inclusion of perspectives other than a coercive control-based understanding of family violence may be particularly relevant for First Nations People in countries such as Australia, Canada, and the U.S.A (Blagg et al., 2018, Blagg et al., 2020, Carlson et al., 2021, Ghanbari et al., 2019, Jones, 2008). Researchers differentiating between types of DFV have found that coercive control and situational couple violence may require different kinds of intervention and support to reduce the risk of continuing violence and harm (Armenti and Babcock, 2016, Bernardi and Day, 2015, Cleary Bradley and Gottman, 2012,

Love et al., 2020, Schneider and Brimhall, 2014, Stith and McCollum, 2011).

For example, joint couple counselling is not safe or appropriate in cases characterised by coercive control, but it may be beneficial in cases of situational couple violence. Most researchers considering DFV in the child protection context have not differentiated between coercive control and situational violence (Lawson, 2019).

Increasing the safety of children and young people in families where DFV is identified as a risk factor is a challenge increased by the complexity that tends to characterise these families in a child protection setting. In child protection practice DFV is usually accompanied by other issues such as drug and alcohol misuse, mental health concerns, parents' own trauma history, parenting difficulties, and poverty (Bromfield et al., 2010, Conley Wright et al., 2021, Humphreys and Healey, 2017, Maguire-Jack and Font, 2017). In addition, child protection services work with involuntary clients who may fear removal of their children and mistrust government services, which can result in both victims and perpetrators of DFV being reluctant to disclose or engage with supports (Humphreys et al., 2021).

There is a lack of understanding of what works to keep children and young people safe when they have ongoing

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contact with a perpetrator of domestic violence, including when parents/ caregivers remain in a relationship despite violence (Gatfield et al., 2021). Further, in the child protection context, there is a limited understanding of the nature of DFV, particularly regarding the directionality or type of violence (English et al., 2009), and how factors such as substance abuse, mental health and poverty interact with DFV to increase risk of harm to children and young people (Conley Wright et al., 2021).

Gatfield et al. (2021) pointed out that differences in theoretical perspectives have led to debates regarding how best to work with families where DFV is a risk to the safety of children and young people. The researchers noted that in the context of these debates, a desire to avoid approaches that could be seen to minimise the responsibility of perpetrators of violence may have hampered some avenues of practice, such as frameworks or services that address bi-directional family interactions and dynamics rather than focussing solely on the behaviour of a single perpetrator. Similarly, Ferguson et al. (2020) argued that a homogenous approach to DFV and an assumption that all DFV has the same causes and characteristics has resulted in child protection practice responses that do not meet the needs of all families.

The current study aims to explore whether differentiating between coercive control and situational couple violence may be relevant and/or beneficial in statutory child protection practice with children and their families where DFV is identified. The study also explores how the heterogeneity of DFV in families in the child protection caseload may be linked to common challenges to effective practice with these families.

## 2. Method

The background of the first author is as a child protection practitioner and the genesis of this research has been their own experience of working with families with diverse presentations of DFV. This practice background has led us to seek out the valuable knowledge and perspective held by child protection practitioners.

The proposed methodology was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

### 2.1. Participants

Child protection practitioners were recruited via social media and asked to read a participant information letter and complete a brief survey to confirm their eligibility to participate in the study. The requirements were that participants must be currently or recently (within the previous 2 years) employed as a practitioner in a statutory (government) child protection service in Australia, have at least 2 years child protection practice experience, and be willing to participate in a phone interview. Once eligibility was confirmed, participants provided a contact .

Six participants met criteria and agreed to participate: two male and four female. Experience in child protection practice ranged from 2 to over 20 years, with four of the six participants having over 5 years-experience. Two participants were from rural locations and four from metropolitan areas.

### 2.2. Materials

Once a time for an interview was set, the first author provided participants with a document containing four case vignettes that portrayed examples of domestic violence with varying dynamics and characteristics (see Appendix A). Two of these (Vignette 1 and Vignette 3) represented coercive control and incorporated factors known to be characteristics of coercive control (Johnson, 2008, Stark, 2007) such as the victim being afraid of the perpetrator, modifying their own or children's behaviour, the perpetrator using threats of suicide and the perpetrator isolating the victim. One coercive control vignette included the perpetrator using physical violence (Vignette 1), the other (Vignette 3) did not. Vignette 1 also included indicators that the victim was using drugs (potentially as a result of the impacts of DFV but this was not specified). The other two vignettes (Vignette 2 and Vignette 4) represented situational violence and incorporated associated characteristics of this (Johnson, 2008, Stark, 2007) such as victims stating they are not afraid of the perpetrator, the violence occurring in the context of fights, and a mutual element to the violence and/or conflict. Although these factors in and of themselves are not contra-indicative of coercive control (for example, both Johnson (2008) and Stark (2007) emphasised that victims of

coercive control may resist or retaliate with violence), what also made the situational couple violence vignettes different to the coercive control vignettes was the absence of any indicators of coercive control. One of these (Vignette 2) involved two young parents who had a history of being in out-of-home care themselves and with a young baby. The other (Vignette 4) involved a family with multiple children, a complex history including the father/stepfather having been in prison, previous neglect concerns, and violence occurring in the context of both parents being intoxicated.

The intent was to discover whether the participants responded differently to the coercive control scenarios compared to the situational violence scenarios and whether they felt the scenarios depicted families similar to those they had worked with. Using vignettes with guiding questions allowed for a discussion in which participants were able to freely voice their views about any differences they noticed between the scenarios.

The use of vignettes containing elements that could be encountered in real life practice has been established as an effective way of understanding how child protection practitioners may understand and respond to particular situations or risk factors (Landsman & Hartley, 2007; Reisel, 2017).

Three guiding questions were used in a semi-structured interview approach. These questions were:

- What do you identify as the concerns and risk factors in this situation?
- What kind of responses and interventions would you use for this family in your current or most recent statutory child protection workplace?
- Is this the kind of situation you might see in your practice? (You can explain why or why not if you wish, and you may discuss de-identified case examples that are similar or different to the vignette).

This approach allowed us to consider whether the participants were able to identify either coercive control or situational violence in the scenarios, how they linked co-occurring issues to domestic violence, and whether there was a marked difference in how participants might respond to scenarios characterised by either violence type. It also gave some insight into which types of violence were prevalent in the cases





the participants had encountered in their practice and led them to reflect on difficulties and complexities they faced in their practice with families where DFV is a risk factor.

### 2.3. Interviews and analysis

Participants were advised that they could comment on the scenarios any way they wanted, including discussing any aspects of their own practice experience that they felt were relevant to the themes in the vignettes, but were cautioned to de-identify any examples from their own practice. Not all participants commented directly on the vignettes as some chose to focus on examples from their own practice that they felt were like those in the vignettes. Interview times ranged from 45 to 75 min.

After transcription, thematic analysis was used to explore the data the interviews provided and identify key themes. As noted by Clarke and Braun (2017), thematic analysis is a particularly useful approach to analysing data which includes a mix of participants' theoretical knowledge and lived experience, views, and perspectives. Using thematic analysis also allowed for a reflective approach (Byrne, 2022) in which the first researcher's identity and perspective as a child protection practitioner was used to build rapport with participants and has influenced the analysis. Interviews were transcribed and then analysed using a

multi-stage process of reading over each transcript for familiarisation, extracting quotes that exemplified the views expressed by each participant, sorting the quotes into groups according to topic (coding), re-reading transcripts to identify further quotes that fit into each code group, and then reading over the sets of quotes several times to define, refine, and name themes (Byrne, 2022, Clarke and Braun, 2017). A theme was identified as relevant if it was evident in quotes from three or more participants.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Themes

The themes that emerged were related to mutual aggression/violence; complexity; coercive control; challenges of working with perpetrators; mother blame and working with mothers; lack of suitable services; and the need for a child focussed practice. In addition to identifying themes, note was made of participants' key comments about each vignette in terms of whether that vignette was one they might commonly encounter in child protection practice, and what they identified as the main issues in that vignette. While most participants identified three of the four scenarios (Vignette 1, Vignette 2, and Vignette 4) as like situations they may see in their practice, the other scenario (Vignette 3, which depicted a family in which there were indicators

of coercive control but no co-occurring issues, no serious physical violence, and no involvement by other services) was not identified as being common. The participants who commented on this vignette indicated that although control and potential violence were risk factors, these would not lead to the family being screened in for a child protection response. Vignette 1, which depicted both coercive control and substance abuse, was identified as common. So were Vignette 2 and Vignette 4, which both depicted situational violence accompanied by other issues such as caregivers having their own history of being maltreated as children, alcohol use, long history of child protection and other system involvement, and caregivers being resistant to child protection involvement. Vignette 4, which depicted mutual violence in the context of alcohol use, past child protection concerns about neglect, and a mother who did not want help was identified by participants who discussed it as *"the most common"* and *"run of the mill"*.

#### 3.1.1. Mutual aggression/violence

The strong emergence of this theme indicated that situational couple violence may be commonly encountered by child protection practitioners. Participants linked this theme to parental lack of emotional regulation, noting that this is particularly common in young parents

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and/or parents who have their own history of child abuse or neglect, and alcohol or drug abuse.

*"I guess it says they're both using violence, it's fights isn't it?... It's what we would see from young parents who have had a rough start to life."* (regarding Vignette 2)

*"She's only 19 years old with a three-year-old and a one-year-old, and the brain hasn't developed, so her impulse control is probably low, and so is his."* (regarding Vignette 2)

Participants reflected on experiencing similar dynamics in their own practice experience.

*"You have mums admitting that they're just as bad as the dad, and that they stir the dad up and that, you know, they're part of the cause of his anger, that they play a part in it. Certainly there's screaming matches that go on."*

*"You do get mothers that are also violent, so obviously consumed with anger or upset or whatever else that they're getting into a full-on brawl in front of the children."*

Some participants discussed the difficulty of identifying a primary perpetrator of violence, if there was one.

*"Certainly, we've had it in male and female and same-sex households where there's been an assumption that it's been one partner that has been the perpetrator and the other one has been the quote 'victim' when that's not actually been the case."*

Participants recognised the complexity of this theme, and several discussed the fact that recognising mutuality of violence can be seen as controversial and a view not shared by other services.

*"If I was to say that with the family violence specialist, they'd be like, no, like mum's only doing this to protect herself, where and, you know a lot of the cases that is the truth, but there are cases where mum's equally violent as what dad is."*

The participants' experiences reflected mutual violence occurring in the context of high levels of complexity such as substance abuse, mental health difficulties and young age of parents.

*"There's numerous families that we're involved with that I can think of that, you know sort of fit this story. Um where both mum and dad are big drinkers, um, where there's more than three children in the household, like usually there's like five*

*to eight kids where you know it's just that entrenched, chronic substance abuse and violence where they're both listed as the perpetrator and the affected family member."* (regarding Vignette 4)

*"I think when, um, you know you're dealing with younger people as well, like younger parents who, you know, probably haven't had that opportunity to find themselves and find their feet in adulthood before they've had to raise children, you do see that, yeah they're both, mum can be a perpetrator sometimes and dad can be a perpetrator sometimes."*

Some participants also spoke about violence occurring in a context of conflict, where only one parent used physical violence but where there was a mutual aspect to the fighting.

*"She said she didn't agree with how he wanted to parent... she was like more strict and he was more 'whatever' and I think when they were using, that she would push and push and push at him, and then he would just lose it and get really violent. And I think she grew up in a similar situation so kind of was putting up with this."*

### 3.1.2. Coercive control

Participants demonstrated a strong awareness of the need to focus on coercive control and identified it readily in the relevant vignettes as well as in examples from their own practice. Although most participants did not use the term 'coercive control', they spoke about controlling behaviour and the impacts this had on both adult victims of DFV and children and young people.

*"Anywhere where the lady, or the victim or whatever, is not allowed to speak or if she's nervous about, erm, he's super calm and she's a little bit anxious, so if he's trying to impress us, that would be a red flag."*

*"Paul could be controlling of her, the fact that she's cut off from her family and they've been concerned... there's definitely red flags."* (regarding Vignette 3)

All participants identified controlling behaviour by perpetrators as an issue in their own practice experience, often noting that when this was present it was particularly difficult to engage with perpetrators or create change in the family.

*"This guy, he had just completely stolen her, like her self-esteem and just made her sub-human. It was awful to see."*

*"Often in DV relationships dad is like the head of the household and you know, controlling everything... if you get a dad like that you have to give some bottom lines around that, or that controlling relationship, because that's very difficult to unpack with mental health, drugs, alcohol use."*

*"Domestic violence perpetrators are really manipulative, and they can tug at the heart strings and there's all kinds of ties and coercive control they use over their partner. So even if you get the partner to a place where they've had enough and they get it and they want to leave and they understand everything... the perpetrators going to be on their back, doing and saying anything to get them back, it's really difficult to fight against."*

Several participants noted that where DFV is characterised by coercive control this can make it particularly difficult to create safety in the family, with one noting that perpetrators of such abuse can be adept at covering their violence, another noting that these perpetrators are often resistant to change.

*"If it's a controlling and DV relationship but they're functioning in all other areas, usually they function well enough to go 'oh well (child protection service) are involved, we better pull our socks up, we'd better stay off the radar."*

*"He was always in denial, would never do your analysis, completely denied that he ever used drugs, it was all the mum. We never got the opportunity to make any headway with him. Yes I believe you can, but yeah it's very rare."*

One participant identified coercive control as a factor in the two vignettes that did not include any such explicit indicators. This participant had recently undertaken training that focussed on coercive control and as such may have had a greater focus on this aspect of DFV.

*"He's probably sending her text messages or going to the kid's schools or, you know doing all of that behaviour that would make it so hard. You know, withholding money."* (regarding Vignette 4).

### 3.1.3. Challenges of working with perpetrators

Participants recognised the importance of working with perpetrators but spoke about the difficulties they encountered. This theme was strongly connected to





the theme of coercive control as several participants reflected on the difficulty of working with perpetrators who are highly controlling.

*"They really try to manipulate workers, and not really for any kind of gain, but it's just that control because they're feeling powerless because you've removed their children and now they're trying to, you know dictate and control things around family contact or what a placement should look like or how they're treated by the department. It's a difficult relationship to navigate, especially when the perpetrators have a fragile ego."*

One participant reflected that while it was important to engage perpetrators and hold them accountable to avoid mother blame, this was difficult when a perpetrator was not present in the home or able to be contacted.

*"It's really hard when we have to do these jobs or have cases where Dad isn't present or Dad isn't engaged, you can't get hold of them, because the only person you can really work with is Mum."*

Another participant spoke about the difficulty in supporting change for perpetrators when services available may not be suitable.

*"How do we think making a violent abusive man go to a hall once a week or once a month or whatever to talk about how violent he is, is going to affect his relationship? Generally, it's not going to be the best."*

#### **3.1.4. Mother blame and working with mothers**

The theme of the challenges of working with perpetrators was closely linked with the theme of mother blame. Participants linked a difficulty in engaging perpetrators of violence with resorting to holding mothers responsible for child safety, even though participants recognised that that this was not ideal. Participants discussed the difficulty of avoiding mother blame when mothers are often the only person caring for a child or young person or the only person willing to engage, and as such the only person who can ensure safety for the child.

Participants also spoke about the challenge of working with families where victims did not want to leave despite violence, particularly given the mandate child protection services must prioritise children's safety.

*"We do have to go in and ensure safety and that's really our bottom line... I think we often do blame mums and say you have to leave, or you know it's their responsibility and sometimes that's all we're left with because Dad's not there or present."*

*"We don't want to put all the onus on, you know, the non-violent parent and make everything their fault, their problem, they're putting their kids at risk by staying in the situation, we get that 100 %, but it's just a very tricky situation."*

Participants also spoke of wanting to work cooperatively with victims,

to support them to care safely for their children, but of encountering difficulties in this due to victims not always accepting help or denying or minimising violence. Most participants recognised that when mothers deny or minimise DFV this can be for a range of reasons such as fear of the perpetrator or a sense of loyalty, normalisation of DFV due to having experienced it for much of their life and/or seeing it in their communities, or distrust of child protection services.

*"A lot of families go, 'no there's no concerns' you know even we get so many times they'll say 'you need to go down the street, they're really bad.'"*

*"In all of the examples really it alludes to mum wanting to support the father and that's a common theme that I see. That you've got a really aggressive man that's in and out of jail and he has nobody because he's ostracised everybody, and so the mum feels like, I need to prioritise him because he hasn't got anybody else."*

#### **3.1.5. Lack of suitable services**

A consistently strong theme was the lack of available or suitable services and this being an obstacle to successful work with families. Participants identified that service availability was limited, particularly in rural or remote areas, and that the services that were available often did not suit the complex needs of child

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protection client families. This included not being equipped to work with intact families or couples, or not addressing issues linked to DFV such as trauma or substance use. A lack of services that focus on helping perpetrators to change their behaviour was a common concern, with this being an obstacle to child protection services holding perpetrators accountable.

Participants identified a need for services that would work with couples together, and that would support perpetrators to address issues causing or contributing to their use of violence.

*"There's nothing for them as a couple."*

*"The domestic violence service here is really about when mum chooses to leave the relationship and it's around housing and supporting her, but again that's the focus on mum, not dad who's the problem."*

*"We don't really have anything in this area where it's sort of like, I guess couples counselling or mediations. There are a couple of options but I don't think they've ever really been successful with people."*

Several participants noted that it would be beneficial to have services that recognised the role trauma can play in DFV perpetration, both for families where parents have their own history of child abuse or neglect, and for Aboriginal families where trauma is linked to the impacts of colonisation.

*"With this person his issues are intergenerational, so he grew up in a family where there was violence, so there's a lot of psych stuff going on for him that needs to be addressed."*

One participant talked about feeling frustrated with domestic violence services that assumed in all cases that the mother was the victim, even when there were indicators that the father was the victim or that a different approach was needed.

*"I think sometimes the reality is that people have a model of how they should engage with families and don't differ from it because they don't know."*

### 3.1.6. Complexity

All participants identified the complexity presented in the vignettes as being familiar and spoke about this contributing to the difficulties they face in their work with families where domestic and family violence is identified.

*"I find in those situations mum is particularly difficult to engage because she might have some underlying issues from her past which she doesn't want to address, and she covers it up with the drugs."*

*"But so many issues connected to domestic violence, it's not just usually that this person's an angry person, they're traumatised, potentially there's drug issues, there's all these different compounding factors which doesn't put them in a good position to be rational."*

*"I think you know the main cohort of people that we deal with there's always multiple complex issues going on in that family, so drug use and family violence, mental health."*

Participants who spoke about their work with Aboriginal families highlighted that in this context family violence was often linked to parents' own experiences of trauma and the continuing impacts of colonisation, including past child removal policies (commonly referred to in Australia as the Stolen Generations).

*"Looking at the legacy of the Stolen Generations, that's huge."*

Most participants noted that where causal or exacerbating issues were linked to DFV these had to be addressed in order to increase safety for children.

*"If you go in there and you only focus on the DV aspect of it, and you don't give the same level of attention to the mental health or substance issues, or the financial issues, or whatever else is driving that behaviour, you'll never increase the safety for those kids."*

Participants highlighted the role of substance abuse in domestic violence, in both the vignettes and their own practice experience. They acknowledged that the relationship between substance abuse and DFV was not always clear and that DFV can have multiple causes. Even so, most identified substance use as either causing or exacerbating cases of DFV.

*"I think, um, if they weren't using drugs would they be violent? Probably not."*

*"I think they're not separate issues. I think that if there's alcohol and family violence, that, um the likelihood of the family violence getting worse if the alcohol was removed is pretty slim. I would suggest that if you remove the alcohol from that situation the family violence would lessen."*

*"From what I see when there's alcohol involved the female is more likely to be*

*listed as the perpetrator. A lot of the families we work with, that's what I see, um and obviously you know alcohol just exacerbates every bad situation."*

Most participants spoke about the threshold for child protection intervention being high and this leading to significant levels of complexity in the cases that do get through, as the more straightforward cases are diverted at intake to other services or simply ignored. Several also reflected that this meant that by the time families receive contact from child protection services the issues are often entrenched and harder to address.

*"A lot of families would be earning frequent flyer points."*

*"We're really at the pointy end nowadays... and that, um, comes down to capacity purely."*

*"If there's a statutory response it's because it's at the highest level, and it's usually not, what do you call it, the low-level proactive stuff, and the effect is that it tends to be the more reactive stuff."*

The participants' thoughts on complexity in many ways reflected what has been referred to as the 'policy practice gap' (O'Connell, 2014), particularly with respect to families whose experiences of DFV may not be addressed by available services. All participants demonstrated a strong motivation toward good practice and an understanding of what this would constitute. However, they indicated that complexities, including situations of mutual parental violence or where both parents presented a risk to the safety of children and young people, sometimes made it difficult to implement best practice principles such as partnering with the adult victim of DFV and holding perpetrators accountable for their use of violence and abuse.

### 3.1.7. Child focussed practice

Participants spoke about the need to have a primary focus on the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. They reflected that while they wanted to work cooperatively with victims and support perpetrators to change, there were some situations where the level of risk to children was too great. The participants expressed compassion for victims of DFV and reflected on the difficulties faced by parents in the child protection system but highlighted the need, in their role, to focus on children and young people first and foremost.



When reflecting on the vignettes or examples from their own practice where both parents were contributing to the risk of harm to children, particularly where violence was mutual or both parents denied that violence was an issue, participants described their frustration that parents were not able to focus on how this was impacting on their children.

*"You know they each individually and collectively have issues, so you need to break that down in a manageable thing, cause otherwise the whole thing just looks a mess, and the kids are in the middle of it."*

*"It all needs to be centred around the kids and how this is affecting the kids, because obviously they don't think it's an issue amongst themselves, but you know this is clearly going to be affecting the children and the household they live in and that's not ok."*

*"The parents can never identify how it's affecting the kids but of course it is." (reflecting on cases they had worked with that were characterised by mutual violence, alcohol and repeated police involvement).*

Participants highlighted that in cases where both parents were acting in ways that made children unsafe, this left children particularly vulnerable.

*"From the children's perspective they are not safe if they can't trust either of their parents to protect them."*

*"If you don't value your own safety the kids don't have the option to get up and walk out of here... both parents are making them be in a situation they don't have a choice in."*

#### 4. Discussion

The responses of the participants highlighted the complex and varied nature of DFV in families that come to the attention of child protection services. Their reflections on the vignettes and examples from their own practice indicated that both coercive control and situational couple violence may be commonly encountered by child protection practitioners. The participants in this study spoke extensively of the need to focus on perpetrator behaviour as the source of risk to children and young people, were able to recognise and discuss coercive control in both the vignettes and examples from their own practice and were able to recognise and discuss a range of protective actions taken by victims of DFV. All spoke about the tension they felt in not wanting to unduly blame victims/mothers in situations of DFV and having to prioritise the safety of children, including considering any risk posed by either parent. Although participants emphasised the need to minimise mother blame, they also spoke about the need to recognise the impact on children when both parents used violence. One participant reflected

that although specialist DFV agencies they had worked with tended to perceive such violence to always constitute self-defence by women, they found that this was not always the case.

The participants did not explicitly differentiate between coercive control and situational couple violence. Nevertheless, there was a marked difference in the way most spoke about cases (both from the vignettes and their own practice) in which mothers were victims of coercive control compared to those in which violence was mutual or conflict driven. When reflecting on the scenarios or their own case examples characterised by coercive control by one parent against a non-offending parent, participants were able to reflect on how the non-offending parent had used protective strategies and on the way the perpetrator's coercive control had impacted on the non-offending parent's capacity to make decisions or protect their children safely. Although they discussed circumstances in which these mothers acted in ways that resulted in harm to children, they recognised that this was ultimately due to the impact of the perpetrator's behaviour. This supported previous research that has identified the way DFV can impact on mother-child relationships, and that supporting mothers can improve the safety and wellbeing of children (Humphreys et al., 2011). In contrast, when discussing

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vignettes or examples from their own practice that were characterised by mutual violence or violence in the context of mutual conflict, participants focussed on the way both parents were contributing to risk to children and the impact it would have on children if neither parent were able to act in a way that supports child safety.

The participants' reflections supported the idea that it is important to identify how a perpetrator's pattern of coercive control can harm children directly and impact on the capacity of the non-offending parent to protect their children (Mandel & Wright, 2019), but also suggested that in some cases harmful parental behaviours occur in a context of mutual situational conflict and violence rather than coercive control. Researchers have argued that child protection practitioners often lack the skill to identify coercive control or accurately assess the dynamics of DFV, for example that they may mis-identify cases of coercive control as mutual conflict (Humphreys et al., 2020). This is an important issue, and it is possible that some of the cases participants in this study identified (from their own practice experience) as being characterised by mutual conflict, actually involved coercive control. The risks of mis-identifying coercive control as situational couple violence are significant (Johnson, 2008, Meier, 2015) and it is not our intent to argue that child protection practitioners should not be encouraged to recognise and understand the behaviours, patterns and impacts of coercive control, nor that child protection practitioners should be quick to assume DFV is situational in nature. It is also not our intent to suggest that child protection practitioners working with real families should make decisions about the nature of DFV based only on the kind of limited information depicted in our fictional vignettes. Rather, we argue that assumptions about the nature of DFV without careful assessment and recognition of the variance of characteristics and causes of different types of DFV may result in child protection practitioners and systems relying on interventions that may not meet the needs of families (Ferguson et al., 2020, Jenney et al., 2014). Indeed, one participant who indicated they had recently undertaken training that focussed on coercive control expressed a belief that the DFV in the two vignettes which did not include any indicators of coercive control was likely to be

characterised by the father/stepfather using controlling behaviours. The results of this study suggest that a nuanced approach is required, in which child protection practitioners are supported to accurately assess and respond to the individual characteristics and dynamics of DFV in any given family, whether this is coercive control or situational couple violence, including mutual violence.

Research on the impact of mutual violence between parents/caregivers on children is sparse but indicates that such violence may have a negative impact on the quality of parent-child relationships and the future mental health of exposed children (Duval et al., 2019). Research has also found that mutual violence is more common in families of lower socio-economic status (Pu et al., 2022), which may mean that this type of DFV is prevalent in the child protection caseload, given the link between poverty and child protection involvement (Doidge et al., 2017). Participants in this study identified a need for services who can work with such families, noting that there are few services able to work with couples together and that domestic violence services may not accept that violence between parents can be mutual. Although there are services that provide whole-of-family support for families impacted by situational/high conflict violence (McCann, 2021, Spratt et al., 2022) these are not common, meaning that many families involved with statutory child protection services may not be able to access such support.

A strong theme of complexity came through in all the interviews and this was linked with the other themes raised in that most of the challenges practitioners spoke about were due to the complex nature of the cases they had worked on. The participants' view that DFV alone was unlikely to lead to a child protection response is consistent with research from the U.S.A which found that child protection responses to DFV, in particular substantiations and child removals, occurred primarily in families where there were also other risk and harm factors present (Henry, 2018). Most participants noted the need for services to address contributing issues such as substance abuse, mental health problems and parents' own experiences of trauma together with DFV, reflecting that addressing DFV alone would not result in safety for children

and young people. This supports prior critiques of interventions and system responses to DFV by researchers who have argued that addressing DFV without addressing the complex range of causes and contributing factors is unlikely to result in long-term change or improved safety for victims and children (Aaron and Beaulaurier, 2016, Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2020, Love et al., 2020, McLaren et al., 2020, Stover et al., 2022).

There are some programs that acknowledge the complex relationship between DFV and issues such substance abuse and/or trauma, emotional dysregulation and parenting difficulties (McCann, 2021, Kertesz et al., 2022, Stover et al., 2022), including programs for Aboriginal men and families in Australia and Native American families in the U.S.A which focus on trauma healing, fathering and restoration of traditional gender roles and values rather than using a power and control approach (Andrews et al., 2021, Blagg et al., 2020, McKinley and Theall, 2021). In child protection practice however, an assumption that DFV is characterised by coercive control may result in reliance on mainstream men's behaviour change programs rather than approaches that also address complex underlying or co-occurring factors (Ferguson et al., 2020).

#### 4.1. Limitations

It was initially hoped that the sample size for this research would be significantly larger, but the researchers experienced difficulty finding child protection practitioners able and willing to participate. It is likely that high workloads of child protection workers and the added stressors of the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to this difficulty. As a result of the small sample size this research cannot be considered representative of child protection practitioners in general, across all systems. Future research using larger sample sizes and across a variety of jurisdictions is needed. Despite the small sample size, it is worth noting that the interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of practitioners' reactions to the vignettes and their own practice experience.

This was an Australian study and as such some issues noted by participants may be unique to the Australian setting, however the challenges faced by child protection systems have been found to be similar across many countries (Lonne





et al., 2021). As such the themes that arose in this study are likely to be familiar to many child protection practitioners.

None of the participants in this study identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander yet Aboriginal children in Australia are at significantly higher risk of child protection involvement than non-Aboriginal children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). Future research that includes the views of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child protection or family violence practitioners would deepen understanding of how relevant the differentiation between coercive control and situational violence may be for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Finally, this study relied on the views of child protection practitioners. Their descriptions of DFV they encountered in their practice may have been influenced by their own biases and understanding of DFV. As such, further research using other data sources, for example case-file analysis, is needed to explore the prevalence of coercive control and situational couple violence in families with child protection involvement.

## 5. Conclusion

This study highlights the complexities and challenges of working with families where DFV poses a risk to the safety of children and young people. It indicates that DFV in the statutory child protection context may be heterogenous in nature, potentially including both DFV that is characterised by coercive control and DFV that is situational in nature, including mutual violence.

Recent research has highlighted the importance of child protection systems understanding and responding to coercive control, partnering with non-offending parents, and holding perpetrators of DFV accountable for their behaviour (Healey et al., 2018, Humphreys and Healey, 2017, Humphreys et al., 2020, Mandel and Wright, 2019). This study supports this and suggests that a strong understanding of coercive control, including the impacts this form of DFV has on both children and adult victims, is vital in continuing to move toward child protection practice that does not wrongly blame victims of DFV for the impacts it has on their children, and that

accurately locates the cause of harm from DFV with the perpetrator. However, this study also indicates that there is a need for child protection systems to be able to identify and address the risks situational couple violence, including mutual violence, may pose to children and young people, and to ensure that, if DFV is situational in nature, parents are offered appropriate supports.

We suggest that a nuanced approach to assessing and responding to DFV in families with child protection involvement is needed, in which child protection practitioners are supported to recognise, assess, and respond appropriately to coercive control, but are also supported to do the same for situational couple violence. This should include recognising when children may be at risk of harm from both parents as well as recognising and supporting the strengths and resilience of many victims of DFV, and recognising and addressing contributing or underlying issues such as substance abuse, poverty and disadvantage, and parents' own trauma and/or experiences of abuse or neglect in childhood.

# Police responses to intimate partner violence incidents involving children: Exploring variations in actions and concerns in an Australian jurisdiction

January, 2024

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## Abstract

### Background

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) has transformed from a private matter into a global concern. Although progress has been made in enhancing police responsiveness to IPV, research on interventions in IPV cases involving children remains limited.



126 males



49 females

### Participants and setting

175 police officers in a single Australian jurisdiction.

### Objective

This study investigates how police officers' responses vary depending on the nature and severity of IPV incidents and explores disparities in their responses when children are present at IPV incidents.

### Methods

A mixed-methods approach utilized an online survey with four hypothetical IPV scenarios to capture anticipated responses. The quantitative analysis assessed officers' recognition of incident seriousness and willingness to take action, while the qualitative thematic analysis explored reasons for response modifications in the presence of children.

### Results

The quantitative analysis revealed that officers consistently recognized the seriousness of IPV incidents and displayed a willingness to take various actions, such as initiating investigations and detaining perpetrators. Thematic analysis of qualitative data uncovered officers' reasons for modifying or maintaining their responses to IPV incidents with child presence. Concerns for child safety, emotional impact on children, and breaking the cycle of violence were identified as key drivers for officers' modified responses. Additionally, some officers adhered to standard procedures, emphasizing their legal obligations and the adequacy of their existing actions.

### Conclusions

This study contributes to an enhanced understanding of the complex decision-making processes among police officers when responding to IPV incidents involving children, highlighting the necessity of balanced policies and comprehensive training to navigate these complexities effectively.

**FULL  
ARTICLE**







## 1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) remains a pressing concern in most contemporary societies, with substantial ramifications for healthcare, criminal justice, and law enforcement services worldwide (Cormier & Woodworth, 2008; Hoeffler, 2017; UN Women, 2013). The role of law enforcement, especially the police, is pivotal in addressing IPV incidents as they often serve as the primary responders and gatekeepers of the criminal justice system, ensuring victim protection, law enforcement, peacekeeping, and facilitating access to support and treatment services (Mazerolle et al., 2018). However, police have frequently faced criticism for their unsupportive and unsympathetic responses to IPV cases over the years (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2017; Goodman-Delahunty & Crehan, 2016; Meyer & Reeves, 2021). Consequently, substantial legal and policy reforms, including officer training, have been implemented to address IPV situations (Hirschel et al., 2007; Sherman, 2018).

The complexity of police responses to IPV incidents intensifies when vulnerable groups, such as children, are associated with these incidents (Wood & Watson, 2017). Children exposed to IPV in their homes are often referred to as 'silent', 'invisible', and 'secondary' victims, facing enduring physical, behavioral, social, psychological, and educational consequences (Huang et

al., 2015; Islam et al., 2017; Islam et al., 2018; Kimber et al., 2018; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Richards, 2011). A particularly concerning impact is the heightened risk of future involvement in delinquent behaviors resulting from witnessing or experiencing IPV during childhood (Hong et al., 2021; Jones & Pierce, 2021; Moylan et al., 2010; Wathen & MacMillan, 2013).

Despite these considerable effects on children, the consideration of children's needs in IPV cases has only recently gained attention within the criminal justice system of high-income countries (Burton, 2000; Finkelhor & Turner, 2015; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012; Shields, 2008; Swerin et al., 2018). Among the current literature, only a few studies have directly investigated the influence of children's presence on police responses to IPV incidents (Millar et al., 2021; Överlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012; Swerin et al., 2018). Due to this lack of knowledge, a crucial question arises: In cases of IPV involving multiple victims, whose interests should take precedence in the police response? Does the attention shift from the primary victim, even if she does not support prosecution, to the children? Or do police decisions remain unaffected by the presence of children? Addressing these questions is intricate due to the complex nature of IPV situations, with officers' discretion playing a crucial role in determining the appropriate response.

With a notable research gap in this area, the current study seeks to investigate how officers' perception of IPV severity and the presence of children influence the likelihood of taking action.

## 2. Children's exposure to IPV

Historically, children have often been recognized as 'invisible victims' of IPV. In Australia, for example, over one million children are affected by IPV (Australian Institute of Health Welfare (AIHW), 2019), with 36–59 % of IPV incidents witnessed by children in their homes (Richards, 2011). Childhood exposure to IPV significantly affects their lives and well-being (Hébert et al., 2018; McDonnell & Valentino, 2016; Moog et al., 2018) and IPV incurs an estimated \$22 billion annual cost to the Australian economy (KPMG, 2016). Recognizing the far-reaching consequences and opportunities for prevention, IPV has become a policing priority in Australia (Victoria Police, 2015), prompting significant policy reforms addressing children's exposure to IPV (Campo, 2015).

Australia has implemented legal and policy responses at the national as well as state and territory levels to address harm to children (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). Reforms include changes to the Family Law Act of 1975 and various state laws to incorporate children's presence in IPV incidents (Campo, 2015).

*continued on page 48*



For example, the Australian Capital Territory has considered children as victims when they are present in IPV incidents. The Northern Territory, Tasmania, and New South Wales have provision for police to mandatorily inform the Child Protection Agency if children are present in their homes where IPV takes place (Campo, 2015). Moreover, national frameworks and plans acknowledge IPV exposure as child abuse (Watch, 2015).

### **3. Determinants of police response to IPV situations**

Researchers have recently examined the decision-making process of how individual police officer responds to IPV incidents (Grant & Rowe, 2011; Johnston & Houston, 2018; Lee et al., 2013; Myhill & Johnson, 2016; Tatum & Pence, 2015; Zhao et al., 2018). Key factors shaping police officers' decisions include officer gender (Sun, 2007); attitudes toward IPV (Campbell et al., 2018; DeJong et al., 2008; Gracia et al., 2008; Lockwood & Prohaska, 2015; Trujillo & Ross, 2008); perceived severity of IPV (Gracia et al., 2008); training (Buzawa, 2012; Diemer et al., 2017; Goodman-Delahunty & Crehan, 2016; Maple & Kebbell, 2021; Oehme et al., 2016; Segrave et al., 2018); and victim gender (Cormier & Woodworth, 2008; Roark, 2016; Russell, 2018). Below, we provide a brief overview of police perceptions and their responses to IPV situations when children are involved.

#### **3.1. Police perceptions and their responses to IPV incidents**

In addition to the above findings, evidence suggests that law enforcement officers hold both reactive and proactive views toward as well as responses to IPV (Chu & Sun, 2014; DeJong et al., 2008). Reactive attitudes or responses may be regarded as the traditional or non-supportive attitudes toward and passive responses to IPV, whereas proactive attitudes or responses may be viewed as preferred or supportive attitudes toward and responses to IPV (Chu & Sun, 2014). Officers holding reactive views tend to consider IPV a private or family matter that should be handled with mediation and social services, and regard responses to IPV situations as secondary police work. Because of that, officers are more likely to favour minimum involvement with IPV cases. In contrast, officers holding proactive views tend to regard IPV as a criminal offense, and

regard responses to IPV incidents as an essential part of their duty, and prefer a pro-arrest policy (Chu & Sun, 2014).

Unless directed by law (e.g., mandatory arrest), officers' evaluations and responses to IPV are often shaped by their attitudes and understanding of the dynamics surrounding IPV (Campbell et al., 2018; Gracia et al., 2014; Lockwood & Prohaska, 2015). Due to the discretion of the police, the same IPV incident may be dealt with differently depending on extra-legal merit. Although prior research has shown that victims tend to seek assistance from the criminal justice system when the abuse they experience is both frequent and severe, particularly when their children's safety is at risk (Jordan, 2004; Meyer, 2010), less attention has been paid to how officers' evaluation of the seriousness of the incident influences their responses to IPV. For instance, law enforcement is less inclined to apprehend individuals responsible for cases of IPV compared to identifiable strangers who commit physical assault or rape (Jordan, 2004; Logan et al., 2006). Therefore, understanding officers' views on the seriousness of IPV severity and the involvement of children is crucial for formulating effective policies and developing training strategies to ensure proactive responses and the well-being of all individuals concerned.

#### **3.2. Police response to incidents of IPV when children are present**

There are limited studies that explicitly focus on how the presence of children affects the way police respond to IPV incidents (Överlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012; Swerin et al., 2018; Tatum & Pence, 2015). Swerin et al. (2018) showed that children's presence increased the likelihood of arrest. Other studies highlighted communication challenges when police interact with children during IPV incidents because there are no standard guidelines (Överlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Yet, a comprehensive understanding of why police responses differ in IPV cases involving children is lacking. Given the negative impacts of IPV on children, enhancing knowledge in this area is vital for effective policing and prevention.

### **4. The present study**

In Australia, a limited yet growing body of empirical research has investigated police attitudes toward IPV (Islam & Mazerolle, 2022; Maple & Kebbell,

2021; McPhedran et al., 2017; Meyer & Reeves, 2021; Segrave et al., 2018), risk assessment process (Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2013; Trujillo & Ross, 2008), and victims' experiences with police interventions (Douglas, 2019; Meyer, 2011; Meyer & Williamson, 2020; Murphy & Barkworth, 2014). We are not aware of any studies in Australia that have specifically investigated how police perceptions of the severity of IPV and the presence of children might influence responses to IPV situations. To contribute to this important knowledge base, this study utilizes survey data collected from a sample of active-duty police officers from a single Australian jurisdiction to investigate two main aspects. Firstly, it examines how officers' responses vary depending on the nature and severity of various hypothetical scenarios involving IPV. Secondly, it analyzes disparities in these responses in situations where children are present during IPV incidents.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1. Setting and Sample**

The study was carried out within a single state police jurisdiction which is the third most densely populated state of Australia. This state has an approximate population of just over 5 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). An online survey was conducted between March and April 2012, focusing on a randomly chosen, representative sample of police officers. The survey was designed to comprehensively capture information on a diverse array of topics related to policing intimate partner violence, encompassing, but not confined to, police officers' attitudes toward IPV. From a pool of 1593 officers selected at random from different police districts across the state, 243 officers participated in the survey, resulting in a response rate of 16%. While acknowledging the relatively low response rate, it is noteworthy that the sample effectively represented the entirety of the state's police force in terms of gender, age, and rank.

As an integral component of the overarching study, participating officers were provided with one out of four hypothetical scenarios illustrating an incident of IPV. These scenarios detailed a fictitious IPV situation and described the response of a hypothetical attending officer, Constable Darcy. Subsequently, the officers were questioned about their



anticipated response when confronted with a similar situation. Among the total respondents, 72 % (175 out of 243) responded to the hypothetical scenarios. These responses were distributed across the scenarios as follows: 47 officers for scenario 1 (33 males, 14 females), 45 officers for scenario 2 (33 males, 12 females), 41 officers for scenario 3 (31 males, 10 females), and 42 officers for scenario 4 (29 males, 13 females). Utilizing Chi-square analyses, we assessed and found no statistically significant differences across gender, age, rank, region, and training experiences among the groups responding to each scenario.

## 5.2. Data collection method

The methodology employed for this study involved the distribution of online survey packages to the participating officers. These packages included an introductory letter, a sheet for demographic information, and vignettes accompanied by Likert-type questions (see Appendix A & B). The primary research instruments employed in this study included vignettes and a set of 13 Likert-type questions, accompanied by additional supplementary questions. Vignettes, known for their ability to present concrete situations, were leveraged to solicit more valid and reliable opinions from respondents compared to abstract survey questions (Alexander & Becker, 1978).

Therefore, we incorporated four distinct vignettes to explore the potential actions of police officers in varying IPV scenarios.

Each vignette shared a common contextual background, subsequently delving into the depiction of an IPV incident involving a man (referred to as Mr. Hamilton) and a woman (referred to as Mrs. Hamilton). These narratives portrayed a dispute that escalated from an argument to a physical assault, wherein the woman was subjected to slapping or punching, leaving a noticeable red mark on her face and causing significant distress. The content of each vignette was also slightly manipulated by the victim's willingness to provide a formal statement to police and by the severity of the alleged verbal or physical assault committed by the hypothetical couple.

Every officer was assigned randomly to one of the four vignettes. Participants were directed to read the assigned vignette and subsequently respond to a 10-point Likert-type question, ranging from 1 (unlikely) to 10 (very likely), reflecting their probable course of action if confronted with an identical situation. Officers were then asked a range of open-ended questions regarding the perceived severity of each vignette. Lastly, officers were provided with an alternative version of each incident and were asked whether their responses or advice would differ if young children were present within the house.

## 5.3. Ethical approval

Approval for this research was granted by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were provided with information regarding the study's goals and the measures taken to uphold the privacy and anonymity of their personal details at the survey's outset.

## 5.4. Analytic strategy

The study employed a comprehensive analytical approach encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore the multifaceted dimensions of police officers' responses to IPV incidents involving child presence.

The quantitative data underwent meticulous coding and examination through the utilization of SPSS version 22.0. Notably, the mean ratings derived from responses to Likert-style rating scales were computed for all questions in the survey that sought insights into various aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. To unearth potential disparities in the generated means across distinct scenarios, we conducted rigorous Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) procedures. By scrutinizing variations among groups, ANOVA allowed us to discern whether statistically significant differences existed in officers' mean ratings based on the presence of different contextual factors. Furthermore, employing Chi-square analyses, we explored potential

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variations in responses across scenarios and between demographic groups, thereby offering valuable insights into any divergent patterns that might emerge.

Recognizing the need for a deeper exploration of officers' perspectives and the intricacies of their decision-making processes, we complemented our quantitative analysis with a meticulous examination of qualitative data. Particularly, we delved into the open-ended questions aimed at elucidating officers' viewpoints on IPV incidents involving children.

For the in-depth analysis of the police officers' narratives, a thematic analysis was employed. This methodological framework facilitated the systematic identification and interpretation of prevalent themes that encapsulated the complex reasoning behind officers' potential adjustments – or lack thereof – in their responses to IPV incidents when children were present. Guided by the established procedure of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), our analytical process focused on identifying and categorizing recurring patterns of reasons, unveiling a comprehensive panorama of the factors shaping officers' decision-making. Throughout this qualitative analysis, conducted using NVivo version 12, we engaged in a systematic process of seeking out commonalities and discrepancies within the narratives of police officers. According to our research objective, we chose the following themes: reasons for changed IPV responses with child presence and reasons for unchanged IPV responses with child presence. Under each theme, we grouped the specific patterns that emerged.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Quantitative data

#### 6.1.1. Profile of the police officers

Table 1 illustrates the participating officers' demographic and service-related attributes. The respondents had an average age of 38.7 years ( $SD = 8.5$ ), spanning from 21 to 60 years. Among the officers, there were 126 males and 49 females. Approximately, two-thirds of the respondents were married (66.3 %). About half of the respondents had served in the QPS for >10 years. A significant portion (73.7 %) held constables or senior constables positions, while 85.7 % had received formal training in responding to domestic violence calls.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the study sample (N = 175).**

Characteristic	N	%
<b>Age 38.7 (8.5)</b>		
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	126	72.0
Female	49	28.0
<b>Rank</b>		
Constable	67	38.3
Senior Constable	62	35.4
Sergeant	44	25.1
Senior Sergeant	2	1.1
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	16	9.1
Married	116	66.3
De facto	30	17.1
In a Relationship	7	4.0
Divorced	2	1.1
Separated	4	2.3
<b>Time at Police Service</b>		
<1 year	4	2.3
Between 1-2 Years	9	5.1
Between 2-5 Years	45	25.7
Between 5-10 Years	38	45.1
> 10 years	79	
<b>Training Received on IPV</b>		
No	25	14.3
Yes	150	85.7
<b>Note. M (SD) = Mean (standard deviation); IPV = Intimate partner violence.</b>		





### 6.1.2. Officer's ratings of the seriousness of the scenarios

Irrespective of the specific scenario (see Table 2), participating officers consistently acknowledged the occurrence of IPV, rating each scenario above 9 on a 10-point Likert scale (9.28, 9.07, 9.68, and 9.21). Officers also regarded all scenarios as relatively 'serious', with average ratings exceeding 3 out of a maximum of 5 (3.09, 3.02, 3.56, and 3.10). Only a minimal number of officers perceived scenarios as 'not at all serious' or 'extremely serious'. However, significant differences in ratings emerged across the scenarios for seriousness ( $p = .001$ ). Notably, scenario 3 received the highest seriousness rating, potentially attributed to Mr. Hamilton's alleged 'punch' rather than 'slap', differentiating it from other cases. This suggests that Mr. Hamilton's actions in Scenario 3 might have been perceived as more severe. Furthermore, Mr. Hamilton denied committing an offense in this scenario, and he accused Mrs. Hamilton of an offense in Scenario 4, which was not the case in Scenario 3.

Table 2. Officer's mean ratings of the seriousness of the scenarios.				
Scenario	Key differences in the scenarios	'n'	IPV occurred?	How serious?
		Total 'n' = 175	Mean rating: 1 (Unlikely)–10 (Very likely)	Mean rating: 1 (Not at all)–5 (Extremely)
1	Mrs H... claims that Mr. H slapped her across the face ... Mr. H claims that he lost his temper and slapped Mrs. H, but just to get her to stop yelling ... Mrs. H is not willing to provide a formal statement	47	9.28	3.09
2	Mrs H ... claims that Mr. H slapped her across the face ... Mr. H claims that he lost his temper and slapped Mrs. H, but just to get her to stop yelling ... Mrs. H is willing to provide a formal statement	45	9.07	3.02
3	Mrs H ... claims that Mr. H punched her in the face ... Mr. H claims that he lost his temper and punched Mrs. Hamilton, but just to get her to stop yelling ... Mrs. H is not willing to provide a formal statement	41	9.68	3.56
4	Mrs H ... claims that Mr. H slapped her across the face ... Mr. H claims that he lost his temper and pushed Mrs. H, but just to try and stop her from hitting him ... Mrs. H is not willing to provide a formal statement	42	9.21	3.10

Note. M (SD) = Mean (standard deviation); IPV = Intimate partner violence.

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### 6.1.3. Officers' potential actions in each scenario

Officers were asked about their likelihood of taking various actions for each scenario, scored on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Unlikely) to 10 (Very likely). The mean responses for each action are shown in Table 3. Significant differences in means were observed across all four scenarios for two actions (see Fig. 1), initiating an investigation ( $p = .001$ ) and detaining Mr. Hamilton ( $p = .019$ ). Officers demonstrated a higher likelihood of detaining Mr. Hamilton (6.47, 7.33, 8.41, 6.86), particularly in scenario 3, identified as the most serious among the scenarios. Significant variations in officers' willingness to initiate an investigation to charge Mr. Hamilton were evident. That is, officers were likely to do so in scenarios 2 (6.09) and 3 (5.76) and unlikely to do so in scenarios 1 (3.98) and 4 (4.12).

Officers were consistently unlikely, in each scenario, to not take any action (3.32, 3.13, 2.39, and 2.26), suggest Mrs. Hamilton seek a private domestic violence order (DVO) (3.57, 2.93, 2.76, and 2.48), file a cross-application for a DVO against both parties (2.19, 3.09, 2.32, and 3.21), or advise Mrs. Hamilton to relocate (4.28, 3.98, 3.78, and 3.71). These trends were more pronounced in scenarios 3 and 4, without reaching statistical significance.

Officers exhibited a consistent tendency, across scenarios, to pursue a DVO (7.81, 8.17, 8.71, and 7.48), inform Mrs. Hamilton of potential criminal charges against Mr. Hamilton (7.15, 7.48, 8.10, and 6.62), anticipate future DV between the couple (7.49, 7.97, 7.93, and 7.86). These inclinations were slightly accentuated in scenario 3, linked to Mr. Hamilton's 'punch', yet without statistical significance.

On average, officers were generally inclined, in all scenarios, to encourage Mrs. Hamilton to consider seeking criminal charges against Mr. Hamilton (6.09, 5.67, 5.39, and 6.14), and were agreeable to gathering statements for charging Mr. Hamilton (5.51, 6.26, 5.44, and 6.33), though statistical significance was lacking. Most importantly, officers consistently displayed a strong tendency, across all scenarios, to refer Mrs. Hamilton to support services (8.83, 8.93, 9.05, and 9.17), although this difference was not statistically significant.

**Table 3. Officer's potential actions for each scenario [Mean rating: 1 (Unlikely) -10 (Very likely)].**

Possible actions	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4	P-value across scenarios
No action necessary	3.32	3.13	2.39	2.26	n.s.
Application for a DVO against Mr. Hamilton	7.81	8.17	8.71	7.48	n.s.
Encourage Mrs. Hamilton to make a private application for a DVO	3.57	2.93	2.76	2.48	n.s.
Take out DVO applications against both Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton	2.19	3.09	2.32	3.21	n.s.
Advise that Mr. Hamilton could be charged with criminal offenses	7.15	7.48	8.10	6.62	n.s.
Initiate an investigation with a view to charging Mr. Hamilton	3.98	6.09	5.76	4.12	$p=.001$
Refer Mrs. Hamilton to support services	8.83	8.93	9.05	9.17	n.s.
Conclude that violence would likely to continue in the future	7.49	7.82	7.93	7.86	n.s.
Advise contact police next day in relation to proceeding with criminal charges	6.09	5.67	5.39	6.14	n.s.
Encourage Mrs. Hamilton to move out of the house	4.28	3.98	3.78	3.71	n.s.
Took a statement from Mrs. Hamilton to discuss criminal charges the next day	5.51	6.26	5.44	6.33	n.s.
Take Mr. Hamilton into detention for IPV	6.47	7.33	8.41	6.86	$p=.019$

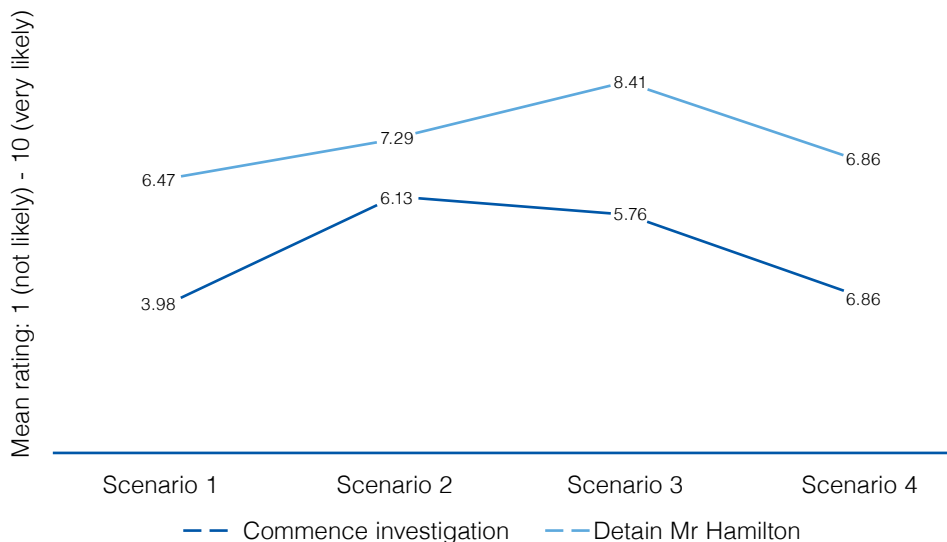
**Note. n.s. = Not significant.**

Scenarios 1 and 2 shared identical offense nature but differed in Mrs. Hamilton's willingness to provide a formal statement to the police. This allowed assessment of her statement's influence on officers' potential actions. Comparative analysis of mean and ordinal ratings revealed a sole significant difference: officers' willingness to initiate an investigation to charge Mr. Hamilton with a criminal offense ( $p = .001$ ). Officers rated their likelihood of doing so for

scenario 1 as 3.97/10 (i.e., unlikely) and 6.13/10 (i.e., likely) for scenario 2. Thus, the victim's willingness to provide a formal statement significantly influenced the officer's willingness to initiate an investigation, while other factors remained constant.

### 6.2. Qualitative data

This section presents the outcomes of the thematic analysis carried out on the narratives provided by police officers in



**Fig. 1. Willingness of officers to commence an investigation ( $p = .001$ ) and to detain Mr. Hamilton ( $p = .019$ ) by scenario.**

response to the open-ended question “Please explain why your course of action would or would not be different if there were young children in the house”. A considerable proportion (34.3 %) of the participating police officers indicated a willingness to change their response to IPV incidents when young children were present in the household. These officers encompassed 48.9 %, 35.6 %, 22.0 %, and 28.6 % across the four scenarios, with the highest inclination observed in scenario 1. Statistical significance in response variations across scenarios was established at  $p = .048$  (see Fig. 2).

It is essential to note that while a majority of officers ( $n = 123$ , 70.3 %) voluntarily provided elaborated written responses, the rates of participation varied across scenarios. Despite this limitation, the subsequent analysis presents consistent themes derived from officers’ narratives regarding their responses to IPV incidents when children were present. The analysis of the police officers’ narratives resulted in two themes and nine sub-themes (see Table 4).

#### **6.2.1. Theme 1: Reasons for changed IPV responses with child presence**

This theme encompasses the responses where police officers indicated that the presence of children in the household influenced their approach to handling IPV incidents. They emphasized the need to prioritize the safety and well-being of the children and consider the potential negative impact of the violence on them.

The predominant rationale underlying this inclination to change their responses to incidents of IPV when children were present in the household was their concern for child safety, well-being, and protection.

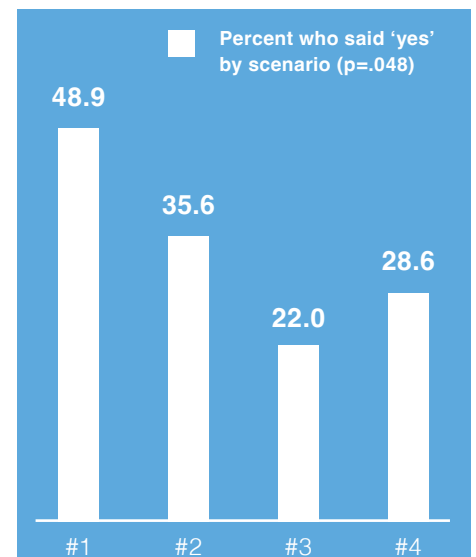
##### **6.2.1.1. Sub-theme 1.1: Concern for child safety and well-being**

Officers in this category stressed the importance of the safety and well-being of the children present and protecting them from harm and ensuring their environment is safe. They expressed concern about children being exposed to violence, both physically and emotionally. This concern was frequently articulated as the main driver for altering responses, as highlighted by Officer ID94 in scenario 1: “When children are present in the relationship - the domestic violence effect is far greater as it impacts the children more so than the aggrieved. For me personally, I see the children as being defenseless in every aspect and most affected by their parent’s actions.”

##### **6.2.1.2. Sub-theme 1.2:**

##### **Emotional abuse consideration**

Some officers acknowledged the potential emotional, psychological and behavioral impact on children who were exposed to IPV incidents. These officers believe that the presence of children heightens the significance of the incident due to the potential harm it poses to them. An officer highlighted, “Emotional abuse aspect—explain that if children are exposed to DV and she [the victim, Mrs. Hamilton] does not engage with DV



**Fig. 2. The proportion of officers who agreed their actions would differ if there were young children at IPV incidents.**

support agencies to address issues then this may reflect unfavorably upon her with respect to acting protectively towards her children.” (ID101, scenario 1).

##### **6.2.1.3. Sub-theme 1.3:**

##### **Legal and protective obligations**

Officers in this group referenced legislation and policies that mandate them to take protective actions when children are involved. They explained that child protection concerns necessitate a different response, which may involve referrals to child protective services or emphasizing the importance of seeking support to ensure the children’s safety. Certain officers also underscored the necessity of assessing the victim’s capability to ensure the safety of the children. This aspect was exemplified by Officer ID203 in scenario 3: “Need to consider whether she [the victim, Mrs. Hamilton] can be protective of children.”

##### **6.2.1.4. Sub-theme 1.4:**

##### **Breaking the cycle of violence**

Some officers mention the importance of breaking the cycle of domestic violence for the sake of the children. They believe that intervening and holding perpetrators accountable in front of their children can set an example and potentially prevent future violence by teaching the children that such violence is unacceptable. One officer highlighted, “You’re trying to break the cycle of IPV in the home by showing the kids that there are always consequences to your actions even in a family DV incident.”

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#### 6.2.1.5. Sub-theme 1.5: Referral and support considerations

Three patterns of responses have been identified: submission of emotional abuse reports, victim counseling and guidance, and referrals to child protection agencies. Some officers advocated for the inclusion of an emotional abuse report in cases involving children's exposure to IPV, recognizing the potential long-term impact on the children's emotional well-being: "I would complete a necessary emotional abuse report in addition to the [DV] application" (Officer ID193 Scenario 3). The second type of response would be advising the victim (Mrs. Hamilton) to consider the repercussions of IPV on children and encouraging them to remove children from potentially harmful environments: "I would advise that it is not good for the children to witness such events and she [the victim] needs to get them away from it" (Officer ID85, Scenario 1). The third type of response would be to make a referral to a child protection agency for follow-up to ensure that children's safety and well-being were assessed and addressed by professionals specialising in child welfare.

#### 6.2.2. Theme 2: Reasons for unchanged IPV responses with child presence

This theme represents responses from police officers who indicated that the presence of children would not significantly alter their approach to dealing with IPV incidents. They emphasized the continuation of police actions based on the nature of the incident, regardless of whether children were present or not.

##### 6.2.2.1. Sub-theme 2.1:

#### Consistency in police actions

Some officers asserted that the nature of the incident and the occurrence of domestic violence are the primary factors influencing their response. They emphasised that regardless of children's presence, domestic violence occurred and the response should remain consistent based on the severity of the incident. Their rationale was based on the belief that their standard response to IPV incidents already accounted for the necessary actions, regardless of the presence of children. In other words, these officers believed that the actions taken in response to IPV incidents were already suitable and adequate, irrespective of child presence. For instance, Officer ID 146 in Scenario

2 highlighted, "DV has occurred – an application is to be taken out regardless of if there were children or not." Officer ID 191 in Scenario 3 conveyed the belief that "Domestic violence investigations should be a mechanical process in bringing offenders before the court."

##### 6.2.2.2. Sub-theme 2.2:

#### Legal obligation and procedures

A subset of officers within this group emphasized their actions were dictated by legal guidelines and protocols surrounding domestic violence. They explained that the presence of children did not inherently alter these legal considerations. This was expressed by Officer ID238 in Scenario 4: "If there are indicators that DV took place and there is a history then obligated by law to take action. Kids or no kids."

It is noteworthy that within this group of officers who reported no change in their response, some still mentioned submitting emotional abuse reports or advising victims about the impact on children but stressed that their primary response would not differ. This is illustrated in the statement of Officer ID176 in Scenario 3: "It makes no difference with what has occurred between the pair, however, an emotional abuse report would be taken for DOCS [Department of Community Services] for what the children had witnessed."

##### 6.2.2.3. Sub-theme 2.3:

#### Incident dynamics

Officers in this group highlighted that their actions were driven by the specifics of the incident, such as the level of violence, the context and the parties involved. They argued that the presence of children would not necessarily change the fundamental dynamics of the incident itself. This was highlighted by Officer ID224 in Scenario 4: "The course of action would be similar, it is very different observing the dynamics of the situation, body language, emotion and utilizing all sensors during an incident. There are a lot of factors to consider."

##### 6.2.2.4. Sub-theme 2.4:

#### Inclusive protection

A couple of officers stressed that their primary duty is to protect all individuals involved in the incident, including both adults and children. They argued that the responses must encompass the entire family's well-being, with or without children present. This was illustrated in the statement of Officer ID155 in Scenario 2: "Protection of the children and providing them with a

happy home with the right image of what a happy couple should behave like."

Overall, the qualitative analysis underscores the complexity of police officers' decision-making processes when responding to IPV incidents with child presence. The analysis indicates a range of perspectives, with some officers placing a strong emphasis on child safety and emotional well-being, while others emphasize legal procedures and the unchanging nature of responses regardless of children's presence.

## 7. Discussion

This study provided empirical evidence of how officers' responses varied depending on the nature and severity of IPV incidents. The research also examined whether the presence of children during IPV incidents influenced them to take actions differently. On balance, the majority of officers exhibited a strong understanding of IPV severity and appropriate response strategies. Moreover, officers' willingness to take various actions in response to the hypothetical incidents demonstrated their understanding of professionally adept police response to IPV.

This study revealed that officers consistently recognized the occurrence of IPV across all presented scenarios, indicating a uniform perception of seriousness. However, noteworthy disparities in perceived seriousness emerged among scenarios, as well as in the anticipated actions for each. Notably, officers considered Scenario 3, involving allegations of a physical punch as opposed to a slap, to be the most serious. Consequently, this scenario elicited a broader range of actions from officers, including the issuance of a DVO, initiating a criminal investigation, and apprehension of the alleged offender, compared to other scenarios. In terms of officers' potential responses to IPV scenarios across vignettes, it was observed that only two actions—initiating a charge-pursuing investigation and detaining the perpetrator—were statistically significant. This finding suggests a consistent inclination among officers to view Mr. Hamilton as the perpetrator across scenarios, regardless of the specific details.

For the correct identification of the seriousness, a possible explanation may be that new legislative initiatives and family violence training for police



officers in Australia have made an impact on the criminal justice system. The establishment of specialized police units focusing on domestic and family violence, sexual assault, and child abuse and neglect in most Australian jurisdictions has probably played a role in shaping this pattern (Australian Law Reform Commission and NSW Law Reform Commission, 2010). Our findings are consistent with those of Robinson et al. (2016) who revealed that most officers in the USA and the UK are increasingly adept at recognizing and responding to IPV incidents. Our study points to the importance of achieving consistency across jurisdictions and highlights the need for further examining the interaction between IPV and child safety laws.

Regarding the victim's willingness to provide a formal statement, this study revealed its significant influence on officers' decision to initiate an investigation for charging the perpetrator. Officers indicated reluctance to initiate an investigation (Scenario 1) when Mrs. Hamilton declined to provide a statement, while they were more likely to do so (Scenario 2) when she agreed. This finding aligns with prior research demonstrating that officers' decisions can be influenced by the perceived commitment of victims to legal proceedings (Dawson & Hotton, 2014; Gracia et al., 2014; Johnson & Dai, 2016; Lee et al., 2013; Logan et al., 2006; Stewart, 2001).

Investigating officers' responses to the presence of children during IPV incidents, a noteworthy number of officers (22–49 %) indicated a potential

alternation in their actions when children were involved. Discrepancies were evident in responses, with some officers expressing a willingness to adapt actions for child safety and welfare, while others favoured maintaining conventional approaches. This finding indicates that children were not always the focal point of some officers' attention, possibly due to varying levels of personal responsibility perception and understanding of the severity of incidents (Gracia et al., 2008; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Additionally, discomfort in interacting with distressed children and a lack of confidence in offering appropriate support might contribute to inconsistent responses (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). These results, coupled with the significance of positive police attitudes, reinforce the necessity for comprehensive education and training for police officers to view IPV as a complex family system concern, with a focus on the well-being of children within this context. This training should target not only changing unsupportive attitudes toward victims and children but also enhancing officers' confidence in selecting appropriate criminal justice responses.

Given the well-established negative consequences of childhood exposure to parental violence, the variations in police responses to IPV incidents children warrant serious consideration. Officers' potential oversight of child witnesses could lead to missed opportunities for emotional support and connection to social services. Therefore, prioritizing additional training and implementing best practices

becomes imperative in such situations. There is a pressing need for further review and potential development of guidelines on how officers should respond to IPV incidents involving children. The findings also highlight the necessity for a review of Operational Performance Manuals to bridge the gap between theory, training, and practice. It is also important to consider whether the legal framework addressing IPV adequately accounts for the presence of children as victims. The focus on whether the victim can keep the child safe as opposed to the perpetrator's responsibility to ensure the child's safety raises questions about the current legal consequences for perpetrators in cases involving children.

The present study has several limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting findings. Firstly, the participants were exclusively from a single Australian state, limiting generalizability to officers in diverse regions due to potential variations in policy impacts on police responses to IPV (Finn et al., 2004). A comprehensive nationwide survey employing face-to-face interview methods with randomly selected officers could yield more representative and generalizable outcomes. Secondly, findings, while insightful into police reactions to IPV scenarios, reflect tendencies or behavioral intentions rather than definitive behaviors due to the use of hypothetical scenarios. Real-word responses might be significantly different from vignette-based reactions (Robinson et al., 2016; Robinson & Chandek,

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*continued on page 56*

2000; Saunders et al., 2016). Thus, investigating actual police responses using official data is essential. Thirdly, the study lacks insights into non-physical abuse responses, such as coercive control, due to the absence of relevant vignettes in our study. To address this, future research should incorporate both violent and non-violent vignettes. Lastly, while some officers offered extensive explanations, others provided succinct responses or none at all. Future studies should conduct a more in-depth investigation of why police would change their responses to IPV incidents involving children while examining their attitudes toward IPV.

## 8. Conclusion

While children are acknowledged as secondary victims of IPV in research and practice, it appears that this concerning issue is sometimes being

ignored by frontline officers. This study underscores the complexity of police officers' decision-making processes when responding to IPV incidents when children are present. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative analyses enriches our understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing officers' actions and attitudes. The quantitative analysis showed that officers consistently acknowledged the gravity of IPV cases and were ready to undertake different measures like launching investigations and detaining perpetrators. However, the qualitative analysis revealed that certain officers rigidly adhered to standard protocols, stressing their legal responsibilities and claiming that their current responses to these incidents were sufficient. The findings highlight the need for comprehensive training that accounts for the intricate interplay between standardized procedures and

the unique contexts of IPV incidents involving children. Ultimately, a nuanced approach that balances the consistent application of protocols with responsive adaptation to situational factors is crucial for the effective policing of IPV incidents and the protection of vulnerable children. Although this adds to a more profound comprehension of the intricate decision-making procedures used by law enforcement officers when handling IPV cases, additional detailed investigation with a large sample applying a mixed method is highly recommended to strengthen our understanding of officers' perceived responses to both violent and non-violent IPV. With a large data set, future studies can undertake more sophisticated analytical procedures and also investigate the potential impact of variations in policy across different jurisdictions.

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