

Smart Justice

“Smart action for a safer community”

Preventing family violence

Family violence is the most common form of violence experienced by Australian women. The key to stopping family violence is increased investment in prevention, early intervention and support.

Family violence is mainly committed by men against women and children

Family violence is behaviour by a person towards a family member that is controlling and causes fear. It includes physically, sexually, emotionally and economically abusive behaviour.¹ Many acts of family violence are crimes, including physical and sexual assault, abduction, property damage, arson and homicide. While anyone can be a victim or perpetrator, family violence is mostly committed by men against women and children.² About 80% of family violence intervention orders in Victoria are issued against men.³

Family violence is a significant proportion of overall crime

It is difficult to measure the true extent of family violence because many family violence crimes are not reported to or recorded by police. Crime victim surveys vary in their methods, but conclude that between 1 in 6 and 1 in 3 women have experienced violence from an intimate partner since the age of 15.⁴ Family violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15-44.⁵ Victoria Police data shows that nearly 40% of crimes against the person relate to family incidents, including 43% of assaults.⁶ There are on average 27 family violence deaths in Victoria each year, comprising about 40% of all homicides.⁷

Victoria Police statistics show the reported family incident related violent crime has increased almost 300% since 2002/03. This seems mainly due to improved police and other service responses giving victims more confidence to report to police, rather than an increase in actual crime.⁸

Despite the significance of family violence related crime, the Victorian Government’s ‘law and order’ policies⁹ have a disproportionate focus on public transport and street crime. This diverts funding for family violence prevention strategies which could in turn reduce the overall rate of crime.

Family violence causes significant harm to individuals and society

Family violence can have serious impacts on health, education, employment and the economic well-being of victims, families, workplaces and communities.¹⁰ The economic cost of violence against women in Victoria is estimated at \$3.4 billion every year, meaning that preventing family violence against one woman would save over \$20,000.¹¹

Family violence can be prevented

The causes of family violence are complex, but include:

- Unequal power relations between men and women;
- Social attitudes and practices that encourage, condone and perpetuate violence; and
- Limited access to resources and support for women and children experiencing family violence.¹²

We can effectively address these causes, but only if we invest sufficient funds in evidence-based prevention and response programs.

Education programs that promote respectful relationships and which highlight that violence is unacceptable have a key role to play in preventing family violence.¹³ Yet, there is no comprehensive statewide education and awareness strategy in Victoria aimed at preventing family violence.

Men’s behaviour change programs can also prevent violence against women and children by changing men’s behaviour, identifying and managing risk, and working with those affected by men’s violence to support their

safety and recovery needs. However, the demand for places in these programs exceeds the capacity to provide them due to inadequate government funding.

Early intervention by providing accessible legal information, advice and representation through community legal centres and their duty lawyer services at court can also prevent future violence by enabling women to protect themselves and their children by applying for an intervention order and linking in with police and other support services. However, family violence courts face increasing strain due to over-crowding, delays and safety risks.¹⁴ Government funding for family violence support services is also not meeting escalating demands.¹⁵

Refuges and family violence support services do not have capacity to meet demand for services which means that women cannot always get the level of support they need. Many women and their children end up becoming homeless when leaving violent relationships.¹⁶

Coordinated, integrated responses are vital to preventing family violence, and particular focus needs to be given to groups at greater risk of violence such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, and women with disabilities.

Smart Justice Solutions

We need to prevent family violence by tackling its causes with:

- Comprehensive long-term strategies to change attitudes and practices to promote non-violence and equal and respectful relationships between men and women.¹⁷
- Greater investment in domestic violence services to match the increased levels of reported family violence and the needs of all victims.
- Specialist family violence units in regional and metropolitan courts staffed by victim and respondent workers, as well as specialist advocates for high risk groups.
- Safe waiting spaces for victims in all courts that hear applications for family violence intervention orders.
- Greater investment in men's behaviour change programs tailored to individual need, so that more men have the option to participate for the time required to achieve sustainable changes.¹⁸
- Cost-effective interventions to strengthen perpetrator accountability across police, corrections, courts, child protection and other statutory and non-statutory agencies.¹⁹
- Greater investment in community legal centres to expand legal assistance to women seeking intervention orders to protect against violence.
- Better family violence court resourcing, training and expanded specialist support services.
- Ongoing investment in Victoria's Systemic Review of Family Violence Deaths, to learn more from family violence deaths in order to prevent future deaths and serious injury.²⁰

This fact sheet was written with Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, Domestic Violence Victoria, No To Violence Male Family Violence Prevention Association, and Women's Legal Service Victoria. It is based on the law of Victoria, Australia and was last updated on 24 July 2014.

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2. *Measuring Family Violence in Victoria: Victorian Family Violence Database Volume 5* (2012).
3. Above n 2, 81.
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Personal Safety Survey 4906.0* (2006); Mouzos & Makkai, *Women's Experiences of Male Violence* (2004). A limitation of household surveys is that they do not record crimes against homeless people or people in institutions.
5. VicHealth, *The Health Costs of Violence: Measuring the Burden of Disease Caused by Intimate Partner Violence* (2004).
6. Victoria Police, *Crime Statistics 2012-13*, 24, 31.
7. *Coroners Court of Victoria 2012-13 Annual Report*, 34. This is considered to be a conservative estimate.
8. Victoria Police, *Crime Statistics 2012-13*, 23-24.
9. Napthine, 'Our commitment to law and order' <http://www.premier.vic.gov.au/our-commitment/law-and-order.html>
10. National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, *Background Paper to Time For Action* (2009), 36-47.
11. Office of Women's Policy, *A Right to Respect: Victoria's Plan to Prevent Violence against Women 2010-20* (2009), 11; National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, *The Cost of Violence against Women and their Children* (2009), 4.
12. VicHealth, *Preventing Violence Before It Occurs: A Framework and Background Paper* (2007).
13. Above n 12.
14. Jones, 'Courts can't cope as domestic violence hits hard,' *Herald Sun*, 10 July 2012; Spooner and Butt, 'System struggles as domestic violence orders, breaches hit record high', *The Age*, 28 November 2013.
15. Sexton, 'Domestic violence services in crisis,' *The Age*, 21 August 2012; Lee and Cook, 'Domestic Violence Victoria calls for funds' *The Age*, 18 April, 2014.
16. AIHW (2012). *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection*, March quarter, Table 4.7, 44.
17. VicHealth, *National Survey on Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women 2009* (2010).
18. See <http://ntv.org.au/what-we-do/mens-behaviour-change/>.
19. See No To Violence Male Family Violence Prevention Association 'What can be done to strengthen accountability for men who perpetrate family and domestic violence?' (2013) <http://ntv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/130919-ntv-accountability-paper.pdf>
20. Toscano, 'Slashed funding raises concerns over curbing family violence' *The Age*, 24 April 2014.