

## Strong Foundations – Family Violence response survey

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria and Tasmania representing more than 150 community service organisations, students, and individuals. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.

As the peak for child and family services, the Centre welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on Victoria's *Strong foundations: Building on Victoria's work to end family violence*. Our submission has a strong focus on the impact of family violence on children and young people and the need for more targeted and evidence-informed responses to address their needs. We look at each of the five key priorities and provide some introductory comments about the document as a whole.

### Overall comments

The Centre supports the proposed focus on five key priority areas, including on children and young people. The document affirms the need to listen to children, to recognise their specific and unique needs, and to tailor services and supports to these needs. However, there are some gaps in the document, including the lack of any reference to children's rights other than a passing reference to the rights of Aboriginal children and young people. The bulk of the document appears to be mainly focused on adult family violence and adult sexual violence. There is little or no mention of the fact that family violence often co-occurs with child abuse, including child sexual abuse.<sup>1</sup> When sexual violence is referred to throughout the document, this is almost exclusively through an adult lens, excluding child sexual abuse.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that, nationally, one in three girls and one in five boys had experienced some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> The study also found that child maltreatment is rarely limited to one form of maltreatment, meaning that exposure to domestic violence can occur alongside other forms of maltreatment, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. The Centre looks forward to the development of a dedicated sexual violence strategy by the Victorian Government and urges inclusion of sexual abuse in relation to children's experiences, including impact, prevention and healing.

While *Strong Foundations* notes that 36 per cent of family violence incidents occurred in front of a child or young person, Crime Statistics Agency data also show that 35 per cent of children recorded by Victorian police in 2018-19 were *under the age of five years*.<sup>3</sup> Despite research showing the significant level of risk to infants under 12 months living with family violence, and the fact that this age group makes up the highest cohort of children to enter crisis accommodation and refuges with their mothers after fleeing family violence,<sup>4</sup> the vulnerability of very young children is not mentioned in *Strong Foundations*. The Centre would like to see more explicit inclusion of infants and young children in *Strong Foundations*, and of their specific needs in relation to addressing the impacts of family violence.

There is also little in *Strong Foundations* relating to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) despite a recent AIFS study on IPV amongst young Australians finding that around three in 10 adolescents aged 18-19 years had reported at least one experience of IPV in the previous year.<sup>5</sup> Emotional abuse was the most common form of IPV reported followed by physical violence and sexual violence. The high levels of IPV among adolescents highlights the need for primary prevention measures and early intervention, including increasing awareness among professionals of its prevalence and impact.

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<sup>1</sup> Campo, M. (2015). Children's exposure to domestic and family violence: Key issues and responses. CFCA Paper no. 36. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

## Drive down family and sexual violence

*What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to build a community-wide approach to preventing family and sexual violence?*

To address gender inequality and violence against women, we need to engage with people where they ‘live, work, learn, socialise and play’.<sup>6</sup> Raising awareness of the harms of family violence, how we identify and respond to it, and ultimately how we eradicate it are important conversations to have in a wide range of settings, workplaces and institutions.

One potential avenue for building community awareness of family violence is through community sport, as recognised in the government’s *Guidelines for Preventing Violence Against Women: Taking Action Through Community Sport*.<sup>7</sup> Over eight million Australians use community sports facilities each year.<sup>8</sup> In regional areas sporting clubs are often ‘the glue’ which holds communities together and provide opportunities to embed gender equity principles and respectful relationships. However, while the numbers of women participating in community sport have increased, there are still gender inequities and a need for policies that explicitly challenge club environments to become more inclusive.<sup>9</sup>

Resources and materials promoting gender equality in junior and senior sporting clubs, the media, schools, early education and care settings, businesses, universities, the entertainment industry, local government areas could also address and potentially help drive down family violence. By sparking conversations, keeping these issues at front of mind, and providing resources for support when it is needed, Victoria can reduce the impact of family violence in our state.

There are specific programs which have proven to be successful, such as The Man Box (JSS) and The Man Cave, Caring Dads, and primary prevention programs run by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that are First Nations-led. Relationships Australia is currently working with Melbourne City Football Club, Victorian Amateur Football Association, Women’s Health in the North and SBS on the *Healthy Clubs, Healthy Relationships* initiative funded by the Victorian Government through the Preventing Violence Through Sports Grant program. Other similarly funded projects include a focus on changing the attitudes of young men, training for coaches, gender equity plans, role modelling through workshops and training drills, and bystander training.

**Recommendation 1.** Continue to fund community sporting organisations to specifically address the drivers of family violence and promote gender equality.

**Recommendation 2.** Develop fit-for-purpose resources designed to address the drivers of gender inequality and family violence tailored for specific sectors.

## Focus on children and young people

*Provide support for children and young people where, when and how they need it*

<sup>2</sup> Haslam, D., Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J., Finkelhor, D., Higgins, D., Meinck, F., Erskine, H., Thomas, H., Lawrence, D., & Malacova, E. (2023). The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology.

<sup>3</sup> Crime Statistics Agency. (2021). Child witnesses of family violence. <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/research-and-evaluation/publications/child-witnesses-of-family-violence>

<sup>4</sup> Bunston, W. (2018). How refuge provides ‘refuge’ to infants: Exploring how ‘refuge’ is provided to infants entering crisis accommodation with their mothers after fleeing family violence. *Perspectives in Mental Health*. 26(4). [https://perspectives.waimh.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2019/06/Bunston\\_1-5\\_-2018\\_4\\_10thDec\\_Final\\_Perspectives\\_IMH.pdf](https://perspectives.waimh.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2019/06/Bunston_1-5_-2018_4_10thDec_Final_Perspectives_IMH.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> O’Donnell, K., Rioseco, P., Vittiglia, A., Rowland, B., & Mundy, L. (2023). Intimate partner violence among Australian 18–19-year-olds. (Growing Up in Australia Snapshot Series – Issue 11). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

<sup>6</sup> RMIT University and Our Watch. (2017). A team effort: Preventing violence against women through sport. <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/11/07030344/A-team-effort-Preventing-violence-against-women-through-sport-evidence-guide.pdf> p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Victorian Government. (2022). The guidelines for preventing violence against women: Taking action through community sport. [https://sport.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0032/183497/Final-SRV-Guidelines-for-Preventing-Violence-Against-Women-long-version.pdf](https://sport.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0032/183497/Final-SRV-Guidelines-for-Preventing-Violence-Against-Women-long-version.pdf) p.4.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Government. (2023). Department of Health and Aged Care: Community sport. <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/sport/community-sport>

<sup>9</sup> Jeanes, R., Spaaij, R. & Gorman, S. (2020). *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*. 45(6). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723520962955>

Children and young people who have experienced the harms associated with family violence deserve to have their experiences validated and to be recognised as victim survivors in their own right. Children are not a homogenous group and their individual circumstances need to be considered when assisting their recovery from family violence. *Strong Foundations* differentiates between children and young people but does not acknowledge the differential risks, vulnerability and needs within the category ‘children’, such as infants and toddlers, primary school aged children and older children.

Children and young people have the right to age-appropriate supports, including therapeutic interventions, which can be easily accessed, to give them the best opportunity for healing and recovery from family violence.<sup>10</sup> Services should continue to be funded and resourced to meet the growing demand for child-centred responses.

The role of the Respectful Relationships program in government schools and in early education and care settings provides opportunities for education and community awareness around the impacts of family violence for children, but it also has the potential to elicit disclosures of family violence. These programs provide vital supports for children and should receive appropriate and sustainable funding. The programs need to be delivered by professionals who understand the early signs of family violence impact and how to respond appropriately in the event of a disclosure. All Victorian government school teachers should be able to provide trauma-informed support for children when they need it and respond to their concerns in a timely and appropriate way. They should be aware of the available supports for children and young people and to refer children and their families to these services. The Centre would like to see more child and family services practitioners in government schools to support teachers in their roles as advocates for child victim-survivors of family violence. Community service organisations can provide intensive, wrap-around supports and referrals to specialist services as needed.

**Recommendation 3.** Advocate for all student teachers to be trained in topics relating to trauma, childhood abuse, and responding to family violence as a core part of their education studies.

**Recommendation 4.** Resource community service organisations to provide skilled practitioners to support families in schools where there is significant need.

### Strengthen support for victim survivors

*What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to provide all Victorians who experience family or sexual violence with the support they need when they need it?*

With the implementation of the 227 recommendations of the Royal Commission, the Victorian Government has laid the foundations for a state-wide and more consistent approach to supporting victim survivors and to holding perpetrators to account. However, systemic barriers such as housing insecurity and economic vulnerability make leaving family violence situations challenging for women and their children. Refuge Victoria, one of the largest specialist providers of family violence refuge accommodation in Victoria, supported 511 people in the 2022-23 financial year, 62 per cent of whom were children under the age of 18.<sup>11</sup> Many arrive without access to financial supports, Medicare cards or other personal identity documentation.

The Homes for Families (H4F) program, funded by the Victorian Government since October 2021, has successfully housed families residing in emergency accommodation and linked them into a range of local community supports. The Centre supports this program continuing to be funded as a means of getting children out of unsafe emergency accommodation, pending the results of the current evaluation. Providing secure and safe accommodation is a fundamental way in which the government could be supporting Victorians who experience family or sexual violence.

<sup>10</sup> Fitz-Gibbon, Kate; McGowan, Jasmine; Stewart, Rebecca (2023). I believe you: Children and young people's experiences of seeking help, securing help and navigating the family violence system. Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/21709562.v2> p.24.

<sup>11</sup> Refuge Victoria. (2023). From refuge to recovery. Annual report 2022-23. <https://refugevictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/7569-RV-Refuge-Victoria-Annual-Report-2022-23-DIGITAL.pdf>

The government has invested significantly in The Orange Door. *Strong Foundations* notes that 34,437 referrals to The Orange Door network included at least one child. However, services specifically designed to work with children as victim survivors of family violence are often not available.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, not all workforces in The Orange Door are confident in working with children and/or young people who have experienced family violence.<sup>13</sup> The Centre is currently funded by Family Safety Victoria to improve workforce capability in The Orange Door network in relation to working with children and young people. If children are to receive an appropriate service, then these service gaps need to be addressed. Staff attrition means the need is ongoing as new practitioners enter the workforce.

**Recommendation 5.** Continue to fund Homes for Families (pending the results of the evaluation).

#### **Invest in the workforce to ensure victim survivors have access to timely, high-quality supports**

Across the state, child and family services and specialist family violence services are under pressure, with levels of demand reaching unsustainable levels. This is evidenced by the wait times for victim survivors seeking case management support, which, at the time of writing, stretches between 14 to 29 days.<sup>14</sup> Such delays not only increase the risks faced by victim survivors but also increase the likelihood of them withdrawing from the system or facing worse circumstances by the time they do receive support.

The Centre urges the government to continue to invest in the child and family services sector to enable the earliest possible intervention in families to prevent and reduce family and sexual violence and sexual abuse of children, and in the specialist family violence workforce to meet the acute safety needs of individuals. The Orange Door network needs to be resourced sufficiently so that all family members can access the type of support needed to keep children, young people and other family members safe and living in nurturing environments.

**Recommendation 6.** Continue to fund child and family services and specialist family violence services to meet current and future service demand to meet the safety and wellbeing needs of all Victorians.

#### **Supporting victim survivor's journey to healing and recovery**

As *Strong Foundations* notes, there is a need for further trauma specialist counselling support for victim survivors of family violence, sexual violence, sexual abuse and other forms of child maltreatment. Currently, there are limited specialist family, domestic and sexual violence counselling services which are non-government run and based in community settings, such as women's health services, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCO's) or via Primary Healthcare Centres. The expense of private therapy remains a significant barrier for many victim survivors.

Adults who have experienced maltreatment as children are 2.8 times more likely to have a mental health challenge.<sup>15</sup> A recent study by the Australian Institute of Criminology in relation to sexual exploitation identified symptoms in victim survivors of traumatic flashbacks, feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, emotional dysregulation and suicidal ideation.<sup>16</sup> While government-funded Medicare subsidies under a Mental Health Treatment Plan cover some costs associated with therapeutic services, victim survivors are often left with significant out-of-pocket expenses. Given the often-profound long-term impacts of maltreatment on people's lives, it is important that those who have been subject to maltreatment can access quality, timely and affordable mental health supports when, where, and how they need it to support their recovery.

<sup>12</sup> Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor. (2020). Children as primary victims of family violence. November Report. <https://www.fvrim.vic.gov.au/report-family-violence-reform-implementation-monitor-1-november-2020/children-primary-victims#clear-need-for-improved-availability-of-support-services-that-meet-children%E2%80%99s-needs>

<sup>13</sup> Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. (2021). Child wellbeing survey. Unpublished survey data.

<sup>14</sup> Safe and Equal. (2023). Measuring family violence service demand and capacity: An emerging picture of the specialist family violence sector, [https://safeandequal.org.au/wp-content/uploads/REP\\_2023-Safe-and-Equal-Measuring-FV-Service-Demand-and-Capacity-Report-FINAL.pdf](https://safeandequal.org.au/wp-content/uploads/REP_2023-Safe-and-Equal-Measuring-FV-Service-Demand-and-Capacity-Report-FINAL.pdf) p.6.

<sup>15</sup> Haslam, D., Mathews, B., Pacella, R., et al. (2023.) The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology.

<sup>16</sup> Australian Government, Australian Institute of Criminology (2023.) Sexual exploitation in Australia: Victim-survivor support needs and barriers to support provision, [https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/r29\\_sexual\\_exploitation\\_in\\_australia.pdf](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/r29_sexual_exploitation_in_australia.pdf), p.viii.

**Recommendation 7.** Collaborate with the Commonwealth to increase the number of Medicare subsidised therapy sessions to 20 per year for victim survivors of family violence, sexual violence, child abuse and all forms of child maltreatment.

### Supporting the diversity of survivor experience

There are inadequate resources available to support LGBTQIA+ people experiencing family violence in Australia.<sup>17</sup> Findings from the Royal Commission generated four recommendations that directly target the needs of LGBTIQ communities.<sup>18</sup> This has resulted in some LGBTIQ community-controlled organisations receiving ongoing or longer-term funding to support the expanded operations of their family violence services. However there needs to be better investment in service inclusivity, including infrastructure and training to support the expansion of existing family violence services so that they can better cater to more of the LGBTQIA+ population.<sup>19</sup>

**Recommendation 8.** Continue funding for LGBTQIA+ specific services to ensure all communities are supported to heal and recover from the impacts of family violence.

### Continued investment in proven and promising programs

**Family Violence Flexible Support Packages** (FSPs) deliver personalised and holistic responses that assist child and adult victim survivors of family violence to access support, stabilise and improve their safety, wellbeing and independence.

Over 8,000 FSPs were provided to victim survivors in 2021–22, giving them the opportunity to direct their own pathway to safety, providing access to a range of supports including counselling, education, housing stability, and other practical or material needs.<sup>20</sup> FSPs can also be used to purchase safety and security responses as part of the Personal Safety Initiative (PSI). This includes property modifications and technology to enable victim survivors of family violence to remain safely in, or return safely to, their homes and communities, or relocate to a new home.

**Recommendation 9.** Continue to fund Family Violence Flexible Support Packages to give victim survivors the opportunity to direct their own pathway to safety, healing and independence.

### Respond to change

*What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to respond to cultural, social and technological shifts that impact family and sexual violence?*

### Importance of ongoing education

One of the emerging risks for children and young people is the perpetration of online sexual abuse, with the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) reporting that online forms of child sexual exploitation have grown exponentially over recent years, including grooming, image-based abuse, and the spread of self-generated sexually explicit material.<sup>21</sup> Key findings from ACCCE's 2020 report on community perceptions found that:

- Awareness and understanding of online child sexual exploitation is limited and superficial
- Online child sexual exploitation is a stigmatised issue, inhibiting discussion as a community
- Existing social norms (such as privacy preservation, victim blaming and prioritisation of physical over online safety) discourage vigilance
- Preventative measures are inconsistently and ineffectively applied

<sup>17</sup> Lusby, S., Lim, G., Carman, M. *et al.* (2023). Evidence to Act: LGBTIQ-Inclusive Family Violence Service Provision in Australia and the Politicisation of Data Gaps. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00615-6>

<sup>18</sup> State Government of Victoria. (2016). Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations (Parl Paper 132 (2014–2016)).

<sup>19</sup> Lusby, S., Lim, G., Carman, M. *et al.* (2023). Evidence to Act: LGBTIQ-Inclusive Family Violence Service Provision in Australia and the Politicisation of Data Gaps. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00615-6>

<sup>20</sup> Victorian Government. (2023). Strong Foundations. <https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/2303438-Strong-foundations-FA4-Web.pdf>, p.16.

<sup>21</sup> Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation. (2020). Online child sexual exploitation: Understanding community awareness, perceptions, attitudes and preventative behaviours. Research report. [https://accce.prod.acquia-sites.com/sites/default/files/2021-02/ACCCE\\_Research-Report\\_OCE.pdf](https://accce.prod.acquia-sites.com/sites/default/files/2021-02/ACCCE_Research-Report_OCE.pdf)



- There is a strong need for awareness and education tools to support the development of preventative behaviours in relation to online safety.<sup>22</sup>

The Centre supports improved resourcing of community education campaigns in schools and more broadly to create safer online environments for children and young people.

**Recommendation 10.** Work with the Commonwealth to implement a national, multi-pronged and ongoing prevention strategy to improve community awareness and knowledge in relation to online child sexual exploitation.

### Inclusive, safe and responsible AI

The national e-Safety Commission has recently highlighted the ways in which artificial intelligence (AI) poses potential risks and harms to children, including providing opportunities for adults to sexually exploit children using harmful images and grooming techniques. AI also has the ability to access children's data and to provide young people with harmful information, such as automatically generated responses to disclosures of imminent harm. Victorian parents, practitioners in the sector and educators need to be aware of these risks when their children are engaging with AI programs.

Government has an important role to play in creating a more regulated and safer environment which balances development of AI with technological progress.<sup>23</sup> While a national approach to the regulation of AI is needed, the Centre recommends that as part of the Rolling Action Plan, resources for practitioners and educators are created to help prevent and respond to the rising impact of AI on victim survivors.

**Recommendation 11.** Prioritise research and data collection around the emerging use of AI-facilitated abuse, to provide an evidence-informed approach to tackling this emerging challenge in the Rolling Action Plan.

### The role of child and family services in responding to place-based need

Place-based responses are crucial in responding to and preventing family violence. These responses are characterised by multi-agency collaboration and a focus on local client support, involving community co-design, particularly from underrepresented groups. While evidence for the effectiveness of place-based services is growing, it is clear they require long-term, flexible funding to support co-design, implementation, evaluation, capacity building, training, and mentoring.

The literature shows that incidents of family violence increase during times of natural disaster.<sup>24</sup> Across the state, our members help facilitate community-led emergency responses that show the value of local expertise in providing timely, tailored solutions. Local communities are ideally positioned to design and implement place-based recovery strategies. An example of this is the Goulburn Flood Recovery Service in Victoria, Australia, which effectively supported flood-impacted communities through a coalition of local organisations, with expertise in disaster recovery, food insecurity, family services and mental health and wellbeing.

Place-based models which bring together local service providers to address local problems have great potential for addressing impacts relating to family violence and align with the Federal Government's plan to end violence against woman and children through community-led initiatives.

**Recommendation 12.** Provide long-term, sustainable investment in community service organisations to deliver place-based responses in times of crisis and disaster.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.III.

<sup>23</sup> Office of the Victorian Public Information Commissioner. (2018). Artificial Intelligence and privacy: Issues and challenges. <https://ovic.vic.gov.au/privacy/resources-for-organisations/artificial-intelligence-and-privacy-issues-and-challenges/#easy-footnote-30-22333>

<sup>24</sup> Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience. (2022). Understanding the experiences of women in disasters: Lessons for emergency management planning. p.73. [https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/9175/ajem\\_23-2022-01.pdf](https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/9175/ajem_23-2022-01.pdf)