



Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into capturing data on family violence perpetrators in Victoria

Parliament House, Spring St

East Melbourne VIC 3002

31 May 2024

Dear Legal and Social Issues Committee,

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into capturing data on family violence perpetrators in Victoria

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry. Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation working to build a just society where all people can live to their full potential. For over 45 years, we have accompanied the most disadvantaged members of the community, providing services and advocacy in the areas of justice and crime prevention; mental health and well-being; settlement and community building; education, training and employment; and gender and ecological justice.

In the past few years, we undertook two major pieces of research, “The Man Box” and “Identifying and understanding child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes among Australian men.” These studies are among a small handful of studies that have sought to gain insight into perpetration of violence and child sexual abuse in Australia. They have allowed us to gain insight not only into the prevalence and nature of perpetration in Australia, but also into the challenges associated with undertaking research with a focus on perpetration. On this basis, we make the following three recommendations:

- 1. Fund research into perpetration**
- 2. Develop improved and nation-wide guidance on how to conduct research on perpetration**
- 3. Develop ways to capture existing data on perpetration.**

This submission outlines our experience collecting data on perpetration of violence and child sexual abuse in Australia; insights we gained in completing this research, including challenges particular to this undertaking; and the rationale for our recommendations.

Jesuit Social Services acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of all the lands on which Jesuit Social Services operates and pay respect to their Elders past and present. We express our gratitude for First Nations people’s love and care of people, community, land and all life.

Our experience

The Men's Project

In 2017, Jesuit Social Services established The Men's Project, seeking to develop new ways to support men and boys to live respectful, accountable and fulfilling lives free from violence and other harmful behaviours. The Men's Project undertakes attitudinal change and early intervention work with men and boys through schools (including flexible learning schools), sports clubs, workplaces, construction sites and other settings. We also deliver a national child sexual abuse helpline, Stop it Now!, which works with adults concerned about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts or behaviours towards children (this work is also outlined in the section below).

The Man Box research

The work of The Men's Project is also informed by landmark research we published in 2018, 2020 and 2024 which tracks the links between attitudes to manhood and harmful behaviour and outcomes among boys and men. The Man Box was the first Australian study to explore the association between attitudes to masculine stereotypes and men's behaviour.

These studies found a strong link between adherence to strict and outmoded gender norms (such as "Men should use violence to get respect if necessary," "A man shouldn't have to do household chores," or "A gay guy is not a real man") and perpetration of violence, worse mental health outcomes, problem gambling and alcohol or other drug use.¹

Methodology²

Below we outline the methodology specific to the 2024 study, which, building on prior work and in partnership with Respect Victoria, included a number of questions related to perpetration of intimate partner violence.

The study's research aims were to understand:

1. The level of social pressure on men to adhere to stereotypical masculine norms
2. The level of men's personal endorsement of stereotypical masculine norms
3. How men's personal endorsement of these stereotypical masculine norms predicts outcomes such as their wellbeing, risk-taking behaviours, pornography use, help-seeking, bystander behaviour, bullying, sexual harassment and perpetration of intimate partner violence
4. The relationship between personal endorsement of these stereotypical masculine norms and men's level of hostility towards women, and denial of gender inequality

¹ The Men's Project & Flood, M. 2024. The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia. Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, p. 12. [Weblink](#).

² For detailed information on the study's methodology, see pp. 22–27, The Men's Project & Flood, M. 2024. [Weblink](#).

5. The impact of men’s level of attachment to stereotypical masculine norms.

Table 1: Proportion of men who have perpetrated physical intimate partner violence, by Man Box quintiles, 18–30-year-olds

% of respondents who answered “yes” to “Have you ever done the following things to your current or any other partner....”

	Quintile 1: lowest Man Box endorsement	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5: highest Man Box endorsement
Slapped or thrown something that could hurt them?	2%	5%	7%	8%	22%
Pushed or shoved a partner?	7%	5%	6%	8%	33%
Hit a partner with your fist or something else that could hurt them?	1%	4%	5%	6%	24%
Kicked, dragged or beat a partner up?	4%	3%	3%	6%	21%
Choked or burnt them on purpose?	5%	7%	8%	4%	18%
% of respondents who said YES to at least one of the five forms of physical violence	11%	14%	18%	21%	59%

The methodology of these studies included both quantitative research (a survey) and qualitative research (focus groups). The survey was completed anonymously by 3,519 men aged 18–45 who currently live in Australia. Non-probability sampling was used to recruit potential respondents. Participants were recruited through CloudResearch, an online recruitment and survey company. CloudResearch asked respondents a series of vetting questions and applied behavioural and device analysis security tests to exclude potential “bots”.

The key construct in this study is the “Man Box score,” which was calculated for each survey respondent to measure the degree to which they personally agree with the Man Box rules (a set of social norms relating to masculinity). To address research aim 3, the survey also collected data on a range of life outcomes, including intimate partner violence (see Table 1 above).

The study found that a large number of men have perpetrated violence against their intimate partner. For instance, for 18–30-year-olds, 28% of respondents self-reported perpetrating at least one of eight forms of physical or sexual violence against their partner (see Figure 1 below).

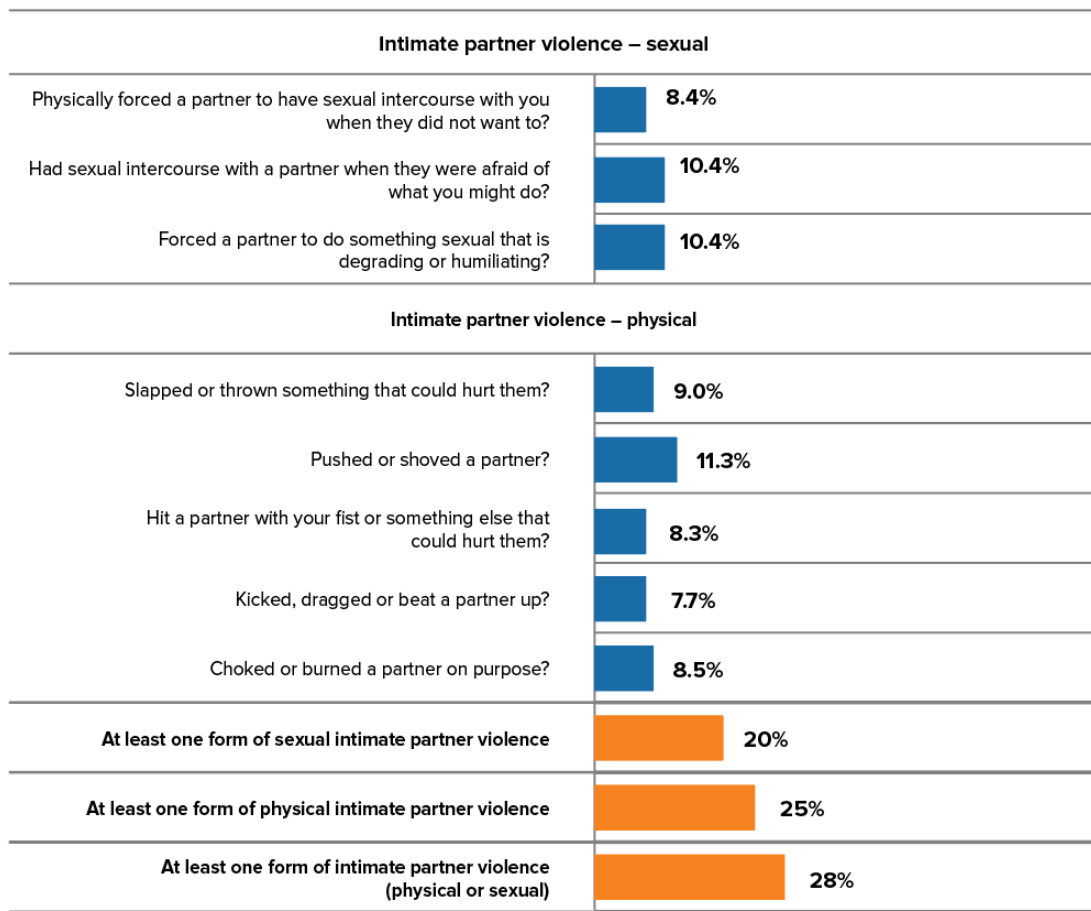
The study also found that, on average, 37% of 18–30-year-old men perceive pressure to conform to Man Box rules; 26% personally agreed with Man Box rules; and those who agreed with Man Box rules were

more likely to have perpetrated violence, hold violence-supportive attitudes, and have consumed violent pornography, including being:

- 35 times more likely to have frequently perpetrated verbal sexual harassment against a woman or girl in a public space
- 17 times more likely to express violence-supportive attitudes
- 11 times more likely to have frequently perpetrated verbal, online or physical bullying
- Eight times more likely to have perpetrated sexual violence against an intimate partner
- Five times more likely to have perpetrated physical violence against an intimate partner
- Three times more likely to have viewed violent pornography at least once a week.

Figure 1: Proportion of men who have perpetrated physical intimate partner violence, by Man Box quintiles, 18–30-year-olds

Percentage of survey respondents who selected yes when asked “Have you ever done the following things to your current or any other partner?”



Stop It Now!

After five years of preparatory work, including publication of a scoping study in 2019, Jesuit Social Services commenced a pilot of Stop It Now! in 2022 to address a gap in efforts to prevent child sexual abuse. This gap had been identified by the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The key features of the program are an anonymous helpline, chat service, and online resources for adults worried about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts and behaviours.

The program was originally founded in 1992 in the US by a victim-survivor of child sexual abuse and has since been successfully implemented in a number of other countries.³ Jesuit Social Services is the only organisation offering this kind of service in Australia.

A draft evaluation completed in December 2023 found that the program is having its intended effect of working with individuals to address risk factors and increasing protective factors for people concerned about their own thoughts and behaviours, and is successfully supporting friends and family to keep children safe.⁴

Research into perpetration of child sexual abuse

In November 2023, in partnership with the University of New South Wales, Jesuit Social Services published a study titled "Identifying and understanding child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes among Australian men".⁵ This was the first nationally representative research into the prevalence of child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes, and the largest study of its kind ever undertaken worldwide.

It found that 15.1% of Australian men report having sexual feelings towards children; that 9.4% of Australian men have sexually offended against children (including both online and offline abuse); and that 4.5% of Australian men want help for their sexual feelings towards children.

It found also that men who had offended against children were more like to be married, to work with children, to have high incomes, experience depression, anxiety, and binge drinking, to have been sexually abused or have had adverse experiences as children, to be active online, and to consume violent pornography or pornography involving bestiality.

³ Van Horn, J. et al. Stop It Now! A Pilot Study into the Limits and Benefits of a Free Helpline Preventing Child Sexual Abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, [s. l.], v. 24, n. 8, pp. 861–867, 2015. [Weblink](#). A history of the implementation of Stop It Now! can be accessed on the international Stop It Now! website. [Weblink](#).

⁴ McKibbin, G., Kuruppu, J. & Humphreys, C. (2023). Stop it Now! Australia: An action research evaluation. Evaluation research report. Melbourne, Victoria.

⁵ Salter, M, Woodlock, D, Whitten, T, Tyler, M, Naldrett, G, Breckenridge, J, Nolan, J & Peleg, N 2023, *Identifying and understanding child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes among Australian men*. UNSW, Sydney, NSW. [Weblink](#).

Methodology⁶

This study had three research aims:

1. To measure the prevalence of offending and risk behaviours and attitudes amongst men aged 18 and above
2. To develop robust statistical profiles of undetected offenders and men at risk of offending
3. To identify key attitudes and technological practices that facilitate offending.

Data for the study was collected via an online anonymous survey. The survey collected demographic information and asked questions about attitudes and behaviours relating to online and offline child sexual offending. It used a variety of validated survey measures alongside some new measures which were subsequently validated.

Data was provided by CloudResearch. A sample of 1,965 adult men was obtained from an original sample of 2,697 Australian participants after removing participants who did not meet the selection criteria (e.g., people who were female at birth, people who did not identify as male, people who failed the mid-survey attention check and those who reported they had not answered the questions honestly). The representativeness of the sample was improved by iteratively adjusting the weight of each participant until the sample distribution was concordant with the population distribution according to seven benchmark demographic characteristics from the 2021 Australian census. The data collection also included a weighted sample of 1,473 men from the US and 1,506 men from the UK.

Five survey items were used to determine if men over the age of 18 had sexually offended with people below the age of 18 years in the following ways:

- Knowingly and deliberately viewed pornographic material containing people below the age of 18 (2.5%)
- Flirted with or had sexual conversations with a person below the age of 18 (4.3%)
- Webcammed in a sexual way with a person below the age of 18 (1.8%)
- Paid for online sexual interactions, images or videos involving a person below the age of 18 (1.7%)
- Had sex or sexual contact with a person below the age of 18 while over the age of 18 (3.2%).

9.4% of men endorsed at least one of these items.

⁶ For detailed information on the study's methodology see pp. 7–11, Salter, M, *et. al.*, 2023. [Weblink](#).

Insights

Through this work over the past seven years, Jesuit Social Services has gained insight into the particular challenges that come with undertaking research that involves collecting data on perpetration. As such, we have learned about what works and what doesn't. We highlight three of the most important insights below.

Format limitations

Our current understanding of perpetration relies significantly on information obtained from people who have been arrested.⁷ For a range of reasons, this cohort is not representative of perpetration of violence or child sexual abuse and are often not a reliable source of accurate information regarding perpetration. Further, we know that a lot of family violence goes unreported, and that, of the instances reported, the proportion that lead to an arrest are smaller still.⁸

Collecting data from a representative sample carries the challenge that people who respond may be disincentivised from disclosing or openly discussing their actions, experience or motivations. Due to fear of criminal consequences acting as a disincentive for honesty, some researchers have chosen to opt for anonymous surveys.

But anonymity substantially limits the nature of the information that can be gathered and future directions of exploration. For example, there is no opportunity for follow-up questions after the initial survey; no opportunity for long-term tracking of participants' lives or behaviour, or anything else related to their perpetration; and no opportunity to go back to a cohort to examine a variable or element not initially recorded.

As such, while anonymity is vital to the success of the data collection in the first place, the format also imposes limitations on the information that can be obtained, affecting the kind of insight that can be gained. Obtaining information from representative samples is necessary for understanding perpetration – but is not, on its own, enough.

A full picture of perpetration

As noted, the picture obtained from those who have been arrested and through surveys from representative samples of the broader population is incomplete. Yet information from victim-survivors is incomplete, too. For example, it often is not possible to determine whether a possible perpetrator in question may be responsible for the perpetration of other instances of violence.

⁷ Seto, Michael C. "Different Approaches to Studying Pedophilia." In *Pedophilia and Sexual Offending Against Children: Theory, Assessment, and Intervention*, 2nd ed., 57–84. American Psychological Association, 2018. [Weblink](#).

⁸ Seto, M. C., Hermann, C. A., Kjellgren, C., Priebe, G., Svedin, C. G., & Långström, N. (2015). Viewing child pornography: Prevalence and correlates in a representative community sample of young Swedish men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44(1), 67–79.

Jesuit Social Services' collaboration with sector partners has given us some insight into the kinds of data various organisations and bodies can or do collect. Social service organisations, health providers, Government and others have access to various kinds of data, and each stores and uses it differently. Front-line workers, both those who work with victim-survivors and those who work with perpetrators, have some of the most valuable information that, if recorded in a consistent and streamlined way, would vastly enrich the picture on perpetration that can be developed.

However, many community sector organisations lack the resources to streamline or analyse the data they collect or have access to. Dedicated resources from Government for this purpose, coupled with guidance on what information, if obtained, should be recorded, stored and reported on, would enable the best use of existing information.

Reluctance from stakeholders

Perhaps the biggest barrier to collecting the perpetration data that is needed is the reluctance by key stakeholders to take part in research which involves asking people about perpetration of violence or child sexual abuse. Most notable in our experience was the reluctance by companies that conduct surveys. For our two studies on perpetration, we spoke to multiple survey companies before finding our ultimate partner.

Many companies were reluctant to engage with research that has a focus on perpetration. One of the major reasons for this reluctance included ambiguity related to mandatory reporting requirements for perpetration. Some exemptions do exist in legislation for research purposes. That said, depending on the nature of the perpetration being studied and the jurisdiction in which the research is carried out, it can often be unclear whether an exemption applies, and its precise nature.⁹ This results in a lack of clarity regarding reporting requirements and serves as a barrier to research on perpetration. Consideration should be given as to how to provide clearer guidance to researchers while also prioritising protection of children.

In addition, companies are concerned about public perception challenges resulting from being associated with a survey that asks questions about topics like child sexual abuse. Finally, with good reason, companies are concerned about the ethical implications and possible harm that may be caused to participants who take part in a survey on perpetration.

There are ways of ensuring that a survey of this nature is done ethically and with care: ensuring proper informed consent; developing a set of carefully worded questions; including information on helplines throughout the survey; including an optional self-care exercise for participants at the end of the survey; and ensuring that the survey itself is not too long.

⁹ For example, for research on child sexual abuse perpetration, New South Wales is currently the only state that has a specific exemption for academic and professional researchers. However, other states and territories have a range of provisions and criteria that put in question mandatory reporting duties. See Mathews, Ben, (2022) Legal duties of researchers to protect participants in child maltreatment surveys: Advancing legal epidemiology. *University of New South Wales Law Journal*, 45(2), pp. 1–42.

There are also existing standards and legal provisions for conducting research safely and ethically, including the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research,¹⁰ the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research,¹¹ and the *Privacy Act (1988)*. These are broad and apply to research more generally, yet include provisions and standards that are applicable to and can guide research into perpetration. However, our experience has been that this did not instil the necessary confidence in potential collaborators to agree to undertake this work with us.

We therefore recommend developing improved and nation-wide guidance on how to conduct research on perpetration. This would normalise this undertaking and give the relevant companies, institutions and participants the confidence to know that the research is being conducted safely and the necessary clarity regarding the associated standards.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Fund research into perpetration

Research such as that undertaken by Jesuit Social Services is vital for gaining a better understanding of perpetration in Australia, and gaining this understanding is vital for developing solutions to prevent violence and child sexual abuse.¹² We are among a handful of organisations and bodies that undertake this work. For example, the 2022 “State of Knowledge Report on Violence Perpetration,”¹³ published by Queensland University of Technology, closely examines the perpetration of violence in Australia; yet a significant challenge outlined in it is the inadequacy of current extant data on violence perpetration which, the report claims, hinders prevention and intervention efforts.

Noting that much of our research efforts related to perpetration to date have been funded philanthropically, much more needs to be explored with support from Government before a clear picture of perpetration in Australia, its prevalence and drivers, and an understanding of effective countermeasures can exist.

Substantially increasing funding from Government for research on perpetration would enable much more of this research to take place and, in turn, normalise it as a legitimate undertaking by researchers. The more perpetration research is seen as an accepted – and necessary – line of enquiry, the easier it will be to engage partners to collaborate on this work.

10 National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2023 – National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023, [Weblink](#)

11 Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, 2018. [Weblink](#).

12 See Salter, M., *el. al*, 2023 for some directions in prevention work on the basis of the study’s findings on perpetration. [Weblink](#).

13 Flood, M., Brown, C., Dembele, L., and Mills, K. (2022) Who uses domestic, family, and sexual violence, how, and why? The State of Knowledge Report on Violence Perpetration. Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.

Recommendation 2: Develop improved and nation-wide guidance on how to conduct research on perpetration

Improved, nation-wide guidance on how to safely conduct research on perpetration would ensure that the research undertaken is consistently conducted safely across the country, and, in turn, give confidence to researchers, partners and participants to take part in such research. This would help normalise research into perpetration as a legitimate and safe undertaking.

Recommendation 3: Develop ways to capture existing data on perpetration

Information relating to perpetration is held by a large number of organisations and bodies, including community service providers, health services, Government and elsewhere. Resources should be devoted to supporting organisations and bodies who have this data to record, store and report on it. This would vastly improve the amount, quality and useability of the information available. This should be complemented with guidance for a standardised way of collecting, storing and reporting on perpetration data, including considerations of safety, anonymity and deidentification.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry and welcome further discussion regarding the feedback detailed in this letter.

Yours sincerely,



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