National Press Club Address, 6 November 2025

Matt Tyler (Executive Director, The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services) and Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon (Monash University)

Matt Tyler:

I'd like start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we're meeting - the Ngunnawal people and pay respects to their elders past and present.

I'd also like to acknowledge victim survivors of all forms of violence and abuse.

I'd like to thank Melanie Thomson who has led the development of the Adolescent Man Box research together with Jane Lloyd and all members of the Jesuit Social Services team who contributed to this work. I'd also like to thank our donors who made this possible - in the absence of any government funding, this work would not have taken place without your support.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge all of you in this room and many watching online for your sustained efforts often over a significant period – I count many of you as friends and we're grateful to each of you for being here today.

Children should be seen and not heard.

This is a refrain that was once common place. It's clear where children sit – their lack of standing. First coined over 600 years ago, this world view endured for a remarkably long time.

But the world moves. Our nation moves.

Our nation only moves though when people speak up. All of us – leaders in this room and many others – can and do play a role here. This includes elevating, listening to and acting on the experiences of young people.

Today we will hear perspectives from over 1,400 young people of all genders from right across the country who Jesuit Social Services surveyed as part of the Adolescent Man Box study.

This research builds on Jesuit Social Services almost 50-year history working with men and boys. For over 20 years, this work has taken place under the leadership of our CEO Julie Edwards who is here today. I'd like to acknowledge your astounding contribution Julie in the pursuit of social justice together with our Chair, also in attendance today, Francis Sullivan.

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation which started and continues to work with men and boys involved in the criminal justice system. Grounded in this experience, in 2017, we established The Men's Project - wanting to do more to intervene earlier to address a range of harmful behaviours including the use of violence and, importantly, also wanting to see men and boys themselves flourish. As part of this, we seek to understand the underlying root causes of what's going on for men and boys: the role of socially constructed ideas related to gender which permeate all of our lives; the impacts of trauma including the reality that the majority of our youth and adult justice participants experienced violence or abuse in their childhoods.

We have sought to understand what men think - and their life experiences – including through our adult Man Box research - with the most recent iteration completed in partnership with Respect Victoria. The research we're releasing today builds on that effort to understand the perspectives of adolescents.

The adolescent man box is made up of four pillars - constantly maintaining a tough and confident persona; being emotionally stoic; not being girly or gay; and doling out and standing up to being teased.

This research has been motivated by what we're seeing at the frontline - here's what we've heard from some of the adolescent boys we work with each day:

"My job is to protect her, that's why I want to know where she is"

"I was raised around fighters, and was raised to be a fighter too"

"No-one understands me, people just keep telling me what to do"

Too often young people share their lived experience and they are then asked to take responsibility for making progress. Adults fail to hold up their end of the bargain – to use the power they have to act. Today, we'll outline practical actions that would result in progress.

There's a lot spoken about the need to engage men and boys, genuinely seek to understand their realities - and also to hold them accountable for their behaviour. I want to acknowledge this is challenging terrain. How can we empathise with men and boys who are feeling cancelled, rejected or hard done by when women are still being killed on a weekly basis?

Starting with victim survivors at the centre of this work is crucial. The victim survivors' statement in the National Plan calls out a simple truth: Abuse and violence is a problem for victims, but it is not the victims' problem.

Advocates such as Lula Dembele have asked us to face the reality that we will not end men's violence without better understanding why men are using violence. And, inevitably, this must include a focus on boys.

What is going on for teenage boys? Based on our survey of 1,400 adolescents, we found that the majority – regardless of gender - believe that most people in Australia expect teenage boys to be tough, confident, strong and to never back away from a challenge at all times. These ideas are not negative in and of themselves. It's when these ideas become deeply fused with one's identity or serve as a means to belong - boys holding onto them at all costs – that's where we see negative outcomes.

And, yet, in good news – relative to the perception of social pressures, far fewer endorse these ideas themselves. This is particularly the case for girls who are much more likely to reject these ideas. That's a compelling pitch to heterosexual adolescent boys – girls don't want you showing up as the big dog alpha.

There are other reasons for hope too. As part of this research, we found that:

- Most boys remain optimistic about their future.
- Most believe in gender equality and reject sexist behaviours.
- A significant number of adolescents believe it's okay for boys to talk openly about their problems and comfort one another.
    - I've seen this myself - connecting with young fellas across the Kimberley - some shared it's the first time they've ever had someone show an interest in their well-being... they'd talk about how their lian had been lifted... boys will open up when given the chance.
- We found that parents and male friends are perceived by adolescent boys to have a more significant impact on their attitudes than online influencers or social media.
    - Importantly, in spite of frequent calls for more male role models, both Mums and Dads are rated by adolescents as having a big impact on their ideas related to masculinities. As the son of a single Mum, this lands for me. Dad fell a long way short - horribly addicted to gambling; full of potential but crippled by addiction. Without Mum I would have been in a lot of trouble. As it happens, Mum was also Dolly Doctor - and, yes, the letters were real for those wondering. And in the context of challenges facing adolescents today - credible, accessible advice that is also cool seems increasingly rare.

I'll now turn to the challenges presented in this study.

Over two-thirds of boys agreed with more than half of the 27 Adolescent Man Box rules.

Looking at specific Adolescent Man Box rules:

- 1 in 4 boys believe that acting manly should be the most important goal and you should never back down from a challenge in public.
- Nearly 1 in 4 believe that if your feelings are hurt, you should hold it in.
- 1 in 3 believe that it is embarrassing to have a lot of gay friends.

Let's now turn to the group of boys who most endorse the adolescent man box. Relative to boys who don't endorse Adolescent Man Box rules, life is lonely – although you don't necessarily reveal that to anyone ... instead showing up in ways that allow you to fit in – belong with your mask firmly in place. You've likely been a victim of violence, and connect better with people through online gaming than you do in person. You feel that no one really knows you well, believe boys have it harder than girls, you gamble, you drink.

You're also more likely to bully and physically hurt someone you know on purpose, and make sexual comments to people you don't know. And you're much more likely than other boys to agree that if a teenage boy has sex with a teenage girl, he should decide what happens and what she does during sex.

For the remainder of this speech, we want to focus on five areas that this research has suggested demand greater action.

First, addressing harm which takes place in the digital environment - including the astounding prevalence of image-based abuse, digital surveillance and – our focus for this speech today – harmful pornography.

As part of this study, we found that many adolescents exposed to pornography viewed unsafe, aggressive, and non-consensual acts. Take for example, Leo, a 13-year-old who we interviewed as part of our Jesuit Social Services work to prevent young people's use of harmful sexual behaviours.

Leo lived with his mum and dad, he went to school and he played footy. Nobody knew that Leo was hiding a dark secret. He had been watching pornography since he was 8 years old, and recently he had started watching illegal content – child sexual abuse material. After watching the material, he was overcome with guilt and a sense of isolation. In his own words, he wondered if he is a "monster" and he felt there was no one he could tell. He tried to act out the material against his younger sister. When the police walked into his bedroom before school to arrest him, he wasn't surprised.

The social media delay and age verification as it relates to pornography will directly reduce harm - including on platforms where children are being groomed. But more is needed including targeting specific types of content. We note progress in the UK just this week where the depiction of strangulation in pornography will be banned.

Two areas that we call out warranting particular attention are infinite scroll and the way algorithms often work to promote harmful content. The evidence is clear - for instance, studies by A Global Witness and separately the University College London focused on Tik Tok found young people are being served up a reinforcing loop of sexualised, misogynistic, violent and racist content. This is dopaminic capitalism in the extreme with profit at its core.

We would not tolerate this level of harm with any other product. There's a need for better regulation - greater transparency, the ability for users to opt-out and reset the algorithm and warning messages to disrupt harmful content or compulsive use. The steps taken by the Australian Government and the eSafety Commissioner are welcome - and there is much still to do.

Shifting now to our second area where there is a need for greater action. We must dramatically increase the scale of early intervention work with boys to prevent violence. Many of the life outcomes foregrounded in this research - violence, substance use and poor mental health - are partly related to the impacts of trauma.

This effort should explicitly target masculinities which underpin cycles of retaliation, performative post and boast crimes, and the behaviour of boys in groups. We are missing opportunities in so many places – when an adolescent uses violence at home, in alternative learning settings or following early initial engagement with police.

A greater focus on early intervention stands in stark contrast to the trend across several states and territories towards predominantly punitive responses to young people's use of harmful behaviours, including violence.

The children that are being locked up are, more often than not, victims of family violence or other forms of child abuse first and have engaged in criminal activity second. Yet the focus is on punishment, not healing, nor restoration which holds young people to account for their actions.

As I close, I'd like to ask you to genuinely think about the reality of a young fella who had been in Parkville's juvenile detention facility in Melbourne who is now attending our school – the Ignatius Learning Centre. I asked him how he was finding being with us; he looked me straight in the eye and said it's the first place he's ever felt safe. He had never felt safe and yet, the moment his behaviour went awry, the justice system came down hard.

We can, and must, do better. With action, we can make progress.

Thank you.

Kate Fitz-Gibbon:

Thank you Matt, and to Julie Edwards, Francis Sullivan and the Jesuit Social Services team for the opportunity to contribute to today's launch. I am very grateful to have so many colleagues and friends in the room today - thank you for your support of this work and for being here to reflect the importance of this issue. In particular, I want to acknowledge Conor Pall – who has been courageous and relentless in his advocacy to improve outcomes for child victims of family violence.

I first came to this work as a young woman wanting to better understand how the father of a good friend of mine at school could possibly have killed her mum. That crime ruptured the safe bubble I had the good fortune to live in up to that point. In that case - Julie left her abusive husband, she commenced a new relationship shortly after, and six weeks after she left him, her estranged husband killed her. It's a pattern for femicide that continues to play out all too often in this country - I have studied this and the leading work of Dr Hayley Boxall shows this also. In the courts he received a lesser verdict on the basis of provocation - in part because of a remark she allegedly made about her new lover being better in bed than him. At the core was rejection.

That killing occurred over 20 years ago. When I read the Adolescent Man Box findings, there was one finding that stood out. For those teenage boys that adhere to these rigid masculine norms – when rejected – they were three times more likely to report retaliating than boys at the opposite end of the Adolescent Man Box scale.

I am reminded often of the negative outcomes, sometimes fatal, of the failure to deal with rejection.

Earlier this year, I provided expert evidence as part of the Coronial Inquest into the killing of Lillie James and the death of Paul Thijssen.

Lillie James was allegedly killed by her ex-boyfriend Paul Thijssen at her workplace – St Andrews Cathedral School in Sydney. She was 21 years old. Paul was 24. During their brief dating relationship, Paul exhibited jealous behaviours, engaged in in-person stalking behaviours following their relationship ending and monitored Lillie's location via SnapChat.

Frighteningly - findings from the Adolescent Man Box Study show that these beliefs from Paul are not unique among adolescent boys in Australia. Of those adolescent boys who most strongly endorse the Adolescent Man box rules said:

- 35% agree that if a teenage boy has a girlfriend, he should know where she is all the time,
- Equally 35% agree that they usually try to get back at someone if they are rejected.

In the lead up to the killing of Lillie, their friendship group mistook Paul's repeated monitoring of Lilie's location as a sign of affection rather than an indication of risk.

At the Coronial Inquest, Lillie's parents provided a heart-breaking statement. In closing Lillie's mum, Peta said:

As parents, if we are not teaching our sons how to respect a woman's opinions and choices and accept rejection, we could be setting our daughters up for failure.

As a country we must do better. While Australia can absolutely be proud of its efforts to develop and deliver respectful relationships education in every state and territory – this study provides an opportunity to check in on the currency of that curriculum.

For example:

- Are we educating young people about how to use location-tracking features in safe ways?
- Can adolescents identify the risks of digital surveillance?
- And have we taught boys how to cope with rejection? how to sit safely with the discomfort of being told 'no'? and do parents know how to instil those skills in their sons?

Respectful Relationships curriculum, as well as other school-based programs and initiatives must reflect the contemporary issues adolescents are facing.

Which brings me to the fourth area where there is a need for greater action - supporting help-seeking among adolescent boys. The death of Paul Thijssen also illuminates the consequences when boys and young men do not have the skills and confidence to seek help.

There was much in Paul's life that was spiralling out of his control in the lead up to his fatal actions. Yet, as far as the evidence showed, Paul did not seek help – from his friends, his family or from services. This increases risk of harm not only for Paul but also for the people in his life. At the extreme end - Jane Monckton Smith in the UK, has often said - if he says he's going to kill himself, take it as a threat that he will kill her.

This reluctance to seek help among young boys is not unique to Paul.

The Adolescent Man Box Study shows that nearly 4 in 5 adolescents report a poor mental health symptom over the past two weeks. Noting that girls reported higher rates of mental ill health, nearly 3 in 5 adolescent boys reported feeling down, depressed or hopeless.

And herein lies the connection - while adolescent boys are experiencing significant distress in their lives they do not want to, nor know how to seek help. The study showed that boys are far less likely than girls to seek help.

We need to upskill adolescent boys and to challenge the underlying cultures that prohibit vulnerability. We must also develop resources that promote help seeking in the offline and online environments in which adolescents spend their time.

A word of caution though, given what has been documented about the current lack of child-specific supports for young people who have experienced violence and abuse, it would be irresponsible to encourage help seeking among adolescents before we have fully funded and embedded the services needed.

Which brings me to the final area where we must drive greater action - system responses for young victim-survivors. The Adolescent Man Box study found two in five adolescents had experienced victimisation - been physically hurt on purpose, sexually harassed, insulted or threatened including online

Crucially, the study also found that of adolescent boys who report using aggression in the past month, 80% also report having been victimised in the same period. Here we have a significant opportunity. Addressing the harms of victimisation, supporting young victim-survivors to recover and heal - is prevention. It directly addresses the risk of intergenerational violence.

But we are falling short. In recent years as part of my research I have interviewed over 100 child victims. Consistently I have heard about the ways in which systems have failed. Despite the best efforts of frontline staff working with a tiny fraction of the resources needed, we have a service system which allows young people's needs to go unmet, and their risks unseen, and lacks meaningful action to support the safety, recovery and healing of child victim-survivors.

We have an evidence-based need for such services at scale across this country. In April 2023, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study found:

- Nearly 1 in 3 Australian children experience physical abuse
- 28% experience sexual abuse, and
- Nearly 2 in 5 Australian children will grow up with domestic and family violence in their household.

This is the reality of Australian children's lives.

And yet – while you would think that these statistics alone would propel governments into action, in the 31 months since their release – nearly 1,000 days – little action has followed.

Forgive me for being impatient but it is, after all, now over 11 years since the horrific killing of Luke Batty. While responsibility for the killing of Luke sits with Greg Anderson alone, Coroner Ian Gray's inquiry findings were clear – the system, at the time, failed to intervene and to prevent Luke's death despite numerous opportunities to do so.

Isn't it ironic then that in amongst a decade of reform activity and political commitments energised in large part by Luke's Mum, former Australian of the Year Rosie Batty, relatively little has been done in practice that would have improved Luke's safety.

This is not said to undermine the significant program of reform that several states and territories have actioned, none more so than my home jurisdiction of Victoria. But I would put it to you - that while there are some exceptions, these efforts have been largely adult focused.

And it is not the only time this has happened. To what extent have the Queensland reforms centred children's risk and safety since the horrific killings of Hannah Clarke and her three children – Trey, Laianah and Aaliyah.

Why as a nation are we not propelled to act on children's risk?

Yes, we now have a National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children, our 10-year strategy which embeds a recognition of children as victim-survivors in their own right. Policy recognition is important. But in the three years since that Plan's launch, it is challenging to point to concrete funded actions which bring that recognition to life.

We have wondered whether this inaction stems from the lack of a dedicated focus on children in the Federal Government. Unlike other countries, New Zealand included, Australia does not have a dedicated Minister for Children. Echoing Anne Hollonds, the former National Children's Commissioner, the late Joe Tucci and others, we call for the introduction of a Federal Minister for Children. This role would provide important cross-portfolio leadership on children's wellbeing and safety, and coordination across jurisdictions. It could drive a longer-term reform agenda across all the settings in which children live, learn and play.

We have also wondered whether inaction is due to the siloing of current efforts to address children's experiences of violence and abuse. We have a national plan to end violence against women and children with a focus on domestic, family and sexual violence. There is also Safe and Supported – a national framework focused on child abuse and neglect, and thirdly, we have a National Strategy to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse.

Each of these have a first Action Plan sitting underneath them. Over the next two years the government has committed to developing a second Action Plan for each of these.

We are at risk of spending more time planning than acting. And our siloed approach stands in contract with the reality of children's experiences. The Childhood Maltreatment Study found 1 in 4 Australians experience between 3 and 5 different forms of child abuse and violence. Yet our plans are siloed.

To shift this status quo – we first need action-oriented investment now. There are clear gaps that should be addressed, including funding interventions and supports focused on healing and recovery for children and young people.

To integrate efforts, we are also calling for the Federal Government to develop and deliver a dedicated five-year National Action Plan for children and young people who have been victims of violence and abuse.

But let us be clear - this is not a recommendation for a Plan for the sake of another Plan. This one Action Plan will consolidate efforts across government and provide an accountable laser focus on explicitly addressing all forms of violence and abuse experienced by children and young people.

In closing, and to return to where Matt started. Children must be seen and heard, and as adults, we must act. It is our responsibility to do so.

Last year in this room, launching her second book 'Hope', Rosie Batty commented that it could have been called 'despair' but she chose hope.

We believe there is reason to be hopeful. We know the challenge and the evidence base points us to the solutions – and therein lies the hope of what we can do now - if there is the political will to do so

So today using this national stage – we ask the leaders of our country, show you care. Not with words – with tangible, transformative actions.

Thank you.

Watch the National Press Club address here: https://youtu.be/lVx-bd8cI48?si=HniZT9clNUFwMpEF