

Start of change:

Mapping engagement with male perpetrators of violence

Findings at a glance

Why did we do this Practice Inquiry?

A sharp focus on perpetrator interventions and holding perpetrators accountable for their violence against family members featured strongly in the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs) are a central platform for intervening with men who use violence, however there has been limited investigation of MBCP intake and assessment practices. This Practice Inquiry aims to improve understanding of these critical processes and identify areas for continuing development within the context of increased government investment and sector reform.

How was the Practice Inquiry done?

This Practice Inquiry used a ground-up approach, privileging the voices of 21 frontline practitioners across five services in two regions of Victoria. Consultations with practitioners explored engagement practices and informed the development of service maps for four of the five participating organisations, with a focus on internal processes and referral and intake practice. A review of perpetrator intervention literature and policy was also conducted.

Key findings

Practitioners identified that intake and assessment processes offer an opportunity for tailored, client-focused interventions. They noted that the intake process – for men who voluntarily make contact and those who are mandated – can influence how men engage with MBCPs. Practitioners said that the intake process offers the opportunity for them to identify and scaffold the man's intentions and motivations to inspire him to maintain engagement. Issues that may present barriers to effective engagement, such as drug and/or alcohol use or mental health issues, can also be identified at this stage.

Practitioners emphasised that the assessment process is critical, and perhaps the only opportunity to engage one-on-one with a perpetrator in a meaningful way. The process provides an opportunity to hear a man's story, develop individualised motivation strategies and tailor a response to his individual needs.

Several factors that hinder a man's completion of a MBCP were identified, including: sense of shame; substance abuse; trauma and poor mental health; and over-subscribed programs.

Practitioners expressed frustration relating to court mandated clients, namely that the determination of MBCP eligibility for these men is made by the courts rather than MBCP providers. As such, some court mandated men fail to present to the MBCP service provider as 'group ready' at the assessment interview. As a result, individual work and support with the man was required before he was able to join a group. Practitioners identified the need for greater flexibility to be built into court mandated orders to allow for a broader suite of interventions.

Recommendations

Consistent with several policy responses stemming from the Royal Commission into Family Violence, including the Building from Strength: 10-Year Industry Plan for Family Violence Prevention and Response and the Victorian Government's Diversity and Intersectionality Framework, GSANZ recommends changes across four domains as summarised below.

Intake and assessment practice

- Increase the suite of interventions to which assessment workers can divert men who use violence to.
- Ensure that MBCPs are complemented by other services.
- Ensure that service provision to men's partners/ex-partners is consistent.
- Increase resourcing to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, LGBTI communities and people with a disability.

Professional and workforce development

- Develop specific actions to address health and wellbeing, including: the high burnout rate; lack of pathways into the profession; cost of qualifications; and ongoing development needs.
- Practice development, learning and peer support resources should also be improved, including establishing a central repository of resources to support best practice and facilitating peer support opportunities.

Standards and guidelines

- Establish a mechanism to ensure MBCP providers are adequately meeting minimum standards, with an emphasis placed on: evidence-based theories of change underpinning each program; robust initial assessment processes that maximise engagement; and the embedding of an intersectional approach.

Justice and court processes

- Court orders should provide for a broader suite of responses, including therapeutic interventions, to address the needs of men unsuited to MBCP group work.
- The role of the Respondent Worker at each of the Magistrates' Courts should be elevated so that they can provide greater support to presiding Magistrates and the intake processes of MBCPs. This could be achieved by having the Respondent Worker provide recommendations to the Court as to the Respondent's readiness for MBCP, as well as identifying additional supports that the Respondent may need either in conjunction with attending a MBCP and/or prior to attending.