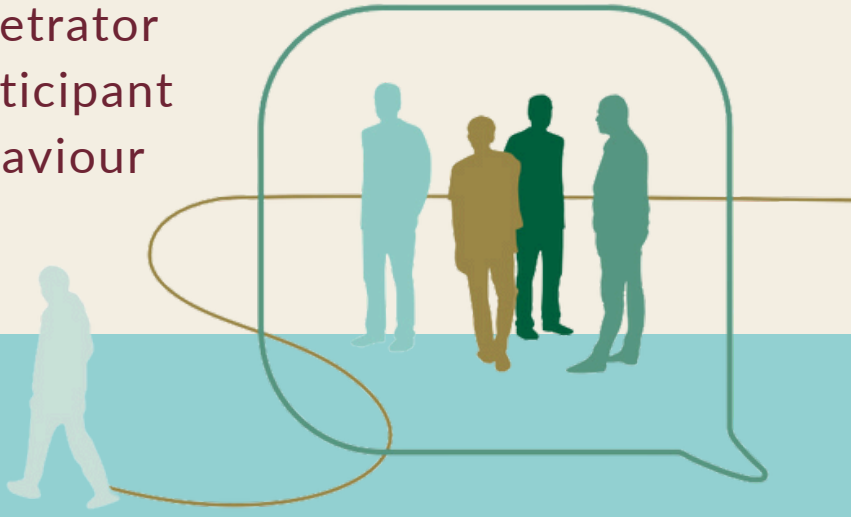
RESEARCH TO POLICY GUIDANCE

Exploring the policy implications from Engaging in change:

A Victorian study of perpetrator program attrition and participant engagement in men's behaviour change programs.



Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs) are crucial components in the effort to enhance perpetrator accountability and reduce domestic, family, and sexual violence. Australia's National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (Department of Social Services, 2022) highlights the significance of these interventions, as did the earlier Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016). However, despite considerable investment and program diversification, there remains a lack of robust evidence on effective engagement strategies and outcomes, necessitating further exploration. This state-wide study sought to contribute to the evidence base by examining the multifaceted nature of perpetrator engagement in MBCPs, and to understanding program attrition.

This project revealed that engagement is a nuanced process influenced by readiness, motivation, referral pathways, and support systems. In highlighting the importance of individualised support and post-program engagement, the study advocates for a more cohesive and supportive approach towards program design and delivery.

In this guidance, we provide an overview of the key study findings as they relate to state-based policies.

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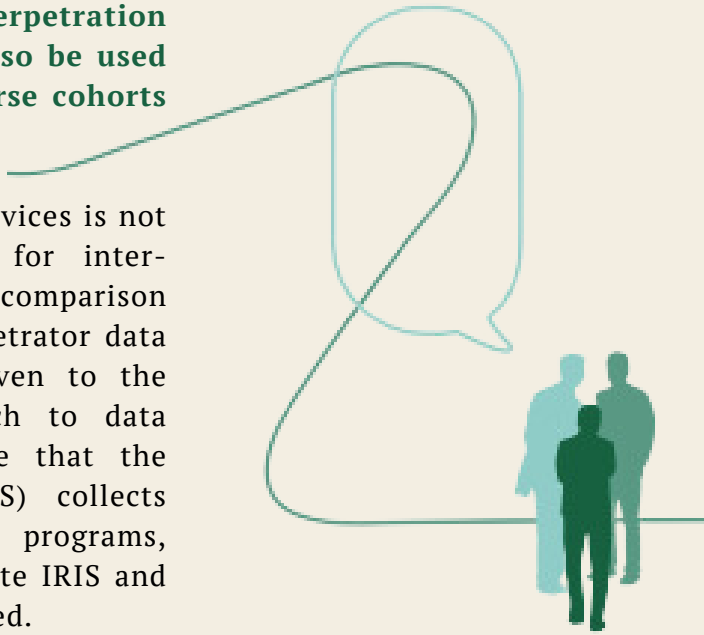
About the study: phases of data collection

1. Implications for perpetrator data collection

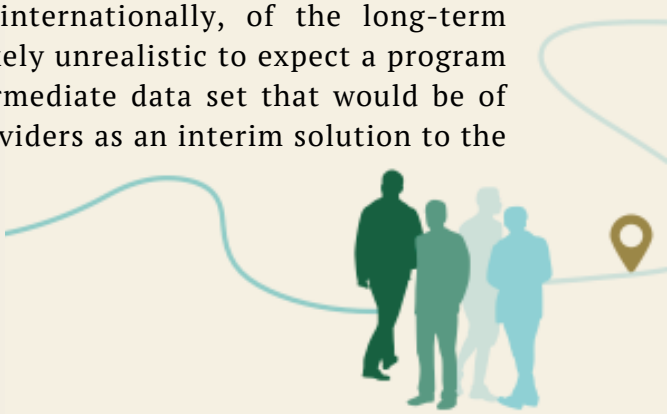
The study findings reveal significant gaps and challenges in data quality and consistency. There is a need to explore how data could be better collected, linked and utilised state-wide to support improved understandings of how people who use violence move through different points of the system, and to support effective intervention. There is also a clear need to collect longer-term data on participants' trajectories following program exit, including data on the uptake of referral pathways, transitions to one-on-one case management work, entry into another program, and engagement with other points of the perpetration intervention and justice system. This data can also be used to support program design to better engage diverse cohorts of people who use violence.

The collation of data across Victorian perpetrator services is not consistent nor systematised. This poses issues for inter-organisational, and potentially intra-organisational, comparison of the data sets. As part of efforts to improve perpetrator data collected in Victoria, consideration should be given to the development of a systematic state-wide approach to data collection for perpetrator interventions. We note that the Integrated reports and information system (IRIS) collects administrative data for some department funded programs, however, court programs are not required to complete IRIS and therefore state-wide data is not systematically captured.



Connected to this is the potential for linked data to support effective intervention through improved understanding of how perpetrators move through the system. This would require a significant uplift and resourcing across the state to support data to be collected systematically in order for a baseline to be created so that attrition data and resulting trends could be monitored over time.

Understanding program attrition rates is critical to building the evidence base of what works in engaging men who use family violence through perpetrator interventions. Where possible, there is also value in programs collecting data on the trajectories of participants following program exit – both in relation to the uptake of referral pathways, transitions to one-on-one case management work, entry into another program, or otherwise. There is very little understanding in Australia, and indeed internationally, of the long-term pathways for men who complete a MBCP. While it is likely unrealistic to expect a program provider to collect longitudinal data, there is an intermediate data set that would be of significant value and could be overseen by program providers as an interim solution to the significant data gaps in this space.



2. Implications for approaches to funding perpetrator interventions

This study finds that short- and long-term funding models used for men's behaviour change programs should be reviewed to address the concerns raised by practitioners in this study. This includes ensuring funding models encompass the full breadth of work required to effectively deliver the intervention, including to support participant attendance, engagement and completion. This requires adequate resourcing of program readiness work and family safety contact work as core components of MBCP delivery.

Focus groups with practitioners revealed that funding concerns are pervasive. Practitioners grapple with the pressures of short-term funding models while striving to maintain the integrity and effectiveness of programs delivered. Practitioners called for revised funding models that prioritise sustainability and program quality.

Throughout the focus groups, practitioners described various strategies used within their organisation to ensure effective program delivery. They included:

- Program readiness work to prepare participants for program commencement,
- Waitlist check in calls for individuals who have not yet commenced a program as a strategy to ensure risk visibility and management,
- Individual check ins and case management support for participants throughout program delivery, and
- Developing program modifications to meet the diverse needs of the incoming cohort.

These practitioner strategies are used to support program participant engagement, to manage risk, and to enhance program effectiveness. Throughout this study, program providers reflected that current funding models do not adequately cover all aspects of practitioner work undertaken to support participant engagement.

As Victoria matures its approach to providing a suite of perpetrator interventions there is a clear need to review short-term and long-term funding models for MBCPs to ensure all core components of program work are resourced. This is particularly important given the widely recognised value of the time intensive work undertaken by practitioners before the formal commencement of a program.

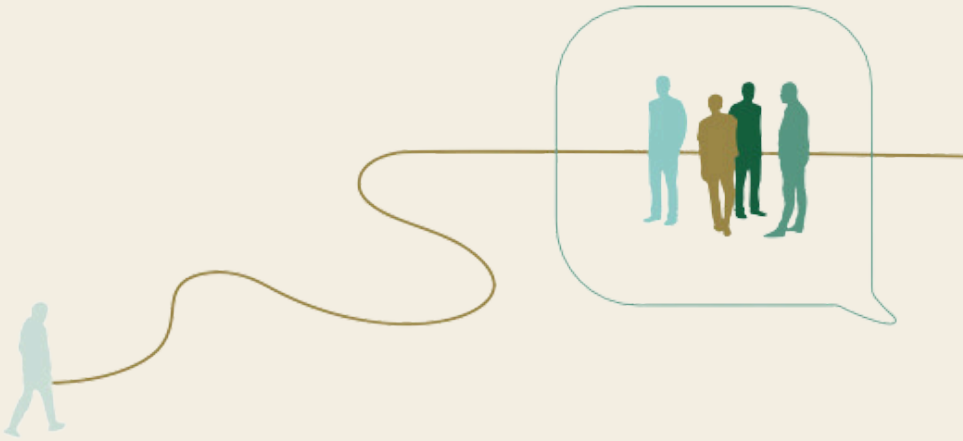
While acknowledging the significance of state government investment to date, there is a clear need for perpetual funding models to ensure program integrity, practitioner well-being and satisfaction, and more effective outcomes. Sustained funding will also enable the collection of valuable longitudinal data to further inform the evidence base on perpetrator interventions.

3. The need to expand housing options for people who use violence

The study findings highlight the need to expand housing options for people who are respondents on intervention orders and have been exited from their primary residence, as well as for people who use violence more broadly.

Throughout the focus groups, numerous practitioners identified housing stability as essential for program eligibility, and supporting program attendance, engagement and completion. However, there was shared recognition that presently there are limited housing supports available in Victoria for people who use violence, placing a burden on men's services to identify accommodation options for participants experiencing housing insecurity.

There was a stated view among some practitioners that access to housing for people using violence has become significantly more challenging post the COVID-19 pandemic.



4. The need to establish a post-program support service

The study findings highlight the need for sustained post-program supports, as ongoing support is necessary to maintain visibility of risk, and to reinforce and extend any behavioural and attitudinal changes.

Our survey of program participants found that of the individuals exiting a program:

- 1 in 4 were seeking additional support,
- 1 in 6 were planning to do another program but were not yet enrolled, and
- 1 in 20 were already enrolled/on a waiting list for another program.

From the perspective of affected family members, post-program supports were viewed as particularly important where children were involved to enhance oversight and perpetrator risk visibility. Affected family members and practitioners recognised that we live in a society that condones violence supportive attitudes and that even if the program is able to break through, this may only be temporary in the absence of other external and ongoing supports. These observations – supported by data collected at other points of the study - demonstrate the clear need for a post-program support service in Victoria. While some of the programs examined in the first phase of this study were receiving fundng for a post-program support, the majority were not resourced to do so.

As part of the ongoing commitment in Victoria to develop a suite of interventions for people who use violence, including via the recent Women's Safety Package announcement (Premier of Victoria, 2024), post-program supports should be expanded to ensure access for all program participants upon completion or exit. This could be developed as a universal post-program support service, rather than being tied to a specific organisation. Once implemented into practice, an evaluation of the post-program support model, including engagement and outcomes as well as increasing understanding of what supports are most effective for different cohorts of program participants, should be undertaken to examine the impact on supporting desistance from violence and ongoing behaviour change.