



**Improving accountability:
The role of perpetrator intervention systems**
Key findings and future directions

ANROWS

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to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children

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ANROWS Research to policy and practice papers are concise papers that summarise key findings of research on violence against women and their children, including research produced under ANROWS's research program, and provide advice on the implications for policy and practice.

This is an edited summary of key findings from the ANROWS research project "Improved accountability - the role of perpetrator intervention systems". Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project and the full project report: Chung, D., Upton-Davis, K., Cordier, R., Campbell, E., Wong, T., Salter, M., ... Bissett, T. (2020). *Improved accountability: The role of perpetrator intervention systems* (Research report, 20/2020). Sydney: ANROWS.

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ANROWS research contributes to the six National Outcomes of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. This research addresses National Plan Outcome 6—Perpetrators stop their violence and are held to account.

Acknowledgement of Country

ANROWS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present, and future, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We are committed to standing and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, honouring the truths set out in the [Warawarni-gu Guma Statement](#).

Improving accountability: The role of perpetrator intervention systems

BACKGROUND

- Perpetrator accountability is stated as a key aim in many domestic and family violence policies. However, there is little agreement on what this means or how it might be achieved.
- A wide range of human services agencies engage with perpetrators of domestic violence, however they do not necessarily identify these individuals as perpetrators of violence, and when they do they do not necessarily know how to respond appropriately.
- The ANROWS research report *Improved accountability: The role of perpetrator intervention systems* comprises ten research studies that examined Australian perpetrator intervention systems, focusing in particular on the most common pathways of identification, assessment and intervention with perpetrators.

KEY FINDINGS

- Accountability can take different forms. These different forms may not align, and may even conflict with each other.
- There is much opportunity for human services agencies to play a role in identifying and responding to perpetrators.
- Men's behaviour change programs (MBCPs) play a key role in supporting men to reduce their use of violence. High expectations are placed upon these programs, while their role in monitoring risk and providing partner support is often undervalued.
- There are limited and inconsistent consequences for men who disengage from programs or otherwise breach orders.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Broaden the conception of perpetrator intervention systems to include a wide range of human services agencies. This will increase capacity across systems to identify perpetrators and to manage risk earlier.
- Assess suitability for referral to MBCPs before mandating attendance.
- Trial a national minimum data set for MBCPs. This will allow the creation of a national database to support an evidence-informed approach to future program development.
- Consider other forms of perpetrator intervention beyond group-based MBCPs.

Understanding perpetrator accountability

“Holding perpetrators accountable” is stated as a key aim in many domestic and family violence policies. But what does this actually mean, and how can it be achieved?

To date, two different forms of perpetrator accountability have generally been recognised. The first is accountability that is externally imposed, so that men who use violence are *held to account*. The main mechanism by which this occurs is through the justice system. Perpetrators may become involved with the justice system following criminal incidents of domestic and family violence, or breaches of civil protection orders. At present, mechanisms for perpetrators to be held to account for their actions are not consistently embedded elsewhere in wider human services systems.

The second form of perpetrator accountability is one that is internally developed through men’s behaviour change programs (MBCPs), with the intention that men who use violence *develop a sense of responsibility* and commit to being accountable to their partners and children. This form of accountability involves the cultivation of an internal sense of responsibility for behaviour, rather than the imposition of external sanctions.

Accountability and responsibility do not always co-occur—indeed, they often do not. Perpetrators can be held accountable without necessarily taking personal responsibility for their behaviour.

Perpetrator intervention systems

The various parts of the justice system (police, courts, corrective services) together with MBCPs have been understood as key pathways for perpetrators, and therefore as critical points for perpetrator interventions. However, perpetrators may come into contact with a range of government and non-government services which may or may not recognise their use of violence.

What would it look like if all of these services operated as coordinated perpetrator intervention systems, working together to prevent and respond to violence? And how would perpetrator intervention systems interact with the specialist services that respond to women and children experiencing violence?

THE ANROWS RESEARCH PROJECT

“Improved accountability: The role of perpetrator intervention systems” by Donna Chung, Karen Upton-Davis, Reinie Cordier, Elena Campbell, Tim Wong, Michael Salter, Siobhan Austen, Patrick O’Leary, Jan Breckenridge, Rodney Vlasis, Damian Green, Amy Pracilio, Amy Young, Ashlee Gore, Lynelle Watts, Sarah Wilkes-Gillan, Renée Speyer, Natasha Mahoney, Sarah Anderson and Tallace Bissett

This project comprised ten studies examining Australian domestic and family violence perpetrator intervention systems, focusing in particular on the most common pathways of identification, assessment and intervention with perpetrators.

The studies were:

1. Locating “accountability” within perpetrator intervention systems: Inceptions and limitations in current understanding.
2. The Tree of Prevention: Understanding the relationship between the primary, secondary and tertiary prevention of violence against women.
3. Mapping perpetrator pathways across systems of intervention.
4. Emerging systems for perpetrator intervention: A case study of the Southern Metro region, Victoria.
5. Finding a safe way forward and keeping the perpetrator in view outside the city: A Western Australian case study.
6. Sibling sexual abuse: Responding to everyone involved. A New South Wales case study.
7. What happens once men commence a domestic and family violence perpetrator program? A case study from south-east Queensland.
8. Towards evidence-based practice: Developing a minimum data set for domestic and family violence perpetrator interventions.
9. Investing in the safety of women and children: Developing and piloting a methodology to evaluate the return on investment in domestic and family violence perpetrator responses.
10. The effectiveness of protection orders in reducing recidivism in domestic and family violence: A systematic review and meta-analysis.

See anrows.org.au for the full report, including methodological details and findings of each study, and a complete list of 30 recommendations for policy and practice.

Key findings

Different forms of accountability may not align, and may even conflict with each other

Accountability to the state does not necessarily align with accountability to women experiencing violence. For example:

- Crimes are prosecuted on behalf of the state, not on behalf of the victim. Therefore, decisions of the court which hold perpetrators accountable may do so in ways that do not acknowledge the impact of violence on the victim, promote her safety, or align with her wishes.

Being held accountable by the state may reduce the likelihood that a perpetrator takes personal responsibility for his violence. For example:

- The court may issue a protection order to hold a man accountable, however some men might perceive this as being “just a piece of paper”, and not feel compelled to comply with the order. This is particularly likely for men who do not view the court as having legitimate authority, or who feel that they were not granted procedural justice.
- Courts commonly issue protection orders by consent and without admissions, a process that was introduced as a time-saving device. Men may experience this process as transactional and perfunctory, giving them the sense that procedural justice was lacking, and diminishing their recognition of the court as a legitimate authority.
- The process of issuing orders by consent and without admissions also means that women’s accounts of violence do not have the opportunity to be validated by the court. Men can then tell themselves that they are not actually at fault, but rather have been persecuted by “the system”.
- Court-mandated referrals may give a man an incentive to attend a men’s behaviour change program—but may provide a disincentive for him to take responsibility for desisting from using violence, particularly when he believes he has not been afforded procedural justice.

There is much opportunity for human services agencies to play a role in identifying and responding to perpetrators

Keeping the perpetrator in view is a key challenge for perpetrator intervention systems. Human services agencies (particularly mental health, alcohol and other drugs, and child protection services) regularly come into contact with perpetrators of domestic and family violence, however men’s use of violence is often invisible or secondary in these contexts. With appropriate training and increased information sharing between agencies, human services agencies could work together with the justice system and with specialist domestic and family violence agencies to create a “web of accountability”, and to guide men towards changing their violent behaviours, their violence-supportive attitudes and their use of coercive control.

Examples of good practice exist where perpetrator intervention systems are well integrated with specialist services for women and children

Good practice in integrating systems was demonstrated through the case studies presented in this research. The case studies were based in the Southern Metro region of Melbourne, south-east Queensland, and rural Western Australia.

For example, when services are coordinated, the conditions given on different orders can mirror each other. For instance, a protection order, a community corrections order, and a child protection order can be aligned so as to improve the consistency of accountability messaging and create greater opportunities to reinforce those protective conditions.

In another example, the co-location of workers was shown to allow for greater coordination. For example, a child protection service employed a specialist men's worker who could engage perpetrator fathers, and a specialist women's domestic and family violence worker was co-located at the child protection service. The men's worker and the women's worker could conduct joint home visits to engage men and women respectively.

Lack of accommodation for perpetrators leads to increased safety risks

A perpetrator might be excluded from the family home as a result of a police-issued family violence safety notice or a court-issued protection order. An unintended consequence of this is that the level of risk he poses to his partner and children can increase in some circumstances.

Men who are excluded from the family home need crisis accommodation. Without crisis accommodation, men can face homelessness; once homeless, accessing any kind of support service becomes more difficult. This in turn can make them invisible and further escalate the level of risk they pose.

One police family violence liaison officer (FVLO) observed that emergency accommodation was so stretched that people would be turned away if they had a car in which they could sleep.

After the initial separation is the most dangerous time for a woman, well you can triple that by putting him in his car with nothing and him sitting there stewing and freezing to death or cooking or whatever, whatever his situation is, you're making her risk factors go up by the hour, as far as I'm concerned. (Participant 1, Legal Focus Group 1)

Exceptionally high expectations are put on MBCPs to support men to change

A systemic assumption appeared to be that a perpetrator had been held to account by the court simply through being a respondent to a court order and referred to an MBCP, and that the MBCP would, in turn, “make him accountable”. MBCP practitioners noted that this was not always realistic, given that MBCPs only had a relatively short period in which to address what might be highly entrenched attitudes and behaviour, in the context of societal acceptance of a level of gender inequality. Moreover, mandated clients who are unsuitable for the program can undermine the process for the rest of the group.

Practitioners observed that perpetrators who were living in their cars or in other adverse conditions were not able to engage productively with MBCP work or with expectations of accountability generally. Instead, their situation fuelled their adoption of victim narratives:

If they're not getting their basic needs met they're not going to connect at all, they're thinking, “where's my food, when's my court date, how am I paying for this, my car's running out of fuel”. (Participant 6, Housing & Health Focus Group 1)

The role of MBCPs in monitoring risk and providing partner support is undervalued

Even if a man has no desire to change (that is, to take responsibility for his violence), his mandated attendance at a MBCP can make some difference:

- The man is kept in view, his level of risk is monitored, and information can be shared across agencies.
- A partner contact service will allow his partner to be supported (even if the man drops out of the program), and may possibly provide her the opportunity to attempt separation in safety.
- Through his partner's engagement, it will be possible to triangulate the level of risk the man poses.

These beneficial aspects of MBCPs were, however, poorly understood by workers who were not actually involved in delivering these programs.

An optimal MBCP (including partner contact and intensive case management) costs approximately \$4375 per participant to run

Given the immensely high costs of domestic and family violence to the economy, programs with only a very small chance of success can show a positive return to the economy.

Even when costs to the state only (rather than costs to the entire economy) are taken into consideration, programs still show positive returns for the more severe forms of domestic and family violence, and in scenarios when probabilities of program success

are higher. The research highlights the social and economic importance of intervening early in patterns of domestic and family violence.

The scenario-based method of assessing return on investment developed in this study highlights the personal costs of violence to women and children. Unlike traditional methods that present data on the *average* costs to women, this methodology gives visibility to the diverse costs borne by women and highlights that, for some, the costs are extreme.

Most MBCPs are collecting rich data but this is not aggregated nationally

Many MBCPs collect data on:

- common demographic variables such as employment status and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status
- relationships, parenting, and living arrangements of clients
- criminal history variables relating to domestic and family violence
- mental health diagnoses and substance misuse
- the establishment and type of partner support offered.

Data that are deemed important by MBCP practitioners but are not regularly collected include:

- data on women who declined partner support
- whether or not the program uses a formal risk assessment tool
- date(s) risk assessment was conducted and results of assessment
- waiting time until assessment; waiting time until program commencement
- information regarding men on a waiting list, such as whether a risk assessment was conducted; referrals made; supports offered; partner contact offered
- outcomes after program completion.

Some key data are not easily accessible for MBCP practitioners without formal information sharing arrangements, such as:

- data from police on weapons possession
- data from Departments of Justice and courts on protection order breaches, previous convictions, and Family Court history.

There are limited consequences for men who disengage from programs or otherwise breach orders

Men who disengage from behaviour change programs face limited consequences, even if they have been mandated to attend.¹ Participants in the research showed that they would disengage from a program when they believed they might not achieve the outcome they wanted, such as reunification with their partner or increased child contact. The court—and perpetrator intervention systems more broadly—appears to invest trust that referral to an MBCP will result in retention (if not actual behaviour change), whereas MBCPs' capacity to enforce this is limited.

Disengaging from a program can mean that a man entirely drops out of view of perpetrator intervention systems. The onus of keeping men within the system falls upon women, an indication that systemic accountability is not necessarily functioning well. For example, it is up to a man's partner to alert police when she believes he has breached his protection order. This can increase risk, since the man can then blame his partner for his engagement with perpetrator intervention systems, rather than attributing his involvement to the action of statutory agencies.

Responding to diversity remains a challenge

Men from a wide range of backgrounds require perpetrator responses that are adapted to their lived experiences. For example, perpetrator intervention systems must be able to respond to young men, men in rural and remote locations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, culturally and linguistically diverse men, men with disability, and men from LGBTIQ communities. Systems also must be able to respond to diverse forms of perpetration, such as sibling sexual assault and violence involving members of the extended family, as well as intimate partner violence. Each of these forms of diversity has unique aspects to be addressed; for example, the Western Australian case study revealed the challenges of establishing a stable workforce in the rural location of the Goldfields, while the Victorian case study highlighted the intensive resourcing required to run MBCPs in-language for men from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

¹ The need for improved monitoring of perpetrator participation in court-mandated referrals to MBCPs was Recommendation 90 of the report of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (Neave, Faulkner, & Nicholson, 2016), so at the time of writing, improvements in this area were under development in Victoria.

Recommendations for policymakers

Broaden the conception of perpetrator intervention systems

A broad range of human services agencies should be supported to play a coordinated role in identifying and responding to domestic and family violence perpetrators. This coordination can increase the visibility of perpetrators so that their risk and dangerousness can be better gauged, and offers opportunities for earlier intervention.

Ensure human services staff understand information sharing legislation and its application in cases of domestic and family violence

Human services staff should be trained so that they can confidently take advantage of information sharing legislation. In this way, practitioners can share early concerns and ensure that perpetrators remain visible across the system.

Fund crisis and short-term accommodation

Accommodation should be available for perpetrators who are removed from their homes as a result of police- or court-issued orders in order for them to be visible and for their locations to be known to authorities.

Increase investment in perpetrator interventions

Investment in accredited and robust MBCPs and other perpetrator interventions should be increased. As well, allocations should be included for waiting list monitoring, partner support, and individual case management of program participants. This increased investment should not be delivered through reductions in funding to victim support services.

Trial the national minimum data set for MBCPs

The minimum data set for MBCPs developed in this research project² should be trialled in agreement with Commonwealth and state and territory governments to establish a national evidence base from which future policy and programming can be developed.

² See Appendices J and K of the full research report (available at www.anrows.org.au) for the participant level data collection instrument and the service level data collection instrument respectively.

Use the “return on investment” methodology to assist with decision-making

The return on investment methodology developed and presented in this research project can be adopted by state and territory governments to assist with policymaking and resource allocation.

Prioritise adapting perpetrator responses so that systems are better able to engage and work with diverse perpetrators and circumstances

This diversity includes perpetrators from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, regional and remote locations, LGBTIQ communities, and those who misuse alcohol and other drugs. Along with intimate partner violence, diverse forms of perpetration, for example sibling sexual abuse, also need to be addressed.

Consider other forms of perpetrator intervention beyond group-based MBCPs

Group-based programs are not suitable for all perpetrators, and the delivery of group-based programs is not viable in some locations (e.g. rural and remote areas).

Recommendations for practitioners and service providers

Recognise human services agencies as part of perpetrator intervention systems

A broad range of human services agencies should recognise their potential role in identifying and responding to domestic and family violence perpetrators, and liaising with specialist domestic and family violence services for women and children.

Recruit more male workers into the human services workforce

More male workers should be recruited into the human services workforce to conduct work with male perpetrators of domestic and family violence in non-specialist settings.

Expand services that work with families who have not separated

Services that work with families where the perpetrator remains in the family home/relationship should be expanded, together with workforce development to support this overlooked group and specialist area of practice.

Follow up on protection orders

Magistrates Courts and local courts across Australia should investigate opportunities for better follow-up of protection orders once they have been served on the perpetrator.

Assess suitability for referral to MBCPs before mandating attendance

All Australian courts mandating referrals to MBCPs should ensure that appropriate and nuanced processes are developed for assessing perpetrator eligibility and suitability for referral. In instances where men are not suitable for a group-based intervention (for reasons such as cognitive impairment or a lack of overt motivation to change), other interventions should be mandated, with the same goals of increasing victims'/survivors' safety and holding perpetrators to account. Such alternative interventions might include individual counselling, or the use of electronic monitoring.

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Further reading and resources

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Please check the online version at www.anrows.org.au for any amendment.

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