



# Submission

## **South Australian Royal Commission on Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence**

*September 2024*

### **Introduction**

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia (YACSA) is the peak body representing the interests of young people aged 12 to 25 years, as well as the non-governmental organisations and services that support them. YACSA operates as a member-based organisation, developing independent policy positions and not aligning with any political party or movement. The organisation aims to effect substantive improvements in the quality of young people's lives. YACSA advocates for the fundamental right of all young people to participate in various aspects of community life, including decision-making processes that affect them, and acknowledges the unique challenges young people encounter when engaging in these processes.

Domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFSV) represents a significant concern for young people, who should be recognized as priority stakeholders. Young people should be acknowledged both as victim-survivors and perpetrators of DFSV, and the elevated risk they experience should be taken into consideration throughout the Royal Commission.

YACSA maintains that governments, institutions, workplaces, and the community play a crucial role in initiating and supporting social and cultural change to prevent violence before its occurrence. Furthermore, as identified by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, YACSA recognises that young people are agents of change in ending violence against women and children and should be prioritised as such.

### **Young people in context**

The 'generational bargain', which involves the transfer of resources, liabilities, rights, obligations, and inequalities between each generation has been compromised. Despite a substantial period of economic growth, young people in Australia are reported to be the first generation since federation to experience a lower standard of living than the previous generation. Policy decisions regarding the economy, environment and social issues have resulted in young people facing distinct challenges not encountered by previous cohorts during the same life stage. Young people in South Australia are experiencing significantly different and challenging circumstances across economic, social, environmental, and civic domains, while simultaneously feeling unrepresented by governments that continue to implement policies that directly exacerbate the disproportionate impacts from recent global events. Experienced by young people. While not directly related to experiences of violence, this relevant context must still be acknowledged when considering young people and how to genuinely consult with them, as well as when making decisions that affect them and their lives.

Young people are also experiencing a stage of development where their attitudes and understandings of DFSV can be impacted by exposure to other's supporting attitudes and understandings. As attitudes and understandings that are supportive of or that dismiss or minimise the impacts of this violence are key drivers of DFSV, this must be considered in efforts to improve prevention and early intervention, especially through education. The assumption that young people

would organically develop better understandings of and attitudes towards DFSV has not been realised in some areas and young people can hold misinformed understandings of DFSV.

There has been a recent decline in the proportion of young people, particularly young men, that accept DFSV is most likely perpetrated by men. This highlights another important consideration regarding young people, how to best approach evolving forms of backlash to progression. The so-called 'manosphere' – an online collection of influencers and communities promoting problematic attitudes and understandings towards gender equality and DFSV – has experienced increasing media attention due to recent high-profile figures. However, it is vital to recognise the long history of backlash against and resistance to efforts to address violence against women that can be traced back to the 1970's 'Men's Liberation Movement' which began promoting gender equality as the cause of 'men's problems'<sup>i</sup>. Since moving online, the 'manosphere' has been believed to have contributed to hostile forms of backlash like 'GamerGate' – an online harassment campaign targeting women in the video game industry and a series of high-profile attacks targeting women<sup>ii</sup>. Backlash to progression has always existed and developments have been made to understand how to address backlash that should also be considered in relation to the online 'manosphere', including anticipating and monitoring backlash, development of prevention programs that incorporate community leaders, and ensuring whole communities are included in prevention efforts<sup>iii</sup>.

Current data collection produces statistics that are unlikely to accurately show the prevalence of violence against young people, especially young women and non-binary people. Certain types of peer-to-peer violence like sexual violence and the prevalence of intimate partner violence, which is classified nationally as someone a person currently or previously lived with, are not well considered. The current approach can exclude young people's experiences as they are less likely to live with a partner<sup>iv</sup>.

## **Prevention**

### *Prevention currently*

DFSV is the product of social, economic and political factors that can be reformed to prevent this violence from occurring. Prevention aims to address the justification, excusing, promotion and underlying drivers of DFSV by addressing gendered attitudes, beliefs, understandings and norms underlying the power imbalance present in our society. Since national primary prevention development began under the first *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* progress has been made yet there is significant work still needed especially in relation to young people.

### *Why focus on young people?*

A key underlying driver of DFSV is attitudes, beliefs and understandings that dismiss, endorse or support gender inequality and DFSV. Recent data shows that previous assumptions young people would naturally develop better attitudes and understandings of gender equality and DFSV have not necessarily been realised and areas of concern remain. While attitudes and understandings held by young people have improved in recent years, there are exceptions. Concerningly, young people have fallen behind in understanding the gendered nature of violence with over 45 per cent believing (incorrectly) that 'women equally perpetrate domestic violence'. Some young people also maintain inaccurate understandings of domestic violence, with almost 30 per cent 'somewhat' to 'strongly' agreeing that 'women who stay with their abusive partner are partly responsible for the abuse continuing' and almost 20 per cent 'somewhat' to 'strongly' agreeing that 'much domestic violence is a normal reaction to day-to-day stress'. Young people also struggle to understand non-physical forms

of violence including technology-facilitated abuse as a form of DFSV. Overall, recent analysis finds young people have similar attitudes to older cohorts but do not have similar understandings of DFSV compared to older cohorts<sup>v</sup>.

### *Prevention potential*

Current prevention approaches need to improve the engagement of men as part of the required whole-of-population approach to effectively shift away from harmful gender norms and understandings on gender inequality. Young men's understandings of gender equality and DFSV are significantly lower than young women and gender diverse peoples'. Concerningly, a considerable minority proportion of young men continue to believe that 'men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household' and that 'women prefer a man to be in charge in a relationship'<sup>vi</sup>. Adhering to rigid gender norms like the belief that men should dictate public and private decision-making results in a young man at greater risk of perpetrating gendered violence like DFSV. Therefore, potential to improve young men's understandings and beliefs on gender equality and DFSV should be key prevention priority, especially as recent evidence shows that more young men under 30 years believe in rigid norms of masculinity compared to men aged 31-45 years<sup>vii</sup>.

To effectively improve the engagement of young men in prevention evidence outlines the importance of engagement being gender-transformative to support reflections on harmful gender norms and to work with young men to address how norms of masculinity can be shifted through community, organisations, family and institutions<sup>viii</sup>. A spectrum of prevention to meet young men where they are has also been shown to be effective, especially when including outreach to unengaged men aimed at increasing their willingness to engage in prevention, support to engaged men to build their capacity to act and long-term engagement to build men's confidence to engage fully<sup>ix</sup>. Improving the effectiveness of engaging young men in prevention also requires developing understandings of reflective practices as well as ways to respond to resistance or backlash<sup>x</sup>.

While improving the engagement of men, especially young men, in prevention is vital to prevent DFSV and make lasting change the importance of retaining a whole-of-population approach cannot be lost, and focus on engaging men cannot come at the expense of existing prevention programs, particularly early intervention and response programs working with young women and gender diverse young people<sup>xi</sup>.

### *Holistic support (addressing disadvantage)*

Addressing structural factors is a significant aspect of DFSV prevention that can be neglected but should be prioritised. Adequate prevention must be holistic and include improved support in relation to social and economic circumstances that impact safety. Evidence of connection between economic insecurity and experiences of violence is extensive, and this is especially relevant for young people in the current context of disproportionate economic consequences and the impacts of economic scarring into the future<sup>xii</sup>. Other circumstances compounding risks of experiencing violence, especially intimate partner violence, like having children, long-term health conditions, being pregnant and identifying as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander woman demonstrate the intersectional approach needed to adequately address disadvantage.

Violence is a leading cause of homelessness especially among young women and young people (15 to 24 years old) who continue to be significantly overrepresented in South Australian homelessness data, representing 27 per cent of all people experiencing homelessness in the state<sup>xiii</sup>. As recognised by the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* and the accompanying *First Action Plan 2023-2027*, developing pathways to safe and secure housing is vital for prevention. In South Australia over 40 per cent of children and young people (under 19 years) who presented to

homelessness services in 2022-23 presented alone, the highest proportion of any jurisdiction<sup>xiv</sup>. Children and young people experiencing homelessness alone are especially vulnerable and have often experienced violence, abuse, family breakdown, neglect and/or family rejection. Age-appropriate support is lacking within the homelessness sector as nationally 15,000 young people who present homelessness services needing medium-to-long-term housing do not receive support. Over 27 per cent of children and young people presenting to homelessness services in South Australia were still experiencing homelessness at last contact with services in 2022-23, concerningly increasing from 12 per cent in 2021-22<sup>xv</sup>. Despite this, this vulnerable cohort of young people are not currently addressed adequately in the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*.

The prevention potential of improving access to housing and the need to centre housing in a holistic prevention approach targeting young people is clear<sup>xvi</sup>. South Australia in particular needs to immediately address the unmet needs of homelessness services supporting young people. The State Government should progress and expand on commitments to increasing social housing stock while resourcing youth specific tenancies as young people are underrepresented as social housing tenants<sup>xvii</sup>. At a federal level increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance and raising support payments like Youth Allowance to at least \$88 per day is vital<sup>xviii</sup>.

## **Early intervention**

Young people are a priority population for targeted early intervention that is designed to identify and support those at risks of using, witnessing or experiencing DFSV to minimise immediate and ongoing risk. Effective early intervention must provide an opportunity for young people at risk to access holistic support, targeted programs and adequate resources and the barriers young people face to accessing services must be recognised. Additionally, early intervention for young people must be evidence-based and co-designed with young people to enhance effectiveness.

### *Language*

The language used across academia, legal settings and service settings has an impact on system responses<sup>xix</sup>. Therefore, it is vital to consider the intersecting issues experienced by young people who use violence including neurodivergence, mental health issues, low wellbeing and experiences of trauma. This approach is significantly different to a response to an adult's use of intimate partner violence where power and control are a consideration, and a system response will focus on removing and holding accountable the perpetrator. Instead, recognition of a young person's developmental limitations should be prioritised and development of a cross-sector understanding on the unique factors involved when a young person uses violence is needed<sup>xx</sup>. Central to developing the appropriate approach is broad adoption of accurate language including shifting away from use of 'predator' or 'perpetrator' towards 'young person who uses violence'. This supports a strengths-based non-clinical approach that recognises young people's capacity to understand the full implications of their actions, and in services it helps maintain focus on the duality of young people who use violence while also still needing care and support from parents, caregivers and support services<sup>xxi</sup>.

### *Targeted intervention*

Data tells us that approximately one in two young people who experience domestic and/or family violence will go on to use violence in the home in the future demonstrating the intergenerational impacts of DFSV<sup>xxii</sup>. Despite this evidence, support for young people who use violence, and their families is inadequate and often not fit for purpose. As young people who use violence likely experience compounding disadvantage and their families continue to present to services with increasingly complex needs, the need to invest in targeted holistic family support as a form of early

intervention is clear<sup>xxiii</sup>. This approach is challenging within a system that typically views each young person as either a victim-survivor or as a perpetrator of DFSV and does not consider the complexity of young people who experience DFSV<sup>xxiv</sup>. Currently, families and young people who use violence likely engage with multiple support services across health, justice, child protection and housing and they also report significant unmet service needs. Comprehensive evidence demonstrates the benefits of taking a strengths-based approach that centres a young person and is trauma-informed, holistic, rights-based and aims to build system capacity<sup>xxv</sup>.

## **Response**

The importance of system responses to young people who have perpetrated or experienced DFSV were acknowledged in the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032* alongside the need to better understand and improve age-appropriate child-centred approaches. Current responses, especially to family violence, do not adequately support young people and opportunities for improvement in practices have been highlighted in previous consultations<sup>xxvi</sup>.

### *Restorative justice*

Young people that come into contact with the justice system as a result of perpetrating violence, usually family violence or 'adolescent violence in the home', experience significant intersecting disadvantage including adverse childhood experiences and trauma that are often addressed inadequately<sup>xxvii</sup>. Additionally, evidence indicates that young people cannot access legal advice, are missing diversionary opportunities and are not provided with support to understand orders made. Recent evaluation of a Victorian program to provide early support to young people who have an intervention order made against them showed that engagement with legal and non-legal support earlier improves outcomes for young people at risk of experiencing detrimental contact with the justice system<sup>xxviii</sup>.

### *Breaking the cycle of violence*

Evidence continues to show that young people, especially young men, who use violence have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences. Young men in contact with the justice system who have experiences of domestic and/or family violence are typically younger when they first engage with the system and often have an extensive history of offending behaviour compared to young men who do not have the same experiences<sup>xxix</sup>. Recent analysis showed on average young men who have been charged with sexual violence offences demonstrate higher rates of adverse childhood experiences, followed by young men charged with violence-related offences. Additionally, young men charged with sexual violence offences were more likely to have experienced sexual abuse<sup>xxx</sup>.

Potential harm resulting from engagement with the youth justice system is evident in literature demonstrating that, regardless of gender, convictions or previous times proceeded against, engaging in DFSV perpetration before the age of 18 years significantly increases future risk of DFSV perpetration as an adult<sup>xxxi</sup>. The reality that adverse childhood experiences and trauma are significant criminogenic factors and impact cycles of violence must be recognised and addressed by improving early intervention for young people with those experiences, especially in relation to communication, policies and services for the protection and care of children and young people therefore reducing risks of future engagement with the justice system<sup>xxxii</sup>.

Youth Affairs Council of South Australia Inc  
GPO Box 2117  
Adelaide SA 5001

Level 4, 182 Victoria Square, Tarntanyangga  
Adelaide SA 5000

(08) 8211 7546  
[yacsa@yacsa.com.au](mailto:yacsa@yacsa.com.au)  
[www.yacsa.com.au](http://www.yacsa.com.au)



**youth affairs council**  
OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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