

Monday 13 May 2024



Communique: Crisis Talks into Murdered and Missing Women Convened by the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission

On Tuesday 7th May 2024, the Commission convened crisis talks bringing together 70 experts from across the country to tackle the alarming rates of murdered and missing women in Australia this year.

These crisis talks brought together experts from across the country to discuss concrete areas of action that we can prioritise as a country to address the crisis of women dying as a result of domestic, family, and sexual violence. We heard from one Queensland service provider that, in the past 90 days, they have had an average of 19 individual disclosures per day from women of threats or attempts to kill her or her children from her abuser. Chillingly, this is just one service out of hundreds operating across the country.

We heard from heartbroken families of escalating violence and missed opportunities to save their loved ones' lives. At the request of the family, Commissioner Micaela Cronin also shared a statement prepared by a spokesperson for Molly Ticehurst's family in Forbes. The statement outlined the patterns of control and abuse prior to Molly's death and the ways the system – intended to support and protect her – failed.

Participants came from across the country and included people with lived experience of violence; representatives from academia and research; staff from the domestic, family and sexual violence sector and peak bodies; representatives from Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs); as well as limited attendees from government.

The Commission acknowledges the personal and professional experience, wisdom, and passion brought by all the participants who attended, and we thank them for their contribution. We also acknowledge the significant number of people who expressed interest in attending and were not able to be accommodated at this particular event. The Commission is committed to providing those who were unable to attend with other avenues for engagement.

This communique provides an overview of the insights we heard, and the proposed areas identified for urgent action and attention that the Commission will take forward to all governments – state, territory, and Commonwealth – and to National Cabinet later this year.

Context

We are at a crisis point in addressing domestic, family, and sexual violence. Governments have made significant investment and reforms over the last two decades, and we have made progress. But we still have a long way to go. The *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*, which all Governments across the country have committed to and invested in, provides a united vision to end domestic, family and sexual violence. This includes a target of 25 per cent reduction per year in female victims of intimate partner homicide. Two years into the ten year plan, we are not on track to reach this target.

While we have seen a decrease in intimate partner homicides over the past three decades, it is clear that the rates of violence that women are experiencing in Australia are still far too high. In May 2024, the Australia Institute of Criminology reported that female intimate partner homicide increased by 28 per cent in the year

2022-2023¹, and these statistics do not capture the many women we do not know enough about, those who go missing and those who choose to take their own lives to escape domestic violence. We need to take urgent action if we are to achieve the objectives and targets committed to in the National Plan.

Institutional and systemic racism continues to affect responses to and prevention of family violence for First Nations people. Participants shared examples of systemic failures and the resultant fear and lack of trust in government systems, in particular child protection, police, courts and justice systems continue to prevent Indigenous women from seeking assistance.

We heard that First Nations women who are murdered or go missing are often disregarded by the broader community, with limited or no media coverage, investigation, or response. Attendees stated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women feel that they are being treated as insignificant and ignored even at moments of national community attention. Participants reinforced that many First Nations women experience violence at the hands of non-Aboriginal men, and that Aboriginal men should not be demonised as a result of acknowledging that Aboriginal women are disproportionately impacted by domestic, family, and sexual violence.

Priority areas for action

The focus of the roundtable's discussions was how we can prevent future homicides as a result of domestic, family, and sexual violence. A number of priority areas for action emerged through these crisis talks:

- Ensure we are systematically learning from our successes, *and* our failures.
- Recognise the vital role played by the domestic, family and sexual violence sector in preventing homicides through greater support and resourcing.
- Housing is critical - expand and increase access to accommodation options to respond to growing and changing demand.
- Improve information sharing and risk assessment frameworks to ensure coordinated responses.
- Work with and engage men, both as part of the solution and to ensure that those using violence are held accountable.
- Regulation of critical factors that exacerbate violence.

Learning from our successes and our failures

A theme throughout the day was the need to learn from systems currently in place that identify the failures and successes of our existing interventions to domestic, family, and sexual violence. There is a depth of analysis undertaken through death reviews, coronial inquests, and state and territory inquiries across Australia that enables us to understand the critical moments for intervention. It is vitally important to learn from these mechanisms: expanding what is working and addressing what is failing, tailored to each jurisdiction.

Participants urged consideration of the establishment of a standing body to collate what is working across the nation, to authoritatively gather and be a source of best practice principles to drive change.

Lives are being saved every day across the country and much harm averted by the outstanding work being done by our front line systems, services and responders. We need to garner the evidence of what is working to feed back to the systems, structures and programs we have and then resource them to do the work.

¹ Miles H & Bricknell S 2024. Homicide in Australia 2022–23. Statistical Report no. 46. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/sr77420>

The Commission will work with all governments to:

- Strengthen and expand state and territory domestic violence death review mechanisms.
- Examine the most effective mechanism to collate what is working across the nation on preventing homicide and be a source of best practice principles to drive change.
- Prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led research and data collection mechanisms to advance, and measure progress against the National Plan target to reduce violence and prevent deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Recognise the vital role played by the domestic, family and sexual violence sector in preventing homicides through greater support and resourcing.

Attendees stressed the need for greater investment to support families at risk of, or currently, experiencing violence. One service provider presented that many specialist services are operating beyond capacity and outside of their funded scope in order to respond to demand. They added that their partner services across the country were reporting 30 to 300 per cent increases in demand with no additional resourcing; for some organisations, that means one in three people are not getting a service.

There are clear patterns of increased demand year on year for frontline services. Key drivers of this include increased police referrals, ongoing reform improving service seeking (such as through the National Plan), insufficient safe and affordable housing, increasing regularity of natural disasters, cost of living pressures and population growth, and difficulty in accessing health and social services.

Attendees pointed to the fact that – despite knowing that a significant number of both survivors and perpetrators have a childhood experience of trauma – there are very few supports in place to intervene and support children who have experienced violence and abuse to recover and heal.

Participants affirmed the strength and power of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women’s leadership in preventing and responding to domestic, family and sexual violence and the importance of amplifying their voices to lead this work.

The Commission urges governments to:

- Ensure that all services are able to provide culturally safe services that meet the needs of First Nations people and those from migrant communities.
- Recognise that ACCOs are essential to the delivery of safety and effective responses to domestic, family and sexual violence through appropriately resourced.
- Provide greater certainty around streams of funding for delivery of frontline services through longer term contract arrangements and additional funding to enable data collection and evaluation.
- Prioritise therapeutic support for children and young people who have experienced violence.
- Explicitly recognise the increased risk of domestic, family and sexual violence for women with disabilities and other priority cohorts and place these cohorts at the centre of service responses.
- Recognise and address the significant scale of the challenge currently being faced in the Northern Territory, as well as other rural and remote areas, including the lack of access to appropriate resources, the delays experience by people seeking help and the capability of emergency services to be able to recognise and response to DFSV appropriately.
- Develop and implement both a national workforce strategy for domestic, family, and sexual violence sector, and targeted workforce strategies at jurisdictional levels.

- Develop and implement professional development strategies for the broader service system – including police, health, housing, education, legal services, and other community organisations – to build their capability to identify risk and respond to disclosures.

Expand and increase access to accommodation options to respond to demand and increasing complexity

As has been raised in multiple forums, we heard that housing is critical to ensuring women’s safety and enabling ongoing recovery. Participants noted that housing options, for both survivors and perpetrators, must also be seen as homicide prevention.

The Commission will promote the urgent need for Commonwealth, state, and territory governments to ensure:

- A range of accommodation options are available to meet the needs women and families suffering violence. This includes:
 - The ability for survivors to remain in their own home where it is safe for them to do so
 - A range of accessible transitional options in and out of community
 - Affordable, accessible long-term options that enable healing and recovery, again recognising that this also contributes to prevention of homicide.
- An expansion of options for accommodation for people using violence. This includes short-term ‘cooling off’ centres to disrupt violence from escalating and longer term options that allow survivors to remain in their homes.

Information sharing and risk assessment frameworks to ensure coordinated responses

We heard that integrated risk assessment is the cornerstone of effective system intervention. While data and information on risks is currently available in the system, it is not always effectively shared or acted upon to keep women safe.

It was also highlighted that risk assessment is almost exclusively conducted with women who have experienced violence, but very rarely on the men who have used violence, and that shifting this could be an important step in improving safety.

The Commission supports the value of:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research and data collection that focuses on the prevention of the deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.
- States and territories using evidence-based risk assessment processes which can easily be reviewed to account for new behaviours, including coercive control, strangulation, and sexual violence.
- Identifying critical moments for information sharing between agencies; for example, between corrections and other services when perpetrators are released from prison.
- Creating systems for, and removing barriers to, cross-jurisdictional information sharing, particularly in the context of high-risk offenders.
- Ensuring system interventions can escalate in response to escalated risk. While there are some examples of this, participants noted that key components of the justice system (such as protection orders and bail) are not adequately implemented or enforced to mitigate this risk.
- Justice systems shifting from responding to single incidents to responding to risk and escalating patterns of violence.

- Accelerate the ongoing work of police to address the impact of ongoing misidentification of perpetrators, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Working with and engaging men, both as part of the solution and to ensure that those using violence are held accountable

These crisis talks had a strong focus on the need to work with men to prevent future deaths.

Participants highlighted that in order to drive real change we need to expand the national conversation about men's violence to understand men's point of view, without seeing this as making excuses – childhood trauma, alcohol, drugs, mental health and gambling are all risk factors for male violence that must be investigated and address. Further understanding the drivers and risk factors of violence and actively engage men in a way that talks *with* them as change makers is imperative if we are to turn the tide.

While men are the perpetrators of violence, they engage in less help-seeking than women, and are therefore less accessible to intervention compared to women, who intersect more often with the service system. Most of our service system responses are targeted towards women.

As we have seen in the horrifying murders that have occurred recently, a significant number of the men who allegedly perpetrated these murders were already known to police and services. Recent research² shared with roundtable participants classified the largest cohort of perpetrators of homicide in their study as 'persistent and disorderly'; of these, 40 per cent had been abusive to former partners and 55 per cent had been involved in non-violence offending.

The Commission will promote the following actions in relation to working with men:

- Urgently expand the range of responses for men using violence, including intensive services for cohorts at high risk of perpetration, support for men seeking to change the trajectory of their behaviour, and targeted support for perpetrators from priority populations.
- Leverage the community around violent men to help support change and hold them accountable.
- Identify other key intervention points outside of the specialist family violence system, such as the men's health ecosystem (including suicide prevention) and the legal system (particularly lawyers involved in Family Court matters) and develop education and build referral pathways.
- Ensure a range of supports for men and families are in place at times when we know risks are increased, such as pregnancy, relationship separation, and release from prison.
- More research on pathways into violence is needed, including learning about what has worked for men who have stopped using violence, and what are the protective factors for those who experience childhood trauma but do not go on to use violence.
- Ensure we have longitudinal data on the causes and consequences of violence, the changes over time, and whether government policies are working.

² Boxall, H., Doherty, L., Lawler, S., Franks, C., & Bricknell, S. (2022). The "Pathways to intimate partner homicide" project: Key stages and events in male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide in Australia (Research report, 04/2022). ANROWS. <https://www.anrows.org.au/project/pathways-to-intimate-partner-homicide>

Regulation of critical factors that exacerbate violence

Participants raised the importance of acknowledging the role of factors such as alcohol and other drugs (AOD), gambling, and pornography in violence. While these factors do not in themselves cause violence, there is strong evidence that they contribute to reducing inhibition and result in more serious violence. There are now calls to have serious, evidence-based discussions about the role these factors have in violence and what levers the government can use.

The Commission will work with Commonwealth and state and territory governments to:

- Urgently consider what role they can play in regulating and responding to factors that can exacerbate domestic and family violence, such as the accessibility of AOD, gambling, and pornography.

Conclusion

This roundtable was a critical step in the Commission's work to provide national leadership in preventing women being killed as a result of domestic, family, and sexual violence. The priority areas outlined will inform future work of the Commission and inform our strategic advice to governments across Australia.

In August, the Commission will provide its first report to Parliament on the progress of the National Plan. This report will highlight the work being done to achieve the objectives of the National Plan and the opportunities for further work to achieve the goal of ending gender-based violence in Australia and reducing intimate partner homicide.

The Commission will continue to work collaboratively to keep women killed as a result of domestic, family, and sexual violence on the national agenda and inform concrete, effective actions.