



NASASV

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SERVICES
AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE

www.nasasv.org.au

National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032

Second Action Plan submission

JULY 2026



National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence

Australia’s peak body for specialist sexual violence services

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Introduction

Thank-you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032 Second Action Plan* Development.

The National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence (NASASV) is the peak body for a diverse range of specialist sexual violence organisations who provide prevention and response services to people, including children, who are at risk of or experience sexual violence in Australia. NASASV operates from a feminist, gender awareness and social justice framework to improve policy, legislation and service program responses to sexual violence.

There are more than 120 sexual assault services across Australia, ranging from community-based organisations to services operated by state and territory governments through public health systems, statewide crisis telephone and after-hours services. Specialist sexual assault services are distinguished by their expertise in responding to sexual violence, with trauma-informed, victim-survivor centred, rights-focused and evidence-based approaches. There is maturity in the sexual assault service system across Australia – some organisations have been operating for more than fifty years and children and young people have been supported in their own right for decades.

Sexual violence incorporates a wide range of sexual behaviours including but not limited to, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, technology-facilitated sexual violence (including AI-generated and deepfake content), generation and distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), stalking, being forced to watch or participate in pornography, stealthing, indecent exposure, sharing intimate photos and videos, reproductive coercion, unwanted touching and medical sexual misconduct. It is important that the Second Action Plan recognises that all non-consensual sexual behaviours, including technology-facilitated abuse, is considered sexual violence and a fundamental breach of human rights.

Sexual violence exists on a continuum of harmful behaviours, ranging from acts that are often dismissed or normalised to other forms of serious sexual offending. Importantly, it is not a hierarchy of behaviours, rather it recognises that the harms across the continuum are interconnected and have significant consequences for victim-survivors. When these behaviours are normalised, minimised or excused, they reinforce attitudes of misogyny, entitlement and power over others, creating an environment in which more severe forms of sexual violence are enabled. Recognising the continuum of sexually violent behaviours is critical to preventing violence before it escalates, and this also needs to be reflected in the Second Action Plan.

There are concerning trends in Australia in relation to some attitudes towards women and girls, particularly amongst young men. The *National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey* found that while Australians have generally become less accepting of violence against women over the past twenty years, progress on some measures has stalled or gone backwards, such as victim-blaming, understanding consent and the minimisation of sexual violence. These shifts are occurring alongside increasing reports of technology-facilitated sexual violence, exposure to extreme misogyny through influencers and online forums, widespread availability of violent and degrading pornography, AI-generated sexual abuse material and image-based abuse. On occasion, girls and women are absorbing this messaging too, which internalises misogyny and contributes to a victim-blaming culture.

Sexual violence shares similar characteristics to hate crimes and violent extremism and is gender-based violence motivated by entitlement, power, inequality, hostility and frequently the subjugation of women and girls. International human rights organisations increasingly recognise violence against women as a form of discrimination. The Council of Europe recognises violence against women as both a human rights violation and a form of discrimination. This is a useful approach as it positions sexual violence as requiring structural prevention rather than isolated offences committed by individuals.

The intersections between misogyny, racism, transphobia, biphobia, homophobia, ableism and other forms of discrimination are central to understanding gender-based violence. These systems of oppression reinforce each other, creating distinct and compounded harms for people with intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989). People with multiple marginalised identities experience discrimination in ways that cannot be understood by considering each identity in isolation. There is growing social polarisation in Australia with online radicalisation and intersecting forms of discrimination occurring. Algorithm-driven extremist content, disinformation about sexual violence and organised hate movements are contributing to the normalisation of abusive and dehumanising behaviour.

NASASV notes the specialist sexual violence sector is different to the family and domestic violence sector. Specialist sexual violence services respond to all victim-survivors of sexual violence: women, men, children, and people who identify as gender diverse, as well as children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours (HSB). Specialist sexual violence services respond to violence that has occurred in a wide range of relationships or settings over the course of a person's life, whereas family and domestic violence services are oriented towards crisis support, with a significant focus on matters of risk and safety, particularly at times of separation. Sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, can occur in every domain of people's lives, not solely within the family or intimate partner contexts. Around two-thirds of sexual violence occurs outside domestic or family violence settings (ABS, Sexual Violence Victimization 2021).

Sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, is a serious, underreported and increasingly prevalent problem in Australia. Approximately 2.8 million (14%) Australians experienced adult-perpetrated sexual violence since the age of 15 (AIHW, Sexual Violence, 2021). **The rate of recorded sexual assault incidence has climbed consistently, with the number of victims recorded in 2024 alone rising by 10%, marking the fourteenth consecutive year of increases, with rates outpacing population growth in four of the previous five years** (ABS, Recorded Crime – Victims, 2024). Police-recorded crime data substantially underestimates the true prevalence of sexual violence, and the 2021–22 ABS Personal Safety Survey (2021) found 92% of women did not report their most recent sexual assault to police.

A recent study (University of Adelaide 2025) found 14 per cent of young Australians have experienced online child sexual victimisation, including non-consensual sexual image sharing. Approximately one in four of these examples involved AI. **In 2024–25, the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation saw a 180% increase in reports since the Centre launched in 2018 (AFP, 2023), equating to 226 reports per day.** The Australian Federal Police has warned of a surge in AI-generated CSAM. Technology is rapidly evolving, changing patterns and methods of victimisation. AI is also being utilised for sexual violence disclosures and help-seeking, with no safeguards in place.

Beyond these statistics, the sheer prevalence and threat of sexual violence particularly shapes how women and girls perceive their safety and affects their freedom to participate in all areas of life. The prevalence and ongoing threat of sexual and gender-based violence shapes how women and girls assess risk, navigate public and private spaces and participate in work, community and social life.

The 2025 ALRC Report *Safe, Informed, Supported: Reforming Justice Responses to Sexual Violence* confirmed that sexual violence is one of the most common and serious harms confronting Australia today. It noted the unique harm caused by sexual violence and how it is linked to persistent myths and stereotypes which affect how people understand what sexual violence is, as well as how people who experience it respond.

Adults and children of all genders can experience sexual violence and child sexual abuse, however women and girls are disproportionately affected, as are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ people and migrants and refugees. Recognising sexual violence as gender-based violence does not diminish the experiences of other victim-survivors; rather, it acknowledges the gendered patterns of prevalence, perpetration and harm. Effective prevention, early intervention, response and healing and recovery must recognise and address the experiences of all victim-survivors, including those who may face additional barriers to disclosure and support.

The overwhelming majority of sexual offences in Australia are perpetrated by men. Perpetrators can be family members, acquaintances, friends, colleagues, authority

figures or strangers. In 2023–24, 93% of offenders prosecuted by police were men and 7% were women (AIC, Sexual Offending in Australia, 2023). Men were more likely than women to have two or more victims, to have multiple sexual offence incidents and to have been charged. A 2023, a UNSW and Jesuit Social Services report found that of the community sample surveyed, one in six Australian men reported sexual feelings towards children and/or have sexually offended against children. This offending can include technology-facilitated sexual violence. One in fifteen men admitted they would have sexual contact with a child aged 14 or younger, if nobody would find out. This was the first Australian study to focus on undetected offenders, bringing visibility to behaviour that is often unseen or overlooked.

Australia also has a serious issue with the widespread generation, availability and consumption of violent and degrading pornography. Evidence suggests that frequent exposure to violent and degrading content may reinforce beliefs that minimise harm and perpetuate misogyny whilst upholding the patriarchy, increase acceptance of sexual aggression, and shape unrealistic or coercive sexual expectations, particularly among young people whose understanding of healthy relationships is still developing (Campo & Webster, 2025). **A 2020 study 45% of Pornhub scenes included at least one act of aggression. The same study found 94–97% of aggressive scenes portrayed women as targets of violence** (Fritz et al, 2020). Children and young people are commonly accessing pornography before receiving relationship and sex education. NASASV member services report increasing numbers of victim-survivors experiencing non-fatal strangulation and coercive sexual practices, which are presented as normal behaviours in violent pornography.

In 2024–25, the Australian Federal Police received 420 reports of modern slavery, with human trafficking the most reported form. 87% of suspected victim-survivors were women and girls. It was the highest number on record. Sex trafficking in Australia can involve forced labour and sexual exploitation, coercion, forced marriage, deception, debt bondage, migration-related exploitation and psychological control. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) estimates that for every identified victim-survivor, around four others remain undetected. Victim-survivors can be girls and women exploited in the commercial sex industry, international students, temporary migrants and people on insecure visas, children and young people and people experiencing homelessness, financial hardship and isolation.

As noted in NASASV's June 2024 submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission's *Inquiry into Justice Responses to Sexual Violence*, specialist sexual assault services across the country are gravely underfunded. The sector is struggling, and this has a serious effect on child and adult victim-survivors of sexual violence seeking support. **Victim-survivors in some areas are facing lengthy waits to access counselling.** Some states and territories do not provide services to children under 12 or to survivors of historic

abuse. Other victim-survivors must travel lengthy distances to obtain help and access to sexual assault services and Forensic Medical Examinations (FME).

In 2025, the *Lifetime Price of Harm* report identified a national funding shortfall of \$80 million annually and approximately 23,000 people across Australia with unmet support needs. In 2017, the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* recommended that the Australian Government and state and territory governments address existing specialist sexual assault service gaps by increasing funding for adult and child sexual assault services in each jurisdiction. **Further, NASASV, as a peak body, remains unfunded, representing a serious gap in the national sexual assault service system infrastructure.**

As the national peak body, NASASV believes that sexual violence will continue to be overlooked as an issue unless there is a dedicated focus, which includes investment, data collection, research, workforce strategy, funding and prevention. If it continues to be couched within the term 'family, domestic and sexual violence', it will continue to be seen as the same as family and domestic violence (FDV) sector. Whilst acknowledging the intersections with family and domestic violence, **NASASV encourages use of the term 'family and domestic violence and sexual violence' to differentiate between the sectors.**

NASASV notes that sexual violence did not receive sufficient standalone attention in the *First Action Plan (2023–2027)* under the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032*. The Plan focused more on family and domestic violence with the often-different drivers, settings, service model responses and needs of sexual violence victim-survivors obscured. **As a result of sexual violence not receiving the dedicated focus it required in the First Action Plan, there have been subsequent, serious funding implications for the specialist sexual violence sector in Australia and consequential impacts on victim-survivors.** NASASV is calling for this to be rectified through the development of the Second Action Plan.

Development of the Second Action Plan for the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030* is also underway. NASASV strongly urges recognition of the continuum of sexual violence and the need to create a more interconnected policy framework to improve outcomes for victim-survivors across the life course. Many victim-survivors first disclose childhood sexual abuse as adults – the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (2017) found victim-survivors take on average 23.9 years to disclose child sexual abuse. Many others never disclose. NASASV's member services routinely support both recent sexual violence and historical child sexual abuse victim-survivors as well as supporting people who access services at different points throughout the lifespan, either for different impacts from the same violence or for additional incidents of violence. **Both policy frameworks should adopt a**

more integrated, life-course approach that recognises child sexual abuse as part of the continuum of gender-based violence.

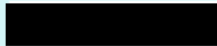
NASASV supports the development of the Second Action Plan and has put forward a 5-point plan to tackle sexual violence in Australia in the next five years. We also outline a number of serious issues which must be addressed in the Second Action Plan; failure to do so will be harmful to sexual violence victim-survivors. NASASV points to the submissions of its multiple member services with their extensive, on-the-ground expertise, such as Canberra Rape Crisis Centre, Sexual Assault Support Service, the Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing, Full Stop Australia, Sexual Assault Services Victoria, Laurel House and Queensland Sexual Assault Network.

NASASV also notes the work underway on related action plans and the need for integration to ensure the common drivers and overlapping victim-survivor experiences are addressed consistently across sectors:

Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan to End Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence 2026–2036

Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031.

NASASV acknowledges victim-survivors of sexual violence and their powerful advocacy to enact change and appreciates the contributions of participants from sexual assault services across Australia for their involvement in a NASASV-led Second Action Plan consultation process supported by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS).

If you would like to discuss this submission further, please contact 
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Five-point plan to address sexual violence in the next five years

- ★ Fund NASASV as a national peak body
- ★ Transparent, whole-of-government agreement through the National Partnership Agreement to support funding uplift to specialist sexual violence services across Australia
- ★ Dedicated focus on prevention of sexual violence
- ★ Strengthen prevention of, and response to, technology-facilitated sexual violence
- ★ Prioritisation of specific Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) Justice Responses to Sexual Violence recommendations

1. Funding NASASV as a national peak body will enable:



A national mapping and data project to be undertaken (partnering with ANROWS)

This is an essential foundational initiative which will provide the Government with a clear overview of sexual violence service provision across jurisdictions to inform future sexual violence policy, programs, legislation and research planning and investment. Importantly, it will provide critical insights into:

- gaps in service provision
- workforce capacity and capability constraints
- funding and service models, including for communities who experience access barriers, as well as current referral pathways
- identification of data and evidence gaps to strengthen sexual violence data collection, better positioning the sector for further development of a nationally consistent data set
- pilot client experience survey to provide insights on the needs of victim-survivors and their service system perspectives including gaps and opportunities. This could inform broader strategies to capture the voice of lived experience such as mapping the experiences of victim-survivors over the life course through a national survey.

The 2025 Australian Law Reform Commission *Safe, Informed, Supported: Reforming Justice Responses to Sexual Violence* Report recommended establishing a nationally consistent data framework that captures the range of sexual violence offences and

justice responses. This has yet to be implemented and this action represents a significant opportunity for this to be done by established, evidence-led organisations.



A National Sexual Violence Prevention Framework to be developed (partnering with Our Watch and others)

The First Action Plan does not outline a comprehensive approach to prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing for sexual violence. An overarching national sexual violence prevention framework needs to be developed and informed by victim-survivors, with a governance and accountability link between the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* and the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030*.

Noting the complexity of this space and the need for different strategies to be utilised, the framework will provide a multi-faceted approach to prevention that includes both widescale primary prevention and localised prevention and early intervention. Whilst there are intersections with existing FDV prevention frameworks, sexual violence also occurs outside intimate partner violence settings, and its prevention requires a specialised national lens. Expected outcomes in a sexual violence prevention framework could include:

- context as to what sexual violence is, where sexual violence occurs and who it affects
- examination of the drivers including patriarchy, misogyny and capitalism
- a clear set of prevention principles
- actionable strategies, including those to increase perpetrator accountability
- targeting conducive contexts that enable sexual violence (rather than risk factors)
- establishing a zero-tolerance approach noting that sexual violence is preventable
- guidance for cross-sector collaboration and
- monitoring and evaluation approach.



A National sexual violence workforce strategy to be developed (with key partners)

Noting the sexual violence workforce is markedly different to the family and domestic violence workforce, a dedicated workforce strategy is needed to:

- assess current and future workforce demand
- identify workforce shortages and capability gaps
- develop education pathways for entry to the professions
- forecast future service needs based on population growth and unmet demand
- establish national workforce development priorities
- support implementation of the *National Standards of Practice for Services Against Sexual Violence*

- explore recruitment and retention challenges and identify strategies to address them and
- align workforce planning with the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* and the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2031*.

2. Transparent, whole-of-government agreement through the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) to support funding uplift to specialist sexual violence services across Australia

There has been no meaningful investment in sexual violence services in decades. NASASV member services are reporting waiting lists of up to 14 months due to unprecedented demand. Delays and lack of access to support can lead to enduring impacts for victim-survivors throughout their life. The costs are profound, resulting in adults, children and young people whose life potential, job prospects, social and economic contributions, and capacity for healthy relationships and community connections are significantly impacted.

Services are managing increasingly complex cases, with children, young people and adults requiring more intensive support over longer periods of time. Mass perpetration events are also occurring more frequently, requiring significant resourcing to support local communities and sectors e.g. early childhood education and care, schools, sporting clubs and other institutional settings.

While governments have supported individual initiatives and pilot programs, there has been no sustained national investment to build the specialist workforce, expand service capacity, or ensure equitable access to specialist sexual violence services across Australia. The sector has historically received significantly less dedicated funding than the family and domestic violence sector.

Current NPA funding arrangements are inadequate, lack transparency and do not consistently reach sexual violence services across Australia. There must be a dedicated, non-competitive funding stream for sexual violence services through the NPA arrangements with the states and territories through the Second Action Plan. Everyone in Australia should be able to access timely, trauma-informed, specialist sexual violence services to support their recovery and healing.

3. Dedicated focus on prevention of sexual violence

NASASV member services report time-limited or no prevention funding through current funding arrangements, despite the growing demand from the community for such interventions. There is a need for specialist services to receive ongoing prevention funding for local, place-based activities, as well as widescale primary prevention through the development of a national prevention framework. NASASV notes that

prevention activity occurs across the four pillars of the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* e.g. therapeutic interventions occurring in response to sexual violence is also a form of prevention.

NASASV member services note that legislative, regulatory and standards-based change is insufficient without cultural and attitudinal change, including a shift toward zero tolerance of sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, and attention focused on the gap between stated and practised understanding of consent and ethical sexual behaviour. There is rising demand for school-based responses, a need for the capacity and capability of mainstream Respectful Relationships programs to be examined and further opportunities to develop comprehensive evidence-informed sexuality education and tiered levels of education to support parents and carers.

NASASV and its members stand ready to support the government in the design and delivery of solutions to prevent and respond to both adults and child sexual abuse, including:

- fostering a long overdue and vital public conversation about child sexual abuse and sexual violence more broadly through a national campaign and ensuring it stays on the political and media agenda whilst reducing stigma, addressing barriers and mobilising 'upstanders'
- challenging issues such as male entitlement and sexual gratification, gender roles, and peer-group behaviours (La Trobe, 2023)
- preventing sexual violence towards children and adults across a wide range of settings, including online and in the family
- intervening early with children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour
- building the capacity for sectors including early childhood education and care, schools, sports and community clubs, justice, and primary healthcare to identify child sexual abuse, implement sexual violence prevention strategies, and provide trauma-informed responses and referrals into specialist services
- supporting systems-level safety, such as housing and income support for victim-survivors
- investment in evidence-informed sexuality education addressing consent in practice, coercion, pornography, online sexual cultures and gender norms, and
- monitoring and evaluation of prevention activities to build the Australian evidence base.

4. Strengthen prevention of, and response to, technology-facilitated sexual violence affecting children, young people and adults

Technology-facilitated sexual violence is an increasing and rapidly evolving issue. NASASV member services are seeing large numbers of young people in particular

seeking assistance after experiencing technology-facilitated sexual violence, which is equally as serious as physical forms of harm. Government can do more to strengthen protections to prevent technology-facilitated sexual violence including:

- justice system recognition that it is just as serious as contact offending
- harmonisation of laws and offences nationally for the generation, viewing and distribution of CSAM and image-based abuse such as using AI to create and share images
- placing greater responsibility on technology companies rather than on individuals experiencing the abuse and their families
- introduce robust regulatory frameworks with mandatory standards, transparency, independent auditing, and meaningful penalties to prioritise child safety and close exploitable gaps (Campo & Webster, 2025)
- stronger powers for the eSafety Commissioner to have greater enforcement capacity, faster removal of harmful material, more monitoring of emerging technologies and proactive investigations
- a regulatory framework overseeing algorithms, including a statutory duty of care, mandatory risk assessments, independent auditing and prohibiting of unlawful content with serious penalties for failing to comply
- uniform police powers and victim protections regardless of location
- nationally harmonised State and Territory offences criminalising the creation of non-consensual sexually explicit deepfakes regardless of whether they are shared
- commonwealth offences addressing transmission, online distribution and cross-border offending
- nationally consistent definitions and penalties to avoid gaps between jurisdictions, and
- better recognition that technology-facilitated abuse often forms part of ongoing patterns of sexual violence and coercive control.

5. Prioritisation of specific Australian Law Reform Commission recommendations

The ALRC *Justice Responses to Sexual Violence* report was released in 2025. NASASV supports some of the recommendations, particularly the focus on improved trauma-informed and victim-centred approaches, including:

- funding of the sexual assault service sector (under recommendation 1)
- national rollout of justice navigators' program (under recommendation 1)
- availability of pre-recorded evidence to all complainants in sexual offence proceedings (under recommendation 28)
- make the use of expert evidence admissible (recommendation 23)

- comprehensive and continual sexual violence training for judiciary, police and lawyers (under recommendation 11)
- establish and fund an independent centralised feedback mechanism for complainants of sexual violence to report their experience of the criminal justice system (under recommendation 6)
- the establishment of independent panels to review police and prosecution decisions not to charge or prosecute (under recommendation 18)
- universal availability of intermediaries to children and young people and people with communication difficulties (under recommendation 31)
- investment in the training of interpreters and sexual and gender-based violence (under recommendation 33) and
- commission research to inform whether sexual assault counselling communications should be absolutely privileged (recommendation 43).

It is important to recognise that implementation of ALRC recommendations should not occur in place of funding the specialist sexual assault sector, as more than 90% of victim-survivors do not report to police (AIHW, 2024).

Sexual violence is not the same as family and domestic violence

While family and domestic violence and sexual violence are deeply interconnected forms of gendered violence, they are not interchangeable terms.

Sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, occurs across a wide range of contexts, including family and domestic relationships, but also in institutional settings, workplaces, schools, universities, residential aged care, online environments, public spaces, and between acquaintances or strangers. Some victim-survivors of sexual violence have not experienced family or domestic violence, and some people affected by family or domestic violence do not experience sexual violence. Two-thirds of sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, is occurring in Australia outside family and domestic violence settings and this is not currently reflected in national policy frameworks.

While family and domestic violence services are oriented towards immediacy and crisis support, specialist sexual violence services often assist clients with incidents that occurred in the past – delays between an incident and disclosure are common. The nature of risk also differs, with family and domestic violence services focused on safety planning to prevent homicide, while specialist sexual violence services frequently respond to the significant psychological impacts of sexual violence, including suicidal ideation and risk of self-harm behaviours. Specialist sexual violence services have unique expertise in trauma counselling and therapeutic recovery and offer access to forensic and medical examinations as well as pathways to connect with the legal system. The service model, along with the workforce and the needs of victim-survivors, is different to those of family and domestic violence services.

There are clear intersections between sexual violence and family and domestic violence though – both forms of violence involve patterns of power and control, disproportionately impact women and children and can have significant and long-lasting impacts on victim-survivors' physical and mental wellbeing. Women and children can also be subject to poly-victimisation through co-occurring FDV and child sexual abuse (Salter et al, 2026). However, the need to differentiate sexual violence from family and domestic violence was highlighted in Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) consultation paper on the Second Action Plan to the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*. These forms of violence require different responses, which must be reflected in the Second Action Plan.

It should be considered that sexual violence is a key tactic and behaviour of coercive and controlling behaviours in intimate partner violence. Family and domestic violence is not defined by listing the specific, abuse behaviours it encompasses. For example, we do not refer to 'family and domestic violence and non-fatal strangulation.' The same

principle should apply when recognising sexual violence as a distinct form of violence. Conflating sexual violence with family and domestic violence is obscuring its prevalence, limiting prevention efforts, weakening data collection, and reducing access to specialist support for victim-survivors. Likewise, it is important that sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, that does occur within an FDV context, receives a specialist sexual violence response.

Sexual violence must be considered in its own right as a distinct form of violence. While it shares some underlying drivers with other forms of violence, it has unique dynamics, impacts and patterns of offending that require dedicated policy attention, specialist clinical, forensic and therapeutic responses, and particular workforce expertise. This will ensure victim-survivors have access to appropriately funded specialised services and that prevention and response efforts address the different dynamics of sexual offending.

An effective national response requires dedicated policy and investment in the existing sexual assault service system and recognises sexual violence as a standalone issue while also responding to its intersections with family and domestic violence where they occur. Failure to do so will result in increased lifetime harm for victim-survivors and a failure to reduce future prevalence of sexual violence.

The national peak body of specialist sexual violence services remains unfunded

NASASV is forty in 2027 yet remains unfunded. The demand for NASASV's expertise and advocacy has never been higher, yet the organisation is severely under-resourced. In 2025, NASASV hired its first, part-time Executive Officer, relying on reserves saved from membership fees over several years to fund the role. NASASV has relied on the voluntary labour of women in the sexual violence sector for too long, further entrenching gender norms and economic harm.

Sexual violence requires specialist expertise that differs from the broader family and domestic violence sector. A national peak body provides essential coordination, advocacy and workforce development functions including:

- national leadership on specialist sexual violence policy and practice
- a coordinated voice for specialist sexual assault services
- expert advice to governments on emerging issues and
- consistency in policy development across jurisdictions.

Without a dedicated peak, there is no organisation representing the specialist sexual violence sector nationally. NASASV is the only organisation able to provide this specialist expertise backed by member organisations with mature service models and decades of knowledge and practice wisdom developed through walking alongside hundreds of

thousands of victim-survivors during their healing journeys. Due to lack of investment, NASASV is currently severely limited in its ability to:

- support implementation of the National Plan and National Strategy
- progress the *National Standards of Practice for Services Against Sexual Violence* and accreditation
- build a stronger specialist workforce
- improve national consistency of legislation
- build sexual violence expertise in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+, disability and culturally and racially marginalised communities
- strengthen prevention
- disseminate best-practice models and emerging evidence
- demonstrate national leadership on emerging issues
- facilitate communities of practice and peer learning across services
- be represented at key national meetings and events
- improve outcomes for priority populations
- facilitate collaboration across sectors and
- represent lived experience.

Sexual violence costs Australia \$14 billion annually, with each new cohort of cases adding \$14.1 billion in lifetime costs (Lifetime Price of Harm, 2025). Yet the national peak body coordinating specialist services receives no Commonwealth (or state) funding. This represents a fundamental gap in the national response infrastructure. The evidence is clear: timely, sexual violence-specialist services prevent harm, save lives and generate substantial economic returns. Every year of inaction adds billions in lifetime costs whilst entrenching disadvantage for victim-survivors. NASASV stands ready to deliver these essential functions and work collaboratively with government to build an effective national response to sexual violence.

Transparent, sustainable and sufficient funding is urgently required for the specialist sexual violence service sector

The specialist sexual assault service sector in Australia faces a range of structural funding challenges that limit its ability to provide timely, specialist, trauma-informed responses to victim-survivors and to contribute effectively to prevention and system reform. There is chronic underinvestment relative to demand and funding has not kept pace with growth, resulting in lengthy counselling waitlists, limited outreach to rural, regional and remote communities and reduced capacity for prevention and early intervention programs.

The National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence funding, also known as the Federation Funding Agreement (FFA), is a funding arrangement between the Australian Government and state and territory governments designed to strengthen frontline family, domestic and sexual violence services and responses.

Funding for the First Action Plan was allocated to family, domestic and sexual violence collectively rather than utilising a dedicated sexual violence funding stream. As a result, most state and territory governments have directed the vast majority of resourcing to family and domestic violence services, with no proportionate investment in sexual violence services. To not have a national requirement to strengthen the specialist sexual violence sector and a dedicated funding stream as part of the current NPA is a serious oversight.

For example, in Western Australia, there are just six specialist adult sexual assault services to cover the entire state. Five of the six services cover regional areas – most of the state – and between them receive only \$2 million a year. There has been no meaningful investment in the specialist sexual violence sector in decades, despite lengthy waiting lists, an increase in the number of sexual violence incidences and the increasing complexity of client needs due to technology-facilitated sexual violence and the impacts of violent pornography. When NPA funding has been allocated in Western Australia, it has been described as funding for ‘family, domestic and sexual violence services’. In practice, however, the services receiving this funding do not provide specialist sexual violence services.

NASASV consultation with member services in 2025 revealed significant variation in wait times for ongoing counselling. Metropolitan services reported wait times ranging from 2–12 weeks for priority cases to 12–18 months for longer term therapeutic counselling support. However, these figures mask a more fundamental problem: many regional and remote areas have no specialist sexual assault counselling services at all. Vast areas lack face-to-face services, forcing victim-survivors to travel significant distances to access specialist support or go without. Session limits vary substantially between services, typically ranging from 12–18 sessions for children and young people to 25 sessions for adults, though some services operate without session caps.

NASASV seeks greater transparency of the project plans developed by each state and territory which are then approved by the Commonwealth before funding is released. Each jurisdiction has discretion over investment decisions, which allows for local flexibility but does not require any commitment to invest in specialist sexual violence services. There is no nationally consistent public reporting to demonstrate what proportion of NPA funding each jurisdiction directs to sexual violence services and how funding is being distributed between family and domestic violence sector and the sexual violence sector.

Funding is also not reflecting the complexity of specialist work undertaken by the sexual violence sector, making comprehensive service delivery difficult. NASASV's member services provide:

- 24/7 crisis response
- forensic and medical coordination
- police and court support
- access to legal pathways
- therapeutic counselling
- family support
- peer support
- responses to harmful sexual behaviours
- multi-disciplinary models (in some locations)
- training of mainstream professionals and
- prevention and community education.

The specialist sexual violence sector in Australia, with its service model maturity, has been working across the four National Plan pillars of prevention, early intervention, response and healing and recovery for decades but has not received investment to reflect this.

Sexual violence imposes an estimated \$14 billion annual economic burden on Australia. In 2021-22, approximately 150,000 cases of childhood sexual abuse and 114,000 cases of adult sexual assault occurred, costing \$7.5 billion and \$6.6 billion respectively over victims' lifetimes (The Lifetime Price of Harm, 2025). These figures represent only reported and substantiated cases; the true scale is significantly higher.

Specialist sexual violence services are not simply crisis response; they are prevention. Evidence demonstrates that timely, sexual violence-specialist intervention disrupts the trajectory towards chronic health conditions, welfare dependency, justice system involvement and intergenerational cycles of violence. The cost of inaction compounds annually: each year of under-investment adds another \$6 billion in lifetime costs to the economy (The Lifetime Price of Harm, 2025).

There is no minimum data set for sexual violence

There are currently significant limitations that affect how accurately sexual violence can be understood, such as prevalence, trends, risk factors, service demand, and outcomes. Firstly, the vast majority of victim-survivors do not report to police. Police data therefore captures only a fraction of incidents and cannot be treated as a measure of prevalence. Australia does not have one consistent national definition of sexual violence used across all datasets. Different systems may measure:

- sexual assault (often criminal justice definitions)

- sexual harassment
- sexual abuse
- child sexual abuse
- technology-facilitated sexual violence
- image-based abuse
- coercive and controlling sexual behaviours and
- reproductive coercion.

This makes comparisons difficult across states and territories, agencies, time periods and population groups. Data collection is also fragmented and may or may not be collected across multiple systems, including police, courts, health services, child protection, sexual assault services, homelessness services, family violence services and population surveys.

Specialist sexual assault services do hold important information about disclosures, presenting issues, client needs, support pathways and barriers to access however, service data is not standardised – jurisdictions collect different information, funding and reporting requirements vary and there are gaps in understanding unmet need. Police data can be influenced by reporting behaviour, policing practices, legislative changes, charging decisions, evidence requirements and victim-survivor willingness to proceed. Specialist services are aware of emerging trends in sexual violence victimisation and perpetration well before these appear in research evidence or the policy environment however there is no nationally consistent approach to collate this information to inform program, policy or legislative reform.

Some datasets also lack detail needed to understand experiences of groups disproportionately affected by sexual violence, including:

- women and girls
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- people with disability
- LGBTQIA+ communities
- culturally and racially marginalised communities
- children and young people
- migrants and refugees
- older people
- international students
- people in institutional settings (including children in out-of-home care) and
- people in rural, regional and remote areas.

Child sexual abuse is particularly difficult to measure because disclosure may occur years or decades later, children may not have the language or power to report and records are often incomplete.

Nationally, there is limited ability to track:

- experiences over a person's lifetime
- repeat victimisation
- long-term health impacts
- pathways through services and
- outcomes after intervention.

NASASV notes a national mapping and data identification project is a foundational piece required for the national sexual violence sector.

Prevention of sexual violence must be prioritised

Prevention of sexual violence remains less developed, less visible and less well-funded than the prevention of family and domestic violence. National prevention efforts involving government have historically focused on intimate partner violence, coercive control, sexual harassment in workplaces and universities, violence against women and family and domestic violence settings. *The Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches* explicitly recognised that sexual violence has not received sufficient attention in Australia's prevention effort and has been overshadowed by the broader focus on family and domestic violence. It also acknowledged that while sexual violence and family and domestic violence share common gendered drivers, sexual violence has distinct patterns, settings and prevention opportunities.

Sexual violence occurs across a continuum – it is not limited to isolated criminal acts but is rather a spectrum of behaviours that are connected by the misuse of power, gender inequality, coercion, dehumanisation and violations of bodily autonomy and consent. Behaviours range from sexist attitudes to harassment, technology-facilitated sexual violence, coercion, unwanted contact, assault and exploitation. This is important to recognise, as many victim-survivors experience multiple forms of sexual violence across their lifetime. The ecological model recognises that sexual violence is influenced by factors operating at individual, relational, community and societal levels (ANROWS 2025). Sexual violence is not just about individual offences – it is a systemic issue driven by gender inequality and harmful social norms.

Prevention remains underfunded relative to crisis response, which is already poorly funded across Australia. NASASV advocates for broader prevention funding beyond school-based programs, recognising that different locations need different prevention approaches through place-based responses. Critically, specialist sexual assault services deliver tertiary prevention (prevention within service delivery) that is distinct from primary prevention (e.g. Respectful Relationships education). Tertiary prevention by specialist services can prevent re-perpetration, reduce justice system contact, improve health outcomes and interrupt intergenerational cycles by targeting the conducive

contexts that enable sexual violence to occur. This is genuine prevention that generates measurable cost savings.

Prevention and early intervention investment must be place-based and built on ongoing relationships rather than delivered as one-off workshops or based on a 'universal design' or dispersed model of care designed for those with the least access. NASASV member services advocate for tertiary prevention and life-course framing so that childhood or adolescent sexual violence does not lead to a pathway of adult victimisation.

Additional prevention funding should enable specialist services to expand prevention activities matched to local needs. Specialist sexual assault services deliver prevention activities across diverse settings including community organisations, workplaces, and professional development contexts, though most services undertake this work without dedicated prevention funding or with time-limited grants. Prevention activities are often reactive and incident-driven rather than strategically planned, reflecting resource constraints and the need for stronger evidence-based frameworks. Current prevention work includes:

- professional education on understanding sexual violence, responding to disclosures, trauma impacts, and vicarious trauma
- support for teachers delivering consent and Respectful Relationships education and
- community education on protective behaviours and trauma impacts on children and bespoke workplace prevention programs.

Prevention efforts need to address sexual violence that also occurs outside family and domestic violence settings noting the clear intersections with the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030* and they must target the conducive contexts that allow sexual violence to flourish in society. Prevention programs need to be tailored to the different needs of:

- women and girls
- boys and men
- young people
- older people
- LGBTQI+ people
- sex workers
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- children, young people and adults with disability
- neurodivergent children, young people and adults
- culturally and racially marginalised communities
- children, young people and adults in institutional settings e.g. early childhood education and care, residential care for young people, disability and aged care

- refugee and migrant communities and
- international students.

NASASV notes that prevention work with boys and men must be accompanied by the acknowledgement that harm is occurring and be informed by work undertaken with girls and women.

Online harms – technology-facilitated sexual violence

Technology-facilitated sexual violence is an increasingly prevalent form of violence that is disproportionately affecting women and girls. The rapid development of technology continues to create new forms of abuse, including:

- image-based abuse, including the non-consensual sharing or threatening to share intimate images
- sexual harassment through digital platforms, including unwanted sexual messages, comments, or explicit images
- cyberstalking and technology-enabled coercive control
- online sexual harassment in workplaces, educational settings, gaming communities, and social media
- recording of and distributing of sexual assaults and use of stupefying drugs to facilitate the assaults
- systemic assault of victims by multiple perpetrators through premeditated exploitation, utilising stupefying drugs and dissemination of assault recordings globally
- AI-generated sex dolls and animated pornography
- easy access to often violent and degrading pornography and CSAM, online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) material and the promotion of rape, non-fatal strangulation, incest, bestiality, as well as reinforcing gender inequality, racism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia
- deepfake pornography and AI-generated intimate images and use of the 'Nudify' app
- sexual extortion, also known as sextortion, where offenders threaten to distribute intimate images unless money, sexual images, or further sexual acts are provided
- offending through dating apps
- access to the 'Rapeable' app
- use of Meta glasses where people and children aren't aware they are being filmed
- encrypted services, the dark web and AI chatbots which enable offending at scale with reduced likelihood of detection

- algorithms promoting misogynistic content and perpetuation of harmful stereotypes from the ‘manosphere’
- grooming, online child sexual exploitation and trafficking and
- using GPS tracking, spyware, or digital accounts to facilitate sexual abuse or monitor victim-survivors.

NASASV notes the further emerging uses, both positive and harmful, of technology by victim-survivors of sexual violence:

- young people utilising AI as a free, 24/7 counselling solution, noting that generated responses may contain incorrect or harmful information, including perpetuation of misogynistic attitudes and behaviours and
- counsellor advocates potentially using AI for intake and case notes.

Algorithms are shaping and amplifying exposure to violent and degrading sexual content, providing pathways to access CSAM, facilitating online grooming, providing networks for offenders, exposing children and young people to harmful content, enabling AI-generated CSAM and supporting image-based abuse.

Australia has made some progress in responding to technology-facilitated sexual violence, but the legal and regulatory frameworks have not kept up with the evolving technologies. Greater responsibility needs to be put on technology companies rather than individuals experiencing the abuse (Campo & Webster, 2025). It is important to note that any government responses must be considered to ensure sex workers are not further marginalised.

Alongside regulatory approaches sustained prevention investment is needed for:

- digital consent education
- public education distinguishing violent and degrading pornography from reality
- programs targeting perpetrators
- focus on healthy masculinities
- sexuality education for women, gender-diverse people and people with disabilities
- Respectful Relationships education that includes online behaviour
- public awareness campaigns and
- education about AI-generated abuse.

This means investing in primary prevention, disrupting grooming before abuse occurs, strengthening technology platform responsibilities, improving victim identification and support, enhancing international cooperation, and ensuring sustained investment in specialist child protection and policing capabilities (Campo & Webster, 2025) as well as supporting specialist forensic capability to assess large volumes of digital evidence.

Harmonisation of laws nationally is also required to ensure consistent responses for victim-survivors and consistent penalties for perpetrators and technology companies.

Cultural change is required in relation to how police and the justice system respond to technology-facilitated sexual violence. It is currently not considered as serious as contact offending, with some victim-survivors being blamed and advised to just block or remove themselves from the platform.

The justice system

The 2025 ALRC report found that the justice system is not meeting either of its two objectives: supporting victim-survivors to seek justice and holding people who commit sexual violence to account. The report spoke to more than low reporting and conviction rates – systemic problems at every stage of the justice process were identified.

There are significant challenges for sexual violence victim-survivors in Australia due to the fragmented legal framework. Although each state and territory criminalises sexual offences, there are differences in legislation and justice processes, meaning that a victim-survivor's experience of justice can vary. The notion of what justice looks like to a victim-survivor can also vary. It is important to note that sexual violence is one of the most underreported crimes in Australia. The ABS Personal Safety Survey in 2021-22 indicated that fewer than one in ten victim-survivors report sexual assault to police. Common reasons for not reporting include:

- fear of not being believed
- the real fear of consequences and reality of retaliation
- the justice process frequently inflicting secondary violence and trauma on victim-survivors
- not wanting to relive their experiences of sexual violence
- feeling shame or embarrassment.

NASASV notes that in many instances victim-survivors' fears of the justice system are well-founded realities. In many cases, real failings of the justice system are highlighted including inadequate accountability, retaliation (including dismissal or escalation of harassment and abuse), breaches of confidentiality, delays, aggressive cross-examinations, retelling their story multiple times, uncertainty about whether the case will proceed, lack of meaningful action and previous poor responses. The Second Action Plan must acknowledge that low reporting rates are an indicator that victim-survivors do not trust the justice system to respond safely and effectively. Attributing low reporting rates to victim-survivor attitudes must shift, with scrutiny applied to the justice system culture, behaviours and adequacy of existing response systems.

The 2025 ALRC report made 64 recommendations aimed at transforming Australia's justice response to sexual violence. NASASV supports some of the recommendations, particularly the focus on improved trauma-informed and victim-centred approaches but notes that focusing on implementation of these recommendations should not come at the expense of investing in the specialist sexual violence sector, given that the vast majority of victim-survivors do not report to police or utilise justice pathways. The report recommended that access to independent specialist sexual assault services is essential to justice and that justice reform cannot succeed without sustained investment in these services.

The report also recommended that Australian governments work towards greater national consistency in sexual offence and consent law. In addition, recommendations were made to develop alternative justice pathways such as restorative justice and civil justice.

Greater national consistency is needed across the following key areas:

Pre-recorded evidence

This is an important trauma-informed reform that allows victim-survivors to pre-record their evidence but varies across jurisdictions. It is also a recommendation of the 2025 ALRC report.

Subpoena of counselling notes

Protected communications limit when confidential communications between a victim-survivor and a counsellor can be disclosed or used in criminal proceedings. Consistent safeguards are needed through an absolute privilege. Government needs to consider further safeguards for other sensitive information like health records, safety plans and employment information which is routinely being weaponised in courts across Australia.

In addition, subpoenaing counselling records of children in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (FCFCOA) can break the trust of children who are in counselling, leading to withdrawal from future support and leaving them isolated.

Consent

Affirmative consent is not defined or implemented consistently across Australia. The 2025 ALRC report recommended that affirmative consent models be evaluated so that a best-practice affirmative consent model be identified for national harmonisation.

Coercive control and non-fatal strangulation

Coercive control is not defined or implemented consistently across Australia. Non-fatal strangulation is one of the most extreme forms of coercive control and is a predictor or future, serious harm, including homicide. NASASV members services are also reporting

an increase in the normalisation of sexual strangulation, particularly among young people who may have given consent and think the practice is safe or risk-free.

Technology-facilitated sexual violence

Victim-survivors need to receive consistent legal protections and that police can respond effectively to offending that routinely occurs across both national and international borders. This form of sexual violence needs to be treated as seriously as contact offending.

Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)

This evidence-based therapeutic modality has been shown to be effective for many people who have experienced sexual assault. Victim-survivors in some states are being advised by police and prosecutors to not access the treatment until any court hearings have concluded, as defence lawyers are querying its credibility and impact on memory. This is unacceptable, noting that various police forces and other first responders in Australia utilise the same modality to treat work-related psychological trauma without any inferences made about its impacts on memory.

Civil justice responses

There are often limitations in victim-survivors accessing compensation and redress schemes and variations in institutional liability. There is also less consistent protection for counselling records in civil proceedings. The 2025 ALRC report made a number of recommendations in relation to civil proceedings, noting that justice may not only entail criminal prosecution and victim-survivors may be seeking a range of other outcomes including compensation, apologies, accountability, protective orders and restorative processes.

Judicial education

Nationally consistent guidance and training can help judges manage proceedings while minimising unnecessary trauma for victim-survivors. This includes recognising improper questioning, understanding trauma and memory, avoiding myths, managing cross-examination, using trauma-informed language, understanding of the continuum of sexual violence and using special measures available.

Hate-crime legislation

In many jurisdictions hate-crime legislation now includes gender. This could provide an additional legal response to extreme misogynistic sexual violence, including online conduct, on the basis that women are targeted because they are women.

Prosecution outcomes for sexual violence victim-survivors remain much lower than reporting rates. There is a gap between what the laws outline and what happens in practice. The low levels of reporting, prosecution and conviction mean that many

perpetrators experience little or no criminal justice consequences. Sexual violence prosecutions can depend heavily on whether a victim-survivor is deemed credible, creating a situation where victim-survivors may feel they are being investigated or judged. Many victim-survivors disengage before a matter proceeds due to:

- extensive questioning about their behaviour before and after an assault (or repeated assaults)
- scrutiny of memory, emotions and when disclosure took place
- myths about victim-survivors and how they are meant to act and
- delays and repeating of information that can cause further trauma.

Sexual violence matters may also not proceed through the justice pathway due to:

- not reporting to police
- matter being reported but not proceeding
- charges not being laid following an investigation
- charges being withdrawn and
- prosecution resulting in acquittal.

The pathway for offenders to be held accountable is so narrow that many perpetrators face little risk of detection, prosecution or consequence. NASASV notes the Standing Council of Attorneys General (SCAG) has a Criminal Justice Responses to Sexual Assault Working Group and an associated workplan.

Police

Police may be the first point of contact for victim-survivors, but experiences can vary considerably. Sexual offences require expertise, consistency and trauma-informed practice. Negative experiences at the reporting stage are a major contributor to under-reporting and attrition. There is no nationally consistent model across jurisdictions for dedicated, adequately resourced, specialist sexual offence investigation units. A victim-survivor's experience should not depend on whether they report in a metropolitan area with a specialist team or in a regional and remote location where a general duties officer may need to manage a complex matter.

In Queensland, the Sexual Violence Review Board has been established and is overseen by the Office of the Victims' Commissioner. The Board identifies and reviews systemic issues in how sexual offences are reported, investigated and prosecuted. The current program of work involves reviewing digital evidence – how it is collected, disclosed and used in sexual offence trials (QLD Government, 2026). This could be replicated in other states and territories, as recommended in the 2025 ALRC report. The United Kingdom has a program called 'Operation Soteria', designed to transform the investigation and prosecution of rape and serious sexual offences. The defining feature of Operation Soteria is to shift from a victim-focused to a suspect-focused model, removing the focus

of a victim's credibility (Gov UK, 2022). The U.K. police force now has thousands of officers who are now trained specifically in sexual offence response and investigation. Australia would benefit from a similar approach.

Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia

NASASV notes the following opportunities for strengthening understanding of, and response to, sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia:

- update the family and domestic violence bench book to include a focus on sexual violence, including child sexual abuse
- develop a sexual violence in the court training through the National Judicial College of Australia, noting there is equivalent training already for family and domestic violence
- reinstate the Court Data Outcomes project through the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) to look at longitudinal outcomes
- consider mechanisms for an information sharing scheme in relation to risk and harm
- a review of systems abuse within the court
- expansion of court support services for children to rural, regional and remote locations
- more trauma-informed training about child sexual abuse for independent children's lawyers
- consider further developmentally appropriate wellbeing supports for children and how they can meaningfully engage in proceedings and be supported in their own right and
- consider how to enable consistent application of the above to the Family Court Western Australia as it operates as its own jurisdiction.

Forensic Medical Examinations

Victim-survivors in some parts of Australia have no access to specialist forensic and medical services, which are a critical first step towards pursuing a justice response to the crime committed against them. A lack of access to forensic and medical care can prevent victim-survivors from access to justice and importantly, it enables access to immediate medical care; an important preventive health service. Access to, and provision of, Forensic Medical Examinations (FME) for adult and child victim-survivors of sexual violence across Australia is inconsistent and fragmented.

The pathways and services available vary, and are postcode-dependent, particularly for people in rural and remote locations. Some states, such as Victoria, require police

involvement to access an FME whilst New South Wales utilises a health system approach. Some victim-survivors may need to travel for hours, often at their own cost, to access an FME. Many victim-survivors experience significant waits before they can access a forensic examination, sometimes for many hours or even more than a day. During this time, they may be told not to shower, change clothes, eat, drink, or use the bathroom, which can intensify trauma.

Noting there is no single national model, with systems differing significantly in their funding models, workforce structure, access pathways, regional coverage, police involvement and integration with specialist sexual assault services, NASASV supports a system-wide, national review of FMEs to identify barriers to access across different jurisdictions and to keep victim-survivors at the centre of any legislative and policy solutions.

Australia has a shortage of trained forensic physicians and forensic nurse examiners, particularly outside metropolitan areas. Some jurisdictions have only one examiner available for entire regions overnight, while some hospitals have no trained staff at all. In the ACT, the hospital doesn't have enough paediatric doctors for children under 14, so they may have to travel to Sydney to access an FME.

Access is substantially worse in rural, regional, and remote communities. Victim-survivors may need to travel long distances or may not receive an examination at all. Delays can compromise both medical care and evidence collection. There is no fully uniform national model for sexual assault forensic care. Different states and hospitals use different systems, protocols, staffing models, and funding arrangements. Forensic and Medical Sexual Assault Clinicians Australia (FAMSACA) is advocating for national training pathways and standards to be considered.

Delays in examinations can reduce the quality or availability of forensic evidence. There have also been major DNA laboratory backlogs in some states. Some victim-survivors report feeling pressured to involve police in order to obtain an examination, despite wanting medical care or evidence preservation without immediately making a formal complaint. This can deter people from seeking help.

There may be:

- inadequate explanations of procedures
- insufficient informed consent processes
- lack of options regarding examiner gender and
- pressure to proceed quickly due to evidence concerns.

NASASV members advise there are examples of victim-survivors throughout Australia experiencing secondary victimisation either due to delayed processes or FMEs being delivered without a trauma-informed, person-centred approach. This issue must receive

attention as part of the Second Action Plan in order to prevent further harm being experienced by victim-survivors of sexual violence when the forensic window is the first opportunity to have a positive, respectful experience.

The sexual violence sector workforce is specialised

The sexual violence workforce in Australia is relatively small, highly specialised, and different to that in the family and domestic violence sector. Almost all staff have an undergraduate degree as a minimum, due to the complexity of the work undertaken by sexual assault services. Disciplines include:

- social work
- psychology
- counselling
- nursing
- community services
- public health
- criminology
- law
- education
- specialist medical practitioners

At present, workforce development is fragmented, inconsistent between jurisdictions and largely dependent on individual employers and short-term project funding.

Skills, training and knowledge in responding to child sexual abuse varies due to the different roles, theoretical approaches and qualification requirements of the various workforces involved. The National Plan identifies building a skilled and sustainable workforce as a national priority. This has not extended to the sexual violence workforce.

There is no documented qualification pathway to work in the sexual assault sector. Sexual Assault Services Victoria (2024) notes that providing in-depth therapeutic support to children who have experienced sexual abuse requires:

- expanded core knowledge and practice base
- encompassing foundational feminist theories
- good understanding of child development
- sound understanding of the neurobiology of trauma and its impact on development
- therapeutic modalities and their implementation at different developmental stages and
- additional therapeutic models such as play therapy and family therapy (when working with non-offending family members).

Workforce challenges represent the most critical barrier to service delivery. Specialist sexual violence services face acute difficulty attracting and retaining qualified sexual violence specialist practitioners and psychologists. High vicarious trauma exposure, combined with insufficient resourcing of clinical supervision and professional development, drives high staff turnover that undermines service continuity. Without workforce investment, increased service funding cannot be effectively deployed. Priority needs include:

- competitive remuneration to attract and retain specialist practitioners
- funded clinical supervision as core infrastructure
- professional development in sexual violence-informed, evidence-based therapies and
- specialist training for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, CARM communities, people with disability, neurodivergent people and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Accredited education pathways are needed, along with structured graduate programs and supervised practice placements within services which would provide clearer pathways to entering the workforce. It is important to note that Australia lacks formal tertiary qualifications for specialist sexual violence practice and can look to the United Kingdom for examples. Investment is also needed for services to provide regular clinical supervision, reflective practice, peer consultation, mentoring and leadership development. When adequately resourced, the sexual assault service workforce would be well placed to provide training to other professionals outside the sector to respond to sexual violence victim-survivors.

Embedding the *National Practice Standards for Services Against Sexual Violence* is essential to ensuring the specialist sexual assault services deliver safe, evidence-informed, high quality and consistent responses for all victim-survivors across Australia. Integrating the standards into induction, supervision, continuing professional development, leadership development and organisational quality assurance will ensure specialist practitioners maintain expertise and respond to the diverse needs of individuals and communities.

Building workforce capability is essential to ensuring victim-survivors have equitable access to high-quality, trauma-informed and culturally safe specialist responses, regardless of where they live. Sexual Assault Services Victoria, in conjunction with the Victorian State Government, have developed the *Responding to Sexual Violence and Harmful Sexual Behaviour Capability Framework* which could be utilised as a best practice approach. A strong specialist workforce is fundamental to improving prevention, early intervention, healing and recovery, and justice outcomes for people impacted by sexual violence across Australia.

Equity is a significant issue for sexual violence victim-survivors in Australia

Equity in terms of access to support services is one of the most significant challenges facing sexual violence victim-survivors in Australia.

Geographic barriers create significant access inequities. Many rural, regional and remote areas lack any specialist sexual assault service. There are limited after-hours crisis responses in some regions, as well as workforce shortages. Delivery of forensic medical examinations in some regional areas presents major challenges, with survivors facing prohibitive travel costs to access services in major centres. This results in a postcode-dependent experience; where access to services depends on location rather than need. It can also be difficult for victim-survivors who reside in small communities to seek support from their closest service for the real fear of retaliation and community isolation.

NASASV emphasises the importance of resourcing existing services to provide best-practice service models before expanding into new geographic areas. This 'strengthen then expand' approach ensures services can deliver comprehensive, sexual violence-informed responses rather than tokenistic presence. Priority investments include secure telehealth infrastructure, specialist training in remote sexual violence-informed delivery, and outreach models.

The justice system also presents equity challenges for victim-survivors of sexual violence. Although all victim-survivors are entitled to equal access to justice, outcomes are often shaped by where a person lives, who they are, the resources available in their area and whether the justice system is equipped to deal with their needs. Again, victim-survivors in rural, regional and remote areas may have reduced access to police and specialist sexual offence investigation units, legal advice, witness assistance services and prosecutors with sexual violence expertise.

Many victim-survivors also face intersecting forms of disadvantage which compounds the barriers to receiving support. Policies and service systems need to adopt an intersectional approach that recognises how multiple identities and structural inequalities combine to shape access to safety, justice and recovery. Applying an intersectional lens is required to understand these additional barriers.

People with disability

People with disability experience sexual violence at higher rates than the population yet may also encounter:

- inaccessible reporting pathways
- communication barriers

- inadequate police and justice responses
- inadequate service responses to disclosures of sexual violence
- services that are physically inaccessible and
- not being able to travel long distances to seek support and/or access a forensic medical examination.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence and may also face:

- lack of choice to attend an Aboriginal community controlled sexual assault service
- racism
- intergenerational trauma
- geographic isolation
- distrust of mainstream systems and
- historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation.

LGBTQIA+ people

People from the LGBTQIA+ community experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence and may also face:

- discrimination, stigma and heteronormative biases
- service gaps
- fear of being misunderstood or not believed and
- lack of practitioner knowledge regarding diverse identities.

Older people

Older people may be invisible in policy and service responses and could also experience:

- ageism
- dependence on perpetrators for care
- limited recognition of sexual violence in aged care settings and
- impact of health issues in disclosing and receiving support e.g. cognitive impairments.

Children and young people

Children and young people who experience sexual abuse may face:

- lengthy waiting lists to access therapeutic counselling
- differing service eligibility across jurisdictions
- difficulty accessing supports for harmful sexual behaviours and
- gaps during transition from child to adult services.

Culturally and racially marginalised people

Culturally and racially marginalised people may experience:

- language barriers
- lack of interpreters or interpreters with conflicts
- visa insecurity
- fear of authority
- limited awareness of legal rights and
- concerns about repercussions.

Men and boys

Men and boys who experience sexual violence may face:

- stigma
- myths about masculinity
- delayed disclosure
- fear of not being believed and
- lack of knowledge about being able to access sexual assault services.

Sex workers

Sex workers who experience sexual violence may face:

- stigma and victim-blaming
- fear of legal consequences
- distrust of police and justice systems and
- fear of disclosure and confidentiality concerns.

Neurodivergent children and adults

Neurodivergent people experience higher rates of sexual violence and child sexual abuse than neurotypical peers and may face:

- a lack of accessible, neuro-affirming sex education
- reliance on caregivers
- difficulty recognising sexual violence
- communication barriers
- sensory barriers and
- executive functioning barriers.

People in institutional settings

People residing in institutional settings such as aged care, disability, prisons, youth justice, residential care and educational facilities may experience:

- dependence on perpetrators
- inadequate reporting mechanisms
- fear of retaliation and
- limited access to external advocacy.

International students

International students may fear reporting sexual violence and experience concerns about:

- student visas
- impact on scholarships
- jeopardising migration opportunities
- resulting financial hardship
- not understanding legal rights and reporting pathways

Children and young people

Child sexual abuse is an urgent and widespread problem in Australia. In 2023, the *Australian Child Maltreatment Study* found that over 1 in 3 girls, just under 1 in 5 boys, and more than 1 in 2 gender diverse children have experienced child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is chronically under-reported, as many children and young people face significant barriers to disclosure. It often takes years for a young person to speak out and receive critical support.

Despite the evidence, reforms designed to keep children safe are still works in progress. Key recommendations from *the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse's* final report December 2017, almost nine years ago, and the *Royal Commission's Working with Children Report* in 2015, more than 10 years ago, are still to be implemented. Delays in taking recommended action to prevent child sexual abuse and properly invest in the service infrastructure that supports child and adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse, and their families, have very real and devastating impacts.

Sexual assault services have been supporting children and young people in their own right for decades – the maturity in this service model requires recognition. The expertise required for specialist sexual violence responses is exclusively held within the sexual violence sector however specialist sexual assault services can work with FDV services to build their capacity to be informed about sexual violence through a 'recognise, respond and refer' approach.

Critical gaps identified by NASASV members nationally include:

- lack of therapeutic services for children under 12 displaying HSB nationally noting there are existing excellent models to refer to for expansion
- limited capacity for adolescent programs beyond pilot initiatives; no dedicated funding for community education on HSB
- workforce training needs spanning assessment models for different age groups and evidence-based intervention approaches. Effective therapeutic responses require family involvement as wraparound support, intensive and supportive

program models, trauma informed modalities, developmental appropriateness, and cultural safety and

- the need for coordinated responses by services in instances where child sexual abuse and FDV is co-occurring; girls are more likely to experience co-occurring child sexual abuse and FDV (Salter et al, 2026).

NASASV member services advocate for engaging the whole family and the extended kinship family in the care of children, noting there are national partnership opportunities within child-wellbeing initiatives, and have concerns for children who grow up in or are exposed to violence, including the neurobiological impacts of trauma on developing brains and the need to map the intersectionality of children living in violence.

There is an acknowledged service gap for children under 12 years of age – not all sexual assault services nationally are funded to provide these specialist supports and children may have to travel long distances in order to access a suitable service. Existing HSB programs for children and young people are also under-resourced with a need for earlier, joined up intervention and neuro-affirming programs so that services can intervene earlier.

The Second Action Plan under the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* should explicitly strengthen its alignment with the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse* to ensure a coordinated, life-course approach to preventing and responding to sexual violence. Given the prevalence of sexual violence and high rates of re-victimisation, it is problematic that there are two separate national policy environments; one for children and one for adults, when victim-survivors are likely receiving support from the same sexual violence service, regardless of whether they experienced historical child sexual abuse or a recent assault as an adult.

Child sexual abuse is a distinct form of violence that has profound and lifelong impacts on health, wellbeing, safety and justice outcomes, and is associated with an increased risk of experiencing other forms of violence across the lifespan.

Systems abuse

Systems abuse can occur when the dynamics of sexual violence (and other forms of violence) are not understood and the structures, laws, policies and service systems cause further harm to victim-survivors, create barriers or are utilised by perpetrators to further the abuse. Systems abuse may look like:

- requiring people to repeatedly tell their story and provide information
- placing the burden of proof on victim-survivors
- failing to recognise trauma responses or identify sexual violence

- delaying justice
- evidence and paperwork requirements that are burdensome
- complex applications
- unclear complaints processes
- repeated requests for information that has already been provided
- lengthy delays in decision-making
- not designing trauma-informed processes with lived experience input
- victim safety not being prioritised and
- access to counselling records and other sensitive records (perpetrators are using this access as a form of continued abuse in courts).

NASASV notes that the Commonwealth Government is currently undertaking a review of departmental systems to identify whether there is abuse occurring, including reforming the child support system to address financial abuse, non-compliance, and the weaponisation of the system. Other forms of system abuse of sexual violence victim-survivors can occur in the:

- justice system (including legislation)
- police system
- child protection and family law/courts
- health system and
- multi-service system.

It is not uncommon for perpetrators of sexual violence (and family and domestic violence) to make malicious complaints against victim-survivors, use family law court proceedings to maintain contact, silence disclosures through privacy or defamation laws, make complaints against staff who are supporting victim-survivors and engage in litigation to intimidate victim-survivors both financially and emotionally. Women experiencing FDV face specific challenges when trying to protect children and young people, with a reluctance among police to investigate the sexual abuse of very young children due to challenges in substantiating such abuse (Salter et al 2026).

NASASV acknowledges the need for more research and evidence-gathering of recent reforms, including the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia's 'Protected Confidences' amendments. Noting the need for judicial independence to be maintained, there is an opportunity for FCFCOA to undertake a review of its own systems for abuse. Further recommendations are contained in the 2025 report, *I wish they knew what they'd stolen from me: Child Sexual Abuse and the Family Court*, which found that children are not able to give evidence in Family Court proceedings and may be framed as unreliable witnesses in relation to child sexual abuse. The Second Action Plan presents an opportunity for further systems abuse reform.

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