

**Empowering Boys To Become Great Men** *Promoting Healthy & Expansive Masculinities in the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children*

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Submitted by: The Man Cave



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## **Acknowledgment of Country & Statement on Gender**

### *Acknowledgement of Country*

The Man Cave acknowledges Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples, Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land and waters on which we live and work. We acknowledge Aboriginal communities and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living cultures, and we recognise the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation.

We also recognise that our work draws on principles of rites of passage present across many cultures, including Aboriginal cultures, over millennia. We commit to working respectfully and in genuine partnership with Aboriginal communities as we continue to develop our understanding of these principles and how they inform our support for boys across Australia to grow into healthy, connected and accountable adults.

### *Statement on Gender*

The Man Cave recognises that gender exists on a spectrum and that not all people identify within binary gender labels. Throughout this submission, the terms "boys" and "young men" refers to young people who identify as male, as well as those who identify outside the gender binary and engage with our programs on that basis. This reflects the young people most commonly engaged through The Man Cave's programs, while acknowledging the diversity of gender identities welcomed into our workshops.

Our programs are gender-specific in focus, addressing the social pressures, expectations and harmful norms associated with rigid masculine stereotypes and reflects the specific gendered experiences our programs are designed to address.

The Man Cave also recognises that boys and young men have diverse experiences of sexuality and relationships. While this submission draws on evidence framed around heterosexual dynamics in places, given the current state of the broader research base, our own program delivery and recommendations are designed to be inclusive of LGBTIQ+ boys and young men and their relationships, and we encourage government to ensure implementation reflects this diversity in practice.

## Framing Principles

This work exists to strengthen, not substitute for, the investment this National Plan makes in women and girls. We state this plainly and at the outset: primary prevention with boys is upstream investment in the safety of women and children, not a redirection of focus away from it.

Four commitments are central to how we have approached this submission, and to our work more broadly.

**First, we centre the safety of women and girls.** Every recommendation in this submission is made in service of, and dependent on, continued investment in women and girls. We do not advance arguments that compete with this investment. Rather, we argue that effective primary prevention with boys and young men strengthens the same outcomes the National Plan seeks to achieve.

**Second, we ground our recommendations in evidence.** Our recommendations draw on the best available Australian and international research, alongside The Man Cave's own evaluation data, including our Department of Social Services-funded Social Return on Investment (SROI)<sup>1</sup> analysis and other program evaluation findings. We note that at the time of writing this report there are limitations placed on the ability to provide data and evidence from the national Healthy Masculinities Trials & Evaluation (Healthy MaTe), funded by the federal government. The interim nature of the evaluation process limits our ability to share findings from this trial, but expect this to be released in due course. We strongly recommend that these findings are made public and that this submission is read in conjunction with that release.

**Third, we adopt an intersectional approach.** Our recommendations are intended to support the full diversity of boys and young men, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys, boys from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, boys experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, those living in regional and remote Australia, and LGBTIQ+ young people. Throughout this submission, we recognise that prevention efforts must be responsive to the different contexts, strengths and challenges that shape boys' lives, including the potential impact of policies such as the under-16 social media age delay on help-seeking for some young people.

**Fourth, we recognise prevention as a high-leverage investment.** Australia has rightly invested heavily in crisis response and specialist intervention, and this commitment must continue. However, prevention has not yet been resourced at a scale that reflects its potential to reduce future violence and lessen demand on downstream systems. For every dollar invested in TMC's school programs in FY2026, Social Impact Hub's SROI analysis of our work found \$8.10 to \$8.40 of social value was generated across participants, their peers, educators and school

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<sup>1</sup> The Man Cave received funding through the Social Enterprise Development Initiative to undertake a Social Return on Investment in 2025/26.

communities. Under the most adverse assumptions modelled, the ratio held at \$3.50 to \$1.<sup>2</sup> We encourage the Second Action Plan to recognise healthy masculinities as a core component of Australia's primary prevention architecture, rather than as a discretionary or supplementary investment.

Finally, we believe the Second Action Plan should adopt a genuinely child-centred approach to prevention. While maintaining its clear focus on ending violence against women and children, this includes recognising boys as children and young people in their own right: both as those who can benefit from early prevention before harm occurs, and as victim-survivors who may themselves experience violence. A child-centred approach strengthens, rather than detracts from, the National Plan's core purpose by ensuring all children receive the support needed to contribute to safer, more respectful communities.

### **About The Man Cave**

The Man Cave is Australia's leading preventative mental health charity for boys and young men. We work to support boys to develop the attitudes, behaviours, skills, relationships and self-awareness needed to create positive impact in their communities over the long term. Since 2014, we have delivered evidence-informed programs to more than 115,000 boys across Australia, working in partnership with schools, families and communities. Throughout this submission, we use the term evidence-informed to describe approaches grounded in the best available research and practice knowledge, alongside the lived experience and context of the boys and communities we work with, recognising that primary prevention practice is strengthened by combining rigorous evidence with genuine responsiveness to those it is designed to serve.

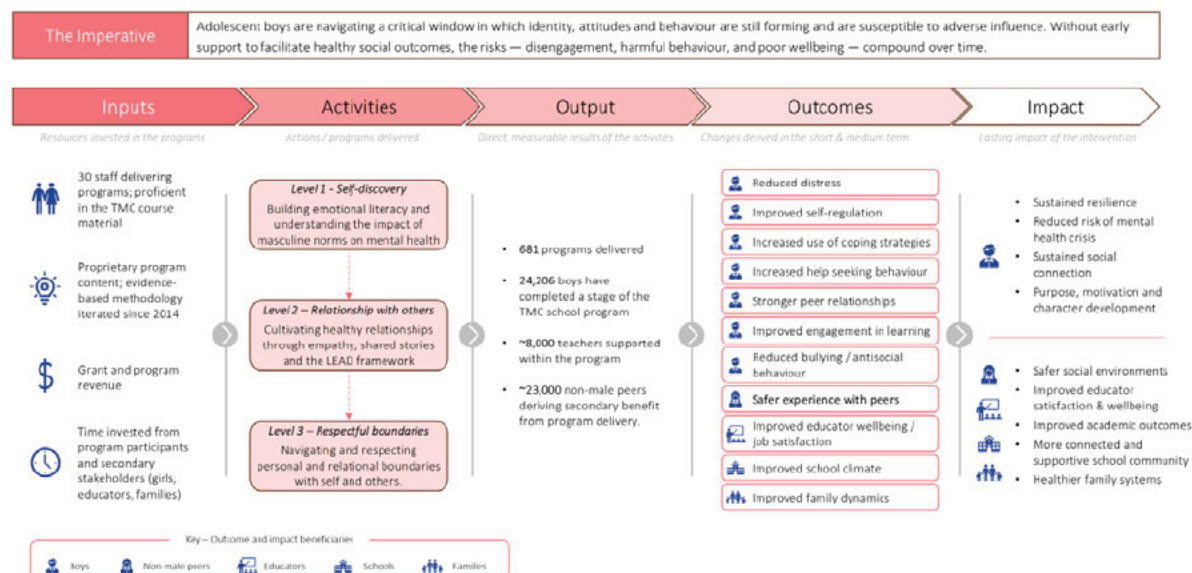
The Man Cave's programs are designed to support sustained shifts in attitudes and behaviours by creating psychologically safe spaces, challenging rigid and harmful gender stereotypes, and providing participants with opportunities to practise healthier ways of relating to themselves and others.

Our school-based, full-day immersive workshops are facilitated by highly trained and diverse role models and grounded in evidence-informed practice. These programs support boys to build emotional literacy, help-seeking confidence and respectful relationship skills at critical developmental stages. This delivery reflects the diversity of Australian school communities, reaching metropolitan, regional and rural areas, and government, Catholic and independent school sectors.

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<sup>2</sup> The Man Cave received funding through the Social Enterprise Development Initiative to undertake a Social Return on Investment in 2025/26.

## The Man Cave Theory of Change – school programs



Alongside program delivery, The Man Cave has developed a national insights engine drawing on tens of thousands of survey responses from boys across Australia, enabling real-time tracking of trends in emotional wellbeing, help-seeking confidence and rigid gender beliefs across diverse communities. Our digital initiatives extend this work further, bringing access to role models and emotional literacy tools into online environments to support connection, resilience and wellbeing beyond the classroom, alongside practical resources for boys, parents and educators to reinforce learning and sustain impact over time.

As a founding member of the Healthy Masculinities Community of Practice, alongside Movember, Jesuit Social Services and the Foundation for Positive Masculinity, The Man Cave contributes to a coordinated national effort to strengthen prevention approaches and lay the foundations for system-level change across policy and practice relating to boys and young men.

These insights are utilised to inform the newly formed Parliamentary Friends Group of Healthy Masculinities.

The Man Cave received funding from the Department of Social Services through the Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation initiative, funded through the First Action Plan (with funding extended into 2026-27). The results of the final evaluation report into Healthy MaTE have not been released at the time of writing this submission. In future, this submission should be read in conjunction with the Healthy MaTE Evaluation, which provides further insight into the impact and scalability of The Man Cave's interventions.

## What is Healthy Masculinities?

In this submission, 'healthy masculinities' refers to ways of understanding and expressing masculinity that support mental health, emotional literacy, help-seeking, and the development of healthy, respectful relationships. It recognises that there is no single way to be a man, and that boys benefit from an expanded range of emotional, relational and behavioural skills alongside characteristics traditionally promoted and valued, such as strength, ambition and achievement.

Healthy masculinities are not about rejecting traditionally valued traits, but about broadening what is possible. They support boys to develop emotional presence, authenticity and accountability, strengthening their capacity to relate respectfully to others and to participate positively in their schools, families and communities. In this way, healthy masculinities contribute to pro-social behaviour, connection and social cohesion, including a stronger sense of belonging and responsibility to others, and are directly relevant to reducing the attitudes and behaviours that underpin gender-based violence.

In practical terms, healthy masculinities are characterised by:

- emotional and physical regulation
- authentic expression
- self-determination
- social connection
- pro-social behaviour

Many boys are seeking clarity about who they are and how they are expected to show up in the world. As Dr Zac Seidler, clinical psychologist and Movember's global director of research, wrote in a November 2025 Movember Institute piece responding to Australia's under-16 social media delay, young men are "hungry for direction, motivation, belonging."<sup>3</sup> Without supportive guidance, that clarity is often drawn from narrow and rigid gender stereotypes that limit emotional expression and connection.

Jesuit Social Services' Adolescent Man Box study found that a majority of boys and girls believe society expects teenage boys to be manly, confident and strong at all times, and that a meaningful proportion of boys personally believe it is weird for boys to talk about their feelings with each other, or that fears should be kept to themselves.<sup>4</sup> A healthy masculinities approach provides an alternative, offering boys greater range, permission and confidence to navigate identity, pressure and relationships in healthier ways for themselves and those around them. This strengths-based approach sits at the leading edge of the field: recent research led by Movember, including Dr Seidler, found that the overwhelming majority of existing masculinity research remains deficit-based, measuring harm rather than health, with strengths-based

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<sup>3</sup> Zac Seidler, "What Will Fill the Void? Why Young Men Need More Than a Social Media Boundary," Movember Institute of Men's Health, Substack, November 27, 2025, <https://movember.substack.com/p/what-will-fill-the-void-why-young>

<sup>4</sup> The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services, *The Adolescent Man Box: Findings from a Survey with Australian Adolescents* (Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, 2025), <https://apo.org.au/node/332792>

approaches representing a genuine and necessary shift in how the field understands and supports boys,<sup>5</sup> one TMC's own approach is built around.

## Executive Summary

The Man Cave (TMC) is Australia's leading preventative mental health charity for boys and young men. Since 2014, we have delivered evidence-informed programs to more than 115,000 boys across the country, working primarily in the education environment, at the intersection of mental health, gender equity and healthy masculinities to prevent harm before it occurs.

This submission sets out TMC's recommendations for the Second Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Children (2027–2032). As noted above, this submission and the recommendations outlined herein should be read in conjunction with the as-yet unreleased Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation Final Report.

Our work exists to strengthen, not substitute for, the investment this National Plan makes in women and girls. Primary prevention with boys is an upstream investment in the safety of women and children, not a redirection of focus away from it, and every recommendation in this submission is made on that basis.

Australia does not need to establish whether primary prevention with boys and young men works. A strong and growing evidence base from ANROWS, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Jesuit Social Services, Movember, eSafety, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Teach Us Consent and The Man Cave's own evaluation already tells us what works. What is missing is the national leadership, funding mechanisms, workforce capability and research infrastructure needed to commission, invest in, and scale evidence-informed prevention with confidence.

Accordingly, this submission makes three central recommendations.

**First, invest in prevention.** Prevention with boys and young men should become a nationally coordinated component of Australia's violence prevention architecture rather than continuing to rely on fragmented, school-by-school or project-by-project investment. This includes expanding access to evidence-informed healthy masculinities education; embedding emotional regulation, intelligence and literacy within school wellbeing systems; strengthening consent and respectful relationships education; investing in digital prevention and critical literacy; rebuilding community "third spaces"; and supporting fathers as one of the earliest opportunities for prevention.

**Second, invest in boys and young men through gender-specific approaches.** Harmful attitudes are shaped through gendered social expectations, relationships and environments. Effective prevention therefore requires approaches designed specifically for boys and young men, while remaining firmly focused on improving safety for women and children. This includes

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<sup>5</sup> Fisher et al., "What Is the Measure of a Man?," *Men and Masculinities* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X261459614>

supporting educators, parents, coaches, youth leaders and trusted role models, while ensuring boys themselves help shape the policies and programs intended to support them.

**Third, build the national infrastructure needed to extend and scale what already works.**

Australia's evidence base is maturing to move beyond isolated pilots to coordinated national implementation. This requires sustainable funding mechanisms, implementation research, stronger cross-portfolio leadership, long-term workforce capability and an enduring national evidence-building infrastructure, including strengths-based evaluation approaches, that enables governments to continuously improve and scale prevention over time.

These three priorities are translated into a series of practical reforms across the nine pillars of this submission, including:

- **Establish** a national funding mechanism to commission and scale evidence-informed healthy masculinities education in schools, expanding access regardless of postcode or school resourcing.
- **Invest in** dedicated, gender-specific sexual violence prevention and consent education for boys and young men.
- **Establish** a Healthy Digital Role Models Fund, redirecting government communications investment into partnerships with credible creators and role models, alongside platform-level reform to reduce structural exposure to harmful content.
- **Embed** father-inclusive support within perinatal care and extend it through community-based support as children grow.
- **Invest in** the infrastructure, workforce and safeguarding needed to rebuild community "third spaces".
- **Establish** a dedicated Minister, and Commissioner for Boys and Men, supported by an Office for Men and Boys working in close partnership with the Office for Women, to provide sustained national leadership.
- **Establish** a government-funded, independently governed national centre for men and boys, modelled on ANROWS, with a founding focus on tracking and responding to harmful online narratives targeting boys.

Across all nine pillars, lasting change depends on implementation quality as much as program content. Sustained, sequenced and developmentally appropriate prevention must be delivered by skilled facilitators, reinforced by capable educators, and supported across families, communities and digital environments

Ultimately, these recommendations set out a coordinated national approach to primary prevention with boys and young men that strengthens Australia's continued investment in the safety of women and children. They move the conversation beyond whether prevention works to the more important question of how governments can confidently commission, invest in and scale evidence-informed approaches that already demonstrate positive outcomes.

## **Pillar 1: Standardise Healthy Masculinities Education and Educator Training**

Preventing violence against women and children requires sustained investment in evidence-informed primary prevention for boys and young men. The Second Action Plan should expand access to evidence-based healthy masculinities programs regardless of postcode or school, while extending and scaling the existing evidence base to support national implementation over time. Programs with a demonstrated evidence base for shifting harmful attitudes and behaviours should be nationally recognised and funded for delivery at scale, not left to depend on individual school leadership, budget or geography.

Australia has multiple emerging evidence-informed models capable of delivering this work, including those developed and evaluated through the Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation (Healthy MaTE). The priority is now to establish a nationally coordinated mechanism to commission and scale proven approaches, with consistent quality assurance and evaluation built into delivery. Rather than relying on individual schools to identify, procure and fund prevention initiatives, the Second Action Plan should establish a national funding mechanism that expands equitable access to evidence-based healthy masculinities programs, regardless of geography or school resources.

The Man Cave's program model is built on universal delivery in school settings, engaging whole cohorts of boys rather than targeting specific individuals. This reflects the nature of the problem: harmful attitudes are shaped through social and cultural norms, not individual deficits. Preventing violence therefore requires reaching the broader peer groups in which these norms are formed and reinforced, rather than focusing only on boys already identified as being at risk.

The experience of respectful relationships education demonstrates the limitations of relying on individual schools to deliver this work in isolation. Despite respectful relationships education being embedded in the Australian Curriculum, the 2026 national survey of Australian teachers found implementation remains highly inconsistent. Fewer than one in five schools had discussed the 2023 curriculum changes with teachers in any detail, while most teachers reported receiving no dedicated pre-service or in-service training to support delivery.<sup>6</sup> These findings point to a systemic implementation challenge rather than a failure of individual teachers or schools.

A nationally coordinated approach would provide greater consistency in quality, workforce capability and student access than the current school-by-school model. It would enable governments to scale evidence-informed prevention more effectively, while allowing schools to draw on specialist expertise alongside investment in educator capability.

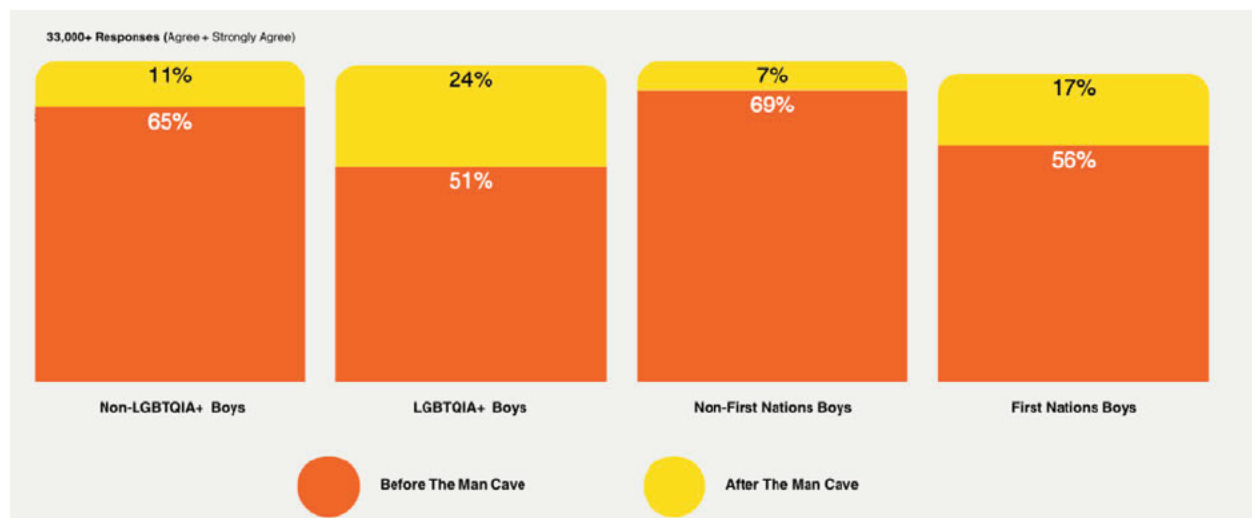
Jesuit Social Services' Man Box 2024 study found that men who most strongly endorse rigid masculine norms (quintile 5) are not only significantly more likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes and perpetrate violence, they also experience significantly worse mental health

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<sup>6</sup> Moor et al., *3rd Australian Survey of Teachers of RSE* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.26181/32919662>

outcomes,<sup>7</sup> two separate consequences of the same underlying factor, rather than one driving the other. Men in quintile 5 were 17 times more likely to agree with statements supporting violence against women than men with the lowest endorsement of these norms, and 66% reported having perpetrated at least one form of intimate partner violence, compared to just 12% of men in quintile 1.<sup>8</sup> The same men were also far more likely to experience poor mental health, including markedly higher rates of suicidal ideation and self-harm. Rigid masculine norms are therefore best understood as a shared underlying factor in both poor mental health and violence perpetration, not a pathway from one to the other, a distinction that matters both for accuracy and for how prevention work should be designed.

This is why help-seeking confidence is a meaningful indicator for this priority area, not a proxy for it. If rigid masculine norms are the shared underlying factor shaping both poor mental health and support for violence, then a program that measurably shifts how comfortable boys are seeking help is showing movement on that same underlying factor. It suggests boys are becoming more willing to reach out, be vulnerable and stay connected to others, the very capacities the Man Box data shows are suppressed in boys who hold the most rigid views. Our evidence suggests building this capacity may be particularly valuable across the full diversity of boys we work with, providing support without requiring them to self-identify or be singled out for intervention. Evaluation of our Level 1 (Self) workshop found that help-seeking confidence improved across all participants, but the greatest gains were experienced by boys facing diverse forms of intersectionality. LGBTQIA+ boys recorded a 24 percentage point increase in help-seeking confidence, compared with an 11 percentage point increase among non-LGBTQIA+ boys, while First Nations boys recorded a 17 percentage point increase, compared with 7 percentage points among non-First Nations boys.

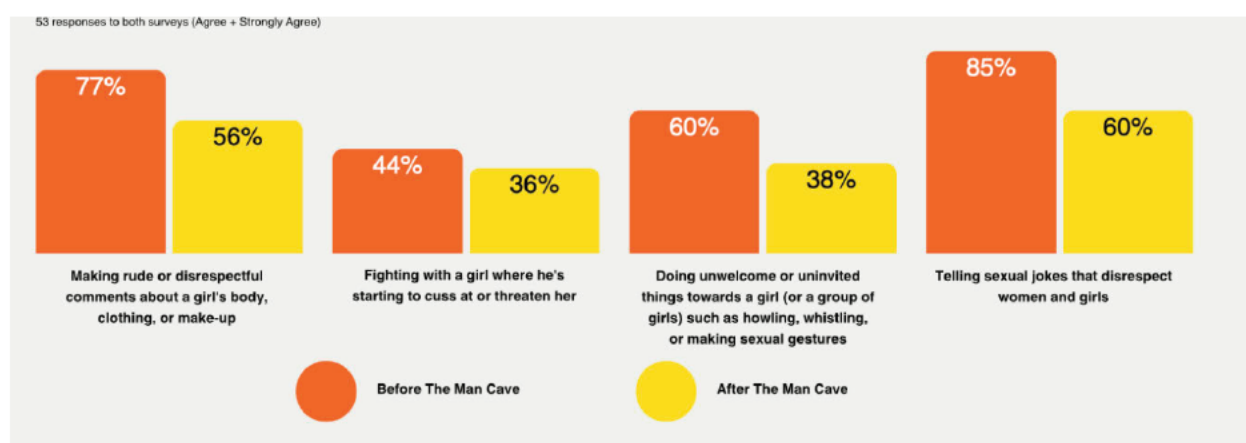


<sup>7</sup> The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services, *The Adolescent Man Box: Findings from a Survey with Australian Adolescents* (Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, 2025), <https://apo.org.au/node/332792>

<sup>8</sup> The Men's Project and Michael Flood, *The Man Box 2024: Re-examining What It Means to Be a Man in Australia* (Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, 2024)

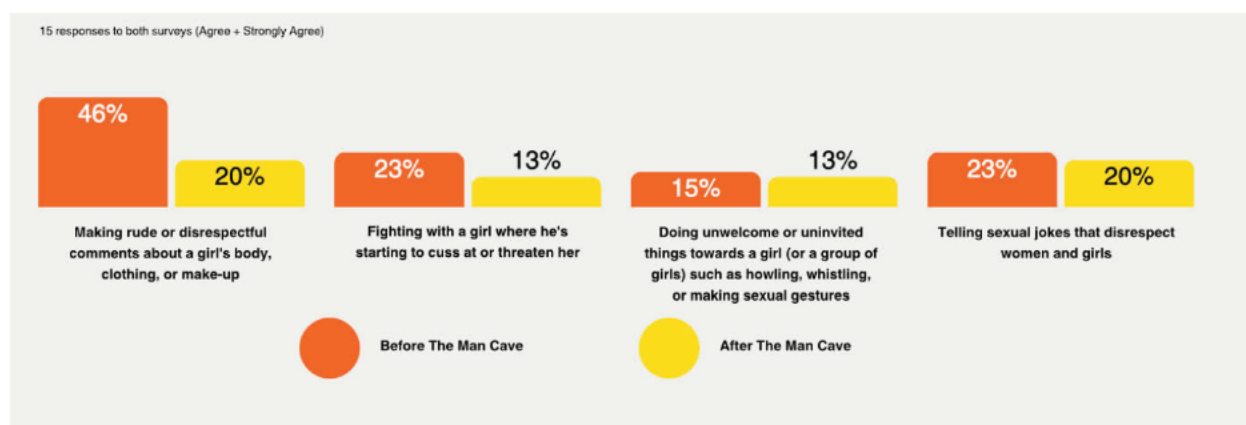
TMC's own program data confirms this shift extends to observable behaviour, not only self-reported attitudes. Three months after participation, female and non-male peers reported measurable reductions in behaviours directly associated with the gendered drivers of violence identified in Change the Story, including an

- 18% decrease in witnessing boys fighting with or threatening girls,
- a 29% decrease in the telling of sexual jokes that disrespect women and girls,
- a 27% decrease in rude or disrespectful comments about a girl's body, clothing or make-up,
- and a 37% decrease in unwelcome behaviours such as catcalling, whistling or sexual gestures.

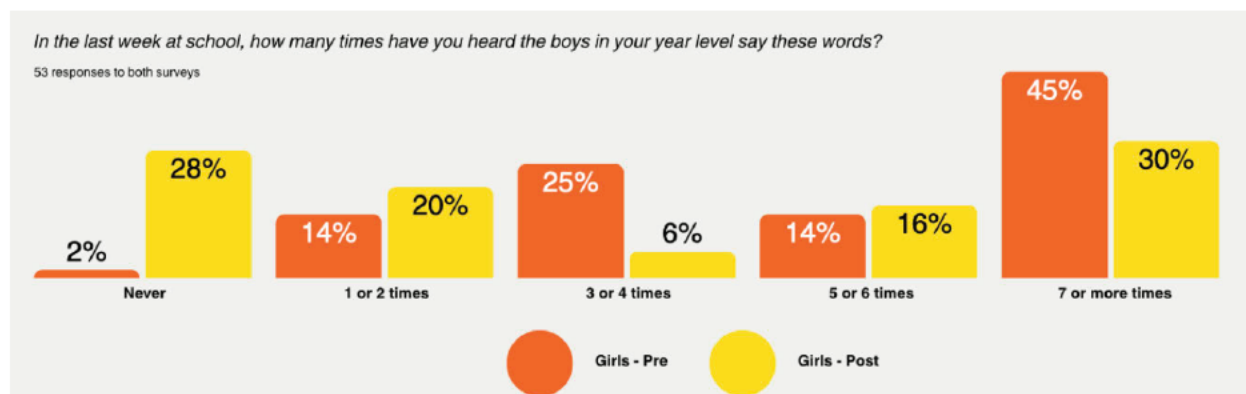


Our Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis, conducted with funding from the Department of Social Services, assigns economic value to these shifts. Improved safety for non-male peers accounts for 18% of the total social value generated, making it the third-largest outcome in the model.

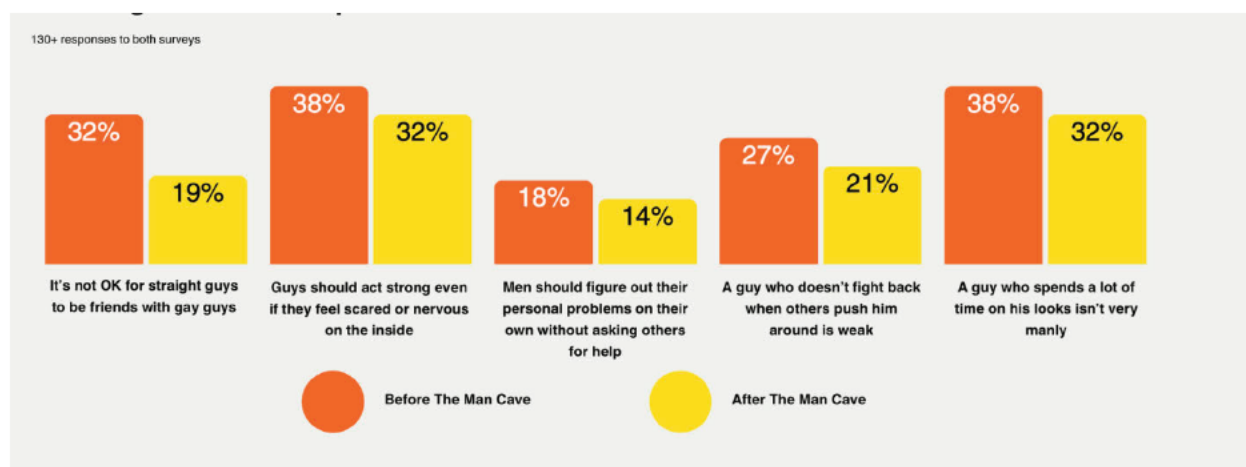
This is echoed by educators themselves: TMC's separate educator-reported data found similar reductions in the same behaviours, including a 43% decrease in witnessing boys fighting with or threatening girls and a 57% decrease in disrespectful comments about a girl's body, clothing or appearance. Because peer-reported data reflects the experience of those directly affected by these behaviours, rather than the boys' own self-assessment, it offers a genuinely independent measure of change.



This shift extends to how boys speak about their peers more broadly. Female and non-male peers also reported a marked reduction in homophobic language and slurs used by participating boys: before a TMC workshop, 45% of peers reported hearing this language seven or more times in the past week, the highest frequency category surveyed. Three months later, reports at this highest frequency had fallen by a third, and the proportion of peers reporting no exposure to this language at all rose from 2% to 28%.



These behavioural shifts are reflected in boys' own attitudes too. Using the Man Box scale to track boys' endorsement of rigid gender stereotypes before and after a single TMC workshop, we found agreement fell from 38% to 32% with the statement "guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside," from 27% to 21% with "a guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak," and from 32% to 19% with "it's not okay for a straight guy to be friends with a gay guy." These shifts reflect movement away from the narrow, restrictive expectations of masculinity that Jesuit Social Services' research identifies as a shared underlying factor in both poor mental health and violence-supportive attitudes.



TMC's own 2024 research, *You Can't Be What You Can't See: How Positive Male Role Models Can Increase Health Outcomes in Primary Prevention*,<sup>9</sup> provides further evidence of what drives this change. Analysing data from over 2,000 teenage boys, TMC examined seven factors, including school type, region, socio-educational advantage and LGBTIQ+ status. The research found that, across all seven factors examined, the presence of a positive male role model was the strongest predictor of boys' prosocial attitudes toward their female and non-male peers, outweighing the influence of every other factor combined. Boys with a positive male role model were considerably more likely to say they would tell a female peer if she were in a toxic relationship and to recognise the behaviours that make their female and non-male peers feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Importantly, a single TMC workshop measurably narrowed this gap for boys who did not already have a positive male role model in their lives. This evidence does not suggest role models alone prevent violence, nor does it claim direct causal impact. Rather, it demonstrates how credible role modelling can shift the attitudes and awareness that sit upstream of violence. This is precisely why TMC's model relies on high-quality facilitators who provide positive male role modelling, delivered universally rather than only to a subset of boys.

These findings demonstrate that universal delivery and equity are not competing approaches. A comprehensive prevention system requires both universal and targeted interventions, recognising that neither approach alone is sufficient to prevent violence or achieve equitable outcomes. Universal programs can achieve population-level reach while delivering proportionately greater benefits for boys experiencing greater intersectionality. A national funding mechanism should preserve this principle, recognising that shifting harmful social and cultural norms requires engaging whole communities of boys while ensuring those who stand to benefit most are not excluded through narrowly targeted approaches.

<sup>9</sup> Moriarty, G. & Datnow-Jamieson, D. (2025, March 13) Boy's Can't Be What They Can't See: How Positive Role Models Increase Health Outcomes in Primary Prevention [Conference Presentation] Engaging Men & Boys To End The Cycle of Violence, Sydney, NSW, Australia. [The Man Cave \(2024\). You Can't Be What You Can't See: How positive male role models can increase health outcomes in primary prevention.. Research poster. Melbourne: The Man Cave Australia.](#)

Universal, specialist program delivery is one half of the investment required to build an effective prevention system. The other is sustained investment in educator capability. Schools play a central role in primary prevention, but they cannot reasonably be expected to develop specialist expertise across every emerging area of practice. Just as schools regularly partner with external organisations to deliver areas such as road safety, cyber safety and careers education, specialist healthy masculinities providers bring dedicated facilitation skills, evidence-informed content and developmental expertise that complements the work of classroom teachers.

At the same time, respectful relationships education delivered by teachers should be supported through ongoing professional learning. The 2026 national survey of Australian teachers of relationships and sexuality education, funded by the Australian Government, found that most teachers had received no pre-service training in respectful relationships education (67.2%) or consent education (66.4%). Despite respectful relationships and consent education becoming mandatory in the Australian Curriculum in 2023, only 36.2% of teachers reported that their school had discussed the curriculum changes with them, and just 31.1% had received training to support implementation. The impact of professional learning was clear: 93.4% of teachers who had undertaken dedicated in-service training felt comfortable delivering the content, compared with around 64% of teachers with little or no training.

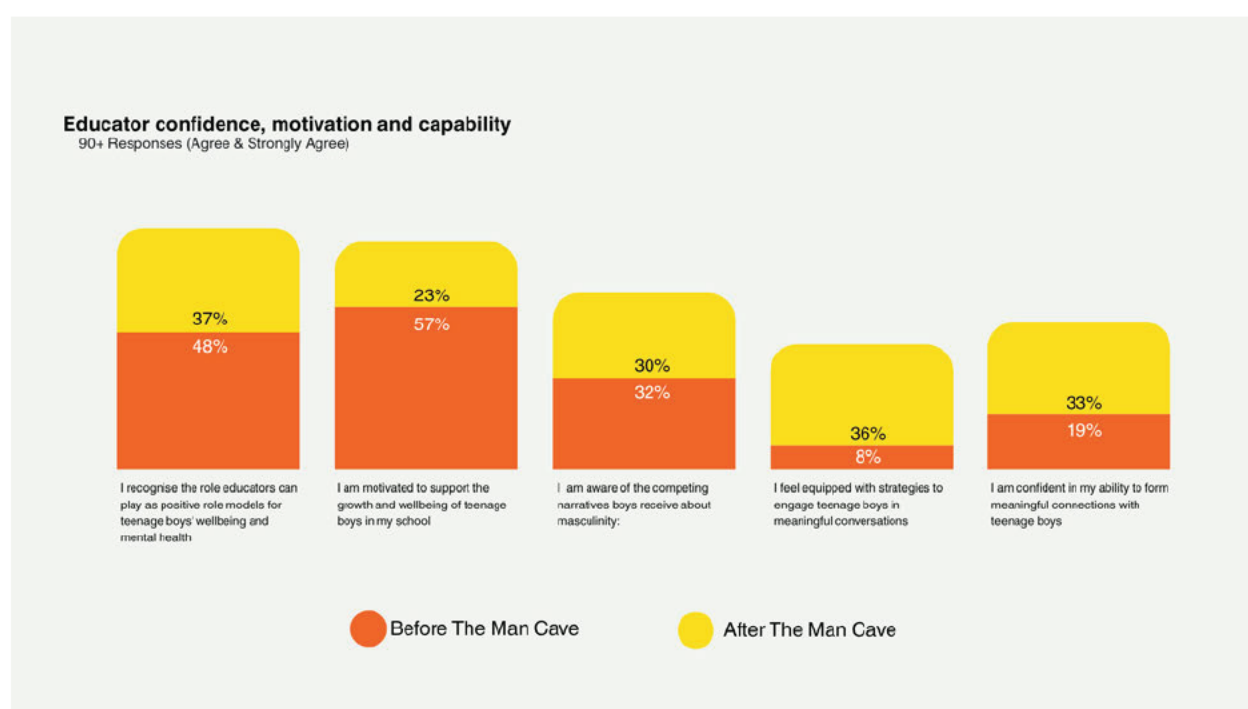
These findings make a compelling case for continued investment in educator capability. They do not, however, reduce the need for specialist delivery. Teachers already work within an increasingly crowded curriculum, and more than half report that their schools do not allocate sufficient time or funding for professional learning in this area. Specialist providers make a distinct contribution by bringing dedicated expertise, purpose-built content and sufficient time to facilitate conversations that many schools cannot consistently deliver alone.

Investments in educator capability and specialist delivery serve distinct but complementary functions within a whole-school prevention system. Evidence-informed specialist delivery and educator capability are mutually reinforcing, creating the conditions for prevention messages to be introduced, reinforced and sustained over time. Investing in both allows governments to build on existing evidence while extending and scaling approaches that can be implemented consistently across Australia. The Second Action Plan should intentionally invest in both as complementary components of a single prevention strategy, recognising that specialist delivery and educator capability are mutually reinforcing, not substitutes for one another.

We recommend the Second Action Plan go further by investing in whole-of-school healthy masculinities programs that engage both boys and the educators who support them. Whole-of-school approaches demonstrate how complementary investments in student prevention and educator capability can work together in practice. The Man Cave's model combines three sequenced, full-day workshops for boys with dedicated professional learning for educators and engagement with parents and carers, recognising that lasting change is strengthened when key messages are reinforced across the environments where boys learn and develop. Evaluation of The Man Cave's professional learning program, launched in 2025, has demonstrated substantial improvements in educator confidence, motivation and capability.

In pre- and post-program surveys, the proportion of educators who strongly agreed with the following statements increased significantly after participating:

- *I recognise the role educators can play as positive role models for teenage boys' wellbeing and mental health:* 48% to 85%
- *I am motivated to support the growth and wellbeing of teenage boys in my school:* 57% to 80%
- *I am aware of the competing narratives boys receive about masculinity:* 32% to 62%
- *I feel equipped with strategies to engage teenage boys in meaningful conversations:* 8% to 44%
- *I am confident in my ability to form meaningful connections with teenage boys:* 19% to 52%



These results point to a clear opportunity: educator capability and direct engagement with boys are not separate investments but two halves of a single, whole-of-school approach. A boy's experience of healthy masculinities work is reinforced (or undermined) by whether the adults around him are equipped to continue that conversation once the program ends. Whole-of-school funding models, which support boys, educators and parents together, should be recognised as a distinct and valuable model within any national mechanism, alongside gender specific programming.

This recommendation builds on frameworks already demonstrating national leadership. Our Watch's *Change the Story* framework identifies four gendered drivers that consistently predict violence against women:

- condoning of violence;

- men's control of decision-making;
- rigid gender stereotyping; and
- male peer relations that reinforce disrespect toward women.

Our Watch calls for action on these drivers at every level of society, from individuals to schools to governments.<sup>10</sup> This whole-of-population approach, which also underpins Australian governments' work in primary prevention, has provided a strong, nationally recognised evidence base for building educator capability and designing primary prevention programs - including The Man Cave's workshops, which have been further enhanced through collaboration with The Men's Project at Jesuit Social Services as part of the Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation initiative. The Second Action Plan should build on this established, evidence-informed foundation by extending and scaling approaches that already align with *Change the Story*, ensuring nationally consistent implementation while allowing flexibility for local contexts, rather than creating new approaches or leaving implementation to develop unevenly across jurisdictions.

The Consultation Paper itself notes that long-term, consistent prevention programs beginning in primary school are most effective, and warns that one-off, poorly contextualised awareness programs can backfire, in some cases leaving boys more supportive of violence than before. This points to a broader principle TMC's own program design is built around: attitudes formed over years of social conditioning are unlikely to shift permanently from a single encounter. Lasting change instead comes from sustained, sequenced and developmentally appropriate engagement with boys across key developmental stages, where each stage builds on skills and understanding established in the last, allowing boys to revisit and deepen this learning as their own maturity and social context changes. The Man Cave's sequential, full-day workshop model, comprising three sessions delivered over either a condensed or extended timeframe, is built directly on this principle.

Commonwealth investment should be structured to support ongoing, staged engagement of this nature. Funding a single session, while expecting durable change, sets programs up to be judged against an outcome they were never resourced to achieve. In practice, this means funding models that support engagement with boys across multiple developmental stages, for example late primary, early secondary and senior years, rather than a single grant for a single session.

Two related barriers currently prevent this. Many schools operate within constrained wellbeing budgets and can only afford to fund a single workshop, even where they would prefer to engage boys across multiple year levels. At the same time, the cost of delivering evidence-informed, sustained programming reflects the genuine investment required in skilled facilitation, developmentally staged content and ongoing quality assurance, this work cannot be delivered cheaply without compromising its effectiveness. National investment at scale addresses both barriers at once. It removes the funding constraint currently limiting individual schools, while

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<sup>10</sup> Our Watch, ANROWS, and VicHealth, *Change the Story*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Our Watch, 2021), <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/change-the-story/>

also creating the economies of scale that reduce per-participant delivery costs as programs are commissioned nationally rather than negotiated school by school.

### **Recommendations:**

- Invest in evidence-informed, gender-specific primary prevention for boys and young men through a national mechanism that commissions, resources and scales healthy masculinities programming with consistent access, regardless of postcode or school resourcing.
- Preserve universal, whole-cohort program design within national funding models, recognising its particular value in reaching boys facing additional intersectionality without requiring self-identification as 'at risk'.
- Fund whole-of-school models that invest in both boys' programming and educator professional development, recognising them as complementary components of a single approach.
- Recognise specialist, evidence-based program delivery as a distinct and necessary complement to educator capability building, given the competing demands teachers already face delivering a crowded curriculum.
- Invest in educator capability through evidence-informed professional learning in respectful relationships, healthy masculinities and the prevention of gender-based violence, building on established national frameworks such as *Change the Story* to support nationally consistent implementation while allowing flexibility for local contexts.
- Support the delivery of sustained, sequenced and developmentally appropriate prevention across key developmental stages, recognising that long-term engagement is more effective than one-off awareness sessions, and extend and scale the evidence base to support confident national implementation.

## **Pillar 2: Reform State-Based Mental Health and Wellbeing Menus**

School mental health and wellbeing systems provide one of Australia's strongest existing platforms for primary prevention with boys and young men. Because rigid masculine norms and poor mental health are closely connected, these systems present a significant opportunity to address both through a coordinated, prevention-focused approach.

Jesuit Social Services' Adolescent Man Box study draws a clear line between rigid masculine norms and mental health outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Boys with the highest endorsement of rigid masculine norms were significantly more likely than boys with the lowest endorsement to report poor mental health symptoms in the past fortnight, significantly less likely to agree they could be vulnerable with a friend, and twice as likely to agree that no one really knows them well. These same rigid norms actively discourage the help-seeking and emotional expression that would otherwise support boys' wellbeing.

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<sup>11</sup> The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services, *The Adolescent Man Box: Findings from a Survey with Australian Adolescents* (Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, 2025), <https://apo.org.au/node/332792>

This connection extends beyond mental health alone. While mental health and violence perpetration must never be conflated, poor emotional regulation and violence-supportive attitudes consistently appear together in the same population. As set out above, men who most strongly endorse rigid masculine norms are both significantly more likely to experience poor mental health and significantly more likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes and perpetrate violence, two separate outcomes of the same underlying factor, rather than one causing the other. This is precisely the mechanism healthy masculinities work is designed to interrupt: by building boys' capacity to regulate emotion and relate to others in flexible, non-rigid ways, before the pressures of rigid masculine norms become entrenched.

This connection extends into adolescence. The Adolescent Man Box research found that boys who most strongly endorse rigid masculine norms are also more likely to report experiences with alcohol than boys who hold more flexible views, echoing the same pattern seen in the mental health and violence-supportive attitudes data above.<sup>12</sup> Rigid masculine norms are therefore not only linked to poorer mental health and violence-supportive attitudes, but to early risk-taking behaviours more broadly, reinforcing the case for addressing these norms as a single, connected prevention target rather than treating emotional regulation, alcohol use and violence-supportive attitudes as separate problems.

Family, domestic and sexual violence should therefore be understood, in part, as a public health issue, one where building boys' emotional regulation capability early is a genuine, evidence-based prevention lever, not only a mental health intervention in its own right.

This points to a clear, practical opportunity, though the infrastructure to act on it is not yet consistent nationally. Victoria and New South Wales have each established school mental health and wellbeing menus, giving schools a structured pathway to access funded wellbeing support, but this model is not universal across Australian states and territories. Where these menus exist, gender-specific healthy masculinities programming, addressing both rigid gender stereotypes and the emotional regulation skills needed to respond to them, should be recognised as a core, standing component within them, not treated as a specialist add-on separate from broader wellbeing provision. Where they do not yet exist, the Second Action Plan presents an opportunity to support their development. This also reflects the genuinely cross-portfolio nature of this work: healthy masculinities programming sits at the intersection of education, mental health and violence prevention, exactly the kind of issue the Second Action Plan itself, and the cross-portfolio coordination we call for in Pillar 8, is designed to address, rather than something any single portfolio can resource alone.

Rigid masculine norms are associated with poorer mental health outcomes for boys, while difficulties in social, emotional and relationship skills are linked to violence perpetration. The Second Action Plan should embed the development of these capabilities as a standing, funded component of whole-school wellbeing approaches, coordinated across the education, health and family violence portfolios.

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<sup>12</sup> The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services, *The Adolescent Man Box: Findings from a Survey with Australian Adolescents* (Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, 2025), <https://apo.org.au/node/332792>

## Recommendations

- Support the expansion of state-based school mental health and wellbeing menus, modelled on existing approaches in Victoria and New South Wales, to jurisdictions where no equivalent structure currently exists, ensuring gender-specific healthy masculinities programming, addressing both rigid gender stereotypes and the emotional regulation skills needed to respond to them, is included as a standing component wherever these menus are established
- Expand the delivery of evidence-informed emotional regulation programming for boys within school mental health provision, drawing on the established link between rigid masculine norms, emotional regulation difficulties and violence perpetration
- Ensure family, domestic and sexual violence prevention is resourced and coordinated as a genuine cross-portfolio, public health issue spanning education, mental health and violence prevention, consistent with the coordination proposed in Pillar 8
- Extend and scale existing evidence on the relationship between masculine norms, emotional regulation and violence perpetration to inform program design and policy investment

### **Pillar 3: Strengthen Sexual Violence Prevention and Consent Education for Boys and Young Men**

Sexual violence has distinct drivers, patterns of offending, disclosure pathways and service needs compared with broader family and domestic violence, a distinction the Consultation Paper itself identifies as a key priority for this Second Action Plan. It therefore requires dedicated prevention alongside broader efforts to end gender-based violence, rather than being assumed to be addressed through general prevention initiatives.

The scale of the challenge is well evidenced. While adult perpetration of child sexual abuse has declined, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study found adolescent-perpetrated sexual abuse has increased in recent years, with 18.2% of Australians aged 16 to 24 reporting they experienced sexual abuse by another adolescent before the age of 18.<sup>13</sup> This finding sits alongside another important reality: most young people are now able to accurately define consent, yet rates of adolescent-perpetrated sexual harm remain high.

Consent education has been mandated in the Australian Curriculum since 2023, although implementation remains inconsistent across schools, with many teachers reporting limited training and support to deliver it as intended. The challenge now is ensuring consent education is delivered consistently and in ways that translate knowledge into behaviour. Our program delivery experience, alongside the broader evidence base outlined throughout this submission, demonstrates that sustained, sequenced and developmentally appropriate engagement, built through trust, skilled facilitation, critical reflection and repeated practice, develops respectful attitudes and behaviours in ways

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<sup>13</sup> Ben Mathews and Chanel Contos, "Some Gains but Fresh Difficulties in Combating Child Sexual Abuse," QUT News, citing findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, <https://www.qut.edu.au/news/realfocus/combating-child-sexual-abuse>.

that instructional content alone does not. The Man Cave already has a strong and growing evidence base (including data from the as-yet unreleased evaluation of Healthy MaTE) demonstrating what works. The priority now is to extend and scale the existing evidence base within consent and respectful relationships education so governments can confidently commission, invest in and scale approaches that translate knowledge into behaviour.

It is important to note that such delivery or programmatic intervention is proposed as a complimentary addition to a whole of school wellbeing response.

Sexual violence prevention must also keep pace with rapidly evolving digital environments. The eSafety Commissioner has found that the average age of first exposure to online pornography among Australian teenagers is 13.<sup>14</sup> Research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies has found that pornography consumption among young people is associated with unrealistic expectations about sex and attitudes more supportive of sexual violence.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, technology is enabling new forms of harm, including image-based abuse and AI-generated sexual content, creating risks that many existing consent education approaches were not designed to address. Prevention must therefore be conceived as an evolving capability rather than a static curriculum topic, with regular review and adaptation to respond to emerging technologies, online behaviours and changing patterns of harm. Extending and scaling evidence-informed approaches must therefore include ongoing adaptation to emerging technologies, online behaviours and evolving patterns of harm.

Taken together, these trends reinforce that preventing sexual violence requires more than curriculum content alone. It requires sustained investment in evidence-informed, gender-specific prevention that engages boys and young men in ways that build respectful attitudes, healthy relationships and a lived understanding of consent. The Second Action Plan should therefore recognise sexual violence prevention as a distinct component of the National Plan's primary prevention agenda, backed by dedicated investment and a commitment to extend and scale the existing evidence base so successful approaches can be implemented consistently, continuously improved and scaled with confidence.

Consent education is now a well established component of Australia's prevention framework. The challenge is ensuring evidence-informed approaches are implemented consistently, at scale, and in ways that translate knowledge into behaviour for boys and young men

## **Recommendations:**

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<sup>14</sup> eSafety Commissioner, "Too Much Too Soon: The Reality of Children's Access to Porn Online," eSafety.gov.au, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/blogs/too-much-too-soon-the-reality-of-childrens-access-to-porn-on-line>.

<sup>15</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, *The Effects of Pornography on Children and Young People: A Research Snapshot*, <https://aifs.gov.au/all-research/research-snapshots/effects-pornography-children-and-young-people>

- Establish a dedicated funding stream for sexual violence prevention with boys and young men, delivered through the national funding mechanism proposed in Pillar 1, protected from being absorbed into general family and domestic violence prevention funding.
- Fund sustained, multi-year consent and respectful relationships programs delivered at key developmental stages, for example late primary, early secondary and senior years, rather than single-session delivery, consistent with the staged funding model proposed in Pillar 1.
- Establish national minimum training and accreditation standards for facilitators delivering consent and respectful relationships education, whether specialist providers or trained educators, so quality does not depend on which provider or school a young person happens to access.
- Establish a formal mechanism for the eSafety Commissioner's ongoing research and monitoring of emerging technology-facilitated harms, including image-based abuse and AI-generated content, to directly inform and update national minimum standards for consent education, ensuring content remains current rather than static
- Direct the national centre for men and boys proposed in Pillar 9 to include sexual violence prevention and consent education as a named research priority, ensuring the evidence base for what works is actively maintained, not assumed to be settled.

#### **Pillar 4: Invest in Digital Literacy**

Digital environments have become one of the primary contexts in which boys learn about masculinity, relationships and identity. Preventing violence against women and children therefore requires prevention efforts that extend beyond classrooms into the online spaces where these attitudes are increasingly formed. We call for dedicated investment in digital prevention that combines positive online content, digital literacy and relatable role models to reach boys where they are.

As noted previously, the eSafety Commissioner has found that the average age of first exposure to online pornography among Australian teenagers is 13, and that most of the material children

encounter is violent, degrading or misogynistic.<sup>16</sup> Jesuit Social Services' landmark report, *The Man Box* (2024), found that men who regularly consume violent pornography are significantly more likely to conform to rigid gender stereotypes than those who do not.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, digital influencers are becoming increasingly powerful sources of guidance and identity formation. Research from the Movember Institute's 2025 *Young Men's Health in a Digital World* study, involving more than 3,000 young men across Australia, the United States

<sup>16</sup> eSafety Commissioner, "Too Much Too Soon: The Reality of Children's Access to Porn Online," eSafety.gov.au, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/blogs/too-much-too-soon-the-reality-of-childrens-access-to-porn-on-line>.

<sup>17</sup> The Men's Project and Michael Flood, *The Man Box 2024: Re-examining What It Means to Be a Man in Australia* (Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, 2024)

and the United Kingdom, found that nearly two-thirds of young men engage with masculinity influencers online.<sup>18</sup>

We support the intent of the under-16 social media ban as an important measure to protect young people online. However, restricting access alone should not be treated as a complete prevention strategy. As Dr Zac Seidler, clinical psychologist and Movember's global director of research, wrote in a November 2025 Movember Institute piece responding to the ban, young men currently aged 12 to 17 spend more than four hours a day across gaming, social media and short-form video. These digital environments make up a substantial part of a young person's social life and identity development and will not simply disappear now that access is restricted.

Seidler's research suggests that restricted access may simply shift young people towards less visible and less regulated online environments, including AI companion platforms designed to simulate emotional intimacy and gambling-adjacent content embedded within gaming environments. At the same time, many of the community "third spaces" that once supported belonging and identity formation, including sporting clubs, youth organisations and informal community settings, have been eroded, leaving fewer positive alternatives for connection. As Seidler puts it, "we can't reclaim four hours a day and expect the vacuum to fill itself."

Importantly, the same research points to where investment should be directed. Seidler notes that young men are "hungry for direction, motivation, belonging",<sup>19</sup> with 75% reporting they feel motivated after acting on advice from an online influencer. This is evidence of a genuine desire for guidance and positive role models - that structured, credible alternatives could meet. The same research found 57% of young men do not understand how algorithmic curation shapes the content they see, while 53% want greater control over their feeds. Together, these findings make a compelling case for dedicated digital literacy education delivered before social media access is restored at age 16.

Government should also explore whether a competency-based model of digital literacy could complement age-based protections. Similar in principle to a driver's licence or a school's "pen licence", young people could demonstrate an understanding of algorithmic curation, manipulation techniques and safe online practices before gaining unrestricted access to social media. Such an approach would not replace age-based protections but could provide a more graduated pathway that links digital literacy education to practical capability.

We also support Teach Us Consent's *Fix Our Feeds* campaign, which highlights how platform design compounds exposure to harmful content.<sup>20</sup> Teach Us Consent's research, published as part of the campaign, found it takes just 23 minutes for a social media account resembling a 16

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<sup>18</sup> Krista Fisher, Simon Rice, and Zac Seidler, *Young Men's Health in a Digital World* (Melbourne: Movember Institute of Men's Health, 2025), <https://us.movember.com/movember-institute/masculinities-report>.

<sup>19</sup> Seidler, "What Will Fill the Void? Why Young Men Need More Than a Social Media Boundary," Movember Institute of Men's Health, Substack, November 27, 2025, <https://movember.substack.com/p/what-will-fill-the-void-why-young>.

<sup>20</sup> Teach Us Consent, *Fix Our Feeds*, <https://www.teachusconsent.com/fix-our-feeds>

to 18-year-old boy to be served misogynistic content, regardless of the account's stated preferences. This demonstrates that exposure is not simply the result of individual choices but is shaped by recommendation systems and platform architecture. We support Teach Us Consent's call for an opt-in default for algorithmically curated feeds, giving young people greater control over the content they receive.

Government has invested for decades in advertising and public messaging campaigns, in health promotion for smoking and road safety, for example, but has not matched this with investment in the creators and role models young men actually engage with every day. Harmful influencers have built vast, highly engaged online ecosystems; competing with this requires building a healthier one, not relying on regulation and warnings alone. **We recommend the Second Action Plan establish a Healthy Digital Role Models Fund**, redirecting a proportion of existing government communications investment into long-term partnerships with credible creators, athletes, gamers, comedians, educators and young men already producing positive content, funding trusted voices to create engaging content where boys already are, rather than running government-branded campaigns alone.

Taken together, this points to a clear conclusion. Restricting access without building genuine alternatives risks creating a vacuum that less safe, less regulated online spaces will fill instead. Digital literacy should therefore be recognised as a core component of primary prevention under the National Plan, rather than being treated solely as an online safety issue. Investment should support positive online engagement, digital literacy, trusted role models and community-based alternatives that help boys develop healthy identities and relationships long before harmful narratives take hold.

## Recommendations

- Establish a Healthy Digital Role Models Fund, redirecting a proportion of government communications investment into long-term partnerships with credible creators and role models producing positive content for boys and young men, rather than relying on government-branded campaigns alone.
- Recognise digital prevention as a core component of primary prevention within the Second Action Plan.
- Fund dedicated digital prevention initiatives for boys and young men, including digital literacy education, positive online content and access to credible role models, drawing on evidence-based models and partnerships with specialist organisations.
- Invest in community "third spaces," including sporting clubs, youth organisations and other settings that provide safe opportunities for connection, belonging and identity development, alongside dedicated research into what actually draws boys and young men back into these spaces, recognising that funding and infrastructure alone do not guarantee engagement
- Fund comprehensive digital literacy education that equips young people to understand algorithmic curation, online manipulation and safe digital participation before social media access is restored.

- Explore the feasibility of a competency-based digital literacy model that complements age-based protections by ensuring young people have the knowledge and skills to navigate online environments safely.
- Support platform-level reform, including an opt-in default for algorithmically curated feeds, consistent with the objectives of Teach Us Consent's *Fix Our Feeds* campaign.
- Invest in research to better understand how young men engage with online masculinity content, emerging digital risks, and the factors that support disengagement from harmful online communities.

## **Pillar 5: Strengthen Father-Inclusive Support Across a Child's Development**

Preventing violence against women and children requires sustained investment in evidence-informed, gender-specific primary prevention for boys and young men, and one of Australia's most significant, underutilised opportunities to do this lies with fathers. While this priority sits outside The Man Cave's own service delivery, the evidence points to a substantial systems gap and a compelling opportunity for government to strengthen support for fathers from the transition to parenthood through the raising of children and adolescents.

While this pillar focuses on fathers, given the specific and well-evidenced role father figures play in shaping boys' understanding of masculinity, we recognise that boys grow up within a wide range of family structures. Any father-inclusive support model should be designed to reflect this diversity, including single-parent, same-sex parent and blended families, rather than assuming a single household or parenting structure.

Australia already has strong evidence establishing fathers as a measurable protective factor in preventing future violence. What is missing is the systems and workforce capability required to act on it. Analysis from the Australian Institute of Family Studies' Ten to Men longitudinal study found that men who grew up with positive, affectionate father figures were 48% less likely to perpetrate family violence in adulthood.<sup>21</sup> This is reinforced by how boys themselves describe the influences shaping their understanding of masculinity: Jesuit Social Services' Adolescent Man Box 2025 found that fathers or male parental figures were identified as the single greatest influence on boys' attitudes towards masculinity, with 59% of boys aged 14 to 18 reporting their father had a "big impact."<sup>22</sup> Together, this evidence base already tells us what matters. The priority now is to extend it into practical, funded systems that support fathers to act on that influence well.

The transition to fatherhood is a particularly important entry point for this support, and the evidence here is equally clear. Movember's 2026 *More Than a Provider* report, based on a nationally representative survey of more than 1,200 Australian fathers, found that fathers are highly motivated to be engaged parents and recognise the importance of their own wellbeing for

<sup>21</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, "The Use of Intimate Partner Violence among Australian Men," *Ten to Men* insights report,

<https://aifs.gov.au/tentomen/insights-report/use-intimate-partner-violence-among-australian-men>

<sup>22</sup> The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services, *The Adolescent Man Box: Findings from a Survey with Australian Adolescents* (Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, 2025), <https://apo.org.au/node/332792>

their children and partners. More than three-quarters reported that becoming a father increased the importance they placed on looking after their physical and mental health, and over 60% recognised the impact of their emotional wellbeing on their family.<sup>23</sup>

Yet this readiness is not being matched by the system. In the same report, nearly 60% of fathers reported that no health professional asked about their mental health or coping during pregnancy or in the first year following birth. At the same time, one in four rated their physical or mental health as only fair or poor during the first year of fatherhood, while almost one in five reported feeling more isolated or lonely since becoming a father. These findings confirm the barrier is not fathers' willingness to engage, but the absence of consistent, father-inclusive support within existing services.

The perinatal period should therefore be seen as the beginning of a broader prevention pathway, not the end of one, and a period of particular urgency: research shows pregnancy and the early postnatal period carry heightened risk for the onset or escalation of partner violence, making this window a critical opportunity for intervention, not just support.<sup>24</sup> Early engagement creates an opportunity to build fathers' confidence, strengthen relationships and connect families with support, but fathers continue to shape children's development throughout childhood and adolescence. A comprehensive prevention approach should therefore include both father-inclusive perinatal care and ongoing opportunities for fathers to access evidence-based parenting support, peer connection and practical guidance as their children grow. Government investment should focus on extending and scaling what already exists, such as Movember's 'Men in Mind' training<sup>25</sup> and Dads Group's integrated model of hospital, digital and community-based father support,<sup>26</sup> rather than building new approaches from scratch.

Greater investment in fathers should complement, not compete with, continued investment in mothers and children. Supporting fathers is not an alternative to supporting women and children; it is an opportunity to strengthen families earlier, build healthier developmental environments for children, and reduce the risk factors associated with violence across generations.

A growing body of evidence indicates that positive, engaged fatherhood is associated with lower rates of future violence perpetration, while research consistently finds that fathers want to play an active role in their children's lives. The priority now is investing in, extending and scaling the systems, training and support that enable fathers to fulfil this role.

## Recommendations

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<sup>23</sup> Movember Institute of Men's Health, *More Than a Provider: Australian Fathers on Health, Identity, and Missed Opportunities for Support* (Melbourne: Movember, 2026), full report PDF: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d77e56c1fc5e024160affa9/t/6a481a0e9947b63e3e101b6c/1783110158361/Movember+Fatherhood+Report.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Boxall & Morgan (2021), via *National DFV Bench Book*, <https://dfvbenchbook.aija.org.au/article/1080189>

<sup>25</sup> Movember, "Men in Mind," <https://meninmind.movember.com/>

<sup>26</sup> Dads Group, "Integrated Model of Care," <https://www.dadsgroup.org/intergrated-model-of-care>.

- Invest in gender-specific, father-inclusive engagement within existing perinatal care, including discussion of mental health, relationship wellbeing and broader psychosocial stressors, with clear referral pathways where additional support is needed.
- Extend and scale training for the perinatal and family support workforce to build confidence and capability in engaging fathers throughout the parenting journey, building on evidence-informed approaches such as Movember's *Men in Mind*.
- Expand community-based parenting, peer support and mentoring opportunities that reduce social isolation and support fathers from early parenthood through their children's adolescence.
- Ensure father-inclusive support is positioned as a whole-of-parenting investment that complements, rather than substitutes for, continued investment in mothers and children.

## **Pillar 6: Invest in third spaces**

Much of boys' identity formation happens outside the school gate, in the community settings where they spend their time beyond the classroom. Schools are the foundation of healthy masculinities education and remain the most effective setting for reaching all boys through universal, evidence-based prevention, but the attitudes, relationships and behaviours developed through school-based programs are reinforced, challenged and practised in the hours boys spend beyond the classroom, including through sporting clubs, youth organisations, other community settings, and increasingly, online. As we set out in Pillar 4, boys are spending growing amounts of time in digital spaces that actively shape their understanding of masculinity, often filling the gap left as access to community third spaces has declined. Investing in physical, community-based "third spaces" is therefore not only valuable in its own right, it is a direct, tangible alternative to this digital substitution, giving boys credible, supervised environments to spend time in rather than defaulting to unsupervised online spaces by default.

When schools, families and community settings reinforce consistent messages about respect, relationships and healthy masculinity, boys are more likely to experience prevention as something that is lived, rather than simply taught. Community "third spaces" provide opportunities for belonging, mentoring and positive identity development that complement the universal reach of schools and strengthen prevention across the environments where boys spend their time.

The priority now is rebuilding community "third spaces" that have gradually declined over time, including sporting clubs, Scouts, libraries and community centres, leaving many young people with fewer opportunities for meaningful connection and a growing sense of isolation.<sup>27</sup> This decline extends beyond the loss of individual programs. Many community organisations are operating with reduced staffing, shrinking volunteer bases and ageing infrastructure, limiting their ability to provide consistent, high-quality engagement for young people. Rebuilding these settings requires investment not only in the activities delivered within them, but also in the organisational capacity, facilities and workforce that enable them to exist.

<sup>27</sup> Zac Seidler, "What Will Fill the Void? Why Young Men Need More Than a Social Media Boundary," Movember Institute of Men's Health, Substack, November 27, 2025, <https://movember.substack.com/p/what-will-fill-the-void-why-young>

These settings also provide an important complement to increasingly dominant digital environments. When trusted community spaces are unavailable or under-resourced, young people's time and attention are more likely to shift towards less regulated online spaces, where harmful narratives about masculinity can flourish. Investment in community settings should therefore be recognised as an important extension of Australia's primary prevention infrastructure, reinforcing and scaling the work already taking place in schools, rather than establishing an entirely new pillar of prevention infrastructure from nothing.

Investment must also extend to the adults who lead these environments. Coaches, youth leaders and mentors are often among the most trusted adults in boys' lives, yet few receive structured preparation to recognise or respond to the attitudes, behaviours and relationship issues that underpin the prevention of gender-based violence. Building capability in these trusted adults should become a recognised, gender-specific component of coaching accreditation and youth leadership development, alongside existing expectations such as safeguarding and first aid.

Finally, strengthening third spaces also requires strengthening safeguarding. Investment in trusted adults must be accompanied by appropriate screening, supervision and ongoing support to ensure these environments remain safe, accountable and worthy of the trust placed in them by young people and their families.

## **Recommendations**

- Recognise community "third spaces" as an important, gender-specific extension of Australia's primary prevention infrastructure, reinforcing and scaling the work already delivered through schools.
- Invest in the long-term sustainability of community settings by funding organisational capacity, staffing, facilities and operating infrastructure, alongside program delivery.
- Embed healthy masculinities, respectful relationships and gender-based violence prevention within coaching accreditation and youth leadership development across sporting codes and community organisations.
- Ensure investment in trusted adults is accompanied by robust safeguarding, screening, supervision and ongoing support.
- Invest in the establishment of a longitudinal research project examining the extent to which participation in physical 'third spaces' is declining in Australia, including what the factors leading to any decline are.

## **Pillar 7: Elevate boys' and young men's voices**

Preventing violence against women and children requires sustained investment in evidence-informed, gender-specific primary prevention for boys and young men, and that prevention is more effective when boys and young men themselves help shape it. Boys and young men should be recognised as active partners in the design, delivery and evaluation of the policies and programs intended to support them, rather than relying solely on adult assumptions about what boys need or how they learn.

TMC is currently piloting a Youth Ambassador model that puts this principle into practice. Youth Ambassadors contribute to program co-design and review, and inform TMC's advocacy, ensuring boys and young men shape not only what TMC delivers, but also the policy positions TMC advances on their behalf.

Jesuit Social Services' *Adolescent Man Box* research argues that young people's voices should be central to efforts to shift attitudes and behaviours because adult assumptions do not always reflect boys' lived experiences.<sup>28</sup> This aligns with the Consultation Paper's recognition that children and young people should be treated as experts in their own lives and meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them. Meaningful participation strengthens program quality. Prevention initiatives designed with boys and young men are more likely to be engaging, credible and relevant because they reflect the language, social norms, online environments and everyday experiences that shape boys' lives.

Meaningful participation should extend across the full policy and program cycle rather than being limited to one-off consultation. Boys and young men should help identify priorities, shape program design, inform implementation, and contribute to evaluation and continuous improvement. This requires sustained, structured mechanisms rather than end-of-program surveys or isolated engagement activities. Youth perspectives should be embedded within governance, design and evaluation as a consistent national expectation across publicly funded prevention initiatives.

Youth participation should also include boys and young men who may be resistant to, or disengaged from, gender equity, not only those already supportive of this work. Understanding these perspectives is essential to designing effective engagement strategies. TMC is contributing to this evidence base through a partnership with Plan International Australia to develop the *Teen Gender Compass*, a youth-focused extension of Plan's landmark *Gender Compass* research.<sup>29</sup> The project will build a national understanding of young people's attitudes towards gender equity and provide an evidence base to strengthen engagement with boys, including those who may be sceptical of, or opposed to, gender equality initiatives. The Second Action Plan should support and draw on this kind of research to inform future policy and program design.

Embedding boys' and young men's voices strengthens the quality, relevance and effectiveness of primary prevention. Achieving this requires investment in the governance, capability and participation mechanisms needed to embed their perspectives consistently across policy development, implementation and evaluation, including through an ongoing lived-experience governance group for children and young people affected by family violence.

This matters because boys are children too, and within the specialist family, domestic and sexual violence system there remain few dedicated pathways for boys to be recognised and supported as victim-survivors in their own right. Where adolescent boys are recognised directly

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<sup>28</sup> The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services, *The Adolescent Man Box: Findings from a Survey with Australian Adolescents* (Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services, 2025), <https://apo.org.au/node/332792>

<sup>29</sup> Plan International Australia, *Gender Compass*, <https://www.plan.org.au/our-work/gender-compass/>

within the system, it is most often through adolescent family violence in the home initiatives, such as Victoria's AVITH model, which respond to boys' use of violence through a whole-of-family, non-punitive approach.<sup>30</sup> We support the Australian Childhood Foundation's recommendation that Commonwealth-funded initiatives in this space adopt a child-centred healing and recovery approach, measuring success through young people's safety, healing and development, rather than solely future perpetration. Boys' voices, including their experiences as victim-survivors, should inform the design of these systems from the outset, not only after concerning behaviour has emerged.

## **Recommendations**

- Embed ongoing, gender-specific mechanisms for boys' and young men's voices to inform the design, implementation, governance and evaluation of policies and programs that affect them, including representation within an ongoing lived-experience governance group for children and young people affected by family violence.
- Resource genuine co-design by providing sufficient time and funding for meaningful youth participation throughout program development, rather than limiting engagement to one-off consultation.
- Require publicly funded prevention initiatives to demonstrate how young people's perspectives have informed program design, delivery and evaluation.
- Recognise boys' and young men's experiences as victim-survivors within the specialist family, domestic and sexual violence system, ensuring pathways exist beyond behaviour-focused responses such as adolescent family violence in the home initiatives, consistent with the Australian Childhood Foundation's recommendation for child-centred healing and recovery.
- Ensure youth participation mechanisms actively include boys from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, LGBTIQ+ communities, regional and remote Australia, and other underrepresented groups.

## **Pillar 8: Strengthen cross-portfolio coordination and accountability for healthy masculinities policy**

Preventing violence against women and children requires sustained investment in evidence-informed, gender-specific primary prevention for boys and young men, and that investment depends on clear national leadership to hold it together. Healthy masculinities is a whole-of-government issue, yet responsibility for policy and investment is currently dispersed across multiple portfolios, including education, health, employment, community services and violent extremism prevention, without a clear point of national leadership or accountability. While this reflects the breadth of the issue, it also creates disconnection. Prevention and early intervention initiatives for boys and young men are often funded, evaluated and championed within individual portfolios, rather than through a coordinated national approach with shared objectives and long-term stewardship.

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<sup>30</sup> CFECFW, "Adolescent Violence in the Home," <https://cfecfw.org.au/our-work/adolescent-violence-in-the-home/>

This disconnection has practical consequences. Programs that demonstrate positive outcomes under one funding stream may lose support when that funding cycle ends, with no clear mechanism elsewhere in government to sustain or scale them. Policy development, funding decisions and implementation also occur largely within portfolio boundaries, limiting opportunities to coordinate investment, align priorities and apply emerging evidence consistently across government.

The ANROWS model demonstrates the value of dedicated national coordination for complex policy challenges. A similar national centre focused on boys and young men would provide the evidence, coordination and implementation support needed to strengthen Australia's prevention efforts. The Minister for Women, supported by the Office for Women within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, reflects the recognition that gender equality cannot be advanced by a single line portfolio alone. Healthy masculinities would benefit from the same model of national leadership and coordination.

We recommend the Second Action Plan establish a dedicated Minister for Boys and Men, providing political leadership and accountability for this work at the highest level of government, supported by an Office for Men and Boys to lead ongoing policy coordination and implementation. We also recommend the establishment of an independent Commissioner for Boys and Men, modelled on the eSafety Commissioner, to provide sustained, non-partisan oversight, research and advocacy that continues beyond any single term of government. Together, these three roles would coordinate policy and investment across portfolios and ensure this work remains a long-term national priority, rather than one that shifts between portfolios and funding cycles as governments change. The Office for Men and Boys should work in close partnership with the Office for Women, recognising that supporting boys and young men is complementary to, and strengthens, broader efforts to achieve gender equality and end violence against women and children, and should draw on the independent research and evidence generated through the national centre proposed in Pillar 9 to ensure policy remains informed by the strongest available evidence.

The need for coordinated leadership is also evident in the growing disengagement of some boys and young men from education and employment. Evidence presented in The Man Cave's submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Educational Achievement of Boys identified this disengagement as fundamentally a challenge of confidence, identity and belonging, rather than simply attendance, motivation or skills. These issues cut across education, employment, mental health and violence prevention, reinforcing the need for governance arrangements that bring portfolios together rather than addressing each issue in isolation. TMC has already sought to build this kind of cross-portfolio engagement at a parliamentary level, having established the Parliamentary Friends of Healthy Masculinities. This cross-party model demonstrates genuine, existing appetite across government for coordinated attention to healthy masculinities, and reinforces the case for translating that parliamentary interest into the kind of formal, resourced leadership this priority area calls for. Responding effectively will require collaboration across government, investment in educator capability and specialist expertise, rather than treating disengagement solely as an attendance or workforce participation issue.

## Recommendations

- Establish clear national leadership and accountability for healthy masculinities policy through a dedicated Minister and Commissioner for Boys and Men, supported by an Office for Men and Boys and appropriate resourcing.
- Ensure the Office for Men and Boys works in close partnership with the Office for Women to advance shared gender equality and violence prevention outcomes.
- Establish formal cross-portfolio governance arrangements to coordinate policy, funding and implementation across education, health, employment, community services and violence prevention, informed by the independent evidence base proposed in Pillar 9.
- Prioritise coordinated action to address boys' and young men's disengagement from education and employment as a challenge of confidence, identity and belonging that requires collaboration across portfolios, investment in educator capability and access to specialist expertise.

### **Pillar 9: Build Australia's evidence base for healthy masculinities and violence prevention**

Preventing violence against women and children requires sustained investment in evidence-informed, gender-specific primary prevention for boys and young men, and sustaining that investment over the long term requires sustained investment in the evidence base behind it. Achieving the ambitions of the Second Action Plan will require not only investment in prevention itself, but investment in understanding what works, so that funding decisions rest on robust, long-term evidence rather than short-term or program-specific evaluation alone.

This submission has already demonstrated the strength of Australia's existing evidence base: ANROWS, AIFS' Ten to Men, Jesuit Social Services' Man Box studies, Movember's research, eSafety, Teach Us Consent and TMC's own program data (including data from the as-yet unreleased evaluation of Healthy MaTE) all point in a consistent direction about what works for boys and young men. Much of this evidence, however, is necessarily cross-sectional or linked to individual program evaluations. While these studies provide valuable evidence of changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, they offer more limited insight into whether these early shifts translate into measurable reductions in violence perpetration over the course of a lifetime. Strengthening Australia's evidence base therefore requires sustained investment in longitudinal research capable of tracking outcomes across adolescence and adulthood, connecting the promising early indicators already documented to the long-term outcomes the Second Action Plan seeks to achieve.

Alongside longitudinal research, Australia has an opportunity to strengthen the broader evidence infrastructure supporting healthy masculinities. This includes investment in implementation research, evaluation and knowledge translation so that evidence generated through government-funded initiatives can be consistently applied across policy and practice. Building this infrastructure will enable successful approaches to be refined, scaled and sustained, rather than remaining isolated to individual programs or funding cycles.

ANROWS, jointly funded by the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, provides a successful model for an independent national research organisation that builds, translates and shares evidence to support the National Plan. A comparable national centre for boys and young men should be established to strengthen Australia's evidence base on healthy masculinities. Government funded but independently governed, the centre would provide research, evaluation and knowledge translation, build institutional expertise over time, and support evidence-informed policy across governments regardless of changes to funding cycles or administrative arrangements. Working alongside the national leadership arrangements proposed in Pillar 8, it would help ensure policy and practice continue to evolve alongside the evidence.

Digital environments should be a founding priority for this centre. Australia currently has significant expertise relevant to how boys become drawn into harmful online narratives, spanning eSafety, ANROWS, artificial intelligence research, universities and youth organisations. No single body brings this expertise together, however, with the goal of tracking emerging online narratives targeting boys, rapidly testing interventions, evaluating creators and campaigns, identifying protective factors, and sharing intelligence with schools, youth organisations, platforms and government in close to real time. A dedicated digital function within this new national centre could coordinate Australia's response to online misogyny and harmful masculinity content, positioning Australia as a genuine world leader in this space.

The Department's Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation (Healthy MaTE) provides an important foundation for this work. Rather than being viewed as a standalone initiative, it presents an opportunity to establish a longer-term national research agenda examining the relationship between healthy masculinities programming and violence prevention outcomes, extending and scaling this investment rather than treating it as complete. We also support Teach Us Consent's recommendation, raised through recent government consultation, to explore a national study into the profile, pathways and drivers of people who use violence. Together, these investments would strengthen Australia's understanding of both what works to prevent violence and why violence occurs.

Finally, evidence only improves policy when it is translated into practice. Research generated through government investment should be systematically shared across portfolios to inform education, health, community services and violence prevention policy, reinforcing the coordinated approach proposed in Pillar 8.

As investment in healthy masculinities grows, so too should investment in the research infrastructure needed to evaluate what works, translate evidence into practice, and respond to emerging challenges, including those arising in digital environments.

The shift toward strengths-based research is urgent. A 2026 systematic review of fifty years of masculinity research, led by Movember and co-authored by Dr Zac Seidler, found that 78% of existing masculinity measures take a deficit-based approach, focused on harm rather than health, while only 22% incorporate strengths-based elements, and fewer still are grounded in

strong cultural attunement or diverse samples.<sup>31</sup> Australia has a genuine opportunity to help build the next generation of masculinity research and measurement, strengths-based, culturally attuned and relationally grounded, rather than relying on tools built to measure harm alone. Investment in a national centre for men and boys should include a mandate to help drive this shift.

## Recommendations

- Invest in longitudinal research examining gender as a determinant of health and violence prevention outcomes, extending the evidence linking early intervention with boys to long-term prevention outcomes.
- Establish a government-funded but independently governed national centre for men and boys, modelled on the independent evidence function of ANROWS, to build sustained, gender-specific research, evaluation and knowledge translation capability for healthy masculinities and violence prevention.
- Establish digital narrative tracking, rapid intervention testing and real-time intelligence-sharing with schools, youth organisations, platforms and government as a founding function of this centre, coordinating Australia's fragmented expertise on how boys are drawn into harmful online narratives.
- Continue and expand the Department's Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation (Healthy MaTE) as the foundation of a longer-term national research agenda on healthy masculinities and violence prevention.
- Invest in implementation research, evaluation and knowledge translation to support the continuous improvement and scaling of evidence-informed prevention initiatives.
- Support further consideration of a national study into the profile, pathways and drivers of people who use violence, consistent with Teach Us Consent's recommendation.
- Ensure evidence generated through government-funded research is systematically shared across portfolios to inform policy, investment and practice.

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<sup>31</sup>Fisher et al., "What Is the Measure of a Man?," *Men and Masculinities* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X261459614>