

Preliminary submission to the South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.

About Full Stop Australia

Full Stop Australia is grateful for the opportunity to make a preliminary submission to South Australia's Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (the **Royal Commission**).

Full Stop Australia is a nationally focused not-for-profit organisation which has been working in the field of sexual, domestic, and family violence since 1971. We started as Sydney Rape Crisis—the first service in Australia dedicated to providing support to survivors of sexual violence. Today, we perform the following functions:

- Provide expert and confidential telephone, online and face-to-face counselling to people of all genders who have experienced sexual, domestic, or family violence, and specialist help for their supporters and those experiencing vicarious trauma.
- Conduct best practice training and professional services to support frontline workers, government, and the corporate and not-for-profit sectors.
- Advocate for laws and systems better equipped to respond to, and ultimately prevent, sexual, domestic and family violence.

Our advocacy is guided by the lived expertise of over 700 survivor-advocates in our [National Survivor Advocate Program \(NSAP\)](#). The NSAP gives victim-survivors of gender-based violence a platform to share their experiences to drive positive change. Through the NSAP, survivor-advocates can access opportunities to share their stories in the media, weigh in on Full Stop Australia's submissions to Government, and engage directly with Government. We are committed to centring the voices of victim-survivors in our work and advocating for laws and systems that genuinely meet their needs.

About this submission

This submission was prepared by Emily Dale, Head of Advocacy and Taran Buckby, Legal & Policy Officer. If you have any questions in relation to this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Emily Dale at emilyd@fullstop.org.au.

This is a brief, high-level submission whose objective is ensuring sexual violence remains a priority as the Royal Commission's work progresses. This submission does not contain a comprehensive set of recommendations to the Royal Commission. Noting that the Royal Commission is inviting submissions until September, Full Stop Australia intends to make a more substantive and detailed submission next month.

The scale and impacts of sexual violence

Sexual violence is currently occurring at unacceptable rates, and its impacts on victim-survivors can be lifelong. Yet, evidence tells us that response, policing, justice, support and service systems across Australia are not resourced, structured or sufficiently integrated to work effectively and holistically to support victim survivors and address sexual violence.

Sexual violence is prevalent in the community

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (**ABS**) Personal Safety Survey shows that 22% of Australian women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15.¹ Meanwhile, the latest Australian Child Maltreatment Study, which surveyed 8,500 Australians aged 16-65+, found that 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 5 boys experience child sexual abuse.²

The impacts of sexual violence are severe and far-reaching

According to research by VicHealth, intimate partner violence is responsible for more preventable ill-health and premature death in women under the age of 45 than any other of the well-known risk factors, including high blood pressure, obesity and smoking.³ Women who have been exposed to violence are at greater risk of developing a range of health problems, including stress, anxiety, depression, pain syndromes, phobias and somatic and medical symptoms, and report poorer physical health overall.⁴

Sexual violence remains vastly underreported

The latest ABS data on sexual violence shows that only 8% of women who were sexually assaulted by a male perpetrator in the ten years leading up to the survey ever reported to police.⁵

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021-22). *Personal Safety, Australia*. ABS.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>.

² Mathews B et al. (2023) 'The Prevalence of Child Maltreatment of Australia: Findings from a National Survey.' *Med J Aust*. 218 (6).

³ VicHealth. (2008). *Violence against women in Australia as a determinant of mental health and wellbeing*. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/ResearchSummary_VAW.pdf.

⁴ World Health Organization. (2000). *Women and Mental Health: An Evidence Based Review*. World Health Organisation, Geneva.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021, August 24). *Sexual Violence - Victimisation*. ABS.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/sexual-violence-victimisation>.

Convictions for sexual violence are extremely rare, meaning the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of these serious crimes are not held accountable

According to data analysis by the ABC, of the over 140,000 reports of sexual assault made to Australian police in the ten years leading up to 2017, only roughly 30% led to an arrest, summons, formal caution or other legal action.⁶

Research in state jurisdictions highlights that these figures may not represent the full scale of the problem. For example, recent NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (**BOCSAR**) analysis found that the figure is even lower—with only 15% of sexual violence matters reported to police resulting in charges laid.⁷ Even fewer matters result in a conviction. According to BOCSAR, only 8% of contemporary child sexual assault incidents reported to New South Wales police end in a conviction.⁸ The number is lower for reported historic sexual assault incidents (7%) and lower again for reported adult sexual assault incidents (6%).⁹

Victim-survivors of sexual violence feel disempowered and retraumatised by the justice system

Victim-survivors who reported sexual violence to police and engaged with the Court process have told us they lacked agency, choice and support, and were made to feel like they were the ones on trial. Clearly, the justice system is not working for victim-survivors of sexual violence.

Victim-survivors in Full Stop Australia's NSAP have told us about the impacts of inadequate systemic responses to sexual violence:

“There needs to be consideration given to the way that sexual violence intersects with other systems... There is so much siloing in the way sexual violence is managed by different systems. It would be fantastic to see all systems improving together and recognising the different roles they all play in the lives of victim survivors (including children).”¹⁰

⁶ Ting, Inga, Scott, Nathaniel and Palmer, Alex. 'Rough Justice: How police are failing survivors of sexual assault.' *ABC*. 28 January 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-28/how-police-are-failing-survivors-of-sexual-assault/11871364>.

⁷ Gilbert, Brigitte. (2024). *Attrition of sexual assaults from the New South Wales criminal justice system*. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_publication/Pub_Summary/BB/BB170-Summary-attribution-sexual-assaults.aspx.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This experience was shared with Full Stop Australia for a recent submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission Inquiry into Justice Responses to Sexual Violence. For the full submission and findings see [here](#).

The need for a specialist response to sexual violence

Full Stop Australia believes a specialist response to sexual violence, which meets the unique needs of sexual violence survivors, is needed. Currently, sexual violence can become subsumed into broader conversations about domestic, family and sexual violence. This occurs in public discourse and government strategies to combat these forms of violence.

Sexual violence is a distinct form of violence that occurs both within and outside of domestic and family violence—with unique impacts and recovery needs. While sexual violence in the context of domestic violence is a critical concern, with evidence demonstrating significant impacts and prevalence, without a focus on sexual violence in other contexts, the needs of victim survivors will not be fully attended to.

We ask that the Royal Commission recognise the need for a distinct specialist response to sexual violence, as a foundation of its work. A specialist response to sexual violence requires:

- Sustainable funding of specialist sexual violence services. As set out below, these are distinct from domestic and family violence services. They are an important pillar of recovery for survivors—both in the immediate aftermath of crisis, and years later.
- A significant investment in recovery and healing services to provide victim survivors with the supports they require immediately and into the future.
- A dedicated strategy for the prevention of sexual violence. This helps ensure the unique impacts, challenges and recovery needs accompanying sexual violence remain in focus.
- A dedicated workforce plan for the sexual violence sector. This helps ensure the demand for specialist sexual violence services can be met by an adequately trained and supported expert workforce.

Sustainable funding for specialist sexual violence services

A specialist response to sexual violence requires sustainable funding of dedicated sexual violence services. These services offer a range of supports to victim-survivors of sexual crimes—including trauma- and sexual violence-informed counselling, advocacy, social work support, medical care and forensic examination. Providing victim-survivors of sexual crimes access to these services is critical to ensure they are supported to recover, heal and thrive.

Some of the ways in which sexual violence services are distinct from, and meet bespoke needs compared to, domestic and family violence services include:

- Sexual violence support services respond to abuse in a wide range of relationships and over the course of a person's lifetime. Sexual violence services support many clients who have experienced sexual violence outside of familial and intimate relationships, whilst domestic and family violence services are geared towards crisis that occurs around separation.
- Sexual violence support services do not only respond to clients in crisis, but also meet long-term counselling and support needs, to help people heal from violence and abuse over time. People impacted by sexual violence can access sexual violence services at any time in their lives. Victim-survivors may dip in and out of services throughout their lives to support their healing journey. Specialist sexual violence counselling and support services work with clients to address the deep impacts of trauma. Trauma-informed counselling delivered by sexual violence services focuses on emotional safety and stabilisation, trauma processing, addressing the impacts of sexual violence, resourcing people with coping mechanisms and developing and enhancing client support networks.

Currently, dedicated services for sexual violence in South Australia are limited and underfunded, with long wait lists for counselling support. This has significant impacts on sexual violence survivors, particularly people based in rural, regional and remote areas. It places the goal of recovery in jeopardy, forcing people who have experienced sexual violence to simply survive, rather than thrive.

Sustainable funding for specialist sexual violence services includes funding services that meet the needs of diverse communities—so priority populations disproportionately at risk of sexual violence have access to culturally safe support that responds to their unique experiences and needs.

A dedicated sexual violence prevention strategy and workforce plan

Finally, to meaningfully address sexual violence—and recognise the reality that sexual and domestic violence service systems remain distinct and siloed—there needs to be a dedicated sexual violence prevention strategy and workforce plan.

The sexual violence strategy and workforce plan should be co-designed with victim-survivors of sexual violence and the specialist sexual violence sector.