



NEW FUTURES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Brisbane Youth Service Inc

Submission to the Women's Safety and Justice
Taskforce on Coercive Control

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Introduction

Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians and Statement of Commitment to Reconciliation

Brisbane Youth Service Incorporated (BYS) wishes to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live, and the many different Nations across Brisbane and Australia. We pay our respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

BYS expresses our commitment as a service to Reconciliation and ensuring our service delivery approach and workforce continue to redress past injustices within our scope of influence.

BYS recognises domestic and family violence as a disproportionate issue affecting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and Australia's history of genocide, dispossession, assimilation, and Stolen Generations.

1. About Brisbane Youth Service Inc

Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) is a medium sized community based not-for-profit organisation and registered Charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission (ACNC). The service specialises in responding to disadvantaged young people who are at risk of or experiencing social disadvantage and exclusion. We are dedicated to ensuring a just society that promotes and celebrates the diverse voices and experiences of young people. BYS is led by an experienced skills-based Board, who guide organisational sustainability and accountability.

Vision, Purpose, Commitment and Values

BYS is committed to fulfilling the organisational vision of **“new futures for young people”**. Established in 1977, BYS operates as a highly respected Youth Specialist Homelessness Service, providing wrap-around, integrated supports to vulnerable young people and young families in Brisbane, Queensland. Our purpose is, **“to enable young people and families to navigate life challenges and thrive in the community.”**

BYS is a registered Tier Three provider under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH) and accredited under the Human Services Quality Framework (HSQF).

Sector Leadership and Partnerships

BYS has a strong emphasis on defining theories of change and collecting data to inform the delivery of quality services and grow the sector knowledge base. This data informs our systems advocacy and sector leadership and drives effective, evidence-based responses to young people who are experiencing domestic and family violence.

BYS partners with crucial housing and support services, as well as corporate partners and philanthropists, identifying service gaps and innovating to meet the growing needs of disadvantaged young people. BYS engages in sector leadership through our active membership in peak bodies, participation in advisory, reference groups, and practice forums.

BYS Service Delivery Response

BYS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce on coercive control as a substantial issue affecting vulnerable young people in the community. BYS recognises the intersectionality of domestic and family violence and the experience of youth homelessness on the young people accessing services.

During 2019-2020 there were a total of 1,433 young people supported through programs, and 39,635 occasions of support, representing a rise of 24% from the previous year.

Of the young people accessing BYS services:

- 71% came from homes where there was family violence
- 25% were currently experiencing family violence
- 15% reported being in a violent intimate partner relationship (likely to be under-reported)
- 44% had previously experienced intimate partner violence

Service Data Snapshot 2019-20

In the 2019-2020 year:

- Geographically, young people came to BYS from 241 different suburbs ranging from the Gold Coast to the Sunshine Coast, with just 9% identifying that they were living in the inner Brisbane city/Fortitude Valley areas.
- 15% of young people were **culturally and linguistically diverse**, with 45 different countries of birth and 68 languages other than English spoken. 10% identified as migrant refugees.
- **31% identified as Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander.**
- 36% identified as **sexuality-diverse** and 6% as **gender-diverse** (identifying as a gender other than male or female).
- 19% of young people had an **identified disability** at the time that they engaged with the service. More young people are also assessed as having a disability eligible for NDIS support during the course of support.
- 49% were unemployed and 15% were enrolled but **disengaged from education** due to life circumstances. 23% had **no source of income** when they were assessed at BYS.

- 54% of young people attending BYs services had a **diagnosed mental illness** at the time that they engaged with support.
- 19% have a **serious physical health condition** identified at the time of assessment, however many young people are not aware of their own health needs when in crisis and experiencing homelessness risks and health concerns during support at BYs. BYs operates a bulk-billed medical clinic including the services of a triage nurse.
- 22% of the young people we support are themselves **young parents**.

Further information about Brisbane Youth Service can be accessed at <https://www.bys.org>

BYS Integrated Continuum of Care Model

BYS's integrated continuum of care model includes:

- intake and intervention services, including comprehensive assessment and brief intervention
- a range of accommodation options such as: 3 x 24/7 congregate living, and 26 units of transitional accommodation
- tenancy sustainment program
- health services, including mental health, alcohol and other drugs support, and primary health medical clinic
- specialist young women and young families programs
- holistic crisis and case management for young people and their families
- transition support of young people to employment, education and training pathways
- specialist domestic and family violence support services, through an embedded Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) worker position provided by Brisbane Domestic Violence Service (BDVS)
- brokerage and emergency relief for the purchase of essential goods and services

DFV Service Responses

BYS is committed to responding to the issue of domestic and family violence across all aspects of service delivery, informed by person-centred practices that assist young people to make choices, whilst balancing rights, risks and responsibilities.

The service has a current Memorandum of Understanding with Brisbane Domestic Violence Service (BDVS), supporting an embedded DFV worker to provide specialist practice guidance across BYs, with streamlined referral processes to the DFV High-Risk Team. The partnership with BDVS increases BYs's capacity to engage in evidence-based and trauma-informed case management that provides an integrated response, safety planning and risk assessment.

Developed as a pilot in 2019, the **Safe Relationships Program** operates through BYs's Young Women and Young Families service. The Program promotes healthy relationships and gender equality through individual work with young men and group programs with young women.

BYS provides an intervention for young men who identify as using violence within their intimate partner relationships and engaging in adolescent to parent violence. Developed in South Australia,

the KIND program uses a trauma-informed, skill development model that focuses on emotional literacy and regulation with perpetrators.

All program investments support the psycho-education of young people regarding coercive control and offer an early intervention response that is developmentally appropriate.

2. Coercive Control and Young People

The statistics around DFV in Australia continue to be alarming, with young women experiencing significantly higher rates of physical and sexual violence (12%) than women in older age groups (4.7%) (ABS, 2016).

DFV is a major cause of homelessness and housing instability and has significant long-term impacts on the health and well-being of victims and survivors. As well as the housing system, domestic and family violence weighs heavily on justice, mental health, child protection, and welfare systems.

Studies indicate that children who witness DFV in their homes, experience mental health issues similar in intensity and magnitude to children who are themselves abused. Children who grow up in violent households may exhibit a host of adverse behaviours and emotions, including developmental delays, violence, suicide ideation, addiction issues, eating issues, self-harm, anxiety and depression.

This submission focuses on young people's experience of domestic violence, coercive control, and the response of systems to young people. The focus for the submission is the non-legislative responses which should occur before or alongside the implementation of a coercive control offence.

BYS's submission is primarily in response to question 9 of the Discussion Paper.

“What could be done to improve the capacity and capability of the service system to respond to coercive control (this includes services to victims and perpetrators)?” (Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce Discussion Paper 2021 – Discussion Questions, p. 3)

This submission draws on a human rights approach to the issue of coercive control, acknowledging that systemic and cultural shifts are required to ensure young people can live in safety and free from violence in their communities.

Drawing on BYs's extensive practice experience of working with vulnerable young people, a common theme is clients' lack of understanding of what constitutes DFV; the tactics and patterns used in coercive control; and what it means to be in a safe and healthy relationship.

This is further compounded by the wide-ranging normalisation of violence in all aspects of young people's lives; from relational violence including child abuse and neglect, and violence within the context of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health and violence within low socio-economic communities.

Many young people experience violence in their daily lives as a normal part of life and have developed maladaptive responses to this violence to survive often harsh realities and experiences. When it comes to identifying coercive control within relationships this can be challenging for young people who may not have had an experience of respectful safe relationships.

Even when young women do understand coercive control and identify their intimate

relationships as unhealthy and controlling, the lack of community and family supports and alternative safe places to live mean that young women will often choose to remain in unsafe relationships. The alternative is experiencing other forms of homelessness, such as couch surfing or rough sleeping, which also place them at high risk. Additionally, young women with limited resources are often left vulnerable to other predatory relationships that can exacerbate existing trauma.

Young women and young mothers are at very high risk of homelessness if they choose to leave violent relationships. There is a critical shortage of emergency and transitional public housing. Refuge or emergency motel accommodation are often not a solution for young people, either because they are deemed ineligible due to the risk of them disclosing the location which is associated with their young age, drug and alcohol use, or mental health presentations. The other challenge is that going into refuge requires a willingness from young people to be placed in geographically remote areas away from any supports and given their young age this is understandably daunting. For the few young women who do enter refuge, they often have nothing in common with their much older co-residents and exit refuge early or return to unsafe relationships.

Young women invariably experience poor system responses to domestic violence. They are often erroneously named as respondents by police and issued with cross orders. The police are often manipulated by the perpetrators practicing image management, wherein young women are labelled and treated as mentally unstable, drug affected, or violent themselves. This leads to a distrust of the police and their capacity to protect them from abuse as well as a hesitancy to call upon the police for support in domestic violence incidents. Often domestic violence incidences are responded to inappropriately and ambulances are called rather than the police.

There is also the additional layer of trauma and discrimination when the young person identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, as described in the below case study. Young Indigenous Australians experience domestic violence at significantly higher rates than the non-Indigenous population (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse 2016). To provide a culturally inclusive and trauma-informed response, BYS recommends further consultation with Indigenous communities to ensure that any solution encompasses the full understanding of cultural abuse.

The following case study highlights the experience of young women in domestic violent relationships who have gained confidence in their ability to safety plan through support from BYS and other key stakeholders. This case study also highlights the negative experiences young people have when reporting incidences to the police.

Female, adult under the age of 25, Brisbane

This young person has engaged with Brisbane Youth Service, due to significant domestic violence in her intimate partner relationship resulting in homelessness. This young person identifies as Aboriginal and had extensive involvement with a range of services such as the Department of Child Safety, Office of the Public Guardian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations and QLD Health.

This young person's experience of domestic violence included significant coercive control over numerous years. This young person was unaware of coercive control, what coercive control meant or how it impacted her and her relationship. The coercion caused this young person to feel anger, distress and at a loss of how to respond. Her connection and relationship with her children was disrupted, further entrenching her sense of failure/shame and causing her to become more vulnerable to her partner's control.

This young person would avoid contacting QPS during her partner's escalation due to previous negative responses with QPS falsely identifying her as the respondent. This young person reported "feeling immediately unsafe" at the thought of calling QPS and would rather seek support elsewhere. At times when the police did present, the young person's partner lied to them about what had happened, and the police did not check with the young person's supports to establish the truth of what she had told them.

However, through engagement with services such as BYS and education about coercive control that was discussed during support, this young person was able to identify the pattern of coercion that her partner was perpetrating and develop her own strengths in keeping herself safe.

3. Recommendations

- (1) Community and organisational education should become part of a comprehensive approach on minimising coercive control. The rise of primary prevention strategies delivered in schools is hopeful and necessary, although a vital cohort is still overlooked. Specific responses for marginalised young people are urgently needed as without early intervention and support, the violence they experience and/or perpetrate will continue and intensify into adulthood.

This education should aim to improve the insight and ability of the community to recognise and respond appropriately to coercive control and potentially combat harmful stereotypes and stigma. It is important however that education goes beyond schools, as most disadvantaged young people are not engaged in mainstream education.

- (2) In responding to coercive control BYS would like to recommend further funding for services that work specifically with marginalised and traumatised young people:
 - Both for responding to and educating young victims/survivors, namely the provision of psycho-educational individual and groupwork.

- The provision of youth specific refuges and other youth-appropriate emergency accommodation in major city locations.
- Further funding for specialist domestic violence services (embedded roles) within youth services.
- Funding for specialist perpetrator interventions which are tailored for young men as opposed to adult men's behaviour change models.
- Review of current models of support to ensure that the needs of young people engaging with the domestic and family violence support system are adequately met.

(3) To ensure young victims/survivors can access appropriate legal responses, it is imperative that police receive enhanced and ongoing training on the presentation and impacts of coercive control, and how to best respond to young people who have experienced domestic and family violence.

(4) The continued long-term commitment of government to focus on stopping cycles of violence, will significantly lower costs to the overall system. Investing in targeted early intervention programs such as the Safe Relationships Program, will contribute significant savings in the coming years in areas such as justice, child protection, mental health, housing, welfare and DFV tertiary response services. BYS is currently working with university research partners to capture outcomes data through robust evaluation frameworks. BYS is committed to sharing the learning and resources with key decision makers, to inform appropriately funded system responses that enable scalable youth-focussed solutions to end domestic and family violence.