



## Attachment A - Victoria Police response to Questions on Notice

### Data collection and definitions

**Question 1: What data/information does Victoria Police currently collect on cult activity within Victoria?**

- a) What criteria, indicators, categories, classifications or other entries are used to record or flag this data? Is it a discrete category or would other categories be used for cult-related offences (e.g., family violence, organised crime)?**
- b) If relevant data is available, please provide any identified trends in cult-related offending in Victoria over the past five years.**
- c) If relevant data is available, please provide any regional, geographic or police district data on cult-related offending in Victoria over the past five years.**

Victoria Police does not currently collect data or information on cult activity within Victoria as cult activity is not categorised in Victoria Police's data systems as an identifiable incident. Participating in a cult is not a criminal offence therefore, police do not intervene or investigate unless there is evidence or allegations of criminal conduct occurring. While some data codes exist in Victoria Police's Law Enforcement Assistance Program that could indicate relevant behaviours (i.e., Issue Motivated Offending, which refers to where an offence is driven by a person's ideological, political or social beliefs), it is not possible to determine which of these have or have not been used in relation to cults and organised fringe group related offending.

*a) What criteria, indicators, categories, classifications or other entries are used to record or flag this data? Is it a discrete category or would other categories be used for cult-related offences (e.g., family violence, organised crime)?*

Victoria Police does not have a discrete category or modus operandi to record cult-related offences. Police can become aware of cult or cult-like behaviour through core duties such as responding to mental health incidents, family violence, vehicle related offences or other crimes, in addition to other sources of information and intelligence, such as from the public. This type of information can be available in a variety of data storage locations but is not centrally collated and identifiable.

*b) If relevant data is available, please provide any identified trends in cult-related offending in Victoria over the past five years.*

Victoria Police does not categorise relevant data in relation to cult-related offending.

*c) If relevant data is available, please provide any regional, geographic or police district data on cult-related offending in Victoria over the past five years.*

Victoria Police does not assess data specific to regional or geographic cult-related offending.



**Question 2: How does Victoria Police define or classify a cult or organised fringe group for operational or investigative purposes?**

Victoria Police has no organisational definition or classification for a cult or organised fringe group.

**Question 3: What barriers prevent Victoria Police from collecting or maintaining data on cult activity and cult-related offending?**

- a) Do legislative or definitional constraints affect the investigation of cult-related conduct?
- b) Are existing legal definitions—such as coercive control, psychological abuse, or false imprisonment—sufficient to address the tactics used by harmful cults?
- c) Does the absence of a nationally consistent legal definition of "cult" limit operational or intelligence efforts?

Offending is investigated on an individual basis as it relates to specific crimes, not due to the nature of it being cult or cult-related activity. Given Victoria Police data collection is limited to criminal activity, even when it may occur in a cult-scenario, instances are difficult to identify as they are categorised against the criminal offence or incident narrative.

*a) Do legislative or definitional constraints affect the investigation of cult-related conduct?*

Cults and organised fringe groups are not defined within Victorian or Commonwealth legislation, nor does Victoria Police have an organisational definition.

*b) Are existing legal definitions—such as coercive control, psychological abuse, or false imprisonment—sufficient to address the tactics used by harmful cults?*

There are a range of definitions available to police to assist in understanding the surrounding behaviours which might be present in cult related activity. For example, **coercive control** is recognised within the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) (FVPA), where family violence is framed as 'patterns of abuse over a period of time', inclusive of behaviours that coerce, control and dominate family members.

The Victorian Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework Knowledge Guide identifies that coercive control can include any combination of family violence behaviours (risk factors) used by a perpetrator to create a pattern or 'system of behaviours' intended to harm, punish, frighten, dominate, isolate, degrade, monitor or stalk, regulate and subordinate the victim survivor. This can undermine a victim's autonomy, capacity for resistance and sense of identity and self-worth.

Police are trained to identify coercive and controlling behaviours in the context of family violence, which may extend to other contexts of coercive or controlling behaviour such as being associated with a cult.



The FVPA states ***emotional or psychological abuse*** means behaviour by a person towards another person that torments, intimidates, harasses or is offensive to the other person. This definition would generally not apply to a cult or fringe group conduct, unless there is a family relationship.

Many of the behaviours outlined in section 21A of the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) for ***stalking*** could be applied to tactics that may be employed by cults however, this offence outlines a course of conduct by an individual 'offender', therefore this may be difficult to apply if perpetrated by a group.

These definitions are specific to family violence dynamics and are generally perpetrated by individuals in an intimate partner or family setting. While the tactics may be the same, the motivation of an organised group for a particular purpose can be different to family violence perpetrators.

*c) Does the absence of a nationally consistent legal definition of "cult" limit operational or intelligence efforts?*

A nationally consistent legal definition may support tactical intelligence assessments and provide an opportunity to support proactive targeting, early intervention and disruption activity as well as accurate data collection and intelligence sharing across jurisdictions.

**Question 4: How would the development of dedicated data collection practices for cult-related activity be operationally beneficial for Victoria Police?**

The intention of developing dedicated data collection practices for cult-related activity would need to be clear to determine potential operational benefits to Victoria Police, particularly in the absence of a criminal offence related to cults.

There may be benefits to victims where offences have occurred in cult-related environments, should the collection of data inform the provision of specific support services by other agencies. For example, dedicated data collection may provide opportunity to support proactive targeting of patterns or behaviours and early intervention methods before the behaviour escalates.

Intelligence collection would require consideration of what methods could be deployed to ensure compatibility with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic), particularly in differentiating between what may be criminal activity as opposed to conduct which may be perceived as atypical.

**Investigations, prosecutions and identification**

**Question 5: Has the Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams (SOCIT) investigated cases where individuals—particularly minors—have experienced harm within cult-like or coercive group environments?**

- a) What indicators or criteria are used to identify a case as involving a cult or high-control group in the context of SOCIT investigations?



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

*a) What indicators or criteria are used to identify a case as involving a cult or high-control group in the context of SOCIT investigations?*

SOCITs are responsible for investigating allegations of sexual offending and/or child abuse including at times conducting joint investigations with DFFH in relation to child abuse. Child abuse could be present in cults or high harm groups which would be investigated by SOCITs.

While this may be a factor of cases investigated by SOCITs, there are no indicators or criteria used to identify cases as involving a cult/high-control group. Investigators are reliant on victim or witness reports to provide detail on the activity occurring which can enable further avenues of investigation to potential offences.

**Question 6: How does Victoria Police collaborate with other agencies, such as health, education, or child protection services, when responding to cult-related harm?**

- a) What formal protocols or memoranda of understanding (MOUs) are in place to support multi-agency information sharing on cult-related matters?**

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<sup>1</sup> [Dr Pradeep Dissanayake: Melbourne skin specialist jailed for abusing children in cult | news.com.au](https://www.news.com.au/australia/melbourne/skin-specialist-jailed-for-abusing-children-in-cult/news-story/2018-07-19) — Australia's leading news site for latest headlines



Victoria Police collaborates with other relevant agencies to ensure the appropriate action is taken when investigating any crime. The protocols and schemes outlined below are not designed for responding to cult-related harms but could be used where there are concerned for the safety of children or experiencing family violence in a cult related setting.

### **Protecting Children Protocols**

The 2023 *Protecting children: Protocol between the Secretary of DFFH, Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care providers and Victoria Police (Protecting Children Protocol)* provides guidance on how to enable effective and collaborative responses to children who have suffered, or are likely to suffer, significant harm from sexual, emotional or psychological abuse or neglect.

### **Child Safe Standards and Reportable Conduct Scheme**

The Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) is responsible for administering the Reportable Conduct Scheme and Child Safe Standards (CSS) under the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic).

Victoria Police provide a role in responding to potential criminal allegations of reportable conduct and breaches of CSS by conducting criminal investigations where required and sharing information with the CCYP.

### **Information Sharing Schemes**

The Child Information Sharing and Family Violence Information Sharing Schemes allow information to be shared between prescribed information sharing entities to identify, assess and manage a range of wellbeing and safety needs and risks for children, families and individuals.

Victoria Police is prescribed as an information sharing entity under both schemes.

#### **Question 7: What specific protocols or specialised training provided to SOCIT officers for responding to suspected cult-related abuse?**

Victoria Police does not deliver any specialised training to SOCIT personnel for responding to suspected cult related abuse. Training is provided in response to child abuse and other harm related offences.

#### **Question 8: In relation to offences occurring within cult environments, please provide (and indicate how many are through SOCIT):**

- a) The number of investigations and prosecutions undertaken by Victoria Police in the past five years.
- b) The types of offences prosecuted (e.g., coercion, abuse, financial exploitation, unlawful detention).
- c) The outcomes of these prosecutions (e.g., convictions, acquittals, ongoing proceedings).



**d) Where prosecution has not been pursued or was discontinued, what were the reasons or challenges which informed this decision?**

Victoria Police recommends the Crimes Statistics Agency and Court Services Victoria will be better placed to comment on this question however, reiterates it does not categorise cult-like modus operandi and any identified cases are reliant upon members knowledge or recollection.

**Question 9: What are the key challenges Victoria Police faces in identifying and responding to harmful behaviours associated with cults or coercive groups?**

Cult leaders' psychological manipulation, abuse, and coercion of their followers is often difficult to identify and respond to due to the difficulty in distinguishing genuine religious freedom from coercive and abusive practices.

Victims are often reluctant or unwilling to disclose harm due to shame, fear of reprisals against them or their families, the ongoing psychological and physical strain of potential investigations and court proceedings, unwanted media attention, and lack of available support and referral services.

Further, cults and coercive groups often have hierarchies which are difficult for police to penetrate and pinpoint who exactly in the group are responsible for, let alone performing, harmful behaviours.

Additional challenges include ambiguity with no clear legal definition of a cult, the legal and human rights constraints, secrecy and restricting engagement with people outside of the cult community and use of psychological manipulation; for example, the gradual indoctrination. There is often no clear lead agency as many cult issues fall between the responsibility of police, health, child protection and other community services, which makes it difficult to identify and respond to the harmful behaviours.

In the example provided at question 5 – cultural and language barriers were identified as challenges which required careful consideration to ensure members of the community were able to provide information to police to progress the investigation.

**Question 10: How does Victoria Police balance its response to cult-related harm with Victoria's legislative protections for freedom of religion or belief, particularly in relation to investigating suspected criminal offences?**

Any criminal investigation response is balanced in ensuring it is proportionate, lawful, accountable and necessary to the level of risk it is seeking to mitigate. Suspected criminal offences are investigated regardless of the environment they occur. There may be cultural, religious or other considerations that are factored into the investigative process and engagement with particular communities or groups, and Victoria Police has specialist capability to inform the response to suspected criminal offences.



**Question 11: How are Victoria Police frontline officers trained to recognise the signs of cultic control or high-control group dynamics?**

There is no content in Foundation Training that specifically covers or discusses recognition of cultic control or high-control group dynamics.

The *Behavioural Observation and Suspicious Activity Recognition (BOSAR) for police members below Sergeant rank and PSOs* training program on the Victoria Police Learning Hub assists police in identifying and responding to high-control behaviours.

The training enables members to:

- Understand Observational screening
- Understand universal principles of criminal behaviour
- Identify five zones of observational control
- Identify the indicators of possible terrorist/criminal activities.

**Supporting people to leave cultic environments**

**Question 12: What support mechanisms are available through Victoria Police for individuals seeking to leave cults or coercive groups?**

- a) How are existing mechanisms, such as those used in family violence contexts, leveraged to support safe exits?
- b) Which organisations provide these support mechanisms?

There are no specific support mechanisms available through Victoria Police to support individuals seeking to leave cults or coercive groups.

The Victoria Police e-Referral (VPeR) system is a consent based, non-crisis and non-family violence referral service which can be used to provide people in need of assistance referral to appropriate support services. The VPeR system has 25 support service referral pathways including but not limited to:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Support
- aged support
- carer support
- child abuse material support
- court support
- disability support
- drug and alcohol dependency/misuse support
- family/child support
- gambling support
- homelessness
- legal advice
- LGBTQIA+ legal advice and homelessness



- mental health
- non-suspicious death
- parenting support
- road trauma
- sex industry worker supports
- support after suicide
- victim support
- youth support.

*a) How are existing mechanisms, such as those used in family violence contexts, leveraged to support safe exits?*

To manage safety after a family violence incident police will (where appropriate):

- consider criminal charges
- apply for an intervention order with specific conditions
- remand/set bail conditions for the perpetrator
- make referrals to the Orange Door for family violence support
- make referrals for crisis accommodation/housing
- make referrals to Child Protection.

These mechanisms are used when police respond to family violence in a cult or coercive group setting however, not more broadly for leaving cult or coercive groups. In addition, police are trained to take immediate action for any member of the public displaying signs of physical or mental harm.

Victoria Police responded to 106,427 reports of family violence in 2024-25 Financial Year. Family violence reports continue to increase each year putting increased pressure on police, courts and the family violence response system. It would not be appropriate to use these mechanisms for individuals seeking to leave cults or coercive groups outside of family violence setting as they are not designed for this unique set of circumstances, and it would further stretch existing resources possibly affecting service delivery to family violence victims.

*b) Which organisations provide these support mechanisms?*

Organisations available through VPeR include but are not limited to:

- Amber Community, Road Incident Support & Education
- Carer Gateway
- Dardi Munwurro
- Elder Rights Australia
- Forensic Disability Statewide Access Service
- Gambler's Help
- Griefline
- Jesuit Social Services
- Monash Health
- National Disability Insurance Scheme
- PartnerSPEAK
- Pride in Place





- Q+Law
- Resourcing health and Education, via the Better Health Network
- The Orange Door
- The Victims of Crime Helpline
- Thirrili
- Turning Point
- Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
- Victorian Legal Aid
- Youth Support Services.

**Question 13: How does Victoria Police engage with community organisations, religious leaders, or mental health services in identifying and responding to harmful cult-related activity?**

Victoria Police has not engaged with community organisations, religious leaders or mental health services specifically in relation to identifying and responding to harmful cult-related activity. Victoria Police maintains ongoing relationships and engagement with organisations to support police service delivery to the Victorian community and to strengthen Victoria Police awareness of current and future issues impacting communities across the State.

**Question 14: What referral pathways are available to support individuals exiting cults or high-control groups?**

**a) How are Victoria Police frontline officers adequately trained to identify, utilise, and explain these referral pathways?**

The VPeR system may support individuals exiting cults or high-control groups, though there is not a specific referral relating to cults or high-control groups.

*a) How are Victoria Police frontline officers adequately trained to identify, utilise, and explain these referral pathways?*

Police recruits undergo VPeR training in week two of Foundation Training. During the session, recruits learn about their obligations under the *Victims' Charter Act 2006* (Vic), who is considered a 'person in need of assistance', what VPeR is and how it should be used.

**Question 15: What gaps has Victoria Police identified in support services for individuals seeking to leave cults or high-control groups?**

**a) What should the Victorian Government prioritise to address these gaps?**

Victoria Police works with identified government and non-government organisations who are endorsed and funded to provide specialised services specific to identified needs of Victorian community members. Victoria Police is not aware of specific support services for individuals seeking to leave cults of high-control groups.