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Submission to the Inquiry into anti-LGBTQIA+ hate crimes in Victoria

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding recent anti- LGBTQIA+ hate crimes.

My current role is as a lecturer within Criminology and Justice Studies at RMIT University, having previously worked for many years as an independent policy consultant and criminal defence lawyer. My research specialisation encompasses best-practice criminal investigations, with particular interest in the intersection of law enforcement with ‘vice’ including illicit drug use, sex work and pornography.

As a consultant I have previously provided guidance to LGBTQIA+ community organisations including community health centres and gay male oriented sex-on-premises venues.

The focus of my submission will be on the recent string of cases involving gay and bisexual men being attacked or threatened after meeting via dating apps. To assist the inquiry I have conducted a search of superior court judgments and media searches to identify reported criminal cases from 2016 to 2026 across Australian jurisdictions involving the targeting of gay and bisexual men involving dating app. This search (which is far from extensive) identified 15 unique incidents, including 4 reported cases,¹ and 11 unique media articles,² which met the search criteria.

¹ *DPP v Keryakus* [2025] VCC 671 (County Court of Victoria); *Idrizi v R* [2025] VSCA 286 (Court of Appeal of Victoria); *R v Tanswell*; *R v Leilua* [2025] NSWDC 178 (District Court of New South Wales); *R v XX*; *R v ZZ* [2023] NSWDC 585 (District Court of New South Wales).

² ABC News. (2017). *Canberra youths involved in dating-app blackmail scam targeting gay men*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation; ABC News. (2018, July). *Perth gay man assaulted after being targeted through Grindr*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation; ABC News. (2020, September). *“Bizarre” Grindr-related robbery and home invasion in Lismore/Kingscliff leads to sentencing*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation; *The West Australian*. (2021, November). *Tyler Dean Borinelli sentenced to approximately 6.5 years imprisonment*

The identified cases fall into four overlapping but distinct categories:

1. Acquisitive robbery
2. Youth bait-and-bash assaults
3. Vigilante / “pedo-hunter” moralised attacks; and
4. Extortion and blackmail

Given both the underreporting of hate crime incidents and limitations in the recording of LGBTQIA+ hate crimes, it is difficult to identify whether homophobic incidents have increased in recent years.

Although there has been some reporting based on Crime Statistics Agency data that recorded homophobic incidents have risen since 2013,³ supposed ‘spikes’ are likely to be influenced by reporting behaviour and police recording practices, rather than an actual increase in incidents rates. Over the past decade Victoria Police and the Crime Statistics Agency have improved how prejudice motivations are recorded and LGBTQ+ communities have become more willing to report incidents. Given limitations in the current data, I would caution against drawing an inference of a ‘rise’ in LGBTQIA+ hate crimes based on a number of high-profile incidents.

Nevertheless, the subtypes of criminal cases reported in the last 10 years reveal some interesting insights into the motivations of offenders utilising dating apps to target gay and bisexual men.

Cases of Acquisitive Robbery

There is a clear subtype of cases where the primary motivation is financial gain.

Across jurisdictions, the pattern of offending is remarkably consistent. Offenders typically create fake profiles on Grindr or similar dating applications and engage victims in sexualised or flirtatious conversations in order to establish credibility and trust. After this initial interaction, a private meeting is arranged, most commonly at the victim’s home. Once inside the residence, the offenders escalate the situation by threatening violence and, in some

for luring, assaulting and robbing men using dating applications. The West Australian; ABC News. (2024, August). *Fourteen-year-old charged after allegedly using fake LGBTQ dating profile to rob and defraud victims in Acacia Ridge.* Australian Broadcasting Corporation; ABC News. (2024, October). *Victoria Police arrest multiple people over attacks on gay and bisexual men allegedly facilitated through dating apps including Grindr.* Australian Broadcasting Corporation; ABC News. (2025). *Blake Dean Nightingall and co-accused charged after alleged “vigilante” Grindr lure, assault and robbery incidents in Cairns.* Australian Broadcasting Corporation; ABC News. (2025). *Terrigal home invasion: alleged “pedo hunters” used Grindr to lure victim before assault and robbery.* Australian Broadcasting Corporation; ABC News. (2025, June). *Five teenagers sentenced in Perth Children’s Court over Grindr lure “bash-and-rob” attacks.* Australian Broadcasting Corporation; ABC News. (2025, September). *Two teenagers sentenced to detention over Grindr attacks in Perth.* Australian Broadcasting Corporation; ABC Investigations. (2026, February). *Sydney “IS-inspired” bait-and-bash attacks targeting gay and bisexual teens and men through dating applications.* Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

³ Thomas, S. (2021, March 29). *Victoria records spike in gay-hate crimes in 2020.* Star Observer. <https://www.starobserver.com.au/news/victoria-records-spike-in-gay-hate-crimes-in-2020/201820>

instances, producing a weapon. Victims are then coerced into surrendering their phones and revealing PINs or banking credentials, allowing offenders to transfer funds electronically. Physical property is also frequently stolen before the offenders leave.

It is not clear in the acquisitive robbery cases whether hatred on the basis of sexual orientation played a role in offending. For example, in *R v Tanswell; R v Leilua*,⁴ robbery was primarily motivated by a need to support a drug habit and gay dating apps were selected because the meetings were private and the targets were isolated.

Cases of Youth Bait-and-Bash Assaults

Another subtype of cases involves adolescents or young adults who use dating apps to lure gay men to public or semi-public locations and then assault them. Unlike acquisitive robberies, violence itself, and sometimes humiliation, appears to be the central motivation.

Details regarding these cases are limited given the majority are finalised through Children's Court judgements. Nevertheless, a common pattern of behaviour is noted across media reporting.

Across cases, offenders create a fake profile on a dating application and arranging a meeting with the victim at a public but relatively isolated location, such as a park, underpass, or similar secluded space. The victim usually arrives alone expecting a consensual encounter. Instead, a group confrontation occurs and the victim is assaulted.

The violence is often accompanied by homophobic slurs and may be filmed for later circulation on social media platforms. In some instances property is stolen during the incident, but robbery appears incidental rather than the primary objective, with violence itself forming the central feature of the attack.

Victims are generally adult men seeking consensual sexual encounters through dating applications, although in at least one reported investigation a minor was among those targeted. In some matters investigators have noted the potential influence of Islamic extremist ideology as a motivation for offending.

Cases of Vigilante / "Pedo Hunter" Attacks

Although demographically similar to the previous sub-type, there is a notable sub-type of cases where youth offenders appear motivated by a moralistic crusade against sexual predation. The offenders appear to target gay and bisexual men on the basis of a longstanding homophobic trope that gay men are more likely to be sexually predatory towards teenagers.

⁴ [2025] NSWDC 178.

In *DPP v Keryakus*,⁵ an 18 year old offender planned a series of vigilante-style attacks after making a false profile on the dating application Grindr and purporting to be 15 years old. The offender engaged in sexualised conversations with adult men on Grindr which moved then to Snapchat before arranging meetings. When the victims attended the arranged locations, the offender and associates confronted the men and assaulted them, including an incident in which a victim was struck with a cricket bat. In one incident he demanded the victim give him \$20,000.

Many of the offenders are motivated in their behaviour through engagement with “pedo hunter” content on social media. “Pedo-hunter” content refers to a genre of online vigilante media in which influencers pose as underage individuals on dating or messaging platforms, lure adults into conversations or meetings, and then film confrontations accusing them of being sexual predators. The videos are typically posted on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, or livestreaming services and emphasise public shaming and dramatic confrontation.

One prominent figure associated with this genre is Vitaly Zdorovetskiy, a Russian-born American online influencer who initially gained fame through prank videos. He has built a large audience across social media, including roughly 10.2 million YouTube subscribers and more than 1.5 billion views, as well as hundreds of thousands of followers on TikTok. In recent years he has produced vigilante-style “predator catching” videos in which suspected offenders are lured to meetings and confronted on camera, content that has generated significant viewership.

Cases of Extortion and Blackmail

A final subtype of cases involves a focus on the use of extortion and blackmail with threats to expose a victim’s sexual orientation.

In these cases offenders establish contact with victims through dating applications and engage in sexual or flirtatious conversations before threatening to disclose the communications to family members, employers, or the public unless money is paid.

The victim profile in these cases typically involves adult men who are concerned about privacy, reputational harm, or family exposure. Some victims may be closeted, married, or professionally vulnerable, making the threat of disclosure particularly coercive. Unlike the robbery series described above, physical violence may not occur; instead the offending relies on psychological pressure and the exploitation of stigma.

Strategies to Combat Dating App Related Attacks

The cases identified suggest that offending involving dating applications is not driven by a single motivation and therefore cannot be addressed through a single intervention.

⁵ [2025] VCC 671.

Some incidents are opportunistic acquisitive crimes, others involve group-based violence motivated by homophobic hostility or humiliation, while a smaller subset involve ideological vigilantism or extortion exploiting stigma. Nevertheless, the cases do highlight several structural vulnerabilities associated with dating application environments.

Dating application platforms themselves have an important role to play in reducing opportunities for offending. Measures such as improved account verification processes, monitoring for patterns of repeat account creation linked to prior complaints and safety prompts before users share precise addresses or move conversations off-platform may reduce risk. Platforms could also expand in-app safety guidance encouraging first meetings in public locations and reminding users not to disclose financial information or banking credentials.

Policing agencies across Australia would also benefit from improved recording and classification of crimes involving dating applications and sexual minority victims. Currently, the absence of consistent national data makes it difficult to determine the prevalence of such offences or whether incidents are increasing over time. Improved data collection relating to the role of digital platforms in facilitating crimes and the presence of anti-LGBTQIA+ motivations would assist policymakers in identifying trends and designing targeted responses. The greater use of LGBTQIA+ Liaison Officers by Victoria could further enhance reporting of hate-motivated offending, providing a more accurate picture of levels of violent homophobia in the community.

Finally, to counter the appeal of “pedo-hunter” style online content, education initiatives should address digital vigilantism and the legal consequences of vigilante behaviour.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. I would be pleased to provide further information or clarification if required.

Yours sincerely,

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