

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Anti-LGBTIQA+ Hate Crimes in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 24 June 2026

MEMBERS

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

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Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Merrin Wake;

Daniel Powell;

David Brown; and

Matthew Roberts.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into anti-LGBTIQA+ violence. I am Joe McCracken, Chair of the inquiry, and we will go through and introduce the members of the committee. I will go to my left and then to my right. And we might have some that are online as well.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Hello. I am Ann-Marie Hermans, representing South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metropolitan.

Michael GALEA: Hi. I am Michael Galea, Deputy Chair of the committee, South-Eastern Metropolitan. Just noting that I work with Daniel in a professional capacity as well.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Ryan Batchelor, Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: And then we have got Ms Watt, who is online.

Sheena WATT: Hi. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: We might also have Ms Gray-Barberio, Anasina, who will be online momentarily. There she is.

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All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript after the hearings, but that will ultimately be made public, because it will be put on the committee's website.

I will just go from my right to my left. Can you just say for the Hansard record your name? You are all appearing in an individual capacity anyway, so I will just get you to say your name, if that is all right. Thank you.

Merrin WAKE: Merrin Wake.

David BROWN: David Brown.

Matthew ROBERTS: Matthew Roberts.

Daniel POWELL: Daniel Powell.

The CHAIR: Thank you, everyone, for appearing – really appreciate it. I am going to put 5 minutes on the clock. Do not worry if it goes higher or lower. It is all good. I will start with Merrin, and I will just go all the way down the line like that. Thanks again. Welcome, and the floor is yours, Merrin.

Merrin WAKE: Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today. I am Merrin Wake. I first want to acknowledge all the unceded lands across Victoria and in particular the Wathaurong people whose land I live,

work, parent and play on. I pay my respects to all First Nations people and any here today. As a white settler on these lands, I commit to doing better.

I am here as a parent and as someone who works with LGBTIQ young people and their families across rural and regional Victoria, and I am here with my son's permission, whose experience is at the centre of what I am about to share. 'You should hold your kid's head under the water until the bubbles stop. Your child should be taken away from you and put in foster care. You are a worthless waste of life and someone should punch you in the face.' These are just some of the messages I get daily online. And then in February this year, my child received a death threat. I say that plainly because anything less softens the truth. It is not abstract or political; it is my child. What has become impossible to ignore is that this threat did not come from nowhere. There is a moment, as a parent, when something tears open inside you. It is physical, immediate, unmistakeable, the moment you realise your child is not safe.

When I heard the threat, instinct took over before thought could. Where is he? Is he alone? How serious is this? It is a moment I cannot shake. Since then my child has been doing the quiet, brave thing young people often do to not make it harder for me trying to hold it together. But every time I look at him, I think he should not know this feeling. He should not know what it is to be threatened for being who he is or calculating risk before he leaves the house. He should not be learning how to carry this fear so young. There is now a gap between the life he deserves and the one the world is giving him, and that gap did not appear overnight.

Harm does not start with a death threat. We need to be honest about something difficult. You do not get a death threat in isolation. You get there in layers, through jokes that go unchallenged, commentary that strips people of their humanity, public conversations that frame trans lives as controversial instead of real – through the steady narratives that position young people like my son as something to debate, question or fear. These things do not stay contained. They do not sit politely in opinion columns or online. They seep and settle, and eventually they land in moments like we experienced, where someone feels entitled to threaten a child's life, and then the rest of us are left holding the consequences and what the fear looks like.

After something like this, life changes in many ways. It is very hard to explain. I watch my child more closely. We hesitate where we used not to. Ordinary things like leaving the house and being visible are no longer ordinary and you begin to hold two realities at once: profound pride and constant fear. I am so proud of my son, proud of his honesty and his clarity, proud of the strength it takes to keep showing up in a world that makes that difficult. But pride does not cancel out fear. It sits right beside it. Every time he is seen or his name is spoken, every time his existence becomes something other and others feel entitled to dissect or debate, then the fear is there. And after a death threat, that fear gets louder, because you understand in your very bones that the world he is moving through is not neutral.

This is not a harmless debate. There are people who will read this and hear this and think it is about differing views, but it is not. It is about impact. When we create a public narrative that questions whether trans people are real, whether they belong, whether they should exist, we are not engaging in harmless conversations. We are creating conditions, conditions where people are dehumanised, conditions where harm feels justified and conditions where threats like the one my child received become thinkable and then actionable. For families like mine, what is often framed as a debate becomes something real. It brings fear and risk and is very real to us.

When a young person is threatened, the response should be immediate – not cautious, not delayed, not diluted by discomfort. But we cannot stop there. We have to confront the systems and narratives that made that threat possible in the first place. We cannot keep treating acts of harm as separate from the culture that produces them, because they are not separate, they are connected. I am speaking today as just one mother, but this is not an isolated experience. I know we are not the only family living with this fear. There are other parents and carers right now sitting beside their children, trying to hold the same impossible mix of love and terror, and there are young people learning in real time what the world thinks they are worth. We need to decide collectively if this is acceptable.

This is on all of us. My son is still here, still fabulous, still himself and still trying to live honestly in a world that makes that harder than it should be, although his world has become smaller, and what many people might describe as 'this narrative' has put him back in the closet. I refuse to accept that fear and threat are the cost of his honesty. I refuse to normalise violence against children, whether that violence arises as words, narratives or threats, and refuse to stay silent about what this feels like. This is not distant. It is here right now, not in the US

or the UK but right here in our state. If you speak about trans young people, your words matter. If you work in systems meant to protect them, your actions matter. And if you shape public narratives in any way, you are helping create the conditions that our children are living in. This is how a child ends up getting a death threat, and what happens next – what we challenge, what we allow, what we change – that responsibility belongs to all of us. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today, and I am happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

David BROWN: Hi. I am David Brown. As an introduction, a lot of what Q+Law were saying earlier was actually part of my submission through them. So a lot of those numbers and the details of that assault were my lived experience. It happened at 5 o'clock in broad daylight in open public places, so this is not something that happened to me in a place that was dark and secluded. It is real, it is out there and they did not care. They did not care about getting caught, because they did not see that they were doing anything wrong. They turned up to a park with a knife bigger than any of you have in your kitchen and held it to me and did not see any problem with that. It was just pure hatred. Now, they did try and rob me, but it was clear that was not their motivation. They were just there to live this out. Through my chats with this person – I had been chatting to them on and off for at least a month. You would see the profile. It would come; it would go. That is not unusual behaviour. My belief now is that every time their profile disappeared, they had assaulted somebody. And that is basically what happened to me. They assaulted me. I was capable of getting myself to hospital. While I was in the waiting room for emergency, I saw their profile reappear with a new profile. They were ready to do it again.

That is when I actually had the police come to hospital and interview me, before I was even seen by medical specialists. Now, thankfully for me – and it is not the experience of many people in the community – the police were actually fantastic. They had been through training; they made that obvious. They understood what I was saying, what had happened. At no point did I feel not believed. And I cannot fault the police in the way they handled my case. Unfortunately, that did not end up with me having any justice. The police played their part and they played it well, but ultimately one of them was charged, found guilty and no conviction. The other person was not charged. They were arrested when three people subsequently, in the following week, assaulted somebody else on the same street, in broad daylight once again, and it was actually a member of the public who did a citizen's arrest on one of them that got them arrested. Ultimately that did not lead to justice.

But support is really the bigger part of my story. I have been supported by a lot of the groups that have been here this morning – Thorne Harbour and Q+Law. I do not know where I would be without it or if I would be at all. I had a medical team; I had the police; I had surgery to deal with. I had therapy to try and get. I had work to deal with, a relationship, a household. I did not have time to worry too much, because my full-time job now was to survive and recover, and that took months. Honestly, it is still going. This happened in August 2024. I am still going through remedial treatment physically and emotionally – well, I have made it this far. Q+Law has already mentioned the numbers that I have been through, and those numbers are counting up. I am always spending more time, more money. There are always more appointments. Medically, I had a great experience, but I hate to think what that cost the public system. Community-wise, the support has been great.

The two biggest let-downs – the difficulty in getting mental health support. Everything else you can get if you are in need and urgent need, but you have got to be pretty close to the edge to get mental health support. I held it together for six weeks, getting told it would be six weeks until I could be seen. On the six-week day I rang up: 'Sorry, it'll be six to eight weeks more.' That was rough. I had to push pretty hard to say no, and thankfully they said yes. The other place that really has not been forthcoming to this point is the victims of crime system. I am now at 11 months and two days waiting for my case to be heard, and there is no real feedback other than 'It's in the system. You'll find out when it's dealt with.' The financial stress of putting yourself through everything that needs to happen and keep paying the bills and keep paying rent, not working – like, instantly that was basically two months off work, as of a Sunday night messaging your boss going, 'I won't be in tomorrow.' So I could have done with more support, but I am really grateful for what I did get and glad that I can be here to answer some questions from the committee. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Matthew ROBERTS: Thank you, Chair. My name is Matthew Roberts, and I am very grateful to be invited here today. This committee has heard about why gay men might be reluctant to report crimes to police. It has heard about the distrust that the LGBTIQ community might have about reporting things to police. There has

been speculation about what might happen to a victim once they do report to the police. My story and my submission are an excellent example of what happens when a gay man who was the victim of a physically violent assault did actually attempt to report the crime to police and my journey to try to seek police accountability when the police failed me.

In 2024 I was on a train in the outer northern suburbs in broad daylight and somebody got on who I had never met before. This was in the Northern Metropolitan Region. He began screaming homophobic slurs at me, and eventually when the assault began – it was not technically a strangulation, it was grabbing my head and my face and squeezing for a long period of time so that I could not talk. I could still breathe; my neck was still functioning – just squeezing. I could not move. My phone was stolen. I eventually got it back. I called 000 when I got off the train, and after about an hour of trying to calm down I went to the nearest police station to report the crime. I was not permitted to make a police statement, even though I had requested to do so. I explicitly identified that it was a gay hate crime. I had all of the details written down. It was not recorded as a gay hate crime, and I was dismissed and treated with disrespect by the officer in question.

Over the next two years I became utterly determined to embark on what I call my police accountability journey. I first went to Victoria Police Professional Standards Command. That resulted in all of my allegations being confirmed, proven and established – that police had failed to investigate and failed to support the victim. One of the key elements of my case was that I had assumed that in this case it would be very easy to find the offender because the entire crime was on CCTV. What we later found out was that the informant failed to request the footage and that the footage was permanently deleted. This enabled the crime to go unsolved, and the offender was never identified, charged or prosecuted. I was asked to relay my story in a public area of the police station when I was still in a distressed state, with redness around my face and neck; I was not provided with victim support services; I was not offered a Rainbow liaison officer; and I felt pretty bad about the whole situation.

When I went to the Victims of Crime Commissioner, their recommendations were damning, and there were many. In terms of what was recommended, it was really about training police officers better. What my case shows is that within the police we largely have the laws that we need and the policies and procedures. It is about ensuring that those are adopted and that police are properly trained, particularly about the police manual. Those recommendations were put directly to Mike Bush, the Chief Commissioner of Police, more than two months ago. He has not yet decided whether he wants to accept those recommendations, and I have not heard formally from the police since.

My response to this is that I believe that Victoria urgently needs a Victoria Police Ombudsman. The existing police accountability mechanisms are not working. Professional Standards Command involves police investigating themselves. The Victims of Crime Commissioner has no enforcement powers; it is a voluntary option. If the police do not agree with or do not want to change what the commissioner calls for, they do not have to. So, my main call to this committee is that we urgently need a Police Ombudsman.

The CHAIR: You timed that very well. Dan, over to you.

Daniel POWELL: Hello, committee members. Thank you for having me today. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land which we are meeting on and acknowledge my fellow panellists. What an honour it is to sit beside such brave people willing to share their stories. I really appreciate all of you.

My name is Dan. I am a proud gay, Yorta Yorta Aboriginal man who uses he/him pronouns. I am here today to provide my perspective regarding the impact that violent crimes against LGBTIQ+ individuals and community have on me and the communities I belong to. It is important to understand that my cultural identity and queer identity are intertwined and woven into the core of who I am. These identities cannot be separated. I mention this because it is important to understand that what impacts me as a queer person also impacts me culturally, and vice versa. I am not someone who is a victim of hate crimes or violent crimes. However, this does not mean that I am not impacted by them.

Being queer is something that I love. I grew up in regional Victoria and for the most part of my teenage years felt extremely isolated and alone in my queer identity. As an adult, I feel I belong to a queer community, and in doing so I have reaped the rewards of what it means to belong. I have developed a sense of belonging, connections that enrich my life and opportunities to participate in activities without the need for censorship or

the fragmentation of my identity. This has meant the world to me, taking me from being an anxious teenager with mental health challenges to someone who is confident and proud of who they are. Violent crimes that target the LGBTIQ+ community threaten the progress I have made and the progress many other young queer people are making in their journey to belonging. The impact of these crimes ripples across the community and leaves people wondering if it is safe for them to be who they are and to do what they love.

In my work, I have the privilege of working alongside people who work with the LGBTIQ+ community across the state and country. I regularly hear stories of violent crimes being committed against the community. Only last month I spoke to someone from Bendigo who told me of their struggles with people waiting outside of trans-affirming programs to assault trans kids as they left the building. A few months ago a friend told me of an experience in Shepparton where he met with someone from Grindr who assaulted him and tried to steal his car. This person was not out, so going to the police was not an option. Hearing stories like this takes me back to the young, anxious teenager I was living in Echuca, worried about how my community would respond to my identity.

It makes me sad to think that my experience was 10 years ago and that, despite the efforts the LGBTIQ+ community has made to be more visible, equal and safe, there are people who are still worried about the impact of affirming their identity today. The role police play in responding to hate crimes or crimes targeting LGBTIQ+ communities is crucial. It is no secret that the relationship between police and LGBTIQ+ communities is ruptured. As a queer Aboriginal person, this relationship is even more strained due to the historical harms experienced by both communities I belong to. Whilst I do not have experience in dealing with police as a result of a violent crime against me because of my LGBTIQ+ identity, I do have experience in dealing with them as a result of same-sex intimate partner violence, and from that experience I can say that there is the need for police to build their capacity to better understand and support LGBTIQ+ people. My experience is not a unique one, with well-documented and historically grounded mistrust between LGBTIQ+ communities and police institutions.

I expect today that I will be asked, in my opinion, what can be done to address violent crimes against LGBTIQ+ communities. I would like to see greater accountability by online platforms. There is the need for social and dating apps to be held to stronger safety standards and be responsible for the safety of their users. Real identity verification should be used to mitigate the risk of fake profiles luring users into real-world violence. Addressing online radicalisation and hate networks – we must understand what drives young people to commit these crimes and address it. We must disrupt the networks that encourage these behaviours. Historic truth-telling – as a queer Aboriginal person, this is an action I feel would have a profound impact on both communities I belong to. Acknowledging the harm that has been experienced by both Aboriginal and LGBTIQ+ communities is the first step in moving towards reconciliation and improving relationships with state institutions and the communities they serve. This is not about placing blame but instead about honouring the reality of our history and validating the harm that has been experienced. I also believe that by acknowledging historical harms we would see improved reporting of these crimes, which brings me to my next point: improved reporting and police engagement. As the other panellists have mentioned, reporting mechanisms need to be accessible, and responses to reports of hate crimes need to be taken seriously and responded to appropriately.

Mandatory police and justice department training – to ensure that reports of hate crimes are responded to appropriately, I would like to see mandatory training delivered across police and justice departments to improve the capacity of these areas to better support the LGBTIQ+ community. Stronger post-and-boast laws – social media posting of violent crimes fuels hate and encourages more violent crimes to be committed. Funding for community safety and support – anti-LGBTIQ+ hate is a systemic issue requiring a coordinated legal, social and institutional response. LGBTIQ+ organisations should be funded to support hate crime victims, and LGBTIQ+ events should have access to funding for security so that we can continue to be visible and proud whilst feeling safe. Funding should be available so that we can continue to hold events that celebrate LGBTIQ+ identities to demonstrate that we are stronger than those who commit crimes against us. Youth-focused interventions – alleged offenders of these crimes have been as young as 13, so early intervention is critical to addressing this issue. Survivor-centred process and ongoing community voice – survivors of these crimes should play a role in determining the response and ongoing policy design.

With all of the above an intersectional approach is key. The LGBTIQ+ community is extremely diverse, and this should be taken into consideration when determining how this issue should be addressed. I sincerely thank

you for the opportunity to share my voice and experience in relation to this issue and hope that in doing so we can work together to end hate-based violence and improve relationships with the communities I am so proud to belong to.

The CHAIR: Thank you to all of you for your opening statements. I can see they are profound and really impactful, and I know that it would have been really challenging to say some of that stuff. I want to acknowledge that and appreciate that. If throughout this questioning session you do need any support, we have got people ready to support you in whatever way you need. Just let us know, and that will be offered to you, no questions asked.

I will start off with my questions, then we will go through the committee members. I do not even know where to start, to be honest. There is a lot in that. Daniel, I might go to you first. I was particularly interested to hear about some of the protections that should be in place on some of the dating app platforms that are used. There has been discussion about age verification, but I think there is more that could be done there. In your experience, what would you like to see more of?

Daniel POWELL: I think real identity verification. So many of the people that commit crimes using these dating apps do so behind fake profiles, behind faceless profiles, so being able to make sure that we know who is using a profile when they are using it would be a really good start. I think better reporting mechanisms within the apps themselves so that you can report instances of online violence that could lead to real-world violence.

The CHAIR: That is fair enough. You did touch on, and we have seen it happen a lot more, the post-and-boast situation, which is some pretty disgusting stuff that happens. There have been some changes in the law around posting and boasting, but what more would you like to see around that?

Daniel POWELL: I could provide a better answer, a written response, after going and considering it, but I think just stronger sentencing to discourage people from posting and boasting would be a really good start – and making it easier to prove that somebody has posted and boasted.

The CHAIR: I think that is pretty fair enough. David, I was interested when you said that the police were fantastic to deal with. I know that a lot of other people have not had that experience.

David BROWN: I hate to say I was lucky, but I was lucky.

The CHAIR: I am trying to understand what it should be like. What was your experience?

David BROWN: They came to hospital. They found a private room within the emergency department to basically interview me, and I was a mess physically and mentally. One of the very first things they said was, 'We've got training on this. You can tell us bluntly what happened. We'll get it. We know the jargon,' and they did. I did not feel judgement. They understood what I was saying. To add to that, to bounce points a little bit, I think it is very important that we do age and account verification, but in this instance I had real photos of the guy and his full name. He thought he was untouchable – that I could give the police full name, face photos and say, 'Go for it,' and they did. Again, I was lucky. Some offenders are not worried about being caught, because they do not think it is going to happen.

The CHAIR: I noticed too you said, and I was actually staggered to hear, that you were told, 'It's going to be another six weeks for mental health support.' I can imagine that in itself causes a lot of concern and anxiety when you have been waiting and waiting and waiting. What lengths did you have to go to make sure that, when it got to that six-week point, as you were saying, you said, 'I will be seen now'?

David BROWN: I made the phone call, and they just said, 'Sorry, we've reviewed where it's at. We've onboarded you, so we know your situation. It'll be another six to eight weeks.'

The CHAIR: Whom was that through? How did that come about?

David BROWN: It was through Thorne Harbour. I had to push back harder than I like to. I am not that sort of person, but at that point I knew I was in trouble. They saw that, and I was seen very quickly. But they were snowed under. I get that – that is demand. Unfortunately, this was at the start of when it was really going to shit, and they had huge demand on their services. But that does not diminish the fact that I needed help.

The CHAIR: My time is up, I am sorry. I wish I could talk to everyone, but I will pass on to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you to each of you for the very powerful evidence that you have given. I apologise in advance that I doubt I will have time to ask each of you questions that I want to. David, you said your attack happened at 5 pm in broad daylight. If you are comfortable to share with us, do you recall what the attackers said to you, if they said anything?

David BROWN: A lot of it I will not repeat. I turned up to an open public place in Hawthorn at 5 o'clock. There was the person that I had photos of – cool, that is a match. I had no red flags to this point. Then within 30 seconds, tops, person 2 walks around the corner with a knife, and my thought at that point was, 'That's it.'

Michael GALEA: Then the attack started.

David BROWN: Thankfully the knife was not used, but they did not hold back. The words that were used were beyond offensive. It was hateful and fearful all at the same time on their part.

Michael GALEA: And clearly targeted around your sexuality?

David BROWN: Absolutely. Yet what they were charged with was attempted armed robbery and recklessly causing injury, and then no conviction.

Michael GALEA: I was quite surprised by your comments that you had been talking with them for a month. I assumed that most of these attacks would happen on a much faster basis than that.

David BROWN: Yes. I had spoken with this person on and off, like you would see them maybe once a week or once every couple of weeks and say, 'Oh, hi. How are you going? It's you again' – continue the conversation, and then they would disappear. That is not unusual, but that is probably because they were assaulting somebody, and then they would have to delete that profile and start again.

Michael GALEA: When they were released – one was not charged and one was released without conviction – and then you saw that they had committed this offending again, what was the first thing that ran through your head?

David BROWN: They were recommitting the offending while I was going through medical processes. They were caught within a week of that, but I think they had been offending for quite a while, and they have no doubt offended multiple times since mine. It was between one and two weeks when they were caught. So it was quite fast, but they had enough information.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Merrin, in your submission a line jumped out at me:

A threat in a regional ... town ... doesn't feel the same as a threat in a city.

And I see you nodding as well, Daniel. Can you talk to just what that exacerbation feels like living in a smaller centre?

Merrin WAKE: I have got three children, and I want all my children to be able to ring emergency services if they are at risk or fearful or anything in the community. We do not have the same amount of safe places. So we do not have queer cafes, we do not have queer art spaces, we do not have parks that are safe, and that makes it really difficult for them to be able to get to a place of safety. Often we hear a lot about the fear of police, and often in regional, but particularly in rural smaller towns – I live in a large regional town – they are the only people they have got to ring. Unfortunately, some of them have had pretty bad experiences, so they are very hesitant to ring them. I know for my son, who was at a party recently and there was a transphobic outing and abuse, that he was concerned about ringing the police because he did not know what their opinion of who he is would be. Now, luckily, he could get on to us and we could support him, but that is something I know my son deals with all the time. There are just not the safe spaces in the country as there are in the city.

Michael GALEA: You have actually touched on I think something I would like to ask each of you, which is the role of police as LGBTIQ+ liaison officers – I believe they are known as LLOs. By the sound of it, Dave, you were dealing with an LLO. Is that correct?

David BROWN: I did on a few occasions, but they made it very clear that they were few and far between and there was a limit to what they could do in terms of resourcing.

Michael GALEA: So the initial officers that did speak with you – and you have shared that positive experience – were they LLOs?

David BROWN: No, they were just general frontline.

Michael GALEA: It is good to hear that training got through in this case.

David BROWN: Yes.

Michael GALEA: If I can quickly ask the panel as a whole: would an expanded role or presence of LLOs be beneficial?

Matthew ROBERTS: Yes.

Merrin WAKE: Yes, especially in regional and rural towns.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much, all. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli, over to you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for appearing before us, and I acknowledge the comments that have already been made – what that must be like for you, to be on a panel like this giving this testimony – but it hopefully does have the impact of going through this inquiry process, speaking truth to power and forming recommendations that hopefully affect change so that we do not see this targeted hate continue to be perpetuated in the way that so many LGBTQIA+ people have experienced and in some cases reported further.

With the limited time I have, we have heard extensively both in this session and earlier today about where the hate ends, where it becomes physical manifestations of violence, threats, all of these things. But something I think the committee is having to really hone in on is where it begins, the feeding into that pipeline to where someone thinks it is okay to go out and to issue a threat or to commit a physical act of violence against a member of the LGBTQIA+ community on the basis of who they are or who they love. I know, Daniel, in your submission you speak about the importance of examining alpha male radicalisation pipelines. Can you speak a little bit more to this? Why is this particularly important?

Daniel POWELL: I think it is particularly important. Like, even as a man, I understand young men. I have got younger brothers, and I am very lucky that my younger brothers are quite switched on and understand what masculinity means to them in a way that does not harm other people. But I have seen in young men this need for belonging, the same sort of belonging that I guess I yearned for, and I think they are finding it in these toxic alpha male circles, a lot of it online. I think that that is something that needs its own lens or its own approach to address.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you feel like these spaces are where that type of rhetoric is proliferating? Are these regulated spaces? Are these places that people are even necessarily aware of, online?

Daniel POWELL: I would say that a lot of them are not regulated. I have heard of Telegram groups and stuff like that where this rhetoric is being spread, and people are encouraging sort of violent crimes. And it is not just crimes against LGBTQIA+ people, you know, it is disrespect of women, it is racism. It is sort of all happening in these spaces.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. And I know Merrin, earlier, just in your remarks, you spoke about how creating the conditions for this hate to fester is in itself a harmful thing. I guess on that lens of examining where some of this hate comes from and what feeds it, perhaps particularly looking at trans and gender-diverse parts of the community, what is the international context? Is that feeding into this? Are there particular things that you could point to that perhaps are catalysts to some of the targeted hate that we are seeing?

Merrin WAKE: Yes. I think the so-called debate or the narrative around sex and gender and around changing of the laws, is contributing to what people would describe as a conversation, but it is much more than

that. And I think that what you have got to understand is for many trans and gender-diverse young people, being online is not a luxury, it is actually a lifeline. It is somewhere where they get peer support and they get support from. I am always really wondering about the fact that we are always being told to stay offline, but yet the people who are perpetrating this hate are not told to stop perpetrating the hate. Our young people get so much. Particularly in regional and rural areas where they can be very isolated, online spaces are really supportive. But I would want to say this has escalated. Those three statements I read to you at the start all came from LinkedIn. They are now in spaces of trans parents where we have a safe space as parents to connect. These people are now in those spaces creating this hate, so it has definitely escalated.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Mrs Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you. First of all, I do really appreciate you being brave enough to come forward, and I think that there are some very good suggestions among some of your thoughts of how we can move forward. I guess, to begin with, Merrin, in terms of – as a mother – the son that you are speaking about, how old is he at the moment?

Merrin WAKE: He has just turned 18.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Eighteen, so he is an adult right now.

Merrin WAKE: Yes. His first transphobic attack was in year 8, which was a physical transphobic attack at school.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: And the one that you have brought to us, though, for the inquiry is a couple of years ago.

Merrin WAKE: Seventeen.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: A couple of months ago, was it?

Merrin WAKE: It was February. He was 17.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: February this year. Yes, so at the beginning of the year. So at school?

Merrin WAKE: The death threat, sorry?

Ann-Marie HERMANS: He is a school student?

Merrin WAKE: Sorry, yes.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: So it is school where he is experiencing this situation or is it –

Merrin WAKE: No. The death threat I talk about came for a public event that was being held, a Pride festival that was being held in the local town.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Has the school been supportive of your son?

Merrin WAKE: The school he is at now, yes. In the past it has been very much reliant on our young people to continually I guess tell the teachers or tell the principal about what is happening, and then nothing gets changed. So there is no consistency. He has had some champions but no consistency.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Schools unfortunately are very much like that across the board with bullying. There are so many situations, unfortunately. We are looking at this particular case and the context of this, but the reality is I hear of these bullying situations in a number of schools and they do not all get dealt with. And it is not all to do with LGBTIQ, but there is a lot of work to be done in that space, I think.

Merrin WAKE: Yes, I agree, but I do not think labelling it bullying is helping. I think it is a crime. It is discrimination. It is against the law in Victoria. It is not bullying of a child in a school room.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you for that. David, you are very brave to come forward when you are still dealing with this. I do have questions for you about your scenario. Just because obviously we have to inform what can become policy in our recommendations – and you are all aware of that – I am trying to get to the bottom of your own scenario and situation and the mental health issue. Good on you for pushing it, because there are so many people still waiting for support for a number of things. I appreciate that you have been able to and that some of your experience has been good and some has not.

David BROWN: Yes. The support has been amazing.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes, and it is good that you have been fortunate to be able to present a very balanced situation of how ‘These things were right, these things worked and these things did not.’ In your situation, how many attackers are we talking about there?

David BROWN: Two at the time when I was attacked, and the same people went on to do it again with three people.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: You mentioned that they had changed their profile. I am sorry, because I am not really familiar with all of this stuff. I asked a question earlier of a panel, and I did not know about the answer to it. There are more apps than just Grindr out there drawing people in?

David BROWN: Yes, numerous apps.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: And you would be able to perhaps help the committee with some information on some of these other apps that we perhaps should be looking at?

David BROWN: Yes, I could add some more in writing on other apps that are available where I have certainly experienced the same thing.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes. Where people are luring people as well and you are hearing about that.

David BROWN: Yes.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: In that situation, we heard that there was a 13-year-old. Was it the 13-year-old that had the machete?

David BROWN: Not in my situation, no – I believe my attackers were 16 years old.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Okay. I do not want to ask you too much, because obviously it is still very real and you are still dealing with it – I mean, you all are, but it is very near and real. I just thank you for telling us that, and if we can get the information on the apps, it would be great. I did have more, but I could not get time. That is all right.

The CHAIR: Sorry. We might have some time at the end. Mr Batchelor, over to you.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Thank you all for coming in today and bravely sharing your stories. It is a really challenging topic for you all to go through, but it is important for us as a committee to be able to hear those stories and think about what we can do and recommend, because ultimately we are here to not just listen but to report and make some recommendations. I want to touch a little bit on these questions through that frame. Daniel and David, you both mentioned in your evidence that you think that identity verification is important for the apps that are there. Given some of the issues within the community about anonymity and the fact that some people are not out, how do you think that the concept of identity verification would be viewed in the broader community?

Daniel POWELL: Yes, it would be challenging to navigate, I think. I can completely understand why people would be against that. I guess it is about trying to strike that balance between safety and allowing people to have the spaces that they need to be able to understand who they are. I do not know the answer to that.

David BROWN: I can add a bit to that, and I will do more of it in writing to give you more details. Actually the app that is the one that I was assaulted through has since put verification features in which say, ‘This profile

has been verified as a real person,' but it just means that person has sent a photo of themselves and the app has said it has lined up.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Talk us through this. How does it work?

David BROWN: The person would send a photo of themselves to the app maker, and that person – I presume there is somebody on the other end, or it might even be AI these days – or the account will then say, 'This person has been verified as a real person.' So it is not a blank profile with no photos and no other details that can then potentially track you. At least you know you are talking to someone who has at least got to that threshold of, 'I'm willing to put a photo to the app.' Then – historically – if the police need to go to that app, they can say, 'Right, we need the photos of the person who created this profile.'

Ryan BATCHELOR: Then that is there and adding a layer of security at the back end?

David BROWN: Yes. I have been told by the police that if you delete your own account, it is always still in the back end of those systems, and they can and do go and get those details.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Right. Again, have you got any reflections, as Daniel did, about the sorts of views in the broader community about identity verification?

David BROWN: In what sense?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Obviously there have been concerns expressed by some about the need or the desire for anonymity in certain groups and how we balance that. As a committee, this is an issue that we are going to have to confront in the recommendations. How do we balance that?

David BROWN: I can do more of it in the written addition to the submissions, but I think it is totally possible to do it without providing like physical ID to the app. But just saying, this is me, I am a real person and I want to engage with the people on this platform. Age verification is one thing, but it just means everyone gets assaulted by someone over 18 and we have not fixed much.

Daniel POWELL: And perhaps it is about giving that guarantee that people can verify that they are who they say they are without actually needing to publicly list who they are.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Matthew, I just want to quickly come to you. You mentioned that there was a lack of a request for CCTV footage from the – was it a train carriage?

Matthew ROBERTS: It was on a train.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So in a carriage. The camera is in the train. Were you advised that it took too long for the request to be made, and therefore the footage had been deleted? Was that the evidence that you gave?

Matthew ROBERTS: Yes. The evidence that I gave was it was never requested. Train footage is deleted in a certain timeframe, and by the time it was requested, after I intervened, it was deleted. If I can just sort of say in terms of recommendations for how to deal with these problems, recording gay hate crimes was something that was raised this morning as a big issue. The excellent Victims of Crime Commissioner report, in my case, goes into some detail about what needs to happen within Victoria Police with training et cetera to make sure that these crimes are recorded accordingly. I would be happy to provide to the committee as supplementary material both the Victims of Crime Commissioner report and the Professional Standards Command report as well that talks about what needs to change to improve these things.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I think it would be really helpful if you could provide that to the committee. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Batchelor. We are going to go to Ms Gray-Barberio, who is online now. So Anasina, I will hand it over to you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you all for appearing before us today. I just want to acknowledge the guts that it takes to not only share with us the story, but the retelling of it as well, so thank you. I just want to touch on some of the evidence that we were presented with earlier today,

and I just want to ask whoever is comfortable in sharing their reflections on this. Now, some of the suggestions that have been put forward or recommendations earlier today are about targeted hate being recorded as part of sentencing. Do you agree that that should be the case at all?

David BROWN: Yes, absolutely.

Daniel POWELL: Yes.

Matthew ROBERTS: Yes, definitely.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you.

David BROWN: But at this point I do not see consequences for my attackers.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Sure. Absolutely. Thank you. Ms Wake, I want to ask you a question. You made some recommendations in your submission. I just want to ask you from a regional perspective – you have already touched on this before with one of my colleagues on the committee. What other recommendations should we be considering as a committee to take into account the fewer resources available to protect LGBTIQ young people going into adulthood as well?

Merrin WAKE: I think that we do have some really great national kind of advocacy for our young people, but I think very much, particularly in regional and rural towns, people are looking for local on-the-ground supports and connection with communities. When we are talking about parents and carers of trans young people, the majority of people that I speak to every day are not part of the LGBTIQ community. They are parents or their carers who this might be new to or have no connection to. There was a great resource brought out by the Victorian human rights commission about talking to your child about gender and sexuality, and I think we need more education from a young age for parents and young people that talk about this in respectful and good ways and age-appropriate ways. But we need to be discussing this more and opening it up more for what families look like, because we all look very different.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Absolutely. That is a really good point. Mr Powell, I want to ask you about your presentation today. How can we as a committee consider systems to ensure that there is cultural safety embedded into the responses for LGBTIQ+ community members that are also of First Nations descent?

Daniel POWELL: I think it is involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in any decision-making and letting them determine the response that is going to affect them. I think I am probably the one blackfella in the room at the moment, and so it would be great to see some more rainbow mob being involved and having a role to play in this.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Are there any other reflections? I am looking at my time, and I think I have got just under 30 seconds to go. Is there anything else that one of you would like to share with us before my time expires?

Merrin WAKE: I just would like to share that I think when it comes to the Department of Education and schools, we need very clear guidelines and policies around the distinction between bullying and discrimination and hate. I think teachers and education staff need training, education and knowledge on how to ascertain the difference between these.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. That is a really well-made point. Thank you, all. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Anasina. Ms Watt, over to you if you are online.

Sheena WATT: Yes, I am. Hiya. Thank you so much to each of our witnesses who are joining us. Perhaps if it is okay, I might actually go to Ms Wake, because you raised a really interesting point there in your last remarks about education, the department and perhaps some training for folks in our schools. If in fact it is beyond bullying and it is actually discrimination, what do you think then needs to happen? I think the steps between the experiences of your child versus bullying are in fact very different, and the responses need to be different. I am interested in your take on what that might look like.

Merrin WAKE: Yes, they are very different. You are right. I think that we now have it specified in our child safety standards – number 5 talks about the protection of LGBTBIQA young people and that schools have regulatory things that they need to do to maintain those child safety standards. I think we need to look at those standards and identify when experiences happen, whether it is a threat or a physical attack or anything like that. When my son was attacked in year 8, it was seen as bullying. It was seen as the opinion of a group of young people that had a different opinion to my son, and therefore they physically attacked him. That is a clear-cut discrimination idea. But I think it is hard. My partner is a principal, so I am really aware of what it is to be educating people. I think teachers and more broadly the leadership in the Department of Education need to have more awareness and training. Just as we would train them in disclosures of child safety standard breaches, we need to really have them knowledgeable in how they distinguish between discrimination and bullying.

Sheena WATT: Similarly, you have talked a lot about parents and support programs for parents, because often this disclosure by children is happening to parents. Can you talk to us about what you particularly think we could do to support parents that might be the first to receive it and receive the news? You are the most trusted one usually, and I am keen to know how we can support you to do better in what is a really challenging situation.

Merrin WAKE: I think the biggest impact on us as a family and me as a parent was the minimisation – that this is just part of it, or this is just differing of opinions. This is not differing opinions; it is harm and discrimination. What was really difficult was, I guess, feeling dismissed, feeling that even the attack in year 8 was very minimised by the school community and other people. That was really difficult. So connecting to other parents who have had similar experiences – and all of us are experiencing daily messages, like the ones I said – has been really, really supportive, to find out what those things are that we can do: ‘Have you had an experience of reporting to the police? Do you know where to get stuff that’s not misinformation and disinformation? Where do you get the right information from and how do we have conversations about that?’

Sheena WATT: Are you looking for that support, do you think, to be facilitated through the education department or through organised community organisations or just an online space? I mean, where is the trusted place to go, because we have heard so much about how incidents are not reported. I am thinking for young people, most disclosures are happening to parents, and I just want to make sure that parents are equipped to support further action when required.

Merrin WAKE: Well, one thing we have done, for instance, in our local town is that we have got a local connection group of parents, some who are new to the experience, some who have been doing this for a long time. We offer each other support socially, but we also offer each other spaces to find out really significant information of where we could go. We also offer each other support for reporting or anything else that those parents need.

Sheena WATT: That is it, I think for me, Chair, if that is all right. Cheers. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Sheena. I just thought in the last few minutes that we have got left, for the witnesses that have come in, are there any final messages that you really want us to hear as we go ahead and consider all the evidence that is before us and make recommendations to government? I might start with you, Daniel, and go up the end there. Is there anything, in 30 seconds or a minute? What do you want us to know that we may not have heard yet?

Daniel POWELL: I think you have already heard this, but just that the impact of these crimes is significant. It is impacting all LGBTIQ+ people, but not just those people – their families, everyone in the community. And so to respond to this appropriately is going to benefit more than just the gay men using Grindr. We are going to see the benefits. Everybody would be able to reap the rewards of people feeling safe in community, and so I really hope that the committee can understand the breadth of what can happen if good decisions are made in response to this.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Matthew.

Matthew ROBERTS: As the committee heard earlier today, there is a big problem with properly recording the extent of this problem, including within Victoria Police. So as my case shows, I would like to see the committee make recommendations to help make sure that police are properly recording gay hate crimes, or hate crimes of any kind, when the victim reports that. That did not happen in my case. The report shows that there

are systemic problems in police that enabled that. And we need to address that so that we can understand the prevalence of this problem. Thank you.

David BROWN: My closing remarks would be around navigating the system. When you are in pain and you are on prescription painkillers, you are not in a good place to start with. And then it is, 'There are great supports out there – go find them.' I had a community worker working with me. I had lots of good people working with me, but no-one can help you in a broad sense. They are always: 'This is my little box, I have to stay here'; 'This is my little box, I'm over there. You ring them'; and 'No, we haven't got an intake – you've got to ring them.' That is why I have got so many hundreds of points of contact. I needed help, and it was hard to find. When I found it, it was great. But connecting people with that help is hard.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Merrin WAKE: I could say a lot, but I just wanted to say I am not sure that young people are necessarily sitting watching this. It might not be their fun thing to do on whatever day it is. Sorry to tell you. But I just want to say that if there are any trans or gender-diverse young people hearing this or reading this later on, no matter what anyone says, you are loved, you are not alone, and it is time for all of us as the adults in the room to step up and protect our children. It is not their job. It should not be counted on, their resilience or their kindness in the world. It should be about the adults in the room stepping up and making sure that they are protected, and not just respected but celebrated and able to thrive for who they are. So to all of you, to any young people watching: we have got this, and we have got you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. On that note, that brings our time to an end. But again, thank you so much for the time that you have taken to appear today and the effort that you have put in towards your words. We definitely take it on board. We all get a proof version of the transcript, obviously, and you will have a chance to have a look through that. But from us, thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.