

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

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Jenna Tuke, Chief Executive Officer, and

Maya Ellazam, Senior Lead, Policy, Advocacy and Communications, Switchboard Victoria; and

Chad Hughes, Chief Executive Officer, and

Caleb Hawk, Deputy Director, Health Promotion and Community Engagement.

The CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to the public hearing of the Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Anti-LGBTIQA+ Hate Crimes in Victoria. Please make sure that all mobile phones are switched off or are on silent so that we can minimise our background noise.

I would like to acknowledge the original custodians of the land, the Aboriginal peoples, and pay respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I will now go through and introduce our committee members. I am Joe McCracken, the Chair. I will go to my left and to my right, and then there are some online too, I think.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I am Ann-Marie Hermans. I represent the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Michael GALEA: Good morning. Michael Galea, Deputy Chair, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Ryan Batchelor from the Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: I will go to Anasina and then Sheena, who are online.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Good morning. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro Region.

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

The CHAIR: Thank you. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during the hearing today is protected by law. You are protected for any action that you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and say the same thing, you may not be protected by that same privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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

Just for the Hansard record, can I get you to say your name, your title and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, please. I will go from my left to right, if that is okay. Thanks.

Maya ELLAZAM: Thank you. I am Maya Ellazam, Senior Lead, Policy, Advocacy and Communications, Switchboard Victoria.

Jenna TUKE: Good morning, Jenna Tuke, CEO at Switchboard Victoria.

Chad HUGHES: Good morning. Chad Hughes, the Chief Executive Officer at Thorne Harbour Health.

Caleb HAWK: Caleb Hawk. I am the Deputy Director for Health Promotion and Community Engagement.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. Welcome and thank you for coming along today. I will go to Switchboard first. I will hand over to you, and then I will go to Thorne Harbour. I will put the timer on, but do not worry if it beeps or anything like that, okay. We will work through it. Welcome. I hand it over to you.

Jenna TUKE: Thank you very much, and good morning. As you know, my name is Jenna Tuke and I am the CEO of Switchboard Victoria. I will also begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, on whose lands we meet today. Sovereignty has never been ceded, and our work takes place on what always was and always will be Aboriginal land. I also here this morning want to acknowledge the strength and resilience of rainbow mob and acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do experience unique and ongoing legacies of settler colonial violence, dispossession and harm. When we are advocating for meaningful responses to anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes, this must also include rainbow mob.

Switchboard Victoria is an LGBTIQ+ community-led service. We were established in 1991 by a lesbian woman and a gay man as a volunteer helpline. We now offer connection, support, information and referral through seven programs, including two helplines and in the areas of suicide prevention, rainbow families with older folk, and with culturally diverse and multifaith queer folk. We operate at the front line of harm, where we commonly receive disclosures from community members who have experienced hate-motivated abuse, threats, discrimination and violence. And we often support people whose experiences of violence and discrimination are compounded by experiences of racism and structural responses to disability, migration status, faith, age, regional isolation or socio-economic disadvantage.

As the opening speaker at this inquiry I am going to take a few minutes to set out the historical context of how LGBTIQ+ people have been treated in this country since white settlement and how this legacy continues to have an impact on how our community members experience violence today. I will then speak a little about our service response thus far. The catalyst for this inquiry – the confronting increase in attacks on gay and bisexual men, trans and gender-diverse people being lured via meet-up apps into public spaces where they are assaulted, robbed, extorted and humiliated – is not occurring in a social or historical vacuum. My colleague Chad Hughes, the CEO of Thorne Harbour, will speak in a moment in detail more about the attacks, but I am going to provide some context first.

To understand the current state of anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes – I am going to use that acronym a lot – we must first understand the legacy of criminalisation, pathologisation and stigma experienced by our community. Until 1981 homosexuality was illegal in Victoria, until 1990 the World Health Organization classified homosexuality as a disease and it was not until 2019 that declassification came – that being trans or gender diverse was no longer classified as a mental illness. The historical, institutional, legal and medical framings of our communities as deviant, sick, immoral and dangerous gave rise to hatred and fear and formed a permissive backdrop to the condemnation, exclusion and violence that many older living LGBTIQ+ Australians still recall. We thought things were getting better. They were getting better, and in many ways they are still better. Legal reforms over the last 20 years have accorded our community members access to greater rights and safety: for example, amendments to the federal *Sex Discrimination Act*, marriage equality, decriminalisation and expungement legislation, banning suppression and conversion practices, hate crime legislation, passport and birth certificate reforms and – most recently in Victoria – protections for children born with innate variation of sex characteristics. All of these reforms have made a difference to the safety and quality of the lives of our communities and also to the mainstream understanding that LGBTIQ+ people are regular people living regular lives. I apologise to anyone here who is offended by that. We are regular and extraordinary.

We have made progress. However, it is clearly not enough, as we are contending with the emergence of hate crimes in a way that is simultaneously both old and familiar and new and unfamiliar. This new wave of violence and discrimination is settling on top of what remains of the harmful residue of past criminalisation, pathologisation and injury. It is profoundly confronting to find ourselves here today, in 2026, in a Victorian parliamentary inquiry into anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes as we contemplate the worst levels of violence that our communities have seen since the 1980s and 1990s. I am really glad that the Victorian Parliament is asking here: what is going on and why, how does it impact our communities and how do we stop it? Over the last few years it has been bubbling. In 2023 we saw neo-Nazi groups on the steps of Parliament house stoking hatred and inciting violence against trans people. Librarians were receiving death threats for running community events, and callers to our helplines Rainbow Door and QLife have been telling us for a few years now that they are impacted by the global tide of anti-rights sentiment and the organised far-right targeted attacks on our community and on lives in the US and Europe and now, increasingly over the last few years, in Australia.

In August last year Switchboard decided that we could do something at a local level to respond directly to the support needs of those who were targeted in the so-called Grindr attacks, though I like to say we do not call them the Grindr attacks, because that gives the idea that it is an app perpetrating harm. But actually,

overwhelmingly it is cis men radicalised and motivated by fear, hatred and harmful ideologies. It is men informed by harmful ideologies using an app to facilitate violent hate crimes which have severe and enduring impacts for victim-survivors and communities. We established a dedicated helpline via the Rainbow Door. The line is open to all members of the LGBTQI+ community impacted by hate crimes. Our trained staff provide victim-survivors with belief, support and information about their rights and options. We facilitate referrals to legal services and to police, counselling, health and victims of crime services, and we work closely with Thorne Harbour Health and Q+Law, sharing expertise and resources to support people. Our community organisations possess immense knowledge and expertise about what our communities are experiencing and their recovery needs, and we have also been at the forefront of every effective social movement which has been promoting the rights and safety of our communities. We are good at this.

It is true that we need comprehensive legal protections for our communities and that we must address historical policing practices in order to move towards safer police engagement with our communities. Many submissions before this inquiry speak to the proposed legal and policing reforms, and we do need these reforms. That said, in my view, we cannot police our way out of this. Legal protections are just one thread of prevention and response to the increase in hate crimes. Leadership matters here. When leaders and institutions look away, are silent or fail to offer alternative messaging to the hate speech that is pervading our screens and airways, that emboldens those who seek to harm and divide us. We need our political, social, and cultural leaders to demonstrate clear and unequivocal commitment to LGBTQI+ rights, safety and inclusion across all levels of society. We need targeted, coordinated violence prevention campaigns which are developed alongside and with our communities, and we need well-resourced specialist services which are equipped to provide support and advice. We can and should be part of the solution to this fresh wave of violence, and we are ready to work with government and community partners. I thank you for the opportunity to speak and look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Jenna. Appreciate it. Chad, over to you.

Chad HUGHES: Thank you, Jenna, and thank you to the committee for your time this morning. I am Chad Hughes. I am the Chief Executive Officer at Thorne Harbour Health. We are Victoria's largest LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing organisation, and we have been serving these communities in Victoria since 1983. This is why I am here today. Over the last two years we have seen new patterns emerge where gay and bisexual men in Victoria have been deliberately targeted by violent attacks. Victims have been lured through dating apps, ambushed by groups, beaten with bats, poles and machetes and filmed as they are abused and humiliated. The question before the committee is whether Victoria is prepared to recognise these crimes for what they are and help us work to address them. They are targeted hate crimes. A person targeted because of their sexuality, their race, religion or disability should have that fact recognised by the justice system, and too often it is not.

In June 2024 Victoria Police approached us at Thorne Harbour Health about a small cluster of attacks – only two or three incidents. Together with support from Victoria Police, we scratched the surface, and then, when we realised there was more, we dug further. We have identified a much larger pattern: more than 95 reported attacks and 42 arrests. Our own Thorne Harbour Health data also shows that since 2018 more than 1500 clients of our services have reported hate-related crimes and violence. The perpetrators are mostly young men, many of them teenagers. The attacks are deliberate and humiliating. Victims are forced to recite slurs on camera, and footage is shared online to give the perpetrators status with their target audiences, others in the manosphere. Some offenders are as young as 13. These victims were not chosen at random. They were specifically targeted because they were perceived to be gay or bisexual. These are hate crimes.

So why don't our community members report these hate crimes? One man told us that he was lured to a meeting, beaten and had a knife held to his throat. His attackers told him, 'This is what we do.' These are only the cases that we know about. There will be many more. At a community forum convened by Thorne Harbour Health 12 men publicly disclosed that they had been attacked. Only two of them had reported it to the police, and one of them regretted that. Clients told us that they have been dismissed, blamed for meeting somebody online or made to feel that they were the ones under suspicion. The fact is the true number of attacks is far higher than the official figures suggest because many in our communities do not trust the systems that are there for the reporting and they do not trust that it will lead to justice.

When people do not trust the system, they come to us, to trusted organisations like Thorne Harbour Health and Switchboard. Thorne Harbour Health gathers these experiences and feeds them back to police and to the

government through forums, partnership meetings and opportunities like today's hearing. We do this largely unfunded and informally, with five part-time counsellors supporting all of our LGBTIQ+ people who come to us. Our state's community organisations cannot be expected to continue to carry this responsibility alone.

What is the issue with the law that we want addressed? The law does not consistently call these crimes what they are. A blatantly homophobic attack is often recorded simply as common assault. The motive disappears, the data disappears and the victims are left feeling that the central fact of what happened to them has been ignored. History matters. Many people in our community remember when homosexuality was illegal, when the people that they loved and that love were illegal. Others remember police harassment, discrimination and institutional mistreatment. That history still shapes whether people believe reporting is worth the risk and the trust that they have in the systems to report to.

So what are we asking for? Victim-survivors that come to us want three things: for the law to recognise what happened to them is a hate crime, to walk away from the police station believing that justice is possible and for support that they can trust from well resourced and equipped community organisations like ours. Our recommendations, as outlined in our submission, which you have read, are pragmatic. They are not about criminalising speech or increasing incarceration. They are about holding online platforms and social media accountable. They are about ensuring that when somebody is targeted because of who they are the law sees that and acknowledges it, that victims are supported and that Victoria has the tools to stop it happening again.

In closing, we are not talking about hypothetical harms. More than 95 Victorians have already reported being attacked, and many more never will. We owe a response to those already harmed and to everybody whose safety now depends on us getting this right. We are ready to partner with government, police and our peer organisations to deliver that response. We sit here before you today as trusted representatives of our communities, to speak on their behalf, and we are ready to answer the questions that you have. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Perfect. Thank you for that. I will go first, and then we will just go to some committee members. Chad, my first one is for you. Obviously the process is: people go on a dating app, they get lured to a location and then they get threatened or they get abused in a particular way. You said that reporting of these incidents is undercooked because of a distrust in the system. Is it a distrust in the system that people are afraid to come out and report it because they feel that just nothing is going to happen?

Chad HUGHES: Look, there are myriad reasons why people do not come to report. The intent of a lot of the attacks is actually to humiliate people, the threats that they are made to say on camera. People have fear that that will make them lose their jobs, lose status in society et cetera. There is also a mistrust of the system, all the way from the police that they report to in the first instance through to the justice system holding the perpetrators to account. People also have reported that because the perpetrators are often under-age, under the age of 18, they do not feel that true justice will be handed down to the perpetrators and the perpetrators will be let off. We have heard of instances where the perpetrators have then reoffended after being let off after being caught in the first place.

The CHAIR: Can I ask you a quick question about that? You said that there were some people as young as 13 on apps trying to lure people into locations. What responsibility do you think the owners of the apps have in ensuring that people are of age to be on them? I know that there are laws that have been passed by the federal Parliament around this, but obviously there are still some gaps there where people under the age of 18 – or 16, I should say – are still getting through. What obligations do you think companies have in that space?

Chad HUGHES: It is a good question. The apps themselves are the platform that is being used; they are not the cause of the problem. The perpetrators are the young people. But when somebody goes onto such a dating app and the dating app is designed for and communicated as being for people above the age of 18, the person using the app should, you know, rightly believe that the person that they are engaging with is of age and 18. There are good reasons for keeping young people off these apps: (1) to protect young people from being on platforms that are designed for adults and (2) to put a hold on this kind of luring behaviour where young people idealise an ideology that they may be seeing online on YouTube or wherever, which is encouraging this kind of behaviour, and then are using these apps as a platform to reach out to people in our communities and to target them. I think there is a lot of work to be done with the owners of these apps, in particular, about regulating them. I am not sure that is the complete answer, because I think people will find a workaround, but it is

definitely a discussion to be had to tighten the controls around these apps to make sure that young people have less access to getting on them and misusing them. Do you want to add to that, Caleb?

Caleb HAWK: Yes. I agree with everything that Chad said, but the reality is social media are tools, right? And they are essentially sentiment-agnostic. I think it is around designing them better, and I think there is a level of accountability that needs to be there. But it is much broader than that. I mean, young people are finding ways to other platforms, not just Grindr – and they have moved to others since then. So it is just something we need to be mindful of. It is not a spot fire solution, I think.

The CHAIR: Yes. I mean, as you quite rightly say, it is a tool that is used, and as you say, it is agnostic. But if the tool can better filter people that are not genuine people – that are under-age – I would have thought that that would rest with the owner of that app or website or whatever it might be that is facilitating that. Is that a fair –

Caleb HAWK: I think, yes, definitely. Part of that responsibility is the owner. Yes, you are right.

The CHAIR: I have only got 10 seconds left, but what sorts of things would you like to see change in that space, in particular?

Caleb HAWK: Advances in age verification.

The CHAIR: Age verification?

Caleb HAWK: Yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. All right. Thank you. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Thanks for joining us. I will acknowledge that I have worked with some of you in professional capacities previously. Chad, I might start with you. It is a very difficult question, I suspect – but 95 reported attacks. From your best estimate, how many attacks have actually happened?

Chad HUGHES: Oh, it is a good question, Michael. You know, both of our organisations are trusted by the community. When they have moments of acute trauma, they do come either to Switchboard or to us, typically. There are others out in the community that also provide such support; our community organisations are central to that. We talk to a lot of people who have stories, who really, even with a lot of encouragement, will probably never go forward to the police for a range of reasons. So part of what we are asking for here is a system for us to be able to count the true number and to be able to work with that so that we have got the correct data to address it. I would not put a figure to it necessarily, Michael, but it is far more than the 95.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And this is obviously not just an issue in Victoria or indeed Australia, is it?

Caleb HAWK: No. Our understanding working with VicPol is that it is actually in every state and jurisdiction in Australia and includes New Zealand.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Can you talk to any of the patterns that you see across the states, whether it is particular rises and falls of the numbers of attacks that you are hearing about or any sorts of particular locations or hotspots?

Chad HUGHES: I think the patterns of luring people into locations, often out in public spaces at night-time, and then a group emerging from the darkness and abusing them is quite common. The ideologies behind why people do that are reported differently in different jurisdictions, but irrespective of the ideology, they are ideologies that target our communities with hate and also target women with misogyny and the like. What we are asking is that that part of the system, going forward, addresses the people who are feeding those ideologies to young people in our state and in our country.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I do want to come back to the ideologies if I have time, but I might ask both of you: within Victoria – and I know this can happen and has happened across many different parts of the state – where is it most commonly occurring in Victoria?

Caleb HAWK: As far as our understanding goes – and again, we have to work really closely with VicPol on this, because that is largely where we get most of our data from, aside from the anecdotal evidence – I think what we hear most commonly is outer metro. That is not to say that it does not happen in inner metro; there have definitely been records of accounts of that there, and regional Victoria. But outer metro is the most common location.

Jenna TUKE: Yes. Outer north and outer south-east, and I think there was also a cluster in Fitzroy. But we actually believe that it is happening very broadly across metropolitan and regional areas. And while the location data that we have often comes from Victoria Police, when we are speaking with community members we are often hearing of stories like they are moving chats off Grindr or whatever app they are using onto other sorts of apps like Snapchat. And I have heard several stories of offenders turning up to someone's home several days after an offence, kind of –

Michael GALEA: The victim-survivor perhaps does not realise that, unless you change it, Snapchat gives out your location.

Jenna TUKE: Yes, because they have been able to trace the location using a different app.

Caleb HAWK: The specificity of the platform can change for geolocation.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. And just diving a bit deeper into that, Jenna, we have had some examples, and you have just given another one. What is the typical experience of people who are calling, for example, the MAPPS line? What is the typical experience that they have had?

Jenna TUKE: Obviously any kind of statement of 'typical' is generalising, and I do not want to flatten the individual experiences, but generally we are certainly hearing from gay and bisexual men, but we are also hearing from other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. But if we are talking about the app-based violence, what we are hearing is that there is a sort of targeted, almost like a grooming engagement, a sort of encouragement to meet up in a public place. There is an entrapment pattern. There is often physical violence, recording and often threats of extortion. We have heard a lot of stories of people who have been contacted after the offence and asked to deposit tens of thousands of dollars in an account: 'Otherwise, this video will be shared with everyone in your contacts. It will be shared with family overseas.' We have certainly seen a pattern of overseas students being targeted from home countries where homosexuality is illegal and they could face the death penalty. The family implications for those people are absolutely massive. So we have had callers on our phone going, 'I've got until 10 o'clock tonight, and if I don't give them this money, they've said they're going to release this to everyone in my contacts, including family overseas.' We are hearing those types of stories quite frequently. We believe that the offenders – look, we are hypothesising at this point because the data is, you know, anecdotal. It is what individuals are telling us. But it does appear that they may be targeting people who they think are not out and for whom the kind of consequences of being outed as gay or queer will be greater, and thus their kind of power to extort and threaten and intimidate is much greater.

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

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli, I will hand over to you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for appearing as part of this inquiry process. I want to acknowledge the statements that you have already made, the power in what has been said to this committee and the importance of what you have shared with us so far. With the limited time I have I might begin with Thorne Harbour Health. Just looking at part of the submission that you made, you do talk a little bit about restorative justice in this area, and of course there will be justice responses and reforms recommended I imagine in that area to reflect the types of targeted behaviours that are occurring and being perpetrated against LGBTQIA+ people. But it is this idea of radicalisation and deradicalisation that I would like to explore a little bit more. Where does restorative justice fit in?

Chad HUGHES: To me it fits in in the sense that, as Jenna set the scene, this is not something that has just started in the last two years. The modality is new, but the hatred against our people from our communities has been with humans for generations and centuries. There are people in this state who have a history of being criminalised for being homosexual, and that history lingers large in their lives but also carries through to the new generations, who carry that burden of trust in the systems, trust in police, trust in the justice system to look

after us and that it is a safe place for us to go with our stories that are very personal and when people are in a very vulnerable state. Having restorative justice to undo some of those historical harms is the state setting a relatively low cost precedent that the state acknowledges the role it has historically played in undermining our communities' trust in police and in systems and will have a huge effect going forward for building that trust, which will help people come forward and confidently tell their story to the police. It is not the full picture. It is one of the recommendations that we make. It needs to be alongside capacity building of the police to identify hate crimes and to be able to deal with those as they arise, including our recommendation to have a specific hate crimes unit within the police.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Does Switchboard potentially have anything to add in this space?

Maya ELLAZAM: In addition to those responses, if we are thinking about justice for our communities, restorative justice is really important. If we think about what it means to do justice more broadly, something that I also think about in regard to what others have shared and what we were talking about around the drivers of this and features of this violence is that social isolation is a huge factor here, as well as feelings of shame and stigma and also these historical experiences and the histories of our communities. So when we are speaking about what it means to do justice, it is also about promoting community connection. It is about putting resources within our communities' hands to be able to live the lives and thrive in the ways that we need to, it is about rupturing shame and it is about making a really clear and coordinated effort across our response sector, across government, across policing systems to at a really foundational level address the drivers of this, which are the institutional homophobia, transphobia and racism that we see, which still are really pervasive and impact people's ability to come forward, to feel connected and to actually seek support when acts of violence do occur as well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The word 'manosphere' has already been used this morning. Chad, in your contribution you mentioned it. What are you speaking to specifically when you use a word like that?

Chad HUGHES: We are speaking to the experiences particularly of younger males online in platforms that they use, like social media – TikTok, YouTube, Instagram – where there are influencers, often from outside of this country, who are having an impact on the ideologies of young men and boys. These exacerbate ideas around misogyny and that women are less than them, which are very problematic and we need to address, and that people from our LGBTIQ+ communities are less than them and not worthy of rights or dignity, and other people from different races and religions. That needs to be addressed by society. We do not have all the solutions to that, but it is part of the cause of why these people are then doing it. Those online manosphere platforms also often provide advice and encouragement and demonstrations of ways to commit these crimes, to film them and to put them up online with the objective that the people who are perpetrating them get the likes and the validation for having done that from that international community of young people, often without, because they are very young, really understanding the true impact and detriment of that crime upon the victims and upon broader society and how much of an impact the thing that they are doing is actually going to cause.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Mrs Hermans, over to you.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you. And thank you for what you have shared today. I have had to look up quite a few things as we have been talking; I am in unfamiliar territory. I just wanted to double-check: was it 2084 that you said that the laws changed? Was it 2084?

Jenna TUKE: 1981. Homosexuality was –

Ann-Marie HERMANS: 1984. Sorry, that is what I meant to say.

Jenna TUKE: In 1981 we had the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Victoria.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: 1981. Okay. Yes, that is right – 1981. Thank you. That is quite a long time ago. One of the questions I wanted to ask is: are these crimes – I am not even familiar with Grindr, so I just had to go and look up Grindr, and I do apologise.

Caleb HAWK: No apology needed.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I represent probably a large percentage of the community where this is just not part of their life, so I am trying to understand. What age group is this largely occurring in, these crimes? There is obviously an age group that has been pinpointed for committing the crimes. Is there an age group largely that you are finding in your clients, the people that are coming forward? Does it tend to be in a particular age group that you are seeing it emerge?

Caleb HAWK: Whilst we do not have the full data, we know that in some jurisdictions it is different. There are reports in New South Wales that were made public that there were a lot more younger victims. In Victoria I think when we look at the people that are willing to come forward, that kind of identifies something there. A lot of the clients that we have built up long trust with will tend to be a little bit older as a result, because they have a longer relationship with us and we do have that social currency with them. So that is not necessarily reflective of everyone that is impacted, but more the people that are willing to come forward to us.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Which is what age group?

Caleb HAWK: I would say anywhere from kind of late 30s through to early 60s.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I represent the south-east. I am very familiar with the crimes in the south-east. I have not been aware of specific targeting. When you mentioned machete attacks, teenagers and brutal ways of humiliating people, to me, this represents crime across the south-east. We have, for instance, in the south-east and in aspects that you have mentioned – and you have hinted at cultural things – some of the highest domestic violence rates in the nation taking place in places like Clyde North, for instance. As a result, a lot of that has come from new migrants and cultural differences. I am struggling to separate this, if you can understand that, because I see this data all the time. Is there something that is specific? Obviously you are alluding to certain videos. I am not aware of those that are actually targeted at particular people or groups. For me, this is just life in the south-east at the moment for people. They are across the board, these machete attacks. They are across the board, these criminal violent attacks. Are you saying that you believe a percentage of these violent attacks are specific to the LGBTIQ community? And if you are saying that, you have come forward with a very small amount of 12 men who were attacked and reported a crime – one regretted it –

Caleb HAWK: That was just in one community forum.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: So what percentage would you say you believe in the south-east, for example, are the result of these hate crimes?

Chad HUGHES: I am not sure of the exact percentage. What we are saying is that all assault is assault and should be dealt with by the law, as you as you state. What we are acknowledging in this state, because we do not have aggravated assaults around hate crimes, is that when somebody commits the assault on the basis that the victim has a characteristic – be that their race, their religion, their disability, their HIV status, their sexuality or their gender orientation – that assault should be treated of a higher degree as an aggravated assault on the basis of the hate that comes behind that. The reason that this is important for the system and also for the victim is that it acknowledges it. It helps us to collect the data that you are asking for to help us see the true magnitude of the problem.

Caleb HAWK: It is demonstrated prejudice as well. In the records we have people using homophobic slurs. They are being selected based on platform because of the profile of that platform. So it is demonstrated prejudice at multiple steps in the videos. People are asked to repeat denigrating statements that are specific to their identity and protected characteristics.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I just did not get a number on that. What are we talking about? How many videos are we referring to here? The number of people here is very low: 12 men attacked.

Jenna TUKE: We can come back to you with specific data.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes, I would appreciate that.

Jenna TUKE: Victoria Police will provide specific data.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: That would be helpful.

Jenna TUKE: I guess what we know is that the example of two out of 12 was given from a particular community forum: where 12 people publicly spoke about their experience, only two had reported to police. That is clearly less than 10 per cent of the people present had reported – my maths is terrible there. What we know is this is a very under-reported crime. I guess what we know, if we think about any form of sexual violence, is that there are very low rates of reporting. One of you asked a question earlier around the barriers to reporting. Often the barriers are fear of not being believed, fear of being blamed and fear of losing control over who knows about what happened to you. If you think about the nature of these specific offences, we know that queer people have a history in engaging with police of experiencing violence directly from police historically, but also we know that for survivors of sexual violence, particularly if they have hooked up with someone on an app with the intention of hooking up and they then experience sexual violence, the risk of victim blaming is enormous – you know, ‘What did you expect? You went to meet someone for sex.’ Straight women, queer women – people experience that all the time. We know that there are very high levels of sexual offences perpetrated in the general community, in the straight community, and we also know that meet-ups through apps are a very common way for offenders to kind of facilitate sexual assault. We also know the victim-survivors are often blamed for that.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Are we talking about sexual assault now, not violent assault?

Jenna TUKE: Sexual assault is a component of these offences.

The CHAIR: I do not mean to interrupt that conversation, but I have got to keep on time. Mr Batchelor, over to you.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you, Chair, and thanks to all of you for coming in and giving your evidence today. I just want to clarify for my purposes your recommendations about the changes to the *Crimes Act*. You are proposing or recommending that there be a circumstance of aggravation if in the commissioning of the crime it is undertaken for selection of a certain characteristic. Would that be a fair summary?

Chad HUGHES: That is correct, yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Right. We have obviously got the commission of the crime itself and the assault. There is the element in these attacks of the recording, the humiliation and the threats but also the function that the act itself is having in a separate online conversation about spreading further hate. Can you talk a little bit about how that is manifesting? Then I might ask you some questions about the legal framework around that.

Chad HUGHES: Do you want to touch on that?

Caleb HAWK: Sure. Sorry, can you just clarify the question?

Ryan BATCHELOR: People are being lured; there are assaults taking place. Those assaults are being filmed. What is happening to the film? There is obviously the extortion element, but is there a broader sort of –

Caleb HAWK: Yes, there is. There is a trend called ‘post and boast’ where basically online, oftentimes in things like a Reddit feed or a similar platform, people are basically encouraged. They are basically copycat scenarios. You build up social currency by posting these videos that you have acquired, and not just acquired but you have produced, because you have perpetrated this violence. Oftentimes that is why we also see groups perpetrate this. This is very rarely a one-to-one scenario. It is usually multiple people that are meeting one victim. I know that some of the people that have been charged with the 95 reported cases that we have had here in Victoria are oftentimes responsible for multiple incidents. It is part of a movement online. You know, honestly, when we first heard about it, it sort of seemed crazy that you would post what could essentially be evidence. I think that really speaks to the fact that you have young people who are getting on board with an ideology and not understanding the true consequences of what they are undertaking.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Last year the Parliament passed laws in circumstances of post and boast that add an additionality in terms of an additional criminal offence and additional sentencing. Do those laws apply to this conduct?

Caleb HAWK: It could, but not always. And I guess the concern there is that it does not cover all of the instances.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Where does it apply and where doesn't it apply? So we can understand as a committee – we are trying to make recommendations, particularly on the post-and-boast element. How much of the current law covers these circumstances and how much of it does not?

Caleb HAWK: To get to the finer detail I would probably have to respond back in writing after the hearing, but I guess my understanding is there are limitations around the number of perpetrators. If there is not a quota met, for instance, in some instances, it does not apply, which is ineffective in that regard.

Ryan BATCHELOR: It would be helpful to the committee I think if you could provide to us, further to today's appearance, any analysis of that particular element, looking at the 2025 bill that was passed, those changes to the *Crimes Act* on post and boast in particular and whether you think the law as written and in effect today is sufficient to cover these sorts of circumstances or whether any further amendment may be required.

Caleb HAWK: I think on our recommendation, the one thing I would highlight is around the idea – we talk about aggravated offences and then the sentencing around that, because at the moment there is sort of a gap where the charges are not actually reflected in the sentencing. Furthermore, they are not reflected in the ongoing record, so that if someone subsequently does another prejudice-motivated crime, the sentencing judge or whatnot that is sentencing in a later instance does not have a record of that.

Ryan BATCHELOR: That is because the way these crimes are recorded at the moment is silent on the hate crime nature –

Caleb HAWK: That is exactly right.

Ryan BATCHELOR: and it is just recorded as a common assault, so it is not available in the future? Right.

Caleb HAWK: The prejudice motivation and the victim targeting are not captured.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Okay. No worries. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will now go to our committee members online. I will first go to Ms Gray-Barberio. Anasina, over to you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you all for appearing before us today. Mr Hughes, I want to start with you. You said the modality is new but the hatred is still there. How much worse is it now with digital app-facilitated violence?

Chad HUGHES: Our communities have been targeted with hate from other members of society for generations – forever. And what we are talking about now is a new modality that we are seeing where the apps are the platform in which people are lured and then become victims and also where online platforms are used then to humiliate and to share that. I think all crimes against people from our communities, historical or current, are bad, and it has been going on for a long time. What we are talking about today in our submission is specifically this new modality and whether as a state we can find ways to address the ideologies at the cause and to improve our policing and justice system, to be able to protect people going forward.

The CHAIR: Jenna.

Jenna TUKE: Can I just very quickly add to that. I want to say that in my view it is worse. We are seeing more violence and we are seeing worse violence over the last couple of years than we have seen over the last decade or so. We are seeing an increasing – in my view, an emboldening – kind of public violence. We are seeing much more hate speech, many more attacks on our community. We are seeing a backwards slide internationally in the legal rights and protections that LGBTIQ+ people have around the world. And I think that we are seeing very clearly in Australia an increase in criticism of our community and an increase in attacks on our legal rights and entitlements, access to health care. We see that from our elected officials at times – recently quite publicly – and that is contributing to the violence. It is an emboldening environment for people using violence.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: No, I totally appreciate your point there around the emboldening coming from certain actors in the political discourse. But I just want to come back to what you said earlier, Mr Hughes: that Victoria Police does not even have a hate crimes unit. Hate crime attacks are considered assaults – they are

not even classified as a hate crime – which is quite disturbing to hear, because when you look at other jurisdictions around the country, Queensland has a hate crimes unit, and New South Wales also has something similar. So your recommendation around exploring Victoria Police having a hate crimes unit is actually really important, because there is so much under-reporting. It is not just in your submissions, it is a theme that is occurring quite strongly in a lot of things – under-reporting and low trust in the police and the justice system. This is probably why we cannot pinpoint certain areas where these hate crimes are actually flourishing under the shadows of group attacks and so on.

I do not have a long time to go. The Labor government has appointed a Minister for Men and Boys to address these issues of radicalisation and the manosphere, misogyny et cetera. Have you met with the minister to address these issues, and what has the response been?

Chad HUGHES: I have not met with him yet. I have a meeting with his adviser on these matters in the coming weeks, and I will be meeting with Ed soon also to talk about it.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay. And you will be also recommending some of these issues that you have made in your submission, correct?

Chad HUGHES: Yes, we will.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Ms Tuke, will you be meeting with the Minister for Men and Boys as well to address these really concerning and important issues?

Jenna TUKE: I have not yet had the opportunity to meet with them, but yes, that is our intention. Thank you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you so much. I realise my time is about to expire.

The CHAIR: You were right on point there, Anasina, so well done with your timing. Ms Watt, are you online there at all?

Sheena WATT: Yes. Hello, Chair. I am having connectivity challenges, so can I cede my time to the Deputy Chair, please?

The CHAIR: We can certainly go back and put that in. Thanks so much, Sheena, and we will try to make sure that you can participate more fulsomely in the future. I might just put it into the general pool if that is all right, because one person cannot cede to another. We will just go back, and I might just do a whole heap of 2-minute sections for each person. Michael, do you want to go first and ask, and then I will go to Aiv and I will go to myself.

Michael GALEA: Jenna, before you spoke about hesitating in calling them the Grindr attacks because it is implying it is the platform and not the perpetrators. Am I also right, though, that it is not just being facilitated on Grindr, it is also on other apps?

Jenna TUKE: Correct. It is happening across a number of platforms, yes. And we are also seeing increasing levels of public violence, yes.

Michael GALEA: And if I can put again to both groups: have you had any engagement with these apps, such as Grindr or other similar apps, and what has the engagement been from them?

Caleb HAWK: It has largely been facilitated through third parties, whether that be through VicPol or through the eSafety Commissioner's office. We did have some success, especially with getting safety messaging out in the early days with push notifications – so that when people come onto the app, there is a push notification around 'There is an increased level of violence at the moment; be careful around that.' But it varies to some degree. These are platforms that have offices overseas, so it can be very tricky at times.

Michael GALEA: Indeed, and we do have one of them appearing before us tomorrow, which will give us a good opportunity to discuss this with them. We have not got the federal eSafety Commissioner appearing; she has declined to appear before this inquiry. Have you had any engagement with her office, and is there any particular role that you think the federal eSafety Commissioner should be playing with these attacks?

Caleb HAWK: We have had some contact with them. We have had a relationship with them as they have developed resources and tools more broadly for safety online. I think that one of the things that we should be able to lean into is that they do have an expertise and that they are focused on this, day in and day out. It is a changing landscape as new platforms emerge, as technology evolves – everyone here is familiar with some of those things, like AI and face recognition – so I think that there is a role with that expertise to inform what we respond to.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Just touching on your earlier remarks, Caleb, about age verification as a tool to keep the right people on and the wrong people off these apps, how do we balance that – as we know, many people are very much quiet about their sexuality – and do so in a way that is not then just pushing them further underground into perhaps even less safe online environments?

Caleb HAWK: It is a balancing act. I think you have got to respond to each, I guess, for lack of a better term, battleground in a different way. I think for time limit, it has landed on age verification, but I also think reporting pathways, and there are a lot of platforms. There was a round table last week in Sydney that I attended that was discussing how we look at reporting pathways on platform to take these reports more seriously.

Michael GALEA: Sorry, I realise I am at my time, but can I briefly ask you what that would look like. And feel free to come back if there is a more fulsome answer you want to give.

Caleb HAWK: Just as a small example, a lot of times if you are reporting an incident online, you are stuck with maybe a free text box and a few ‘select from the list above’. We have plenty of technology there that could catch more qualitative data and more informed data with things that people would use. You can record your voice, and we can see transcription is improving dramatically in recent years. I think there are things like that where we could capture more holistic and qualitative data to understand these assaults in a more comprehensive way.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli, over to you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Chair. I am going to go back to Switchboard. I think it was in your opening remarks you spoke about how we cannot just police our way out of this issue. Obviously there are the justice elements we have spoken to this morning. Beyond that policing element, though, what do we need to see in place to both prevent and respond to this radicalisation that is occurring, driving people to commit these types of offences?

Jenna TUKE: Thank you for picking up on that point. Can I invite you to speak to that?

Maya ELLAZAM: Sure. Thank you. We know that we need effective response for our communities who are impacted by this violence. As Jenna mentioned, we know that there is that facilitated violence, but we know that violence against our communities is a lot broader than that at the moment, particularly when it comes to trans and gender-diverse communities’ experiences of increased online hate. I think something like 49 per cent of trans and gender-diverse people have experienced online hate since the year 2020. We saw neo-Nazis protesting on the steps of the Victorian Parliament in 2023, all of these things that lead our communities to feel really unsafe. We need effectively resourced organisational responses and support options for our communities, such as through trusted community organisations like Switchboard and Thorne Harbour Health. We also need effectively coordinated prevention strategies, and we know that our communities need to be at the centre of those. We know that through effectively resourcing community-led organisations where LGBTIQ+ expertise and a diversity of LGBTIQ+ expertise is included and centred, our communities can be effectively represented in the response to this violence and the prevention of it, working across government systems, with police, with everyone to effectively coordinate something that will meet our community’s needs as opposed to just trying to, I guess, respond to individual incidents of violence, really looking at the broader drivers, looking at how we can create an integrated system that adequately responds to institutional homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, racism as the key drivers of this violence.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I have got a couple of quick questions. I want to talk more about the threats that are posed to people. As you said, they are sort of used as an extortion mechanism. Whether it is to expose them at work or to family or whether there is a religious bent to that, it is really sick sort of stuff. Sometimes that comes from, as you say, young teenagers, but sometimes it can come from other people in the community that are trying to threaten someone that might not be fully open or out with their own sexuality. Have you had many experiences with that sort of thing? Jenna, for example – both, if you want to respond to that – how do you support someone through that? I actually do not care where the violence and the threats come from, I think it should stop. Whether it is from teenagers or whether it is from other people in the LGBTIQ+ community, it is disgusting.

Jenna TUKE: It is disgusting.

The CHAIR: How do you deal with it when it is people within the community itself that are the perpetrators?

Jenna TUKE: That indeed can happen. We offer two helplines. I think when people can call an anonymous service, that offers a degree of safety to be able to really talk about experiences like that. I guess with any community, sometimes there will be differences of perspective and opinion. I guess our view would be that outing someone against their will is a form of violence that is not okay. Working with an individual, we would support them in their individual experience, which is listening, helping them identify what supports they are going to find helpful, affirming their right to choose who they come out to and in what circumstances – affirming individual rights and choices. It is a form of violence to out someone. The threat of outing is something we would say is a tool of family violence quite often.

Chad HUGHES: We do have a small amount of money to address family violence in our communities. That is often working with the perpetrators of that violence to change their behaviour. That is not addressing the sort of more broad community violence which is coming at us; that is about working with families and individuals. That is useful but not necessarily going to solve the problem we are talking about today.

The CHAIR: No, that is fair enough. Thank you. All right. I guess that brings us to the end of our time today. I really appreciate the time you have taken to give evidence today. As I said, you will get a proof version of the transcript once it has been finalised in draft format for you to have a look over. But from us, thanks very much for your time today. Appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.