



Legislative Assembly
Legal and Social Issues Committee

Volume 1 | Crossing the line

Coercion and harm in high-control groups

Inquiry into the recruitment methods
and impacts of cults and organised
fringe groups

July 2026



Acknowledgements

Traditional owners

The Committee acknowledges First Nations people as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the various lands in Victoria and pays respects to Elders past and present.

Victims and survivors

The Committee recognises and honours the remarkable strength, resilience and courage of all victim-survivors, secondary victims and affected communities.

We extend our sincere gratitude to everyone who has shared their personal experiences and stories with us. Each contribution, whether provided privately or publicly, has been integral to our work and the development of our findings and recommendations.

The Committee pays its respects to those who did not survive and to their loved ones.

A note on content

The Committee acknowledges that this Report contains sensitive information that may be distressing to read, especially for those whose experiences are directly or indirectly referenced. Please take care of yourself and read this Report with consideration to your own wellbeing.

If you or someone you know needs support, see the final pages of this Report for information of available support services. These are also available on the Committee's website: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg>



Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee

Volume 1 | Crossing the line

Coercion and harm in high-control groups

Inquiry into the recruitment methods
and impacts of cults and organised
fringe groups

July 2026

Published by order, or
under the authority, of the
Parliament of Victoria
July 2026

ISBN 978 0 908262 82 3 (print version)
ISBN 978 0 908262 83 0 (PDF version)
This report is available on the Committee's website:
parliament.vic.gov.au/lisic-la

Committee membership



CHAIR
Ella George MP
Lara



DEPUTY CHAIR
Annabelle Cleeland MP
Euroa



Chris Couzens MP
Geelong



John Lister MP
Werribee



Cindy McLeish MP
Eildon



Meng Heang Tak MP
Clarinda
(from 18 June 2026)



Jackson Taylor MP
Bayswater
(until 17 June 2026)



Rachel Westaway MP
Pahran

About the Committee

Functions

The Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee is established under the Legislative Assembly Standing Orders Chapter 24—Committees.

The Committee's functions are to inquire into and report on any proposal, matter or thing connected with—

- the Department of Families Fairness and Housing
- the Department of Health
- the Department of Government Services
- the Department of Justice and Community Safety
- the Department of Premier and Cabinet and related agencies.

Secretariat

The Committee is supported by a Secretariat team.

Contact details

Address Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne Victoria 3002

Phone +61 3 8682 2843

Email lsic.assembly@parliament.vic.gov.au

Web parliament.vic.gov.au/lsic-la

About the Report

The Report has two volumes.

Volume 1: *Crossing the line* explains the Committee's analysis of coercive high-control groups. It describes how these groups operate, the harms identified in the evidence, and the Committee's recommendations to the Victorian Government.

Volume 2: *In their words* shares the experiences of people directly affected by coercive high-control groups and those close to them. It describes how people are recruited, the impacts on them, and common patterns of behaviour that support the Report's findings and recommendations.

Contents | Volume 1

Preliminaries

Committee membership	ii
About the Committee	iii
About the Report	iv
Terms of reference	xiii
Chair's foreword	xv
Executive summary	xix
Findings and recommendations	xxxiii
From inquiry to government response: what happens	lvii
Acronyms and terms	lix

How the Committee approached a complex task 1

Scope of Inquiry	2
How the Inquiry gathered evidence	3
Avoiding naming groups in this Report	6
Why terminology matters	6
Considerations when examining evidence	7
Centring lived experience	7
Avoiding unintended consequences on rights and freedoms	8
Focusing on behaviours, not beliefs	9

Part 1 | Why is understanding coercive high-control groups important? 11

1.1 We need to build a more informed community	13
1.1.1 Challenging common misconceptions	13
1.1.2 It can happen to anyone	15
1.1.3 Making hidden harm visible	16
1.2 We need to use neutral language to support effective reform	17
1.3 We need to improve system access and responses	19

Part 2 | Consistent patterns of control and the harms they cause 23

2.1 Types of coercive high-control groups	25
2.1.1 Religious/spiritual	27
2.1.2 "Doomsday"/apocalyptic	28
2.1.3 Personality driven/"cult-of-one"	28
2.1.4 Other types of coercive high-control groups	29

2.2	The blurred lines between group types	29
2.3	Common characteristics and harmful dynamics	30
2.3.1	Authoritarian, centralised leadership structures	32
2.3.2	Dependency	32
2.3.3	Ideological purity	33
2.3.4	Manipulation	33
2.3.5	Surveillance, shaming and shunning	34
2.3.6	Isolation and restrictions	35
2.3.7	Fear-based narratives	36
2.3.8	Financial exploitation	36
2.4	Recruitment	38
2.4.1	Recruitment methods used by coercive high-control groups	41
2.4.2	Recruitment tactics used by coercive high-control groups	42
2.4.3	Recruitment is not a single identifiable event	43
2.4.4	Most people enter through family or trusted relationships	44
	Family-based pathways	44
	Trusted relationships pathways	45
2.4.5	Deception is key and indoctrination is gradual	46
2.4.6	Vulnerabilities are targeted and exploited	48
2.4.7	Online recruitment enables reach, anonymity and rapid escalation	51
2.5	Impacts on individuals and families	53
2.5.1	Psychological harm is pervasive, persistent and non-linear	58
	Impacts of fear-based narratives and punishment	58
	Impacts of losing autonomy, self-trust and identity	59
	Impacts of strict ideological purity	61
	Impacts of shunning/excommunication and shaming	62
	Impacts of long-term exposure	65
	Leaving is not the end of the psychological harm	66
2.5.2	Physical harm can be used to enforce control and compliance	68
	Physical violence	69
	Sexual violence and abuse	70
	Medical neglect	72
	Other forms of physical harm	74
2.5.3	Imposing personal restrictions creates dependency	75
	Forced tithing or financial contributions increases dependency and control	78
2.5.4	Women and girls often face unique harms and impacts	81
2.5.5	Families experience distinct harms	83
2.5.6	Broader impacts on communities	85

2.6	Importance of lived experience expertise in responding to harms	91
2.6.1	Ensuring diverse lived experience representation	93

Part 3 | Reforming the law to respond to group-based coercion **97**

3.1	Identifying coercive behaviours in high-control groups	99
3.1.1	Conduct-based indicators of a genuine, safe and supportive group	100
	International alignment with conduct-based approaches	100
3.1.2	Group-based coercion as a pattern of conduct, not isolated acts	102
3.2	Coercive behaviour: scope and meaning	104
3.2.1	Coercive behaviour	104
3.2.2	Coercive control	106
3.2.3	Understanding the spectrum of influence	107
	Distinguishing healthy influence from coercive behaviour	108
3.3	Existing legal responses to coercive control in family violence settings	111
3.3.1	Victoria: <i>Family Violence Protection Act 2008</i> (Vic)	111
3.3.2	Other Australian jurisdictions: stand-alone coercive control offences	112
3.3.3	Overlap between coercive control and coercive high-control group behaviours	114
	Isolation	115
	Restrictions on movement	116
	Technology abuse and surveillance	116
3.4	Thinking beyond family violence	117
3.4.1	Family violence legislation is fit for purpose within its intended scope	119
3.4.2	Risks of extending family violence framework to group-based coercion	120
3.5	Rationale for a group-based coercion offence	122
3.5.1	Criminal justice system's capacity to identify and respond to group-based coercive conduct	124
	Limits of a criminal justice response focused on discrete, identifiable acts	124
	The totality of experience is excluded from individual criminal proceedings	125
	Reliance on related offences offers only limited pathways to justice	126
	Evidentiary barriers	129
	Under-recognition of group-based coercion	131
	Should the focus be on better enforcement of existing laws?	132

3.5.2	Key cautions in designing a group-based coercion offence	134
3.5.3	International insight: France	136
3.6	Designing an appropriate group-based coercion offence	140
3.6.1	Defining group-based coercion	140
3.6.2	Key components necessary to establish the offence	141
	Intent and culpability	142
	Apparent consent is not a defence	143
	Limitation periods	144
3.6.3	Positioning the offence within a broader system response	146
	Civil and pre-criminal mechanisms	146
	Protection orders	146
	Multi-agency response	149
3.7	Further work is required to get the law right	152
3.7.1	Preventing unintended consequences	152
3.7.2	Matters appropriate for referral to the Victorian Law Reform Commission	153
3.7.3	Co-design with lived experience and broader community consultation	154
Part 4 	Improving protections for children and young people	159
4.1	The unique risks for children and young people	161
4.1.1	Dependence on adults who participate in or allow harm	162
4.1.2	Isolation from external systems	163
4.2	Distinct impacts on children and young people	166
4.3	Developmental and psychological harm	167
4.3.1	Identity is constructed according to the group	169
4.3.2	Protective relationships are displaced or absent	172
4.3.3	Ordinary childhood experiences are denied or limited	173
4.3.4	Trust is eroded often leading to difficulties in forming healthy relationships	175
4.3.5	Educational disadvantages and limited life skills	176
	Educational disadvantage	176
	Lack of life skills	178
4.3.6	Impacts are often cumulative and lifelong	180
4.4	Physical harm	183
4.5	Child sexual abuse	184
4.6	Intergenerational harm	187
4.7	Reframing ‘recruitment’: how children and young people become involved in coercive high-control groups	188
4.7.1	Experiences of children born into coercive high-control groups	189

4.7.2	Experiences of children brought in by parents or carers	191
4.7.3	Targeting at-risk young people	192
4.7.4	The absence of informed consent	192
4.8	Barriers to detecting harm and accessing support for children and young people	195
4.8.1	Children may not display visible or apparent indicators of harm	195
4.8.2	Home schooling can isolate children from external oversight	196
4.8.3	Harm towards children and young people is underreported and mandatory reporting obligations are often not met	197
4.8.4	Data gaps contribute to system invisibility	198
4.9	Victoria's child protection and safety frameworks	202
4.9.1	Reportable Conduct Scheme	203
	Scope of the Scheme	204
	Obligations to notify the Regulator and investigate reportable conduct	206
	Limitations of disclosure mechanisms and reliance on organisational self-reporting	206
	Limitations where allegations involve the head of entity	207
	Own-motion independent investigations of the Regulator	208
	Improving understanding of sexual misconduct	210
	February 2026 changes to the Reportable Conduct Scheme	212
4.9.2	Child Safe Standards	215
	Scope of the Standards	216
	Limitations of the engagement-dependency model	218
	Symbolic compliance with the Standards by organisations within scope	218
4.9.3	Working with Children Checks	221
	Checks as cover rather than protection	222
	Checks without verified child safe policies provide limited protection	223
	Evasion through structural design	224
	Areas addressed by recent reforms	226
4.9.4	Child Protection	228
	Children presenting as safe	229
	Limitations of existing education and detection frameworks	230
	Lack of specialised capability and data	231
4.10	Developing indicators of group-based coercion in child safety guidance	233

4.11	Strengthening protections for children and young people	240
4.11.1	Building awareness among school-aged children	241
	Respectful Relationships	243
	Including group-based coercion as a discrete element	245
	Non-curriculum based opportunities	246
4.11.2	Building awareness among university and other tertiary students	248
	Orientation week as a key opportunity to raise awareness	250
	Framing awareness around risk indicators and help-seeking behaviours	251
4.11.3	Supporting young people to leave and recover	255
	18–25 cohort: service gaps in the transition to adulthood	255
	Transition and exit support for young people aged 18–25	256
4.11.4	Building trust before crisis: improving proactive engagement	259
	International insight: New Zealand and Canada	261
 Part 5 Other opportunities to address the harms caused by coercive high-control groups		267
5.1	Better support: improving service system responses	269
5.1.1	Gaps in current support services: a whole-of-system issue	270
5.1.2	Developing shared indicators and risk frameworks for coercive high-control groups	272
	Under-recognition	274
	Language as a barrier to recognition	278
	Group-based coercion requires distinct indicators	279
	Modelling on existing assessment tools	280
	Cultural considerations	281
	Interdependence of indicators and legal reform	282
	Supporting staff to upskill	283
5.1.3	Building cross-agency coordination	284
	Cross-agency coordination	284
	Absence of a clear lead agency	285
	Information sharing	286
	Cross-jurisdictional information sharing	287
5.1.4	System gaps in meeting support needs of people who have left coercive high-control groups	291
	Immediate or crisis support	291
	Role of lived experience peer support	293
	Long-term support needs	296

5.1.5	Strengthening the response of specific frontline services	299
	Psychological and mental health responses	299
	Housing	302
	Victoria Police and frontline workers	302
5.2	Building public understanding and awareness: foundations for prevention	306
	International insight: Austria	309
5.3	Greater protections: strengthening accountability and legal responses	311
5.4	Financial transparency and accountability	312
5.4.1	ACNC enforcement powers are limited	314
5.4.2	ACNC secrecy provisions	315
5.4.3	Basic Religious Charities	317
5.4.4	Productivity Commission, Future foundations for giving recommendations	318
5.5	Modern slavery and forced marriage	323
5.5.1	Modern slavery	323
	Exploitation framed as voluntary participation	324
	The servitude threshold and the reasonable person test	327
	Other workplace laws and regulators	329
5.5.2	Forced marriage	330
5.5.3	Barriers to application in the coercive high-control group context	332
5.6	National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse	335
5.6.1	Barriers to accessing the Scheme	335
5.6.2	Scope limitations	336
5.6.3	Other redress avenues	338
5.7	Civil remedy options (non-financial)	339
5.7.1	Civil penalties and enforceable undertakings for registered organisations	339
5.7.2	Legal aid	340
5.8	Whistleblower protections	342
5.8.1	Challenges in speaking out	342
5.8.2	Applicability of current complaint pathways and whistleblower protections	343
5.9	Future readiness: Preparing for emerging risks	345
5.9.1	Technology and online environments	345
5.9.2	Strengthening evaluation and research	347
5.9.3	Ongoing monitoring and maintaining public awareness	349
	Concluding remarks for <i>Volume 1: Crossing the line</i>	352

Appendices

A	About the Inquiry	353
B	Comparison of Victoria and Australian jurisdictions with standalone coercive control offences	361
C	Alternative text for figures	367

Support services	369

Terms of reference

Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups

On 3 April 2025, the Legislative Assembly agreed to the following motion:

That this House refers an inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control to the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee for consideration and report no later than 30 September 2026.

Chair's foreword

I am pleased to present the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's third report for the 60th Parliament, *Coercion and harm in high-control groups: Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups*. The Report is presented in two volumes: *Volume 1: Crossing the line* and *Volume 2: In their words*.

Throughout this Inquiry, the Committee heard from many people who have lived experience of coercive high-control groups, either directly or through someone they cared about.

This Inquiry brought forward deeply thoughtful and considered evidence. People shared their experiences with clarity, care and purpose, often reflecting on harms that have had lasting effects on their lives.

For many participants, this Inquiry was the first time their experiences had been formally heard and acknowledged. They described this recognition as an important step in their healing. They also expressed a strong hope that the Inquiry's work will help prevent further harm and send a clear message to those currently within coercive environments—that support is available and there is a pathway out to safety.

The scale of engagement with this Inquiry was significant. The Committee received 291 submissions and 317 responses to its anonymous online questionnaire, held eight days of hearings and met with several key stakeholders. The Committee's understanding was further informed by correspondence and informal engagement, which provided additional insight into the behaviours of coercive high-control groups and their impacts on individuals, families and communities. Together, this evidence demonstrates both the complexity of the issues, the strong desire for these experiences to be recognised and addressed, and the need for greater protections.

Many who contributed to the Inquiry had lived experience of coercive high control groups, either directly or through someone they cared about. A consistent theme across their evidence was a motivation to prevent further harm. People came forward not for recognition, but to help others and ensure no one else experiences the same harm. This generosity of purpose has been central to the Inquiry and underpins the findings and recommendations in this Report.

The evidence makes clear that the issue is not belief systems or the presence of strict rules in themselves. Rather, it is intent and behaviour; specifically, the use of coercion, manipulation and control. This distinction is critical. Many groups hold strong beliefs or expect commitment from their members. The conduct considered in this Report is distinguished not by those characteristics, but by the deliberate use of harmful and controlling practices.

A key concern identified by the Committee is the risk that coercive high-control groups pose to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Effective protection relies on the ability to recognise the problem, understand how risk may present in different contexts, and having the capability to respond appropriately. This includes the ability to identify risk where there may be no formal disclosure or report of harm, particularly when a child or young person lacks the language, opportunity, or freedom to seek help. Across all frontline services, the Committee emphasises that being listened to, taken seriously, and believed is a critical foundation for protecting and supporting children and young people affected by coercive and controlling environments.

The Committee heard consistent evidence that many essential support services are not yet sufficiently equipped to identify or respond to harms associated with coercive high-control groups. This is not a reflection on the dedication or capability of individual workers and professionals, who often have limited exposure to these dynamics. Instead, it points to a broader systemic gap in awareness, training and understanding. Addressing this gap will be critical to ensuring that people affected by these harms are identified early, appropriately supported and able to access effective pathways to safety, recovery and long-term wellbeing.

This Inquiry has brought an issue that often remains out of the public view into broader public awareness and national significance. The evidence demonstrates that these harms are not confined by geography or sector. They occur across community settings and, at times, across borders. Increasing awareness is essential, and the Committee's recommendations are intended to support a more informed, coordinated and effective response.

As the Inquiry progressed, growing recognition of the issue also enabled important knowledge sharing across jurisdictions and sectors. For example, I had the opportunity to attend a workshop convened by the NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner examining the intersection between modern slavery and coercive high-control groups. These discussions reinforced the complexity of the harms described in this Report and the importance of coordinated, cross sector efforts to strengthen prevention, support and accountability.

I would like to sincerely thank everyone who contributed to this Inquiry. In particular, I acknowledge the individuals with lived experience who shared deeply personal accounts with the Committee, often for the first time. Your willingness to come forward and place trust in the Committee and in this process has been invaluable. I also recognise the contributions of families, supporters, practitioners, researchers and community organisations, whose insights have strengthened the evidence base and informed the Committee's work. Your contributions have played an important role in the development of this Report and its finding and recommendations.

I wish to thank my fellow Committee Members, Deputy Chair, Annabelle Cleeland MP, Christine Couzens MP, Cindy McLeish MP, John Lister MP, Rachel Westaway MP, Meng Heang Tak MP, and former member, Jackson Taylor MP, for their contributions and dedication to the Inquiry.

On behalf of the Committee, I also extend our gratitude to the Committee Secretariat team and other parliamentary officers who supported this important Inquiry work.

I commend this Report to the Parliament.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ella George". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Ella George MP
Chair

Executive summary

This Report is presented in two complementary volumes.

Volume 1: Crossing the line sets out the Committee's analysis of coercive high-control groups, including how they operate, the nature and extent of the harms identified in the evidence, and the Committee's recommendations to the Victorian Government.

Volume 2: In their words presents the experiences of people with lived experience and those close to them, illustrating the recruitment methods, impacts, and patterns of behaviour that underpin the findings and recommendations of the Report.

Volume 1: Crossing the line

How the Committee approached a complex task

Topics covered include:

- the scope of the Inquiry and how evidence was gathered
- why this Report uses the term 'coercive high-control group' rather than 'cult'
- the importance of centring lived experience
- avoiding unintended consequences for rights and freedoms
- focusing on behaviours, not beliefs.



How the Committee approached the evidence

This Inquiry required the Committee to navigate a genuinely complex task. The subject matter sits at the intersection of deeply personal lived experience, contested language, fundamental rights, and gaps in existing legal and service frameworks. Gathering evidence in a way that was safe and accessible for those most affected, while remaining rigorous and balanced, required deliberate choices about method, terminology and framing.

The Committee gathered evidence through an anonymous questionnaire, written submissions and public hearings. A significant volume of evidence was received confidentially—through anonymous questionnaire responses and confidential submissions—reflecting the real risks many participants told the Committee they faced in speaking about their experiences. Written questions on notice, briefings and meetings with regulatory agencies and other key stakeholders strengthened the evidence base.

It is impossible to know the full extent of coercive high-control groups in Victoria. After formal evidence gathering ended the Committee was made aware of harmful experiences related to groups not identified in the evidence. The Committee also acknowledges gaps in the Inquiry evidence received from First Nations peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and limited evidence from LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Throughout the Inquiry, the Committee was guided by three principles:

- Lived experience must be central, informing how the evidence is understood and shaping the development of analysis at every stage, rather than being treated as peripheral or supplementary.
- Language matters, the terminology used must be precise and consistent, focusing on harmful conduct and its impacts, to avoid inadvertently capturing ordinary or lawful group activity.
- Reform must focus on behaviour rather than belief, as the harm in coercive high-control group settings arises from what groups do, not what they believe, and any response that conflates the two risks over- and under-inclusion.

Part 1: Why is understanding coercive high-control groups important?



Topics covered include:

- common misconceptions about coercive high-control groups
- becoming involved in a coercive high-control group can happen to anyone
- the need for neutral language in any policy reform
- the need to improve existing systems to recognise and respond to harm.

What the Committee heard

Public understanding of coercive high-control groups is often shaped by inaccurate assumptions and misconceptions. For example, that these groups are rare or easily identified, that only certain kinds of people become involved, or that involvement reflects a personal failing. People with lived experience, practitioners and researchers told the Committee that these misconceptions cause real harm: they delay recognition, reduce access to support, and make it harder for those affected to be taken seriously when they seek help.

Inquiry evidence raised consistent concerns about language. The term ‘cult’ is widely used in public discourse but poorly suited to legal or policy settings, where precision and consistency are essential. Evidence identified significant risks in embedding the term in law, including the absence of any agreed definition, potential human rights implications, and the tendency to focus attention on what a group believes rather than what it does. A behaviour-based framework (i.e., one that identifies harmful conduct

regardless of a group's identity, beliefs, or stated purpose) was broadly supported as a more effective and principled foundation for reform.

Existing systems are not consistently equipped to identify or respond to harm arising from coercive high-control group settings. Across family violence, mental health, child protection, education, housing, and policing, Inquiry evidence described a limited shared understanding of how coercion operates in group settings. Without this understanding, harm can go undetected, survivors can be misunderstood, and opportunities for earlier intervention are missed.

What the Committee thinks

Misconceptions about coercive high-control groups are not merely a matter of public awareness, they have direct consequences for whether harm is recognised and whether those affected can access support. A more accurate, widely shared understanding of how coercion and control operates in group settings is a necessary foundation for prevention, intervention, and effective reform.

The Committee is satisfied that the term 'cult' should not be used in legislation or policy reform arising from this Inquiry. The evidence makes clear that a label-based approach risks targeting groups on the basis of identity or belief rather than conduct, and that the legal and human rights risks associated with such an approach are significant. Reforms should be grounded in behaviour-focused language that can be applied consistently, regardless of a group's particular beliefs or identities.

The Committee is concerned that existing systems lack the shared language, training, and frameworks needed to identify coercive high-control group dynamics when they arise. Building that capacity, across sectors and at the frontline, is essential to ensuring that harm is recognised earlier and that those affected can access appropriate support.

Part 2: Consistent patterns of control and the harms they cause



Topics covered include:

- types of coercive high-control groups
- common characteristics and harmful dynamics of coercive high-control groups
- ways coercive high-control groups recruit, including the methods and tactics used
- impacts of coercive high-control groups on individuals, families and communities
- the role of lived experience expertise in shaping reforms related to coercive high-control groups.

What the Committee heard

Coercive high-control groups vary in their beliefs, structures and stated purposes, but show consistent patterns of coercion and control. Inquiry evidence described authoritarian, centralised leadership structures, manufactured dependency, enforced ideological conformity, manipulation, surveillance, isolation, fear-based narratives and financial exploitation. These characteristics do not operate in isolation, rather it is their combination and cumulative application that distinguishes coercive high-control groups from groups with genuine intentions.

Recruitment is gradual, deliberate and sustained, designed to blend into ordinary social life. Most people who shared their personal experiences with the Committee did not perceive themselves as being recruited at all. The majority entered through family members or trusted personal relationships, with recruiters targeting individuals during periods of vulnerability or transition. Coercive high-control groups present as legitimate, familiar or beneficial, with their true intentions concealed until trust and commitment are established. Deception and gradual indoctrination are defining features. Online platforms are a growing recruitment pathway, enabling groups to reach large audiences, operate with anonymity, and accelerate indoctrination while avoiding scrutiny.

The impacts on individuals are serious, wide-ranging and cumulative. At their core is psychological harm—the most prevalent impact reported, experienced by 94.9% of the Inquiry’s questionnaire respondents—including chronic fear, diminished personal autonomy and self-trust, identity loss, and the enduring effects of shunning and excommunication. A significant proportion of lived experience Inquiry evidence also reported physical harm, including physical violence, sexual abuse and medical neglect. These practices are typically used by coercive high-control groups to enforce compliance and are often not visible by those outside group leadership. The imposition of personal restrictions on education, employment, relationships and finances was also a common experience for people involved in coercive high-control groups. These practices entrench dependency and leave many individuals ill-equipped to function independently after leaving.

Inquiry evidence makes clear that harm is not experienced uniformly. Women and girls experience distinct and disproportionate harm, with gendered power structures normalising and exacerbating coercive control, sexual violence and economic dependency. Structural disadvantage, social isolation, language barriers and discrimination can compound vulnerability and harm across diverse communities.

Beyond the individual, families are left with sudden estrangement, prolonged ambiguous grief, and limited pathways for reconnection or support. At a broader level, the community bears significant and ongoing costs, with individuals exiting coercive high-control groups placing demand on housing, health, welfare and other public services. Those costs are not well understood—in part, because the people who have experienced them firsthand have not had a formal voice in how systems are designed to respond. People with lived experience emphasised to the Committee that their

advice and insights are essential to understanding how these groups operate, how harm develops, and where current systems fail to respond effectively.

What the Committee thinks

Coercive high-control groups cause serious, cumulative harm, often with the deliberate intention to control and coerce an individual. Deception, gradual escalation and the targeting of vulnerability are not incidental features; they are the mechanisms through which control is established and maintained. Because no single step appears extreme in isolation and involvement deepens gradually, responsibility is too easily shifted onto individuals rather than recognised as the result of a sustained, systematic strategy of concealment and escalation. Regardless of their stated purpose or belief systems, coercive high-control groups use similar methods to recruit, retain and regulate members, and the psychological, physical and social harms that result are predictable consequences of environments that centralise authority, manufacture dependency, suppress dissent and make exit costly.

The Committee is particularly concerned by Inquiry evidence that physical and sexual violence within these groups is often concealed by group structures, that victims are frequently discouraged from reporting, and that abuse is reframed as spiritual or a disciplinary necessity. The Committee is equally concerned that the personal restrictions imposed on members (i.e., on education, employment, relationships and finances) are not incidental but strategic, creating the conditions of dependency that make leaving feel impossible and reintegration genuinely difficult. These dynamics mean that harm frequently continues well beyond a person's formal involvement with a group, and that the point of exit is often the beginning, not the end, of a person's need for support.

Current systems and services are not consistently equipped to recognise or respond to these dynamics. People exiting coercive high-control groups often present with complex and compounding needs, and because recovery is frequently prolonged and non-linear, responses that do not account for the underlying nature of coercive control in group settings are often inadequate. For many, they are ill-equipped to understand and make decisions in the real world. The costs of this, to individuals, families and the broader community, are significant and largely unquantified.

Addressing this requires ongoing engagement with people who have lived experience to help inform policy design and evaluation, rather than consulted on an ad hoc basis. Victoria has well-established lived experience infrastructure across adjacent policy areas, and a dedicated mechanism for coercive high-control groups, reflecting the diversity of communities affected, would build on that foundation. The Committee's recommendation in this Part reflects these concerns, calling on the Victorian Government to establish a formal lived experience advisory body to co-design, inform and evaluate reforms addressing the impacts of coercive high-control groups.

Part 3: Reforming the law to respond to group-based coercion



Topics covered include:

- the meaning of coercive behaviours in group settings, and how it differs from coercive control in family violence law
- how group-based coercion can be distinguished from group conduct that is genuine, safe and supportive
- the limitations of existing legal frameworks in capturing cumulative, pattern-based harm in coercive high-control groups
- the risks of extending family violence legislation to address group-based coercion
- the rationale for a standalone criminal group-based coercion offence, including its key components
- the referral of detailed legislative design work to the Victorian Law Reform Commission.

What the Committee heard

Inquiry evidence described coercive behaviour in group settings as operating through patterns of conduct rather than isolated acts. Behaviours such as enforced dress codes, financial demands, movement restrictions and social exclusion are not necessarily coercive when considered individually. It is their combination, repetition and cumulative impact, which are designed to erode personal autonomy and entrench dependency on leadership, that defines the harm.

This type of harm falls outside existing legal frameworks. Many of the behaviours common to coercive high-control groups may not meet criminal thresholds when assessed individually, even where their cumulative effect causes serious and lasting psychological, social and economic harm. Inquiry evidence from people with lived experience, legal practitioners, Victoria Police and others, confirmed that existing offence categories were not designed to capture this kind of patterned, group-enforced harm.

Inquiry evidence drew clear parallels between the behaviours of coercive high-control groups and those addressed by coercive control laws in family violence settings. However, group-based coercion involves substantially different dynamics—including distributed authority, collective enforcement, multiple or shifting perpetrators, and pseudo-familial relationships—that fall outside existing legal definitions of coercive control. Inquiry evidence cautioned that extending or adapting the family violence legislation framework to cover group settings may introduce legal ambiguity, increase the risk of misidentifying victims as perpetrators, and dilute the focus and resourcing of existing family violence responses.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated broad support for a dedicated standalone criminal offence capable of capturing sustained and patterned coercive conduct in group settings. Several essential components for such an offence were identified, including a course of conduct or pattern of behaviour framework, a defined intent element, an express provision that apparent consent obtained under coercive conditions is not a defence, and limitation periods that reflect the time survivors commonly take to name and report harm. Inquiry evidence also emphasised that criminal law reform alone is insufficient, and that civil and pre-criminal mechanisms are needed to provide earlier intervention options.

What the Committee thinks

The Committee is of the view that Victoria's current legal framework does not adequately recognise or respond to group-based coercion as a distinct form of harm. Existing offences may address isolated acts, but they cannot capture the sustained, cumulative pattern of conduct through which coercion and control in group settings operates.

This gap cannot be adequately addressed by focusing on reform to existing family violence legislation. Victoria's family violence framework is highly specialised and fit for its intended purpose, and group-based coercion operates through fundamentally different structural dynamics. The Committee considers that the seriousness of the identified risks associated with extending the family violence framework provides a further and compelling reason not to pursue this approach.

Addressing group-based coercion requires a standalone offence that is grounded in conduct, recognises cumulative harm through a course-of-conduct framework, and focuses accountability on those who create and benefit from systems of control.

Apparent consent obtained under coercive conditions must not operate as a defence, and limitation periods must reflect the reality that survivors commonly take years or decades to recognise and report what happened to them.

The Committee acknowledges that designing such an offence is a complex task requiring dedicated legal analysis, structured consultation, and careful attention to human rights compatibility. These questions cannot be resolved within the scope of this parliamentary inquiry. The Committee recommends that the Victorian Government commit to legislating a group-based coercion offence and refer the detailed design of that offence to the Victorian Law Reform Commission, with co-design with people with lived experience central to that work.

Part 4: Improving protections for children and young people



Topics covered include:

- the unique risks and vulnerabilities faced by children and young people in coercive high-control groups
- the serious and cumulative harms experienced by children and young people in coercive high-control group environments, including psychological and physical harm, child sexual abuse, educational disadvantage, and intergenerational harm
- how children and young people become involved in coercive high-control groups, and why frameworks built around adult concepts of choice and membership are poorly suited to their circumstances
- the barriers that prevent harm to children and young people in coercive high-control groups from being identified or reported
- the capacity of Victoria's child protection and safety frameworks to identify and respond to harm in coercive high-control environments, including the Reportable Conduct Scheme, Child Safe Standards, Working with Children Check, and Child Protection system
- opportunities to strengthen awareness among school-aged children, university students, and practitioners about coercive high-control groups
- support for young people leaving coercive high-control groups, including those in the 18 to 25 cohort, and approaches to proactive community engagement.

What the Committee heard

Children and young people in coercive high-control groups face a combination of risks that Victoria's child safety system was not designed to address. Unlike adults, most children in these environments have no prior identity or external reference point to draw on. For those born into these groups, it is not something they joined—it is the only world they have ever known. Their sense of self, relationships, and understanding of right and wrong are shaped entirely within the group's authority structures, often before they have the capacity to question them. Children brought in through a parent or carer's involvement exercise no greater choice. In both cases, concepts such as 'recruitment' and 'membership' are misleading. They obscure the reality of these children's experiences and create barriers to recognising their circumstances for what they are: clear matters of child protection.

The harm experienced by children in coercive high-control groups is serious, cumulative, and often lifelong. Evidence before the Committee described pervasive psychological harm, including anxiety, depression, complex trauma, and profound disruption to identity formation and attachment. Protective relationships are systematically displaced, with group authority substituted for the parent-child bond

and children conditioned to regard questioning adults as spiritually unsafe. Physical harm, including corporal punishment administered at the direction of group leadership, and child sexual abuse occurring in conditions of enforced secrecy and limited access to mandatory reporters, were also documented extensively. Educational deprivation is often deliberate, designed to limit children's capacity to think independently or function outside the group. Many survivors leave without qualifications, foundational life skills, and the social reference points that most young Victorians acquire through ordinary adolescence.

Victoria's child safety frameworks (i.e., the Reportable Conduct Scheme, the Child Safe Standards, the Working with Children Check, and the Child Protection system) were identified in Inquiry evidence as containing significant structural gaps in relation to coercive high-control groups. Many such groups fall entirely outside these frameworks because they lack formal organisational structures. Even where they are technically in scope, their closed and insular nature means the disclosure, reporting, and organisational engagement these frameworks rely on are unlikely to occur.

Children in coercive high-control environments often have limited or no contact with mandatory reporters. Where contact does occur, practitioners frequently lack the training, tools, and practice guidance needed to recognise harm in these settings, or respond effectively to the dynamics at play. No agency in Victoria currently collects data categorised by involvement in a coercive high-control group, meaning the scale of harm is unknown and cannot be monitored or evaluated.

What the Committee thinks

The Committee is deeply concerned by Inquiry evidence about children and young people in coercive high-control groups. These are among the most vulnerable and least visible children in Victoria. Deliberate isolation, suppressed disclosure, the removal of protective relationships, and the absence of any external frame of reference mean that harm in these environments is unlikely to come to the attention of services—and, when it does, may not be recognised.

The Committee acknowledges the dedication and skill of the workforce that continues to support and protect Victorian children, often in complex and demanding circumstances. The Committee wishes to emphasise that the issues raised in this Part reflect systemic and structural shortcomings rather than the skills and expertise of individual practitioners.

The Committee considers that the current Victorian child safety framework contains structural gaps that leave this cohort without adequate protection. Closing these gaps requires targeted reform. Informal, comprehensive control over children's lives should not place them beyond the reach of regulatory protections. Where mandatory reporting obligations exist, the conditions that enable it—access to trusted adults, contact with mandated reporters, the capacity to recognise and name harm—are routinely absent in coercive high-control group settings. These are not failures of individual practitioners; they are structural problems that require structural responses.

Children born into coercive high-control groups do not recover a prior identity when they leave. Rather, they must build one, often for the first time in adulthood and without adequate support. The Committee considers this a distinct and severe form of harm that warrants specific recognition in policy and service design. Young people aged 18 to 25 who exit these environments occupy a clear service system gap: no longer eligible for child protection supports, yet poorly served by adult service systems not designed for their particular needs.

The Committee's findings and recommendations in this Part address the regulatory and protective frameworks governing child safety, the capability of practitioners to identify and respond to harm in coercive high-control group settings, awareness-building in schools and universities, and support for young people leaving these environments. These issues are also connected to broader system-level questions addressed in Part 5.

Part 5: Other opportunities to address the harms caused by coercive high-control groups



Topics covered include:

- gaps in the current service system's capacity to identify and respond to people affected by coercive high-control groups
- the development of shared risk indicators and cross-agency coordination mechanisms for group-based coercion
- the role of lived experience peer support in recovery
- sector-specific gaps and reform opportunities in the mental health, housing, and policing workforces
- public awareness as a foundational prevention measure
- financial transparency and accountability for coercive high-control groups registered as charities
- the application of modern slavery and forced marriage offences to conduct occurring in coercive high-control group settings
- access to redress for people harmed in coercive high-control groups
- civil remedies, legal aid access, and whistleblower protections
- emerging risks from technology and online environments
- strengthening research and evaluation, ongoing monitoring, and public awareness.

What the Committee heard

Volume 1 (Parts 2 to 4) and *Volume 2* document the serious harms experienced by people in coercive high-control groups and the barriers to identifying and responding to those harms. Part 5 examines what an effective system response would require and where the current system falls short.

Inquiry evidence identified significant and interconnected gaps across Victoria's service system. Services most likely to be accessed by people in or leaving coercive high-control groups, such as mental health, housing, legal, welfare, and policing services, were not designed with this cohort in mind. Frontline workers lack the training, shared indicators, and referral pathways needed to identify group-based coercion when they encounter it. No single agency in Victoria holds the mandate, expertise, or visibility to respond effectively. There is no cross-agency coordination mechanism, no shared risk framework, and no structured pathway for sharing information about group-based coercion across the service system.

The support needs of people leaving coercive high-control groups are often complex and enduring. At the point of exit, they commonly face acute and overlapping needs, including safe housing, income support, and access to mental health care, with no dedicated or capable crisis response available to them. Recovery is typically prolonged, non-linear, and multi-dimensional. Lived experience peer support was consistently identified as a necessary and distinctly effective form of support for this cohort.

Financial transparency and accountability were identified as significant gaps. Some coercive high-control groups operate as registered charities, including as Basic Religious Charities, which are exempt from key governance and reporting obligations. This limits the capacity of regulators to identify and respond when concerns about harmful conduct are raised.

Inquiry evidence also identified patterns of conduct in these groups that may amount to forced labour, servitude or forced marriage under Commonwealth law, but which have rarely been recognised or acted upon by enforcement agencies.

Survivors of institutional child sexual abuse in coercive high-control groups face compounding barriers to accessing the National Redress Scheme, including groups' deliberate avoidance of legal registration and the Scheme's institutional eligibility threshold.

Looking forward, evidence before the Committee pointed to the growing role of digital platforms as sites for recruitment and harm, the limited and fragmented state of research into coercive high-control groups in Australia, and the need for sustained public awareness that keeps pace with groups that adapt, rebrand, and shift their methods over time.

What the Committee thinks

The Committee considers the current system response to coercive high-control groups to be fragmented and, in important respects, not fit for purpose. Inquiry evidence indicated that the primary gaps are not in service availability, but in the capacity of services to recognise and respond to a cohort with distinct and complex needs. Addressing this requires both targeted investment and systemic change.

No single agency currently has the mandate, expertise, or visibility to respond effectively across all the domains in which harm occurs. The Committee's view is that the immediate priority should be to build system-wide capability, develop shared indicators, and establish coordination mechanisms across existing agencies, rather than create a new statutory body. Victoria's established frameworks and agencies provide a foundation on which a more coordinated response can be built, and the Committee considers that investment in that foundation should precede any determination about whether a dedicated body is required.

The Committee considers that lived experience peer support is not a supplementary measure but a core component of an effective service response. Inquiry evidence shows this support is currently provided without sustainable resourcing, with survivor-led organisations meeting significant demand on a largely volunteer basis. This is not a sustainable long-term arrangement.

On financial accountability, the Committee is persuaded by the Productivity Commission's analysis that no clear policy rationale justifies the Basic Religious Charity category, and that its removal would promote consistent regulatory oversight across all charities. The Committee is also satisfied that existing Commonwealth offences for forced labour, servitude, and forced marriage are broad enough to capture conduct in coercive high-control groups. But the problem is not the law's scope, rather the extent to which it is being applied in practice. These are known challenges, and the Committee's recommendations in this Part reflect a clear view that they warrant action.

The Committee is conscious that effective reform cannot be treated as a fixed, one-time undertaking. Coercive high-control groups adapt, rebrand, and shift their methods. Digital environments present growing and evolving risks. The evidence base remains limited. Sustained commitment—to research, awareness, monitoring, and coordination—is a necessary condition for the reforms in this Report to achieve their intended effect over time.

Volume 2: In their words

Volume 2 presents the lived experiences of individuals who were directly affected by coercive high-control groups, drawing on the substantial body of evidence provided to the Inquiry. It is composed of direct quotes. *Volume 2* foregrounds the voices of those who were born into, recruited, or otherwise impacted by these groups, alongside the perspectives of families and others who witnessed harm. While not exhaustive, the evidence presented demonstrates the consistent patterns identified across diverse settings and group types.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated that coercive high-control groups operate across a wide spectrum of environments and are not confined to fringe or easily identifiable contexts. People encountered these groups through everyday settings such as workplaces, universities, and social circles. Those affected came from varied backgrounds; a common thread was not personal weakness, but ordinary periods

of vulnerability, including life transitions, isolation, or distress, during which offers of belonging, purpose, or support appeared credible, appealing and comforting.

A central finding emerging from the evidence in this Volume is the systematic and calculated nature of recruitment. Lived experience evidence from people recruited described methods that are relational, gradual, and often highly adaptive, including targeted outreach, the use of trusted networks, and the offer of care, opportunity, or personal growth. These approaches frequently obscured the controlling nature of the group until deeper involvement had been established.

Once recruitment occurred, the evidence illustrated a range of coercive behaviours used to shape members' beliefs, relationships, and decision-making. These included forms of psychological manipulation, information control, social isolation, and the imposition of rigid behavioural expectations. The impacts described are profound, affecting mental health, autonomy, relationships, education, and financial stability. For many, the impacts are enduring, often lasting many years after a person has left a high-control group.

Inquiry evidence included many accounts from people highlighting the particular vulnerability of children and young people, especially those born or raised in coercive high-control groups who had no meaningful opportunity to consent to their involvement. People born into coercive high-control groups are not 'recruited' and there was no moment of joining: their choice was removed. Inquiry evidence was also received from young people who were recruited during formative stages of identity development.

Lived experience evidence from people who were involved as children or young people described experiences of restricted agency, exposure to harmful practices, and long-term developmental impacts. *Volume 2* documents the consistent patterns of behaviour directed specifically at children and young people identified across the evidence, including intensified control, indoctrination, and disciplinary practices that compound harm.

Across Inquiry evidence, the accounts converge to show that harm arises not from what groups profess to believe, but from how they exercise control over individuals. The voices in this Volume provide critical insight into the mechanisms through which harm is enacted and sustained, as well as its human consequences.

The Committee recognises the significance of this evidence and the courage required to contribute to the Inquiry. These accounts underpin the findings and recommendations of the Report, providing an essential evidentiary foundation for understanding coercive high-control groups and informing an effective policy response.

Findings and recommendations

Volume 1: Crossing the line

How the Committee approached a complex task

FINDING 1: A behaviour-based approach provides the strongest foundation for legal and policy reform addressing coercive high-control groups, ensuring that attention is directed to harmful conduct and its impacts rather than beliefs or group identities.

10

Part 1 | Why is understanding coercive high-control groups important?

FINDING 2: Misconceptions that coercive high-control groups are rare or easily recognised obscures the patterned and relational harm they cause across a range of different settings. This increases the risk that those affected are misunderstood, not taken seriously or dismissed.

15

FINDING 3: Involvement in coercive high-control groups can happen to anyone, regardless of background, age or education. Raising awareness of this reality is necessary to reduce stigma, increase community vigilance, and support earlier identification and intervention when coercive and harmful group dynamics are present.

16

FINDING 4: The Victorian Government should not define the term ‘cult’ in law. Legislative and policy reforms addressing coercive high-control groups should use neutral, behaviour-based language to identify harmful conduct and respond to its impacts without targeting particular beliefs or group identities.

21

FINDING 5: Harm caused by coercive high-control groups is frequently invisible to those outside the group, and poorly recognised by existing legal and service frameworks. Shared language and awareness across communities and sectors is essential to effective policy and service responses.

21

Part 2 | Consistent patterns of control and the harms they cause

FINDING 6: Recruitment into coercive high-control groups is not a single moment but a gradual, deliberate process that escalates over time, obscuring coercion until individuals are deeply embedded in the group. People often do not realise they are being recruited or understand a group's real intentions.

46

FINDING 7: Coercive high-control groups often recruit through existing personal networks and trusted relationships, deliberately exploiting trust, obligation and emotional dependence to secure compliance. This recruitment model establishes control early, conceals coercion behind existing relationships, and creates barriers to recognition, refusal and exit.

46

FINDING 8: The full intent of recruitment is rarely disclosed upfront by coercive high-control groups. Instead, they typically use deception, gradual escalation and strategic concealment of the group's true nature. This distinguishes their practices from groups with genuine intentions that recruit transparently.

48

FINDING 9: Coercive high-control groups actively exploit vulnerability to recruit new members, often targeting periods of personal transition or distress—including adolescence, relocation, starting study, relationship breakdown, bereavement, physical or mental health concerns, financial pressure, trauma, loneliness, or social isolation—to manufacture dependence and control. Apparent support, care or belonging is deliberately used to secure compliance, increase an individual's dependency on a group and entrench harm.

50

FINDING 10: Online platforms enable coercive high-control groups to recruit at scale by using anonymity, deceptive practices and targeted engagement to accelerate indoctrination and avoid scrutiny. Digital recruitment lowers barriers to entry, increases vulnerability and allows harmful and coercive behaviours to escalate rapidly within closed online spaces.

53

FINDING 11: Psychological harm is the most prevalent and enduring impact of coercive high-control groups. It affects individuals across all group types and durations of involvement. For most, the harms persist well beyond exit, with recovery typically prolonged and non-linear.

68

FINDING 12: Harmful behaviours used by coercive high-control groups, including moralising doubt, reframing dissent as personal failure, and enforcing shunning or social exclusion increase the psychological costs of leaving the group. These dynamics create conditions that can mentally trap individuals, making remaining in the group feel safer than departing, even when they recognise the harm they are experiencing.

68

FINDING 13: Shunning is often the most powerful mechanism of psychological control used in coercive high-control groups. Public excommunication also serves as a collective disciplinary tool, controlling remaining members and often compelling family members and friends to participate in shunning as an act of self-preservation within the group.

68

FINDING 14: Many coercive high-control groups use physical violence and abuse, including physical injury, sexual abuse and medical neglect, as tools of control. These practices cause severe physical and psychological harm to members and often occur alongside active efforts to prevent victims from seeking help or reporting abuse to relevant authorities.

75

FINDING 15: Coercive high-control groups that allow physical and sexual violence typically fail to provide safeguards or meaningful support for victims. Group leadership often compounds the impacts of this harm by dismissing disclosures, protecting perpetrators, reframing abuse as a moral lesson, and discouraging or undermining engagement with external support or reporting pathways.

75

FINDING 16: Coercive high-control groups often systematically restrict personal choices about education, employment and finances. These restrictions increase dependency and destroy confidence, making it significantly harder for individuals to leave, and creating lasting barriers to recovery and adjustment after exit.

81

FINDING 17: Financial giving in coercive high-control groups is fundamentally different from the voluntary contributions made in genuinely intentioned faith and community settings. Forced tithing and financial contributions in coercive high-control groups are required, monitored and enforced, often through fear or threats of negative consequences. The absence of genuine choice distinguishes these practices from legitimate forms of giving and increases dependence and control.

81

FINDING 18: Women and girls often experience distinct and disproportionate harm in coercive high-control groups, where gendered power structures normalise and exacerbate these harms.

83

FINDING 19: Coercive high-control groups deliberately undermine family relationships to isolate members and strengthen control. This leads to sudden estrangement and long-term psychological distress for families, including ambiguous grief, as they are left with limited pathways for reconnection or support.

85

FINDING 20: Coercive high-control groups often impact the community more broadly by increasing demand on support services, reducing economic participation and productivity, and undermining community safety, social cohesion and trust in public institutions.

87

FINDING 21: People with lived experience of coercive high-control groups hold essential insights into how these groups operate, how harm develops, and where current systems fail to respond effectively. There is currently no formal mechanism to ensure that this expertise informs the Victorian Government's reform efforts to address the harms caused by coercive high-control groups. As these groups affect people from many different communities, lived experience input should reflect a diversity of backgrounds.

94

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Victorian Government establish a formal lived experience advisory body, including professional expertise, to co-design, inform and evaluate legislative, policy and service reforms addressing the impacts of coercive high-control groups, including for the purposes of progressing the implementation of the recommendations in this Report.

95

Part 3 | Reforming the law to respond to group-based coercion

FINDING 22: A genuine, safe and supportive group safeguards informed consent, personal autonomy and freedom of exit by ensuring people understand what they are joining, can exercise independent judgement, and are able to leave freely. A coercive high-control group undermines these safeguards by limiting disclosure, restricting personal autonomy, and imposing barriers to, or consequences for, exit.

101

FINDING 23: The following indicators reliably distinguish a genuine, safe and supportive group from a coercive high-control group:

- Membership is genuinely voluntary and based on an informed understanding of the group.
- Members are able to question or express doubt without facing punishment, isolation or rejection.
- People can leave the group without facing significant risk or consequences, including the loss of family, friendships, financial security or personal safety.

102

FINDING 24: An effective legal framework for addressing group-based coercive behaviours must assess the patterns of conduct as a whole, rather than focusing on individual acts in isolation.

104

FINDING 25: Coercive behaviours and coercive control are not limited to family and domestic relationships; they can occur in high-control groups. Harmful, coercive behaviours in high-control groups take many forms. They can be exercised by individuals or collectively and can operate overtly or subtly. These behaviours may occur as isolated episodes or as continuous, sustained patterns, including through distributed authority and socially reinforced practices that restrict personal autonomy and compromise the ability to exit safely.

110

FINDING 26: Group-based coercion constitutes a distinct form of conduct. While the family violence coercive control framework provides valuable conceptual and legal tools, its expansion or adaptation cannot effectively address the breadth, structural complexity, or shared coercive behaviours in high-control groups.

122

FINDING 27: Victoria's current legal framework is not fit for purpose to address the unique harms caused by coercive high-control groups. Existing laws are not adequately designed to recognise or respond to group-based coercion as a distinct harm, particularly where that harm arises from cumulative and patterned conduct.

134

FINDING 28: Individual actions of a coercive high-control group may not, on their own, meet a criminal threshold. However, when considered together as a part of an ongoing course of conduct, those actions can result in serious harm to an individual, that is often not recognised or appropriately responded to by the criminal justice system.

134

FINDING 29: Group-based coercion primarily operates through non-physical means and must be recognised as such in law. Psychological pressure, isolation, financial control, surveillance, and the restructuring of identity and independent thought, are key mechanisms through which coercive high-control groups inflict and maintain harm. **151**

FINDING 30: Compliance or apparent consent arising from coercive conditions is not genuine consent. Coercive high-control groups systematically erode a person's capacity to make free and informed choices. **151**

FINDING 31: Current laws do not provide a clear and effective means of holding to account those who create and operate systems of group-based coercion. Accountability is particularly challenging where the harm is carried out or facilitated by members who are themselves subject to coercion and control. Many survivors of coercive high-control groups are unable to identify or name the harm that they experienced until many years, or sometimes, decades after it occurred. **151**

FINDING 32: Group-based coercion often falls below criminal thresholds, particularly in the early stages of a person's involvement in a group. Where criminal prosecution is possible, it may occur only after significant delay, during which time harm can continue. **151**

FINDING 33: No single agency has the mandate, capability, or cross-sector reach to respond effectively to group-based coercion. Disclosures in this context are often fragmented across multiple agencies without being connected, frequently not recognised as indicators of harm, and may be suppressed by fear of retaliation. **152**

FINDING 34: Legislative reform in this area must be carefully designed to avoid unintended consequences, including the inadvertent infringement of rights and the criminalisation of victims. A poorly designed legislative response to group-based coercion risks capturing genuinely voluntary participation or producing outcomes that harm those it is intended to protect. **155**

FINDING 35: The complex and technically demanding legal questions involved in designing a group-based coercion offence cannot be resolved within the confines of this parliamentary inquiry. **155**

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Victorian Government ask the Victorian Law Reform Commission to review legislative options to criminalise group-based coercion, with the Commission to report by July 2028 to support the introduction of legislation by February 2029.

The referral must direct the Victorian Law Reform Commission to:

- develop recommendations for legislation, including draft group-based coercion offence provisions, supported by civil and regulatory mechanisms that can intervene before criminal thresholds are met (for example, protective orders)
- co-design proposed legislative options with survivors of group-based coercion
- consult broadly with legal practitioners, law enforcement, trauma specialists, researchers, representatives of religious and cultural communities, civil liberties organisations, and relevant government agencies
- assess compatibility of all proposed measures with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic)
- consider and report on interactions between any proposed offence and existing Victorian and Commonwealth laws, including those addressing family violence, human trafficking, elder abuse and labour exploitation, and identify where amendments to existing Victorian laws are required
- address evidentiary, enforcement, and procedural questions, including how courts assess patterned conduct over time and what training prosecutors, police, and judiciary will require and have regard to other legislative models.

Any options for a group-based coercion offence must consider:

- establishing a clear criminal threshold demonstrating that control is exercised in a way that is sufficiently total or pervasive as to suppress the person's capacity to live, think, or act independently of the group
- being behaviour-focused and belief-neutral, including not requiring proof that a group is a 'cult' or that a belief system is inherently harmful
- requiring proof of a sustained 'course of conduct' or 'pattern of behaviour' rather than a single act, recognising that group-based coercion operates through cumulative, patterned behaviour
- capturing non-physical coercion—such as psychological pressure, enforced dependency, isolation, surveillance, financial control, spiritual or existential threats—and the restructuring of a person's identity or capacity for independent thought
- including an intent element, requiring proof that the perpetrator intended, knew or ought to have known, that the conduct would coerce or control the victim

(Continued)

RECOMMENDATION 2: CONTINUED

- making clear that apparent consent or compliance is not a defence where it was produced by the coercive conditions the offence is designed to address
- attributing culpability proportionately, focusing on those who create, maintain, and benefit from systems of control, and accounting for the diminished culpability of those who enabled harm under duress or dependency
- including protections:
 - to ensure that conduct which is genuinely voluntary and does not cause harm falls outside the offence
 - for survivors against retaliation
- ensuring limitation periods reflect the time it commonly takes survivors to name and report criminal conduct.

156–157

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Victorian Government introduce legislation to criminalise group-based coercion by February 2029, following the Victorian Law Reform Commission’s report on legislative options.

157

Part 4 | Improving protections for children and young people

FINDING 36: Children in coercive high-control groups face a distinct combination of risks, including dependence on adults who may enforce the group’s control, isolation from external reference points needed to recognise harm, and limited visibility to the contact points on which child safety frameworks rely.

166

FINDING 37: The harm caused to children and young people in coercive high-control groups is serious, cumulative and the impact is often lifelong. It results from sustained coercive behaviour during critical development years and leads to enduring impacts on health, relationships, economic security and participation in community life.

182

FINDING 38: Children born into coercive high-control groups face a distinct and severe form of harm. Their entire sense of self, relationships, and worldview are constructed by the group before they have the capacity to question it. When they leave, they are not recovering a prior identity, they are building one for the first time.

182

FINDING 39: Coercive high-control groups often deliberately remove the protective relationships that children depend on to recognise and disclose harm. The absence of safe adults, combined with enforced secrecy and loyalty, leaves these children among the most vulnerable and least visible in Victoria.

182

FINDING 40: Educational disadvantage in coercive high-control groups is often deliberate and designed to limit children's capacity to question group doctrine, causing long-term and enduring harm. Many people leave these groups with limited qualifications and without foundational life skills, resulting in ongoing barriers to employment and economic independence.

183

FINDING 41: Children and young people in coercive high-control groups may experience physical harm that is not recognised, disclosed, or treated at the time it occurs. Because of their age and stage of development, this harm is compounded and often results in serious, long-term health consequences, that may remain unidentified until adulthood, placing a significant, largely unquantified burden on health and social support systems.

187

FINDING 42: Children in coercive high-control groups are particularly vulnerable to child sexual abuse because of how these environments operate, including isolation from mandatory reporters (such as teachers and health professionals), the suppression of disclosures, and inadequate frameworks to recognise and respond to abuse. These conditions significantly limit opportunities for detection, intervention and recovery, and can result in profound and long-lasting harm for survivors.

187

FINDING 43: Intergenerational harm is a common structural outcome of coercive high-control group environments.

188

FINDING 44: Children who are born into coercive high-control groups, or are brought into them by parents or carers, are not recruited. They do not consent to join or participate in the group, and they have no real ability to leave.

194

FINDING 45: Using the language of 'recruitment' and 'membership' in relation to children in coercive high-control groups incorrectly suggests that they have agency or choice. This framing can create barriers to identifying and responding to their situation as a child protection matter.

194

FINDING 46: A child or young person's failure to disclose harm, seek help, or resist control is not evidence of safety or willing participation in a coercive high-control group. It may instead reflect how profoundly the group has shaped their understanding of their own circumstances.

194

FINDING 47: Coercive high-control groups may deliberately target adolescents and young people, particularly during periods of vulnerability. These groups may exploit social isolation, personal crisis, and cultural and language barriers to draw young people in and deepen control.

194

FINDING 48: Children in coercive high-control groups may present as outwardly functional, well-behaved, healthy, visibly well cared for or composed to external observers. This can actively mislead protection agencies and suppress timely identification of risk. Existing guidance that directs practitioners to observable indicators of harm is insufficient for this cohort.

200

FINDING 49: Children who are isolated and have reduced routine contact with external and varied reporting pathways may have limited opportunities for harm to be identified or disclosed, increasing the risk that concerns remain undetected.

200

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Victorian Government consider opportunities to increase and diversify children and young people's contact and connections with multiple reporting channels, particularly for those who are isolated. This should include a review of home schooling arrangements in Victoria to consider opportunities for greater contact and connections between home schooling students and Victorian Government schools.

200

FINDING 50: Coercive high-control groups systematically suppress disclosure of harm through internal reporting channels, internal disciplinary processes, and social and spiritual consequences for those who report to outside authorities. This means mandatory reporting obligations, even where they apply, are routinely undermined in practice.

200

FINDING 51: No agency in Victoria currently collects data categorised by involvement in a coercive high-control group. As a result, the scale and nature of harm to children and young people in these settings is currently unmeasurable, and agencies are unable to identify patterns, assess risk trends, or evaluate the effectiveness of any response.

200

FINDING 52: Many coercive high-control groups may fall outside the scope of the Reportable Conduct Scheme. These groups often lack recognisable formal organisational structures, yet exercise functional control over the lives of children raised within them.

213

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Victorian Government review the application of s 16C of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to assess whether it is fit for purpose, and consider:

- what amendments are required to ensure that organisations and groups exercising substantive control over the lives of children cannot fall outside the scope of the Reportable Conduct Scheme because of informal structures or the deliberate avoidance of formal organisational characteristics.
- whether the existing threshold of ‘formal care, supervision or authority’ should be supplemented by reference to ‘functional control’, including control over children’s access to information, relationships, education, and healthcare.

213

FINDING 53: Where a reportable allegation concerns the head of an organisation, the Reportable Conduct Scheme does not require the organisation to have pre-nominated an alternate person to manage notification and investigation processes. Identifying an alternate contact in these circumstances can take considerable time, and the Social Services Regulator may have no option but to make initial contact with the subject of the allegation.

214

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Victorian Government consider amendments to the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to require all organisations subject to the Reportable Conduct Scheme to pre-nominate a person authorised to perform the head of organisation’s functions under the Act if the head of organisation is the subject of a reportable allegation.

214

FINDING 54: The Reportable Conduct Scheme relies heavily on heads of organisations fulfilling their own notification and investigation obligations. In coercive high-control group environments, organisational leaders are unlikely to notify the Social Services Regulator of allegations, and adult members are also unlikely to make disclosures to external authorities.

214

FINDING 55: Where organisational self-reporting fails, the Reportable Conduct Scheme lacks a reliable mechanism to ensure that allegations are independently investigated.

214

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Victorian Government consider whether amendments to s 160 of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) are necessary to:

- require the Social Services Regulator to investigate a reportable allegation disclosed under s 16L
- empower the Social Services Regulator to direct an organisation to investigate a reportable allegation where it has failed to do so.

In considering any such amendments, the Government should assess if additional resourcing is required to enable the Social Services Regulator to meet any new legislative requirements.

214

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Victorian Government consider whether amendments are required to the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to empower the Social Services Regulator to issue binding directions to a head of entity regarding the conduct of an investigation.

214

FINDING 56: In coercive high-control environments, some forms of harmful conduct may not be recognised as sexual misconduct under the current operation of the Reportable Conduct Scheme. This includes exposing children to sexually explicit material or subjecting them to explicit sexual questioning by adult authority figures. Such conduct may fall outside the Scheme where there is no evidence that it was motivated by sexual arousal or gratification.

215

RECOMMENDATION 9: The Victorian Government consider amendments to the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to clarify that overly personal and intimate conduct in relation to a child can constitute sexual misconduct even where there is no finding that the conduct was for sexual arousal or gratification.

215

FINDING 57: Many coercive high-control groups are unlikely to fall within Schedule 1 of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) and are therefore not required to comply with the Child Safe Standards. The closed nature of these groups also means that regulators may have no awareness of their existence or activities.

220

RECOMMENDATION 10: The Victorian Government review Schedule 1 of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to assess whether current criteria for determining which organisations are required to comply with the Child Safe Standards adequately captures organisations or groups that exercise authority over children through informal arrangements rather than formal service delivery.

220

FINDING 58: Even where a coercive high-control group falls within scope of the Child Safe Standards, the Standards depend on organisational willingness to engage and implement cultural change. This is unlikely where groups are characterised by resistance to external authority and deliberate avoidance of contact with government bodies.

220

RECOMMENDATION 11: The Victorian Government consider developing a protocol for identifying and engaging with organisations that pose risks to children and are resistant to current compliance mechanisms under the Child Safe Standards. The protocol should explicitly address coercive high-control groups and draw on multi-agency expertise.

220

FINDING 59: Some coercive high-control groups are structured in ways that place them outside the scope of Victoria's child protection and safety framework. In these settings, children may be under sustained and significant authority of adults who are not required to meet any formal child safety requirements.

228

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Victorian Government review the definition of 'child-related work' under the *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic) to assess whether it adequately captures adults who regularly exercise sustained authority or functional control over children in informal group settings.

228

FINDING 60: Screening of adults who work with children provides limited protection where the organisational environment in which they operate lacks effective child safety policies or supervision in practice. While organisations subject to the Child Safe Standards are required to maintain child safe policies, there is no obligation to demonstrate those policies to a regulator unless a concern is raised or harm occurs. This creates a system in which individual screening requirements may be met, while organisational conditions remain unsafe for children, without detection until after an incident.

228

RECOMMENDATION 13: The Victorian Government consider whether current requirements need to be strengthened to:

- require organisations subject to the Child Safe Standards that engage adults in child-related roles to regularly lodge and update their child safe policies, including supervision arrangements and procedures for responding to disclosures, where indicated by risk, complaints or identified non-compliance, to support more proactive monitoring and enforcement
- improve the ability of the Social Services Regulator to proactively assess and intervene where organisations subject to the Child Safe Standards have inadequate child safe policies, without waiting for an incident to occur.

228

FINDING 61: Child Protection services in Victoria currently lack the specialised training, practice guidance, data collection arrangements, and inter-agency coordination needed to effectively identify and respond to children at risk in coercive high-control group environments.

233

RECOMMENDATION 14: The Victorian Government develop and implement specialised training, practice guidance, risk assessment tools, and data collection arrangements for Child Protection practitioners working with children in coercive high-control group settings.

233

FINDING 62: Victoria's child safety framework was not designed to identify collective coercion, ideological control, or group-based systems of abuse, and does not currently provide adequate protection for children and young people in coercive high-control groups.

233

RECOMMENDATION 15: The Victorian Government consider reviewing Victoria's child safety framework to better identify and respond to children at risk in coercive high-control group environments.

233

FINDING 63: The PROTECT framework, which is the primary child safety guidance resource for mandatory reporters in Victorian schools, does not include indicators, contextual guidance, or procedural direction specific to children involved in coercive high-control group settings.

240

RECOMMENDATION 16: The Victorian Government update the PROTECT framework to include specific guidance and indicators to assist mandatory reporters in Victorian schools to identify children at risk of harm due to involvement in coercive high-control groups, including clear decision-making guidance on managing parent or carer notification in a way that prioritises child safety. The Government should also consider whether this should be a mandatory component of child safety training in Victorian schools.

240

FINDING 64: Where a child's disengagement from school is caused by family involvement in a coercive high-control group, current school attendance frameworks have limited capacity to respond effectively or to re-engage the student.

248

FINDING 65: School is one of the few settings that many children in coercive high-control groups access regularly outside the group's influence. Building awareness of coercive group dynamics and available support through the school environment is an important means of reducing vulnerability to involvement in such groups and supporting those already experiencing group-based coercion to recognise harm and seek help.

248

FINDING 66: The Respectful Relationships initiative does not address group-based coercion as a discrete topic. While the general skills it develops are valuable, they do not adequately equip school-aged children to recognise the specific harmful characteristics and dynamics of group-based coercion.

248

RECOMMENDATION 17: The Victorian Government review the Respectful Relationships curriculum and resources to identify opportunities to introduce age-appropriate content on group-based coercion across primary and secondary school year levels.

248

FINDING 67: University students are vulnerable to recruitment by coercive high-control groups, and deceptive recruitment activity has been reported on and around university campuses across Victoria.

254

FINDING 68: Some universities and student associations are undertaking awareness-raising activities to protect students from deceptive recruitment.

254

RECOMMENDATION 18: The Victorian Government:

- explore opportunities to engage with universities to deliver awareness materials about the risks of coercive high-control groups
- in collaboration with the Australian Government, consider options to support universities and tertiary institutions to deliver coordinated awareness materials about the recruitment methods of coercive high-control groups. The materials should be developed in consultation with universities and student representative bodies.

254

FINDING 69: The vulnerability of children and young people in coercive high-control groups does not end at the age of eighteen, and current service settings do not adequately account for the ongoing needs of young people exiting these environments.

259

FINDING 70: Children in coercive high-control groups are frequently not identified by child protection agencies, and are therefore unlikely to meet the eligibility requirements for transition support programs that require prior statutory involvement. **259**

FINDING 71: Victoria’s child-facing agencies lack the specialist knowledge, skills and shared practice base required to identify coercive high-control group dynamics or undertake proactive, relationship-based engagement with affected communities. **265**

FINDING 72: Victoria has no systematic approach to proactive engagement with communities where children have limited visibility to child safety and protection services. **265**

RECOMMENDATION 19: The Victorian Government invest in building specialist capability across child-facing agencies—including child protection, education, police and relevant oversight bodies—to improve understanding of coercive high-control group dynamics, indicators of risk, and culturally respectful, relationship-based engagement practices. **265**

RECOMMENDATION 20: The Victorian Government develop an inter-agency framework for proactive engagement with communities in which children may have limited visibility to child safety and protection services, including coercive high-control group communities. **265**

Part 5 | Other opportunities to address the harms caused by coercive high-control groups

FINDING 73: The services most likely to be accessed by people in or leaving coercive high-control groups were not designed with their distinct circumstances and risks in mind. This has created systemic gaps in the capacity and capability of services to identify and respond to group-based coercion. **289**

FINDING 74: Understanding of the dynamics of group-based coercion is not embedded in any standard professional training or curriculum for frontline service providers in Victoria. **290**

RECOMMENDATION 21: The Victorian Government undertake a whole-of-system mapping of service gaps affecting people leaving coercive high-control groups. This mapping should identify services likely to be first points of contact, assess capacity and capability gaps across those services, and inform a coordinated plan for addressing them.

290

FINDING 75: The absence of shared risk indicators for group-based coercion means it is assessed inconsistently across the service system. Existing risk frameworks, including those for family violence and child protection, do not adequately capture the distinct features of group-based coercion.

290

RECOMMENDATION 22: The Victorian Government develop shared risk indicators for group-based coercion to be applied across Victoria's service system. In developing these indicators, consideration should be given to structural consistency with existing risk assessment tools to support workforce uptake and minimise additional training burden.

290

RECOMMENDATION 23: The Victorian Government explore options to develop a training framework for frontline workers to recognise and respond to group-based coercion. This should account for existing training requirements and be supported by a workforce sustainability plan.

290

FINDING 76: There is no structured mechanism in Victoria to share information about group-based coercion across agencies. This information typically surfaces through informal channels and in fragments, with no pathway to assemble a cumulative picture of harm.

290

RECOMMENDATION 24: The Victorian Government explore options for developing an information-sharing framework for group-based coercion, drawing on existing Victorian information-sharing models. The framework should:

- accommodate partial and informal disclosures
- consider extending information-sharing permissions to professionals not currently covered by existing schemes but well-placed to identify risk of group-based coercion
- establish clear thresholds and good-faith protections for information sharing
- include appropriate privacy safeguards.

The framework should be developed in conjunction with Recommendation 22 and Recommendation 23.

290

RECOMMENDATION 25: The Victorian Government work with other jurisdictions, including the Australian Government, to share jurisdictional approaches and develop nationally consistent approaches to identifying and responding to group-based coercion.

291

FINDING 77: People leaving coercive high-control groups frequently have acute support needs at the point of exit, including safe housing, income support and mental health care, but lack access to a dedicated or capable crisis response.

298

FINDING 78: People leaving coercive high-control groups often experience overlapping, long-lasting harms that extend well beyond the point of exit and create demand across multiple service systems. The costs associated with these harms are not currently measurable due to the absence of systematic data collection and therefore accumulate without visibility or accountability.

298

RECOMMENDATION 26: The Victorian Government work with service agencies to embed a *no wrong door* approach to crisis support for people leaving coercive high-control groups, so that wherever a person presents, they are connected to appropriate assistance. This should include:

- developing a dedicated support framework that addresses the full continuum of need from immediate crisis response through to long-term recovery
- improving pathways that build independence and resilience, including through education, employment, financial literacy, and social reconnection
- ensuring services can accommodate non-linear, survivor-paced recovery rather than time-limited support programs.

299

FINDING 79: Lived experience peer support is an important and distinct component of an effective service response for people leaving coercive high-control groups. It is currently provided on an unfunded, pro-bono basis by survivor advocates, with no dedicated funding available in Victoria.

299

RECOMMENDATION 27: The Victorian Government, including in collaboration with the Australian Government, consider options to support funding to lived experience-led organisations and peer support networks supporting people leaving coercive high-control groups and their families.

299

RECOMMENDATION 28: The Victorian Government establish a process to collect systematic data on the service needs, service use, and long-term outcomes of people who have left coercive high-control groups, to support evidence-based service planning and resource allocation.

299

FINDING 80: The psychological and mental health workforce lacks specialist understanding of group-based coercion and its developmental and psychological impacts. Without this knowledge, practitioners risk misidentifying or misdiagnosing harm and may inadvertently retraumatise the people they are trying to help.

305

FINDING 81: Specialist training on group-based coercion exists but is limited in reach, largely self-funded, and delivered primarily by unfunded volunteer organisations. There is no consistent pathway for incorporating this content into continuing professional development for frontline workers or mental health practitioners.

305

RECOMMENDATION 29: The Victorian Government work with relevant professional peak bodies to explore options to incorporate specialist content on group-based coercion and its impacts into continuing professional development frameworks for psychologists, counsellors, and allied mental health practitioners.

305

FINDING 82: People leaving coercive high-control groups often experience acute housing insecurity, compounded by factors such as the absence of an independent rental history, employment record, savings, or identity documentation, which limit their eligibility to access standard housing assistance. Young people leaving coercive high-control groups are at particular risk of falling outside housing support pathways.

306

RECOMMENDATION 30: The Victorian Government review, and where necessary update, housing support pathways and eligibility criteria to ensure they can identify and support people leaving coercive high-control groups. This should include ensuring existing pathways can recognise the unique dynamics and harms associated with coercive high-control groups.

306

FINDING 83: Victoria Police has no specialist training or indicators on coercive high-control group dynamics. Complaints involving coercive high-control groups are typically assessed against individual criminal offences rather than patterns of conduct, which limits recognition of patterns of harm and undermines effective response.

306

RECOMMENDATION 31: The Victorian Government support Victoria Police to establish a clear internal pathway for identifying and escalating matters involving coercive high-control groups to officers with appropriate expertise. This could include the development of targeted training, shared indicators, and referral pathways, drawing on models of specialist capability already established in comparable areas. Options include a dedicated unit, specialist capacity within an existing unit, or a designated liaison function.

306

FINDING 84: The risks and harms of coercive high-control groups are not sufficiently understood by the general public, leaving individuals and communities without the knowledge needed to identify warning signs or seek help.

311

RECOMMENDATION 32: The Victorian Government:

- ensure that relevant government services provide clear, accessible and publicly available information on the indicators of coercive high-control groups, common recruitment tactics and available support pathways
- develop and implement a targeted public awareness campaign to promote community understanding of coercive high-control groups, including where to seek help.

311

FINDING 85: The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission's (ACNC) secrecy provisions are a significant source of frustration for individuals who have raised concerns about coercive high-control groups that are registered as charities. A lack of communication about whether concerns have been acted on or resolved can leave individuals feeling unheard, reducing confidence and trust in ACNC's regulatory role.

317

RECOMMENDATION 33: The Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government to review, by 31 December 2028, the impact of the amendment to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission's (ACNC) secrecy provisions that took effect on 5 December 2025, including whether it provides adequate transparency and communication for individuals who raise concerns about charities with the ACNC, and to consider the need for additional measures, such as a trauma-informed complaints process.

317

FINDING 86: Coercive high-control groups registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission as Basic Religious Charities are exempt from important reporting obligations and oversight mechanisms.

322

FINDING 87: Removing the concept of a Basic Religious Charity from the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) would improve transparency by bringing all registered charities under a consistent regulatory framework. Enabling the Commissioner of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission to compel charities to provide information to determine if they are a federally regulated entity would further strengthen accountability and enforcement.

322

RECOMMENDATION 34: The Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government to implement the following recommendations from the Productivity Commission's *Future foundations for giving: Inquiry report* (2024):

- Recommendation 7.1 – The Australian Government should amend the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) to remove the concept of 'basic religious charity' and associated exemptions, so all charities registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission are regulated in a consistent manner. This should include obligations to comply with principles-based governance standards and reporting requirements proportionate to size.
- Recommendation 7.2 – The Australian Government should:
 - amend the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012 (Cth) (the Act) to enable the Commissioner of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) to require a charity to provide the information necessary to assess whether the charity is likely to be a 'federally regulated entity'
 - amend the Act to enable the Commissioner of the ACNC to require a charity undergoing revocation of its ACNC charity registration to evidence the intended or actual distribution of its net assets to an eligible entity unless that requirement is waived by the Commissioner
 - work with state and territory governments to ensure the Commissioner of the ACNC has the necessary enforcement powers to fulfil their role within the regulatory framework for charities. This should include implementing or reforming laws, where necessary, to confirm that the Commissioner of the ACNC has standing to make applications in a state or territory Supreme Court for orders regarding the administration of charities, including the protection of assets held in trust for charitable purposes, regardless of a charity's structure.

323

FINDING 88: The conditions of labour exploitation, financial dependency and social control characteristics of coercive high-control groups are capable of satisfying the definitions of forced labour and servitude under s 270.5 and 270.6 of the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth). The ideological framing of such labour as voluntary does not preclude these offences, and s 270.11 expressly provides that consent or acquiescence is not a defence.

334

FINDING 89: Marriage in some coercive high-control groups occurs under conditions that appear capable of engaging the forced marriage offence under s 270.7B of the *Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)*. Inquiry evidence identified no instances in which this offence has been applied in this context.

334

RECOMMENDATION 35: The Victorian Government proactively engage with the Australian Government in any consultative processes arising from the *Targeted Review of Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)* (2023). In doing so, the Victorian Government should draw on the evidence before this Inquiry to demonstrate how current Commonwealth frameworks appear to:

- have failed to capture labour exploitation, forced marriage, and other harmful conduct occurring within coercive high-control groups
- lack sufficient mechanisms to identify and respond to risks arising from coercive high-control groups, including because of the absence of accessible third-party reporting pathways
- require strengthening to ensure coercive high-control groups are clearly answerable under the law for relevant harmful conduct, supported by enhanced enforcement mechanisms and more effective investigative processes.

334

FINDING 90: The National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse does not adequately serve survivors of coercive high-control groups.

339

RECOMMENDATION 36: The Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government for a national approach that includes all jurisdictions for a ‘funder of last resort’ mechanism under the National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse for survivors of institutional child sexual abuse perpetrated by coercive high-control groups.

339

FINDING 91: People who have experienced harm in coercive high-control groups face significant practical barriers to accessing civil legal remedies. Current legal aid eligibility and service structures do not adequately address the specialist needs of this cohort.

341

FINDING 92: Existing whistleblower protection frameworks are primarily designed for employees reporting through internal organisational processes, not disclosures of harm associated with coercive high-control groups that are typically made externally to authorities, media or other affected individuals, without protection against retaliation. Strengthening Victoria’s broader service system response would improve support for individuals making disclosures and help reduce some of the barriers to safe reporting.

345

FINDING 93: The digital environment is an increasingly significant setting for the recruitment and operation of coercive high-control groups. Existing online safety frameworks were not designed to address these harms and are not adequate to prevent exposure to, or provide appropriate support for, those affected by coercive high-control groups operating online.

351

RECOMMENDATION 37: The Victorian Government, in consultation with relevant Commonwealth bodies and the eSafety Commissioner, review the adequacy of existing online safety frameworks in responding to the specific harms associated with coercive high-control groups. This review should also consider the education, training, and care infrastructure required to support those exposed to or harmed by such groups online. Following this, coercive high-control groups should be explicitly included in any future reviews of these frameworks.

351

FINDING 94: The current body of research on coercion and high-control groups is developing but remains limited and fragmented. Differences in terminology and approaches across disciplines hinder the development of a consistent and shared understanding. Strengthening the evidence base through coordinated, multidisciplinary research would support a clearer insight into the prevalence, tactics, and impacts of coercive high-control groups, enhance the effectiveness of policy responses, and contribute to prevention through increased awareness.

351

RECOMMENDATION 38: The Victorian Government support new targeted research to strengthen the evidence base on coercive high-control groups, including their prevalence, tactics, impacts, and the effectiveness of reforms, in partnership with tertiary institutions.

351

FINDING 95: Sustained and ongoing public awareness of coercive high-control groups is a necessary component of prevention.

351

RECOMMENDATION 39: The Victorian Government develop and implement a model for sustained public awareness of coercive high-control groups that moves beyond periodic campaigns, supports ongoing engagement with survivor communities and service providers, and is regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changes in how such groups operate.

351

Volume 2: In their words

FINDING 96: Recruitment and harmful behaviours associated with coercive high-control groups occur within contemporary Victorian society.

67

FINDING 97: Coercive high-control groups employ diverse and adaptive recruitment methods and tactics across relational, public, digital and institutional settings. These practices can affect individuals of any background, age or circumstance, and are combined with manipulative and abusive behaviours that establish control, dependency and barriers to exit. Failing to recognise and respond to these behaviours allows harm to persist and places individuals, families and communities at continued risk.

67

FINDING 98: Children and young people exposed to coercive high-control groups experience many of the same harms as adults, but they also face additional impacts that are unique to their age and circumstances. Due to their vulnerability and stage of development, this exposure can result in significant, severe and lasting consequences for this cohort.

67

From inquiry to government response: what happens

There are several stages to a parliamentary committee inquiry.

A parliamentary committee operates independently of the Victorian Government and is made up of Members of Parliament from different political parties.

The Committee conducts the Inquiry

The Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee received its Terms of Reference for this Inquiry from the House on 3 April 2025.

In undertaking the Inquiry, the Committee followed a comprehensive evidence gathering process. This included:

- conducting an anonymous online questionnaire and publishing an insights document and interactive report of responses
- calling for, receiving and publishing written submissions
- holding briefings, hearings and meetings
- receiving responses to written questions on notice
- seeking other additional information relevant to the Inquiry.

The findings and recommendations in this Report are based on the evidence gathered through this process.

The Committee's Report is presented to Parliament

Once a parliamentary committee inquiry is completed, the Committee presents its Report to the Victorian Parliament.

The Report for this Inquiry has been tabled and is publicly available at:
<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg-reports>.

The Government's response to the Committee's Report

Following the tabling of a parliamentary committee's report, the Victorian Government has six months to respond in writing to the Committee's recommendations arising from an inquiry.

The Government's response:

- is made public and published on the Committee's Inquiry page:
<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg-reports>
- indicates whether the Committee's recommendations are supported, supported in principle or not supported by the Government
- may outline other actions the Government intends to take in response to the Committee's Report.

This means that any questions about the progress of recommendations or next steps should be directed to the Victorian Government, rather than the Committee.

Expiry of the Legislative Assembly ahead of the State election

At the end of the 60th Parliament, the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee will cease to exist. This is a standard part of the parliamentary cycle, as committees expire when the Legislative Assembly expires.

As a result, once the 60th Parliament ends the Committee can no longer meet, conduct inquiries, collect evidence, or make decisions. Members also cease to be members of the Committee.

This means that no further evidence can be considered or responded to by the Committee after this point.

After the election, a new Parliament is formed, and new committees are established.

Acronyms and terms

Acronym/term	Description
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ACNC	Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission
BATForce	Barwon Adolescent Task Force
BRC	Basic Religious Charities
CBD	Central business district
CCYP	Commission for Children and Young People
CISS	Child Information Sharing Scheme
C-PTSD	Complex post-traumatic stress disorder
DFFH	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
FOCA	Austria's Federal Office for Cult Affairs, sometimes translated as Federal Office for Sect Issues
FVISS	Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme
FWO	Fair Work Ombudsman
LGBTIQA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse people
MARAM	Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management
Meli	Meli Community
Miviludes	Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires English: Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Cultic Deviances
NDA	Non-disclosure agreement
OAASC	Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner
PROTECT	PROTECT provides child safety information for teachers, educators and staff in early childhood services and schools.
PSIO	Personal Safety Intervention Order
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RMIT	The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
SAFER children framework	The SAFER children framework is the risk assessment approach for Victorian child protection practitioners
SARC	Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee
SOCIT	Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team

Acronym/term	Description
SSR	Social Services Regulator
UMSU	University of Melbourne Student Union
VCAT	Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal
VRQA	Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority
VSAC	Victim Survivors' Advisory Council
WWCC	Working with Children Checks

How the Committee approached a complex task

➔ In this Part

Topics covered include:

- the scope of the Inquiry and how evidence was gathered
- why this Report uses the term ‘coercive high-control group’ rather than ‘cult’
- the importance of centring lived experience
- avoiding unintended consequences for rights and freedoms
- focusing on behaviours, not beliefs.



How the Committee approached the evidence

This Inquiry required the Committee to navigate a genuinely complex task. The subject matter sits at the intersection of deeply personal lived experience, contested language, fundamental rights, and gaps in existing legal and service frameworks. Gathering evidence in a way that was safe and accessible for those most affected, while remaining rigorous and balanced, required deliberate choices about method, terminology and framing.

The Committee gathered evidence through an anonymous questionnaire, written submissions and public hearings. A significant volume of evidence was received confidentially—through anonymous questionnaire responses and confidential submissions—reflecting the real risks many participants told the Committee they faced in speaking about their experiences. Written questions on notice, briefings and meetings with regulatory agencies and other key stakeholders strengthened the evidence base.

It is impossible to know the full extent of coercive high-control groups in Victoria. After formal evidence gathering ended the Committee was made aware of harmful experiences related to groups not identified in the evidence. The Committee also acknowledges gaps in the Inquiry evidence received from First Nations peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and limited evidence from LGBTIQ+ individuals.



Throughout the Inquiry, the Committee was guided by three principles:

- Lived experience must be central, informing how the evidence is understood and shaping the development of analysis at every stage, rather than being treated as peripheral or supplementary.
- Language matters, the terminology used must be precise and consistent, focusing on harmful conduct and its impacts, to avoid inadvertently capturing ordinary or lawful group activity.
- Reform must focus on behaviour rather than belief, as the harm in coercive high-control group settings arises from what groups do, not what they believe, and any response that conflates the two risks over- and under-inclusion.

I want to start by saying that this is a very complex and nuanced issue; this is not black and white. When we have great freedom-of-religion [association and belief] laws we also have this freedom exploited in harmful ways, making combating this difficult. In some ways this is a societal issue. Psychologists tell us that we are in a loneliness epidemic, with mental health issues on the rise and the breakdown of the family unit due to globalisation and other factors. This fosters in us a need for belonging and community. Coupled with this, we are witnessing a bombardment of information and misinformation that can lead people to crave some simple answers. Cults provide simple answers to complex problems.

Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, *Transcript of evidence*, 20 October 2025, p. 21.

Scope of Inquiry

I hope this inquiry increases government and public awareness about the harms of high control groups and brings to light the experiences of an invisible population of survivors who are suffering with very limited and almost non-existent support.

Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 5.

On 3 April 2025, the Legislative Assembly asked the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee to inquire into and report by 30 September 2026 on:

cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control ...¹

¹ Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 3 April 2025, *Parliamentary debates*, p. 1507.

At the outset of this Inquiry the Committee wanted to be very clear that it is not about judging or questioning anyone's religious or other beliefs. Many groups, across a range of backgrounds and traditions, play an important role in bringing people together around shared values and in offering genuine community, meaning, and support that positively influence their members' lives.

The Committee's focus is on methods used by groups that can harm individuals emotionally, psychologically, financially, or physically. Harmful or abusive practices can happen in any group—religious or not—and the Committee's concern is with these practices, not with the beliefs a group holds.²

The Inquiry seeks to explore:

- What recruitment and retention methods are being used by groups that can cause harm?
- Do these methods amount to coercion or control?
- How can these practices be addressed through legislation or policy?

How the Inquiry gathered evidence

The Committee gathered evidence through three main channels:

- **Anonymous online questionnaire responses** to provide a safe and accessible way for individuals to share experiences without fear of retaliation or stigma.
- **Written submissions** to enable detailed input from stakeholders, organisations, and experts.
- **Hearings** to offer an opportunity for open dialogue and deeper exploration of issues raised in submissions.

This approach aimed to balance transparency with sensitivity to participants' concerns, recognising that some individuals felt at risk and needed confidential ways to contribute. In addition to the traditional process of receiving written submissions, the Committee designed an anonymous questionnaire to enable individuals to share their experiences and perspectives in a safe and accessible way. The questionnaire sought to provide a space for people to share their experiences for the first time, recognising the importance of being listened to and heard, particularly for individuals with lived experience. Listening to those voices was a central consideration for the Committee throughout the Inquiry.

² Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Recruitment methods and impacts of cults and 'organised fringe groups': Guidance note*, Parliament of Victoria, April 2025 <<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg-guidance-note>> accessed 28 January 2026.

Figure 1.1 Key stages of the Inquiry



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups*, (n.d.), <<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg>> accessed 11 May 2026.

After formal evidence gathering ended, people continued to contact the Committee to share their experiences and the impacts of coercive high-control group practices. Some of these accounts related to groups not identified in the formal evidence.



Important note on confidential evidence

There are 317 anonymous questionnaire responses and 52 confidential submissions that are not directly attributed in this Report. This safeguard is necessary to protect participants' privacy and safety.

This large volume of confidential evidence was significant and influential to the Inquiry. It shaped the Committee's analysis, corroborated patterns of harm, and underpins many of the arguments, findings, and recommendations in this Report.

These contributions complemented the public evidence and added valuable depth of insight, enabling the Committee to better understand systemic issues, identify gaps in responses, and consider practical measures to address them. Readers should keep this context in mind when interpreting the Report.

To strengthen its evidence base, the Committee sought briefings and meetings with relevant stakeholders, including the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. It also used written questions on notice to obtain information from key oversight and enforcement agencies and government departments, ensuring it had the evidence needed to identify gaps and consider appropriate responses.³ To assist in building a clearer understanding of the support services currently available to Victorians affected by coercive high-control groups the Committee asked four organisations to respond to 12 questions about demand, delivery and funding.⁴



Important note on contextual information informing the Committee's work

Through the Inquiry process, the Committee gained firsthand insight into how some coercive high-control groups operate and the methods they may use to influence, pressure or manipulate people.

The Committee heard consistent accounts of group practices that affect personal relationships, isolate people from their support networks, and in some instances, involve contacting law enforcement in ways that appear to be retaliatory or punitive. These practices can create distress, disrupt family life, and, for some, contribute to longer-term impacts on wellbeing and trust in institutions.

These insights have strengthened the Committee's understanding of the real-world impacts of some coercive high-control group behaviours and helped to inform its approach to considering evidence and potential reforms.

The Committee acknowledges significant gaps in the Inquiry evidence including from First Nations peoples and from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. While these perspectives are critical to understanding the full range of experiences and impacts, they were not reflected in the Inquiry evidence to the extent the Committee would have wished. The Committee also notes limited evidence from LGBTIQ+ individuals.

In developing future reforms, targeted and culturally appropriate engagement will be essential to ensure these voices are meaningfully included. Such efforts will be necessary to ensure that reforms are informed by diverse lived experiences and that intended outcomes are effective and equitable for all communities.

³ See *Additional information*, Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups: Submissions*, 2025, <<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/submissions>> accessed 13 March 2026.

⁴ Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Understanding support service demand: Responses from four support organisations*, June 2026.

Avoiding naming groups in this Report

The Committee has chosen not to name or focus on specific groups in this Report. Where groups were identified in public submissions or hearing evidence, that information is contained within those published documents. However, any specifically identifying details about locations, leaders or individuals have been redacted from published submissions. The Committee recognises the importance of transparency to the community and has sought to balance this against the Inquiry's intent, which is not to name, expose or judge particular groups or people.

The Inquiry focuses on coercive high-control groups' patterns of behaviour that allow coercion, manipulation and abuse to occur across a range of settings. Reforms must focus on behaviours and practices, rather than groups and labels, to ensure they are not overly restrictive and can apply wherever harm occurs.

This Report documents people's experiences of behaviours associated with various groups. The Committee's role is not to investigate or determine whether any group is, or is not, a coercive high-control group. References to evidence throughout this Report do not indicate that the Committee has formed a view on the status of any group as a coercive high-control group.

Why terminology matters

The term *cult* has long been used to describe many coercive group environments. For survivors, it remains a useful descriptor. But in law, policy, and service delivery, the term remains imprecise, stigmatising, and often unhelpful. It invokes images of fringe extremism or charismatic leaders, obscuring the systemic and patterned nature of the harm. Worse, its use is often met with defensiveness or dismissal, disingenuously framed as an attack on religious or cultural practice.

This ambiguity limits institutional responses ... The danger in focusing on definitional clarity rather than coercive behaviours is this: no victim should be required to prove their group is a cult in order to prove that the coercive behaviours they endured caused harm. [original emphasis]

Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 40.

This Report uses the term **coercive high-control group** rather than **cult**. The Committee made this decision deliberately, to shift away from labels that are emotive, contested and inconsistently defined, and towards terminology that focuses on identifiable patterns of coercive and controlling behaviours that have harmful impacts on people. As the Committee acknowledged in its Guidance Note at the outset of the Inquiry, the term can 'lead to stigma, misrepresentation, and potential infringement on rights such as freedom of belief or association'.⁵

⁵ Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Recruitment methods and impacts of cults and 'organised fringe groups'*, p. 1.

Several stakeholders warned that the term ‘cult’ lacks any stable or objective meaning and may have significant unintended consequences.⁶ For example, the Australian Christian Lobby noted that what constitutes a ‘cult’ varies widely depending on ‘cultural, social or personal perspectives’,⁷ and cautioned that separating beliefs from practices is not straightforward.⁸ The New South Wales Council of Churches observed that because not all groups labelled ‘cults’ are ‘violent or socially oppressive’, the term can obscure important distinctions and miscategorise minority or unfamiliar religious communities.⁹ Raphael Aron, Director of Cult Consulting Australia, which provides assistance to individuals and families affected by coercive high-control groups, reflected:

We do not use the word in court, as you mentioned – in relation to cults – because what does the word ‘cult’ actually mean? It has all sorts of connotations. As I said, it is a very pejorative word.¹⁰

The term coercive high-control group reflects an approach focused on harmful behaviours. It directs attention to patterns of coercion, manipulation or control that may give rise to legal concern, without presupposing theological or ideological judgement. By focusing on conduct and impact rather than identity, the terminology aligns more closely with existing harm-based frameworks and seeks to reduce the risk of unnecessary stigmatisation.

Considerations when examining evidence

It is important to stay focused on the real-world impacts that coercive high-control groups can have on individuals, families and communities. The Committee heard repeatedly that policy decisions in this area must be grounded in the practical consequences of action or inaction.

Centring lived experience

The harms described by lived experience stakeholders are not abstract or theoretical. They are the lived reality of people recovering from their experiences in coercive high-control groups.

I think it is the most vital thing that you can do, to keep centring survivor voices.

Elise Heerde, Certified Coach and Mental Health Practitioner, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

6 Catalyst Baptist Church, *Submission 147*, pp. 2–3; Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty, *Submission 170*; Australian Christian Churches, *Submission 99*, pp. 5–6; Shane St Reynolds, *Submission 25*, p. 3; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalic, *Submission 40*, p. 40.

7 Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*, p. 8.

8 Jasmine Yuen, Victorian Director, Australian Christian Lobby, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 54–55.

9 New South Wales Council of Churches, *Submission 282*, p. 2.

10 Raphael Aron, Director, Cult Consulting Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

Lived experience evidence reveals forms of harm that might otherwise remain overlooked. Coercion and control in group settings is cumulative, layered and often invisible to outsiders. Survivors explained that coercive high-control groups operate as total systems that often shape every aspect of life. For example, Ryan Carey described coercive high-control groups as ‘states within a state’ with their ‘own rules ... own enforcement ... own surveillance’.¹¹

Survivors of group-based coercive control hold essential expertise necessary for addressing the complexity, breadth, and cumulative harm of coercive systems – insight that is critical to designing effective, ethical, and trauma-informed responses.

Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 47.

By centring lived experience, clear patterns of manipulation, isolation and dependency are revealed. These accounts show how coercive environments erode autonomy, distort decision-making and trap people in systems that are extremely difficult to leave, with impacts that continue long after exit.¹²

By sharing their experiences, stakeholders have strengthened the Committee’s capacity to consider effective evidence-based reform. Lived experience evidence grounds policy in the real-world consequences of coercive practices and exposes both the overt and the cumulative, long-term harms. It also helps identify what interventions are likely to work in practice, and the risks when responses fall short.¹³

Avoiding unintended consequences on rights and freedoms

Any reforms that pursue improved safeguards must also recognise the potential for unintended consequences, including in relation to fundamental rights. Victorians’ freedoms of religion, association and expression remain essential, and any limits on these rights must be carefully considered and clearly justified.

The concern that mainstream religious groups could be mischaracterized as coercive is valid. However, when the inquiry is careful to distinguish between devotion and manipulation, it can serve an important role in protecting the vulnerable while upholding religious freedom.

Casey Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Submission 204*, p. 1.

... a delicate approach is required ... It is vitally important that any reform upholds Victorians’ rights such as freedoms of religion, association and expression, which are protected both internationally and domestically and can only be limited in specific circumstances.

Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*, p. 2.

¹¹ Ryan Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

¹² Name withheld, *Submission 262*, p. 1. Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 24.

¹³ Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 259*, p. 1.

It is important to ensure that reform designed to address harmful group behaviours do not inadvertently affect people or groups engaged in ordinary, lawful practices. Overly broad reforms could create unintended impacts on legitimate expressions of belief, community life or organisational practice.¹⁴ However, approaches that are too narrow may fail to catch behaviours that allow coercive high-control groups to operate and cause harm.

In evaluating the evidence of harmful behaviours and possible reforms, the Committee has been guided by a commitment to centre lived experience and to consider any unintended consequences that policy or legislative changes could have on rights and freedoms.

Focusing on behaviours, not beliefs

... if we agree that the use of coercive methods of influence and control, that demand absolute allegiance and obedience, that use ongoing controlling behaviours, wide-ranging restrictions and humiliating and abusive punishments, often public within the group for so-called disobedience, including the exploration of alternative ways of thinking and behaving – in other words, an individual’s loss of independent thinking and decision-making – if that exists within a group, then no matter the type of ideology, well then, that can never be benign.

Dr Janja Lalich, CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

Any effective response to coercive high-control groups must focus on behaviours rather than beliefs. Harm arises not from theology or ideology itself, but from patterns of coercion, control and exploitation that strip individuals of their autonomy and capacity for free decision-making.

A behaviour-focused framework protects human rights by clearly separating a person’s or group’s beliefs from their actions. This approach ensures that risk and harm can be identified and addressed without governments or their agencies being required to evaluate the validity, orthodoxy or acceptability of particular doctrines or teachings—a role that is neither appropriate nor within the proper function of the State. By targeting harmful behaviour only, it avoids unintended consequences for freedom of belief, expression or association.

This distinction matters in practice as much as in principle. A framework based on conduct rather than belief is better able to capture the different settings in which coercive control and exploitation occur. These harms can arise in religious, commercial enterprise, therapeutic or wellness communities, or any other type of group structure. Focusing on behaviour avoids the risk of unfairly targeting groups based on their beliefs or because they fall outside mainstream norms, while still allowing a response

¹⁴ Religious Freedom Alliance, *Submission 175*, p. 6; Freedom for Faith, *Submission 228*; Mike Southon, Executive Director, Freedom for Faith, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

to behaviours that cause real harm. By concentrating on coercive patterns of behaviour, the State can remain neutral on matters of belief while intervening when conduct unreasonably undermines autonomy, safety and human dignity.

The Committee considers this distinction fundamental to principled and workable reform. Any legislative or policy response that conflates belief with harmful conduct risks two problems:

- under-inclusion, by missing harmful groups that do not fit a recognised profile
- over-inclusion, by capturing communities whose beliefs may be unconventional, but whose conduct causes no harm.

A behaviour-based approach avoids both failures and provides a more stable and rights-consistent foundation for reform.

FINDING 1: A behaviour-based approach provides the strongest foundation for legal and policy reform addressing coercive high-control groups, ensuring that attention is directed to harmful conduct and its impacts rather than beliefs or group identities.

Part 1

Why is understanding coercive high-control groups important?



In this Part

Topics covered include:

- common misconceptions about coercive high-control groups
- becoming involved in a coercive high-control group can happen to anyone
- the need for neutral language in any policy reform
- the need to improve existing systems to recognise and respond to harm.



What the Committee heard

Public understanding of coercive high-control groups is often shaped by inaccurate assumptions and misconceptions. For example, that these groups are rare or easily identified, that only certain kinds of people become involved, or that involvement reflects a personal failing. People with lived experience, practitioners and researchers told the Committee that these misconceptions cause real harm: they delay recognition, reduce access to support, and make it harder for those affected to be taken seriously when they seek help.



Inquiry evidence raised consistent concerns about language. The term ‘cult’ is widely used in public discourse but poorly suited to legal or policy settings, where precision and consistency are essential. Evidence identified significant risks in embedding the term in law, including the absence of any agreed definition, potential human rights implications, and the tendency to focus attention on what a group believes rather than what it does. A behaviour-based framework (i.e., one that identifies harmful conduct regardless of a group’s identity, beliefs, or stated purpose) was broadly supported as a more effective and principled foundation for reform.

Existing systems are not consistently equipped to identify or respond to harm arising from coercive high-control group settings. Across family violence, mental health, child protection, education, housing, and policing, Inquiry evidence described a limited shared understanding of how coercion operates in group settings. Without this understanding, harm can go undetected, survivors can be misunderstood, and opportunities for earlier intervention are missed.

What the Committee thinks



Misconceptions about coercive high-control groups are not merely a matter of public awareness, they have direct consequences for whether harm is recognised and whether those affected can access support. A more accurate, widely shared understanding of how coercion and control operates in group settings is a necessary foundation for prevention, intervention, and effective reform.

The Committee is satisfied that the term ‘cult’ should not be used in legislation or policy reform arising from this Inquiry. The evidence makes clear that a label-based approach risks targeting groups on the basis of identity or belief rather than conduct, and that the legal and human rights risks associated with such an approach are significant. Reforms should be grounded in behaviour-focused language that can be applied consistently, regardless of a group’s particular beliefs or identities.

The Committee is concerned that existing systems lack the shared language, training, and frameworks needed to identify coercive high-control group dynamics when they arise. Building that capacity, across sectors and at the frontline, is essential to ensuring that harm is recognised earlier and that those affected can access appropriate support.

*Note: This Part relies on confidential Inquiry evidence received by the Committee that is not directly cited or attributed to protect participant privacy and safety. Readers should be mindful that this evidence supports aspects of the analysis, findings and recommendations in this Part. See *Important note on confidential evidence* in *How the Committee approached a complex task*.*

A stronger understanding of the dynamics of coercive high-control groups—including how they recruit and control their members—helps ensure Victorians involved in these groups, or at risk of recruitment, are better protected and supported.

Understanding is the starting point for any effective response. Building a clear understanding of the dynamics of coercive high-control groups is a necessary first step to enable identification, prevention and appropriate intervention. Without this foundational understanding, the tools available to the Victorian Government, services and communities cannot be applied meaningfully.

The more we understand coercive high-control groups, the more opportunities we have to recognise and address harmful patterns of behaviour before they cause serious and lasting damage. These patterns can erode autonomy, compromise genuine consent, and normalise control, manipulation and abuse.

Recognising the features of a coercive high-control group helps earlier identification of risk and strengthens prevention efforts. It also enables more effective, trauma-informed responses by supporting practitioners and services to understand behaviour in context, rather than misinterpreting it as personal choice or unwillingness to engage. This is particularly important in settings where people may be seeking belonging, support or a sense of meaning, and where coercion and dependency can be difficult to see from the outside.

Victoria's experience in responding to family violence provides an example of how a behaviour-based approach to identifying harm has been applied in practice. By recognising coercive control as a pattern of ongoing, often non-physical behaviour, rather than focusing only on physical harm or isolated incidents,¹ this approach has informed efforts to recognise risk and respond earlier in some contexts.² Comparable dynamics of coercion, control, fear and dependency may also arise in group settings. Taking a similar behaviour-focused lens in these contexts would contribute to recognising and addressing harm wherever it occurs.

An informed community and a capable system reinforce each other. This Inquiry is an important start to increasing awareness of coercive high-control groups in Victorian communities and acknowledging the serious harms they cause. It lays the groundwork for the changes needed to help people safely exit these groups, recover from harm and be better protected in the future.

1.1 We need to build a more informed community

Public discourse on coercive high-control groups is often shaped by myth, sensationalism and outdated stereotypes. Popular culture commonly portrays 'cults' as fringe, bizarre or easily identifiable groups, that only naïve or extreme individuals become involved in. This obscures the reality: that coercion and harm in group settings often develops gradually through relationships, and is embedded in familiar social or cultural environments, making it difficult to recognise and easier for groups to hide their true intent.³

This Inquiry provides a critical opportunity to strengthen public understanding of coercive high-control groups and to ensure that community, service, and legal responses are equipped to recognise and address the harms they cause. These harms are often misunderstood, minimised, or rendered invisible by dominant cultural narratives. Building a clearer, shared understanding is a necessary first step toward prevention, intervention, and meaningful reform.

1.1.1 Challenging common misconceptions

These barriers to finding the right support are made worse by public ignorance, salacious media coverage and stigma. Survivors hide their experience to avoid ridicule, which isolates them further. They end up suffering alone.

Anke Richter, Director, Decult, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

-
- 1 Respect Victoria, *Coercive control, non-physical violence and relationship red flags*, 2026, <<https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/prevention/recognise-violence/coercive-control-non-physical-violence>> accessed 5 March 2026.
 - 2 See for example, Johanna M Lynch, et al., 'Coercive control: Recognising relational patterns that affect patient wellbeing', *Australian Journal of General Practice*, 2025. 'By recognising patterns of coercive control, GPs can contribute to early intervention enabling individuals, families and communities to move toward safety and healing'.
 - 3 See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Relational recruitment', 'Establishing social bonds/relationships', 'Deception-based recruitment', 'Opportunistic recruitment', and 'Emotional manipulation/grooming'.

The consequences of common misconceptions include delayed recognition of harmful behaviours, reduced understanding of dynamics and lived experiences of coercive high-control groups, and diminished empathy for those affected. When these groups are framed as rare or absurd anomalies, those affected by harmful behaviours risk being dismissed as complicit or irrational.⁴ For families concerned about their loved ones, it can be difficult to articulate concerns in ways that are taken seriously when they seek help or support, this is compounded in situations which do not reach a clear legal threshold.⁵ A more informed community understands that coercive control is about patterns of behaviour (not belief systems or stereotypes) and that harm can occur in diverse settings.

The Committee uses the term ‘cult’ in the below Table 1.1 because it reflects common use in public discourse. Given the prevalence of the term in the Victorian community, the assumptions and misconceptions associated with it, influence how the harms identified in this Inquiry are perceived and discussed. Using the term in this context supports clearer public understanding.

Table 1.1 Common misconceptions about “cults” identified in Inquiry evidence

✗ Common misconceptions	✓ What the evidence told us
“Cults” only exist on the edges of society.	Coercive high-control dynamics can occur in any type of group, including those that appear ordinary or mainstream. These groups do not need to be religious or spiritual in nature. What defines a coercive high-control group is harmful behaviour and conduct, not whether it appears fringe or unconventional. Features such as authoritarian leadership, restricted information, and ‘us versus them’ narratives were described across different types of coercive high-control groups.
“Cults” only occur in religious or spiritual contexts.	
“Cults” are about unusual beliefs, not harmful behaviours.	Coercive high-control groups are not identifiable by what they believe, but by what they do. Regardless of the belief system involved, concern arises where groups use coercive, deceptive, or exploitative practices to recruit, control, and retain members, resulting in serious and often lasting harm.

4 Elise Heerde, Certified Coach and Mental Health Practitioner, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 55–56; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 43.

5 Renee Spencer, closed hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25; Dr Ahona Guha, Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, closed hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 131a*, p. 4.

✗ Common misconceptions	✓ What the evidence told us
People in “cults” could just leave if they wanted to.	Leaving is often difficult and risky. There are many barriers to leaving a coercive high-control group, including social isolation, loss of family/community, financial dependence, and significant psychological pressure, showing that exiting can be complex and destabilising.
Only naïve, complicit or weak people become involved in “cults”.	The harmful dynamics of coercive high-control groups can affect people from diverse backgrounds. Involvement reflects sustained relational and organisational pressure, not personal weakness or poor judgment.
The harm caused by “cults” is exaggerated or isolated.	Coercive high-control groups cause recurring patterns of psychological harm, financial exploitation, family estrangement and long-term trauma. This harm is patterned and cumulative, rather than isolated or incidental.

Note: See evidence to the Inquiry. Submissions can be accessed here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/submissions>. Transcripts and responses to Questions on Notice can be accessed here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/hearings>. Read the Committee's insights from its anonymous questionnaire: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg-questionnaire-insights>.

By reframing the issue away from sensational narratives and toward patterned coercive dynamics, the Inquiry contributes to a more accurate and constructive public discourse.

FINDING 2: Misconceptions that coercive high-control groups are rare or easily recognised obscures the patterned and relational harm they cause across a range of different settings. This increases the risk that those affected are misunderstood, not taken seriously or dismissed.

1.1.2 It can happen to anyone

Absolutely anyone can be pushed and then pulled into a cult, unless they understand the situational, and then recruitment and retention strategies these predatory groups employ.

Sue Winter, Submission 2a, pp. 4–5.

Recruitment and involvement in coercive high-control groups cuts across age, education, gender, cultural background, and socio-economic status. Teenagers seeking belonging, international students settling into university in a new country, migrants navigating resettlement, individuals experiencing trauma or mental health challenges,

people undergoing hardship, and those just seeking community, have all been identified as potential targets for recruitment.⁶

Vulnerability is often shaped by life circumstances rather than personal traits. Life transitions, grief, isolation, experiences of trauma, identity exploration, or social marginalisation can make people more open to influence.⁷ An informed community response recognises this complexity and rejects narratives that frame harm as a result of individual weakness or poor decision-making.

In many cases, individuals are not recruited into coercive high-control groups at all but are born into them. For these individuals, there was no gradual recruitment process. Instead, the rules, control and harmful practices of the group formed the backdrop of everyday life from childhood, rather than developing gradually over time. This can make recognition of harm, and eventual exit, particularly complex for these individuals.⁸ Part 4 examines the specific impacts of children and young people in coercive high-control groups, including those born into such environments and their distinct experiences.

Understanding that involvement in a coercive high-control group *can happen to anyone*⁹ is essential to prevention. It reduces stigma, increases vigilance, and supports earlier intervention.¹⁰

FINDING 3: Involvement in coercive high-control groups can happen to anyone, regardless of background, age or education. Raising awareness of this reality is necessary to reduce stigma, increase community vigilance, and support earlier identification and intervention when coercive and harmful group dynamics are present.

1.1.3 Making hidden harm visible

They have hidden it, they have suppressed it, and now they are living with the broken arm, so to speak; they are living with the part of their life that got stolen. Often they are now trying to impart to someone, realising that it is not available, not there, so that becomes a very difficult thing to do.

Ben Shenton, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

The Inquiry provides an important opportunity to recognise the patterns of harm linked to coercive high-control groups that are often overlooked. By engaging with survivors, families, practitioners and organisations, it has brought together and documented

⁶ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing the 'Recruitment methods' and 'Recruitment tactics' of coercive high-control groups.

⁷ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing the 'Recruitment methods' and 'Recruitment tactics' of coercive high-control groups.

⁸ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Relational recruitment'.

⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 24; Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, pp. 4–5; Name withheld, *Submission 239*, p. 2.

¹⁰ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 43–44.

experiences that are often private, fragmented, misunderstood and difficult to speak about. Collecting and publishing this evidence through the Inquiry process helps build a clearer and more widely shared understanding of how harm can occur in coercive high-control group settings.

Coercive and harmful conduct in group settings is frequently difficult to detect from the outside. Not all harmful behaviours leave a visible mark, and the insular nature of coercive high-control groups make it difficult for those outside to understand what is occurring.¹¹ Control may operate through emotional dependency, information restriction, surveillance, identity restructuring or gradual social isolation. Further, the harm is often cumulative and normalised over time, and often causes serious and long-lasting impacts (see Part 2, Sections 2.4.5 and 2.5 and Part 4, Section 4.3.6).

Because these dynamics are relational and patterned, rather than incident-based, they can fall between existing legal and service frameworks. Survivors may also struggle to describe their experiences in language recognised by others, including well-trained frontline justice and support services.¹² Family and friends may observe deterioration without being able to clearly identify the cause.¹³

Recognising this harm is the starting point for meaningful reform. Clearer language, improved awareness and a common understanding across communities and sectors are essential to developing effective policy and service responses.

1.2 We need to use neutral language to support effective reform

Building a more informed community is a necessary foundation for change. However, public understanding alone is not enough. For reform to be effective and fair, the language used in legislation, policy and institutional responses must also be neutral and fit for purpose.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated that commonly used terms in public discourse—most notably the term ‘cult’—are ill-suited to legal and policy settings. While this language may reflect widespread community use, Inquiry evidence raised concerns about the Committee adopting the word ‘cult’, warning of the legal risks of relying on an undefined or subjective concept when translating it into reform.¹⁴

¹¹ Name withheld, *Submission 105*, p. 1; Laura McConnell, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 20.

¹² Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 87.

¹³ Professor Julie Cogin, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Australian Catholic University, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Patrick McIvor, Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 40; Mike Southon, Executive Director, Freedom for Faith, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 37.

The lack of a universal definition or clear, objective criteria makes it difficult to distinguish a ‘cult’ from other groups and is often used prejudicially rather than derived from an established legal basis.¹⁵ Other jurisdictions that have introduced legislation specifically addressing harms associated with ‘cults’ have similarly not defined the term in law.¹⁶

The term, however, continues to be irresponsibly used in popular parlance—particularly in the media—without attention to the nuances of meaning or its problematic nature, or with any recognition of how it prejudices people against groups who have been labelled as “cults”.

Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty, *Submission 170*, p. 4.

Inquiry evidence identified multiple risks associated with using the term ‘cult’ in legislation or policy reform, typically focussing on potential or unintended consequences, including:

- **Definitional vagueness:** a risk of definitional ambiguity because using ‘cult’ in law embeds a term that ‘often becomes a pejorative label lacking clear definition or objective’,¹⁷ making legislation unstable and difficult to apply consistently. Experiences in other jurisdictions (such as the United States and Europe) demonstrate how the direct insertion of ‘cult’ into a legislative or policy context has been problematic.¹⁸ The indirect incorporation of ‘cult’ as a legal concept also creates similar problems. If the law tries to regulate particular groups, doctrines or belief systems based on this idea, it can lead to the same instability, inviting selective application¹⁹ and remaining vulnerable to legal challenge or judicial review.²⁰
- **Stigmatisation and discrimination:** a ‘cult’ label in legislation or policy risks unfairly targeting minority or unfamiliar groups/communities.²¹ It also risks reinforcing its sensationalised negative associations in media and public discourse, perpetuating broader social stigma and harmful connotations.²²

¹⁵ Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty, *Submission 170*.

¹⁶ For example, see Part 3, Section 3.5.3 and Case Study 3.2 which provides insight into France’s approach to coercive high-control groups, noting ‘France has not legally defined the term ‘sect’ or sectarian abuse, but the agency focuses on several criteria which were established through the two parliamentary inquiries that preceded the legislation’.

¹⁷ Shane St Reynolds, *Submission 25*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.; Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Submission 286*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 40.

²⁰ David Griffiths, *Submission 65*, pp. 4–5.

²¹ Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty, *Submission 170*, p. 6; Elizabeth Kendal, *Submission 200*, p. 4.

²² New South Wales Council of Churches, *Submission 282*, p. 3; Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Submission 286*, p. 4; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 41.

- **Human rights infringement:** applying a ‘cult’ label to groups without clear criteria can lead to potential infringements on rights,²³ such as the rights to freedom of religion, belief and association.²⁴
- **Government overreach:** focusing on what a group is (its identity or beliefs) rather than what a group does (its behaviour), risks targeting belief systems through legislation rather than focusing on harmful behaviour.²⁵
- **Strengthening group isolation:** can reinforce an ‘us-versus-them’ narrative, causing groups with potentially harmful behaviours to further withdraw and make it more difficult to detect issues, prevent harm and provide support.²⁶
- **Conduct versus belief confusion:** framing legislative or policy responses around a ‘cult’ label risks common religious or community practices being misrepresented as harmful without evidence of harmful behaviours.²⁷ It can also allow a group to avoid organisational responsibility by attributing coercive control or harmful behaviour to the actions of a single leader of a ‘cult’.²⁸

Inquiry evidence also cautioned against compiling or endorsing a list of ‘cults’ or coercive high-control groups because it would not meaningfully address the harms caused by these groups. Lists risk oversimplifying complex situations and reinforcing stigma, without improving prevention, early intervention or support for those affected. Listing or naming organisations may also ‘inadvertently legitimise unlisted groups that continue to cause harm’.²⁹

1.3 We need to improve system access and responses

Social workers, teachers, mental health professionals, and law enforcement officers often encounter people affected by cults without the training to identify or support them.

Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9.

Government and non-government support systems and organisations often rely on fragmented and inconsistent processes, that can limit support and reduce the capacity of services to recognise the patterns of harm present in coercive high-control groups.

²³ Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty, *Submission 170*, p. 1; Australian Christian Churches, *Submission 99*; Falun Dafa Association of Australia Victoria Branch, *Submission 252*, p. 2.

²⁴ Mike Southon, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 30–31; Milton Oliver, *Submission 115*; Name withheld, *Submission 116*, p. 1; John Cleverdon, *Submission 121*, p. 1.

²⁵ Catalyst Baptist Church, *Submission 147*, p. 3; Freedom for Faith, *Submission 228*, p. 3; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 176*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 17.

²⁶ Paul Gratton, Pastor, Now Church Moe, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 17.

²⁷ Jasmine Yuen, Victorian Director, Australian Christian Lobby, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 53–54; Mike Southon, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29; Australian Christian Churches, *Submission 99*, p. 7; Catalyst Baptist Church, *Submission 147*, p. 2.

²⁸ Cult Consulting Australia, *Submission 227*, p. 2.

²⁹ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 56.

Across sectors (including family violence, mental health, education, child protection, housing, and policing) there is limited shared understanding of how coercion operates in group settings.³⁰ Definitions appear inconsistent, there is an absence of screening tools, and frontline workers may lack training to identify early warning indicators.³¹ This can mean:

- harm may go unrecognised until it has escalated³²
- survivors experiences' may be mischaracterised as isolated relationship issues, faith disputes, or lifestyle conflict³³
- opportunities for early intervention may be missed.³⁴

Inquiry evidence highlighted that survivors often experience significant barriers to disclosing harm that occurred in coercive high-control group settings, making it harder for people to access support.³⁵ Accounts described feelings of shame, stigma, fear of retaliation, and concern about losing their entire social network if they reported or left. In some cases, continued access to housing, employment, education, or contact with children and family members was closely tied to remaining a member of the group.³⁶ Inquiry evidence also indicated that some people, including children and young people, did not initially recognise their experiences as harmful or were simply unaware what support services were available.³⁷ For example, where child protection systems failed to identify concerns or where age-based limits on supports, restrict access to assistance.³⁸

³⁰ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19–20; Dr Janja Lulich, CEO, Lulich Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Clare Heath-Mclvor, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32; Jane Kennedy, Registered Counsellor, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

³¹ Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19–20; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

³² Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 20; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lulich, *Submission 40*, pp. 45, 50–51, 74.

³³ Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

³⁴ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 30; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 54; Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

³⁵ Anke Richter, Director, Decult, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

³⁶ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Restrictions on education and information', 'Restrictions on relationships and social life', 'Housing and movement restrictions', and 'Legal and civic restrictions'.

³⁷ Excerpt from a deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 77; Name withheld, *Submission 180*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 246*, p. 4; BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 4.

³⁸ See Part 4.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The evidence makes a compelling case against the use of the term 'cult' in any legislative or policy reform arising from this Inquiry. The risks identified collectively demonstrate that the term is ill-suited to a legal or policy context where precision, consistency and certainty are essential.

The Committee acknowledges that people with lived experience often use the term 'cult' to describe their own experiences. For some, the term captures the intensity of the control, isolation or manipulation they experienced and forms an important part of their process to understand and recover from that harm. The Committee respects the use of this term in individual evidence.

At the same time, any policy and legislative responses must take a different approach. Reforms need to be grounded in a behaviour-based framework that targets demonstrably harmful practices, regardless of a group's nature or identity. This approach protects groups with genuine intentions from unfair and unwarranted stigma while ensuring that harmful conduct is addressed wherever it occurs.

The Committee is of the view that there is limited shared understanding across sectors of how coercion operates in group settings, including in family violence, mental health, education, child protection, housing and policing. Parts 3 to 5 of this Report consider in detail various reform opportunities to strengthen system responses to coercive high-control groups and better support people affected by harm.

FINDING 4: The Victorian Government should not define the term 'cult' in law.

Legislative and policy reforms addressing coercive high-control groups should use neutral, behaviour-based language to identify harmful conduct and respond to its impacts without targeting particular beliefs or group identities.

FINDING 5: Harm caused by coercive high-control groups is frequently invisible to those outside the group, and poorly recognised by existing legal and service frameworks. Shared language and awareness across communities and sectors is essential to effective policy and service responses.

Part 2

Consistent patterns of control and the harms they cause



In this Part

Topics covered include:

- types of coercive high-control groups
- common characteristics and harmful dynamics of coercive high-control groups
- ways coercive high-control groups recruit, including the methods and tactics used
- impacts of coercive high-control groups on individuals, families and communities
- the role of lived experience expertise in shaping reforms related to coercive high-control groups.



What the Committee heard

Coercive high-control groups vary in their beliefs, structures and stated purposes, but show consistent patterns of coercion and control. Inquiry evidence described authoritarian, centralised leadership structures, manufactured dependency, enforced ideological conformity, manipulation, surveillance, isolation, fear-based narratives and financial exploitation.

These characteristics do not operate in isolation, rather it is their combination and cumulative application that distinguishes coercive high-control groups from groups with genuine intentions.

Recruitment is gradual, deliberate and sustained, designed to blend into ordinary social life. Most people who shared their personal experiences with the Committee did not perceive themselves as being recruited at all. The majority entered through family members or trusted personal relationships, with recruiters targeting individuals during periods of vulnerability or transition. Coercive high-control groups present as legitimate, familiar or beneficial, with their true intentions concealed until trust and commitment are established. Deception and gradual indoctrination are defining features. Online platforms are a growing recruitment pathway, enabling groups to reach large audiences, operate with anonymity, and accelerate indoctrination while avoiding scrutiny.



The impacts on individuals are serious, wide-ranging and cumulative. At their core is psychological harm—the most prevalent impact reported, experienced by 94.9% of the Inquiry’s questionnaire respondents—including chronic fear, diminished personal autonomy and self-trust, identity loss, and the enduring effects of shunning and excommunication. A significant proportion of lived experience Inquiry evidence also reported physical harm, including physical violence, sexual abuse and medical neglect. These practices are typically used by coercive high-control groups to enforce compliance and are often not visible by those outside group leadership. The imposition of personal restrictions on education, employment, relationships and finances was also a common experience for people involved in coercive high-control groups. These practices entrench dependency and leave many individuals ill-equipped to function independently after leaving.

Inquiry evidence makes clear that harm is not experienced uniformly. Women and girls experience distinct and disproportionate harm, with gendered power structures normalising and exacerbating coercive control, sexual violence and economic dependency. Structural disadvantage, social isolation, language barriers and discrimination can compound vulnerability and harm across diverse communities.

Beyond the individual, families are left with sudden estrangement, prolonged ambiguous grief, and limited pathways for reconnection or support. At a broader level, the community bears significant and ongoing costs, with individuals exiting coercive high-control groups placing demand on housing, health, welfare and other public services. Those costs are not well understood—in part, because the people who have experienced them firsthand have not had a formal voice in how systems are designed to respond. People with lived experience emphasised to the Committee that their advice and insights are essential to understanding how these groups operate, how harm develops, and where current systems fail to respond effectively.

What the Committee thinks

Coercive high-control groups cause serious, cumulative harm, often with the deliberate intention to control and coerce an individual. Deception, gradual escalation and the targeting of vulnerability are not incidental features; they are the mechanisms through which control is established and maintained. Because no single step appears extreme in isolation and involvement deepens gradually, responsibility is too easily shifted onto individuals rather than recognised as the result of a sustained, systematic strategy of concealment and escalation. Regardless of their stated purpose or belief systems, coercive high-control groups use similar methods to recruit, retain and regulate members, and the psychological, physical and social harms that result are predictable consequences of environments that centralise authority, manufacture dependency, suppress dissent and make exit costly.

The Committee is particularly concerned by Inquiry evidence that physical and sexual violence within these groups is often concealed by group structures, that victims are frequently discouraged from reporting, and that abuse is reframed as spiritual or a disciplinary necessity.



The Committee is equally concerned that the personal restrictions imposed on members (i.e., on education, employment, relationships and finances) are not incidental but strategic, creating the conditions of dependency that make leaving feel impossible and reintegration genuinely difficult. These dynamics mean that harm frequently continues well beyond a person's formal involvement with a group, and that the point of exit is often the beginning, not the end, of a person's need for support.

Current systems and services are not consistently equipped to recognise or respond to these dynamics. People exiting coercive high-control groups often present with complex and compounding needs, and because recovery is frequently prolonged and non-linear, responses that do not account for the underlying nature of coercive control in group settings are often inadequate. For many, they are ill-equipped to understand and make decisions in the real world. The costs of this, to individuals, families and the broader community, are significant and largely unquantified.

Addressing this requires ongoing engagement with people who have lived experience to help inform policy design and evaluation, rather than consulted on an ad hoc basis. Victoria has well-established lived experience infrastructure across adjacent policy areas, and a dedicated mechanism for coercive high-control groups, reflecting the diversity of communities affected, would build on that foundation. The Committee's recommendation in this Part reflects these concerns, calling on the Victorian Government to establish a formal lived experience advisory body to co-design, inform and evaluate reforms addressing the impacts of coercive high-control groups.

*Note: This Part relies on confidential Inquiry evidence received by the Committee that is not directly cited or attributed to protect participant privacy and safety. Readers should be mindful that this evidence supports aspects of the analysis, findings and recommendations in this Part. See *Important note on confidential evidence in How the Committee approached a complex task*.*

2.1 Types of coercive high-control groups

The Terms of Reference direct the Committee to examine the methods used to recruit and control members of coercive high-control groups in Victoria, and their impacts. This Part summarises the Inquiry evidence relating to those matters, identifying consistent patterns of behaviour across groups and the harms they cause to members, former members, their families and the community.

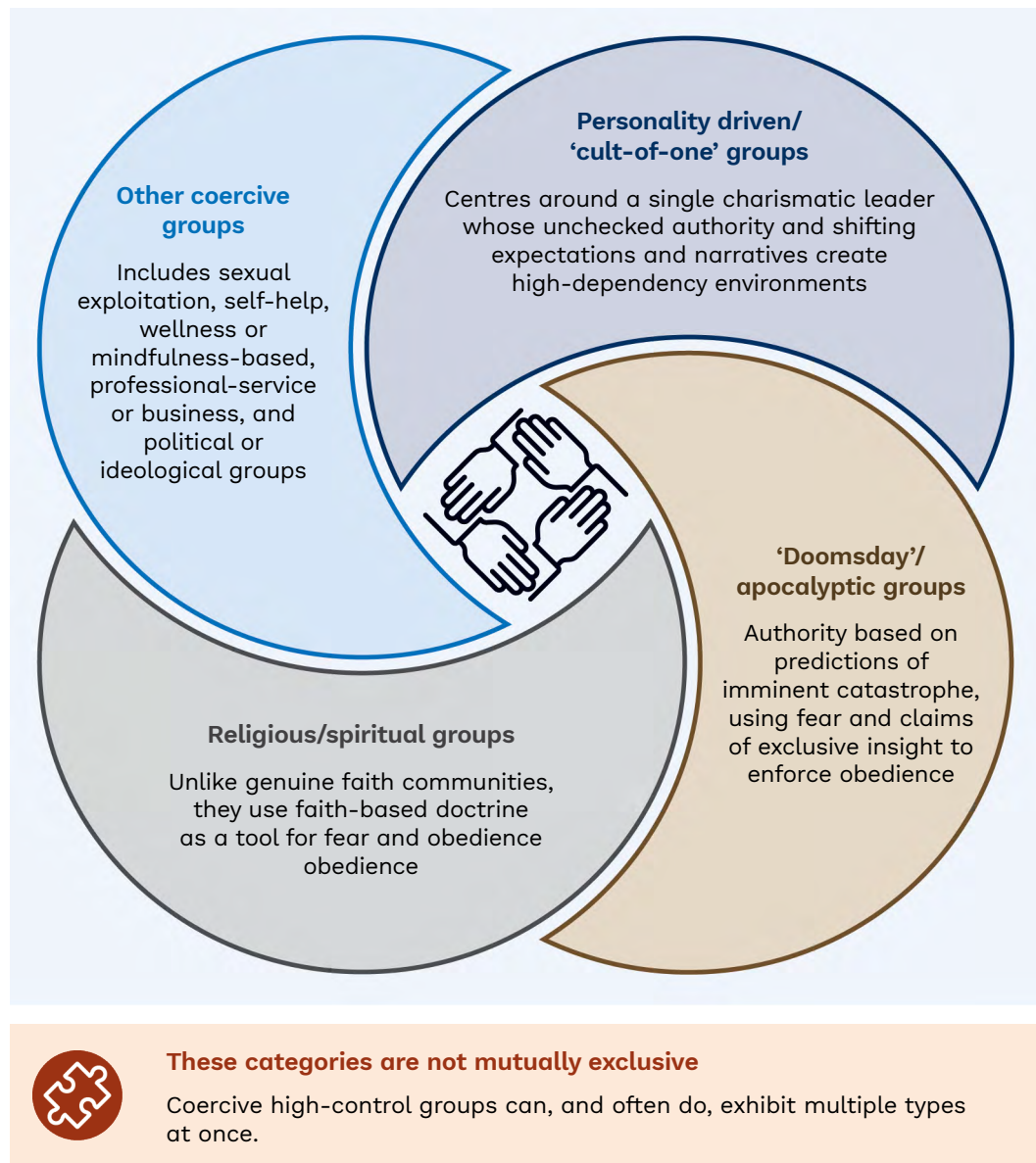
Coercive high-control groups vary in their beliefs, structures and stated purposes, but show consistent patterns of coercion and control. Common tactics include deception, isolation, behavioural regulation, punishment for dissent, and restricting access to external supports and social networks.¹

¹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Deception-based recruitment', 'Control and indoctrination', 'Social control and isolation', 'Creating dependency', 'Restrictions on education and information', 'Restrictions on personal freedom and expression', 'Restrictions on relationships and social life', 'Restrictions on medical or psychological care', and 'Exit barriers and post-exit harm'.

Within this spectrum, the Inquiry identified several types of coercive high-control groups. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and groups can (and often do) exhibit multiple types at once.

Figure 2.1 below outlines the four broad types of coercive high-control groups identified through the Inquiry evidence.

Figure 2.1 Types of coercive high-control groups



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee.

2.1.1 Religious/spiritual

A religious/spiritual coercive high-control group uses faith-based doctrine to control members' lives. Religious or spiritual teachings are used to create fear, dependency, and obedience rather than voluntary belief associated with genuine faith-based groups. These groups differ fundamentally from genuine religious practice.

These groups introduce force, compulsion or undue influence into religious practice. For example, while many genuine religious/spiritual groups make exclusive claims about truth or salvation,² harmful coercive high-control groups use these claims to justify intrusive rules, excessive demands, and total obedience to leaders to the detriment of members.³ This restricts individual decision-making, directing members to act in accordance with group-defined behaviours and routines; undermining personal agency and choice.⁴

What is the distinction between a coercive high-control religious-based group and a genuine religious organisation?

Genuine faith communities protect personal agency. Participation is voluntary, beliefs can be questioned without consequence, and individuals are free to access external support, maintain relationships with people outside the group, and leave at any time without retaliation.⁵ These communities uphold the right to believe, change belief, or not believe at all.⁶

Religious/spiritual coercive high-control groups differ because they substitute choice with control. They may use spiritual authority, exclusive truth claims or community structures to justify intrusive rules,⁷ excessive demands,⁸ isolation from outside relationships,⁹ financial or labour exploitation,¹⁰ or total obedience to leaders.¹¹ These groups often employ a cumulative pattern of deception¹² and dependency,¹³ reshaping a person's identity and decision-making until informed consent is no longer possible.¹⁴

² Australian Christian Churches, *Submission 99*, p. 7; Church and Nation Committee Presbyterian Church of Victoria, *Submission 87*, p. 3; Religious Freedom Alliance, *Submission 175*, p. 4.

³ Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 22; Richard Baker, Investigative Journalist, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 45, 54.

⁴ Mary Hughes, *Submission 236*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 202*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 100*, p. 1; Raphael Aron, Director, Cult Consulting Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 2.

⁵ Kojo Akomeah, Board Member, Freedom for Faith, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31; Casey Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Submission 204*, p. 1.

⁶ Kojo Akomeah, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 3.

⁸ Dr Janja Lalich, CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 28*, p. 15.

⁹ Elise Heerde, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 3; Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 4; Australian Sangha Association, *Submission 71*, p. 4.

¹¹ Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 1; David Whitaker, *Submission 151*, p. 1.

¹² Gloria, closed hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*.

¹³ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, pp. 3–4; Name withheld, *Submission 223*, pp. 3–5.

¹⁴ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 24; Name withheld, *Submission 162*, p. 8; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 7; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

For the purposes of this Report, when the Committee uses the terms ‘genuine religious or faith communities or organisations’, or ‘religious or faith communities or organisations with genuine intentions’, it is describing groups that support voluntary participation, personal agency, and freedom of belief. In contrast, when the Committee uses the terms ‘coercive high-control religious or spiritual groups’, it is describing groups whose practices depart from these principles by involving fear, manipulation, or undue influence.

2.1.2 “Doomsday”/apocalyptic

Doomsday or apocalyptic coercive high-control groups base their authority on predictions of an imminent catastrophe. Leaders claim exclusive insight and use it to direct members’ choices, loyalty and daily behaviour.¹⁵ Fear of destruction or the outside world is a core control tactic, suppressing questioning¹⁶ and eroding independent decision-making. These groups restrict members’ agency and ties to wider society, often pressuring them to relocate, leave study or work, cut external relationships, and rely solely on the group.¹⁷

These groups may also be religious or spiritual in nature, but differ from other religious/spiritual coercive high-control groups because their control hinges on an imminent ‘end-times’/apocalyptic event that requires active, intense preparation and strict compliance.¹⁸ Urgent, catastrophic predictions are used to override personal agency, dictate readiness, and justify deep intrusion into members’ lives.

2.1.3 Personality driven/“cult-of-one”

Personality-driven coercive high-control groups typically centre around a single charismatic leader whose personal authority—rather than a shared belief system—directs how the group functions.¹⁹ A group’s rules, expectations and narratives shift according to the leader’s preferences, moods or personal interests.²⁰

These groups often operate through high-dependency structures designed to isolate members and increase reliance on the leader. This can include communal houses, ashram-style living, or other group-controlled accommodation where members are encouraged to separate from family and friends.²¹ Members may be placed in leader-approved living arrangements, with daily schedules, meetings and social contact tightly controlled.

¹⁵ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*.

¹⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Thomas Beanlands, *Submission 17*, p. 1; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 5–6; Name withheld, *Submission 275*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 2; Renee Spencer, closed hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

¹⁹ Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*; Cult Consulting Australia, *Submission 227*, p. 2; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*.

²⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*; Name withheld, *Submission 276*, p. 2.

²¹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 15–16; Naresh Nayak, *Submission 217*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 276*; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 4.

2.1.4 Other types of coercive high-control groups

Evidence also raised several other types of groups which can be coercive and highly controlling. For example:

- **Sexual exploitation groups** use coercion, manipulation, or authority to obtain sexual access to members. This can include grooming, forced relationships, or creating environments where consent is absent or compromised due to unequal power, fear, or control tactics.²²
- **Self-help, wellness or mindfulness-based groups** can present themselves as personal-development or wellbeing programs but use coaching, therapeutic language, or self improvement to exert control.²³ Coercion can include dependence on the leader's authority, pressure to cut off outside relationships, financial exploitation, or promises of 'healing' or 'transformation' that require escalating commitment and obedience.²⁴
- **Professional-service or business groups** operate under a business or professional front, using commercial structures to attract members and progressively exert coercive control. Framed as legitimate businesses/enterprises (including multi-level marketing companies) development programs (including psychological or mental health services), they rely on authority, dependency and escalating commitments to shape members' decision-making. External advice is discouraged, and internal practices can isolate members, normalise intrusion and enable financial or relational exploitation.²⁵
- **Political or ideological groups** can use a political cause, social movement, or ideological belief system to justify controlling members' lives. They may demand total commitment, isolate members from differing viewpoints, and use fear, guilt or moral pressure to maintain compliance.²⁶

2.2 The blurred lines between group types

Cults behave the same ... When I was deconstructing and leaving the cult it became very evident that the same methods are used across the board in all these coercive control groups. They use friends, family and fear to control their members.

Ryan Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

Coercive high-control group types are best understood as overlapping rather than mutually exclusive. The core issue is not the group's specific belief system but the way

²² Dr Ahona Guha, Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, closed hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2, 8; Name withheld, *Submission 283*.

²³ Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, p. 3; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 13.

²⁴ Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*; Thiruranjan Tharmarajah, *Submission 152*.

²⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 143*; Name withheld, *Submission 162*, pp. 10–15; Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*.

²⁶ Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*; Patrick McIvor, *Submission 177*, p. 3; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Submission 103*, pp. 3–5.

authority operates. Groups often use a combination of ideology, individual leadership, behavioural norms and transformational practices to sustain ongoing coercion and control.

Groups may shift across categories over time. A community may begin as a faith-based or self-development group and later adopt stronger leader-centric authority, urgent belief systems or increased behavioural rules. Whilst categorising groups is a useful analytical tool, it does not reflect the full complexity of how coercive high-control groups operate.

Regardless of their stated purpose—religious, doomsday, personality-driven, ideological, or other cause—many groups use similar methods to recruit, retain and regulate members.

2.3 Common characteristics and harmful dynamics

The exposure to so many different tactics of control of varying intensity and from multiple levels all come together to create a web of entrapment ... This is not easy to explain.

Name withheld, *Submission 223*, p. 6.

The characteristics and harmful dynamics identified below are often observed in coercive high-control groups. What defines a coercive high-control group is the convergence of multiple characteristics; while individual features may appear in benign contexts, it is their combination that creates the harmful dynamic.

These characteristics manifest through a range of behaviours and practices that impact member's autonomy, relationships, and wellbeing. Section 2.5 below examines the impacts on individuals, families and communities more broadly. *Volume 2* outlines the behaviours identified by people with lived experience through their observations and experiences of coercive high-control groups.

Figure 2.2 below outlines the common characteristics and harmful dynamics of coercive high-control groups identified through the Inquiry evidence.

Figure 2.2 Common characteristics and harmful dynamics of coercive high-control groups



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee.

2.3.1 Authoritarian, centralised leadership structures

Power flows downward, not outward, reinforcing dependency and silencing dissent.

The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 2.

Coercive high-control groups are typically characterised by authoritarian, top-down leadership, where power and decision-making are tightly centralised.²⁷ Power is often concentrated in a single leader or a chosen inner circle, this can include around familial or kinship lines. These inner circles may hold privileged access to the group's information and financial resources, and their status within the group gives them power.²⁸ Loyalty to leadership is maintained by rewarding obedience with status and influence and excluding or marginalising those who challenge leadership or do not follow group rules.²⁹

2.3.2 Dependency

He “sifted” these individuals, identifying those most susceptible to psychological manipulation and dependency.

Thiruranjan Tharmarajah, *Submission 152*, p. 1.

Members of coercive high-control groups are progressively encouraged to develop increasing dependency on the group for identity, purpose, guidance, emotional and financial support.³⁰ They are taught that their worth, morality, and sense of self are inseparable from their membership to the group. Personal goals, values, and decision-making are gradually replaced with those of the group, with members expected to prioritise collective group objectives over individual aspirations.³¹

Independent thought or personal initiative is reframed by coercive high-control groups as disloyal, dangerous or morally wrong.³² This reinforces the idea that fulfillment and virtue can only be found by following the group's leadership and aligning with their purpose.

²⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 4; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, pp. 11–12; Roselyn Owen, *Submission 94*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, pp. 1–2; Arieth Bullmann, *Submission 138*, p. 3; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, pp. 11, 24–26; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 207, Attachment 1*, p. 11; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 11–12; Mary Hughes, *Submission 236*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 3; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 61; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, pp. 19, 25–28.

²⁸ Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, pp. 3, 5; Stuart Alsop, *Submission 158*, p. 2; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 1; Clare Heath-McIvor, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

²⁹ Karen Alsop, *Submission 60*, p. 12; Thomas Boreham, *Submission 97*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 46*, p. 2.

³⁰ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 38–39, 51; Name withheld, *Submission 95*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 2; Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 2; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 17; Thiruranjan Tharmarajah, *Submission 152*, pp. 1, 3.

³¹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 28; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 28; Name withheld, *Submission 258*, pp. 15, 20; Name withheld, *Submission 192*, p. 1.

³² Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 21; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 7.

The group positions itself as the main or only source of meaning, safety and truth. This leads to members relying on approval from leaders instead of trusting their own judgement. Over time, this dependency weakens personal autonomy and self-confidence, resulting in members feeling unable to function independently, make decisions or find a sense of belonging outside the group.³³

Dependency for children born into or raised in a coercive high-control group is discussed in Part 4.

2.3.3 Ideological purity

Their entire world, their sense of self, and their moral compass are constructed within the confines of the group's ideology.

Dr Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 63.

In coercive high-control groups, ideological purity is demanded and often strictly enforced through rigid belief systems that leave no room for questioning, doubt, or differing perspectives.³⁴ Members are taught that deviation from the prescribed beliefs is morally wrong, dangerous, or even a threat to the group's survival. This often involves manipulating members' spiritual beliefs and emotional vulnerabilities, creating an environment where critical thinking is discouraged and conformity becomes a measure of loyalty and worth.³⁵

Challenges to the group's ideology are commonly met with punishment, shaming or social exclusion, which reinforces compliance and discourages independent thought.³⁶ By requiring complete conformity, these groups exert strict control over members' beliefs, decisions and behaviours. This ensures the group's authority is unchallenged and that members' individuality is suppressed in favour of the group's collective ideology.³⁷

2.3.4 Manipulation

Apart from financial exploitation and dependence, the family have observed that our brother is heavily influenced by [the leader] and has developed a pervasive distrust of any authority outside the cult. He also has subscribed to a host of conspiratorial beliefs that have been fed to him.

Name withheld, *Submission 95*, p. 3.

³³ Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 11–12; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 233; Mary Hughes, *Submission 236*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 259*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 1.

³⁴ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Elise Heerde, Certified Coach and Mental Health Practitioner, The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 3; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*, p. 6.

³⁵ Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, pp. 16–17; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 29; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 6; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 33–36.

³⁶ The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 2; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 43.

³⁷ Samantha Sellers, Registered Therapist and Clinical Supervisor, The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

Coercive high-control groups rely heavily on manipulation, using emotional pressure and fear to control member behaviour.³⁸ They encourage distrust of authorities, including government services, law enforcement, health and education systems, and family and friends who are not part of the group, isolating members from outside perspectives.³⁹ This can result in members avoiding the police even in dangerous situations, and rejecting or not seeking medical advice or treatment from qualified doctors when they are unwell.

Manipulation also extends to beliefs, language, reasoning, and emotions, that are shaped to suppress critical thinking and enforce strict ideological conformity.⁴⁰ Unlike genuine educational or spiritual growth, which welcomes questions and independent reflection, this form of thought reform punishes doubt and steadily narrows a person's ability to think beyond the group's framework.

2.3.5 Surveillance, shaming and shunning

Peer surveillance plays a key role in sustaining conformity within the group. Members are routinely encouraged to report one another's behaviour to leadership, especially if someone is seen to be breaking group rules. There is also a culture of confession, where individuals are pressured to disclose perceived spiritual failings. This fosters guilt, shame, and dependency on leadership for validation.

Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 4.

Coercive high-control groups often rely on surveillance practices to monitor members' actions and relationships. These practices can include digital surveillance, self-reporting (such as confessions) and peer reporting.⁴¹ When this monitoring reveals behaviour that deviates from group expectations, members may face consequences designed to create an atmosphere of fear and compliance.⁴²

Shaming and shunning are commonly used by coercive high-control groups as disciplinary tools. With people publicly criticised, humiliated or socially excluded when they are perceived as disobedient or insufficiently loyal. The public nature of these practices is used not only to harm the individual but for other members to witness. By

³⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 6; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, pp. 11–12; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 1–2; Ben Shenton, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 41, 45–46; Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 22–24.

³⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 100*, p. 7; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 11; Name withheld, *Submission 95*, p. 3; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, pp. 7, 10.

⁴⁰ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 85; Wendy Jasper, *Submission 79*, p. 1; Thiruranjan Tharmarajah, *Submission 152*, p. 1; Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 7.

⁴¹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 66; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 285*, p. 3.

⁴² Ryan Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 1, 15; Laura McConnell, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 7.

linking monitoring and surveillance to these punitive responses, the group strengthens control, suppresses dissent and reinforces strict conformity.⁴³

2.3.6 Isolation and restrictions

My whole life has been lived in isolation in a bubble being poisoned against normal society.

Thomas Beanlands, *Submission 17*, p. 1.

Coercive high-control groups typically isolate members from family, friends, and external influences to further entrench control. By cutting off or discouraging contact with broader society, these groups weaken outside support systems that might challenge the group's beliefs or practices.⁴⁴ Members may be told that outsiders are untrustworthy, creating an 'us versus them' mindset that increases dependence on the group.⁴⁵ In some groups, developing relationships, interests or knowledge outside the group is often seen as a moral failure or weakness (often met with consequences for non-conformity).

Isolation is reinforced not only through social separation but through control of members' time. Members may be required to prioritise group activities above all else, leaving little or no time for relationships, study, work or interests outside the group. Constant demands, mandatory meetings, labour, prayer, or service obligations can create an environment in which members are expected to devote their energy exclusively to the group, further limiting opportunities for independent thought or connection with others.⁴⁶

These groups may also restrict members' education choices, including how they participate and whether they can attend university or pursue further study. These restrictions prevent members from gaining independent skills or perspectives that could enable greater autonomy.⁴⁷

Restrictions on information, relationships, time and personal autonomy limit members' ability to think critically or act independently. Mandatory activities and controlled personal choices further reduce opportunities for self-reflection and meaningful engagement outside the group.⁴⁸

⁴³ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 24; Annie Boehm, *Submission 93*, p. 4; RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, *Submission 241*, p. 5; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*, pp. 3, 8, 10–11; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 207*, p. 2; Andres Chiriff, *Submission 205*, p. 2; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 6; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 14; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 23–24.

⁴⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 82*, p. 3; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 10; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Annie Boehm, *Submission 93*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 3; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26; Professor Julie Cugin, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Australian Catholic University, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2–3.

2.3.7 Fear-based narratives

Any “end-times” teaching must be rooted in hope, not hysteria, and must align with love, compassion, and ethical living.

Catalyst Baptist Church, *Submission 147*, p. 2.

Fear-based narratives are often central to coercive high-control groups maintaining control. These can involve apocalyptic thinking or moral panic narratives (for example, anti-LGBTIQA+ rhetoric), framing outsiders as dangerous threats.⁴⁹ This creates an environment of chronic fear and obedience, making it psychologically and socially difficult for members to question the group or leave.⁵⁰

2.3.8 Financial exploitation

Members are pressured to contribute money, unpaid labour, and full-time voluntary service, all while the organisation, or more to the point, its leaders, the governing body, amasses extraordinary wealth.

Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 3.

Financial exploitation in coercive high-control groups can involve exploiting people directly or through systems. These practices primarily benefit group leaders, often without evidence that the funds or benefits generated are used for genuinely charitable or philanthropic purposes for the group or broader community.⁵¹

Exploiting people through volunteering and unpaid labour are common, with members often feeling that the culture created by these groups expects this commitment, regardless of capability or capacity.⁵² In some cases, experiences of unpaid work have been likened to child labour and modern slavery.⁵³

Exploiting people through systems by using formal or informal financial and legal structures to control members and extract resources from them is also common.

⁴⁹ Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 16–17; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, pp. 3–4.

⁵⁰ Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 3; RMIT University, *Submission 281*, p. 1; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 55; Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 1; The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3.

⁵¹ Grahame Gee, *Submission 13*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 3; Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, p. 25; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 29, 32; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 7; Name withheld, *Submission 211*, p. 3.

⁵² Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 3; Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 3; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 13; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 5; Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 134*, p. 4; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 5; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, pp. 2–3; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 7; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 14–20; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

⁵³ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 66–68; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 12–25; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 5; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 33. See Part 5, Section 5.5 for a more detailed discussion of modern slavery.

For example, members can be coerced into entangling their assets with the groups, creating an additional barrier to leaving.⁵⁴

A lack of financial transparency and accountability are key characteristics, with members often facing repercussions for raising concerns.⁵⁵ Coercive high-control groups use various means to maintain an opaque financial environment, such as a reliance on cash and misuse of family trusts.⁵⁶

Many of these groups are also registered as ‘basic religious charities’ with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), which means they are not required to comply with ACNC Governance Standards, provide annual financial reports or answer financial questions in their Annual Information Statement.⁵⁷ See Part 5 for a discussion on basic religious charities.



Important note: Individual recruitment methods or tactics and behaviours are not, on their own, evidence of a coercive high-control group

Some recruitment methods or tactics, and behaviours identified in this Report can also be found in genuine and positive settings. For example, practices such as teaching or holding apocalyptic beliefs may occur in groups that operate with genuine intentions. Their presence alone does not mean a coercive high-control group is operating.

What distinguishes coercive high-control groups from groups with genuine intentions is how these recruitment methods or tactics, and behaviours are combined, applied and intended. In coercive high-control group settings, they are not used to support members’ wellbeing or development. Instead, they are deliberately used to harm, manipulate and maintain control, progressively increasing influence over an individual’s choices and behaviour in ways that cause harm to individuals, families and communities.

⁵⁴ Name withheld, *Submission 46*, p. 4; Karen Alsop, *Submission 60*, pp. 10–11; Name withheld, *Submission 95*, p. 3; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 3–4; Name withheld, *Submission 247*, pp. 1–3; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 60; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 27–28; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10; Jeremy Stein, *Submission 85*, p. 3; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 100; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, pp. 5, 8; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 9; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 27–28.

⁵⁷ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 2; Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 2; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 5; Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

2.4 Recruitment

... recruitment was not random; it was deliberate, structured and highly systemised. Volunteers were trained to identify and engage newcomers quickly, to collect their details and guide them through a defined pathway, from attending services to quickly joining volunteer teams, joining small groups with the ultimate goal of getting them to commit ...

Elise Heerde, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 12–13.

Coercive high-control groups do not rely on a single recruitment pathway, nor do they recruit in a uniform or predictable manner. Recruitment is deliberate, adaptive and sustained. It is designed to blend into ordinary social life rather than present as a distinct or identifiable event.

A recurring theme in lived experience evidence was that many individuals did not perceive themselves as being ‘recruited’ at all.⁵⁸ Instead, they described starting relationships, participating in activities or entering environments that appeared genuine, familiar or beneficial, only later recognising these as the initial stages of coercive high-control group involvement.

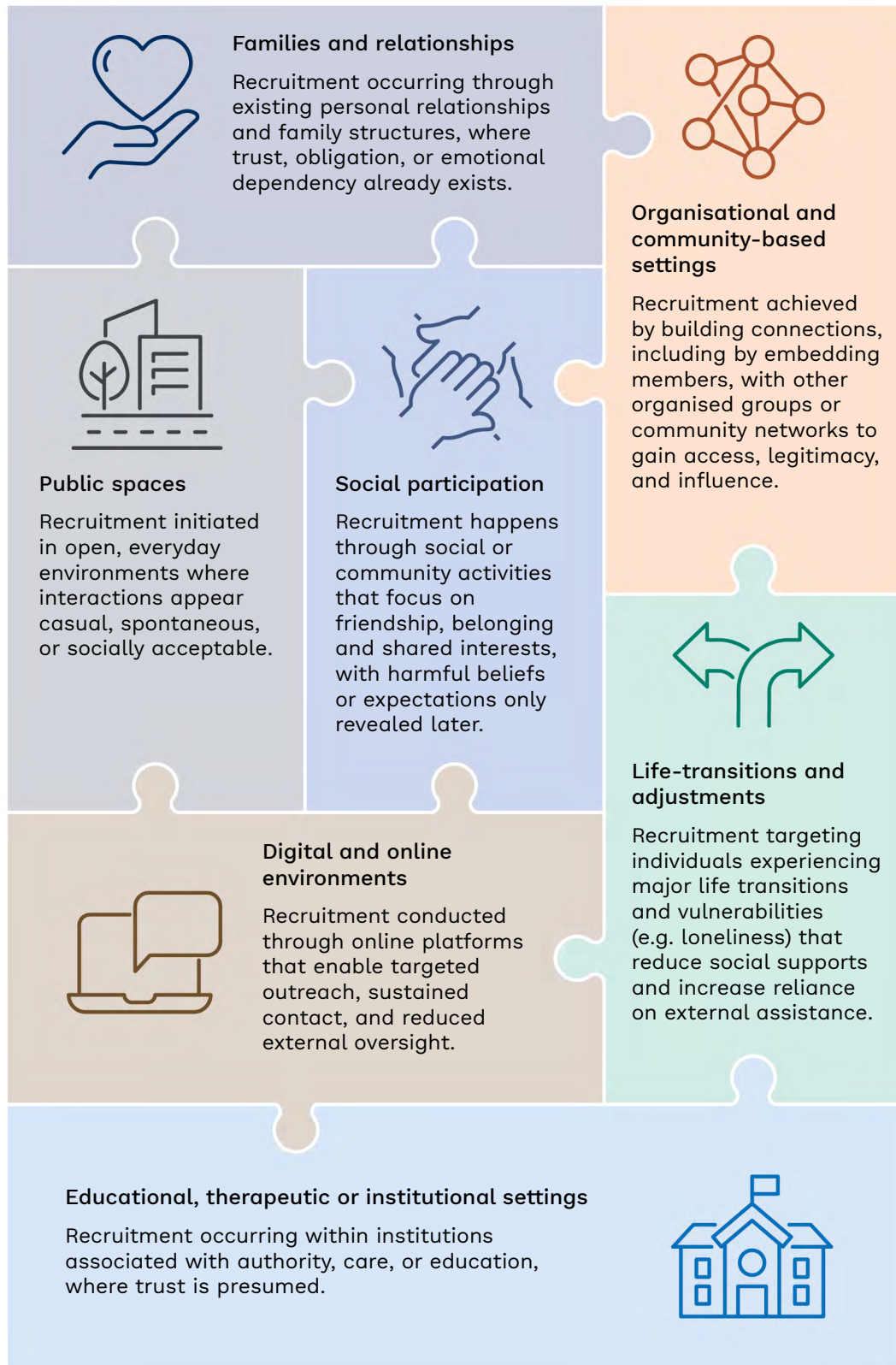
Through its analysis of the Inquiry evidence, the Committee identified seven common target areas that coercive high-control groups often focus on to initiate, normalise and escalate group involvement. These target areas reflect the common contexts and relationships that are leveraged by coercive high-control groups to establish influence.

The common target areas show how recruitment operates across relational, public, institutional and environmental contexts. Recruitment pathways often overlap and reinforce one another, creating cumulative pressure that deepens dependency and reduces autonomy over time.

Figure 2.3 below outlines the seven common target areas of recruitment into coercive high-control groups identified through the Inquiry evidence.

⁵⁸ Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, pp. 5–6; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

Figure 2.3 Seven common target areas of recruitment into coercive high-control groups



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee.

Volume 2 of the Report details a comprehensive range of recruitment methods and tactics used by coercive high-control groups and the impacts they cause, drawn directly from what people with lived experience told the Committee. These behaviours are often subtle, relational and gradual, making them difficult to recognise—particularly at early stages.

In this Section of the Report, the Committee focuses on how these methods and tactics operate in practice to recruit new members into coercive high-control groups. Understanding recruitment methods is critical to recognising early warning signs, preventing harm, and supporting timely intervention before coercive control becomes entrenched and causes long-term psychological, social or financial damage.

It is important to note that many people with lived experience who provided Inquiry evidence were not ‘recruited’ into coercive high-control groups in the conventional sense. They were second- or later-generation members who were born into these groups. For these individuals, entry was not the result of targeted recruitment but of upbringing.⁵⁹ Part 4 looks separately at children and young people raised inside these groups, including the distinct long-term impacts of generational membership and the challenges associated with autonomy, exit and recovery.

To help explain the impacts of recruitment discussed in this Part, Table 2.1 below sets out some of the recruitment behaviours identified in Inquiry evidence to show the range and adaptability of practices and how they can interact and intensify over time.

Table 2.1 Examples of recruitment methods and tactics used by coercive high-control groups

Target area(s) affected	Method or tactic
Families and relationships	<i>Recruitment method</i> Trusted networks: Through friends, family members, work colleagues, or acquaintances.
	<i>Recruitment tactic</i> Blurring/removing personal boundaries: Blurring personal boundaries is used to reshape an individual’s identity to align with the group’s beliefs and expectations. This differs from groups with genuine intentions, which respect personal autonomy and encourage individuals to adopt beliefs as a matter of informed, voluntary choice, without pressure or coercion.
	<i>Recruitment tactic</i> Love bombing: Recruiters/members use excessive friendliness or affirmation (‘love bombing’) to create a sense of belonging. In healthy groups, care is consistent and not withdrawn to enforce compliance.
Families and relationships	<i>Recruitment tactic</i>
Life-transitions and adjustments	Targeting isolation and loneliness: Recruiters/members intentionally engage individuals who appear isolated or lonely. Genuine outreach seeks inclusion without completely replacing existing relationships or supports, or preventing new ones forming.

59 Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*.

Target area(s) affected	Method or tactic
Public spaces	<i>Recruitment method</i> Approached/presence in a public space: Recruiters/members approach individuals in public spaces, including streets, stations, campuses, shopping centres, and festivals. <i>Recruitment tactic</i> Expanding into more isolated areas: Coercive high-control groups can exist in any community or location. Groups may move or expand into rural or regional areas to avoid being recognised.
Social participation	<i>Recruitment method</i> Friendship and relationship building: Recruiters/members form friendships or social relationships to build trust. This typically occurs after an initial social engagement brings a person into contact with the group, with relationships then used to normalise ongoing involvement and facilitate deeper involvement as beliefs and expectations are gradually revealed.
Social participation Organisational and community-based settings	<i>Recruitment tactic</i> Incremental disclosure: Groups conceal their identity during early recruitment, gradually increasing exposure to their beliefs and practices as a person becomes more dependent and enmeshed. As gradual indoctrination occurs, so does an increase in demands. Groups with genuine intentions are transparent from the outset and allow informed choice.
Life-transitions and adjustments	<i>Recruitment tactic</i> Targeting vulnerability: Approaching individuals during periods of acute vulnerability, including grief, relationship breakdown, financial stress or personal transition. Periods of vulnerability are intentionally targeted and leveraged to fast-track emotional dependence and loyalty, distinguishing these practices from genuine care, which does not condition support on allegiance or compliance.

- a. 'Love bombing': Overwhelming new recruits with affection, praise, and attention to create emotional bonds. See: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Guidance note: Recruitment methods and impacts of cults and 'organised fringe groups'*, Parliament of Victoria, April 2025, <<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg-guidance-note>> accessed 28 January 2026.

Source: Volume 2: *In their words*.

2.4.1 Recruitment methods used by coercive high-control groups

... most recruitment into high-control groups involves a slow build-up of trust, emotional investment, and shifting norms. Often, people join because of personal connections, not doctrine. These bonds are later leveraged to enforce conformity.

Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 23.

Coercive high-control groups adjust their recruitment methods⁶⁰ based on various factors, such as:

- age
- life stage
- emotional vulnerability

⁶⁰ Methods describe the specific ways coercive high-control groups recruit new members.

- cultural background
- social isolation
- transitional moments (for example, starting university, relocating, experiencing relationship breakdown, bereavement, illness or financial stress).⁶¹

Recruiters assess personal suitability early and adapt their approach accordingly. Initial contact may occur through a casual conversation, online interaction, community activity or trusted relationship, before progressing into more structured engagement, like regular meetings, classes, mentoring or group activities. This staged approach increases group involvement gradually while keeping intentions ambiguous at each step.

Recruitment methods rarely operate in isolation. They intersect and reinforce one another, creating a cumulative effect that progressively limits opportunities for disengagement.⁶² For example, an initial online interaction may lead to an in-person social invitation, which then becomes embedded in a broader network of relationships, routines and expectations.⁶³ Institutional settings, such as educational, professional, religious or wellbeing environments, are often used to normalise participation and confer legitimacy. At the same time, relational recruitment introduces social expectations, interpersonal pressures and emotional leverage that encourage continued group involvement.

2.4.2 Recruitment tactics used by coercive high-control groups

Coercive high-control groups use a range of deliberate and adaptive recruitment tactics⁶⁴ designed to influence how potential recruits think, feel and behave.⁶⁵ These tactics do not rely on a single point of persuasion. Instead, they work together as a gradual process that combines emotional engagement, psychological pressure, social manipulation and escalating commitment over time. Recruitment is often subtle, incremental and difficult to recognise in its early stages, particularly for individuals seeking connection, meaning or support.⁶⁶

When I first attended classes I felt a great sense of belonging. I was treated with so much love and warmth and made me feel special. The instructors appeared genuine and intelligent. As I progressed the treatment of the group slowly and subtly got worse. It was so slow and subtle that you can't pinpoint a moment of change, ill

⁶¹ Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 2; Mary Hughes, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 2; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 22; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 7; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

⁶² Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 23.

⁶³ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*.

⁶⁴ Tactics describe the strategies used by coercive high-control groups to shape how potential recruits think, feel, and behave.

⁶⁵ Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 3; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁶⁶ Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, p. 13; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 23; Roselyn Owen, *Submission 94*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 5.

treatment was normalised at each step of the way. I look back and wish that I could have just spoken up, but it was as if we were too afraid to do so, the instructors could do no wrong.

Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, p. 13.

Recruitment tactics frequently exploit moments of vulnerability, trust and transition.⁶⁷ Groups position themselves as sources of certainty, belonging or guidance, while progressively narrowing a recruit's autonomy and exposure to alternative viewpoints. As involvement deepens, tactics shift from attraction and reassurance toward obligation, dependency and control. This progression allows groups to normalise increasing demands and suppress questioning before recruits fully understand the nature or expectations of the group.⁶⁸ Recruitment tactics also vary according to context, audience and opportunity. Groups adjust their approach based on perceived personal characteristics, social isolation, cultural background or life circumstances.

2.4.3 Recruitment is not a single identifiable event

Recruitment into coercive high-control groups rarely occurs as a single, clear decision point. Instead, groups draw people in through a staged and cumulative process that blends into ordinary social life. Many lived experience contributors told the Committee they did not perceive themselves as being 'recruited' at all. They described entering relationships, activities or environments that appeared genuine, familiar or beneficial, only later recognising these experiences as the initial stages of coercive high-control group involvement.⁶⁹

Recruiters assess personal suitability early and tailor their engagement accordingly. Initial contact may begin with casual conversation, online interaction, community participation or a trusted relationship, before progressing into more structured involvement. This can include regular meetings, classes, mentoring or group activities.⁷⁰

This incremental model makes recruitment difficult to identify in real time. Inquiry evidence described initial participation being framed as friendship, education, self-improvement, spiritual exploration or support, before shifting into increasing demands on time, behaviour and loyalty. Over time, these demands may be accompanied by expectations of secrecy, conformity and prioritisation of group activities over external relationships. This transition was often subtle and progressive, making it difficult to pinpoint when ordinary social participation became harmful.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 13; Name withheld, *Submission 105*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 180*, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

⁶⁹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Relational recruitment', 'Public approach', and 'Deception-based recruitment'.

⁷⁰ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Public approach' and 'Deception-based recruitment'.

⁷¹ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 28–29.

2.4.4 Most people enter through family or trusted relationships

I think it is important to know more than two-thirds of people get recruited by a friend, a family member or a co-worker, so initially you are getting invited to something by someone you know. You end up going because it is harder to say no to somebody you know.

Dr Janja Lalich, CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

Most people enter coercive high-control groups through family members or trusted personal networks, rather than through chance encounters or overt recruitment. For many, their first point of contact was not a clear recruitment event at all, but an existing relationship that gradually drew them into group involvement.

Family-based pathways

The goal of cult recruiters is to gradually increase the commitment of a person, ultimately leading to full integration into the cult ... Children who are dependent upon their parent or caregiver due to their age and stage of development, do not undergo such a process; they are placed into authoritarian environments, often through birth. The cult obtainment of the child is done through the parent ...

Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 20.

Inquiry evidence indicates that family-based pathways are the most common route into coercive high-control groups. In these circumstances, recruitment is not experienced as a choice but as a social inheritance, with beliefs, norms and obligations established early and reinforced over time.⁷² Individuals raised in these environments often have limited exposure to alternative perspectives⁷³ and face significant emotional and social barriers to exit, particularly where leaving would result in the loss of family relationships.⁷⁴



Questionnaire insight

- 38.2% of respondents were recruited through a family member or friend
- 22.1% of respondents were born into a group.

⁷² Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1.

⁷³ Thomas Beanlands, *Submission 17*, p. 2; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 33; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 5; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 29.

⁷⁴ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 5; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 37–38.

Trusted relationships pathways

Recruitment also often occurs through close personal relationships, including friendships, romantic or intimate relationships, classmates and work colleagues.⁷⁵ The Committee heard that coercive high-control groups deliberately prioritise relational recruitment because it provides credibility, lowers suspicion and creates emotional leverage. Trust established through familiarity allows recruitment to proceed gradually, often without the individual recognising that they are being recruited at all.⁷⁶ Recruitment through trusted connections commonly coincides with periods of vulnerability or transition. Recruiters adapt their approach to these circumstances, presenting the group as a source of belonging, guidance or support.⁷⁷

Recruitment through trusted relationships is rarely isolated from other methods. Relational recruitment typically operates alongside structured and systemised processes, including staged engagement, escalating expectations, increasing time commitments and progressive normalisation of group authority.⁷⁸ Over time, personal bonds are leveraged to enforce conformity, prioritise group activities over external relationships, and discourage questioning or disengagement.⁷⁹ Because these changes occur incrementally, individuals often struggle to identify the point at which ordinary social participation shifted into coercive and harmful behaviours.

Recruitment through family and trusted networks makes coercive high-control groups difficult to detect and intervene in, both for individuals and external institutions. When recruitment is integrated into everyday relationships, warning signs may be misinterpreted as conventional family dynamics, friendship obligations or community engagement. This can delay help-seeking and increase the risk of prolonged harm.⁸⁰

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee considers that recruitment into coercive high-control groups should not be understood as a single moment of entry, but as an evolving trajectory of influence that unfolds over time. Individuals often do not recognise that they are being recruited early in the process, allowing influence and control to deepen.

Recruitment often begins within relationships characterised by trust, affection and dependence, rather than ideology or doctrine. As involvement in a coercive high-control group deepens, personal autonomy is progressively narrowed, dependence on the group increases, and opportunities to recognise what is happening and exit are reduced.

⁷⁵ Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20; Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 223*, p. 2; Vicky Tsiaras, *Submission 6*, p. 1.

⁷⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 124*, p. 1; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

⁷⁷ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, pp. 3–4.

⁷⁸ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Deception-based recruitment' and 'Structured recruitment'.

⁷⁹ Vicky Tsiaras, *Submission 6*, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 223*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 6.

The Committee believes that effective prevention, education and response strategies must recognise both the gradual nature of recruitment and the central role played by people who the individual being recruited already knows and trusts.

FINDING 6: Recruitment into coercive high-control groups is not a single moment but a gradual, deliberate process that escalates over time, obscuring coercion until individuals are deeply embedded in the group. People often do not realise they are being recruited or understand a group's real intentions.

FINDING 7: Coercive high-control groups often recruit through existing personal networks and trusted relationships, deliberately exploiting trust, obligation and emotional dependence to secure compliance. This recruitment model establishes control early, conceals coercion behind existing relationships, and creates barriers to recognition, refusal and exit.

2.4.5 Deception is key and indoctrination is gradual

It is hard for many people to understand why someone in their 'right mind' would go through all of this and not question themselves about why they are doing it, and what purpose they believed they were serving.

However, if one understands the gradual steps I was made to undertake to get me to that point, it becomes clear how it all happened.

Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 3.

Coercive high-control groups rely on deliberate deception and gradual indoctrination to draw individuals from ordinary participation into increasingly harmful and controlling environments.⁸¹ Inquiry evidence demonstrated that these groups do not begin with overtly extreme beliefs or practices. Instead, they intentionally present themselves as genuine, benign and socially acceptable, introducing harmful controls only after trust and commitment have been established.⁸² For example, some groups use 'front' businesses⁸³ or charities⁸⁴ as the initial point of entry, while obscuring their real identities and intentions.

Many lived experience contributors suggested that their initial involvement appeared indistinguishable from participation in non-harmful groups. They described a consistent pattern in which initial participation was framed as friendship, education,

⁸¹ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

⁸² Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 1.

⁸³ Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*; Name withheld, *Submission 162*; Name withheld, *Submission 143*.

⁸⁴ Name withheld, *Submission 38*, pp. 4–5.

self-improvement, spiritual exploration or support.⁸⁵ Over time, this shifted into increasing demands on time, behaviour and loyalty, alongside expectations of secrecy, conformity and prioritisation of group activities over external relationships. This transition was often subtle and incremental, making it difficult for individuals to identify the point at which normal engagement became coercive and harmful.⁸⁶ This lack of transparency is a critical distinction between coercive high-control groups and groups with genuine intentions, which clearly disclose their purpose, leadership and expectations and enable informed choice from the outset.

Once initial trust and routine participation are secured, indoctrination proceeds through structured and incremental escalation. Evidence revealed a consistent progression: time commitments increase, behavioural rules tighten, and questioning is reframed as personal weakness, lack of faith, insufficient commitment or moral failure. What begins as voluntary involvement shifts into expectation and obligation. Over time, practices that would ordinarily be rejected, become normalised and enforced, including intrusive oversight, compulsory attendance, enforced secrecy, social isolation, financial exploitation and surrender of personal autonomy.⁸⁷

This staged process moves individuals across a clear threshold, from voluntary participation to exposure to harmful and coercive control over thoughts, relationships, time, finances and identity. Inquiry evidence consistently described how each new demand is justified as necessary for growth, healing, belonging or spiritual progress.⁸⁸ Because changes occur gradually, individuals often do not recognise the cumulative impact until they are deeply embedded, emotionally dependent,⁸⁹ and afraid to disengage.⁹⁰

So why didn't I see it? I have come to realise it is similar to the story of the frog in boiling water! It is slow, subtle, and gradual, which erodes one's ability to see and sense it ... until the damage is done. It's the kind of environment that kills individuals' potential, crushes their dreams, ability to have a healthy ongoing community, impacts on restricts their finances as well, and worst of all, for some, destroys their faith in God and their walk with Jesus.

Roselyn Owen, *Submission 94*, p. 1.

Deception extends beyond beliefs to obscure the true risks and consequences of continued involvement. Many individuals were not informed of escalating financial

⁸⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Relational recruitment', 'Public approach', 'Establishing social bonds/relationships', and 'Crisis-based recruitment'.

⁸⁶ Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Submission 103*, p. 10. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Deception-based recruitment', 'Social control and isolation', and 'Restrictions on relationships and social life'.

⁸⁷ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Emotional manipulation/grooming', 'Social control and isolation', 'Creating dependency', 'Restrictions on education and information', 'Labour and financial restrictions', 'Restrictions on personal freedom and expression', 'Restrictions on relationships and social life', 'Housing and movement restrictions', and 'Legal and civic restrictions'.

⁸⁸ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 27.

⁸⁹ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 22.

⁹⁰ The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 2.

obligations, unpaid labour requirements or the extent of leaders' authority over personal decisions until months or years after joining. At that point, the threat of exclusion, spiritual sanction or loss of family and community functioned as a powerful mechanism of compliance.⁹¹ This progression distinguishes coercive high-control groups from non-harmful organisations, where participation remains genuinely voluntary, boundaries are respected, and exit does not result in punishment or social isolation.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is particularly concerned that gradual indoctrination enables coercive high-control groups to obscure their true intentions while steadily increasing harm. Because no single step appears extreme when viewed in isolation, responsibility is frequently shifted onto individuals for not leaving sooner, rather than on the group's systematic strategy of concealment and escalation. This obscures abuse, delays intervention and allows harmful practices to persist.

The Committee considers that deception and gradual indoctrination are defining features of coercive high-control groups. These groups are distinguished not by belief, but by behaviour: a sustained pattern of concealment, escalating control and enforced dependency that crosses the line from acceptable association into coercive and harmful conduct. The Committee notes that some individuals participated in introducing others to a group before they realised the harm this could cause. At the time, they had not fully realised the impact of the group's coercive behaviours on themselves or others. Parts 3 and 4 discuss the importance of distinguishing between those who benefit from a coercive high-control group and individuals who may enforce its rules while also being subject to its coercion and control.

FINDING 8: The full intent of recruitment is rarely disclosed upfront by coercive high-control groups. Instead, they typically use deception, gradual escalation and strategic concealment of the group's true nature. This distinguishes their practices from groups with genuine intentions that recruit transparently.

2.4.6 Vulnerabilities are targeted and exploited

The fringe, cult-like and hate groups we have studied operate not because their views, hatred or sense of separation from others is appealing alone, but because they offer a setting of belonging and purpose. They appeal, therefore, to those who are seeking meaning and a sense of community.

Fringe groups, hate groups and cults work by exploiting deeply-felt loneliness. This may not necessarily be the experience of those who are actually isolated, but a deeper experience of loneliness even among those who have high rates of interaction.

RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, *Submission 241*, p. 8.

⁹¹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Emotional manipulation/grooming', 'Control and indoctrination', 'Emotional and psychological abuse', 'Social control and isolation'.

Coercive high-control groups deliberately identify, target and exploit personal vulnerability as a central recruitment strategy. Evidence to the Inquiry demonstrates that recruitment is calculated and adaptive, with recruiters trained to recognise emotional, social and situational vulnerability and to adjust their approach accordingly. What initially appears as care or concern is, in practice, a means of securing influence.



Questionnaire insight

- 11.7% of respondents were recruited during a time of personal hardship (e.g., illness, grief, housing stress)
- 10.7% of respondents were recruited at school, university or work.

People who were targeted by coercive high-control groups during vulnerable periods in their lives explained in Inquiry evidence that recruiters actively seek out individuals experiencing periods of transition or distress.⁹² Periods where a person may be vulnerable to recruitment include adolescence, relocation, starting university, relationship breakdown, bereavement, physical or mental health concerns, financial stress, trauma, loneliness or social isolation. These circumstances heighten a person's need for connection, certainty and reassurance, while simultaneously reducing their capacity to critically assess risk. Recruiters exploit this imbalance by presenting the group as a source of immediate support, meaning or stability at precisely the moment an individual is least equipped to refuse or question engagement.⁹³

Vulnerability is assessed early and systematically. Inquiry evidence shows that recruiters listen closely for disclosures of hardship, insecurity or unmet needs and then tailor their messaging to position the group as the solution. In many cases, individuals were recruited not because of shared ideology or belief, but because they were emotionally available, isolated or seeking relief.⁹⁴ This allows coercive high-control groups to bypass critical scrutiny and establish emotional reliance before introducing beliefs, obligations or authority structures. This process marks the first point at which behaviour crosses the line from genuine outreach into manipulation: support is offered not to restore an individual's autonomy, but to establish reliance on the group.

The effect of this strategy is cumulative and corrosive. Initial vulnerability is not resolved but redirected into dependence. Early affirmation, attention and assistance create a sense of safety and belonging, which is then leveraged to increase compliance.⁹⁵ As involvement deepens, external sources of support are gradually displaced, leaving individuals increasingly reliant on the group for validation, identity

⁹² Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁹³ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Relational recruitment', 'Public approach', 'Establishing social bonds/relationships', 'Institutional infiltration', 'Crisis-based recruitment', 'Opportunistic recruitment', 'Emotional manipulation/grooming', and 'Demographic-based recruitment'.

⁹⁴ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 23–25. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Crisis-based recruitment', 'Opportunistic recruitment', and 'Demographic-based recruitment'.

⁹⁵ The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3.

and practical support.⁹⁶ This transition transforms vulnerability from a temporary state into a sustained condition of dependence.

Children born into coercive high-control groups are not ‘recruited’ but involved through their parents or caregivers and have no meaningful opportunity to consent.⁹⁷ However, young people outside these groups are frequently targeted during key identity-forming stages, when belonging, affirmation and certainty carry heightened importance. Inquiry evidence highlighted the vulnerability of international students and migrants, who may be socially isolated, unfamiliar with local systems, and more susceptible to approaches framed as friendship, cultural connection or informal support.⁹⁸

In coercive high-control groups, care and support is frequently used as a mechanism of control rather than protection. Emotional affirmation, inclusion and practical help are offered early, then progressively withdrawn or made conditional on obedience and conformity.⁹⁹ This distinguishes coercive high-control groups from those with genuine intentions, which do not offer conditional care for loyalty, do not isolate individuals from external relationships, and actively support autonomy and informed decision-making.

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The Committee is concerned that coercive high-control groups deliberately target individuals experiencing vulnerability or distress, using moments of genuine human need as pathways into control. Rather than alleviating vulnerability, these groups systematically exploit it. The Committee considers the intentional exploitation of vulnerability, combined with manipulative, harmful conduct to be a defining characteristic of recruitment by coercive high-control groups. Apparent support is made conditional, assistance becomes a tool of influence, and vulnerability is instrumentalised to entrench compliance and control.

The Committee is of the view that effective prevention and response depend on recognising when conduct crosses the line from support to exploitation—when care becomes conditional, when help is weaponised, and when vulnerability is being used to advance harmful purposes rather than addressed in a genuinely supportive manner.

FINDING 9: Coercive high-control groups actively exploit vulnerability to recruit new members, often targeting periods of personal transition or distress—including adolescence, relocation, starting study, relationship breakdown, bereavement, physical or mental health concerns, financial pressure, trauma, loneliness, or social isolation—to manufacture dependence and control. Apparent support, care or belonging is deliberately used to secure compliance, increase an individual’s dependency on a group and entrench harm.

⁹⁶ Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 2; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 22; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

⁹⁷ See Part 4, Section 4.7 for more detail. This Section discusses how the term ‘recruitment’ implies a degree of choice and agency that does not reflect how most children come to be part of a coercive high-control group.

⁹⁸ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Demographic-based recruitment’.

⁹⁹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Deception-based recruitment’ and ‘Emotional manipulation/grooming’.

2.4.7 Online recruitment enables reach, anonymity and rapid escalation

Online and digital environments are a growing recruitment pathway for coercive high-control groups.¹⁰⁰ They allow these groups to reach large audiences quickly, operate with anonymity, and accelerate indoctrination while avoiding scrutiny.

Inquiry evidence demonstrates that online recruitment is not incidental or supplementary, but a deliberate and increasingly sophisticated strategy. Coercive high-control groups use social media platforms, video-sharing sites, messaging apps, online forums and dating applications to identify and approach potential recruits, including mainstream platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Recruiters often target individuals who share particular interests, beliefs or vulnerabilities online, including through faith- or spirituality-related content, self-improvement, conspiracy narratives or 'truth-seeking' material.¹⁰¹



Questionnaire insight

8.8% of questionnaire respondents were recruited from 'social media or online forums'.

Online recruitment allows groups to conceal their identity and intentions more effectively than in face-to-face settings.¹⁰² Often, individuals who were recruited online were initially drawn into private chats, online courses or virtual study groups without being told who was running them or what participation would ultimately involve.¹⁰³ In some cases, online engagement later transitioned into in-person meetings or physical involvement, at which point more extreme beliefs, expectations or practices were revealed.¹⁰⁴

Digital platforms enable groups to tightly curate information, suppress dissent and control the narrative presented to newcomers. This delays exposure to harmful beliefs or coercive demands until emotional investment and dependency have already formed.

It was once I came out here to be with him that I started to see the reality of what the cult was like. I think when you are online a lot can be hidden, but I could essentially live my own life without the strictures, without the monitoring, without all of the gender-based coercion which happened within the cult. When I came out here I saw the reality, started to see the sleep deprivation, the increasing paranoia, the financial pressure, and that was what helped me recognise that it was a cult.

Dr Ahona Guha, Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Online/digital' recruitment.

¹⁰² Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

¹⁰³ Name withheld, *Submission 275*, p. 2; Daniel Reiher, *Submission 37*, p. 1; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*.

¹⁰⁴ Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

Online recruitment also enables rapid escalation. Low-cost or free content, such as videos, webinars, meditation sessions or Bible studies, is used to build trust and legitimacy. This is then followed by increasingly time-intensive programs, private groups or paid courses.¹⁰⁵ As engagement deepens, recruits are often moved off public platforms into encrypted messaging apps or closed communities (either online or in-person). Here external scrutiny falls away and leaders can progressively escalate control. This becomes the point where coercive high-control groups will often begin introducing manipulative or unreasonable demands designed to test boundaries, normalise obedience, and identify those willing to comply.

Online courses that may have low initial introductory offers will often ramp up the costs as they promise to deliver the answers and enlightenment that followers are looking for. Sometimes when the costs become prohibitive, a devotee will end up working for the group to “pay off” the fees, and that can escalate into dedicating all of their spare time to a manipulative organisation.

Sarah Steel, Submission 187, p. 3.

Inquiry evidence indicates that online recruitment amplifies vulnerability. Individuals experiencing loneliness, isolation or distress may engage heavily in online spaces, making them easier to identify and target.¹⁰⁶ Reflecting on the recruitment by ‘online hate groups’ with ‘cult-like behaviour’, RMIT’s Digital Ethnography Research Centre explained that, ‘What is significant is not that such groups forge a sense of belonging that helps users overcome loneliness, but that these users are finding it difficult to develop social bonds elsewhere in their lives’.¹⁰⁷

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The Committee is concerned that online recruitment blurs the boundary between genuine digital communities and coercive manipulation. The absence of physical cues, the speed of interaction, and the normalisation of intensive online engagement make it harder for individuals to recognise when participation has shifted from voluntary interest to coercive behaviours. These conditions are easily exploited by coercive high-control groups, who can use the online environment to gradually increase pressure, limit critical reflection, and erode a person’s ability to recognise escalating manipulation. This environment complicates detection and enforcement, as harmful activity may occur across jurisdictions and platforms with limited oversight.

The Committee considers online recruitment to be a significant and evolving risk factor in the growth of coercive high-control groups. Effective responses must recognise the role of digital platforms in enabling deception, accelerating indoctrination and deepening dependency. Responses must strengthen digital literacy, ensure platform accountability and enhance early-intervention mechanisms to prevent harm.

¹⁰⁵ Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, *Submission 241*, pp. 8–9.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

FINDING 10: Online platforms enable coercive high-control groups to recruit at scale by using anonymity, deceptive practices and targeted engagement to accelerate indoctrination and avoid scrutiny. Digital recruitment lowers barriers to entry, increases vulnerability and allows harmful and coercive behaviours to escalate rapidly within closed online spaces.

2.5 Impacts on individuals and families

For over three decades, I lived with the deep belief that I was fundamentally broken, unable to live up to the standards demanded by the organisation. It has taken intensive therapy, rebuilding, and the support of professionals to understand that what I experienced was not my fault — it was abuse.

Name withheld, *Submission 72*, p. 1.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated a high degree of complexity in the nature and extent of the impacts associated with coercive high-control groups. Individuals, families and communities experience these impacts in different ways, and they vary depending on factors such as length of involvement, level of control, age, dependency, and availability of external supports.

Box 2.1 Impact domains

Psychological harm is caused by behaviours that manipulate or damage a person's mental and emotional state.

Physical harm is caused by behaviours that directly compromise physical health or safety.

Personal restrictions are caused by behaviours that limit a person's autonomy, agency, or access to basic resources and opportunities.

Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups: Questionnaire insights*, 2025, <<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg-questionnaire-insights>> accessed 28 January 2026.



Impacts on individuals

How they think • How they live • How their bodies are used

Coercive high-control groups often follow a consistent pattern of behaviour aimed at systematically dismantling individual autonomy and replacing it with dependence on the group. Psychological harm, physical harm and personal restrictions do not operate as discrete practices, but as an integrated system of domination. A defining commonality across all three domains (psychological harm, physical harm and personal restrictions) is the targeting of agency.

Coercive high-control groups target agency in how individuals think (for example, through ‘mind control’/ ‘thought reform’¹⁰⁸ and fear-based teachings¹⁰⁹), how they live (for example, through restrictions on relationships,¹¹⁰ education,¹¹¹ movement¹¹² and medical care¹¹³), and, in some cases, how their bodies are used (for example, through bodily autonomy restrictions,¹¹⁴ forced labour/exertion,¹¹⁵ physical violence,¹¹⁶ or sexual abuse¹¹⁷).

(Continued)

-
- ¹⁰⁸ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 65–68; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 2; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 80; Name withheld, *Submission 149*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 100*, pp. 2–3; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Submission 103*, pp. 17–18.
- ¹⁰⁹ Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 12; Name withheld, *Submission 190*, pp. 2–3; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 7; Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 2; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, pp. 2–3; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 131*.
- ¹¹⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 2; Leanne Treloar, *Submission 74*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 104*, p. 3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 16; Catherine Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 8–9.
- ¹¹¹ Name withheld, *Submission 246*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 1; Annie Boehm, *Submission 93*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 219*, p. 4; Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.
- ¹¹² Name withheld, *Submission 8*; Maurice Jurgens, *Submission 56*, p. 1; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 216*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 5.
- ¹¹³ Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33; Name withheld, *Submission 11*, pp. 2–3; Name withheld, *Submission 22*, pp. 1–2; Name withheld, *Submission 28*, p. 7; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Submission 103*, p. 7.
- ¹¹⁴ Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 25, 36; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*.
- ¹¹⁵ Megan Gotts, *Submission 101*, p. 2; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Submission 103*, p. 13; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 34; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*.
- ¹¹⁶ Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, pp. 14–15; Name withheld, *Submission 76*, p. 2; David Hyland, *Submission 150*, p. 1; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 14; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 34; Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 3.
- ¹¹⁷ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*; Naresh Nayak, *Submission 217*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 219*; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*; Name withheld, *Submission 242*; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, pp. 2–3.

Impacts on individuals (continued)

How they think

- “ It denied us the opportunity to develop independent critical thinking skills, as all information was filtered through the group’s anti- establishment lens. It left us utterly unprepared for life outside the group, creating significant challenges in later navigating education, employment, and social relationships in the broader world.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 19.



2

How they live

- “ There is also a rule that you can’t move to another state or country unless you are moving to look after an Assembly. If a woman marries someone from another Assembly, they have to move there. You are not allowed to move too many suburbs away from where the church in your area is. The distance is determined by the pastor of the Assembly. Pastors should not have a say where people live.

Name withheld, *Submission 216*, p. 3.



How their bodies are used

- “ Girls are taught from a young age that their role is to serve and obey. The idea of personal boundaries and bodily autonomy is non-existent. I recall an incident in one case, when a girl reported sexual abuse by her father, her mother was asked by a priest if she had “given him enough sex.” The implication being that the sexual abuse of the child by her father was her mother’s fault for not fulfilling her marital duty.

Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 15.



Inquiry evidence explained that these controls were not primarily about the specific choices being restricted, but more about progressively eroding independent decision-making and increasing reliance on the group for permission, guidance and meaning.¹¹⁸ For example, Laura McConnell reflected on her experience of being shunned when she began questioning the harmful behaviours she was experiencing, at the same time she had decided to pursue higher education:

I do not think it was my education. It was that they could see that I did not want to be there by the way that I was dressing, by the questions I was asking and the fact that I wanted an education. So they just drove past me and pushed me out.¹¹⁹

The Committee heard consistently that harmful behaviours rarely only affect a single impact domain. For example, restrictions on movement or association not only limit personal autonomy but also intensify psychological distress and dependence on the group. Sustained fear-based teachings can also manifest in physical symptoms such as exhaustion, sleep disturbance or chronic anxiety. Inquiry evidence indicates that these behaviours operate collectively to entrench control, making harm difficult to recognise in isolation and difficult to escape without external intervention.

Volume 2 of the Report details a comprehensive range of harmful behaviours used by coercive high-control groups, drawn directly from what people told the Committee. In this Part of the Report, the Committee focuses not on these behaviours one by one, but on the serious and lasting harm they cause to individuals, families and communities. Reform must address, prevent and respond to these impacts, including the psychological, physical, financial, and social harms that can shape and diminish people's lives.

To help explain the impacts discussed in this Part, Table 2.2 below sets out some of the harmful behaviours identified in Inquiry evidence to show how wide-ranging they are and the varying harms they cause.

¹¹⁸ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 24; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, p. 18; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, pp. 63–64.

¹¹⁹ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

Table 2.2 Examples of harmful behaviours occurring in coercive high-control groups

Impact domain(s) affected	Harmful behaviour
Psychological harm	Indoctrination: Repetitive instruction that frames group teachings as absolute truth while delegitimising external information or perspectives. Unlike robust teaching or advocacy, which allows engagement with alternative views, indoctrination systematically undermines the credibility of any external source.
	Gaslighting: Deliberately causing individuals to doubt their perceptions, memories or beliefs to maintain control.
	Public humiliation and shaming: Shaming or reprimanding individuals in front of others to enforce conformity and deter dissent.
	Forced self-disclosure: Pressuring individuals to disclose private thoughts, doubts or perceived failures which are then used to shame, control, or enforce conformity. Disclosures are typically made to people in authority; however, may also be made to, or in front of, other members. Voluntary sharing in groups with genuine intentions is consensual, confidential where appropriate, and never weaponised.
	Fear conditioning: Conditioning members to associate dissent, exit or non-compliance with severe emotional, social or existential consequences.
	Post-exit retaliation: Continuing attempts to exert control even after leaving, such as social isolation, condemnation, harassment, reputation attacks and threats of legal action.
Psychological harm Physical harm	Boundary violations: Ignoring or overriding personal, emotional or physical boundaries.
	Physical assault/abuse: Intentional use of physical force causing pain, injury or fear.
	Sexual assault: Any non-consensual sexual act.
	Forced physical exertion: Compelling individuals to perform strenuous exercise (e.g. running, planking) or physical activities, to demonstrate devotion or as a punishment.
Psychological harm Personal restrictions	Apocalyptic narratives: Teaching or actively planning for imminent catastrophe to discourage long-term planning, independence or making personal decisions separate from the group. Theological or political beliefs about crisis within groups with genuine intentions, differ from use of catastrophe in coercive high-control groups to prevent autonomy or exit.
	Isolation from external relationships: Discouraging or prohibiting contact with non-members to reduce alternative sources of support or perspective. Time-intensive communities may naturally limit availability, but coercive isolation actively severs external bonds and frames outsiders as dangerous.
	Shunning/excommunication: Withdrawing social, emotional or familial contact as punishment. Choosing personal boundaries differs from organised, collective exclusion designed to inflict psychological harm or force return.
	Information restriction: Limiting access to external media, alternative points of view or other critical sources of information.

Impact domain(s) affected	Harmful behaviour
Psychological harm Physical harm Personal restrictions	Controlled intimate or sexual relationships: Regulating dating, marriage choices or sexual relationships. Relationship and marriage practices, including arranged marriages, hold significant cultural and religious meaning in many traditions and are not inherently coercive. In coercive high-control groups, however, control over intimate relationships is used as a tool of manipulation and compliance. Forced or coerced labour: Requiring unpaid or underpaid work presented as service, duty or spiritual obligation. Discouragement of medical care Discouraging or preventing medical treatment in favour of group-approved treatment. Group-approved healing practices become coercive when members are denied informed or actual choice.

Source: Volume 2: *In their words*.

2.5.1 Psychological harm is pervasive, persistent and non-linear

Psychological harm emerged as a central and pervasive impact of coercive high-control groups across the Inquiry evidence. Inquiry evidence consistently described environments where fear, control and emotional manipulation were used to regulate behaviour and reshape individuals' sense of self, safety and reality.



Questionnaire insight

94.9% of respondents experienced some form of psychological harm:

- 82.0% experienced 'mind control techniques or indoctrination'
- 81.7% experienced 'pressure to remain in the group or fear of punishment if leaving'
- 81.4% experienced 'fear-based teachings or apocalyptic beliefs'
- 77.9% experienced 'isolation from family and friends'
- 75.0% experienced 'emotional abuse'.

Impacts of fear-based narratives and punishment

Individuals in coercive high-control groups are often conditioned to anticipate severe consequences for non-compliance, placing them in a sustained state of threat.¹²⁰ This can result in individuals experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety,¹²¹

¹²⁰ Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 162*, p. 9; Name withheld, *Submission 202*, p. 1.

¹²¹ Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 7; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 14; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2, 5; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 3.

hypervigilance¹²² and emotional dysregulation,¹²³ with many remaining ‘constantly alert’¹²⁴ even in safe environments. Normal stressors may trigger disproportionate fear responses, and authority figures may provoke intense distress. In some cases, this pattern develops into post-traumatic stress responses, including intrusive thoughts,¹²⁵ avoidance behaviours¹²⁶ and dissociation.¹²⁷

The prolonged exposure to fear-based teachings, threats of eternal punishment, spiritual abuse, and exorcisms resulted in severe psychological distress. I experienced persistent night terrors for decades, dissociation, anxiety, and symptoms consistent with complex trauma. The belief that I was inherently defective or evil, particularly due to my sexual orientation, was reinforced through spiritual language and conversion practices, contributing to long-standing internalised shame and identity confusion.

Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 7.

The psychological pressure was so intense that I once fainted at school. I lived in constant fear of getting too close to classmates because I believed they could influence me to “lose faith” ...

Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 3.

Impacts of losing autonomy, self-trust and identity

Psychological harm is also caused by coercive high-control group’s deliberate erosion of individual autonomy and self-trust. Many individuals described being taught to distrust their own thoughts, emotions and moral judgement, with discomfort or doubt reframed as spiritual weakness, rebellion or moral failure. For example, a submitter reflected that their self-doubt continued even after they left the coercive high-control group:

It was very difficult after so long to be able to trust your own thoughts, having been told from a child that I did not know what I was talking about or I would do the wrong thing if I wasn’t acting in obedience ...¹²⁸

Over time, this undermines an individual’s capacity to evaluate risk, assert boundaries or make independent decisions.¹²⁹

¹²² Name withheld, *Submission 3*, pp. 1–2; Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 223*, p. 11; Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 2; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹²³ The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 34, 63; Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

¹²⁴ Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 10.

¹²⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 8; The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 72; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

¹²⁶ Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 22; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 4.

¹²⁷ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 4; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 21; Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 23; Name withheld, *Submission 47*, pp. 4–5.

¹²⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 7.

¹²⁹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Emotional manipulation/grooming’, ‘Control and indoctrination’, ‘Emotional and psychological abuse’, ‘Fear-based control’ and ‘Creating dependency’.

Psychological harm was often exacerbated by chronic exhaustion and cognitive overload. People with lived experience of coercive high-control groups, including former members and affected family or loved ones, described how excessive meeting schedules, irregular hours and constant expectations of availability, wore down emotional resilience, reduced critical thinking and increased compliance. Inquiry evidence described long-term impacts on concentration, memory and emotional regulation.

Sleep deprivation occurs when individuals consistently do not get enough sleep, leading to various negative effects on cognitive functions, mood, and overall health. Sleep-deprived individuals often experience impaired judgment, decreased cognitive abilities, and increased irritability.

Name withheld, *Submission 28*, p. 15.

Eldership meetings were frequent (fortnightly) and often Ad Hoc and regularly extended late into the night, lasting over three hours. They were marked by high stress, verbal abuse, and emotional breakdowns ...

Stuart Alsop, *Submission 158*, p. 1.

... soon after joining, her behaviour changed drastically. She began hiding her involvement, attending events and services late into the night. She became secretive, fearful, and emotionally withdrawn from our family. She lost her job as a data analyst at a major bank due to the extreme time demands placed on her ...

Name withheld, *Submission 268*, p. 1.

This gradual erosion of autonomy can ultimately result in a deeper loss of identity itself. Over time, a person's sense of self can become closely tied to the group's beliefs, leadership structure and rules.¹³⁰ Personal values, preferences and goals may be replaced with expectations set by the group. Members may come to believe that belonging, safety or security depend on following these expectations.¹³¹ As a result, individual autonomy is reduced and acceptance becomes conditional on compliance.

Before you know it, your sense of self, confidence, and personal power are rooted in an external organisation and its approval. Stay there long enough, and your identity disintegrates, your essence taken hostage, and your mind shaped by a warped ideology masked as artistic training and wellbeing.

Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, p. 12.

¹³⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 7; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 12; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 34.

¹³¹ Deidentified survivor testimonials, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 66; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*; Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

LGBTIQA+ members of coercive high-control groups are often forced to suppress, deny or change their identities. This may include subjecting members to harmful and illegal practices such as ‘gay conversion therapy’ or exerting pressure on them to conform to rigid, prescribed heterosexual roles.¹³² These practices can deeply undermine a person’s sense of identity and contribute to shame, stigma, fear of exclusion and long-lasting psychological harm.

After leaving coercive high-control groups, many people with lived experience reported ongoing difficulties in rebuilding a stable sense of self. Having been encouraged to suppress their own thoughts and feelings, they have often experienced uncertainty about their values, relationships and future.¹³³ For some, re-establishing an independent identity can be a lengthy process and may take years to rebuild.¹³⁴

Impacts of strict ideological purity

Inquiry evidence indicates that, for many people, the psychological harm they experienced intensified when they began to question behaviours, express doubt or attempt to leave a coercive high-control group. Rather than being treated as something to be respectfully explored, questioning was frequently reframed as a profound moral failing, disloyalty or a personal defect.

In many groups, doubt itself was treated as evidence of corruption, weakness or wrongdoing, justifying increased scrutiny, correction or punishment. For example, questioning was often explicitly tied to threats to spiritual salvation, with individuals taught that dissent placed them at risk of eternal punishment. This framing heightened fear responses and significantly raised the psychological cost of leaving.¹³⁵

This contrasts with practices of religious/spiritual groups with genuine intentions. Inquiry evidence explained that an important distinction between coercive high-control groups and those with genuine intentions, is that their members can openly question beliefs and practices without reprisal or threat.¹³⁶ For example, the Catalyst Baptist Church stated that doctrinal teaching should be ‘open to questioning, discussion, and respectful disagreement’. In contrast, coercive high-control groups often involve ‘closed systems, suppression of questions, and the punishment of dissent’.¹³⁷

¹³² Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 219*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 247*, p. 2.

¹³³ Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 34; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 43.

¹³⁴ Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 25; Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 3.

¹³⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 223*, p. 3; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 17; Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 6.

¹³⁶ Jane Kennedy, Registered Counsellor, The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Dr Janja Lalic, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Australian Christian Churches, *Submission 99*, p. 9; Paul Gratton, Pastor, Now Church Moe, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹³⁷ Catalyst Baptist Church, *Submission 147*, p. 1.

... questioning or changing course can feel like spiritual failure, creating additional psychological pressure and guilt ...

Dr Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 15.

This dynamic, where expressions of doubt are portrayed as morally problematic, was not confined to religious/spiritual coercive high-control groups. In non-religious/spiritual coercive high-control groups, questioning leadership or attempting to disengage was similarly positioned as a loss of truth, enlightenment or spiritual standing. Dissent was treated as evidence that an individual had become corrupted, misguided or disconnected from the group's exclusive source of knowledge.¹³⁸

This framing of questioning as moral failure, often combined with significant consequences for leaving the group, functioned as a powerful mechanism of psychological entrapment. Inquiry evidence indicates that this dynamic not only delayed or prevented individuals from leaving, but compounded trauma by pressuring individuals to silence themselves to preserve safety, belonging or salvation.¹³⁹

Impacts of shunning/excommunication and shaming

We stood on opposite sides of the grave; her 'faithful' family who still attended the church on one side and we heretics on the other. A few crossed the threshold to offer a forced handshake but most stayed away entirely. Some of my cousins, who'd once been my best friends, wouldn't even look in my direction. We had a small gathering after the burial, mainly so that Grandma's brother could say a few words as he wasn't welcome to do so at the official church ceremony (he was a backslider also). None of the old church family turned up to this gathering, choosing instead to meet covertly around the corner.

Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 8.

Shunning was the most frequently described form of psychological harm across the Inquiry evidence. It was also identified as the most powerful mechanism preventing individuals leaving coercive high-control groups, even after doubts had formed. Many people with lived experience described that the threat of total relational loss often outweighed concerns about beliefs, mistreatment or personal wellbeing.

¹³⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, pp. 3, 7, 20; Wendy Jasper, *Submission 79*, p. 1.

¹³⁹ Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*; Byron Avietti, *Submission 107*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 223*, p. 8.



Questionnaire insight

81.7% of respondent's identified there was pressure to remain in the group or fear of punishment if they left. For most, the threat of disfellowship and/or excommunication, followed by mandatory shunning, was the main pressure to stay in the high-control group.

2

The psychological impact of this threat was compounded by the fact that shunning was not abstract or symbolic but visibly enforced and regularly observed by members of coercive high-control groups. Inquiry evidence described formal rules and expectations prohibiting contact with those who had been excluded. This included explicit instructions that members 'should not talk to or interact',¹⁴⁰ not associate with, not have 'meals together' with,¹⁴¹ or otherwise acknowledge individuals who had been shunned. In effect, treating them as though they no longer existed. This reinforced that shunning, or the threat of shunning, functioned as a collective disciplinary tool as well as an individual punishment.¹⁴²

Inquiry evidence emphasised that the psychological harm of shunning extended beyond the moment of exclusion. People with lived experience, most of who had experienced shunning/excommunication, described the enduring guilt and distress linked to the sudden loss of all meaningful relationships. For example, Mark Darbyshire, who experienced shunning, described leaving a coercive high-control group as 'absolute':

I might as well have died for the sense of sudden, unexpected grief I inflicted on the people I left behind ... As soon as my departure became known, people began to unfriend me on Facebook. Close friends made the difficult decision to exclude me from their lives. I expected this but it was still deeply painful.¹⁴³

Given the prevalence of shunning/ex-communication as forms of psychological harm reported by people with lived experience in Inquiry evidence, the examples below (Box 2.2) show the significant harmful impacts of these practices on individuals. *Volume 2* of the Report also provides further examples provided by people with lived experience, offering additional insight into how these behaviours affect those subjected to them.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 3.

¹⁴¹ Name withheld, *Submission 76*, p. 1.

¹⁴² Barbara Maccarrone, *Submission 12*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 5.

¹⁴³ Mark Darbyshire, *Submission 263*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Social control and isolation'.

Box 2.2 How shunning/excommunication impacts people: examples from Inquiry evidence

Internal shunning

A couple of times when I was a teenager, I was “put out” for a month as punishment for something I’d done. Because I was still young and living with my mother this was more of an internal shunning, where I still had to attend meetings, but I was instructed not to speak to anyone else, so for a whole month I would be completely isolated from everyone around me.

Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 1.

Threat of shunning

The threat of shunning, both for formal “removal” or informal social distancing/soft-shunning, adds another layer of psychological distress, particularly for those grappling with questions, identity, or crisis.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 22.

The very threat of total isolation from everyone and everything you hold dear creates a barrier to exit from the group, and is significant enough to prevent many individuals from leaving.

Name withheld, *Submission 272*, pp. 50–51.

Impacts on family dynamics

I cried for days, missing my mother and sisters, but the church’s shunning rules forbade contact. A secret letter to my younger sister was met with her plea to stop writing, as she feared punishment. This isolation deepened my depression, leaving me feeling abandoned and confused by my family’s obedience to the church over our bond.

Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 3.

Despite still sharing a home, he now shuns me completely. There is no conversation, no support, no empathy. I am expected to pay half the utility bills and fund all of my own groceries. He no longer provides for me in any meaningful way, emotionally or materially.

Name withheld, *Submission 142*, p. 2.

(Continued)

Box 2.2 Continued

... we were told we could no longer be in fellowship and our kids who were 14, 12 and 7 weren't welcome either. We assumed it was a temporary disfellowshipping as punishment, my husband even shook our pastor's hand, looked him in the eye and said "I'll bring my family back". The very next meeting our pastor announced that we were to be unfriended, unfollowed on social media, removed from groups, instantly & brutally cut off.

Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 7.

I knew at that time that it meant that I would have to leave home and that I would be disowned. I had been preparing for that, really, since I was aware of my sexuality, probably 12 or 13. I had just always accepted, because it is so the antithesis of the teachings of the church, that you would be excommunicated, you would have to leave your family, and not just move out and get your own little apartment somewhere; you would be absolutely cut off and shunned and told you are going to hell and told you are a disappointment. So I had been sort of preparing for all these things to happen, and then it happened exactly as I predicted.

Name withheld, closed hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

Long-term consequences of shunning

The group has shunned me. I experienced a loss of identity and loss of community. I have had to reestablish relationships with my family and friends that had been severed by the controls of the ministry. It is very difficult to trust myself or to trust anyone else. This makes it difficult to rebuild any kind of community and reintegrate into society. I struggle in relationships with others and have a deep pervading sense that I am a bad person.

Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 4.

Impacts of long-term exposure

Leaving the organisation was the start of many years of recovery and it happened in stages. First, I had to learn how to survive and establish my identity, including basic things such as setting up a bank account, a personal email address, learning to drive a car, save up for dental work, etc. Once I finally achieved some stability, I began the work of unravelling the psychological damages and addressing the harms that I had experienced.

Miriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 2.

For individuals raised in coercive high-control groups, the psychological impacts are often developmental. Long-term exposure to coercive environments can disrupt emotional development and limit the acquisition of independent life skills. This leaves individuals ill-equipped to navigate adult relationships, employment and decision-making after exit. Part 4 outlines the specific impacts on children and young

people, while Part 5 considers potential reforms to improve system responses for people leaving/who have left a coercive high-control group.

I feel that Centrelink staff and medical staff need to be more educated about Coercive control. I am so grateful for people who have been supportive and have helped me to negotiate the very complex journey to finding ways to manage when there was so much that I didn't understand about how government agencies, banking and other systems worked. I also know that others in similar situations to myself have not received the same understanding and support that I have experienced.

Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 4.

Leaving is not the end of the psychological harm

The impacts of the various psychological harms experienced by individuals involved in coercive high-control groups are often enduring and persistent.¹⁴⁵ Lived experience Inquiry evidence described ongoing trauma responses, including anxiety,¹⁴⁶ hypervigilance,¹⁴⁷ depression¹⁴⁸ and difficulty trusting others,¹⁴⁹ long after they had left.

For over three decades, I lived with the deep belief that I was fundamentally broken, unable to live up to the standards demanded by the organisation. It has taken intensive therapy, rebuilding, and the support of professionals to understand that what I experienced was not my fault — it was abuse.

Name withheld, *Submission 72*, p. 1.

Inquiry evidence showed that recovery from psychological harm caused by coercive high-control groups was rarely linear. Some lived experience Inquiry evidence described cycles of improvement followed by periods of struggle, often unexpectedly.¹⁵⁰ Others detailed chronic challenges to recovery.¹⁵¹ Inquiry evidence emphasised that leaving the group did not always result in immediate improvements to health and wellbeing. While physical separation from the group marked an important step, many described internalised control mechanisms that continued to shape their thoughts, emotions and behaviour long after exit. The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network reflected that 'many survivors remain in a prolonged state of pain, confusion, loss, and partial recovery'.¹⁵² The Survivors Network also

¹⁴⁵ Anke Richter, Director, Decult, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁴⁶ Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁴⁸ Lachlan Walker, *Submission 220*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 239*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 259*, p. 1; Aiden Bowers, *Submission 277*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁰ Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 273*, p. 8; Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 202*, p. 2; Excerpt from deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 67; Name withheld, *Submission 243*, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ Patrick McIvor, *Submission 177*, pp. 3–4.; Excerpts from deidentified survivor testimonials, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 65, 74; Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 4; Belinda Young, *Submission 201*, p. 3.

¹⁵² The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 45.

emphasised that these challenges are compounded by a lack of targeted and specific support services.

This non-linear recovery was exacerbated by the scale of loss experienced at exit. One joint submission that was developed collaboratively with 64 lived experience advocates, described that individuals lose not only belief systems, but ‘community, purpose, and belonging that were once central to their lives’.¹⁵³ In some cases, this included permanent separation from family members and friends who remained in the group.¹⁵⁴ Inquiry evidence also explained that rebuilding a sense of self after such losses was slow and uneven.¹⁵⁵ As a result, many former members required long-term, specialised support. They reported that expectations to ‘move on’ or recover quickly failed to recognise the enduring nature of the psychological harm they had experienced. The need for specialised responses and support services for individuals harmed by coercive high-control groups is discussed further in Part 5.

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The psychological harm arising from coercive high-control groups is not an incidental or unintended outcome. Instead, it is the overarching goal of these groups and their leaders that build systems that rely on fear, control and conditional belonging to maintain compliance of individuals within the group. This compliance enables leaders to benefit from the power and control exerted over group members, who may also be used to bring others into the group before they have realised the harm being caused.

Coercive high-control groups operate in ways that systematically undermine individual autonomy, self-trust and emotional safety, and the resulting psychological harm can be profound. In this context, psychological harm is not limited to moments of acute distress, but reflects sustained exposure to environments that normalise threat, suppress dissent and punish independence.

The Committee is particularly concerned by the mechanisms that reinforce and deepen this harm, including practices designed to discourage questioning and delay exit. Practices such as moralising doubt, reframing dissent as failure, and enforcing shunning or social exclusion significantly increase the psychological costs of leaving a coercive high-control group. In the Committee’s assessment, these dynamics place individuals in situations where remaining within a group may feel safer than departing, even when they recognise the harm they are experiencing. The Committee considers this form of mental entrapment to be a defining feature of coercive high-control groups.

The Committee recognises that psychological harm does not end at the point of exit from a coercive high-control group. Inquiry evidence makes clear that many individuals leave with deeply internalised patterns of fear, guilt and shame, alongside the loss of identity, community and meaning. Recovery is frequently prolonged, non-linear and heavily

¹⁵³ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 27.

¹⁵⁴ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁵ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 4.

dependent on access to specialised support. The Committee considers that expectations of rapid recovery or self-resolution fail to account for the cumulative and enduring nature of this harm, particularly for those exposed to coercive high-control environments from childhood or adolescence.

In the Committee's view, the prevalence, severity and persistence of psychological harm require it to be treated as a central impact of coercive high-control groups. This has significant implications for how this type of harm is identified, how support services are designed and delivered, and how responsibility for prevention and support is allocated.

FINDING 11: Psychological harm is the most prevalent and enduring impact of coercive high-control groups. It affects individuals across all group types and durations of involvement. For most, the harms persist well beyond exit, with recovery typically prolonged and non-linear.

FINDING 12: Harmful behaviours used by coercive high-control groups, including moralising doubt, reframing dissent as personal failure, and enforcing shunning or social exclusion increase the psychological costs of leaving the group. These dynamics create conditions that can mentally trap individuals, making remaining in the group feel safer than departing, even when they recognise the harm they are experiencing.

FINDING 13: Shunning is often the most powerful mechanism of psychological control used in coercive high-control groups. Public excommunication also serves as a collective disciplinary tool, controlling remaining members and often compelling family members and friends to participate in shunning as an act of self-preservation within the group.

2.5.2 Physical harm can be used to enforce control and compliance

Physical harm also emerged as a significant impact of coercive high-control groups across the Inquiry evidence. People with lived experience described environments in which direct acts of violence and indirect practices placed members' physical wellbeing at risk, including forced physical exertion, deprivation of rest or medical care, and the normalisation or concealment of physical abuse. The Committee notes that these forms of physical harm frequently sit alongside, and contribute to, significant psychological impacts.



Questionnaire insight

52.4% of respondents experienced one or more types of physical harm:

- 32.2% experienced physical violence and/or sexual abuse
- 28.7% experienced child abuse or neglect
- 20.8% experienced sleep deprivation.

2

Physical violence

Corporal punishment was a routine and brutal tool of control.

Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 37.

Systemic neglect, harsh corporal punishment, and a complete lack of personal and/or sexual boundaries were not “abuse” to us; they were simply “life.” These things were presented to us as normal, necessary, and even holy. We could not report abuse because we lacked the words and the concepts to identify it as such. It was impossible for us to describe a reality we had never experienced.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 21–22.

This Section focuses primarily on physical violence that was embedded as a form of discipline or control within coercive high-control groups. Inquiry evidence also described incidents where physical assaults and violence occurred between members that were not necessarily linked to sanctioned group practices.¹⁵⁶ In both circumstances, the Committee is concerned by reports received in Inquiry evidence that groups often failed to support victims or report the physical violence to appropriate authorities.¹⁵⁷

Lived experience Inquiry evidence explained that where physical violence occurred within coercive high-control groups, it was typically used as a deliberate means of enforcing obedience and maintaining authority, rather than as isolated or spontaneous acts.¹⁵⁸ Physical violence was enacted both directly by group leadership¹⁵⁹ and indirectly through expectations placed on parents or other adults to physically discipline children or other members.¹⁶⁰ Evidence received by the Committee indicates

¹⁵⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 72*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 76*, pp. 2–3; Name withheld, *Submission 72*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 1; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 18; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Name withheld, *Submission 245*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 62*, p. 1; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 37. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Physical violence’.

¹⁵⁹ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Name withheld, *Submission 54*, p. 2; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 58; Name withheld, *Submission 265*, p. 1; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, pp. 1–3.

¹⁶⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 251*, pp. 2–3; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, pp. 58–59; Name withheld, *Submission 211*, pp. 3–4.

that physical violence can result in a range of interrelated impacts on individuals, including:

- **Physical injury and bodily trauma**, including pain, shock and stress responses arising from physical punishment or forced exertion.¹⁶¹ This harm may occur in private or in group or public contexts, where the presence of witnesses can intensify humiliation, fear and loss of personal autonomy.¹⁶²
- **Physical exhaustion and physiological depletion**, including prolonged fatigue linked to excessive workloads, sleep deprivation and physically punishing routines that were framed by coercive high-control groups as discipline, correction or spiritual obligation.¹⁶³ This exhaustion often reduced individuals' physical resilience and capacity to question authority or resist control.
- **Heightened bodily fear and hypervigilance**, including where individuals became conditioned to anticipate physical pain, injury or bodily distress in response to perceived moral, spiritual or behavioural failure.¹⁶⁴
- **Internalisation of blame and somatic guilt**, including where individuals interpreted their abuse as personal inadequacy, disobedience or spiritual failure. Bodily pain and distress were often experienced as confirmation of wrongdoing, reinforcing shame and self-punishment.¹⁶⁵
- **Normalisation of pain and physical harm**, including where injury, discomfort and physical distress were reframed by individuals as necessary, deserved, corrective or spiritually meaningful.¹⁶⁶ This normalisation reduced the likelihood that harm would be recognised as abusive, disclosed to others, or reported to external authorities.

Physical violence was often embedded within broader systems of control and often compounded psychological harm.¹⁶⁷

Sexual violence and abuse

Sexuality, like other basic human needs, becomes a tool of control and manipulation, whether it is amplified when you get pressured or rewarded to be promiscuous or it is suppressed by purity culture, celibacy, homophobia and strict gender segregation. Sex with the leader is often reframed as healing or spiritual growth.

Anke Richter, Director, Decult, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

¹⁶¹ Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 251*, pp. 2-3; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 1.

¹⁶² Excerpt from deidentified survivor testimonials, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 59; Name withheld, *Submission 76*, p. 2.

¹⁶³ Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, p. 13; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 268; Jim Spencer, *Submission 174*, p. 6.

¹⁶⁴ Name withheld, *Submission 88*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 155*, p. 1.; Gloria, public hearing, p. 28; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 71; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁵ Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 21; Deidentified survivor testimonials, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 69; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*.

¹⁶⁶ Catherine Carey, *Submission 112*, p. 3; Excerpt from deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 59; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 10.

¹⁶⁷ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 24; Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 2; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 58.

In my case, the sexual abuse within this morally rigid environment created a toxic fusion where natural human impulses became sources of self-hatred and spiritual terror, while the fear of disappointing religious authorities became so deeply ingrained that even decades later, my core identity remained defined by chronic inadequacy, sexual shame, and the belief that I was fundamentally unworthy of love, intimacy, or familial belonging.

Dr Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 26.

Some individuals experienced sexual violence within coercive high-control groups, with severe and enduring impacts. This was often compounded by the failure of group leadership and other adults in the group to respond appropriately. In the context of coercive high-control group environments, sexual violence can result in a range of interrelated physical, psychological and social impacts on individuals, including:

- **Sexual trauma and physical injury**, including pain, injury, reproductive health impacts and psychological injuries, including acute mental health issues and substance use problems.¹⁶⁸
- **Enduring psychological distress**, including shame, fear, dissociation and trauma responses.¹⁶⁹
- **Loss of bodily autonomy and sexual self-determination**, including where individuals internalised beliefs that their bodies were subject to external authority, discipline or moral judgement by others.¹⁷⁰
- **Impaired capacity to identify or name abuse**, including where sexual harm was reframed as normal, deserved, spiritually necessary or the result of personal failing.¹⁷¹
- **Long-term impacts on intimate relationships**, including difficulties with trust, consent, intimacy and physical safety extending well beyond involvement in the group.¹⁷²

The impacts of sexual violence were often compounded by the lack of any protective or accountable institutional response within coercive high-control groups. Lived experience Inquiry evidence described disclosures being minimised, ignored or redirected into internal processes that prioritised group cohesion and authority over

¹⁶⁸ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*; Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁹ Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*; Name withheld, *Submission 285*, p. 6.

¹⁷⁰ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 2; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 27; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹⁷¹ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*; Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*.

¹⁷² Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 26; Excerpt from lived experience testimony, Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 27; Name withheld, *Submission 155*, p. 1.

victim safety.¹⁷³ The Committee heard that individuals who disclosed sexual abuse were frequently:

- discouraged or prevented from reporting to police or external authorities¹⁷⁴
- encouraged to forgive or reconcile with perpetrators¹⁷⁵
- told that abuse was their fault¹⁷⁶
- pressured to remain silent to avoid bringing shame or reputational damage to the group.¹⁷⁷

In some cases, abuse was reframed as a matter to be resolved through counselling by unqualified leaders,¹⁷⁸ or increased submission to the abusive behaviour,¹⁷⁹ rather than recognised as criminal conduct requiring external intervention.

Inquiry evidence described feelings of betrayal, abandonment and disbelief, noting that the absence of protection reinforced the original abuse. Failing to respond appropriately increased the risk of ongoing or repeated abuse, as perpetrators were shielded from accountability and victims were left without protection. Children and young people were particularly vulnerable to ongoing sexual violence because of a lack of institutional safeguards. See Part 4, Sections 4.1, 4.5 and 4.9.

Sexual abuse within coercive high-control groups causes profound and enduring harm. Institutional inaction significantly exacerbates these impacts, deepening the injury, delaying recovery and undermining trust in systems of authority and care.

Medical neglect

There was intense guilt and shame for not getting a miraculous healing or going to medical professional for assistance. If you didn't get 'healed' then you had a problem. If you went to the doctor and the Pastor found out, you would be deemed as not worthy.

Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 3.

¹⁷³ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, pp. 15–16; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁴ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*; Mirriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 4; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁵ Annie Boehm, *Submission 93*, p. 4; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 21; Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 22; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 219*, p. 2; Lachlan Walker, *Submission 220*, p. 3; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁷ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 80; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 21; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 12.

¹⁷⁸ The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 2.

¹⁷⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 1.

... this doctor came around the corner in his white coat. And I remember holding on to my mum's hand looking up this guy. And he said, "... unless your husband has a blood transfusion immediately, he's going to die. We need to transfuse right now". Well, my mum said, "No. No. My husband won't allow it. And neither will I". He said, "well then unfortunately, the prognosis for a survival of your husband is pretty much nil. Then he put his head down and – I'll never, ever forget it – he turned his back on mum and walked away.

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 101.

Medical neglect was another common source of harm within some coercive high-control groups. This neglect took multiple forms, including discouraging or prohibiting people from seeking medical treatment, framing illness as a moral or spiritual failure, and substituting professional healthcare with prayer, obedience or disciplinary practices.¹⁸⁰

Inquiry evidence demonstrated varied and compounding impacts on individuals who experience medical neglect because of the practices of their group, including:

- **Delayed or untreated illness and injury**, including where individuals were discouraged from seeking medical care or lacked permission to do so, resulting in the progression of what may have been treatable conditions.¹⁸¹
- **Worsening of chronic health conditions**, including pain, fatigue and mental health-related illness, due to prolonged neglect and the absence of appropriate medical management.¹⁸²
- **Internalisation of blame for illness**, including where individuals attributed physical symptoms to insufficient faith, disobedience or moral weakness, rather than recognising them as legitimate health concerns.¹⁸³
- **Underutilisation or loss of trust in medical systems**, particularly where individuals were conditioned to view external professionals as untrustworthy or hostile to the group. For some, this continued even after they left the group.¹⁸⁴

Inquiry evidence also identified that in extreme cases medical neglect has resulted in death. Several stakeholders referred to the 2022 death of 8-year-old Elizabeth Struhs in Toowoomba, Queensland, where 14 people (including Elizabeth's parents and the leader of the group they were members of) were found guilty of manslaughter

¹⁸⁰ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Restrictions on medical or psychological care'.

¹⁸¹ Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 22*, pp. 1–2.; Excerpt from deidentified survivor testimonials, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 62; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

¹⁸² Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 22; Name withheld, *Submission 162*, p. 9; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, pp. 54–55.

¹⁸³ Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 2; Grahame Gee, *Submission 13*, p. 3.

¹⁸⁴ Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

following her death after she was denied access to insulin.¹⁸⁵ All of the adults convicted were part of the same group whose practices included rejecting the use of medicine.¹⁸⁶

Medical neglect functioned as another form of coercive control, reinforcing individuals' dependence on the group and its leaders. By positioning the group as the sole source of guidance or healing, members could be discouraged from trusting their own physical symptoms or seeking independent medical advice. For many, this resulted in a diminished capacity to recognise when the group's discouragement or prohibition on medical care was undermining their health and causing them harm, to advocate for their own health, or to assess when medical intervention was necessary.¹⁸⁷

Other forms of physical harm

Physical harm in coercive high-control groups is not limited to overt violence. Inquiry evidence described significant harm caused by practices that used the body itself as a means of control. Although often framed as discipline, spiritual growth or commitment, these practices in reality caused serious physical and psychological harm.¹⁸⁸ Inquiry evidence was received that indicated some coercive high-control groups caused physical harm through the following practices:

- **Forced physical exertion:** Some groups imposed excessive workloads, prolonged manual labour and physically demanding routines that exceeded people's physical limits. When individuals could not keep up, leaders treated this as a moral failing or a lack of faith rather than a health issue.¹⁸⁹
- **Deprivation-based control:** Some groups restricted sleep, limited access to food and denied rest. Sleep deprivation was commonly used to increase compliance, weaken critical thinking and deepen emotional dependence. Inquiry evidence described long-term fatigue and physical depletion that reduced an individual's ability to question instructions or resist unreasonable demands.¹⁹⁰
- **Bodily control and surveillance:** Inquiry evidence from people with lived experience described strict control over posture, movement, appearance, diet and daily routines. Physical discomfort was normalised and reframed as necessary for demonstrating obedience or personal transformation.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 248*; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 18; Cult Consulting Australia, *Submission 227*, p. 2; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34; Maria Esquerro, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7. See also: Laura Lavelle, 'Elizabeth Struh's parents each sentenced to 14 years jail for her manslaughter', *ABC News*, 26 February 2025, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-26/elizabeth-struhs-manslaughter-religious-group-sentencing/104938208>> accessed 24 June 2026; Andrew Messenger, 'Witchcraft' medicine and God's 'healing power': inside the Australian 'cult' that killed an eight-year-old', *The Guardian*, 1 February 2025, <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/feb/01/saints-conservative-christian-sect-brendan-stevens-elizabeth-struhs-insulin>> accessed 24 June 2026.

¹⁸⁶ Andrew Messenger, 'Witchcraft' medicine and God's 'healing power'.

¹⁸⁷ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Restrictions on medical or psychological care'.

¹⁸⁸ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Physical violence' and 'Physical punishment masking as discipline'.

¹⁸⁹ Mary Hughes, *Submission 236*, p. 8; Name withheld, *Submission 268*; Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 6; Serge Del Mar, *Submission 235*, p. 6; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 33. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Physical punishment masking as discipline'.

¹⁹⁰ Belinda Young, *Submission 201*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 7; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Submission 103*, p. 13. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Physical punishment masking as discipline'.

¹⁹¹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Restrictions on personal freedom and expression' and 'Sexual, bodily and gender-based control'.

Forced exertion, deprivation and bodily control can be serious forms of physical harm when they are imposed involuntarily as a mechanism of control. Practices such as fasting or prescribed forms of dress can be genuine expressions of belief in some contexts, but they become harmful when used to coerce, manipulate or control people. Although these practices may not always meet criminal thresholds when considered on their own, they can form part of broader patterns of coercive control that cause lasting physical injury, undermine personal autonomy and entrench dependency within coercive high-control groups.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is deeply concerned by the scale and severity of physical harm occurring within some coercive high-control groups. Inquiry evidence demonstrates that physical violence, sexual abuse and other forms of physical harm are not isolated incidents, but systemic features of control in many of these environments.

Sexual violence is one of the most serious and traumatic forms of abuse experienced in coercive high-control groups. The Committee understands that it is often enabled or concealed by group structures, leaving victims without support and significantly increasing the risk of long-term physical and psychological harm. The Committee considers it essential that victims of sexual violence are believed, supported and able to access appropriate protections and pathways to safety.

Physical and sexual violence in these groups often serves a deliberate function: it enforces compliance, asserts authority and conditions members to accept bodily harm as normal or deserved. These harms typically occur in settings where individuals cannot safely refuse, report or leave. Financial dependence, social isolation and lack of external support create conditions where abuse can continue unchecked. Parts 3 to 5 consider ways to improve responses and increase safety for those affected.

FINDING 14: Many coercive high-control groups use physical violence and abuse, including physical injury, sexual abuse and medical neglect, as tools of control. These practices cause severe physical and psychological harm to members and often occur alongside active efforts to prevent victims from seeking help or reporting abuse to relevant authorities.

FINDING 15: Coercive high-control groups that allow physical and sexual violence typically fail to provide safeguards or meaningful support for victims. Group leadership often compounds the impacts of this harm by dismissing disclosures, protecting perpetrators, reframing abuse as a moral lesson, and discouraging or undermining engagement with external support or reporting pathways.

2.5.3 Imposing personal restrictions creates dependency

Denial of personal choice in the basic aspects of daily life also emerged as a significant impact across the Inquiry evidence. Inquiry evidence described environments where personal restrictions operated cumulatively, progressively eroding individuals' capacity

to function independently inside and outside the group. Restrictions on education, employment, movement, relationships and finances were not experienced as isolated controls. Rather, they combined to create dependency, deepen coercive control and entrench long-term disadvantage. These restrictive practices enabled coercive high-control groups to extract labour, money and compliance, while the resulting physical, psychological and social costs were felt by members and their families.¹⁹²

Personal restrictions imposed by coercive high-control groups systematically undermine members' capacity for independent living, creating profound and lasting vulnerabilities upon exit. By limiting members' education, employment opportunities, and development of essential life skills, individuals are left ill-equipped to navigate the demands of independent life. This can lead to underemployment, financial insecurity, and persistent housing instability.¹⁹³ For some, these challenges prevent people from leaving the group entirely.¹⁹⁴

... I was denied the opportunity to pursue higher education in college. This educational sabotage has had lasting financial impacts. I believe I would have had a much more rewarding career path if I had been allowed to pursue a proper college degree.

Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 2.

... they are sent out with the clothes that they have on their back – whatever they brought in – and they, like me, are totally ill equipped to deal with the government requirements of Centrelink, of living in town, in the real world, as an individual person, completely cut off from a community and from all the provisions that were provided for you in community that prevented you from growing with responsibility.

Mary Hughes, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

His housing is insecure in that [redacted] controls his housing and if he chose to evict our brother or even sell the property that was purchased using our brother's funds, that he has no rights to the property and could become destitute.

Name withheld, *Submission 95*, p. 3.

I had nowhere to go when I left home and the GRC at 16. Being isolated from my father there was difficulty with making connections with him or any people in the outside world. I had not learned to know who I could trust. I had not learned about how the outside world really operated, I didn't know where to go to for help or even about Centrelink, so I ended up living on the streets.

Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 5.

¹⁹² See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Restrictions on education and information', 'Labour and financial restrictions', 'Restrictions on personal leisure or rest', 'Restrictions on personal freedom and expressions', 'Restrictions on relationships and social life', 'Restrictions on medical or psychological care', 'Housing and movement restrictions', 'Legal and civic restrictions'.

¹⁹³ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 5; Mary Hughes, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 43.

¹⁹⁴ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 71.

Imposing personal restrictions, and limiting autonomy in decision-making, was often used by coercive high-control groups to isolate members from external social networks and support structures which could help them leave. This manufactured dependency creates a cycle where the same factors that trap individuals within coercive high-control groups become the primary barriers to rebuilding their lives after leaving. Consequently, many people who have left a coercive high-control group rely heavily on social services and grapple with anxiety, difficulty making a decision, and the psychological aftermath of prolonged control. Part 5 considers support services for people from coercive high-control groups, including social services, in more detail.

Coercive high-control groups also invade members' privacy as a way of imposing personal restrictions. Inquiry evidence shows that some groups use surveillance and monitoring to reduce the private space necessary for independent thinking and autonomous decision-making. This included practices such as reading personal communications without permission, requiring members to report on one another, and using digital technologies to track behaviour without consent.¹⁹⁵

These practices were not incidental but purposive. Where privacy was removed, coercive high-control groups further constrained members' ability to think and act independently.¹⁹⁶ For many individuals, this created fear, self-censorship, and increased dependency, compounding other personal restrictions members experienced while involved in the group.¹⁹⁷

Inquiry evidence demonstrated that, in some circumstances, the impacts of privacy removal can persist well beyond an individual's formal involvement with a group. This occurred in two distinct ways:

- some former members continued being monitored or harassed by their group after leaving¹⁹⁸
- others described internalised effects of sustained surveillance, including ongoing self-monitoring, fear of judgment, and difficulty trusting their own thoughts and decisions long after exit.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Surveillance and monitoring'.

¹⁹⁶ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 90–91; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 4; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 30; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 2; The Religious Trauma Collective - Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3; Excerpt from deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 64; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 4.

¹⁹⁸ Warrick Stephens, *Submission 39*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 6; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 30–32.

¹⁹⁹ Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Excerpt from deidentified survivors testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 65; Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 2.

Forced tithing or financial contributions increases dependency and control

Forced tithing and other financial contributions, were raised extensively in Inquiry evidence as a significant concern. These practices play a central role in entrenching dependency and create a substantial barrier to individuals seeking to exit coercive high-control groups.



Questionnaire insight

51.7% of respondents experienced financial control or exploitation.

While financial giving is a normal and accepted practice across many faith traditions and community organisations, Inquiry evidence indicates that financial contributions in coercive high-control groups operate differently. The critical distinction identified is voluntariness. In groups with genuine intentions financial contributions are freely given, anonymous and without pressure, coercion or negative consequences. In contrast, when financial contributions are compelled, monitored or tied to threats, punishment, or loss of status in a group, they become a form of coercion that contributes to dependency and control.²⁰⁰

If members are being forced to contribute money, then I think there is a problem there.

Kojo Akomeah, Board Member, Freedom for Faith, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

Many submissions noted that tithing practices occurred within coercive high-control groups, often involving a weekly minimum contribution of 10% of a member's earnings.²⁰¹ Some groups were reported to expect additional contributions when needed.²⁰² Inquiry evidence shows that financial contributions in coercive high-control groups were enforced in a variety of ways, including fear-based teaching, monitoring of members and the use of social pressure by group members to ensure compliance.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ For examples of monitoring see: Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21; Name withheld, *Submission 134*, p. 5.

²⁰¹ Sue Winter, *Submission 2*, p. 1; Grahame Gee, *Submission 13*, p. 4; Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 46*, pp. 1, 3; Name withheld, *Submission 47*, pp. 2, 4; Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 3; Jeremy Stein, *Submission 85*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 4; Alister McKeich, *Submission 126*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 134*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 139*, pp. 1–2; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 25; Name withheld, *Submission 211*, p. 3; Naresh Nayak, *Submission 217*, p. 1; Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, pp. 12–13, 23; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 7.

²⁰² Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 3; Jeremy Stein, *Submission 85*, p. 3; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 7; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

²⁰³ Name withheld, *Submission 46*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 4; Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 134*, p. 5; Naresh Nayak, *Submission 217*, p. 1; Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, p. 23; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

In mainstream churches tithing is normal practice but is voluntary, optional and anonymous. In cults it is a demand, it is an expectation and it is a sin if you do not comply.

Clare Heath-Mclvor, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

As the accounting team at the time, I was feeling pressure to remind my members about giving tithes and stuff like that. In Christianity is not compulsory to do that. This is what makes the difference between cults and Christianity.

Gloria, closed hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

The Inquiry also received evidence that some contributions were made through traceable payment methods, such as direct deposits or electronic transfers, enabling close oversight and enforcement by the group.²⁰⁴

The transfers worry me because they can see who and the amount they are giving. When it was cash the money would go into the bag, but you really pushed to 10% and more. But now, with electronic transfer, they can see who is tithing, I have grave concerns that people would be very heavily targeted that are not meeting that mark. I think that is a very dangerous thing. They call it a free-will offering, but it is not really free will. It is like 10% or you are risking hell really.

...

Now it is the era of direct debit there is tracking and stuff like that, which worries me ...

Ryan Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 8, 12.

When Covid hit, the first thing they did was put up the BSB and ACC number so people could transfer their tithes, and then said “if you’re having trouble transferring money, please contact the church and we’ll walk you through it”. They heavily use tithing verses from the Bible to obtain financial gain, and speak of not being blessed if you don’t tithe.

Name withheld, *Submission 134*, p. 5.

This expectation that members regularly contribute a portion of their income can cause significant financial strain and create a barrier to leaving. Inquiry evidence included examples of some individuals selling personal belongings to meet tithing requirements or to financially provide for the group.²⁰⁵ The evidence also indicated that the threat of not participating could result in psychological harm.²⁰⁶ Lived experience Inquiry evidence described the challenges faced when financial giving was prioritised and expected within the group.

²⁰⁴ See for example, Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27; Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 8, 12; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 8, 12; Jane Simson, *Submission 154*, p. 5.

²⁰⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 268*, p. 1; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

²⁰⁶ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Labour and financial restrictions’.

I later discovered that my husband had been secretly donating substantial sums of money ... every single month, even while failing to save or contribute financially to our household.

Name withheld, *Submission 142*, p. 2.

A common theme is that members should pay tithing *before* all other financial responsibilities [original emphasis].

Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, p. 24.

The financial burden of the contributions we were expected to make began to take a toll on our marriage, leading to significant financial strain.

Name withheld, *Submission 33*, p. 1.

Significant financial demands were made upon my daughter, extorting most of her money over the four years. This occurred without transparency; no receipts were ever provided for the funds handed over. And she had to sell all her jewellery that was given to her by her grand parents and parents and family.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 3.

a lot of people are living below poverty. I know a lot of people that are inside cannot leave because their community is all within Shincheonji and also they do not have money to rent an apartment ...

Gloria, closed hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

The personal and psychological impacts of financial contributions is compounded by the lack of transparency around the use of tithes and donations by coercive high-control groups. Part 5 considers potential reforms aimed at increasing financial transparency and accountability to address these issues.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee believes that coercive high-control groups often impose systematic restrictions on members' education, employment, movement, relationships and finances. These are not isolated controls but interconnected practices designed to create dependency, limit members' ability to exit, and contribute to long-term social and economic disadvantage. These restrictions often do more than limit choice within the group; they also erode an individual's capacity to live independently outside it. Individuals who leave are often without qualifications, work experience, financial literacy or social networks, which can lead to homelessness, reliance on social services, and prolonged economic insecurity.

The Committee notes that, in many cases, the same restrictions that trapped individuals in coercive high-control groups also became primary barriers to successful reintegration after leaving. Former members described not knowing how to access Centrelink, lacking trust in external systems, and being unable to secure stable housing or employment. These vulnerabilities were manufactured by the coercive high-control group and often persist long after a person has exited.

FINDING 16: Coercive high-control groups often systematically restrict personal choices about education, employment and finances. These restrictions increase dependency and destroy confidence, making it significantly harder for individuals to leave, and creating lasting barriers to recovery and adjustment after exit.

FINDING 17: Financial giving in coercive high-control groups is fundamentally different from the voluntary contributions made in genuinely intentioned faith and community settings. Forced tithing and financial contributions in coercive high-control groups are required, monitored and enforced, often through fear or threats of negative consequences. The absence of genuine choice distinguishes these practices from legitimate forms of giving and increases dependence and control.

2.5.4 Women and girls often face unique harms and impacts

Women/young girls are indoctrinated with the notion that they will grow up and their calling in life is not to get an education or have a career, but it is to marry from within the cult and live as a subordinate wife. I was just 15 years old when a man of the cult (30+ years old) being my stepfathers best friend came to my work place (yes, I was 15yo and was working full time and had left school in year 9) and approached me at the shop counter and asked me to marry him ...

Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 3.

The gendered impacts of restrictive practices are evident in the rigid, patriarchal structures described in Inquiry evidence, where ‘men are given all formal authority’²⁰⁷ and women are excluded from leadership and decision-making roles regardless of their capability, while being conditioned from an early age into narrowly defined domestic roles.²⁰⁸ Inquiry evidence described that ‘girls were raised to be housewives’,²⁰⁹ valued primarily for ‘motherhood and marriage’,²¹⁰ and rewarded for strict adherence to submissive gender roles.²¹¹ This reinforces a system in which women’s aspirations beyond these confines were actively discouraged and sanctioned as ‘demonstrating the wrong spirit’.²¹²

Harms experienced within coercive high-control groups are typically not gender-neutral. They can be highly gendered, with women and girls disproportionately affected by sexual violence, coercive control, and restrictions on their autonomy. Lived experience Inquiry evidence explained that the gendered power structures within many coercive-high control groups, contributed to, and normalised, these harms.

²⁰⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 23.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 58; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 2.

²⁰⁹ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 58.

²¹⁰ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 2.

²¹¹ Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 3; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 2.

²¹² Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 2.

Women often experience unique or acute harms in coercive high-control groups. For example, Inquiry evidence described environments in which ‘women are denied equal roles or autonomy’²¹³ and where leadership hierarchies make it ‘difficult for members, especially women, to challenge abuse or inequality’.²¹⁴ In some groups, these dynamics manifest as explicit misogyny, with women described as being ‘systematically objectified and valued primarily for [their] sexuality and reproductive capacity’,²¹⁵ and expected to have a ‘submissive spirit’ geared towards male authority.²¹⁶

Inquiry evidence outlined a range of ways that women and girls can be subject to distinct or disproportionate harms in coercive high-control group settings, including:

- Women’s sexuality is deliberately controlled as a primary mechanism of domination, with sexual violence occurring within ‘a broader context of control of women’s sexuality, including dress, dating, marriage and reproduction’.²¹⁷
- Control of sexuality is used to establish control over women’s lives, with Inquiry evidence noting that ‘controlling someone’s sexuality or sex life is an effective method of all-inclusive manipulation and control’, such that once established, ‘no part of life is left untouched by the cult leader’s influence’.²¹⁸
- Marriage is often used as a key mechanism of gendered coercion, with doctrinal authority granting husbands power such that ‘husbands were able to dictate the terms of their marriage’, while wives were forced to comply or face expulsion and shunning.²¹⁹
- Group counselling practices can entrench gendered harm by discouraging women from leaving abusive relationships, including practices that involve ‘advising women to forgive and return to abusive marriages’.²²⁰
- Women may also be removed from, or denied access to, education and paid employment, resulting in long-term economic dependency.²²¹
- Financial control can further restrict autonomy, with women often lacking access to their own earnings. This enforced economic dependency can significantly limit women’s ability to leave abusive or coercive environments.²²²

²¹³ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 7.

²¹⁴ The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3.

²¹⁵ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 25.

²¹⁶ Clare Heath-McIvor, *Submission 103*, p. 4.

²¹⁷ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 2.

²¹⁸ Dr Janja Lalich, ‘Dominance and submission: the psychosexual exploitation of women in cults’, *Cultic Studies Journal* vol. 14, no. 1, 1997, p. 8, referenced in Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 2.

²¹⁹ Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 2.

²²⁰ The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 2.

²²¹ Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 225*, p. 3.

²²² Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 15.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is deeply concerned by evidence demonstrating that harm in coercive high-control groups is often gendered, with women and girls experiencing specific and commonly systemic patterns of control and abuse. Inquiry evidence showed that gendered power structures are not incidental or accidental but central to how coercive control is exercised. The Committee considers this gender-based control within coercive high-control groups to be a significant and under-recognised form of harm that warrants targeted policy responses and support. The Committee acknowledges that adherence to strict gender-based norms does not, in itself, indicate that a group is coercive. These practices only become coercive when non-compliance leads to harm or punishment. Part 4 examines impacts on girls and young women, while Part 5 considers broader potential reforms and policy measures to address these harms.

FINDING 18: Women and girls often experience distinct and disproportionate harm in coercive high-control groups, where gendered power structures normalise and exacerbate these harms.

2.5.5 Families experience distinct harms

The ripple effect of cult harm is also worthy of a mention, since when a family member is recruited into a group such as this, they are often separated from family and loved ones in order to fully devote themselves to this new cause. If they are not physically separated, they are emotionally separated, and the cult recruit becomes unrecognisable to their family.

Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

Inquiry evidence from individuals with lived experience included accounts from those whose families were involved in coercive high-control groups, as well as from family members whose loved ones joined independently. Inquiry evidence described sudden and often profound disruptions or breakdowns in family relationships, alongside enduring emotional, psychological and practical harms.

There was consistent Inquiry evidence that coercive high-control groups deliberately undermine family relationships as part of their control strategies.²²³ The impacts on families included:

- **Abrupt relational estrangement or rupture** including sudden reduction in contact, tightly controlled communication, or complete estrangement following their loved one's involvement in a coercive high-control group. These changes often occurred without explanation or warning, leaving families confused and excluded from their

²²³ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Social control and isolation' and 'Restriction on relationships and social life'.

loved one's life.²²⁴ In some cases, sudden estrangement occurred when families ended financial support because they were unwilling to continue facilitating their loved one's ongoing involvement with a group. These decisions were made out of concern for the person's wellbeing but nonetheless severed already fragile lines of connection.

- **Erosion of pre-existing family bonds** including deliberate reframing of families as a threat, by portraying family members as morally compromised, spiritually inferior or emotionally unsafe. This reframing fostered distrust and fear, making withdrawal from, or complete severance of, previously stable relationships seem justified.²²⁵
- **Emotional distress and psychological strain** often resulting from a constant balancing act between expressing concern and avoiding actions that might be interpreted by the group as opposition in attempt to avoid estrangement.²²⁶
- **Prolonged and ambiguous grief** where their loved one remained physically alive but psychologically and relationally unavailable. For families estranged, this unresolved grief was reported to persist for years, with no clear pathway to reconciliation.²²⁷
- **Legal intimidation and escalation** was sometimes a response to attempts by families to seek help or challenge group involvement, further deterring families from advocacy and deepening isolation.²²⁸

Inquiry evidence emphasised that the harms associated with exiting a coercive high-control group extend beyond the person who leaves, also affecting family members who remain within the group.²²⁹

At a public hearing, Tore Klevjer from Cult Information and Family Support described the consequences of involvement in coercive high-control groups as having 'devastating psychological and relational impacts' that extend beyond the individual to their wider family network.²³⁰ For many families, these harms were sudden, disorienting and enduring, with limited access to appropriate support or guidance.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is concerned about the distinct psychological harm experienced by families, including prolonged and ambiguous grief when a loved one involved in a coercive high-control group is alive but no longer reachable in a meaningful way. Families described living with constant uncertainty, trying to maintain connection without triggering further withdrawal, and experiencing profound distress with limited access to advice or support.

²²⁴ Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Jim Spencer, *Submission 174*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 275*, pp. 3–4; Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 7; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

²²⁵ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 82; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 283*, pp. 7–8.

²²⁶ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

²²⁷ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 7.

²²⁸ Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*.

²²⁹ Mark Darbyshire, *Submission 263*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 80*, pp. 5–6; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

²³⁰ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

The Committee notes that some families who sought help or challenged a loved one's involvement in a coercive high-control group, were met with legal intimidation, which deterred further intervention, and left them even more isolated. The Committee considers families affected by coercive high-control groups to be a significantly underserved group whose needs require recognition and targeted support. Part 5 considers potential options for strengthening supports for this group to address these harms.

FINDING 19: Coercive high-control groups deliberately undermine family relationships to isolate members and strengthen control. This leads to sudden estrangement and long-term psychological distress for families, including ambiguous grief, as they are left with limited pathways for reconnection or support.

2.5.6 Broader impacts on communities

Beyond individual and familial trauma lies a significant and largely unquantified public burden. The social and economic costs of coercive groups do not end with their members. They are externalised quietly and cumulatively onto public systems and community services, from healthcare to welfare, legal aid, and housing.

Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 37.

Coercive high-control groups can cause broader harms that extend beyond individual members and families, affecting community safety, social cohesion and trust in public institutions. Their practices undermine community systems, including education, health, housing, genuine faith communities and civic life.

Communities are affected not only by the direct harm experienced by individuals, but also by the broader downstream impacts of untreated trauma and social dislocation associated with coercive high-control groups. The social and economic costs of these groups are often shifted onto public systems, community services and non-profit organisations.²³¹

Individuals exiting coercive high-control groups often require extensive support to stabilise their lives, including 'domestic violence support services, housing, education, child care, disability care, drug and alcohol support, community support and more to help make up for the family and friends they lost in the rupture of their exit'.²³² While survivors carry the immediate impacts, 'the broader community bears deferred costs of crisis responses, long-term care, and social recovery', contributing to 'a growing dark figure of unmet need and unmeasured cost'.²³³

²³¹ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 37–39; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 39.

²³² Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

²³³ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 37.

These costs are not confined to the point of exit. Recovery from coercive high-control group involvement is rarely linear and does not follow a fixed timeline.²³⁴ Individuals may require different forms of support at different points of their lives. For example, as they rebuild identity and relationships, enter or re-enter education and employment, become parents, or encounter later-life events that resurface unresolved trauma.²³⁵ The demand placed on public services is not a one-off event but a recurring, long-term draw across multiple support systems.²³⁶

The negative impact of abuse and coercive control within cults and organised fringe groups can persist for many years. We have seen through our work the need to ensure continuity of support for children and young people experiencing trauma and disadvantage, including as they transition into adulthood. Support needs do not simply stop when a person turns 18. Any joined-up systems approach should recognise this and ensure that ongoing support is available for young people who continue to experience vulnerability and require further assistance to effectively integrate into broader society.

Commission for Children and Young People, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 13 February 2026, p. 18.

Many people exit coercive high-control groups without basic life and employment skills, leaving them financially and socially vulnerable.²³⁷ Prolonged isolation from education, employment and external support systems can mean they lack work history,²³⁸ qualifications,²³⁹ basic skills,²⁴⁰ or experience navigating housing, legal and financial systems.²⁴¹ Individuals may need long-term, tailored assistance to rebuild independence. Part 5 considers the broader economic impacts associated with coercive high-control groups, acknowledging that the needs of individuals are complex and overlap across multiple service systems.

In addition to higher demands on social services, coercive high-control groups also contribute to lost economic participation and productivity. The combined effect is not only individual hardship, but an ongoing public cost carried by communities and government systems when these environments systematically erode members' capacity to function independently outside the group.

²³⁴ Commission for Children and Young People, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 13 February 2026, p. 18; Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

²³⁵ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

²³⁶ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50; Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 4.

²³⁷ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 36; BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 3; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 5.

²³⁸ Excerpt from deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 70.

²³⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 46.

²⁴⁰ Mary Hughes, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

²⁴¹ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Dave Hoar, *Submission 244*, p. 1; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*.

Inquiry evidence emphasised that without targeted intervention, individuals may receive inadequate support which may prolong their recovery and stability.²⁴² Dedicated support services for people from coercive high-control groups is discussed further in Part 5.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee recognises that the impacts of coercive high-control groups extend beyond individuals and families to affect broader communities, public services and social cohesion. Individuals exiting coercive high-control groups often present to multiple support services with complex and compounding needs, including housing instability, trauma responses, economic vulnerability, and social isolation. These needs place pressure on support services, health institutions and other community supports; many of which are not equipped to recognise or respond to the specific dynamics of coercive control within group settings.

The Committee considers that, in addition to increasing demand on social services, coercive high-control groups also reduce economic participation and productivity. Together, these impacts contribute not only to individual hardship but to an ongoing public cost experienced across communities and government systems when coercive environments reduce members' abilities to function independently outside the group.

The Committee is concerned that without targeted support and specialist understanding, individuals may be cycled through generic services that do not address their underlying trauma or provide adequate pathways to recovery and stability. This prolongs individual harm and increases pressure on public services that are already in high demand. This issue is discussed further in Part 5.

FINDING 20: Coercive high-control groups often impact the community more broadly by increasing demand on support services, reducing economic participation and productivity, and undermining community safety, social cohesion and trust in public institutions.

²⁴² Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 2.



Common patterns across coercive high-control groups

How power and control operate • How individuals become involved • How authority and control is maintained • How harm occurs • Warning signs that a group may be coercive and high-control often appear gradually

2

Recognising coercive high-control groups

Coercive high-control groups differ in purpose or beliefs, but they use similar methods to recruit, control and retain members.

A single practice or behaviour on its own does not prove that a group is coercive or high-control.

How power and control operate

The issue is not a group's purpose or beliefs, but how power and control operate.



- Power is centred in a leader or small inner circle
- Obedience and loyalty are expected
- Questioning beliefs or practices is discouraged
- Members become socially and emotionally dependent on the group
- Outsiders are framed as dangerous or misguided
- Behaviour, relationships and daily life are increasingly regulated
- Surveillance, shaming or exclusion are used to enforce conformity
- Control and demands increase gradually over time.

How individuals become involved

Recruitment is gradual, relational and often hard to recognise. It rarely feels like recruitment.



- Most people join through friends, family or partners
- Groups present as supportive, helpful or life-changing
- Vulnerability is targeted, usually during periods of transition or hardship
- Harmful expectations appear only after trust is built
- Involvement increases slowly over time
- Leaving becomes harder as commitment grows.

(Continued)

Common patterns across coercive high-control groups (continued)

How authority and control is maintained



Authority is maintained by shaping how members think.

- Group teachings are presented as absolute truth
- Outside information is discouraged or dismissed
- Doubt or questioning is framed as weakness or betrayal
- Members learn to distrust their own judgement.

Fear and shame are used to maintain obedience.

- Fear of punishment, failure or catastrophe
- Love and approval withdrawn for non-compliance
- Public or private shaming or shunning
- Belonging becomes conditional on compliance.
- Humiliation for mistakes or doubt

Control increases as connections weaken.

- Contact with non-members is discouraged
- Former members are shunned or cut off
- Members are encouraged to report each other
- Dependence on the group replaces external supports.

How harm occurs



Harm often arises from combined and sustained control over a person's life.

Psychological harm

Control over thoughts, emotions and identity. Common impacts include:

- Fear, guilt and shame
- Loss of self-confidence and decision-making ability
- Pressure to conform and suppress doubt
- Anxiety, trauma and long-term emotional distress.
- Isolation from support and alternative views

(Continued)

Common patterns across coercive high-control groups (continued)

Physical harm

Control over safety, health and bodily autonomy.

- Physical abuse, sexual violence or physical harm
- Medical care discouraged or denied
- Abuse hidden or handled internally
- Fear of seeking outside help.

Personal restrictions

Control over everyday life and independence.

- Limits on education, work or finances
- Control over relationships and living arrangements
- Monitoring of behaviour or movement
- Excessive time demands limiting personal freedom
- Financial or social barriers to leaving
- Dependency makes exit difficult.

Warning signs that a group may be coercive and high-control often appear gradually



People usually join seeking community, meaning or support.

- Control often develops slowly, making it difficult to recognise harm until someone is deeply involved.
- Healthy communities allow questioning, maintain personal freedoms, and support people leaving without punishment.

2.6 Importance of lived experience expertise in responding to harms

Part 2 has shown that coercive high-control groups cause harm through patterned, adaptive and often concealed practices. Control is typically applied incrementally and normalised over time. The resulting harms whether psychological, physical, social or economic are cumulative, enduring and frequently misunderstood by external systems.

The Committee considers that these dynamics are most clearly understood by people who have lived through them. Lived experience accounts provide insight into how coercive practices operate in real-life group settings, rather than how they may appear in theory.

Through its consideration of the Inquiry evidence, the Committee learned that people with direct lived experience of coercive high-control groups, whether they were members themselves or had a family member who was involved, are often the first to recognise changes in behaviour and harms being inflicted. They have direct experience of how boundaries are tested, resistance is discouraged and authority is justified in these settings. Their knowledge and insights are essential to ensuring that any policy responses implemented by the Victorian Government in this space are effective and remain so over time.

Survivors of group-based coercive control hold essential expertise necessary for addressing the complexity, breadth, and cumulative harm of coercive systems — insight that is critical to designing effective, ethical, and trauma-informed responses.

Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 47.

Inquiry evidence included recommendations for establishing a formal lived experience advisory body to ensure that lived experience expertise consistently informs legislative reform, service design, training and evaluation.²⁴³ People with lived experience also have vital skills in identifying risks, recognising emerging harms and shaping effective responses. It is important that this expertise is treated as foundational to reform efforts rather than supplementary,²⁴⁴ or an optional addition.

The Olive Leaf Network Australia which recommended the establishment of a lived experience advisory council noted that such a body would ensure ‘that all measures are survivor-centric and grounded in the reality of these experiences’.²⁴⁵ A formal advisory mechanism would support trauma-informed participation by providing

²⁴³ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 47; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Rationalist Society of Australia, *Submission 226*, p. 5; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 48, 55; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 36.

²⁴⁴ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 47.

²⁴⁵ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 55.

appropriate safeguards, support and recognition, while ensuring that survivor knowledge is incorporated systematically across reform processes.²⁴⁶

No government-established, dedicated lived experience advisory bodies exist for coercive high-control groups in Australia or internationally.²⁴⁷ However, Victoria already has several well-established lived experience advisory bodies across areas such as family violence, mental health, alcohol and other drugs, disability, youth and homelessness. Some Inquiry evidence noted these bodies as effective and consistent mechanisms to embed lived experience in policy development and system oversight.²⁴⁸

Victoria's Victim Survivors' Advisory Council (VSAC) provides an example of how structured, supported and ongoing lived experience input can inform government decision-making in a consistent and accountable way (see Box 2.3 below).²⁴⁹

Box 2.3 Victim Survivors' Advisory Council (VSAC)

VSAC was established by the Victorian Government after the Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2016. Its purpose is to make sure people who have *lived experience* of family or sexual violence are listened to and have influence over how the government designs and improves its family and sexual violence policies, services and laws. According to its website, members come from diverse backgrounds and are chosen to reflect the range of experiences of victim survivors across Victoria.

VSAC provides advice and insights to help shape better support systems, strengthen responses to violence, and work toward preventing violence in the first place. It also contributes to Victoria's ongoing reform efforts by embedding the voice of lived experience at the centre of decision-making.

Source: Victorian Government, *Victim Survivors' Advisory Council*, 24 February 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/victim-survivors-advisory-council>> accessed 10 April 2026.

Anke Richter from Decult reflected on Victoria's 'mature lived experience policy infrastructure' arguing that 'a dedicated advisory mechanism in relation to cultic harm would build on established Victorian practice and bring this area into alignment with adjacent fields'.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 47.

²⁴⁷ Anke Richter, Director, Decult, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups hearing, response to questions on notice received 1 December 2025, p. 1; Patrick McIvor, Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

²⁴⁸ Rationalist Society of Australia, *Submission 226*, p. 5; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10; Anke Richter, response to questions on notice, p. 1.

²⁴⁹ Victorian Government, *Victim Survivors' Advisory Council*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/victim-survivors-advisory-council>> accessed 10 April 2026.

²⁵⁰ Anke Richter, response to questions on notice, p. 1.

When you are constantly using your story to educate somebody else, I am not sure that moves us forward, because the onus is not on us to do better as a sector. I think the story guides us. It tells us where the gaps are, it tells us where their barriers are and then it tests the liveability of the work we have done.

Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 20–21.

Inquiry evidence also urged for reform to be undertaken through genuine co-design with people who have lived experience.²⁵¹ Rather than just relying on people with lived experience to repeatedly share personal stories as a proxy for meaningful engagement. Inquiry evidence indicated that while lived experience narratives can help identify harm, over-reliance on storytelling risks placing an ongoing burden on survivors without necessarily improving systems. Leigh Bartlett from BATForce emphasised that lived experience expertise is most effective when used to identify gaps and test whether proposed reforms and policies are workable for those they are intended to support, without requiring people to continually recount traumatic experiences to educate others.²⁵²

2.6.1 Ensuring diverse lived experience representation

Coercive control is a socio-political problem influenced by migration, race, class, and systemic inequality rather than just being a psychological or relational dynamic.

Annie Boehm, *Submission 93*, p. 6.

Victim-survivors are diverse; an intersectional approach recognising these differences and the role of compounding forms of structural discrimination should underpin policies to address coercive control.

Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 48.

Anyone can be involved in a coercive high-control group, therefore lived experience expertise must reflect the full diversity of Victorian communities. Inquiry evidence shows that some coercive high-control groups strategically target people at particular life stages or those experiencing vulnerability, and often use identity, values and community belonging to recruit, retain and entrench dependency.²⁵³

These dynamics are not confined to any single cohort. Factors such as structural disadvantage, social isolation, discrimination, language barriers, dependency relationships and intergenerational trauma can heighten vulnerability across diverse communities. This includes culturally and linguistically diverse communities,

²⁵¹ BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 3; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 47; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 55.

²⁵² Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 20–21.

²⁵³ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Crisis-based recruitment', 'Opportunistic recruitment', and 'Demographic-based recruitment'.

First Nations communities, people with disability and LGBTIQ+ communities. An intersectional approach is necessary to ensure that reform recognises how coercive control interacts with broader systems of inequality and the distinct and compounded harms experienced by different communities.

Any lived experience advisory mechanism should include deliberate and supported representation from diverse communities to ensure that reforms are equitable, culturally safe and responsive to compounded harm. This helps avoid inadvertently excluding people who may be facing systemic disadvantage or other vulnerabilities that increase their risk of harm.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee recognises lived experience expertise as essential to understanding, preventing and responding to the harms caused by coercive high-control groups. Inquiry evidence demonstrates that people with lived experience hold unique and necessary knowledge about how these groups operate, how harm accumulates, and where current systems fail to respond effectively. The Committee also notes that coercive high-control group dynamics affect many different cohorts, making it critical that lived experience representation reflects the diversity of Victorian communities.

The Committee considers that meaningful reform in this area requires lived experience expertise to be embedded into governance, policy design and evaluation, rather than consulted on an ad hoc basis. A structured mechanism would support people with lived experience to participate safely and with appropriate support, while improving the quality and long-term effectiveness of reform.

In light of the identified gaps in Inquiry evidence from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the Committee considers engagement with appropriate community-led organisations and representative peak bodies to be integral to identifying the most culturally appropriate and effective options for lived experience participation. This could include, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations such as Gellung Warl or peak bodies like the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, as well as culturally and linguistically diverse-led or multicultural organisations and relevant specialist services.

When implementing recommendations in this Report, the Committee believes that the Victorian Government should adopt a co-design approach with people who have lived experience expertise, ensuring representation from diverse communities affected by coercive high-control groups. As part of this work, the Committee encourages the Victorian Government to engage with existing lived experience advisory bodies in Victoria to understand what has and has not worked in their establishment and operations.

FINDING 21: People with lived experience of coercive high-control groups hold essential insights into how these groups operate, how harm develops, and where current systems fail to respond effectively. There is currently no formal mechanism to ensure that this expertise informs the Victorian Government's reform efforts to address the harms caused by coercive high-control groups. As these groups affect people from many different communities, lived experience input should reflect a diversity of backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Victorian Government establish a formal lived experience advisory body, including professional expertise, to co-design, inform and evaluate legislative, policy and service reforms addressing the impacts of coercive high-control groups, including for the purposes of progressing the implementation of the recommendations in this Report.

Part 3

Reforming the law to respond to group-based coercion



In this Part

Topics covered include:

- the meaning of coercive behaviours in group settings, and how it differs from coercive control in family violence law
- how group-based coercion can be distinguished from group conduct that is genuine, safe and supportive
- the limitations of existing legal frameworks in capturing cumulative, pattern-based harm in coercive high-control groups
- the risks of extending family violence legislation to address group-based coercion
- the rationale for a standalone criminal group-based coercion offence, including its key components
- the referral of detailed legislative design work to the Victorian Law Reform Commission.



3

What the Committee heard

Inquiry evidence described coercive behaviour in group settings as operating through patterns of conduct rather than isolated acts. Behaviours such as enforced dress codes, financial demands, movement restrictions and social exclusion are not necessarily coercive when considered individually. It is their combination, repetition and cumulative impact, which are designed to erode personal autonomy and entrench dependency on leadership, that defines the harm.

This type of harm falls outside existing legal frameworks. Many of the behaviours common to coercive high-control groups may not meet criminal thresholds when assessed individually, even where their cumulative effect causes serious and lasting psychological, social and economic harm. Inquiry evidence from people with lived experience, legal practitioners, Victoria Police and others, confirmed that existing offence categories were not designed to capture this kind of patterned, group-enforced harm.



Inquiry evidence drew clear parallels between the behaviours of coercive high-control groups and those addressed by coercive control laws in family violence settings. However, group-based coercion involves substantially different dynamics—including distributed authority, collective enforcement, multiple or shifting perpetrators, and pseudo-familial relationships—that fall outside existing legal definitions of coercive control. Inquiry evidence cautioned that extending or adapting the family violence legislation framework to cover group settings may introduce legal ambiguity, increase the risk of misidentifying victims as perpetrators, and dilute the focus and resourcing of existing family violence responses.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated broad support for a dedicated standalone criminal offence capable of capturing sustained and patterned coercive conduct in group settings. Several essential components for such an offence were identified, including a course of conduct or pattern of behaviour framework, a defined intent element, an express provision that apparent consent obtained under coercive conditions is not a defence, and limitation periods that reflect the time survivors commonly take to name and report harm. Inquiry evidence also emphasised that criminal law reform alone is insufficient, and that civil and pre-criminal mechanisms are needed to provide earlier intervention options.

What the Committee thinks

The Committee is of the view that Victoria's current legal framework does not adequately recognise or respond to group-based coercion as a distinct form of harm. Existing offences may address isolated acts, but they cannot capture the sustained, cumulative pattern of conduct through which coercion and control in group settings operates.



This gap cannot be adequately addressed by focusing on reform to existing family violence legislation. Victoria's family violence framework is highly specialised and fit for its intended purpose, and group-based coercion operates through fundamentally different structural dynamics. The Committee considers that the seriousness of the identified risks associated with extending the family violence framework provides a further and compelling reason not to pursue this approach.

Addressing group-based coercion requires a standalone offence that is grounded in conduct, recognises cumulative harm through a course-of-conduct framework, and focuses accountability on those who create and benefit from systems of control.

Apparent consent obtained under coercive conditions must not operate as a defence, and limitation periods must reflect the reality that survivors commonly take years or decades to recognise and report what happened to them.

The Committee acknowledges that designing such an offence is a complex task requiring dedicated legal analysis, structured consultation, and careful attention to human rights compatibility. These questions cannot be resolved within the scope of this parliamentary inquiry.

The Committee recommends that the Victorian Government commit to legislating a group-based coercion offence and refer the detailed design of that offence to the Victorian Law Reform Commission, with co-design with people with lived experience central to that work.

Note: This Part relies on confidential Inquiry evidence received by the Committee that is not directly cited or attributed to protect participant privacy and safety. Readers should be mindful that this evidence supports aspects of the analysis, findings and recommendations in this Part. See *Important note on confidential evidence* in *How the Committee approached a complex task*.

3.1 Identifying coercive behaviours in high-control groups

More often than not we talk about the fact that if we had been in safe places, we probably still would be there. It was not about belief; it was about the practices that were being utilised in those spaces and the coercion and the behaviours by leaders and by other members in congregations.

Samantha Sellers, Registered Therapist and Clinical Supervisor, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

Inquiry evidence described insidious patterns of coercive behaviours in high-control groups. These behaviours are typically subtle, cumulative and embedded in everyday group practices. In group settings, coercion functions as a key mechanism through which dominance is established and maintained, including through control of information, enforcement of rigid norms and the suppression of dissent. Over time, these dynamics erode individual autonomy and reinforce dependency on leadership, making the coercive group environment difficult to recognise and challenge.



Questionnaire insight

94.9% of respondents experienced some form of psychological harm.

Most people reported a combination of psychological coercion, emotional abuse, and social isolation.

Unlike coercive control in family or intimate partner relationships, where harm typically involves one individual exerting control over another, harm in group contexts typically involves collective behaviours and institutional settings that enable or support it.

Coercive behaviours in group contexts involve control or harm that is:

- shared or carried out by a group, not just an individual
- built into systems, rules or cultures of groups
- ongoing and reinforced, through group practices, expectations and authority structures.

This conduct-based understanding provides an essential foundation for distinguishing between genuine, safe and supportive groups and harmful coercive high-control groups, without requiring judgement about a group's beliefs. Inquiry evidence consistently demonstrated that harm in coercive high-control groups is driven by group behaviours, not belief or ideology, and is not confined to intimate or family relationships.

3.1.1 Conduct-based indicators of a genuine, safe and supportive group

Inquiry evidence established that genuine, safe and supportive groups can be distinguished from coercive high-control groups by the presence of the following conduct-based indicators:

- membership is genuinely voluntary and informed¹
- questioning or doubt is accepted and met with engagement rather than punishment²
- exit is practically possible without the loss of family, financial security, or personal safety.³

The absence of these indicators signals risk. Where they are not present in a group, this usually reflects an intent to control rather than support members. This distinction is fundamental to differentiating a safe group from a coercive one.

Part 2 and *Volume 2* detail the patterns of harmful coercive behaviours in high-control groups identified in Inquiry evidence, and where necessary explain how these can be distinguished from the practices of groups with genuine intentions.

International alignment with conduct-based approaches

International approaches reinforce the use of a conduct-based framework.⁴ For example, Austria's Federal Office for Cult Affairs assesses groups according to

-
- 1 Australian Sangha Association, *Submission 71*, pp. 3–4; Stephen Messer, *Submission 169*, p. 2; Casey Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Submission 204*, p. 1; Raphael Aron, Director, Cult Consulting Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 28–29; Clare Heath-McIvor, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 31–33. Voluntary means, members have the freedom to choose the extent and nature of their participation, and can decide whether, when, and how they engage in group activities (for example, attending services occasionally rather than compulsorily, or making voluntary financial contributions rather than being pressured or required to do so). Informed means, individuals are provided with accurate, transparent information about the group's purpose, beliefs, practices, expectations, and leadership before joining, and are able to ask questions and reconsider their involvement over time.
 - 2 Jane Kennedy, Registered Counsellor, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Dr Janja Lalich, CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Samantha Sellers, Registered Therapist and Clinical Supervisor, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Australian Christian Churches, *Submission 99*, p. 1.
 - 3 Freedom for Faith, *Submission 228*, pp. 2, 9; Australian Sangha Association, *Submission 71*, pp. 3–4; Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.
 - 4 See for example, UK Home Office, *Controlling or coercive behaviour: statutory guidance framework*, 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-statutory-guidance-framework/controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-statutory-guidance-framework-accessible>> accessed 31 March 2026; Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 2.

identifiable ‘dangers’ rather than doctrine.⁵ Its Managing Director, Ulrike Schiesser, outlined five areas of concern:

1. risks to life or physical or mental health
2. restrictions on the free development of personality, including the freedom to join or leave a group
3. harm to the integrity of family life
4. threats to financial independence
5. harm to the free mental and physical development of children and young people.⁶

Ulrike Schiesser emphasised that the assessment of a group, is not about labelling a group a ‘cult’ or not, but about providing ‘information on the dangers which may be proposed by programs or activities of cults or cult-like activities’.⁷ Insights from Austria’s Federal Office for Cult Affairs are discussed further in Part 5, Case Study 5.1.

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The Committee considers that what determines whether a group is safe is not what it believes, but how it treats its members. While it can be difficult to discern from the outside, Inquiry evidence consistently showed that genuine, safe and supportive groups can be distinguished from coercive high-control groups without regard to their stated intentions or beliefs.

Of central importance is whether members can join with a clear and full understanding of what is involved, whether they are free to decide if, how, and to what extent they participate in group activities, whether they can raise questions or express doubt without fear of punishment, and whether they can leave freely without significant personal, social or financial consequences. Where these conditions are absent, the Committee considers this to be a strong and reliable indicator that a group is operating with an intent to control and coerce.

FINDING 22: A genuine, safe and supportive group safeguards informed consent, personal autonomy and freedom of exit by ensuring people understand what they are joining, can exercise independent judgement, and are able to leave freely. A coercive high-control group undermines these safeguards by limiting disclosure, restricting personal autonomy, and imposing barriers to, or consequences for, exit.

⁵ Ulrike Schiesser, Managing Director, Federal Office for Cult Affairs (Austria), public hearing, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

FINDING 23: The following indicators reliably distinguish a genuine, safe and supportive group from a coercive high-control group:

- Membership is genuinely voluntary and based on an informed understanding of the group.
- Members are able to question or express doubt without facing punishment, isolation or rejection.
- People can leave the group without facing significant risk or consequences, including the loss of family, friendships, financial security or personal safety.

3.1.2 Group-based coercion as a pattern of conduct, not isolated acts

As shown in Part 2, identifying group-based coercion requires looking at the pattern and totality of behaviours and conduct, not assessing individual acts in isolation. Behaviours such as social exclusion, intensive mentoring, strict dress codes, or forced financial contributions are not necessarily coercive when considered on their own. However, when these behaviours form part of an interconnected and sustained system designed to entrap, monitor and discipline members, their coercive nature becomes clear.⁸ The harm lies not in any single behaviour, but in how these behaviours work together to erode a person's autonomy, identity and capacity for independent thought.⁹ Assessing each action in isolation risks missing this entirely.

Recognising the cumulative impact of behaviours matters because it shapes how the law must respond. Traditional legal frameworks generally focus on discrete offences, examining individual acts with identifiable elements that can be proved and prosecuted separately.¹⁰ Many behaviours common to coercive high-control groups such as strict rules, social exclusion, movement monitoring, financial demands do not meet existing criminal thresholds when considered in isolation.¹¹ However, when these behaviours are combined and sustained over time with the aim of dominating a person, they can cause significant psychological, social and economic harm.¹² Existing offence-based frameworks are not designed to capture this kind of cumulative, patterned harm in group contexts.

For example, in the context of coercive high-control groups, a joint submission from lived experience advocates identified 205 distinct potentially coercive acts experienced

⁸ Elise Heerde, Certified Coach and Mental Health Practitioner, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 71; Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 2; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 2; Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Richard Baker, Investigative Journalist, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 112.

⁹ See Part 2 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Recruitment tactics' and 'Behaviours'.

¹⁰ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 74.

¹¹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 50; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52, Attachment 1*, p. 112; Patrick McIvor, Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 2.

¹² See Part 2 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Recruitment tactics' and 'Behaviours'.

by people involved in such groups and mapped these against existing Victorian and Commonwealth laws. Based on this analysis, the submission concluded that, ‘the vast majority of coercive practices fall outside existing legal protections or are only conditionally addressed’.¹³ It also noted that ‘even where significant psychological, relational, or economic harm is present, legal thresholds are often unmet unless physical violence, sexual abuse, or fraud is involved’.¹⁴ This assessment is consistent with the lived experience Inquiry evidence.¹⁵

This concept of harm arising from ongoing patterns of behaviour, not discrete events, is not new to criminal justice reform. The recognition of coercive control in family violence law reflects an established understanding that patterns of domination cause harm that incident-based offences alone do not capture (see Sections 3.3 and 3.4 below).¹⁶

Inquiry evidence identified instances in which alleged criminal conduct may have occurred in coercive high-control groups, including physical assault, sexual abuse and fraud.¹⁷ However, even where such conduct was reported, many lived experience stakeholders described significant challenges in reporting these matters to law enforcement.¹⁸ These challenges included the direct impact of coercive behaviours themselves, which often operate to suppress disclosure through fear, isolation and control.¹⁹ Inquiry evidence indicates that coercive behaviours often preceded physical harm.²⁰ For many individuals, domination and control were established before any overt physical violence occurred, and in some cases physical violence did not occur at all. This was particularly evident among first-generation adults.²¹ The distinct experiences of children and young people are addressed in Part 4.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee's view is that there is a gap in the law's ability to protect people from the harms caused by coercive high-control groups. Conduct that causes serious and lasting psychological, social and economic harm frequently falls below existing criminal thresholds when each behaviour or act is assessed in isolation. Existing offence-based legal frameworks were not designed to capture this kind of cumulative harm.

¹³ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Part 2 and *Volume 2*.

¹⁶ Victorian Government, *MARAM Practice Guides: Foundation Knowledge Guide*, 2021, p. 23.

¹⁷ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Physical violence’, ‘Sexual abuse and violence’, ‘Child abuse’, ‘Physical punishment masking as discipline’, and ‘Public approach’.

¹⁸ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Legal and civic restrictions’.

¹⁹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 40; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 27; Name withheld, *Submission 193*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 2; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 14; Commission for Children and Young People, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 13 February 2026, p. 7. See also: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Volume 4: Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse*, 2017, p. 16; Royal Commission into Family Violence, *Volume IV: Report and recommendations*, 2016, p. 9.

²⁰ Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 1; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Recruitment tactics’.

²¹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Recruitment tactics’.

The Committee considers that coercive conduct in high-control groups must be assessed by reference to the totality and pattern of behaviours, rather than by examining individual acts in isolation. Inquiry evidence clearly demonstrates that behaviours which may appear unremarkable when viewed separately or from the outside, such as rules governing dress, finances, social contact, or daily routines, can together form a sustained system of domination. It is this pattern of behaviour, not any single act, that causes serious harm to a person's autonomy, identity and capacity for independent thought.

In the Committee's view, an effective legal response to group-based coercive behaviours must be grounded in a pattern-based framework.

FINDING 24: An effective legal framework for addressing group-based coercive behaviours must assess the patterns of conduct as a whole, rather than focusing on individual acts in isolation.

3.2 Coercive behaviour: scope and meaning

This Section distinguishes between **coercive behaviour** as a broad category of harmful conduct and **coercive control** as a specific legal construct that has developed in the context of family violence.

3.2.1 Coercive behaviour

Coercive behaviour refers to conduct that constrains a person's autonomy through pressure, threat, dependency, deception, surveillance, or exploitation. It operates by limiting a person's capacity to make independent decisions and by attaching social, spiritual, relational, financial or psychological consequences to non-compliance.²²

Coercive behaviour may arise in any setting, including families, workplaces, organisations, faith and cultural communities, therapeutic and clinical environments, or informal social groups.²³ It may be carried out by an individual, exercised through leadership structures, or reinforced collectively through a group's shared expectations and practices.²⁴ It is defined not by a group's beliefs or ideology, but by the patterns of behaviour that restrict personal autonomy.

Inquiry evidence identified that group-based coercive behaviour can be:

- **Episodic or patterned:** coercive behaviour may emerge and intensify across the course of a person's involvement in a coercive high-control group, with discrete acts

²² Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Renee Spencer, closed hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

²³ Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 26; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1. See Part 2, Section 2.1 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Recruitment methods' and 'Recruitment tactics'.

²⁴ Gloria, closed hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 11; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

accumulating into a broader pattern of control. While a single incident could be coercive, harm more often develops through repeated expectations, pressures, or controlling behaviours that often become normalised over time.²⁵

Throughout therapy I was gradually exposed to various tactics of recruitment and indoctrination over a period of time – which, as mentioned, was all folded seamlessly into other science and evidence based clinical treatments and approaches. the subtlety and nuance of these tiny little gestures build over time where the concepts are normalised ... Through methods that promised secret/higher knowledge, the use of specific and obfuscating coded language and the emotional abuse brought about by shame, I was locked into an infinite cycle of repeating patterns of past abuse, which continued on and off over ten years.

Name withheld, *Submission 180*, p. 2.

- **Constant or pervasive:** coercive behaviours may form part of a person's ongoing environment, operating continuously rather than only through discrete incidents or episodic, patterned acts.²⁶ In these circumstances, control is maintained through sustained monitoring, restriction, and psychological pressure that shapes daily life and limits opportunities for independent decision-making.

Control extended into every corner of daily life—what we wore, who we spoke to, what media we consumed, and even our career paths.

David Hyland, *Submission 150*, p. 3.

- **Individual or collective (and simultaneously subject and enforcer):** coercive behaviour is rarely unidirectional. Leaders, governing bodies, peer networks, and ordinary group members may participate in enforcing compliance,²⁷ while themselves operating under the same coercive pressures.²⁸ In this way, systems of control are sustained not only through authority, but also through social reinforcement and expectations tied to belonging.

Because with institutional harm it is the entire institution. It is multiple people; it is not a single perpetrator.

Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

25 Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 22; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, pp. 1–2.

26 Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, pp. 1–2; Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, pp. 7, 19; Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 2.

27 Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 35; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, pp. 29–30; Ben Shenton, *Submission 186*, p. 4; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 71; Karen Alsop, *Submission 60*, p. 19. Subject refers to the person who is under coercive control. Enforcer refers to the person who helps apply or maintain that control. In coercive high-control settings, the same individual is often both at once. A person may enforce rules, expectations or norms on others while simultaneously being controlled themselves through fear, obligation, social pressure, or threat of exclusion or punishment.

28 Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 72; Elise Heerde, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

It seems from my observations that many people have experienced many forms of family trauma, sometimes for many generations. This has made these people vulnerable to abuse and coercion and also at the same time caused many people within the group to perpetrate this same abuse and coercion on others. I mention this because it is important to understand that people who are victims of coercive control are often perpetrators of the same coercion. It is a very complex dynamic.

Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 1.

- **Overt or concealed:** coercive practices may be introduced gradually and obscured during recruitment or early involvement.²⁹ Entry may be presented as voluntary and empowering, while key information about authority, expectations and internal regulation is disclosed incrementally.³⁰ Emotional and social commitment can precede an individual gaining a full understanding of the group they are joining, which undermines informed consent and lays the groundwork for dependency.³¹ As participation deepens, expectations and controls may expand to regulate a person's time, relationships, and behaviour, increasing dependency and making resistance or exit more difficult.³²

As I progressed the treatment of the group slowly and subtly got worse. It was so slow and subtle that you can't pinpoint a moment of change, ill treatment was normalised at each step of the way. I look back and wish that I could have just spoken up, but it was as if we were too afraid to do so, the instructors could do no wrong.

Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, p. 13.

Coercive behaviour is best understood as a broad category of autonomy-constraining harm. It is not tied to any particular relationship type and may arise wherever power is exercised in ways that erode independent decision-making or the ability to exit safely.³³ This can include group-based harm as well as harm occurring in personal relationships.

3.2.2 Coercive control

The term 'coercive control' has a specific legal and policy meaning in family violence contexts. Coercive control is understood to involve:

- an identifiable, often single, perpetrator and an identifiable victim
- an intimate, formerly intimate, or familial relationship
- a pattern of ongoing control and domination exercised by one person over another.³⁴

²⁹ Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 2.

³⁰ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 28–29; Dr Ahona Guha, Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, closed hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 1–2; Mary Hughes, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Australian Sangha Association, *Submission 71*, p. 3.

³¹ Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 12–13; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 28–29.

³² Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*; Roselyn Owen, *Submission 94*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 161*, p. 1; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 16; Name withheld, *Submission 18*, p. 1.

³³ Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5–6.

³⁴ *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) s 5.

This relational architecture is central to its legal application. This means the term ‘coercive control’ does not capture the full range of behaviours and conduct that can arise in a coercive high-control group.

... it is critical to move beyond the notion of a single culpable individual ... the continuation of harm relies on a network of enablers and operational actors, all of whom play distinct roles in facilitating, reinforcing, or executing coercive control.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52, Attachment 1*, p. 45.

Coercive behaviours in high-control groups often extend beyond the interpersonal assumptions that underpin traditional understanding of coercive control in family violence. In coercive high-control group settings, relationship dynamics are significantly different. Authority may be hierarchical but distributed to other group members,³⁵ enforcement may be peer-driven,³⁶ and sanctions or punishments may be collective.³⁷ These characteristics make it difficult to recognise and respond to such conduct using existing frameworks that have been developed primarily for intimate partner and family violence. This issue is discussed further in Section 3.5 below.

Nonetheless, many lived experience stakeholders found ‘coercive control’ to be a helpful concept for articulating their experiences,³⁸ indicating that it provided a useful framework for understanding institutional or group-based harm.³⁹ Stakeholders described patterns of domination, isolation and psychological pressure that were cumulative, pervasive and sustained over time, rather than confined to discrete incidents.⁴⁰ These characteristics are often recognised features of coercive control laws in family violence contexts.

3.2.3 Understanding the spectrum of influence

A number of Inquiry stakeholders emphasised that any regulatory or policy response to coercive high-control groups must remain firmly grounded in harmful conduct, rather than belief, identity, or group type.⁴¹ Many groups with genuine intentions—

³⁵ Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*, p. 6; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 42–43; Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, pp. 18–20; Jeremy Stein, *Submission 85*, p. 2; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, pp. 3–5. Distributed means that while power may be structured from the top down, the day-to-day enforcement of control is carried out by many individuals throughout the group, including those who are themselves subject to that authority.

³⁶ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 42; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 4; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 207, Attachment 2*, p. 1; Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 8; Serge Del Mar, *Submission 235*, p. 7; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52, Attachment 1*, p. 45.

³⁷ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 79.

³⁸ Karen Alsop, *Submission 60*, pp. 20–21; Wendy Jasper, *Submission 79*, p. 2; Annie Boehm, *Submission 93*, pp. 6–7; Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 5; Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 2; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 2.

³⁹ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 50; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 53.

⁴¹ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 43; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 7; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 111–112; Rationalist Society of Australia, *Submission 226*, p. 2; Australian Sangha Association, *Submission 71*, p. 1.

including religious organisations, cultural communities, therapeutic services, advocacy movements, and charities—provide guidance, counselling, moral teaching, and structured rules. Some of these rules may be demanding. However, strictness, hierarchy, or strong conviction does not, of itself, amount to coercion.

Inquiry stakeholders cautioned that, without a clearly articulated behaviour-based framework, discussion of coercive conduct could be misconstrued as targeting particular faith or cultural traditions, minority communities, or ideological positions.⁴²

In themselves, strong religious beliefs and disciplines are not coercive. Problems arise only when such disciplines are imposed through manipulation, deception, threat, or without the informed and ongoing consent of the individual—particularly in contexts where exit is not meaningfully possible.

Freedom for Faith, *Submission 228*, p. 10.

As affirmed at the outset of this Report, the Committee agrees that the focus must be on conduct, not belief systems, identity categories, or group profiles. A behaviour-based focus ensures that positive forms of influence, including mentorship, pastoral care, moral instruction, or robust advocacy, are not captured where participation remains voluntary, informed, and reversible. Concern arises only where conduct imposes consequences for dissent, interferes with independent decision-making, or creates barriers to safe exit.

Inquiry evidence indicates that influence operates along a spectrum, rather than as a simple distinction between acceptable (non-coercive) and unacceptable (coercive) behaviour. At one end of the spectrum are forms of group engagement that are transparent, voluntary, and respectful of individual autonomy.⁴³ At the other end are patterns of group conduct that obscure intentions, constrain independent decision-making, impose consequences for non-compliance, and undermine a member's ability to exit safely.⁴⁴ Between these poles are practices that may incrementally narrow autonomy over time, without immediately presenting as overtly coercive.

Distinguishing healthy influence from coercive behaviour

In distinguishing healthy influence from coercive behaviour, several features emerge as significant. Healthy influence is characterised by transparency, genuine choice, freedom to question or refuse, and the ability to disengage safely. Coercive behaviour,

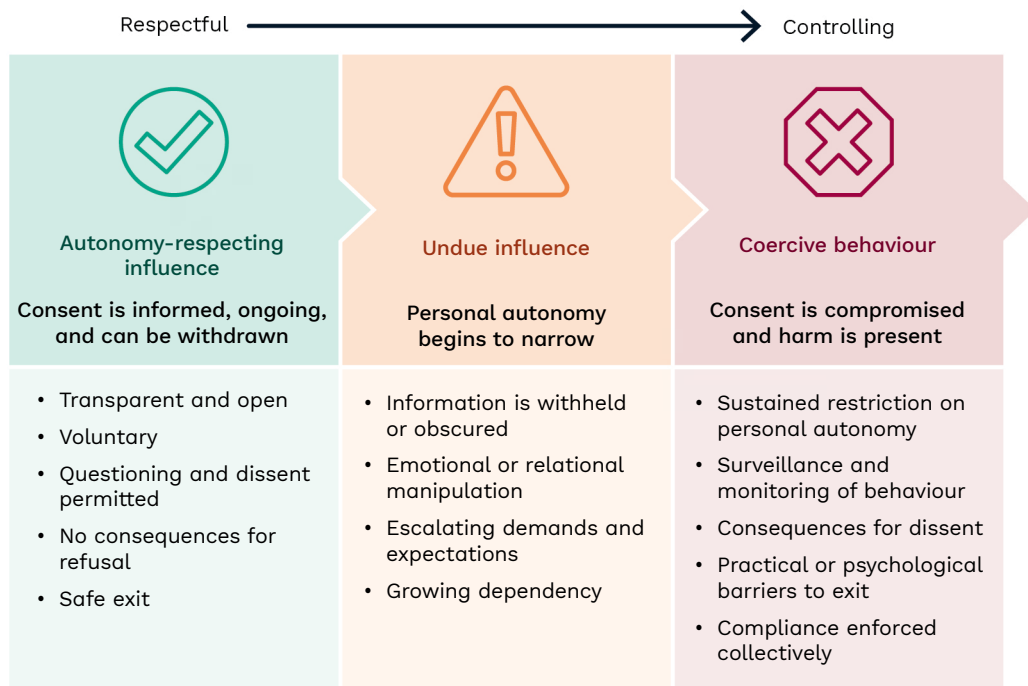
⁴² Australian Sangha Association, *Submission 71*, p. 3; Religious Freedom Alliance, *Submission 175*, p. 6; Freedom for Faith, *Submission 228*, p. 9; Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Submission 286*, p. 6; Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*, p. 8; Australian Christian Churches, *Submission 99*, p. 8.

⁴³ Casey Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Submission 204*, p. 1; Australian Sangha Association, *Submission 71*, p. 3; Stephen Messer, *Submission 169*, p. 2; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

⁴⁴ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Deception-based recruitment', 'Control and indoctrination', 'Emotional and psychological abuse', 'Creating dependency', and 'Exit barriers and post-exit harm'.

by contrast, involves the erosion of these safeguards. It may include the withholding of key information, emotional manipulation tied to belonging, surveillance, punishment or shunning, structural dependency, or the collective enforcement of compliance.⁴⁵ The defining feature is not the content of what is taught or encouraged, but whether a person can meaningfully refuse, dissent, or leave a group without suffering significant harm.

Figure 3.1 Spectrum of influence



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee considers that coercive behaviour and coercive control are not limited to family or domestic relationships, and that this gap in legal frameworks and protections should be addressed.

The Committee considers that coercive behaviour is not limited to any single type of relationship, setting or organisational structure. It may be exercised by an individual, embedded within leadership systems, reinforced by peers, normalised through group culture, or sustained collectively over time. Coercive behaviour does not look the same in every situation and can take many different forms. It can manifest through conduct that is episodic or patterned, constant or pervasive, individual or collective, and overt or concealed.

⁴⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Control and indoctrination', 'Emotional and psychological abuse', 'Fear-based control', 'Social control and isolation', 'Creating dependency', 'Restrictions on relationships and social life', 'Surveillance and monitoring', and 'Housing and movement restrictions'.

While the legal concept of ‘coercive control’ provides an important framework in family violence contexts, the Committee considers that an effective understanding of coercive behaviour must extend beyond that setting. In the Committee’s view, coercive behaviour warrants attention wherever it arises in high-control groups, including where responsibility is diffused, enforcement of the conduct is shared, and harm is structural rather than solely interpersonal. The Committee’s focus is on the nature, operation and impact of group conduct, rather than on the legitimacy of a group’s doctrine, the sincerity of its beliefs, or the cultural identity of its members. In practical terms, the Committee considers that concern arises where:

- influence accumulates over time in ways that entrap people
- power is exercised in ways that foster dependency and fear
- dissent is excessively penalised or deterred
- exit becomes psychologically, socially, or materially unsafe.

It is this patterned restriction of autonomy that defines coercive harm.

While coercive behaviour must be understood broadly, the Committee is of the view that the concept of coercive control remains a useful reference point, given the significant behavioural overlap between that framework and the conduct identified in Inquiry evidence relating to coercive high-control groups. The Committee considers that elements of the family violence coercive control model can be leveraged to respond to group-based harm.

In the Committee’s view, coercive high-control group settings often involve distributed authority, collective enforcement, and structurally embedded norms that differ from the relational model in family violence law. Coercive behaviour is therefore best understood through a broader lens that focuses on patterned restrictions of personal autonomy and compromised safe exit, regardless of the relationship or group type in which the behaviour occurs.

FINDING 25: Coercive behaviours and coercive control are not limited to family and domestic relationships; they can occur in high-control groups. Harmful, coercive behaviours in high-control groups take many forms. They can be exercised by individuals or collectively and can operate overtly or subtly. These behaviours may occur as isolated episodes or as continuous, sustained patterns, including through distributed authority and socially reinforced practices that restrict personal autonomy and compromise the ability to exit safely.

The remaining sections of this Part examine existing legal responses to coercive control in family violence law and consider options for designing an appropriate response to improve protections against group-based coercive behaviour.

3.3 Existing legal responses to coercive control in family violence settings

Coercive control has been recognised across Australia through various state and territory family violence laws. In some jurisdictions it is a standalone criminal offence in intimate partner relationships.⁴⁶

In 2023, the Australian Government released the *National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence* (National Principles).⁴⁷ These principles were developed through a nation-wide consultation process, and are designed to be used across all Australian jurisdictions.⁴⁸ Recognising the difficulties of creating an exhaustive definition of ‘coercive control’ because of its many different forms, the National Principles focus on the ‘common features’, being understood as patterns of behaviour which ‘[build] up over time to have a controlling effect’.⁴⁹

3.3.1 Victoria: *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic)

In Victoria, coercive control is addressed through the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic).⁵⁰ While the Act does not define ‘coercive control’, the definition of family violence includes behaviour by a person toward a family member that ‘is coercive’ or ‘in any other way controls or dominates’ them, and causes them to fear for their own safety or wellbeing, or the safety and wellbeing of another person.⁵¹

The Act takes a broad approach to the relationships in which family violence can occur. It applies to intimate and domestic partner relationships, and relationships between family members, relatives, and carers. However, it does not extend to coercive behaviour occurring in group settings, unless it arises within those relational dynamics.⁵²

In December 2025, the Victorian Attorney-General, Hon Sonya Kilkeny, advised that the Victorian Government would legislate in 2026 to make coercive control a stand-alone family violence criminal offence.⁵³

⁴⁶ New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia have introduced coercive control as a stand-alone family violence criminal offence. See: Appendix B, *Comparison of Victoria and Australian jurisdictions with stand-alone coercive control offences*. Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia include coercive control or coercive controlling behaviors in legislation that defines family violence or domestic abuse. See: *Family Violence Act 2016* (ACT), *Domestic and Family Violence Act 2007* (NT), *Family Violence Act 2004* (Tas), *Family Violence Legislation Reform Act 2024* (WA).

⁴⁷ Standing Council of Attorneys-General, *National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence*, 2023.

⁴⁸ Office of the Commissioner for Victims of Crime (Western Australia), *Legislative Responses to Coercive Control in Western Australia: Consultation Outcomes Report*, 2023.

⁴⁹ Standing Council of Attorneys-General, *National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, s 5(1)(a), 5(2)(b), 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, s 8–11.

⁵³ Statement from Hon Sonya Kilkeny, Benita Kolovos, ‘Victorian Labor to introduce stand-alone coercive control offence in backflip to match opposition policy’, *The Guardian*, 3 December 2025, <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/dec/03/victoria-labor-allan-coercive-control-backflip-jess-wilson>> accessed 26 February 2026. The Victorian Opposition also introduced the Crimes Amendment (Coercive Control) Bill 2025 to the Legislative Council in December 2025.

3.3.2 Other Australian jurisdictions: stand-alone coercive control offences

In recent years, New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia have introduced coercive control as a stand-alone family violence criminal offence.⁵⁴ In each of these states 'coercive control' is not defined exhaustively but is reflected in a non-exhaustive list of behaviours that may contribute to a pattern of coercive control.⁵⁵ Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia have both indicated they will introduce stand-alone coercive control offences.⁵⁶

While the behaviours listed differ slightly between jurisdictions, they generally describe controlling behaviours that cause psychological or physical harm to the victim.⁵⁷ One example of the slight differences is that Queensland's offence lists behaviour making a person dependent on or subordinate to another,⁵⁸ whereas South Australia's offence lists behaviour which restricts a person's ability to make choices with respect to their body.⁵⁹

In contrast to approaches that focus on the nature of the behaviour itself, South Australia's offence places emphasis on the effect of the behaviour, defining 'coercive control' as behaviour that 'is likely to have, a controlling impact'.⁶⁰ This approach was designed to support enforcement, as a controlling effect can be proven through measurable factors such as 'access to food or support services'.⁶¹ A 'controlling impact' includes restricting a person's access to basic amenities and engaging in social, cultural and religious activities.⁶² With approaches focused on the nature of behaviours 'there is a risk that authorities may bring their own biases to these concepts when administering the legislation'.⁶³ This South Australian law received royal assent in September 2025 but will not commence until further consultation with key stakeholders has occurred to ensure systems are prepared.⁶⁴

⁵⁴ *Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Act 2022* (NSW); *Criminal Law (Coercive Control and Affirmative Consent) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024* (Qld); *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA).

⁵⁵ See Appendix B.

⁵⁶ The Australian Capital Territory introduced the Crimes (Coercive Control) Amendment Bill 2026 in May 2026, seeking to create a stand-alone criminal offence for coercive control. See: Crimes (Coercive Control) Amendment Bill 2026; ACT Government, *Making coercive control a crime*, June 2026, <<https://www.act.gov.au/law-and-justice/law-reforms/making-coercive-control-a-crime>> accessed 24 June 2026. Western Australia undertook consultation on the State's current legislative response to coercive control in 2024. *Family Violence Legislation Reform Act 2024* (WA) amended the *Restraining Orders Act 1997* (WA) to recognise coercive control in the context of family relationships. However, no legislation has been introduced to create a stand-alone offence. See: Government of Western Australia, *Coercive control consultation*.

⁵⁷ See Appendix B.

⁵⁸ *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld) s 334B(3)(j).

⁵⁹ *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA) s 5. On commencement, this will be s 20B(2)(d) of the *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935* (SA).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Upon commencement, this will be s 20C(1) of the *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935* (SA).

⁶¹ Government of South Australia, *Legislation Comparison: Difference between Former Government and Current Government Bills*, (n.d.), <https://yoursay.sa.gov.au/download_file/3434/1582> accessed 25 March 2026.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Government of South Australia, *South Australia passes coercive control laws*, 2025, <<https://dhs.sa.gov.au/news/2025/sa-passes-coercive-control-laws>> accessed 23 April 2026.

Across most Australian jurisdictions, ‘coercive control’ is defined with reference to a ‘course of conduct’ or ‘pattern of behaviour’, rather than individual acts. This reflects victim-survivor experiences that coercive control typically accumulates over time.⁶⁵ While legislation commonly refers to a ‘course of conduct’ or a ‘pattern of behaviour’ these terms are not generally defined in legislation.⁶⁶

New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia’s stand-alone coercive control provisions all require some form of a reasonable likelihood of fear or harm. This ‘reasonable’ standard brings an objective element into the test.⁶⁷ It considers whether an ordinary, rational adult in the same position as the perpetrator (without adopting their specific viewpoints or beliefs) would consider the course of conduct to be likely to cause fear or harm.⁶⁸

Some jurisdictions also require proof that the person accused of using coercive control intended to control or coerce the victim.⁶⁹ Importantly, the intention is to control, not necessarily to cause fear or harm. This reflects an understanding that perpetrators are motivated by the aim of controlling the victim but may not recognise or consider the fear or harm their behaviour may cause the victim.⁷⁰

In New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia stand-alone ‘coercive control’ offences apply to intimate partners, although Queensland’s offence also applies to wider family and informal care relationships.⁷¹ Queensland’s Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce considered expanding the application of their coercive control offence beyond family violence, but concluded this could have unintended consequences.⁷² Inquiry evidence identified this restricted scope as a gap in existing legal responses to coercive behaviors in group settings. For example, Laura McConnell, reflecting on her lived experience, noted:

I sought legal advice about taking certain ‘leaders’ (Workers) to court in NSW under the coercive control laws which came in on 01 July 2024. I was advised that it only applied to domestic and intimate relationships. Workers live in our homes, influence our families from within our homes. However their behaviour is not captured by this legislation in NSW.⁷³

⁶⁵ Parliament of New South Wales, Joint Select Committee on Coercive Control, *Coercive control in domestic relationships*, June 2021, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Exceptions are Tasmania, requiring family violence on at least three occasions to constitute a criminal offence; Queensland, requiring a course of conduct on more than one occasion; and New South Wales, defining ‘course of conduct’ as ‘engaging in behaviour repeatedly and/or continuously’.

⁶⁷ See Appendix B.

⁶⁸ See Appendix B, p. 3.

⁶⁹ This is the case in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

⁷⁰ Government of South Australia, *Legislation Comparison: Difference between Former Government and Current Government Bills*.

⁷¹ The New South Wales Government is expected to review the legislation in 2026, which includes consideration of other types of relationships. See: New South Wales Government, *Coercive control and the law*, (n.d.), <<https://www.nsw.gov.au/family-and-relationships/coercive-control/law>> accessed 14 April 2026; Government of South Australia, Attorney-General’s Department, *Coercive control in South Australia*, (n.d.), <<https://www.agd.sa.gov.au/law-and-justice/consultation/coercive-control-in-south-australia>> accessed 14 April 2026; Queensland Government, *Coercive control laws*, 1 October 2025, <<https://www.qld.gov.au/community/getting-support-health-social-issue/support-victims-abuse/need-to-know/coercive-control/coercive-control-laws>> accessed 14 April 2026.

⁷² Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce (Qld), *Hear her voice: Report 1 – Volume 3*, 2023, p. 744.

⁷³ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, pp. 8–9.

In addition to a standalone coercive control law, family violence legislation in Queensland has a unique element making it an offence to aid a respondent. This offence is aimed at preventing family and friends from abusing on behalf of a perpetrator, or private investigators from following or monitoring a person protected by a domestic violence order.⁷⁴ It applies where a person knew, or should have reasonably known, that the individual targeted was a protected person under such an order. The offence does not require the respondent to have knowledge of the aiding conduct. Instead, a person accused of this offence is responsible for establishing a reasonable excuse for their behaviour.⁷⁵

An associated amendment to s 180 of the *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* (Qld) clarifies that an aggrieved or named person is not guilty of aiding or procuring a breach of a domestic violence order merely by encouraging or permitting the respondent's conduct.⁷⁶ This ensures protected persons are not criminalised for the respondent's breach unless they actively facilitate the offending behaviour. However, as this offence is anchored to domestic violence orders and framed around individualised relationships, its application may be limited in group settings where coercive behaviour is exercised collectively or outside formal domestic or family violence contexts. As this offence is relatively new, its operation in practice remains uncertain and will depend on prosecutorial guidance and emerging case law.

3.3.3 Overlap between coercive control and coercive high-control group behaviours

Many lived experience stakeholders referenced coercive control in their Inquiry evidence because it is a helpful concept to describe their experiences, and they recognise a behavioural overlap between coercion addressed in family violence laws and the behaviours they experienced in coercive high-control groups.⁷⁷

The relationship red flags identified by Respect Victoria as a means of recognising the early warning signs of coercive control include love bombing, gaslighting, financial abuse and technology abuse.⁷⁸ Inquiry evidence clearly reflects all of these behaviours.⁷⁹

Emerging empirical research also indicates a clear overlap between coercive control tactics and practices associated with coercive high-control environments. For example, research undertaken through a Master's thesis study of 52 'former cult members' found

⁷⁴ Explanatory Memorandum, Criminal Law (Coercive Control and Affirmative Consent) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2023 (Qld) p. 18.

⁷⁵ *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* (Qld) s 179A.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, s 180.

⁷⁷ See for example, Sue Winter, *Submission 2*, p. 2; Barbara Maccarrone, *Submission 12*, pp. 1–2; Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 23*, p. 1; Sarah Bacaller, *Submission 26, Attachment 1*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 38*, pp. 2–3.

⁷⁸ Respect Victoria, *Coercive control, non-physical violence and relationship red flags*, 2026, <<https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/prevention/recognise-violence/coercive-control-non-physical-violence>> accessed 5 March 2026.

⁷⁹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Love bombing', 'Gaslighting', 'Forced or coerced tithing' and 'Digital surveillance'.

that ‘coercive control tactics were present in all 52 narratives’.⁸⁰ The study concluded that the ‘coercive control framework can be reliably used to assess how power imbalances are created and maintained in cults to entrap members’.⁸¹ However, the study also identified ‘cult specific subtactics’ that, while bearing similarities to tactics observed in intimate partner violence and sex trafficking contexts, operate through mechanisms unique to coercive high-control groups. For example, the study found that:

... while verbal abuse was present across contexts, the content is significantly different in cult settings. Sex traffickers and violent partners often use swear words and make derogatory statements to their victims regarding their appearance, abilities, etc. Cults, however, often use their own lexicon and verbally abuse their members with terminology deemed derogatory by the group. Cults use words intended to belittle which, in most cases, would not elicit an emotional response from people outside the group.⁸²

Additional behaviours identified in Inquiry evidence are also reflected in stand-alone coercive control family violence legislation in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia.⁸³

Isolation

New South Wales legislation identified isolation as a behaviour that prevents a person from making or keeping connections with their family, friends or culture, or otherwise isolates the person.⁸⁴ Inquiry evidence indicated that isolation in coercive high-control groups can take many forms, including shunning practices and leadership discouraging relationships (romantic and platonic) and association with people who are not part of the group.⁸⁵

Followers are discouraged from building connections - hobbies and friendships outside the group

Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 7.

We were told instead to only have friends in the assembly and not have friends ‘in the world’. Having relationships with anyone not in the assembly was very much discouraged

Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Sarah Feliciano, *An Application of Coercive Control Framework to Cults*, MA thesis, CUNY John Jay College, New York, 2023, pp. 12, 16. The study identified eight coercive control tactics: surveillance, microregulation, manipulation/exploitation, isolation, intimidation, degradation, deprivation, and sexual coercion/abuse.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸² Ibid., p. 21.

⁸³ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Social control and isolation’ and ‘Surveillance and monitoring’.

⁸⁴ *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54F(2)(g).

⁸⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Social control and isolation’ and ‘Restrictions on relationships and social life’.

Restrictions on movement

South Australian legislation provides that behaviour has a controlling impact if it restricts another person's freedom of movement.⁸⁶ Inquiry evidence included multiple accounts of group leaders restricting individuals' movement, including decisions about:

- where they could live, including location and housing arrangements⁸⁷
- whether they can move home or relocate, regardless of distance or personal circumstances⁸⁸
- whether and where they could take holidays or travel.⁸⁹

I knew of people who would have loved to have moved to where their children, grandchildren or grandparents were, but couldn't because they would be put out of fellowship.

Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 6.

I had to ask if we could go on holidays, how long we could go away etc. Service to the ashram was the first priority.

Name withheld, *Submission 276*, p. 2.

Technology abuse and surveillance

New South Wales legislation recognises technology abuse and digital surveillance as behaviour that directly or indirectly harasses a person, or monitors or tracks a person's activities, communications or movements, including through the use of technology.⁹⁰ Queensland's legislation also defines unauthorised or unreasonable surveillance, of a person, as monitoring or tracking a person's movements, activities or interpersonal associations, including by using technology, that is unauthorised or otherwise unreasonable.⁹¹ In Victoria, conduct constituting technology abuse and surveillance is criminalised under the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) and other legislation.⁹²

⁸⁶ *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA) s 5. On commencement, this will be s 20B(2)(a) of the *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935* (SA).

⁸⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 1; Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁸⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 216*, p. 3; Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 47*, pp. 1, 4; Name withheld, *Submission 162*, p. 7; Name withheld, *Submission 216*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 276*, p. 2. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Housing and movement restrictions'.

⁹⁰ *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54F(2)(e).

⁹¹ *Criminal Code Act* (Qld) s 334A, 334B(3)(h).

⁹² See *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) s 21A. Under s 21A(2) conduct constituting technology abuse or surveillance is captured, such as keeping a person under surveillance (s 21A(2)(f)); and tracing a person's use of the internet, e-mail or other electronic communications (s 21A(2)(bc)).

Inquiry evidence included accounts of how coercive high-control groups are using digital monitoring, such as:

- restrictions requiring personal devices to be purchased from group affiliated businesses⁹³
- installation of tracking or monitoring software on personal devices⁹⁴
- lack of privacy in emails, text messages, social media and phone calls.⁹⁵

In the last two decades, the rules on computers, laptops and mobile phones were relaxed, and these were allowed as long as they are purchased through UBT, the business arm of the PBCC. Monitoring software is installed, and emails and calls can be, and are, monitored.

Name withheld, *Submission 285*, p. 3.

During my defamation trial against McKay in 2023, it was clearly demonstrated that all outgoing emails were reviewed, coached, and edited by cult leaders ... all emails from “outsiders” are routinely circulated among the group and scrutinised for secret messages.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 30.

Inquiry evidence demonstrates that the patterned restrictions on autonomy that define coercive control in family violence settings also occur in coercive high-control groups. Where this conduct is carried out by an intimate partner as part of a course of conduct, it would meet the legislative threshold for coercive control.

3.4 Thinking beyond family violence

Concerns about coercive control occurring outside family violence contexts, including in group contexts, have been raised with Australian state and federal governments over an extended period of time.

These concerns have been reflected in a range of policy and parliamentary processes, including:

- In 1996, the Model Criminal Code Offences Committee, in its *Discussion Paper on Non Fatal Offences Against the Person*, considered if the harm caused by ‘cults and obsessive small religious groups’ should be included in the definition of harm. The

⁹³ Name withheld, *Submission 285*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 287*, p. 2.

⁹⁴ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 30; Rationalist Society of Australia, *Submission 226*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 30; Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 1; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 30; Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 2. See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Surveillance and monitoring’.

paper used the term ‘coercive persuasion’ to describe techniques used to influence behaviour.⁹⁶

- In 2000, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade in its *Inquiry into Freedom of Religion and Belief*, acknowledged the significant harm caused by cults, stating that ‘cults have clearly generated very great sadness, pain and, above all, a sense of loss for many people’.⁹⁷ The Committee also observed that when people are pressured or forced into actions that place their rights or wellbeing at risk, society may be justified in imposing limits on such behaviour.

When rights are put at risk by the behaviours of others, when people are pressured or forced into actions that may harm them in some way, then society has the right to impose limits.

Parliament of Australia, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Freedom of Religion and Belief*, November 2000, p. 176.

- In 2010, the Senate Economics Legislation Committee in its *Inquiry into Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010*, noted that ‘sufficient evidence was put before [the Committee] to suggest that the behaviour of cults should be reviewed with a view to developing and implementing a policy on this issue that goes beyond taxation law’.⁹⁸ The Committee recommended the Attorney-General’s Department report to them on the operation and efficacy of law enforcement agencies overseas monitoring and controlling the activities of ‘cult-like organisations who use psychological pressure and breaches of general and industrial law to maintain control over individuals’.⁹⁹
- In 2022, coercion in high-demand groups was raised in evidence to the NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues *Inquiry for the Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Bill 2022*.¹⁰⁰
- In 2023, ‘religious coercion’ was raised in evidence to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights *Inquiry into Australia’s Human Rights Framework 2023*.¹⁰¹
- In October 2024, a petition called on the Australian Government to legislate against coercive control within a high-control group.¹⁰² In response, the then-Attorney-General the Hon Mark Dreyfus KC MP stated that ‘[w]hether coercive

⁹⁶ Parliament of Australia, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Freedom of Religion and Belief*, November 2000, pp. 182–183.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

⁹⁸ Parliament of Australia, Senate Standing Committee on Economics, *Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010*, September 2010, p. 3.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

¹⁰⁰ Parliament of New South Wales, Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Inquiry into Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Bill 2022*, October 2022; Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 2*, submission to Parliament of New South Wales, Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Inquiry into Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Bill 2022*, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights *Inquiry into Australia’s Human Rights Framework*, March 2023; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 335*, submission to Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Inquiry into Australia’s Human Rights Framework*, 2023.

¹⁰² Parliament of Australia, *Petition EN6576 - Call for Government to criminalise coercive-control within a high-control group*, <<https://www.aph.gov.au/e-petitions/petition/EN6576>> accessed 11 March 2026.

control should be a specific criminal offence, and the form this may take, is a matter for individual state and territory governments'.¹⁰³

Given the clear similarities between coercive control in family violence contexts and coercive behaviour in high-control groups, some Inquiry stakeholders raised the question of whether family violence legislation should be reformed to address group-based coercion. Several submissions proposed amending the Family Violence Protection Act to include a definition of coercive control that explicitly captures behaviour occurring in group settings.¹⁰⁴

3.4.1 Family violence legislation is fit for purpose within its intended scope

In Victoria, the Family Violence Protection Act and associated policy frameworks, including the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM), are highly specialised and responsive to the complexities of family violence and its impacts on victim-survivors, perpetrators and children. The 2015 Royal Commission into Family Violence made 227 recommendations which were implemented by 2023, and legislation continues to evolve in response to need.¹⁰⁵

Victorian family violence law is designed to address violence perpetrated by an individual in an intimate or familial relationship.¹⁰⁶ It is not designed to address group-based coercion involving collective or multi-actor forms of harm, even where those harms involve comparable restrictions on personal autonomy.

Coercive control laws that relate to intimate partner relationships are urgent and vital, because in these relationships we know that coercive control is strongly linked to intimate partner homicide. Group coercive control legislation should be looked at with very different considerations.

Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8.

While some Inquiry stakeholders described relationships within groups that resembled familial relationships based on living arrangements and relational dynamics, existing family violence law does not apply in these circumstances.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Commonwealth Attorney-General Hon Mark Dreyfus KC MP, *Ministerial response to Petition EN6576 - Call for Government to criminalise coercive-control within a high-control group*, Parliament of Australia, 2025, <<https://www.aph.gov.au/e-petitions/petition/EN6576>> accessed 29 April 2026.

¹⁰⁴ Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 12; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 112–113; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Victorian Government, *About the Royal Commission into Family Violence*, 2023, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/about-royal-commission-family-violence>> accessed 24 April 2026.

¹⁰⁶ *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) s 5(1)(a), 8(13).

¹⁰⁷ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, pp. 8–9; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 60–61; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 41.

... because the relationship did not fit the traditional view of “family,” no protective response could be triggered. This reveals a gap in both the interpretation and enforcement of existing legislation.

Renee Spencer, closed hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61.

Although the Family Violence Protection Act adopts a broader definition of family relationships than standalone coercive control legislation in other jurisdictions, it does not extend to pseudo-familial relationships unless they fall within the context of a carer relationship.¹⁰⁸ Inquiry evidence also showed that, in some cases, group-based relationships and behaviours that may fall within scope of family violence law are not consistently recognised or acted on in practice. Part 5 examines this issue, including ways to improve education, guidance, and system capability so existing legal protections are better understood and more effectively used where they already apply.

3.4.2 Risks of extending family violence framework to group-based coercion

Some Inquiry stakeholders expressed concern that introducing new legislation or reform covering coercive control in a group settings could result in legislative overreach. They noted the difficulty of creating definitions that are sufficiently precise and workable, while avoiding the risk of capturing groups indiscriminately.¹⁰⁹

Inquiry stakeholders also raised similar concerns with expanding the Family Violence Protection Act. Coercion in group settings often involves unrelated adults, pseudo-familial dynamics, multiple perpetrators and collective reinforcement of practices by leaders and peers simultaneously.¹¹⁰ Inquiry stakeholders raised concerns that these dynamics create a high risk of misidentifying a victim as the person using family violence, that may result in the criminalisation of the wrong people if existing family violence legislation were amended to cover group-based coercion.¹¹¹

Inquiry stakeholders cautioned that expanding existing legislation and frameworks to address group-based coercion could weaken the focus and resourcing of family violence protections and responses. While there are clear behavioural similarities in family violence contexts and in group settings, Inquiry evidence identified that applying a single legislative approach could reduce the effectiveness of responses in both contexts and could undermine existing protections.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) s 8(3).

¹⁰⁹ See for example, Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*; Australian Christian Churches, *Submission 99*; Freedom for Faith, *Submission 228*; Chinese Christian Pastors, *Submission 183*.

¹¹⁰ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 15, 17; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Victorian Government, *Misidentification is a significant issue that has enormous consequences for the victim survivor*, 2021, <<https://archive.fvrim.vic.gov.au/monitoring-victorias-family-violence-reforms-accurate-identification-predominant-aggressor/misidentification-significant-issue-enormous-consequences-victim-survivor>> accessed 13 March 2026; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 15, 17; Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 44.

¹¹² Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty, *Submission 170*, p. 7; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 43; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

We believe that to extend coercive control provisions in pre-existing laws beyond their designed purpose runs the risk of making them so subjective and so broad as to be judicially useless.

Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty, *Submission 170*, p. 7.

Patrick McIvor also noted that MARAM is designed specifically for family violence and that responses to group-based coercion require distinct and ‘parallel work’, despite areas of overlap.¹¹³

These structural differences indicate that attempting to retrofit Victoria’s family violence framework to address group-based coercion would be likely to create legal ambiguity about who is the perpetrator and what relationships are covered. This would also increase the risk of misapplication and wrongful criminalisation.

3

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The Committee is of the view that Victoria’s family violence legislative and policy framework, including the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) and the MARAM framework, is highly specialised and is appropriate for its intended purpose. These frameworks were specifically designed to respond to violence occurring in intimate and familial relationships, where there is typically an identifiable perpetrator and victim. Family violence remains one of the most significant social challenges facing Victoria and affects people across all communities. This includes family violence taking place within families in coercive high-control groups. It is critical that focus and resolve to prevent and respond to family violence are not diminished.

The Committee acknowledges longstanding concerns about coercive behaviour occurring beyond family violence contexts, particularly in group settings, as raised through parliamentary inquiries, policy processes and stakeholder advocacy. The Committee recognises that the coercive behaviour experienced in these groups can result in significant harm and, in many cases, reflects patterns of coercion comparable to those seen in family violence contexts.

While there are some similarities with the family violence context, group-based coercion often involves substantially different dynamics, including collective enforcement, multiple or shifting perpetrators, unrelated adults, and pseudo-familial relationships that fall outside existing legal definitions of ‘coercive control’. The Committee agrees with Inquiry evidence that:

- extending family violence legislation to address group-based coercion could introduce legal ambiguity, increase the risk of misidentifying victims as perpetrators, and potentially lead to the wrongful criminalisation of individuals who are themselves subject to coercive harm
- expanding family violence legislation or associated frameworks to address group-based coercion risks diluting the focus, clarity and resourcing of family violence responses.

¹¹³ Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

It is the Committee's view that group-based coercion cannot be effectively addressed by extending existing family violence laws. Consideration of legislative or policy responses to coercive behaviour in group settings should occur separately from the family violence framework and be informed by a clear understanding of the unique dynamics involved.

FINDING 26: Group-based coercion constitutes a distinct form of conduct. While the family violence coercive control framework provides valuable conceptual and legal tools, its expansion or adaptation cannot effectively address the breadth, structural complexity, or shared coercive behaviours in high-control groups.

3.5 Rationale for a group-based coercion offence

Inquiry evidence demonstrated broad support for a dedicated criminal offence to address group-based coercion. Inquiry stakeholders emphasised the need for a specific offence capable of capturing sustained and patterned coercive conduct in group settings. Given this strong support across Inquiry evidence, the examples below (Box 3.1) identify why stakeholders consider a legal response that recognises cumulative, group-based harm to be necessary.

Box 3.1 Support for a dedicated criminal offence addressing group-based coercion: examples from Inquiry evidence

A new law that specifically addresses coercive control in environments where leaders establish systems of undue influence and abuse would provide a clearer pathway to justice for survivors. It would introduce a much-needed nuance for legal interpretation that is not currently available.

Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 50.

There was not then, nor is there now, legal language to account for this type of entrapment by religious authority. The law might recognise issues of consent, but not the loss of self that happens when someone is gradually, systematically groomed under the guise of pastoral care. This is why legal reform is essential.

Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 6.

Our existing laws cover some incidents, but they leave patterned, cumulative domination largely unknowable. As coercive control accumulates across life domains, it becomes a serious harm in its own right and also a precursor to other criminal conduct. A legal definition of ‘group-based coercive control’ would not replace existing protections, it would fill the gap between them and support the multi-agency coordination that this harm demands.

Patrick McIvor, Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

... legislation should be introduced to prohibit coercive control practised by any cult or organised fringe group

Secular Party of Australia, *Submission 188*, p. 1.

Enact a robust criminal offence for coercive control that is explicitly drafted to capture the social-psychological, emotional, and financial control exerted by leaders and groups in cultic settings.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 4.

Survivors and advocates have called for such legal recognition of “group coercive control” to hold leaders and organisations accountable for systemic abuse.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 12.

... criminalise coercive influence and control so that this does not only apply to domestic situations, and not only for physical abuse, but it must include psychological, emotional, social and financial control. Getting coercive and influence control criminalised so that it would be so much easier to take legal action against these groups would be such a huge step forward in helping with this problem.

Dr Janja Lalich, CEO, Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

3.5.1 Criminal justice system's capacity to identify and respond to group-based coercive conduct

Inquiry evidence demonstrates the limitations in the criminal justice system's capacity to identify and effectively respond to harm caused by coercive high-control groups. While a range of existing laws may address discrete instances of harmful conduct in these settings, the current framework presents significant challenges in capturing the full nature and extent of the harms caused.

Evidence also highlights substantial barriers to seeking justice for victims and identifies opportunities to strengthen the criminal justice response to group-based coercive control.

Limits of a criminal justice response focused on discrete, identifiable acts

Conduct occurring in coercive high-control groups may, in some circumstances, fall within the scope of existing laws where the relevant criminal thresholds are met. Examples of applicable laws identified in Inquiry evidence include:

- offences under the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) such as assault, stalking, sexual offences against children, failure to protect a child, and fraud¹¹⁴
- trafficking, slavery and slavery-like offences under the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth)¹¹⁵
- unpaid labour and minimum entitlement provisions under the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth)¹¹⁶
- family violence, including coercive control provisions, where they apply to intimate and family relationships.¹¹⁷

Where conduct meets the elements of an existing criminal offence, a legal pathway may exist. However, Inquiry evidence indicated that even in these circumstances, people frequently encounter institutional unfamiliarity with the nature of group-based harm, which can impede reporting, investigation, and prosecution.¹¹⁸ This issue is discussed further below.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ See for example, Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*, p. 8; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 73; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*; Paul Mitchell, *Submission 69*, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ See for example, Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 68–69; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, pp. 19–21; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, pp. 82–83.

¹¹⁶ See for example, Name withheld, *Submission 157*, p. 2; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 26; Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 9.

¹¹⁷ See for example, Victoria Police, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 20 November 2025, pp. 2–3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 63.

¹¹⁸ Lived experience quotes, Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 36, 74; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 2; Lex de Man, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 16; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 22.

¹¹⁹ See *Evidentiary barriers and Under-recognition of group-based coercion* below.

Despite the availability of these existing laws, several Inquiry stakeholders advised that they do not adequately capture or understand the full range of harms experienced by people in coercive high-control groups.¹²⁰ Inquiry evidence indicated that current criminal laws are not fit-for-purpose to recognise pattern-based harm in coercive high-control group settings, and that fitting that harm into available offence categories distorts both the harm and the system response.¹²¹

The totality of experience is excluded from individual criminal proceedings

Where a discrete criminal act exists and is prosecuted, evidence of the broader coercive environment is often treated as irrelevant to the specific charge before the court. In coercive high-control group settings it is often the totality, accumulated and ongoing experience of coercion that defines the nature and severity of the harm. Addressing a single act in isolation, without regard to the system of control in which it occurred, cannot fully reflect what was actually done or provide meaningful justice.¹²² Inquiry stakeholders argued that a specific offence capable of capturing the full pattern of group-based coercive control is needed to ensure the totality of harm can be properly considered in criminal proceedings (see Sections 3.5 and 3.6 below).

But then add it on to all the other behaviours across a person's life, in their environment, their ecosystem, and together those things, perhaps for some people, all of those behaviours done towards them, may not meet a specific single incident-based criminal threshold but are having a profound impact on their life and causing them to self-regulate rather than through physical force.

Patrick Mclvor, public hearing, 1 December 2025, Melbourne, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

Patterned/cumulative harm is invisible to an act-by-act assessment. As shown in Part 2 and *Volume 2*, many harmful acts in coercive high-control groups do not meet a current criminal threshold on their own and may appear minor when viewed in isolation. It is the combination, repetition, and accumulation of these acts over time that can make their impact acute and enduring.¹²³ A legal framework that relies on proving individual, discrete provable acts cannot capture harm of that nature.¹²⁴

In a cult context, subtle, continuous, pervasive control might not be seen as “serious” in a single incident but is devastating cumulatively. The review could aim to clarify how continuous patterns of subtle control, even without overt physical violence, meet these thresholds.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 50.

¹²⁰ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 47; Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

¹²¹ Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 10; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 41; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 50.

¹²² Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 47.

¹²³ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 11; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 6.

¹²⁴ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 41.

The difficulties of recognising pattern-based harm in criminal proceedings are not new, having been identified during legislative reforms to address coercive control in the family violence context. For example, prior to establishing a stand-alone coercive control offence (see Section 3.3 above), the Parliament of New South Wales' Joint Select Committee on Coercive Control released its 2021 report *Coercive control in domestic relationships* which found that, at the time:

Current laws do not capture coercive and controlling behaviour, as they focus on incidents of physical violence. Police cannot charge offenders, which leaves victims vulnerable to further abuse.¹²⁵

Reforms to family violence laws were based on the recognition that harm arising through accumulation and patterns requires a legal category designed to capture it.¹²⁶ Several Inquiry stakeholders argued that a similar principle should inform any legislative response to group-based coercion.¹²⁷

Reliance on related offences offers only limited pathways to justice

Inquiry evidence identified psychological harm as a key area of harm that is inadequately addressed by existing criminal laws, with little or no clear pathway to justice.¹²⁸ A person with lived experience argued that 'without reform, organisational abuse of this nature remains beyond criminal reach'.¹²⁹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network submitted that 'the unique dynamics of cultic abuse ... are often unrecognised or shoehorned into existing criminal categories (e.g. fraud, assault) which fail to capture the full scope of the harm'.¹³⁰

In the absence of a legal construct designed for group-based coercion, some Inquiry stakeholders noted that prosecutorial efforts have focused on fitting the harm into the most applicable—and available—offence category.¹³¹ A joint submission from several lived experience advocates noted that adjacent offences (e.g., trafficking or slavery) have been used to prosecute or charge offences committed by coercive high-control groups, but observed that 'these categories may not map cleanly onto the layered and identity-based coercion used by high-control groups'.¹³²

¹²⁵ Parliament of New South Wales, Joint Select Committee on Coercive Control, *Coercive control in domestic relationships*, p. 18.

¹²⁶ Parliament of Queensland, Legal Affairs and Safety Committee, *Criminal Law (Coercive Control and Affirmative Consent) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2023*, January 2024; Parliament of New South Wales, Joint Select Committee on Coercive Control, *Coercive control in domestic relationships*.

¹²⁷ Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 2; Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, pp. 8, 12; Sarah Bacaller, *Submission 26, Attachment 1*; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 11; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 6.

¹²⁸ Shane St Reynolds, *Submission 25*, p. 2.

¹²⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 10.

¹³⁰ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 41.

¹³¹ *Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner* (16 March 2026) pp. 2, 5.

¹³² Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 45.

In Australia, prosecutions for alleged slavery and labour exploitation that have occurred in coercive high-control group settings are rare.¹³³ Where charges have been brought, cases have encountered obstacles, including challenges displacing assumptions about what exploitation and offenders look like, which has limited available evidence,¹³⁴ and in some instances, proceedings have been discontinued.¹³⁵

Case Study 3.1 below, on NXIVM in the United States, demonstrates how prosecuting adjacent offences can address harmful conduct in a coercive high-control group. It also illustrates the limitations of relying on this approach in capturing the full scope of harm.

Case Study 3.1 NXIVM: conviction of leader Keith Raniere (United States)

Background

NXIVM was a US-based organisation founded by Keith Raniere in the late 1990s, presented publicly as a ‘self-help organization for women’.^a It recruited widely, including from professional and entertainment circles. The organisation operated a system of coercion and control over members, including through a ‘secret subgroup’^b known as DOS, in which women were subjected to sexual exploitation, blackmail, and enforced obedience to Raniere and senior members.^c

Criminal prosecution and convictions

In 2019, Raniere was convicted by a New York jury on racketeering, racketeering conspiracy, sex trafficking, attempted sex trafficking, sex trafficking conspiracy, forced labour conspiracy, and wire fraud conspiracy. The racketeering offences included extortion, identity theft, and production and possession of child pornography.^d He was sentenced to 120 years’ imprisonment.^e

Use of adjacent offences

Some Inquiry evidence highlighted a significant feature of Raniere’s prosecution, being the deliberate reliance on anti-trafficking laws while purposefully avoiding a focus on NXIVM’s ‘cult’ dynamics. Paul Mitchell contended that the NXIVM cases highlights:

... how coercive behaviour within fringe groups can be prosecuted by framing the conduct within existing criminal offences, and underscores the need for tailored legal tools to effectively address such conduct.^f

(Continued)

¹³³ Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner (16 March 2026) p. 2; Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner, *Justice out of reach for most modern slavery victims, new report finds*, media release, 9 June 2026.

¹³⁴ Kyla Raby and Dr Nerida Chazal, ‘The Myth of the ‘Ideal Offender’: Challenging persistent human trafficking stereotypes through emerging Australian cases’, *Anti-Trafficking Review* no. 18: Special Issue – Traffickers, 2022, pp. 27–28.

¹³⁵ Jack Gramenz, ‘Further charges dropped for ‘so-called cult’ patriarch’, *The Canberra Times*, 9 January 2024, <<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8481334/further-charges-dropped-for-so-called-cult-patriarch>> accessed 9 April 2025.

Case Study 3.1 Continued

A joint submission from several lived experience advocates also observed that the trafficking narratives were ‘strategically mobilised to make coercive group dynamics legible to the court, raising important questions about the adequacy and fit of existing legal constructs’.⁹

Broader implications and limitations

Reflecting on the NXIVM prosecution, Dr Janja Lalich noted other successful prosecutions of leaders of coercive high-control groups who were convicted of serious criminal offences.^h A commonality across these cases was the presence of identifiable criminal offences, such as labour trafficking.

It is suggested that the successful prosecution of Keith Raniere was possible because his conduct crossed into serious, clearly identifiable criminal offences. However, the broader system of psychological coercion, identity manipulation, and enforced compliance that characterised NXIVM’s operation across many years, and that applied to a much larger group of members who were not subjects of sex trafficking charges, went largely unaddressed in the courtroom.ⁱ

- a. United States Attorney’s Office, *NXIVM Leader Keith Raniere Sentenced to 120 Years in Prison for Racketeering and Sex Trafficking Offenses*, media release, Eastern District of New York, 27 October 2020, <<https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/nxivm-leader-keith-raniere-sentenced-120-years-prison-racketeering-and-sex-trafficking>> accessed 17 March 2026.
- b. Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 80.
- c. United States Attorney’s Office, *NXIVM Leader Keith Raniere Sentenced to 120 Years in Prison for Racketeering and Sex Trafficking Offenses*.
- d. Steven Alan Hassan, *The BITE Model of Authoritarian Control: Undue Influence, Thought Reform, Brainwashing, Mind Control, Trafficking and the Law*, PhD thesis, Fielding Graduate University, California, United States, 2020.
- e. United States Attorney’s Office, *NXIVM Leader Keith Raniere Sentenced to 120 Years in Prison for Racketeering and Sex Trafficking Offenses*.
- f. Paul Mitchell, *Submission 69*, p. 1.
- g. Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 45.
- h. Dr Janja Lalich, CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.
- i. Steven Alan Hassan, *The BITE Model of Authoritarian Control*, p. 63.

Offending is investigated by Victoria Police ‘on an individual basis as it relates to specific crimes, not due to the nature of it being cult or cult-related activity’.¹³⁶ There are a ‘range of definitions available to Victoria Police to assist in understanding the

¹³⁶ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 2.

surrounding behaviours which might be present in cult related activity', but they have limited applicability:

- 'The [Family Violence Protection Act] states emotional or psychological abuse means behaviour by a person towards another person that torments, intimidates, harasses or is offensive to the other person. This definition would generally not apply to a cult or fringe group conduct, unless there is a family relationship.'¹³⁷
- 'Many of the behaviours outlined in section 21A of the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) for stalking could be applied to tactics that may be employed by cults however, this offence outlines a course of conduct by an individual 'offender', therefore this may be difficult to apply if perpetrated by a group.'¹³⁸

In both examples, Victoria Police noted that the definitions were 'specific to family violence dynamics', and 'while the tactics may be the same, the motivation of an organised group for a particular purpose can be different to family violence perpetrators'.¹³⁹ Victoria Police's view aligns with Inquiry evidence from other stakeholders that existing legal definitions were designed for individual perpetrators operating within defined relationships, and do not readily extend to organised, group-enforced patterns of coercion in coercive high-control group settings.¹⁴⁰

Evidentiary barriers

Even where conduct of a coercive high-control group may fall within an existing criminal offence, evidence is difficult to gather and present.

Inquiry evidence identified several evidentiary challenges often encountered when individuals seek justice for harms experienced in a coercive high-control group, including:

- **Victims may appear from an outside perspective to consent:** Coercive dynamics, particularly where there is no overt physical harm, can lead to compliance that looks, from the outside, like genuine agreement. Members may defend the group, recruit others, enforce rules, and resist outside help because of the coercive environment.¹⁴¹ Inquiry stakeholders argued that this apparent consent should not prevent prosecution of criminal offences.¹⁴² Victorian and Australian law already recognises in similar contexts that consent given under coercion is not genuine.¹⁴³ Inquiry evidence suggested that the same principle should apply to group-based coercive conduct.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ryan Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 68; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8.

¹⁴¹ See Part 2.

¹⁴² Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 44.

¹⁴³ See for example, *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) s 36AA(1)(c); *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) s 270.11.

¹⁴⁴ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 23.

Under current consent laws, valid consent cannot exist when the act happens due to coercion, intimidation, or the misuse of a relationship based on authority, trust, or dependence. While these legal definitions are important, they do not go far enough. They recognise that authority can override free will, yet they still view abuse mainly through individual incidents and often miss the ongoing, systemic aspects of coercive control.

Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, pp. 3–4.

- **Assessing individual responsibility is complicated because victims and perpetrators can overlap:** Members who enforce rules, report on peers, or pressure others to comply may be acting entirely as a result of the coercive environment they are in, rather than from free choice.¹⁴⁵ Existing criminal law focuses on the actions of individual perpetrators and struggles to account for the totality of a group's system of coercion and control, or for the benefits these systems bring to leaders or other beneficiaries.¹⁴⁶ Without a legal framework that distinguishes those who benefit from a controlling and coercive system from those trapped in it, there is a risk that victims will be unfairly penalised.¹⁴⁷ The issue of not criminalising victims is discussed further below in Section 3.6.2.

Who is the kingpin? Who is making the money? I think about myself as a teenager who never went to school, never had medical care myself, watching my baby die of meningitis. The law is such a blunt instrument – like, should I be in jail now? I did not have any access to other information. I think it is really important that we do not criminalise something to the point where you are putting all the victims in jail or they are being harmed.

Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

- **Harm develops gradually over extended periods:** The incremental nature of the process, makes it difficult for survivors and outside observers to easily identify a clear point at which legal intervention would have been justified, even where the cumulative harm is severe.¹⁴⁸

Before theories of brainwashing can constructively inform legal proceedings ... critical questions must be addressed. These include broader inquiries into the nature, causes, and indicators of involuntariness, as well as the closely related challenge of determining the point on a continuum at which the intensity of indoctrination crosses the threshold into psychological incapacitation.

Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 79.

¹⁴⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Surveillance and monitoring'.

¹⁴⁶ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 49; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁴⁷ Mirriam Francis, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Paul Mitchell, *Submission 69, Attachment 1*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁸ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 21; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 12; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

- **Survivors face significant structural barriers to disclosure:** Major barriers to speaking out include shame, social isolation from shunning/excommunication, threats of retaliation, and the risk of losing family, community, and livelihood. These barriers often continue well beyond the period of direct group involvement.¹⁴⁹ Many survivors also do not recognise they were abused until years after their involvement in a coercive high-control group ended. Disclosure is rarely a single event, but typically a process that unfolds over years after exit. Often survivors require extended periods of time, distance from the group and periods of recovery before they can identify/name what occurred and be able to report it.¹⁵⁰

It took me a long time, probably two to three years, to work out I actually was damaged and had issues. I am just trying to be successful in life. A lot of kids that have grown up in cults are not even going to be able to articulate it.

Ben Shenton, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

Under-recognition of group-based coercion

Inquiry evidence showed that the people most likely to encounter victims of group-based coercion (e.g., teachers, doctors, nurses, housing workers, psychologists, counsellors, social workers, and police) largely lack the knowledge, language, or referral pathways to recognise and respond to what they are seeing.¹⁵¹ Where a frontline worker does not recognise indicators of group-based coercion, disclosures may be minimised, misattributed, or not recorded in ways that support a later criminal investigation.¹⁵² As coercive behaviour is established through a pattern of conduct over time, it can only be identified if the system is capable of seeing it. Consequently, the under-recognition of the indicators of group-based coercion can significantly limit the capability of the criminal justice system to respond.

Victoria Police certainly does not talk about cults within its training and what to identify, especially in the community policing area and so forth. There is no training of recruits or at sergeant or detective training school or whatever or even an address about cults to my knowledge — or in departments like the health department or education department, where departments interact with children. I do not believe that there is a clear understanding about what cults can do.

Lex de Man, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

¹⁴⁹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Exit barriers and post-exit harm'.

¹⁵⁰ Ben Shenton, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48; Laura McConnell, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 11–12; Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30; Lex de Man, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 15–16; Maria Esquerro, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19–20; Mary Hughes, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6; Ben Shenton, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 28–29; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 6; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 32–33; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 54; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 77.

¹⁵² Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 2; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 26; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 55; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 19.

Victoria Police does not have training which ‘specifically covers or discusses recognition of cultic or high-control group dynamics’ for frontline officers, and ‘does not deliver any specialised training to [Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams] personnel for responding to suspected cult related abuse’.¹⁵³ Inquiry stakeholders consistently reported being told by police and other authorities that the conduct they described fell outside their remit, or that they did not understand the unique dynamics of coercion in a group setting.¹⁵⁴ In the absence of a recognised legal framework for group-based coercion, frontline responders have limited capacity to identify or respond to harms that do not clearly fit existing categories.

In 2016, I reported my allegation of child slave labour to Victoria Police. The police officer I met with was at the [redacted] child sexual abuse (SOCIT) office and she told me she wasn’t in the right department to report it, and so I should report it elsewhere. I didn’t know what that meant and I didn’t feel she believed me, so I took no further action at that time.

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 21.

Another challenge contributing to under-recognition of criminal conduct is that, typically, survivors of coercive high-control groups do not disclose in a straightforward way. Many have been conditioned to distrust outside authorities or ‘lacked the language, frameworks, or recognition to name’¹⁵⁵ what had happened to them. This has direct consequences for the identification of criminal conduct. Opportunities to build system-wide capacity to identify harms caused by coercive high-control groups are considered in more detail in Part 5.

Should the focus be on better enforcement of existing laws?

Some Inquiry stakeholders argued that the issue is not the absence of legal powers, but weaknesses in enforcement, resourcing and awareness. They suggested that existing laws prohibit the harmful activities associated with coercive high-control groups, making the need for new laws unnecessary.¹⁵⁶ For example, the Australian Christian Lobby submitted that ‘existing laws already prohibit the types of clearly unlawful activities that may be commonly associated with cults’,¹⁵⁷ and cautioned against any legislative reform due to potential unintended consequences.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 83–84; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 2; Lex de Man, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 85; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 16; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 22.

¹⁵⁵ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 26.

¹⁵⁶ Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Submission 286*, p. 8; Mike Southon, Executive Director, Freedom for Faith, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 31–32; Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ Jasmine Yuen, Victorian Director, Australian Christian Lobby, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 49, 51.

However, lived experience Inquiry evidence highlighted limitations to this viewpoint. This evidence suggests that existing laws are often underutilised or not applied in practice. Some attributed this to a lack of understanding among authorities of coercive high-control group dynamics.¹⁵⁹ For example, one lived experience stakeholder described approaching police about harmful practices in a group:

The group held exorcisms to ‘heal’ gender identity and sexual orientation. I went to the police. Three different police officers dismissed me, saying they didn’t know if it was in their remit.¹⁶⁰

Limitations in the application of existing law also have broader consequences for survivors seeking support and redress outside the criminal justice system. In the absence of a clear legal pathway, survivors must often engage multiple support agencies for help. Without a shared legal framework for group-based coercive harm, support services, including health, housing, and social services, may also lack the tools needed to identify and respond appropriately. For example, Samson Rising described current reporting pathways for survivors as ‘limited in scope’ requiring them to ‘navigate disparate systems’, and that individuals ‘often face dismissal or referral ping-pong’.¹⁶¹

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The evidence before the Committee establishes a clear case for legislative reform. Victoria’s current legal framework is not designed to adequately recognise or respond to group-based coercion as a distinct criminal offence. Existing offences may be able to address isolated acts; however, they cannot capture the sustained, cumulative pattern of conduct through which coercion and control in group-based settings operate. The result is a gap in the law that leaves survivors without a meaningful pathway to justice and a system with limited tools to respond effectively.

The Committee acknowledges that existing laws, properly enforced, could address some of the harmful activities associated with coercive high-control groups. However, the lived experience evidence received makes clear that this potential is not being realised in practice. Individuals who have sought help from police and other authorities have frequently been dismissed or redirected; this was attributed to the lack of knowledge and a framework to recognise coercive group-based harm for what it is.

The consequences of these limitations extend beyond the criminal justice system. Where there is no shared framework for understanding group-based coercive harm, people are left to navigate fragmented and often unresponsive systems. The Committee considers that people who have left coercive high-control groups deserve a system that can recognise the harm they have experienced, respond coherently, and connect them to appropriate support.

¹⁵⁹ See *Under-recognition of group-based coercion* below.

¹⁶⁰ Lived experience quote, Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 74.

¹⁶¹ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 78.

Enforcement of existing laws remains an important part of addressing coercive high-control group harm, but Inquiry evidence points to a significant need for greater education and awareness across the justice system about the nature and dynamics of these groups. The Committee is of the view that a standalone group-based coercion offence would itself contribute to raising that awareness—sending a clear signal about the seriousness of this harm and providing a shared framework for identifying it.

The Committee further considers opportunities to improve how services respond and support people affected by coercive high-control groups, including through improved use of existing laws, in Part 5.

FINDING 27: Victoria's current legal framework is not fit for purpose to address the unique harms caused by coercive high-control groups. Existing laws are not adequately designed to recognise or respond to group-based coercion as a distinct harm, particularly where that harm arises from cumulative and patterned conduct.

FINDING 28: Individual actions of a coercive high-control group may not, on their own, meet a criminal threshold. However, when considered together as a part of an ongoing course of conduct, those actions can result in serious harm to an individual, that is often not recognised or appropriately responded to by the criminal justice system.

3.5.2 Key cautions in designing a group-based coercion offence

Inquiry evidence identified standalone coercive control offences in the family violence context in other Australian jurisdictions as relevant reference points for the creation of a group-based coercion offence. These models were seen as instructive because the offences:

- are framed as a course of conduct/pattern of behaviour, capturing a systematic pattern of coercive and abusive behaviours. This allows courts to assess cumulative harm in its full context.¹⁶²
- recognise that coercive control does not require physical violence, rather that harm can be characterised by non-physical conduct including psychological abuse, isolation, financial exploitation, surveillance and intimidation.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 12; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalic, *Submission 40*, pp. 25, 72; Caley Otter and Meg Bosanko, *What is coercive control?*, Parliament of Victoria, Parliamentary Library and Information Service, 2022, p. 3; Parliament of New South Wales, Joint Select Committee on Coercive Control, *Coercive control in domestic relationships*, p. 7.

¹⁶³ Shane St Reynolds, *Submission 25*, pp. 2–3; Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 10; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 50; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalic, *Submission 40*, p. 43; *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025 (SA)* s 5 (on commencement, this will be s 20B of *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935 (SA)*).

- in some cases, require proof of an intent to coerce or control, focusing the offence on the purpose behind the conduct rather than the characteristics of the perpetrator or the setting in which the conduct occurs.¹⁶⁴
- recognise the erosion of personal autonomy as a legally cognisable harm, capturing conduct intended to dominate, disorient and undermine independent thought or action, not only conduct that causes direct physical injury.¹⁶⁵

However, as noted in Section 3.4 above, Inquiry evidence identified significant risks associated with expanding existing family violence legislation to cover group settings. These include weakening established family violence protections, misidentifying victims as perpetrators, and creating definitions so broad that they may be difficult to apply in practice.

Inquiry evidence suggested that while family violence coercive control offences provide useful conceptual guidance, reform should not proceed through the expansion of family violence legislation. Attention should focus on improving the criminal justice system's capacity to respond by exploring carefully designed legislative options for a stand-alone offence that specifically addresses group-based coercion.

Some Inquiry stakeholders raised concerns about introducing a law which specifically targets group-based coercion.¹⁶⁶ As noted throughout the Report, reforms or new laws introduced without precise definitions, increase the risk of unintended consequences, including inadvertently infringing on important rights and the potential targeting individuals or groups with genuine intentions.

A further caution raised by Inquiry stakeholders was the risk of unintentionally criminalising victims.¹⁶⁷ In group-based environments, individuals who outwardly enable harm are frequently themselves acting under coercion or manipulation,¹⁶⁸ and the law must be designed to target those who architect and maintain the system of control rather than those entrapped within it.¹⁶⁹ Both of these cautions are valid and integral to good legislative design.

¹⁶⁴ *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54D(1)(c); *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Vic) s 334C(1)(c).

¹⁶⁵ Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, pp. 3–4; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 111; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalic, *Submission 40*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁶ Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*, p. 2; Mike Southon, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29; Paul Gratton, Pastor, Now Church Moe, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41; Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty, *Submission 170*, p. 7; Church and Nation Committee Presbyterian Church of Victoria, *Submission 87*, p. 5; Stephen Messer, *Submission 169*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁸ See Part 2.

¹⁶⁹ Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

3.5.3 International insight: France

Inquiry evidence also pointed to international models that directly address harms in coercive high-control groups as potential reference points.¹⁷⁰ France, for example, has specific criminal offences addressing harm occurring within what it terms ‘sectarian abuses’.¹⁷¹ Alongside these criminal offences, France, has established a coordinated government approach through the agency Miviludes (Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Cultic Deviances). As part of this approach Miviludes ‘includes annual reporting on cultic activity, coordinated multi-departmental response, public education programs, and legal support for victims’.¹⁷²

Several Inquiry stakeholders noted France’s direct approach to coercive high-control groups.¹⁷³ Dr Lani Roy, a psychologist with lived experience of coercive high-control groups, submitted the French model ‘demonstrates how systematic monitoring and support can address coercive control while respecting religious freedom’.¹⁷⁴ Tore Klevjer, President of Cult Information and Family Support, described Miviludes as France’s ‘cult watchdog’ and suggested while it could provide a ‘reference point’, the model had ‘been met with significant debate and has been anything but straightforward’.¹⁷⁵

Case Study 3.2 below provides an overview of France’s legislation focused on coercive high-control groups (*About Picard law*) and Miviludes.

¹⁷⁰ See for example, UK Home Office, *Controlling or coercive behaviour: statutory guidance framework*; Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 2.

¹⁷¹ Miviludes, *Submission 118*.

¹⁷² Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, pp. 32–33.

¹⁷³ Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, p. 2; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, pp. 32–33; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*, p. 15; Ulrike Schiesser, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

¹⁷⁴ Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 33.

¹⁷⁵ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

Case Study 3.2 France's Miviludes and the *About-Picard law*

In June 2001, France introduced the *About-Picard law* (Law 2001-504 of 12 June 2001) to prevent or minimise 'sectarian movements that infringe upon human rights and fundamental freedoms'.^a This legislation seeks to combat 'fraudulent abuse of a state of ignorance or weakness and psychological or physical subjection'^b by redefining the offence of *abus de faiblesse*, or abuse of weakness. The introduction of legislation followed two parliamentary inquiries into the activities of 'sects'.^c

The law criminalises:

- abuse of 'a state of weakness' for a vulnerable victim which causes them to act in a way that is 'seriously harmful' to themselves
- creating or maintaining a state of weakness in a person, defined as psychological subjection, which causes them to act in ways harmful to themselves.^d

Miviludes was established in 2002 following the *About-Picard law* to strengthen preventative mechanisms and coordinate government action. Miviludes is composed of several specialised divisions and relies on a network of regional referrals.^e

Miviludes' role is to:

- 'observe and analyse' sects
- 'coordinate preventative and repressive action' by public authorities, and encourage sharing of information between services
- 'inform and raise awareness' among the general public, institutions and professionals
- 'welcome and guide victims', in liaison with specialised associations, and respond to requests for information and reports
- provide judicial authorities with facts 'likely to constitute offences'.^f

France has not legally defined the term 'sect' or sectarian abuse, but the agency focuses on several criteria established through two parliamentary inquiries preceding the legislation. Multiple criteria need to be met to establish sectarian abuse, and Miviludes maintains that 'the first criterion (mental destabilisation) is always present in cases of sectarian abuse'.^g The criteria are:

- mental destabilization;
- exorbitant financial demands;
- break with the usual environment;
- physical and psychological harm;

(Continued)

Case Study 3.2 Continued

- anti-social discourse and demonization of the outside world;
- disturbance of public order;
- the importance of legal disputes;
- possible hijacking of traditional economic circuits;
- attempts to infiltrate public authorities and business circles.^h

Miviludes insists that ‘any individual can, at some point in their life, become vulnerable to a sectarian abuse’.ⁱ It notes that this vulnerability is not pre-existing mental disorders but rather situations of fragility or transition such as bereavement, serious illness, separation, or a search for meaning.^j

Key figures at a glance

- **Reports more than doubled over last 10 years.** In 2024, Miviludes recorded 4,571 reports, up from with 2,160 in 2015, an increase of 111%.
- **Health and wellbeing at the forefront.** 37% of these reports concerned health and well-being.
- **Religious and spiritual practices close behind.** 35% of these reports concerned religious or spiritual practices.
- **The rise of self-improvement schemes.** 13% of these reports related to personal development or coaching.
- **Ideology and conspiracy.** 6% of these reports were linked to ideological or conspiracy radicalism.
- **Children and young people affected.** Between 2022 and 2024, nearly one in five cases (19%) of reports concerned minors.^k

Support for victims is provided through a partnership approach between Miviludes, specialised associations and public services. Victims are referred according to their specific needs, such as legal, psychological, or social support. Victims and their families are also put in contact with an advisor from Miviludes from one of four divisions who provide assistance:

- health division
- education-youth division
- economic affairs, labour, employment and professional training division
- security division, which deals with complex cases.^l

(Continued)

Case Study 3.2 Continued

A new law was introduced on 10 May 2024 to strengthen the legal framework and enshrine Miviludes' in French law. It introduced an autonomous offence of psychological or physical subjection 'applicable even without physical harm'.^m This change recognises the role of psychological harm in these situations. However, it is still too early to assess the law's practical impact, because the law is recent, there is not yet substantial case law clarifying how courts will interpret and apply the new offence.

- a. Miviludes, *What does the law say?*, (n.d.), <<https://www.miviludes.interieur.gouv.fr/comprendre-et-prevenir/que-dit-loi>> accessed 18 February 2026.
- b. *Code pénal Articles 223-15-2 to 223-15-5*, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/section_lc/LEGITEXT000006070719/LEGISCTA000006165293> accessed 11 June 2025.
- c. Susan J Palmer, 'France's About-Picard Law and Neo-Phare: The First Application of "Abus de Faiblesse"', paper presented at CESNUR 2006 International Conference, 2006 San Diego State University, San Diego, California, 13-16 July 2006.
- d. *Code pénal Articles 223-15-2 to 223-15-5*.
- e. Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 1.
- f. Ibid.
- g. Ibid., p. 2.
- h. Ibid.
- i. Ibid., p. 3.
- j. Ibid.
- k. Ibid., pp. 1-3.
- l. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
- m. Ibid., p. 7.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee acknowledges the cautions raised by Inquiry stakeholders in relation to the design of a group-based coercion offence. However, the Committee does not regard these cautions as reasons to delay reform, but rather, as reinforcing the importance of carefully creating a well-targeted, standalone offence that is clearly framed, and appropriately limited.

The Committee notes that the French framework, including the work of Miviludes and the *About-Picard law*, focuses on harms associated with sectarian abuse. While this provides a structured response in the French context, the Committee is concerned that a focus on sectarian movements may limit flexibility in addressing the broad and evolving nature of group-based coercion. The Committee is of the view that a Victorian approach should adopt a broad, behaviour-based framework, allowing regulatory and preventative responses to focus on harmful group conduct. The Committee considers that a behavioural focus will be better suited to addressing emerging risks of group-based coercion across diverse settings.

A standalone group-based coercion offence would strengthen Victoria's capability to respond to the harms of coercive high-control groups. It would address current limitations in the legal framework and provide survivors with a pathway to justice that is not currently available.

In the Committee's view, a standalone group-based coercion offence would provide a single, coherent basis for prosecution by capturing the full pattern of harmful conduct, rather than requiring reliance on multiple separate charges that address only individual elements in isolation. As an umbrella offence, it would capture how behaviours such as psychological manipulation, surveillance, harassment, or financial exploitation work together as part of a coercive system.

Group-based coercion operates through sustained patterns of conduct rather than discrete incidents. While individual behaviours may not meet criminal thresholds on their own, when considered together as a course of conduct, they can cause serious and cumulative harm. This reflects the same legislative logic underpinning coercive control offences in family violence law, where the pattern of behaviour itself constitutes the offence. A standalone group-based coercion offence would, for the first time, enable courts to properly recognise and respond to the same cumulative harm in group-based contexts.

The Committee supports the introduction of a group-based coercion offence, while noting that further work is required to ensure the legislation is detailed and workable. Based on the evidence received, the Committee has identified the key components required to establish such an offence, as well as the safeguards necessary for its effective operation. The following sections examine these components, drawing on Inquiry stakeholder evidence and setting out the Committee's determinations.

3.6 Designing an appropriate group-based coercion offence

This Section considers what is required to design an effective group-based coercion offence. It examines how group-based coercion should be defined, identifies the key components necessary for the offence, and considers how it would operate within a broader system response to group-based harm.

3.6.1 Defining group-based coercion

For a legal framework to function, it must define the conduct it targets with sufficient precision to enable consistent application, avoid over-reach, and withstand scrutiny under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.¹⁷⁶ Any definition of group-based coercion must be anchored in behaviour, not belief. Requiring proof that a group is a 'cult', or that its belief system is inherently harmful, would create an unworkable threshold.¹⁷⁷ It would require courts to assess and judge ideological

¹⁷⁶ *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic).

¹⁷⁷ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 40; Cult Consulting Australia, *Submission 227*, pp. 1–2.

content, which could risk breaching rights under Victoria's Charter of Human Rights. A belief-focused definition also risks obscuring harmful groups because they do not meet legislated criteria.¹⁷⁸

The behavioural threshold must be set high enough to capture genuine systems of control while excluding conduct that is genuinely voluntary.¹⁷⁹ Control must be sufficiently total or pervasive as to suppress the person's capacity to live, think, or act independently of the group. This distinguishes the sustained domination described in Inquiry evidence from voluntary commitment which does not erode independent agency.

In defining group-based coercion, an important element would be the adoption of a sustained *course of conduct/pattern of behaviour* approach. This would allow harmful behaviours to be considered in their totality rather than incident by incident. The 'course of conduct' or 'pattern of behaviour' models already adopted in Australian coercive control legislation provide a useful framework, establishing that cumulative, controlling behaviour can constitute a distinct criminal wrong where the offence is anchored in the perpetrator's intent to coerce or control, rather than proof of any individual act.¹⁸⁰ This reflects Inquiry evidence demonstrating that harm experienced in coercive high-control groups is cumulative and systemic.¹⁸¹ A single-act model would be insufficient to capture this nuance, especially in cases where individual acts do not reach a clear criminal threshold.

Like coercive control laws in family violence contexts, group-based coercion must be defined in a way that captures non-physical forms of control, such as psychological pressure, isolation, surveillance, financial control, enforced dependency, and the restructuring of identity and capacity for independent thought. Inquiry evidence shows that these are the primary mechanisms through which group-based coercive control operates.¹⁸² A framework limited to physical conduct would be inadequate to address the complex psychological harm experienced.

3.6.2 Key components necessary to establish the offence

Understanding the issues and concerns raised throughout the Inquiry (i.e., about how group-based coercion operates, where existing laws fall short, and what survivors need from a legal response) has identified several elements that would need to be carefully considered in designing an effective offence. The below sections do not prescribe the precise form legislation should take, rather they identify the key considerations that any legislative design process would need to consider.

¹⁷⁸ Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 6; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁹ Freedom for Faith, *Submission 228*, p. 10; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 53; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 10.

¹⁸⁰ *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54G; *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld) s 334C(1)(b); *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935* (SA) s 20C(1).

¹⁸¹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Recruitment tactics' and 'Behaviours'.

¹⁸² See Part 2 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Control and indoctrination', 'Emotional and psychological abuse', 'Creating dependency', 'Labour and financial restrictions', 'Surveillance and monitoring', and 'Exit barriers and post-exit harm'.

Intent and culpability

Any offence must include an intent element. Prosecution must establish that the perpetrator intended, knew, or ought to have known that their conduct would coerce or control the victim. This formulation is consistent with existing Australian legislative approaches in coercive control laws, for example:

- Tasmania's *Family Violence Act 2004* defines emotional abuse as conduct that a person 'knows, or ought to know' is likely to control or intimidate¹⁸³
- South Australia's *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* requires that the person intends the course of conduct to have a controlling impact on the victim¹⁸⁴
- New South Wales' *Crimes Act 1900* requires that the intent of the conduct is to coerce or control.¹⁸⁵

Without an intent element, there is a real risk that the law would capture conduct it was never designed to address.¹⁸⁶ A framework that does not require proof of intent risks over-criminalising ordinary relationships and interactions that fall well outside the scope of what the law is seeking to address. For example, in the context of modern slavery offences, the Australian Anti-Slavery Commission explained that a 'key legal issue is identifying where the line is drawn' when assessing whether criminal conduct has occurred.¹⁸⁷

It is important that culpability is attributed proportionately, so that victims of coercive high-control groups are not over-criminalised. As discussed in Section 3.5.1 above, many Inquiry stakeholders identified that members of coercive high-control groups involved in enforcing group rules on others within the group, do not do so as independent actors but as victims of the controlling system themselves. Reflecting on this issue, Sarah Steel, an Australian author and podcaster researching coercive high-control groups, primarily through interviews with former members, stated that:

Any legislative approach would need to keep in mind that many cult members are both victims and perpetrators of coercive control within a group that may demand this behaviour of adherents. We must be careful whom we hold to account.¹⁸⁸

Legislation that fails to distinguish between architects and beneficiaries of coercive systems and those who comply with or enable harm under duress or dependency would misrepresent the reality of the nature of group-based coercion and risk prosecuting victims. Offence provisions should focus accountability on those who create, maintain, and benefit from systems of control.

¹⁸³ *Family Violence Act 2004* (Tas) s 9(1).

¹⁸⁴ *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA) s 5. On commencement, this will be s 20C(1)(d) of *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935* (SA).

¹⁸⁵ *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54D(1)(c).

¹⁸⁶ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 44.

¹⁸⁷ *Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner* (16 March 2026) p. 2.

¹⁸⁸ Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8.

Leadership accountability must be explicit in the framework. Inquiry evidence demonstrated that many leaders of coercive high-control groups routinely place nominal responsibility on others while retaining effective control and benefitting.¹⁸⁹ A standalone offence should prevent this arrangement from being used to shield those who in fact create and benefit from coercive systems.

Apparent consent is not a defence

Apparent consent or compliance that has been given under coercive conditions is not genuine. A standalone offence should include a provision that apparent consent is not a defence where it is obtained under coercive conditions. In considering whether limitations on rights under Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities are lawful, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission noted that the *reasonable person test*¹⁹⁰ could be applied to determine whether an adult genuinely consented to harmful behaviour.¹⁹¹

... where an adult is consenting, i.e. follows or willingly believes in a religion, group or movement but experienced harm as a result of their behaviours and/or practices, focus on a reasonable person anticipating harm, and proportionate limitation. Focus on circumstances.

For example, anti-vilification laws limit the right to free speech, but in that conduct some things need to be unlawful due to potential harm. In the *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act 2021* consent is irrelevant.

Notes from Committee briefing with Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (23 June 2025) p. 4.

This is consistent with approaches taken in other areas of law, such as in modern slavery provisions, where consent is negated in circumstances involving coercion, force, threats, or abuse of power or vulnerability. For example, s 270.6 (1) of the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) sets out that the conditions of forced labour are established where the victim provides 'labour or services if, because of the use of coercion, threat or deception, a reasonable person in the position of the victim would not consider himself or herself to be free' to stop or leave.¹⁹²

A standalone group-based coercion offence should consider adopting a similar approach that makes clear that apparent consent to harmful behaviour does not negate liability where that consent results from coercion, threats, abuse of power, or exploitation of vulnerability. This would align the offence with established approaches in other comparable areas of law and ensure the focus is on the coercive circumstances

¹⁸⁹ Mary Hughes, *Submission 236*, pp. 4, 6; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 3; Lived experience quote, Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 44.

¹⁹⁰ The reasonable person test in law considers how an ordinary, rational adult in the same position would have acted or perceived the conduct, without adopting the specific viewpoints or beliefs of the person experiencing the behaviour.

¹⁹¹ *Notes from Committee briefing with Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (23 June 2025) p. 4.*

¹⁹² *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) s 270.6(1).

and the absence of genuine, voluntary choice, rather than on formal notions of consent that do not reflect the realities of group-based coercion.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated that children and young people are especially vulnerable to coercion, including in group-based contexts. Because of this, they may be more likely to go along with or comply with harmful behaviour which does not reflect genuine consent (see Part 4). In these situations, particular care is needed to ensure adequate protection for children and young people, and any claimed consent should be closely examined and not treated as valid if it results from coercive conditions.

Limitation periods

Limitation periods for a group-based coercion offence must take into account the time it commonly takes survivors to recognise, process, name and report the harm they experienced. Inquiry evidence shows that reporting is often delayed due to factors such as years spent within the group, the cumulative psychological impact of coercion and extended periods of recovery, and threats of retaliation by the group.

I wouldn't dare speak out and self-silenced such was the self-imposed shame and stigma I felt. It took me over 10 years to finally understand I had been in a cult, when I happened to listen to a BBC Radio 5 programme about cults.

Sue Winter, *Submission 2*, p. 1.

It took me 17 years to finally break free from the cult I had been born into.

Daniel Torridon, *Submission 5*, p. 3.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated patterns of delayed disclosure consistent with those recognised and examined in other contexts. For example, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that delayed disclosure is the norm, not the exception. Survivors who spoke with the Royal Commission took, on average, 23.9 years to tell someone they had been sexually abused.¹⁹³ Many survivors could not disclose the abuse during childhood and did not disclose until well into adulthood.¹⁹⁴ The Royal Commission found that one of the most common barriers to disclosing child sexual abuse is shame or embarrassment; feelings that can overwhelm a survivor and have a silencing effect that can last for many years or decades.¹⁹⁵ Inquiry evidence from survivors of group-based coercion described similar profound emotional barriers and fears that delayed their ability to disclose harmful behaviours experienced in group settings.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Volume 4: Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse*, p. 9.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 40–41; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 53.

In response to the evidence patterns of delayed disclosure, the Royal Commission recommended that all jurisdictions ‘remove any limitation period’ for damage claims for personal injury resulting from institutional child sexual abuse.¹⁹⁷ Victoria had already reformed its legal framework in 2015, prior to the publication of the Royal Commission’s final report, by removing limitation periods for claims for damages arising from child sexual abuse through the *Limitation of Actions Amendment (Child Abuse) Act 2015* (Vic).¹⁹⁸

A standalone group-based coercion offence should consider how limitation periods operate in practice for survivors of coercive high-control groups. Limitation periods that do not account for the time it commonly takes for survivors to disclose coercive harm, risks excluding those most affected by such conduct from access to justice. Any proposed standalone offence should consider the impact of limitation periods and seek to find the appropriate balance between acknowledging the reality of delayed reporting and principles of fairness in the justice system.



Important note on historical allegations of abuse received through the Inquiry process

Through the Inquiry process, the Committee received evidence that included historical allegations of abuse. While this material related to past events and experiences, it was often described by witnesses as having occurred over extended periods of time.

The Committee acknowledges the sensitive nature of this evidence and notes that many contributors came forward to share difficult personal experiences. While the Inquiry was not tasked with determining culpability in relation to historical allegations, this evidence provided important context for understanding the patterns, impacts, and long-term effects of coercive and controlling group practices.

These accounts informed the Committee’s understanding of how harm can manifest over time in group-based settings and reinforced the importance of considering cumulative and historical experiences when assessing current risks and potential policy and legislative responses.

¹⁹⁷ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report Recommendations*, 2017, p. 88.

¹⁹⁸ Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Common Guiding Principles: child sexual abuse civil claims*, 2024, <<https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/justice-system/laws-and-regulation/common-guiding-principles-child-sexual-abuse-civil-claims>> accessed 20 March 2026.

3.6.3 Positioning the offence within a broader system response

Civil and pre-criminal mechanisms

Inquiry evidence showed that criminal justice system reform alone is not sufficient to address the needs of people impacted by coercive high-control groups. Some Inquiry stakeholders described a criminal justice system-focused response as too ‘blunt’,¹⁹⁹ with thresholds potentially too high to capture the experiences of many. While the high evidentiary burden for criminal prosecution is appropriate, many forms of group-based coercion (particularly during in an individual’s earlier stages of involvement in a group) may not meet the threshold of a standalone offence. Delays in the criminal justice process can also mean that harm continues while evidence accumulates and a case progresses.²⁰⁰

Civil and pre-criminal mechanisms to protect people from coercive high-control groups may:

- protect people currently experiencing coercive control who cannot wait for a criminal investigation to conclude²⁰¹
- create a documented record of patterned conduct, including accumulation of complaints across agencies, that may support later criminal proceedings²⁰²
- impose organisational consequences that address the institutional dimension of group-based coercion, where criminal prosecution cannot.²⁰³

By implementing additional protective measures alongside a criminal offence, Victoria can establish a tiered response to the harms of coercive high-control groups. This approach would allow for earlier intervention to help prevent harm from escalating, ensure responses are proportionate, and reserve criminal law for the most serious and sustained conduct.

Protection orders

Inquiry stakeholders proposed establishing protection orders specifically designed for group-based coercive situations, like family violence intervention orders.²⁰⁴ While Inquiry evidence indicated that some individuals impacted by coercive high-control

¹⁹⁹ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 44.

²⁰⁰ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 45; Name withheld, *Submission 33*, p. 5; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 9, 69; Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

²⁰¹ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

²⁰² Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 50–52.

²⁰³ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 5.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 83; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 53.

groups were able to get personal safety or family violence intervention orders,²⁰⁵ others noted that existing protection orders are not always fit for purpose to protect people affected by coercive high-control groups.²⁰⁶

The absence of recognition of group-based coercion in law means that the dynamics of these environments are often not recognised or understood, limiting opportunities to successfully get protection orders. For example, the Family Violence Protection Act does not cover relationships between leaders of coercive high-control groups and members, unless it is a familial or domestic relationship.²⁰⁷ This can leave many people at risk ‘without recourse against psychological abuse designed to isolate them’.²⁰⁸

Box 3.2 Taking a closer look—Why a personal safety intervention order (PSIO) may not apply in a coercive high-control group setting

A person is involved in a high-control group structured around shared ideology, social pressure, and hierarchical authority. The group consists of multiple unrelated individuals who exert influence collectively rather than through identifiable one-to-one conduct.

Over time, the person is subjected to a pattern of coercive behaviours, including:

- persistent pressure to conform to group rules and beliefs
- isolation from friends and family through discouragement and social exclusion
- intimidation framed as ‘guidance’ or ‘discipline’
- threats of reputational harm, ostracism, or spiritual or moral consequences if they attempt to leave
- coordinated monitoring and reporting of behaviour by multiple group members.

No single individual consistently engages in conduct that, in isolation, clearly constitutes assault, stalking, harassment, or a threat within the meaning of a PSIO. Instead, the harm arises cumulatively from the coordinated actions of multiple people, each acting intermittently and often indirectly.

(Continued)

²⁰⁵ Under the *Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010* (Vic), a personal safety intervention order is a court order aimed to protect a person from unwanted behaviour (including physical and mental harm) by someone who is not a family member. Under the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic), a family violence intervention order is a court order aimed to protect a person from the behaviours of a family member, partner or ex-partner who has used family violence, and may also protect children, property or people supporting the protected person.

²⁰⁶ Shane St Reynolds, *Submission 25*, p. 2; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52, Attachment 2*, p. 11.

²⁰⁷ *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) s 8.

²⁰⁸ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 83.

Box 3.2 Continued

In this context:

- The affected person cannot readily identify a single respondent whose behaviour meets the threshold for an intervention order.
- Much of the coercive conduct does not fall neatly within existing PSIO categories (such as stalking or threats), particularly where the behaviour is non-violent, subtle, or framed as voluntary participation.
- The power imbalance is embedded in group dynamics and authority structures, rather than in an individual relationship.
- Applying for multiple intervention orders against different group members would be impractical, potentially retraumatising, and unlikely to capture the collective nature of the harm.

An added complication in a coercive high-control group setting is the role of a leader or small group of leaders who establish the rules, determine consequences, and exercise authority over members, yet do not personally or explicitly engage in coercive conduct. Instead of acting directly, these leaders intentionally outsource enforcement to others, directing or encouraging members to apply pressure, discipline or punishment, while maintaining distance from the specific interactions that cause harm. This separation allows leaders who should bear the greatest responsibility for the harm to have no direct contact with the affected person and beyond the reach of a PSIO.

As a result, while PSIOs are designed to protect individuals from unwanted behaviour by non-related persons, they may be ineffective or unavailable where coercion is exercised through a diffuse, group-based pattern of control rather than discrete, individual acts. This leaves individuals experiencing serious psychological, social, and emotional harm without an effective civil or criminal legal remedy.

Source: Magistrate's Court of Victoria, *Personal safety intervention orders*, 6 November 2024, <<https://www.mcv.vic.gov.au/intervention-orders/personal-safety-intervention-orders>> accessed 20 March 2026.

Examination of options for legislative reform presents an opportunity to consider whether a dedicated protective order mechanism could provide a practical avenue for improving safety for people affected by coercive high-control groups. Such a mechanism would not depend on the existence of a familial or domestic relationship and could be designed to reflect the specific dynamics of coercive high-control groups. This would allow individuals harmed by group-based coercion (particularly those who have recently left a group) to seek enforceable protections against contact, or retaliation by group leaders or members, without the need to meet a criminal standard of proof. Further work is required to determine whether this objective would be best achieved through a standalone protection order framework or by expanding existing protection order frameworks to better capture coercive high-control groups.

Part 5 considers other civil law reform options for responding to harm caused by coercive high-control groups.

Multi-agency response

There is often no clear lead agency as many cult issues fall between the responsibility of police, health, child protection and other community services, which makes it difficult to identify and respond to the harmful behaviours.

Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice received 20 November 2025, p. 6.

No single agency currently holds the mandate, capability, or cross-sector reach to respond to group-based coercion alone.²⁰⁹ The Committee heard that many survivors are presenting at various support agencies—including outside the criminal justice system—but staff lack awareness of the issues,²¹⁰ and there are not sufficient procedural mechanisms to document or escalate what they know.²¹¹ Responsibility for identifying people at risk, and providing support, should be shared across Victoria's support service systems.

Inquiry evidence indicates that a key challenge to implementing a fit-for-purpose multi-agency response is that the agencies' people tend to often lack the skills and understanding to recognise harm in coercive high-control group contexts. Inquiry evidence indicated that disclosures typically:

- reach multiple agencies and services without being connected, so that the cumulative and patterned nature of the harm remains invisible to any single receiving agency²¹²
- use learned in-group language and frameworks that receiving agencies may not recognise as indicators of harm, leaving the systemic nature of the control undetected²¹³
 - in particular, children and young people often lack the language or conceptual framework to identify what has happened to them as abuse, including child sexual abuse, particularly where harm has been normalised as doctrine, discipline, or devotion²¹⁴
- are suppressed or withheld because the person disclosing fears consequences, ostracism, or retaliation, including threats that disclosure will harm the group, their family's salvation, or their standing in the community²¹⁵

²⁰⁹ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50.

²¹⁰ Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Submission 103*, p. 7; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 18; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

²¹¹ Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

²¹² Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 6; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 17; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50.

²¹³ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 30; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 56.

²¹⁴ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 19.

²¹⁵ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

- reach professionals through informal rather than formal channels or warnings passed between frontline staff, without triggering any formal reporting or escalation pathway.²¹⁶

These challenges would not be solved by the introduction of a standalone group coercion offence, rather they may impede the proper operation and application of such an offence. Therefore, it is important that agencies responsible for responding to harms from coercive high-control groups have appropriate awareness and understanding.

Some Inquiry stakeholders recommended implementing dedicated information-sharing and coordination mechanisms to enable better sharing across the support service system. For example, information-sharing mechanisms in the family violence sector were referenced as potential models which could be adapted to the context of coercive high-control groups, such as the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework.²¹⁷

Opportunities for improving the awareness and understanding of the indicators of a coercive high-control group across Victoria's support services is discussed in Part 5.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee considers it essential that a standalone group-based coercion offence capture non-physical forms of coercion. These include psychological pressure, isolation, financial control, surveillance, and the restructuring of identity and independent thought, which are the primary mechanisms through which harmful group-based coercion operates.

The Committee has identified several essential components that the Victorian Government should consider in developing a standalone group-based coercion offence:

- Intent and culpability—the offence should require proof that the perpetrator intended, knew or ought to have known that their conduct would coerce or control the victim. This approach is consistent with related considerations in family violence legislation and other areas of law. It is also important that culpability is attributed proportionately. Many members of coercive high-control groups enforce group rules not as independent actors but as victims of the controlling system themselves. The offence must focus accountability on those who create, maintain, and benefit from systems of control.
- Apparent consent—apparent consent should not operate as a defence where it is obtained under coercive conditions. The mechanisms through which coercive high-control groups operate systematically undermine a person's capacity to make genuinely free choices. This approach is consistent with established law in comparable areas, including modern slavery provisions. It is also important to recognise that children and young people raised in coercive high-control groups may be more likely to comply with harmful behaviour.

²¹⁶ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50.

²¹⁷ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 17; Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 14–15.

- Limitation periods—limitation periods for an offence should reflect the reality that people subjected to coercive high-control groups commonly take years or decades to recognise, name, and report the harm they have experienced. It is important that a standalone offence recognise this issue and find an appropriate balance between the reality of delayed reporting and principles of fairness in the justice system.

The Committee recognises that criminal law reform alone cannot address the full scope of harm caused by coercive high-control groups. Many forms of group-based coercion will not meet the threshold of a standalone criminal offence. The Committee is of the view that consideration should be given to reforming civil and pre-criminal mechanisms, including protection orders, to provide more options for individuals impacted by group-based coercion to seek recourse.

No standalone offence can operate effectively without a stronger multi-agency response. Disclosures relating to coercive high-control groups currently reach multiple agencies without being connected, are not recognised as indicators of harm, and are suppressed by fear of retaliation. The Committee emphasises that responsibility for identifying people at risk must be shared across Victoria's support service systems, and agencies must be equipped with the tools, training, and frameworks to recognise and respond to group-based coercive harm. Part 5 considers improving service systems responses in further detail.

FINDING 29: Group-based coercion primarily operates through non-physical means and must be recognised as such in law. Psychological pressure, isolation, financial control, surveillance, and the restructuring of identity and independent thought, are key mechanisms through which coercive high-control groups inflict and maintain harm.

FINDING 30: Compliance or apparent consent arising from coercive conditions is not genuine consent. Coercive high-control groups systematically erode a person's capacity to make free and informed choices.

FINDING 31: Current laws do not provide a clear and effective means of holding to account those who create and operate systems of group-based coercion. Accountability is particularly challenging where the harm is carried out or facilitated by members who are themselves subject to coercion and control. Many survivors of coercive high-control groups are unable to identify or name the harm that they experienced until many years, or sometimes, decades after it occurred.

FINDING 32: Group-based coercion often falls below criminal thresholds, particularly in the early stages of a person's involvement in a group. Where criminal prosecution is possible, it may occur only after significant delay, during which time harm can continue.

FINDING 33: No single agency has the mandate, capability, or cross-sector reach to respond effectively to group-based coercion. Disclosures in this context are often fragmented across multiple agencies without being connected, frequently not recognised as indicators of harm, and may be suppressed by fear of retaliation.

3.7 Further work is required to get the law right

Getting the law right requires more than identifying that reform is needed. Before any legislation is introduced to the Parliament, further work is required to ensure it is fit-for-purpose.

3.7.1 Preventing unintended consequences

The principles set out in this Part must be implemented with care. As noted elsewhere in this Report, a poorly designed response to coercive high-control groups risks capturing genuinely voluntary participation and producing outcomes that harm those it is intended to protect.

Any bill presented to Parliament will be required to include a Statement of Compatibility under s 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic), addressing the rights most directly engaged.²¹⁸ The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission advised the Committee that rights under the Charter can be lawfully limited, but only where limits are reasonable and demonstrably justified, taking into account:

- the nature of the right
- the importance of the purpose
- the nature and extent of the limitation
- the relationship between the limitation and its purpose
- whether less restrictive means are reasonably available.²¹⁹

These are not merely procedural requirements, they are the substantive tests against which any offence must be designed from the outset.

The Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee (SARC) also plays an important role in examining whether laws are compatible with the Charter. SARC is responsible for examining all bills for compatibility with the rights established under Victoria's Charter.²²⁰ Where SARC identifies a potential incompatibility with the Charter, it

²¹⁸ *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic) s 28.

²¹⁹ *Notes from Committee briefing with Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission* (23 June 2025) p. 2. See: *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic) s 7(2).

²²⁰ *Parliamentary Committees Act 2003* (Vic) s 17.

reports those concerns to Parliament, providing an additional layer of scrutiny before legislation is passed.

Given the complex rights considerations engaged by any legislative response to group-based coercion, early and careful engagement with Charter requirements is essential to reduce the risks of unintended consequences. This work should begin at the initial legislative development stage, well before a bill is presented to Parliament, so that Charter compatibility is built into the framework from the outset.

3.7.2 Matters appropriate for referral to the Victorian Law Reform Commission

As stated in Section 3.6 above, a group-based criminal coercion offence is necessary, but further work is required to ensure it is appropriately designed, given the complex and technically demanding nature of the design choices involved.

Several foundational questions remain to be worked through before legislation can be introduced to the Parliament. These include:

- How should courts assess a sustained course of conduct that may have unfolded across years or decades, often without contemporaneous records?
- What evidentiary tools will enable prosecutors to establish a pattern rather than a sequence of ambiguous incidents?
- How should the offence interact with existing Victorian and Commonwealth laws—including those addressing family violence, human trafficking, elder abuse, and labour exploitation—to avoid duplication, inconsistency, or unintended gaps?
- What amendments to existing law may be required to ensure coherence across the framework?
- How should limitation periods be constructed to reflect the time it takes survivors to name and report harm, while upholding principles of procedural fairness?

These questions cannot be resolved adequately within the confines of this parliamentary inquiry process. They require dedicated legal analysis and structured consultation with a broad range of stakeholders, including people with lived experience, legal practitioners, law enforcement, prosecutors, the judiciary, trauma specialists, researchers, religious/spiritual and cultural communities, and civil liberties organisations.

The Victorian Law Reform Commission is an independent body established under the *Victorian Law Reform Commission Act 2000* (Vic) and acts as the State's central agency for law reform.²²¹ Under s 5 of the Act, the Commission's role is to examine, report and make recommendations to the Victorian Attorney-General on law reform matters that are either referred to it by the Attorney-General, or are

²²¹ Victorian Law Reform Commission, *About us*, <<https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/about-us>> accessed 19 March 2026.

identified by the Commission as ‘relatively minor’ legal issues that do not require significant resources.²²² The Commission may also suggest law reform matters to the Attorney-General for referral.²²³

The Commission has extensive experience conducting detailed legal research, consulting broadly with the community and stakeholders, and developing practical, evidence-based recommendations to improve Victorian laws.²²⁴ Its established processes emphasise independence, transparency and inclusive consultation, including engagement with affected and marginalised groups, ensuring that any proposed legislative options are well-informed, balanced and responsive to community needs.²²⁵

3.7.3 Co-design with lived experience and broader community consultation

In line with *Recommendation 1*, any reforms responding to the harms of coercive high-control groups must be co-designed with people with lived experience of these groups. Survivors understand how control operates and why disclosure is difficult because they have experienced it. Their knowledge is not optional or supplementary to the legal design; it is essential.

Inquiry evidence shows that people with lived experience must be central to reform, not consulted at the margins, and embedded in the design process from the outset.²²⁶ Co-designing legislative options with people with lived experience, ensures any proposed laws are fit for purpose and capable of protecting people from harm.

People with lived experience bring of coercive high-control groups bring unique insight into:

- what types of conduct the law needs to address,
- what language accurately describes their experiences,
- what procedures will support or obstruct access to justice, and
- what protections are needed so people can report harm safely.

Victoria’s experience with survivor-led family violence reform provides a clear model. Legislative development processes in this area should adopt a similar approach through properly resourced and genuinely inclusive co-design with people with lived experience.

²²² Victorian Law Reform Commission Act 2000 (Vic) s 5(1)(a)–(b).

²²³ Ibid., s 5(1)(c).

²²⁴ Victorian Law Reform Commission, *Our process*, <<https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/our-approach/our-process>> accessed 19 March 2026.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 55; BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 3; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 24.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee recognises that drafting a fit-for-purpose offence for group-based coercion is a difficult and complex task. The cautions raised about protecting genuine rights, avoiding the criminalisation of victims, and maintaining workable evidentiary standards are the conditions under which reform must be designed. Poorly designed legislation risks producing outcomes that are unjust or unworkable, or that generate unintended harms for the communities it is intended to protect. The Committee does not accept that difficulty in design is a basis for inaction; instead, it is a basis for rigorous process.

The Committee recommends a two-stage approach to reform: first, that the Victorian Government commit to legislating a group-based coercion offence, and second, that the Victorian Law Reform Commission be engaged to develop detailed legislative options to give effect to that commitment. The principles set out in Section 3.6 should guide the Commission's work, and co-design with people with lived experience must be central to that process. People with lived experience of coercive high-control groups bring knowledge of the mechanisms of control, the barriers to disclosure, and the procedural features that enable or obstruct access to justice that is not available from any other source.

The design task is substantial. Questions about evidentiary standards, limitation periods, the interaction with existing Victorian and Commonwealth law, the treatment of apparent consent, and the appropriate attribution of culpability across complex group hierarchies require dedicated legal analysis and structured consultation. These questions cannot be resolved adequately within the scope of this Inquiry. The Committee considers that they require expert-led review and structured consultation across relevant disciplines, of the kind routinely undertaken by the Victorian Law Reform Commission.

Victoria has an opportunity to lead in this area. The Committee is confident that, through a careful and consultative process, Victoria can develop a legislative response that is both effective in protecting people from harm and consistent with the rights of all Victorians.

FINDING 34: Legislative reform in this area must be carefully designed to avoid unintended consequences, including the inadvertent infringement of rights and the criminalisation of victims. A poorly designed legislative response to group-based coercion risks capturing genuinely voluntary participation or producing outcomes that harm those it is intended to protect.

FINDING 35: The complex and technically demanding legal questions involved in designing a group-based coercion offence cannot be resolved within the confines of this parliamentary inquiry.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Victorian Government ask the Victorian Law Reform Commission to review legislative options to criminalise group-based coercion, with the Commission to report by July 2028 to support the introduction of legislation by February 2029.

The referral must direct the Victorian Law Reform Commission to:

- develop recommendations for legislation, including draft group-based coercion offence provisions, supported by civil and regulatory mechanisms that can intervene before criminal thresholds are met (for example, protective orders)
- co-design proposed legislative options with survivors of group-based coercion
- consult broadly with legal practitioners, law enforcement, trauma specialists, researchers, representatives of religious and cultural communities, civil liberties organisations, and relevant government agencies
- assess compatibility of all proposed measures with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic)
- consider and report on interactions between any proposed offence and existing Victorian and Commonwealth laws, including those addressing family violence, human trafficking, elder abuse and labour exploitation, and identify where amendments to existing Victorian laws are required
- address evidentiary, enforcement, and procedural questions, including how courts assess patterned conduct over time and what training prosecutors, police, and judiciary will require and have regard to other legislative models.

Any options for a group-based coercion offence must consider:

- establishing a clear criminal threshold demonstrating that control is exercised in a way that is sufficiently total or pervasive as to suppress the person's capacity to live, think, or act independently of the group
- being behaviour-focused and belief-neutral, including not requiring proof that a group is a 'cult' or that a belief system is inherently harmful
- requiring proof of a sustained 'course of conduct' or 'pattern of behaviour' rather than a single act, recognising that group-based coercion operates through cumulative, patterned behaviour
- capturing non-physical coercion—such as psychological pressure, enforced dependency, isolation, surveillance, financial control, spiritual or existential threats—and the restructuring of a person's identity or capacity for independent thought
- including an intent element, requiring proof that the perpetrator intended, knew or ought to have known, that the conduct would coerce or control the victim

(Continued)

RECOMMENDATION 2: CONTINUED

- making clear that apparent consent or compliance is not a defence where it was produced by the coercive conditions the offence is designed to address
- attributing culpability proportionately, focusing on those who create, maintain, and benefit from systems of control, and accounting for the diminished culpability of those who enabled harm under duress or dependency
- including protections:
 - to ensure that conduct which is genuinely voluntary and does not cause harm falls outside the offence
 - for survivors against retaliation
- ensuring limitation periods reflect the time it commonly takes survivors to name and report criminal conduct.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Victorian Government introduce legislation to criminalise group-based coercion by February 2029, following the Victorian Law Reform Commission's report on legislative options.

Part 4

Improving protections for children and young people

In this Part

Topics covered include:

- the unique risks and vulnerabilities faced by children and young people in coercive high-control groups
- the serious and cumulative harms experienced by children and young people in coercive high-control group environments, including psychological and physical harm, child sexual abuse, educational disadvantage, and intergenerational harm
- how children and young people become involved in coercive high-control groups, and why frameworks built around adult concepts of choice and membership are poorly suited to their circumstances
- the barriers that prevent harm to children and young people in coercive high-control groups from being identified or reported
- the capacity of Victoria's child protection and safety frameworks to identify and respond to harm in coercive high-control environments, including the Reportable Conduct Scheme, Child Safe Standards, Working with Children Check, and Child Protection system
- opportunities to strengthen awareness among school-aged children, university students, and practitioners about coercive high-control groups
- support for young people leaving coercive high-control groups, including those in the 18 to 25 cohort, and approaches to proactive community engagement.



What the Committee heard

Children and young people in coercive high-control groups face a combination of risks that Victoria's child safety system was not designed to address. Unlike adults, most children in these environments have no prior identity or external reference point to draw on. For those born into these groups, it is not something they joined—it is the only world they have ever known. Their sense of self, relationships, and understanding of right and wrong are shaped entirely within the group's authority structures, often before they have the capacity to question them. Children brought in through a parent or carer's involvement



exercise no greater choice. In both cases, concepts such as ‘recruitment’ and ‘membership’ are misleading. They obscure the reality of these children’s experiences and create barriers to recognising their circumstances for what they are: clear matters of child protection.

The harm experienced by children in coercive high-control groups is serious, cumulative, and often lifelong. Evidence before the Committee described pervasive psychological harm, including anxiety, depression, complex trauma, and profound disruption to identity formation and attachment. Protective relationships are systematically displaced, with group authority substituted for the parent-child bond and children conditioned to regard questioning adults as spiritually unsafe. Physical harm, including corporal punishment administered at the direction of group leadership, and child sexual abuse occurring in conditions of enforced secrecy and limited access to mandatory reporters, were also documented extensively. Educational deprivation is often deliberate, designed to limit children’s capacity to think independently or function outside the group. Many survivors leave without qualifications, foundational life skills, and the social reference points that most young Victorians acquire through ordinary adolescence.

Victoria’s child safety frameworks (i.e., the Reportable Conduct Scheme, the Child Safe Standards, the Working with Children Check, and the Child Protection system) were identified in Inquiry evidence as containing significant structural gaps in relation to coercive high-control groups. Many such groups fall entirely outside these frameworks because they lack formal organisational structures. Even where they are technically in scope, their closed and insular nature means the disclosure, reporting, and organisational engagement these frameworks rely on are unlikely to occur.

Children in coercive high-control environments often have limited or no contact with mandatory reporters. Where contact does occur, practitioners frequently lack the training, tools, and practice guidance needed to recognise harm in these settings, or respond effectively to the dynamics at play. No agency in Victoria currently collects data categorised by involvement in a coercive high-control group, meaning the scale of harm is unknown and cannot be monitored or evaluated.

What the Committee thinks

The Committee is deeply concerned by Inquiry evidence about children and young people in coercive high-control groups. These are among the most vulnerable and least visible children in Victoria. Deliberate isolation, suppressed disclosure, the removal of protective relationships, and the absence of any external frame of reference mean that harm in these environments is unlikely to come to the attention of services—and, when it does, may not be recognised.

The Committee acknowledges the dedication and skill of the workforce that continues to support and protect Victorian children, often in complex and demanding circumstances. The Committee wishes to emphasise that the issues raised in this Part reflect systemic and structural shortcomings rather than the skills and expertise of individual practitioners.



The Committee considers that the current Victorian child safety framework contains structural gaps that leave this cohort without adequate protection. Closing these gaps requires targeted reform. Informal, comprehensive control over children's lives should not place them beyond the reach of regulatory protections. Where mandatory reporting obligations exist, the conditions that enable it—access to trusted adults, contact with mandated reporters, the capacity to recognise and name harm—are routinely absent in coercive high-control group settings. These are not failures of individual practitioners; they are structural problems that require structural responses.

Children born into coercive high-control groups do not recover a prior identity when they leave. Rather, they must build one, often for the first time in adulthood and without adequate support. The Committee considers this a distinct and severe form of harm that warrants specific recognition in policy and service design. Young people aged 18 to 25 who exit these environments occupy a clear service system gap: no longer eligible for child protection supports, yet poorly served by adult service systems not designed for their particular needs.

The Committee's findings and recommendations in this Part address the regulatory and protective frameworks governing child safety, the capability of practitioners to identify and respond to harm in coercive high-control group settings, awareness-building in schools and universities, and support for young people leaving these environments. These issues are also connected to broader system-level questions addressed in Part 5.

*Note: This Part relies on confidential inquiry evidence received by the Committee that is not directly cited or attributed to protect participant privacy and safety. Readers should be mindful that this evidence supports aspects of the analysis, findings and recommendations in this Part. See *Important note on confidential evidence* in *How the Committee approached a complex task*.*

4.1 The unique risks for children and young people

In considering how coercive high-control groups recruit and control people, the Committee received substantial Inquiry evidence about the distinct circumstances of children and young people, which warranted dedicated consideration in this Report.

Children and young people in these environments face profound structural disadvantage and compounding, acute harm. Unlike adults who may have initially joined a coercive high-control group voluntarily, children have no choice, no external frame of reference, and no meaningful agency over their circumstances. The group's control mechanisms entrench this vulnerable position, isolating children from outside adults who might otherwise identify and respond to harm.

Where abuse occurs—including child sexual abuse—barriers to disclosure are intensified by fear, loyalty, dependence and the absence of any trusted external adult. Sustained exposure to harm during critical developmental periods places these children at heightened risk of severe and complex trauma, including complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD).

Victoria's child safety system was designed to prevent harm to children and to promote safety, responsiveness, and accountability when child abuse is reported in organisations or businesses that provide services 'specifically for children'.¹ However, some coercive high-control groups sit outside these regulatory settings and, even where they are in scope, their closed and insular nature can significantly limit disclosures, mandatory reporting and external visibility. This reduces the capacity of current mechanisms to identify harm arising from collective coercion, ideological control, or group-based systems of abuse, with the result that children in these environments experience vulnerabilities that are not readily detected by existing frameworks.

The Inquiry identified several factors contributing to these particular vulnerabilities, that provide an important foundation for considering questions of an appropriate system response.



Important note on the issues identified in this Part

In Part 4, the Committee identifies a number of concerns arising within the sectors and settings examined. Given the heightened vulnerability of children and young people in coercive high-control groups, the Committee considered it necessary to make targeted findings and recommendations directed at those sectors.

However, the issues identified in Part 4 also reflect broader, whole-of-system challenges raised in evidence. The observations made in this Part should therefore be read as informing Part 5, where the Committee considers system-wide responses and makes recommendations at that level.

4.1.1 Dependence on adults who participate in or allow harm

Our parents were not our refuge. At least, mine weren't. My father was not present for most of my life. And my mother was deeply compromised. Anything I said to her, anything I feared, questioned, or struggled with, would be used for a "spiritual cleansing" or public rebuke. We learned very young that nothing was confidential. Nothing was safe. I lived in a house full of adults and had no one to turn to as a child.

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 5.

Children, unlike adults, have limited capacity to exercise independent judgment about their circumstances or to seek help outside the communities in which they are raised. Their capacity to assess risk, form independent views, and act on their own behalf or interests develops over time and depends heavily on access to trusted adults and

¹ Commission for Children and Young People, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 13 February 2026; Commission for Children and Young People, *Who do the Standards apply to?*, (n.d.), <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/who-do-the-standards-apply-to-page>> accessed 16 April 2026.

external reference points. In coercive high-control groups, both of these conditions are absent or actively suppressed.² Such environments prevent children from developing independence or recognising harm by cutting them off from the people and perspectives that children growing up in more open community settings would ordinarily rely on.

As noted in *Volume 2*, lived experience stakeholders described environments in which questioning group authority was treated as betrayal or moral failure. They also described children being conditioned from an early age to distrust external institutions, including schools, health services and statutory authorities.³ In these circumstances, a child's ability to recognise harm—let alone name it or seek help—is compromised. A joint submission from Bev Cox and Laura McConnell who have lived experience as young people growing up in a coercive high-control group, described the 'developmental impact on children' as 'especially concerning', stating:

From an early age, children are taught to conform unquestioningly, suppressing their natural curiosity, creativity, and individuality. They are often required to sit silently through long, doctrinal meetings and discouraged from asking questions, internalising the message that faith should be blind and doubts are dangerous. Children are discouraged from critical thinking and emotional development.⁴

In coercive high-control groups, the adults responsible for a child's care are often participants in, and in many cases an extension of, the group's control. Rather than a concerned parent or carer being the first to identify and report harm, adults in these settings may actively reinforce group norms, including by applying disciplinary measures against their own children at the direction of group leaders.⁵ Inquiry evidence indicates that, in these settings, parents may be pressured to use corporal punishment in public settings as an expression of loyalty to the group.⁶ In such circumstances, the child often has no safe adult within reach. It is important to note that many parents are victims of coercive high-control groups themselves. See Section 4.6 for a discussion on intergenerational harm.

4.1.2 Isolation from external systems

Inquiry evidence shows that children in coercive high-control groups are often removed or obscured from the institutional contact points that Victoria's child safety system relies on to prevent, identify and respond to harm.⁷ In some cases this can include social and educational institutions where mandatory reporting applies, particularly

² The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 14; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 18; Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19–20; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 5.

³ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Developmental and environmental control'.

⁴ Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 14.

⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Development and environmental control' and 'Child abuse'.

⁶ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Child abuse'.

⁷ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Exploitation'.

in the case for children who are home schooled and have limited, or no, socialisation outside the group.⁸

Victoria's child safety system depends on visibility. The Victorian Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) made clear that for child safety frameworks to 'work effectively and recognise alarm bells, they need to be able to see and engage with children'.⁹ CCYP also identified that the 'assumptions on which child abuse reporting regimes are based may not apply in closed communities',¹⁰ explaining that:

[Child safety] claims may not be identified and investigated through normal avenues and social contacts, such as via teachers, neighbours, or friends of the family, and the accused may not cooperate in taking action.¹¹

For 'closed organisations' that are not engaged with the Child Safe Standards or the Reportable Conduct Scheme, CCYP observed that it may be 'that there is extensive underreporting' and noted that it 'rarely is informed of matters from these organisations'.¹² CCYP also acknowledged that it currently has no specific outreach or engagement strategies directed at children in 'closed communities'.¹³

Similar observations have been made in other comparable jurisdictions.¹⁴ For example, a 2023 evidence brief published by New Zealand's Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Children) on *Safeguarding children in closed communities* noted that 'normal avenues and social contacts' may not apply in these environments.¹⁵ Further insights from New Zealand are outlined in Section 4.11.4 below.

Children born into coercive high-control groups are likely to be more acutely disadvantaged due to isolation from external systems. Dr Jill Aebi-Mytton, a Counselling Psychologist with lived experience, described children as having a 'unique vulnerability':

... unlike adults who may convert, children born into these groups have no choice and no external frame of reference. Their entire world, their sense of self, and their moral compass are constructed within the confines of the group's ideology.¹⁶

Children in this position may not recognise that their circumstances require intervention and may actively resist contact with the external systems best placed to assist them. This has a direct impact on the effectiveness of external intervention. Reflecting on

⁸ See Sections 4.3.3 and 4.8.2 below.

⁹ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹² Ibid., p. 15.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, *Safeguarding children in closed communities: Evidence brief*, New Zealand, 2023, pp. 14–15; UK Metropolitan Police, *Child abuse linked to faith or belief*, (n.d.), <<https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/caa/child-abuse/faith-based-abuse>> accessed 16 April 2026.

¹⁵ Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, *Safeguarding children in closed communities*, pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 1.

attempted interventions in the 1990s,¹⁷ the Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network explained how ‘children were psychologically incapable of identifying their own experiences as abusive or viewing the police as rescuers’.¹⁸

For those of us who were children in the Victorian and NSW homes in 1992, the day the police and social workers came was not a rescue. It was an attack.

When the Committee asks why those investigations failed, why hundreds of children could be assessed only to be sent straight back into the arms of our abusers, the answer is this: you were looking for individual victims, but you found a unified army of indoctrinated children.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 19.

... the authorities expected victims to behave like people with free will, but they were dealing with individuals whose identities and loyalties had been completely captured by the cult; the silence of those children was not evidence of innocence, but rather the most profound evidence of the cult’s total control.

Statement from Dr Steven Hassan, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 85.

Other lived experience stakeholders described significant barriers to children and young people disclosing harmful behaviour to someone outside the group.¹⁹ Current child safety systems largely rely on children being able to disclose harm to a trusted adult or mandated reporter. However, lived experience Inquiry evidence indicates that these conditions are not present in coercive high-control group environments. In particular:

- children ‘may be coached to conceal abuse or denied unsupervised contact with outsiders’;²⁰
- even where contact with mandated reporters does occur, those professionals may lack the training to recognise the indicators of coercive high-control group dynamics²¹ or to conduct interviews in a manner that accounts for the psychological barriers children in these environments face.²²

Barriers to detecting children and young people at risk in coercive high-control groups is discussed further in Section 4.8 below.

¹⁷ New South Wales, Legislative Council, 10 November 1993, *Parliamentary debates*, pp. 5027–5029.

¹⁸ Statement from Dr Steven Hassan, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 85.

¹⁹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Sexual abuse and violence’, ‘Developmental and environmental control’ and ‘Child abuse’.

²⁰ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 36.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 20–21, 85.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is highly concerned about the unique risks and vulnerabilities faced by children and young people in coercive high-control groups, and the lack of child safety system oversight in these groups. Victoria's child safety system depends on visibility, access to trusted adults, and a child's capacity to recognise and communicate harm. In coercive high-control group environments, these foundations are routinely undermined or absent. Adults and carers closest to a child or young person may be participants in, or enforcers of, the group's control. A child's understanding of harm is often shaped entirely within the group, often leaving them without language or confidence to recognise and disclose their experiences. At the same time, the contact points the system relies on to identify risk—schools, health services, mandated reporters—may have little or no contact with the child.

The Committee considers that taken together, these factors create a significant protection gap that requires targeted reform of Victoria's child protection frameworks.

Part 4 considers these issues in detail and identifies opportunities to strengthen Victoria's ability to safeguard and support children and young people affected by coercive high-control groups.

FINDING 36: Children in coercive high-control groups face a distinct combination of risks, including dependence on adults who may enforce the group's control, isolation from external reference points needed to recognise harm, and limited visibility to the contact points on which child safety frameworks rely.

4.2 Distinct impacts on children and young people

Children and young people face unique risks within coercive high-control groups that can make their experiences more severe and their harms more lasting than those experienced by adults. The harmful behaviours and impacts described throughout the Report are not confined to adult members of coercive high-control groups. Children and young people who have lived through similar experiences describe the same patterns of control, harm, and loss. Factors such as age at entry, length of exposure, degree of isolation, and whether a child was born into the group or joined later, each shape the nature and extent of the harm. For children born into coercive high-control groups, the absence of any secure attachment or identity outside the group structure compounds harm in ways that distinguish their experience from others.

Volume 2 of the Report details a comprehensive range of harmful behaviours used by coercive high-control groups, drawn directly from what stakeholders told the Committee. While some behaviours listed are identified as having particular relevance to children and young people, all of the behaviours described in *Volume 2* can affect them. For example, behaviours that have general relevance but also relate to children and young people include 'Restricted access to education', 'Excessive time demands,' 'Restrictions on recreation or rest', and 'Gender-based control'.

To help explain the impacts discussed in Sections 4.3 to 4.6, Table 4.1 below sets out some of the harmful behaviours identified in Inquiry evidence that are directed at, or affect, children and young people, to show their breadth and the varying types of harm they cause.

Table 4.1 Examples of harmful behaviours directed at children and young people

Impact domain(s) affected	Harmful behaviour
Psychological harm	Displacement of parental authority: Group leaders or senior members assuming psychological and existential authority over children—replacing the parent–child bond with loyalty to the group. Children are taught to regard dissenting parents as spiritually unsafe or corrupt, undermining the protective role of the family. Coaching children to deceive protective authorities: Instructing children to present a false picture of safety to teachers, child protection workers, doctors, and other professionals; and to distrust or actively deceive parents who attempt to remove them from the group. Children are also trained to report on family members who question the group.
Psychological harm Personal restriction	Denial of developmental experiences: Preventing children from accessing the ordinary experiences of childhood—including play, peer interaction, recreational activities and cultural participation—that are necessary for healthy social and emotional development. Children are often raised without knowledge of mainstream social norms or the skills needed to function outside the group.
Psychological harm Physical harm	Child sexual abuse: Sexual exploitation or assault of minors, including failure to protect or report abuse.
Psychological harm Personal restriction Physical harm	Child neglect: Failure to provide adequate supervision, care, medical attention or protection.

Source: Volume 2: *In their words*.

4.3 Developmental and psychological harm



Questionnaire insight

100% of respondents born into a coercive high-control group experienced psychological harm:

- 100% experienced ‘fear-based teachings or apocalyptic beliefs’
- 97.1% experienced ‘pressure to remain in the group or fear of punishment if leaving’
- 91.4% experienced ‘mind control techniques or indoctrination’
- 90% experienced ‘isolation from family and friends’
- 87.1% experienced ‘emotional abuse’.



Questionnaire insight

97.5% of respondents recruited through a family member or friend experienced psychological harm:

- 88.4% experienced ‘fear-based teachings or apocalyptic beliefs’
- 88.4% experienced ‘pressure to remain in the group or fear of punishment if leaving’
- 87.6% experienced ‘isolation from family or friends’
- 85.9% experienced ‘mind control techniques or indoctrination’
- 79.3% experienced ‘emotional abuse’.

Inquiry evidence showed that children and young people in coercive high-control groups can experience serious and lasting psychological harm. Anxiety,²³ depression,²⁴ grief,²⁵ shame,²⁶ post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),²⁷ and C-PTSD²⁸ were among the most frequently reported outcomes of psychological harm.

These impacts are consistent with the psychological harms identified in Part 2 of this Report, which are also experienced by children and young people. Dr Ahona Guha, a clinical and forensic psychologist with lived experience, explained that ‘social anxiety [is] very common’ among those affected, and linked this to the ‘threat-based model[s]’ used by coercive high-control groups.²⁹ Reflecting on the experiences of children and young people, Dr Guha stated:

if you have spent a long time within a cult – and especially for kids who have grown up in cults, you have not had any normal developmental experiences. So your capacity to do things like just engage with people in the world and maybe go to work or know how to engage with mainstream education is very stunted.

I think depression and grief are certainly key things I have noticed, because there is a lot of grief, and there was for me, with having realised that some very key developmental years I had sacrificed to this cult, and I got out relatively quickly for a cult. I have

-
- 23 Mix Carpenter, *Submission 1*, p. 1; Lisa Pinson, *Submission 10*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 11*, p. 1; Lived experience statement, Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 29; Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 2; Dr Ahona Guha, Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, closed hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.
- 24 Name withheld, *Submission 11*, p. 1; Lived experience statement, Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 29; Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 8.
- 25 Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 6; Patrick Mclvor, *Submission 177*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 8; Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 2.
- 26 Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 3; Byron Avietti, *Submission 107*, p. 1; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 21; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, pp. 2–3; Name withheld, *Submission 262*, p. 1.
- 27 Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 4; Belinda Young, *Submission 201*, p. 3.
- 28 Mix Carpenter, *Submission 1*, p. 1; Lisa Pinson, *Submission 10*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 8; Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 193*, p. 4; Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 72–74.
- 29 Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

certainly known other people who were in the cult that I was in for about 15 years and spent their entire 20s and part of their early 30s there. Coming to terms with that has been very significant, and depression is a key feature of that.³⁰

The psychological harm experienced by children in coercive high-control group environments is not simply the accumulation of individual adverse experiences. It is the product of sustained coercion occurring during the developmental years when foundational capacities for emotional regulation, secure attachment, identity formation, and trust are still forming.³¹ Inquiry evidence described how behaviours such as fear-based and conditional caregiving place children at elevated risk of disorganised attachment, with consequences that often persist across the life course.³² These may include relational instability, difficulties with self-regulation and increased vulnerability to further harm.³³

4.3.1 Identity is constructed according to the group

When you are raised in an environment where every interaction is scripted and policed, you learn a very specific set of social rules that are useless, and often detrimental, in the outside world. Upon leaving, I quickly realised I was missing a fundamental human instruction manual that everyone else seemed to have been born with.

Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 64.

Growing up in a coercive high-control group can adversely affect children and young people across multiple areas of development. For example, limited access to important life experiences, such as education and employment opportunities, can significantly impact the development of social skills, independence and practical capability. Inquiry evidence indicated that these impacts are often more pronounced for women and girls, whose opportunities may be further constrained.³⁴ Educational disadvantages and a lack of life skills is discussed further in Section 4.3.5.

Inquiry evidence from stakeholders with lived experience indicated that the following developmental areas are commonly impacted:

- **emotional regulation and mental health**, including anxiety, depression, complex trauma and difficulty identifying and processing emotions³⁵

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.6.

³² See Section 4.3.2.

³³ See Section 4.3.4.

³⁴ Part 2, Section 2.5.4 considers the unique harms experienced by women and girls in more detail.

³⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 3; Lived experience statement, Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 29; Name withheld, *Submission 88*, p. 1; Lived experience statement, Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 4; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 24–25, 67 (Deidentified survivor testimonial); Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 7.

- **capacity for trust and healthy relationships**, including lasting difficulties forming attachments and establishing appropriate boundaries, arising from the conditional nature of relationships in the group (erosion of trust and impacts on developing healthy relationships is discussed further below)³⁶
- **social development**, including limited exposure to mainstream social norms, cultural reference points and peer experience outside the group³⁷
- **connection to cultural heritage, citizenship, and extended family**, including severance from cultural identity and family networks through isolation and, in some cases, repeated geographic relocation³⁸
- **physical health and bodily autonomy**, including a limited understanding of personal boundaries, consent and the right to make autonomous decisions.³⁹

Inquiry evidence indicated that impacts on a child's sense of self and personal identity are among the most reported consequences of growing up in a coercive high-control group and are closely connected to each of the developmental harms described above. Coercive high-control groups actively manipulate identity formation by offering a ready-made identity, a prescribed sense of belonging, and a defined purpose, building a young person's identity completely around the group.⁴⁰ Children and young people who experience risk factors such as social isolation or family disruption may be at higher risk of being targeted by coercive high-control groups.⁴¹

For children born into coercive high-control groups, there is no prior identity to draw on and no external frame of reference against which to evaluate their experiences. Inquiry evidence described how, for these children, the group is not a belief system adopted by choice but the entire basis of their world view, relationships, and sense of self (often formed before they have the capacity to question it).⁴² This distinguishes the experience of children born into groups from that of adult recruits. While a first-generation adult member who exits a group loses a community, a person raised in a coercive high-control group who exits also loses their entire identity and any framework for understanding the world outside the group.⁴³

³⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 6; Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 63. See Section 4.3.4.

³⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 181*, p. 1; Lived experience statement, Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 4; Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 64–65.

³⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 32.

³⁹ Mix Carpenter, *Submission 1*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 3. See *Volume 2*.

⁴⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 20; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 34; Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 4; Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 66; Name withheld, *Submission 88*, p. 1; Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Joshua Stagg, President, University of Melbourne Student Union, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Professor Julie Cugin, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Australian Catholic University, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Gloria, closed hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*, p. 11.

⁴² Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 1.

⁴³ Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 18; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 73, 88 (Statement from Dr Janja Lalich); Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is a period of continued susceptibility, and the legal threshold of adulthood does not correspond to the developmental or psychological threshold at which a person is protected from the influence of coercive high-control group dynamics. Survivors can find it difficult to build healthy relationships and understand social and cultural norms, having been cut off from the cultural reference points that most young people experience.⁴⁴ This is compounded for those who did not participate in external education or social activities.

Where young people do exit, they frequently present with overlapping and acute needs that extend well beyond crisis support, including:

- complex trauma, including enduring psychological harm⁴⁵
- educational and vocational deficits⁴⁶
- ongoing social isolation⁴⁷
- financial vulnerability⁴⁸
- difficulty finding a support network outside the group.⁴⁹

Recovery does not involve reclaiming a prior self but rather requires developing identity, social understanding, and independent judgment, often for the first time, in adulthood.⁵⁰ In its submission, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network referred to a survey of 76 survivors of coercive high-control groups which found that 96.1% of respondents reported that their 'sense of self' was an aspect 'growing up in the cult adversely impacted'.⁵¹

Opportunities for improving ongoing support for young people, including those aged 18 to 25, is discussed further in Section 4.11.3 below.

⁴⁴ Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 29; Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 181*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 12; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 37; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 47.

⁴⁶ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 25; Catherine Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Richard Baker, Investigative Journalist, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 51; Laura McConnell, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Ryan Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 190*, pp. 7–8; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 30–32; Name withheld, *Submission 211*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Belinda Young, *Submission 201*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 144*, p. 1; Patrick Mclvor, *Submission 177*, p. 4; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 71; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 36–37.

⁴⁹ Dr Janja Lalich, CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Mark Darbyshire, *Submission 263*, p. 12; Name withheld, *Submission 83*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 104*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 1; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 12.

⁵¹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 30.

4.3.2 Protective relationships are displaced or absent

In the groups where we, as children, were harmed, the boundary between adults and children was often removed. Our protection rights, particularly concerning our vulnerabilities, were denied. We were exposed to harm because no protective barrier existed. This blurring of lines served to lessen or negate parental or caregiver responsibilities, enabling them to contribute more to the organisation, and/or to facilitate the exploitation of children. Both scenarios ultimately benefit the group or its leader.

Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 16.

Harm to children and young people is compounded by the way coercive high-control groups deliberately intervene in and disrupt their relationships with protective adults. Inquiry evidence indicated that groups often systematically displace the parent-child bond, positioning the group as the primary source of psychological and moral authority, and teaching children to regard questioning parents as spiritually corrupt or unsafe.⁵²

The parents are completely not connected to what has happened to the child. The parent just enforces complete denial and refuses to connect with them. The compounding factor is that — this is in my mother's own words, from what she told me, and I am hearing this from many of the kids that I grew up with, whose parents are telling them the exact same thing — they believe that it is not just this lifetime. The child-parent relationship was fractured so long ago. Being told that your child is not actually your child — it is an adult in a small body — changes that parental-child attachment and development.

Miriam Francis, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

Inquiry evidence demonstrates that when protective relationships are absent or have been displaced, children and young people often experience severe and lasting harms, including:

- **Disorganised attachment:** where 'caregivers and the group—the supposed sources of safety and love—are also the source of threat and fear'.⁵³ This undermines a child's core capacity to feel safe in relationships.⁵⁴
- **Impaired development:** exposure to persistent fear and control during formative years impairs psychosocial development. Children who grow up without secure

⁵² Name withheld, *Submission 46*, p. 3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 84 (Statement from Dr Steven Hassan), 88 (Statement from Dr Janja Lalich); Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 2; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 34, 35 (Statement from person with lived experience).

⁵³ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5, 10; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 28.

attachment may need to develop these capacities for the first time upon leaving the group, without having a prior foundation to build on.⁵⁵

- **Serious psychological harm:** including symptoms consistent with C-PTSD, such as persistent depression, anxiety, suicidality, and profound challenges relating to identity and sense of self.⁵⁶

In coercive high-control groups, peer-based protective relationships may also be absent or displaced. Inquiry evidence shows that children are also frequently enlisted to monitor other member's behaviours (including other children), and report on members who express doubt or do not follow rules.⁵⁷

People talk about cults like they're communities. But community implies mutuality, affection, safety. This was surveillance. Emotional relationships were filtered through doctrine—who you could be close to, who you couldn't, what you could say, what was forbidden. We were taught to report on each other. Even as children.

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 5.

I was drafted. As a child “auditor.” At age 12. Forced to interrogate adults. So-called “peers.” And myself. This was called “preparation.” But it was, in reality, textbook grooming. In “course rooms.” Children. Through the explicit use of, including but not limited to, “clay demos,” teddy bears, and dolls. Instructed how to “audition” them. How to extract, including but not limited to, self-admitted Class A felonies of the most serious nature. No boundaries. We were treated as adults. Under the false pretense that any adult with a paid membership to the hotels has the so-called “right to believe” that kids are “adults in small bodies.”

Serge Del Mar, *Submission 235*, p. 7.

4.3.3 Ordinary childhood experiences are denied or limited

The denial of ordinary childhood experience compounds the developmental and psychological harm experienced by children and young people in coercive high-control groups. Inquiry evidence shows that children across multiple groups were routinely prevented from taking part in the activities and social experiences through which children ordinarily grow and connect. These include but are not limited to sport, birthday parties, school excursions, holidays, after-school activities, and friendships with peers outside the group.⁵⁸ These restrictions were a deliberate tactic used by many coercive high-control groups to keep children's entire social world within the group's boundaries.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 37.

⁵⁶ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 39.

⁵⁷ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Surveillance and monitoring'.

⁵⁸ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Labour and financial restrictions', 'Legal and civic restrictions' and 'Developmental and environmental control'.

⁵⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 104*, p. 3; Alister McKeich, *Submission 126*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 2.

When people have few friendships outside the group, they are not exposed to different ideas to the ones held by the group. This limits people's opportunities to assess what are "normal" social interactions and limits people's critical thinking skills. It also means that people's entire social and family life is within the group so if a person is considering leaving, they have a very limited support network outside the group.

Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 2.

My husband experienced severe social anxiety and has never integrated into a community or friendships outside of the cult. Growing up with the same people knowing you all your life, and the enmeshed nature of these relationships makes it very difficult to know how to relate to people in a normal way on the outside. He remains very isolated from relationships and finds it stressful to try to connect or integrate in any type of community or social setting.

Name withheld, *Submission 211*, p. 4.

They were not allowed access to television, books, music, or pop culture of our generation unless the cult decided there was something specific they could show us that could incite fear in us.

Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 3.

It was confusing as a young person to have questions, especially those about an enforced belief system, that were actively shut-down. It was hard to be isolated from other peers at school and in other social networks, to grow up always feeling as though my life was very different. It was crushing for my life to be controlled, to be told my internal thoughts, or things I wanted to experience, were wrong and dangerous.

Name withheld, *Submission 245*, p. 5.

Inquiry evidence described that while individual exclusions might seem minor in isolation, their cumulative effect is a constant, visible separation from peers. This reinforced a sense of difference,⁶⁰ and deepened children's investment in the group's identity.⁶¹ For example, one person with lived experience described how these limitations impacted them:

These suffocating restrictions impeded my healthy development and I feel that I lost any real sense of individuality and identity. I deliberately kept distant from potential friendships because I would inevitably have to disappoint them by missing their birthdays, turning down sleepovers, or not being allowed to see movies with them if they contained violence or magic.⁶²

The cumulative effect is that many people who leave coercive high-control groups after childhood, reach adulthood without the shared experiences that connect people to their peers and their community. Maria Esguerra, a Director of Olive Leaf

⁶⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 10.

⁶² Name withheld, *Submission 181*, p. 1.

Network Australia, observed that children in coercive high-control groups have ‘minimal shared commonalities with the outside world, and support networks are very difficult’.⁶³

4.3.4 Trust is eroded often leading to difficulties in forming healthy relationships

Social isolation ... is not healthy for developing important social skills, such learning to interact with others, form healthy relationships, and understand social norms.

Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 23.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated that children and young people who grow up in coercive high-control groups are commonly raised in environments where affection and acceptance are conditional on obedience.⁶⁴ In these conditions, children are unable to develop the secure attachments that underpin healthy social and emotional development.⁶⁵

Disrupted relationships can have lasting negative consequences for a young person. Inquiry evidence, from people with lived experience who were in coercive high-control groups as children or young people, reported significant difficulties with trust and intimacy in adulthood.⁶⁶ Many struggle to form stable relationships, set appropriate personal boundaries or distinguish care from control. Some individuals tolerate or recreate harmful relational dynamics because they reflect the only model of closeness they have experienced.⁶⁷

I have been vulnerable to exploitative and manipulative relationships ... If we don't have strong support structures, we can be taken advantage of more easily.

Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 4.

These difficulties can extend across any type of personal relationship, including friendships, workplace connections and everyday social interactions. Inquiry evidence indicated that people involved in coercive high-control groups from a young age often lack basic social skills or reference points, which can make ordinary social connection feel unfamiliar or unsafe.⁶⁸ A deidentified survivor testimonial in The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network's submission to the Inquiry that was provided by a person who was raised in a coercive high-control group, reflected on

⁶³ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Control and indoctrination'.

⁶⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 3; Byron Avietti, *Submission 107*, p. 1; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 21.

⁶⁶ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 63; Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 7.

⁶⁷ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 4; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 30; Name withheld, *Submission 259*, p. 1; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 29.

⁶⁸ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 38; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 7; Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 24.

the impacts of this upbringing, including ‘identity confusion’ and difficulties ‘building social rules’:

Simple things like making small talk with a cashier, understanding sarcasm, or knowing how much personal information is appropriate to share with a new acquaintance were completely foreign concepts. I had to consciously study people, to mimic their cadence and gestures, to try and reverse-engineer the basics of normal human connection. It was, and still is, exhausting.

Years later, I still face significant barriers in what should be normal daily interactions.⁶⁹

4.3.5 Educational disadvantages and limited life skills

Education and the development of practical life skills are foundational to a child’s capacity for independent, healthy participation in society. Inquiry evidence showed that children and young people in coercive high-control groups often experience limitations on educational access, participation and attainment, with group structures and practices diminishing the development of skills needed for adult life.

Educational disadvantage

Inquiry evidence indicated that children and young people in coercive high-control groups frequently experience significant educational disadvantage. In the most serious cases, children receive no formal schooling at all.⁷⁰ Where some form of instruction occurs within the group, it tends to be heavily shaped by group doctrine,⁷¹ with core academic subjects (including mathematics, science and history) receiving little or no attention.⁷² Inquiry evidence from people with lived experience described receiving education that was primarily focused on reinforcing group beliefs rather than genuine learning.⁷³

Inquiry evidence identified a range of educational disadvantages experienced by children and young people in some coercive high-control groups, including:

- books and other learning materials, being altered, restricted or censored, to ensure children and young people are not exposed to content which contradicts a group’s beliefs⁷⁴

I am still learning how terrible my education was as I find more and more things I do not know.

Name withheld, *Submission 110*, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 64.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 13; Name withheld, *Submission 110*, p. 1.

⁷¹ Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 3; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 19.

⁷² The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 31.

⁷³ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 2; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Submission 103*, p. 7; Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 19; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 16; Name withheld, *Submission 219*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 110*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 181*, p. 1.

- critical thinking skills being deliberately reduced or removed from the curriculum, limiting children's capacity to question group doctrine or evaluate information independently⁷⁵

We were told in various interviews with school personnel that lessons focused on CTS [critical thinking skills] were removed from the curriculum completely. I don't believe all teaching re: critical thinking skills could be removed. CTS is integrated into the curriculum. From what the school staff told us- one school executives were removing lessons just focused on reinforcing CTS.

Lived experience quote, Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 2.

- children being confined to a narrow range of approved subjects, with further education (including university) forbidden or strongly discouraged⁷⁶

Youths are routinely warned that university education is a distraction from serving God and may lead them away from the organization. Instead, they are encouraged to pursue part-time or low-skilled work that allows more time for preaching activities. This institutional bias against education limits members' access to professional development, financial stability, and social mobility. It also disproportionately impacts women, who are often steered toward domestic roles or part-time employment, reinforcing dependence on male headship.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 20.

- children being assigned adult roles and responsibilities (including missionary work, fundraising and caregiving) which limits time for educational activities.⁷⁷

There has never been a time in my life that I have not been responsible to bring in finances, even from the age of two. Time was spent doing this work and not on my educational or play needs.

Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

Girls and young women often face compounded disadvantage, with strict gender roles actively discouraging pursuit of higher education or professional pathways.⁷⁸ Inquiry evidence from people with lived experience indicated that some groups explicitly teach that education for women is incompatible with their expected role as wives and mothers.⁷⁹ Part 2, Section 2.5.4 considers the unique harms experienced by women and girls in more detail.

⁷⁵ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 2; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 16.

⁷⁶ Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Name withheld, *Submission 110*, p. 1; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Name withheld, *Submission 140*, p. 2; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 72; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 37; Mirriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 157*, p. 2; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*.

⁷⁸ Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Leanne Treloar, *Submission 74*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 4; Leanne Treloar, *Submission 74*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 14.

The consequences of these disadvantages are lasting. Inquiry evidence indicated that many survivors exit their groups without formal qualifications, facing significant barriers to employment, further education and economic independence.⁸⁰

For children attending school, Inquiry evidence shows that the group may actively work to undermine the school's authority and discourage meaningful engagement.⁸¹ Families connected to coercive high-control groups may avoid contact with school staff, including not engaging with attendance plans or re-engagement strategies.⁸² Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer for BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), identified family engagement with schools as a potential risk factor, explaining the importance of 'measuring for connection' to community rather than the prevailing tendency to measure for deficit.⁸³ Reflecting on the Victorian system, Leigh Bartlett told the Committee:

We have got really good policy from zero to eight, and then we have got policy from twelve to twenty-five, and it is a little bit of a no man's land, with respect, from that eight to twelve space. Most service systems that are developed for eight to twelve [year olds] really need to be whole of family, and this is where it is problematic. The flag for me would be: can the school engage the family into the school? If they cannot or there is a real separation from engaging the family – some of the families were suggesting by year 10 a lot of these kids are disconnecting from school. Some families are saying they just do not do formal education at all. Finding out where they are – have we got tools that we use? ... if we start measuring for connection through, you know, asking a student, you can find out a lot by saying, 'Do you do activities outside school?' Then you can start to explore that. You know, parents and carers turning up to parent-teacher interviews – these are big flags if we are not getting that level of connection.⁸⁴

Inquiry evidence indicated that where children may be at risk (from disengagement or other wellbeing concerns), some are coached to present a false appearance of normality to teachers and other school professionals.⁸⁵ This makes it very difficult for staff to identify children at risk and significantly limits schools' overall capacity to recognise and respond to vulnerable children.

Lack of life skills

Beyond restricted access to formal education, Inquiry evidence demonstrated that children and young people in coercive high-control groups often have limited opportunities to develop important life skills. This lack of social or life skill development can have significant consequences, including on their capability to safely exit these groups.

⁸⁰ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 31.

⁸¹ Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 2; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 37.

⁸² Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ See Section 4.8.1 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Developmental and environmental control'.

Inquiry evidence indicated that young people leaving coercive high-control groups often lack foundational skills that most Victorians gain in adolescence, including the ability to navigate basic systems such as Centrelink, secure housing and sustain employment.⁸⁶ Tore Klevjer, President of Cult Information and Family Support, described the ‘huge gaps’ in basic skills and social knowledge experienced by people leaving coercive high-control groups:

They have difficulty applying for jobs because they cannot account for the lost years that they have spent in a cult. Many times they do not know how to function in society. They do not know how to apply for Centrelink; they do not know how to apply for the funding and things that are out there for people. So there is this huge gap with just integrating into society, and some explain it as being like an invisible immigrant, because you do not look like an immigrant but you have stepped out of a completely different cultural setting where your bills were paid for you, where your rent was paid, where you did not control any finances, you may not have owned a phone and you have been cut off from popular media.⁸⁷

Basic social interactions can also present significant challenges for children and young people who have left a coercive high-control group. This includes navigating workplace relationships, understanding unspoken social norms, forming friendships, and managing everyday transactions.⁸⁸ Dr Marisha McAuliffe, an academic and person with lived experience, reflected on the impacts of growing up in an ‘insular’ community, describing it as:

not healthy for developing important social skills, such [as] learning to interact with others, form healthy relationships, and understand social norms ... social skills such as sharing and cooperation, empathy, and the development of self-esteem, are missing. The skills crucial for building positive relationships and navigating social situations throughout life are not formed or strengthened.⁸⁹

A joint submission from several lived experience advocates explained that limited life skill building in coercive high-control groups often leads to ‘disrupted life trajectories’,⁹⁰ and is:

leaving survivors with hidden deficits in independent judgment, boundary-setting, and navigating unfamiliar systems. Skills are frequently cultivated in service of compliance, over-functioning, or group-defined roles rather than genuine autonomy. These distortions may remain masked until tested by real-world demands, complicating recovery and reintegration.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 56–58; Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 6; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 39; Name withheld, *Submission 258*, pp. 20–21; Name withheld, *Submission 144*, p. 1; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

⁸⁷ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

⁸⁸ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 64; Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 5; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 23.

⁹⁰ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 29.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated that the practical consequences of these deficits are wide-ranging. The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network reported that ‘deliberate isolation and educational deprivation’ left survivors ‘ill-equipped for the practical demands of mainstream life’.⁹² Many face significant challenges in areas including financial literacy, obtaining and maintaining employment, and accessing support services.⁹³ The Network noted that, in a survey of 76 survivors of coercive high-control groups, only 18.7% completed a high school education while in the group, creating enduring barriers to higher education, stable employment, and participation in skilled professions.⁹⁴

Improving support for children and young people exiting coercive high-control groups to build foundational life skills is discussed further in Section 4.11.

4.3.6 Impacts are often cumulative and lifelong

The harm experienced by children and young people in coercive high-control environments is serious and cumulative. Inquiry evidence demonstrates that, in many cases, these impacts do not resolve in the short-term after a person exits a group and instead require long-term support to address.

The physical health consequences of these harms are also significant. Inquiry evidence identified that adults who were raised in coercive high-control groups frequently present with complex psychological presentations alongside chronic health conditions. These include chronic pain,⁹⁵ autoimmune conditions,⁹⁶ and other physical impacts associated with sustained stress and trauma during developmental years.⁹⁷

Several Inquiry stakeholders drew on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) framework to demonstrate the cumulative effect of harmful behaviours by coercive high-control groups. ACEs are a broad category of harmful events children may encounter during childhood, spanning three main areas: various forms of abuse, neglect, and instability or dysfunction within the home environment.⁹⁸ A 1998 study developed an ACE questionnaire to score childhood adversity exposure, finding that higher scores were associated with greater risk of poor health outcomes in adulthood.⁹⁹ The ACE questionnaire provides a useful framework for assessing greater risk of adverse outcomes and continues to be used in government research. For example, in 2022 the Australian Institute of Criminology published the results of

⁹² The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 36.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹⁵ Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, p. 6; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 3; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 15; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 39.

⁹⁶ Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, p. 6; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 4; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 39.

⁹⁷ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 63; Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, pp. 6–7; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁹⁸ Department of Health, *Supporting people experiencing a mental health issue who are justice involved*, Victorian Government, 2025, p. 64.

⁹⁹ Vincent Felitti, et al., ‘Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study’, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1998.

an ACE study to assess ‘adverse childhood experiences and trauma among young people in the youth justice system’.¹⁰⁰

Inquiry evidence noted that children and young people in coercive high-control group settings frequently accumulate high ACE scores,¹⁰¹ ‘associated with increased risk of serious health conditions, addiction and shorter lifespan’.¹⁰² For example, the Olive Leaf Network Australia advised that 67% of people in their ACE-study had a score of six which was associated with a reduction in life expectancy of approximately 20 years.¹⁰³ Expanding on the implications of adverse childhood experiences, Maria Esguerra, a Director of Olive Leaf Network Australia, told the Committee that they are ‘the number one risk to mental health and physical health ... If children are having a lot of adverse childhood experiences and neglect, their lives are going to be incredibly shortened and harmed’.¹⁰⁴

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The Committee is deeply concerned by the weight and consistency of the evidence it received about the harm experienced by children and young people in coercive high-control groups. It is often severe, long-lasting and endures beyond childhood. In many cases the harm extends beyond their involvement with a coercive high-control group, with survivors continuing to experience difficulties in social and professional settings. The harm experienced by children and young people is not incidental or the product of isolated incidents. It arises from environments that are deliberately structured to prevent healthy development from occurring. The Committee is of the view that children in these environments are systematically denied the conditions required for development, including secure and protective relationships, autonomy, ordinary social experiences, and meaningful access to the outside world.

The Committee is particularly concerned about the situation of children born into coercive high-control groups. These children do not experience a period of healthy development before harm begins. Their sense of self, their understanding of relationships, and their framework for making sense of the world are formed entirely within the group. The Committee heard that when these children eventually leave, they are not recovering a prior identity; they are constructing one for the first time in adulthood, often without adequate support. The Committee considers this a qualitatively distinct and severe form of harm, warranting specific recognition in policy and service design.

Along with other developmental harms, restricted access to education is often a deliberate feature of how coercive high-control groups operate. By limiting curriculum, suppressing

¹⁰⁰ Catia Malvaso, et al., ‘Adverse childhood experiences and trauma among young people in the youth justice system’, *Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice*, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 39–40; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 51; Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, p. 6.

¹⁰² Mirriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 40. The Committee notes that The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network’s submission highlighted their findings from an ACE study on 76 survivors which also showed that most survivors ‘will have a reduced life span of 20 years’. See The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁴ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

critical thinking, and discouraging further education or contact with the outside world, these groups reduce children's capacity to question doctrine and to function independently after leaving. Girls and young women typically experience compounded disadvantage, with gender-based restrictions further narrowing their educational and vocational opportunities. The cumulative effect is substantial. Children denied access to formal education and normal peer relationships face barriers not only to employment and economic participation, but also to social belonging and identity formation.

Inquiry evidence makes clear that the consequences of this harm extend well beyond childhood. Survivors experience long-term impacts across mental and physical health, their capacity to form relationships, economic security, and participation in community life. The Committee is concerned that these outcomes are not yet adequately reflected in how services are designed, funded or delivered, and that survivors frequently encounter systems that are neither equipped to recognise the nature of their experience nor resourced to support the depth of recovery required.

The Committee considers that children and young people in coercive high-control groups represent some of the most vulnerable and least visible children in Victoria. The combination of deliberate isolation, suppressed disclosure and the removal of protective relationships means these children are unlikely to come to the attention of services, and may lack the ability to identify or articulate their own harm. This visibility gap must be addressed. Any effective response must be grounded in a clear understanding of the developmental harm documented by this Inquiry. Barriers to detecting and supporting children and young people, and potential reforms to address those barriers, are examined in Sections 4.8 to 4.11 below. This includes identifying opportunities for improving contact with organisations and services involved in child protection, including schools and other key contact points for children and young people.

FINDING 37: The harm caused to children and young people in coercive high-control groups is serious, cumulative and the impact is often lifelong. It results from sustained coercive behaviour during critical development years and leads to enduring impacts on health, relationships, economic security and participation in community life.

FINDING 38: Children born into coercive high-control groups face a distinct and severe form of harm. Their entire sense of self, relationships, and worldview are constructed by the group before they have the capacity to question it. When they leave, they are not recovering a prior identity, they are building one for the first time.

FINDING 39: Coercive high-control groups often deliberately remove the protective relationships that children depend on to recognise and disclose harm. The absence of safe adults, combined with enforced secrecy and loyalty, leaves these children among the most vulnerable and least visible in Victoria.

FINDING 40: Educational disadvantage in coercive high-control groups is often deliberate and designed to limit children’s capacity to question group doctrine, causing long-term and enduring harm. Many people leave these groups with limited qualifications and without foundational life skills, resulting in ongoing barriers to employment and economic independence.

4.4 Physical harm

It became very apparent that [redacted] had been seriously assaulted, by extensive bruising on his legs; courtesy of [redacted] Belt.

It was reported that [redacted] had been shaking with terror from these assaults. His natural amiability and cheerful personality disappeared. [Redacted] had no understanding of why he was being punished. It has taken many years for a lot of the details of these incidents to come out.

Name withheld, *Submission 54*, p. 2.

As outlined in *Volume 2*, Inquiry evidence indicated that children and young people in coercive high-control groups can experience or be exposed to physical harm that has serious and lasting consequences.¹⁰⁵ In these settings, physical harm often occurs during critical periods of child development,¹⁰⁶ is often normalised within the group environment,¹⁰⁷ and typically takes place in circumstances where children have no access to adults who can act protectively on their behalf.¹⁰⁸

Inquiry evidence indicated that children and young people experience physical impacts, including:

- medical conditions occurring in childhood such as chronic pain, fatigue, and untreated physical injury persisting into adulthood¹⁰⁹
- permanent physical injury, disability or serious illness resulting from delayed or denied medical treatment¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ The impacts of physical harm experienced by members of coercive high-control groups are discussed in Part 2. This Section focuses specifically on children and young people, for whom physical harm results in distinct and compounding consequences due to their stage of development

¹⁰⁶ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 28; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 14; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 24; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 3; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 100*, p. 2; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 15; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

¹⁰⁸ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 14; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 16, 19; Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 2; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 14; Ben Shenton, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁹ Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, p. 6; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 15; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 15; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Submission 103*, p. 6.

¹¹⁰ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 62; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 30; Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 1; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

- adverse childhood experiences associated with an increased risk of chronic health conditions and reduced life expectancy¹¹¹
- serious and often enduring psychological injury arising from physical harm¹¹²
- a normalised tolerance of physical harm that often persists after leaving a coercive high-control group, affecting help-seeking behaviour and increasing vulnerability to further abuse.¹¹³

4.5 Child sexual abuse

I was sexually abused by my uncle as a child. When I disclosed this to elders, I was interviewed alone at age 9 without either of my parents present. I was asked humiliating, degrading questions: where did he touch me, where did I touch him, did I think he liked it, did I like it, what was I wearing, why didn't I just leave, where were my parents? It was interrogative and accusatory. I was retraumatised, and nothing came of it. The police were never contacted — in fact, we were explicitly told not to go to the police. My mother was shunned just for suggesting it might be necessary ...

Name withheld, *Submission 72*, pp. 2–3.

Child sexual abuse within coercive high-control groups is shaped by the features of these environments that enable it to occur, keep it concealed and intensify the harm experienced.¹¹⁴ Inquiry evidence demonstrated a range of impacts experienced by survivors of child sexual abuse occurring within coercive high-control groups, including:

- **Ongoing psychological distress from abuse:** people who experienced child sexual abuse reported experiencing ongoing psychological distress, including high rates of C-PTSD.¹¹⁵
- **Delayed identification of abuse:** children raised in coercive high-control environments were, in some cases, provided with frameworks of consent and bodily autonomy that were inconsistent with broader community standards. This affected their capacity to identify what had occurred as abuse, often delaying recognition and help-seeking until adulthood.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Mirriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 1; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 39; Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, p. 6.

¹¹² Name withheld, *Submission 193*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 72*, p. 3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 24.

¹¹³ Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 62.

¹¹⁴ Part 2 examines the range of harmful impacts of sexual abuse occurring within coercive high-control groups. This Section focuses specifically on child sexual abuse and how the features of high-control environments shape the occurrence of abuse, enable its concealment, and intensify its impacts on survivors. Where the Committee has referred to the 'features' of coercive high-control groups, this encompasses their dynamics/characteristics, behaviours and impacts as canvassed in Part 2.

¹¹⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 193*, p. 4; Lived experience quote, Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 47.

¹¹⁶ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5, 11; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 21–22; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, pp. 1–2; Mix Carpenter, *Submission 1*, p. 1; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 29; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 37; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 25.

- **Reduced capacity to engage with institutions and services:** where abuse was perpetrated or ignored by leaders or senior members of the coercive high-control group, there are additional impacts arising from the authority those figures held within the group. These included lasting effects on survivors' capacity to engage with institutions and professional services in later life, including a loss of trust in institutions and services.¹¹⁷
- **Loss of family and community support networks:** children who reported abuse occurring within coercive high-control groups, or whose families sought external assistance, were often subject to disciplinary or social consequences within the group, such as shunning. In some cases, this resulted in the loss of access to family and community networks that would otherwise have constituted primary sources of support.¹¹⁸
- **Prolonged harm arising from failure to report:** in a number of instances, it was reported that leadership or adults within the coercive high-control group were aware of abuse but did not report it to external authorities, and often discouraged victims and their families from doing so.¹¹⁹ This absence of an adequate institutional response had ongoing effects on survivor wellbeing and recovery.¹²⁰
- **Delayed access to support:** features of coercive high-control environments, including restricted access to external relationships, distrust of external institutions, and ongoing community pressure, affected survivors' access to support. As a result, significant periods of time elapsed in some cases before survivors were able to access appropriate services such as counselling or other wellbeing support.¹²¹

Inquiry evidence also suggested that children and young people in coercive high-control groups may experience elevated rates of child sexual abuse compared to the general population.¹²² For example, Dr Jill Aebi-Mytton noted that preliminary results from a study of 113 Australians formerly involved in coercive high-control groups showed 53.4% reported child sexual abuse.¹²³

The closed nature of coercive high-control groups has implications for the experiences of survivors of child sexual abuse that extend beyond the period of abuse itself. Children in these settings are frequently isolated from teachers, health professionals, and others who serve as mandatory reporters under Victorian law, limiting opportunities for early identification and intervention (as noted above in Section 4.1.2).

¹¹⁷ Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 2; Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, pp. 22–23; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Volume 4: Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse*, 2017, pp. 17, 90–92; Sexual Assault Services Victoria, *Submission 209*, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 40; Mirriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 4; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 7.

¹¹⁹ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Arieth Bullmann, *Submission 138*, p. 2; Mirriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 4.

¹²⁰ Arieth Bullmann, *Submission 138*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 18.

¹²¹ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 3.

¹²² Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 1; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 15; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 36.

¹²³ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 4.

Inquiry evidence indicated that this isolation can be: physical, through restricted contact with anyone external to the group, including teachers, health professionals and other mandatory reporters;¹²⁴ and/or social and psychological, where children lack the language or understanding needed to identify or describe abuse.¹²⁵ Inquiry evidence also described instances where children were coached to conceal or minimise concerning behaviour when contact with external authorities did occur.¹²⁶

Inquiry evidence included instances where child sexual abuse went unaddressed for extended periods, with the closed character of the coercive high-control groups limiting the external oversight that might otherwise have prompted earlier action.¹²⁷ CCYP identified the 'secretive, insular and closed nature and dynamics' of coercive high-control groups as a key barrier to regulatory engagement.¹²⁸

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is deeply alarmed that children in coercive high-control groups face a heightened risk of physical and sexual abuse, and that the features of these environments systematically compound that risk. Children cannot consent to harm, may not recognise that harm is occurring, and are dependent on the protection of adults who, in these environments, may be responsible for the abuse or complicit in concealing it.

The Committee understands that trauma from physical harm and child sexual abuse in coercive high-control group settings is frequently not identified or treated until well into adulthood, if at all. The isolation of children from mandatory reporters, the suppression of disclosures by group leadership, and the absence of adequate frameworks and safe pathways for children to identify and name abuse significantly reduce the opportunities for detection, intervention and recovery. This means that the serious health consequences resulting from this harm may remain hidden for many years, contributing to a significant and largely unquantified burden on individuals and on public health and social support systems.

The Committee acknowledges the profound and lasting harm experienced by survivors of child sexual abuse and physical abuse occurring within coercive high-control groups, including the loss of family and community support networks that often follow disclosure.

The Committee considers that the closed and insular nature of coercive high-control groups demands targeted regulatory and protective responses that do not rely solely on children or families within these groups to initiate contact with external authorities. This issue is considered further in Sections 4.9 and 4.10.

¹²⁴ Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 2; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 26; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 34.

¹²⁵ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 21–22; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 2; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 18; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19–20; Patrick McIvor, Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

¹²⁶ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 21–22; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 34, 36; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 4.

¹²⁷ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Restrictions on education and information', 'Restrictions on relationships and social life', 'Legal and civic restrictions', 'Sexual abuse and violence' and 'Exploitation'.

¹²⁸ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, pp. 5–6, 17.

FINDING 41: Children and young people in coercive high-control groups may experience physical harm that is not recognised, disclosed, or treated at the time it occurs. Because of their age and stage of development, this harm is compounded and often results in serious, long-term health consequences, that may remain unidentified until adulthood, placing a significant, largely unquantified burden on health and social support systems.

FINDING 42: Children in coercive high-control groups are particularly vulnerable to child sexual abuse because of how these environments operate, including isolation from mandatory reporters (such as teachers and health professionals), the suppression of disclosures, and inadequate frameworks to recognise and respond to abuse. These conditions significantly limit opportunities for detection, intervention and recovery, and can result in profound and long-lasting harm for survivors.

4.6 Intergenerational harm

The neglect I endured was not something I could simply leave behind. It has caused a cascade of intergenerational trauma that affects every aspect of my life and the lives of my children.

Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 63.

Parenting practices and family environments within coercive high-control groups are frequently shaped, and constrained, by the group's systems of control. Where a parent has been involved in a coercive high-control group (including being raised in one themselves), their parenting is often shaped by that experience. Inquiry evidence shows that this minimises capacity to provide healthy caregiving, normalises coercive discipline, and entrenches children's isolation from important protective factors.¹²⁹

Inquiry evidence identified disrupted attachment as a common outcome of multigenerational involvement in coercive high-control groups.¹³⁰ Adults raised in these environments may have experienced communal child-rearing that reduced contact with primary caregivers, emotional unavailability from parents who were under significant group pressure, or the normalisation of punitive discipline.¹³¹ These experiences undermine their ability to form, maintain and model secure attachments with their own children.

People with second- or later-generation involvement in coercive high-control groups reported that they often lacked the parenting frameworks, emotional literacy, and

¹²⁹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 6, 21; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 13; Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 1; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 59; Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 56.

¹³⁰ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 28; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 9.

¹³¹ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 63; Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 3; Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 2.

external support networks needed to prevent the continuation of harmful patterns. Many described carrying unresolved issues from their own childhood that were never recognised or addressed.¹³²

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee recognises that intergenerational harm in coercive high-control groups is a structural consequence of these environments, rather than simply the result of individual family dynamics. Adults raised in coercive high-control groups frequently lack the parenting frameworks, emotional literacy, and external support networks needed to break harmful patterns; often because they experienced harm themselves. The Committee considers that targeted, trauma-informed support for parents with lived experience of coercive high-control groups is an essential component of any effective response to the harms these environments cause.

Support for children and young people in coercive high-control groups is considered further in Section 4.11 below.

FINDING 43: Intergenerational harm is a common structural outcome of coercive high-control group environments.

4.7 Reframing 'recruitment': how children and young people become involved in coercive high-control groups

Children and young people often become involved in coercive high-control groups in ways that are fundamentally different from adults. Understanding this distinction is critical to improving child protection and wellbeing responses, as frameworks built around adult concepts of 'choice to join' or 'membership' are poorly suited to recognising the unique vulnerability of children.

The term 'recruitment' implies a degree of choice and agency that does not reflect how most children and young people come to be part of a coercive high-control group.¹³³ Maria Esguerra, a Director of Olive Leaf Network Australia, raised concerns about framing children's involvement in coercive high-control groups similarly to adults, stating that:

Using terms like 'recruitment' and 'membership' in the context of children is not semantic, it is actually a primary barrier to protection. The language incorrectly assigns agency to a child, misclassifying a child protection crisis as a religious or a lifestyle choice.¹³⁴

¹³² Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 4; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 39; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 38.

¹³³ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 19.

¹³⁴ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

Inquiry evidence shows that children who grow up in coercive high-control groups never made a decision to join. They were born into these environments, brought in through a parent or carer's involvement, or targeted during periods of acute vulnerability when their capacity for free and informed decision-making was significantly compromised.

4.7.1 Experiences of children born into coercive high-control groups

The majority of people with lived experience who provided evidence to the Inquiry were raised from birth in coercive high-control groups. For these individuals, the group was not something they chose or even encountered later in life, it was the only world they had ever known.¹³⁵



Questionnaire insight

22.1 % of respondents were born into a coercive high-control group.

From infancy, their relationships, education, daily routines, values, and sense of identity were shaped entirely within the group's authority structure.¹³⁶ With no alternative reference points, they had little opportunity to question, evaluate or resist what they were taught.¹³⁷

Inquiry evidence described children born into coercive high-control groups as being placed into this environment, instead of being recruited into it.¹³⁸ For example, Olive Leaf Network Australia submitted that children born into such environments are not recruits but 'captives, placed into systems of coercive control by caregivers who are often manipulated themselves'.¹³⁹

Given the significant amount of Inquiry evidence received from and about people born into coercive high-control groups, Box 4.1 below provides some examples to demonstrate how the harms they experience compound over time in ways that differ substantially from the experiences of adults who were recruited.

¹³⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Relational recruitment'.

¹³⁶ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Relational recruitment' and 'Developmental and environmental control'.

¹³⁷ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 1.

¹³⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 88*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 225*, p. 1; Mark Darbyshire, *Submission 263*, p. 5; Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 18.

¹³⁹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 6.

Box 4.1 Experiences of people born into coercive high-control groups — Examples from evidence

... the organisation systematically dismantles personal agency and replaces it with loyalty to the organisation. This is especially damaging to children raised in the group, as their psychological development is shaped within an environment of surveillance, blame, and fear.

Name withheld, *Submission 100*, p. 1.

I realized that since birth, I had been coerced into handing over my autonomy, identity, self-expression, and voice.

Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 4.

Unfortunately for me, I was born into it. Recruitment was simple for them; I was vulnerable and knew no other reality nor was I given a choice.

Name withheld, *Submission 88*, p. 1.

Like many others who were born into or brought into a cult as children, the practices were instilled or enforced before we had the time to understand ourselves. Before we had the ability to tune into our internal voice, before we learnt to pay attention to what was happening in our bodies, before we could form an idea of what a boundary was; before we could connect to our own identity.

Miriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

For over three decades, I lived with the deep belief that I was fundamentally broken, unable to live up to the standards demanded by the organisation. It has taken intensive therapy, rebuilding, and the support of professionals to understand that what I experienced was not my fault — it was abuse.

Name withheld, *Submission 72*, p. 1.

My client explains that children raised in the cult were taught from birth that they have no right to their own bodies, minds, or personal realities.

Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 3.

Those who become members by birth, grow up with the idea that the group is normal because this is where they receive their education and socialization. Second-generation members who have been pulled out of cults may not feel that they have been rescued at all. Instead, they have left all they have ever known.

Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 33.

Sarah, the first of the girls that I met, sadly, died of a drug overdose a number of years ago, and I was given the privilege of speaking at her funeral to give the eulogy. It was directly caused by her involvement in the cult, and she had been stolen at birth

Lex De Man, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39.

(Continued)

Box 4.1 Continued

... there are profound developmental deficiencies and neglect. If you look at psychology theories – sociocultural and ecological attachment theories and Erikson’s stages of development – you can see how catastrophic this upbringing is. For children raised in cults it is particularly difficult because they lack fundamental developmental care and infrastructure

Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

4.7.2 Experiences of children brought in by parents or carers

As a child, my parents joined the church, and I had no option but to follow the practices and teachings from a young age.

Name withheld, *Submission 245*, p. 1.

Where children are not born into coercive high-control groups, they frequently become involved because a parent or carer joins. In these cases, children exercise no choice or agency in entering the group. Inquiry evidence described a range of methods and tactics used by coercive high-control groups to recruit adults,¹⁴⁰ and noted that a consequence of recruitment was children joining alongside parents or family members.¹⁴¹



Questionnaire insight

38.2% of respondents were brought into a coercive high-control group by a family member or friend.

As with children born into coercive high-control groups, Inquiry evidence raised concerns about the absence of agency experienced by children who enter groups through their parents or carers. These children do not consent or chose to join the group and have no meaningful ability to refuse. Inquiry evidence showed that once inside the group, children are exposed to the same harmful practices as those born into such environments, and that group dynamics progressively reshape the parent-child relationship.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Recruitment methods’ and ‘Recruitment tactics’.

¹⁴¹ Alister McKeich, *Submission 126*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 245*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 216*, p. 1; Heidi Campbell, *Submission 53*, p. 1; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 7.

¹⁴² Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 34, 37; Mirriam Francis, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

4.7.3 Targeting at-risk young people

As a teenager in a [redacted], I was recruited ... At an age when many of us were seeking belonging and identity beyond our families, a Friday night youth group appeared to be harmless fun. But what followed was far from harmless.

Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 4.

Inquiry evidence showed that some groups exploit social isolation, personal crisis, and cultural or language barriers to recruit people and progressively deepen control over them, often without the person recognising what is happening to them.¹⁴³ These tactics are also used to recruit young people.

Beyond those born into or brought into coercive high-control groups in childhood, Inquiry evidence described deliberate and targeted recruitment of young people, particularly during periods of vulnerability.¹⁴⁴ People with lived experience reported that young people were approached in adolescence or early adulthood and, through incremental contact and escalating social investment, became enmeshed in group life. In some cases, this process led young people to sever ties with their families altogether.¹⁴⁵ In others, young people were encouraged to significantly reduce contact with their families and to conceal their involvement in the group, including from their parents.¹⁴⁶

4.7.4 The absence of informed consent

Children are often forced to participate, regardless of their understanding or consent, just like I was.

Name withheld, *Submission 83*, p. 3.

Many children ... are now the leaders of the cult and have never left.

This may be explained by them as a 'choice' but I believe that instead, the cult operates to coercively ensure that leaving the cult is near-impossible, especially when one has grown up in that environment and is essentially brainwashed.

Alister McKeich, *Submission 126*, p. 3.

Inquiry stakeholders noted that authorities may decline to act in relation to allegations of harm occurring in coercive high-control group situations on the basis that the person has *chosen* to be there.¹⁴⁷ This is wholly inappropriate when applied to children.

¹⁴³ See *Volume 2* and Part 2.

¹⁴⁴ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Targeting vulnerability'.

¹⁴⁵ Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 8, 50; Sandra Dawson, *Submission 215*, p. 1; Patrick McIvor, *Submission 177*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Van Pham, *Submission 66*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 268*, p. 1; Jim Spencer, *Submission 174*, pp. 4–5; Catherine Carey, *Submission 112*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁴⁷ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 20; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 13; Sue Winter, *Submission 2a*, p. 12.

For children born into or raised within these groups, there is no moment at which they choose to join or participate, and no meaningful exercise of agency. Olive Leaf Network Australia emphasised:

Children cannot choose to be exploited. They cannot choose to sacrifice themselves for a “greater cause.” Children cannot consent to harm. While a parent or responsible caregiver participates in a group, their experience must be viewed as separate from their child’s; the child is not an extension of them. Parental responsibility is to ensure safeguards and adequate care and protection for their child, aligned with the child’s needs and developmental stage.¹⁴⁸

Evidence showed that these dynamics are sometimes obscured in practice by a focus on a child’s apparent willingness to remain within a coercive high-control group. It was explained that children raised within coercive high-control groups often have no ‘external frame of reference’ against which to assess their own circumstances.¹⁴⁹ In addition, the psychological, social and practical consequences of leaving are often so severe that departure feels impossible.¹⁵⁰ In this context, Inquiry evidence noted that a child or young person’s failure to disclose harm or seek outside help is not a reliable indicator of their safety. Instead, it may reflect the extent to which the group’s control has shaped their understanding of their own situation.¹⁵¹

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The evidence received by the Committee makes clear that the ways children and young people become involved in coercive high-control groups are significantly structurally different from how adults become involved. The majority of lived experience evidence received to the Inquiry came from people who were born into these groups and never had any opportunity to choose their involvement.

The Committee believes that this reality is poorly reflected in current understandings of coercive high-control groups which are built around adult concepts of recruitment, joining and membership. Where there is an assumption that an initial act of joining can be consented to or refused, this fails to recognise the situation of children in coercive high-control groups. Current understanding incorrectly assigns agency to children that they do not have, creating a structural barrier to appropriate identification and response.

Regardless of how a young person becomes involved in a coercive high-control group, the common thread is the absence of any genuine or informed choice. The Committee affirms that a child or young person’s presence in a coercive high-control group should not be treated as evidence of consent or willing participation. The absence of visible resistance,

¹⁴⁸ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 23.

¹⁴⁹ Statement from Dr Steven Hassan, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 85; Statement from Dr Janja Lalich, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 88; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁰ Alister McKeich, *Submission 126*, p. 3.

¹⁵¹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 20–21; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 34; Serge Del Mar, *Submission 235*, p. 6; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 4.

help-seeking, or disclosure of harm is not a reliable indicator that a young person is safe. Rather, it may reflect the extent to which the group has shaped that young person's understanding of their own situation from an early age. Treating this absence as consent risks compounding the harm already done.

The Committee considers that existing child protection frameworks, and the language and assumptions that inform them, need to be examined in light of this evidence. Where the frameworks assume an initial act of choice or voluntary participation, they will fail to adequately recognise or respond to the circumstances of children and young people in coercive high-control groups. Barriers to supporting children and young people in coercive high-control groups are considered further in Section 4.8 below. Opportunities to improve Victoria's child protection and safety frameworks to better respond to harms by coercive high-control groups are discussed in Sections 4.9 and 4.10 below.

FINDING 44: Children who are born into coercive high-control groups, or are brought into them by parents or carers, are not recruited. They do not consent to join or participate in the group, and they have no real ability to leave.

FINDING 45: Using the language of 'recruitment' and 'membership' in relation to children in coercive high-control groups incorrectly suggests that they have agency or choice. This framing can create barriers to identifying and responding to their situation as a child protection matter.

FINDING 46: A child or young person's failure to disclose harm, seek help, or resist control is not evidence of safety or willing participation in a coercive high-control group. It may instead reflect how profoundly the group has shaped their understanding of their own circumstances.

FINDING 47: Coercive high-control groups may deliberately target adolescents and young people, particularly during periods of vulnerability. These groups may exploit social isolation, personal crisis, and cultural and language barriers to draw young people in and deepen control.

4.8 Barriers to detecting harm and accessing support for children and young people

Children and young people in coercive high-control groups face distinct and compounding barriers to identification of harm and access to support. Inquiry evidence indicated that these barriers are not incidental but, in many cases, are a direct consequence of the environments in which these children live.¹⁵² Several features of coercive high-control groups operate together to limit the likelihood that harm will be detected, reported, or responded to by external agencies.

4.8.1 Children may not display visible or apparent indicators of harm

With this kind of group, these children and youths normally do not go and seek help. They are sometimes very nice, very easy in schools – they do not make trouble – so they are very often overlooked. It is important also to school teachers into being aware that the quietest, nicest child in class might be the most endangered, so to look out for it.

Ulrike Schiesser, Managing Director, Federal Office for Cult Affairs (Austria), public hearing, Melbourne, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

Inquiry evidence shows that a distinct barrier to identifying children at-risk in coercive high-control groups is that they may appear outwardly functional and engaged with services. The absence of visible or apparent indicators of harm can suppress professional concern and delay identification of risk.

Maria Esguerra from Olive Leaf Network Australia explained that children's outward presentation may be actively misleading, noting that 'just because someone is smiling' or appears 'incredibly well behaved and silent' does not indicate the absence of abuse. Instead, these behaviours may reflect 'extreme authoritarian control' and, in many cases, dissociation, requiring protection agencies to 'dive deeper'.¹⁵³ Similar observations were made by Ulrike Schiesser from Austria's Federal Office for Cult Affairs who observed that children from coercive high-control groups are sometimes very well-behaved and may consequently be overlooked and their harm hidden.¹⁵⁴ This behavioural presentation can obscure indicators of harm and contribute to ongoing invisibility.

The Department of Education noted that while the 'PROTECT guidance and training are designed to apply to all forms of harm and child abuse', the 'approach supports schools staff to respond to concerns based on observable physical and behavioural indicators'.¹⁵⁵ This focus may limit the identification of harm where abuse is

¹⁵² See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Developmental and environmental control' and 'Exploitation'.

¹⁵³ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁴ Ulrike Schiesser, Managing Director, Federal Office for Cult Affairs (Austria), public hearing, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

¹⁵⁵ Department of Education, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 20 February 2026, p. 9.

psychological, coercive, or cumulative, and where children and young people do not present with overt signs. The need to strengthen the ability of agencies with child-safety responsibilities to identify and understand the distinct and non-traditional indicators of harm affecting children and young people in coercive high-control groups is considered further in Sections 4.9 and 4.10 below.

4.8.2 Home schooling can isolate children from external oversight

Inquiry evidence raised concerns that home schooling children may be used by coercive high-control groups to further isolate them from system oversight. Schools represent one of the most significant and consistent points of contact between children and adults who are positioned to identify and respond to harm. Teachers and other school staff are mandatory reporters, and the school environment offers an important setting in which indicators of harm may be observed by adults outside the group.¹⁵⁶ However, this protective environment is not available to children who are home schooled.

Dr Janja Lalich, Chief Executive Officer of the Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, observed that ‘many groups are able to escape scrutiny because of homeschooling’.¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Ulrike Schiesser, Managing Director of Austria’s Federal Office of Cult Affairs, noted that children who are home schooled can be ‘even more controlled and they have no possibility to build up friendships outside and even see that other families are different’.¹⁵⁸

While mandatory reporting obligations continue to apply where school staff have reasonable grounds for concern prior to a child’s withdrawal from a school,¹⁵⁹ mechanisms for ongoing monitoring are limited once a child leaves the school system. Under the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic), home schooling is a recognised alternative to mainstream schooling,¹⁶⁰ with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) responsible for assessing and reviewing home schooling arrangements.¹⁶¹ However, neither the Act or the Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 ‘require the department to maintain direct oversight of students who have been registered for home schooling’.¹⁶² Rather, VRQA conducts annual reviews of ‘selected home-schooling families to ensure requirements are being met’.¹⁶³ It is unclear if this process is designed, or used, to identify children who may be at risk within coercive high-control group environments.

¹⁵⁶ Department of Education, *PROTECT: Identifying and responding to all forms of abuse in Victorian schools*, 2022, p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ Ulrike Schiesser, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

¹⁵⁹ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 7.

¹⁶⁰ *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic) s 2.1.1(b).

¹⁶¹ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 8.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

As discussed in *How the Committee approached a complex task* and Part 3, it is important to be mindful of the risks of unintended consequences and to avoid overreach. While parents have an important and recognised right to make decisions about their children's upbringing and education, those decisions must also ensure that children are protected from harm.

4.8.3 Harm towards children and young people is underreported and mandatory reporting obligations are often not met

I also attempted to report a serious crime I experienced while in the group. I was told it was my fault, and warned that if I went to the police, I would lose my family, friends, and God. That moment still haunts me.

Lachlan Walker, *Submission 220*, p. 3.

Inquiry evidence identified a recurring pattern in which internal reporting mechanisms within coercive high-control groups work to intercept disclosures before they reach external authorities.¹⁶⁴ These may include dedicated channels that route complaints back through organisational leadership,¹⁶⁵ internal processes that substitute for formal reports to police or child protection services,¹⁶⁶ and group-imposed evidentiary standards that make substantiation of abuse extremely difficult.¹⁶⁷ In practice, these measures operate as an effective deterrent for external reporting.

Inquiry evidence described practices in which victims or alleged perpetrators are relocated specifically to prevent disclosure or investigation.¹⁶⁸ It also noted that use of specialised internal group language to re-describe abuse in ways that obscure its character or minimise it, further reduces the likelihood that disclosures will be recognised or escalated as reportable harm.¹⁶⁹

In many coercive high-control groups, reporting concerns to outside authorities is treated as a form of disloyalty or transgression, typically carrying social, spiritual, or practical consequences. Inquiry evidence suggested that this structural suppression of disclosure undermines mandatory reporting obligations, even where those obligations technically apply.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Sexual abuse and violence' and 'Legal and civic restrictions'.

¹⁶⁵ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 41–42.

¹⁶⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 22; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 104*, p. 2; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 42.

¹⁶⁸ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 42; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 33; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 20.

¹⁶⁹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 42.

¹⁷⁰ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Emotional and psychological abuse' and 'Legal and civic restrictions'.

This pattern has been documented previously in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Royal Commission identified at least one case study, in which a single organisation had recorded over one thousand internal allegations of child sexual abuse with no evidence that any had been reported to external authorities, including police.¹⁷¹

Inquiry evidence observed that the exclusion of many coercive high-control groups from current mandatory reporting frameworks,¹⁷² creates significant gaps in oversight and accountability. The potential role of the Reportable Conduct Scheme in addressing these gaps is considered in Section 4.9.1 below.

4.8.4 Data gaps contribute to system invisibility

A significant consequence of the factors described above is that children and young people in coercive high-control groups are largely invisible to the agencies responsible for their protection. Inquiry evidence indicates that this invisibility is compounded not only by limited external contact points, but also the absence of any central mechanism for identifying, reporting or aggregating information where a coercive high-control group context is relevant to child harm.¹⁷³

No agency in Victoria currently has responsibility for collecting or coordinating data that identifies children and young people as being involved in a coercive high-control group. There is also no shared or agreed definition of what constitutes a coercive high-control group environment for the purposes of data collection. Inquiry evidence noted that these limitations mean that the scale and nature of harm experienced by children in these settings cannot currently be reliably measured.¹⁷⁴ This limits the ability of agencies to identify patterns of harm, assess emerging risks, or evaluate the effectiveness of any prevention and response efforts.¹⁷⁵

The experience of CCYP provides a useful example of these challenges. CCYP has had 'some limited engagement with closed organisations, a broader category in which cults or organised fringe groups could fall' through its administration of child safety regulations.¹⁷⁶ However, CCYP 'does not classify organisations under the terms 'cults' or 'organised fringe groups' and as such does not have data specific to these groups'.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷¹ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Volume 16: Religious institutions (Book 3)*, 2017, p. 88; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Volume 16: Religious institutions (Book 1)*, 2017, p. 52.

¹⁷² Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 36; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 15.

¹⁷³ Victoria Police, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 20 November 2025, p. 6.

¹⁷⁴ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 118; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 37; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁷⁵ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 5; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 1; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 2.

¹⁷⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 1.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

These data limitations are not confined to children and young people. Similar issues exist across service systems that may interact with individuals involved in a coercive high-control group at any stage of life. Data collection and definitional challenges across systems more broadly are considered in greater detail in Part 5.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is very concerned that existing child protection frameworks are not equipped to recognise and respond to the unique vulnerabilities of children in coercive high-control groups. Guidance that relies on observable physical and behavioural indicators of harm will, by definition, be less effective where children have been conditioned to present well.

Mandatory reporting obligations that depend on a child being present in school cannot protect a child who is not. Reportable conduct frameworks that apply to organisations exercising formal care or supervision over children will not capture groups that operate informally or outside institutional structures. The Committee emphasises that these are not failures of individual practitioners, rather they are structural gaps to address.

The cumulative effect of these gaps is an almost complete absence of understanding of how many children are part of coercive high-control groups. No agency currently collects data categorised by involvement in a coercive high-control group. Without that data, it is not possible to assess the scale of harm, identify patterns, monitor risk, or evaluate whether any response is working. Decisions about how to protect children in these environments are challenging in the absence of a basic evidence base. Part 5 seeks to address some of these challenges by identifying ways to improve Victoria's whole-of-system response and support for people in coercive high-control groups.

The Committee acknowledges that some of the barriers identified engage complex and competing rights. Home schooling is a lawful choice available to all families, and the vast majority of home schooled children are not at risk. Oversight of parental decisions also raises legitimate questions about religious freedom and freedom of association. These considerations are acknowledged and respected. However, the evidence before this Inquiry indicates that the current balance leaves a cohort of children without adequate protection. The Committee considers that this warrants a considered, proportionate and evidence based response. For example, increasing opportunities for children who are home schooled to be kept in view of the education system through involvement in onsite school activities.

FINDING 48: Children in coercive high-control groups may present as outwardly functional, well-behaved, healthy, visibly well cared for or composed to external observers. This can actively mislead protection agencies and suppress timely identification of risk. Existing guidance that directs practitioners to observable indicators of harm is insufficient for this cohort.

FINDING 49: Children who are isolated and have reduced routine contact with external and varied reporting pathways may have limited opportunities for harm to be identified or disclosed, increasing the risk that concerns remain undetected.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Victorian Government consider opportunities to increase and diversify children and young people's contact and connections with multiple reporting channels, particularly for those who are isolated. This should include a review of home schooling arrangements in Victoria to consider opportunities for greater contact and connections between home schooling students and Victorian Government schools.

FINDING 50: Coercive high-control groups systematically suppress disclosure of harm through internal reporting channels, internal disciplinary processes, and social and spiritual consequences for those who report to outside authorities. This means mandatory reporting obligations, even where they apply, are routinely undermined in practice.

FINDING 51: No agency in Victoria currently collects data categorised by involvement in a coercive high-control group. As a result, the scale and nature of harm to children and young people in these settings is currently unmeasurable, and agencies are unable to identify patterns, assess risk trends, or evaluate the effectiveness of any response.



Isolation and dependence increase the risk of harm for children and young people

When protections, oversight and data are limited, harm may remain unseen. Without identification, safeguarding responses may not be activated, potentially resulting in lifelong consequences.

Why children and young people are at higher risk



Reliance on adults

- Dependence on adults who may participate in or allow harm.
- Limited ability to seek help independently.

Loss of protective relationships

- Protective relationships are displaced or absent.
- Trust is eroded, affecting healthy relationships.

Isolation

- Separation from external systems (schools, services, community outside the group).
- Children and child-safety contacts are not visible to one another.

Identity and development impacts

- Identity is shaped by the group or the group environment.
- Ordinary childhood experiences are denied.

Lifelong consequences

- Educational disadvantages and limited life skills.
- Impacts are often cumulative and lifelong.
- Safeguards are not activated when children are not identified.

Why harm is hard to detect or address



Low visibility

- Children may not display visible or obvious indicators of harm.
- Authorities may have limited external oversight.

System failures

- Harm towards children and young people is underreported.
- Mandatory reporting processes are not consistently followed.

Information gaps

- Data gaps reduce system awareness.
- Safeguards are not activated when children are not identified.

4.9 Victoria's child protection and safety frameworks

Cults are closed-door systems, meaning that there is no-one to intervene. Abuse in such settings is compounded. It is prolonged, torturous and has devastating consequences. Following the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the child safe standards and reportable conduct scheme and the state commissions responsible for them were supposed to provide an entrance to closed-door systems.

Miriam Francis, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

Victoria has extensive legislative and regulatory frameworks aimed at protecting children from abuse and harm. The Reportable Conduct Scheme, the Child Safe Standards, and the Child Protection system together form a layered set of safeguards that has developed considerably since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse reported in 2017.¹⁷⁸

The evidence before this Inquiry does not call into question the general value of these frameworks. They reflect sustained policy and regulatory effort and operate across a wide range of organisational settings. However, Inquiry evidence indicates that, in important respects, these frameworks in their current form, are not equipped to identify and respond to risks to children in coercive high-control groups. For example, a number of people with lived experience provided Inquiry evidence alleging that reports of child abuse made to a group's head or senior leader were not properly investigated or acted upon.¹⁷⁹

The structural features that define coercive high-control environments limit visibility and accountability, presenting challenges for existing frameworks that rely on detection, reporting and engagement by organisations or individuals. Each framework examined in this Section contains gaps that have practical significance in this context, some of which have been identified by regulators over a number of years without being resolved.

¹⁷⁸ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, (n.d.), <<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>> accessed 15 May 2026.

¹⁷⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 131*; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Name withheld, *Submission 11*, p. 3; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 20.



Important note on child safety regulatory changes

From February 2026, responsibility for regulating the Child Safety Standards and Reportable Conduct Scheme transferred from the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) to the Social Services Regulator (SSR). While the administering body has changed, the SSR's powers and regulatory responsibilities in this area are substantially the same as those previously held by CCYP.

During this Inquiry, the Committee received evidence and information from, or relating to, CCYP. Where the Report relies on this material, the Committee has considered the impact of the transfer of functions and is satisfied that the evidence and analysis remain relevant. Accordingly, any concerns or areas for improvement relating to CCYP's former regulatory functions in this Report should be read as applying equally to the SSR in its exercise of the same functions.

4

4.9.1 Reportable Conduct Scheme

The Reportable Conduct Scheme (the Scheme) is a key mechanism for identifying and responding to allegations of child abuse and misconduct by workers and volunteers in organisations across Victoria.¹⁸⁰ The Scheme covers approximately 12,000 organisations that exercise care, supervision or authority over children.¹⁸¹ Since February 2026 the Scheme has been administered by the SSR following the transfer of responsibility from CCYP as part of the Victorian Government's response to the 2025 Rapid Child Safety Review.¹⁸²

Evidence to the inquiry raised concerns that the current Scheme is not well designed to recognise or respond to coercive high-control group environments, particularly where groups lack clear and identifiable organisational structures.¹⁸³ CCYP, in its response to written questions on notice, acknowledged that it had limited capacity to engage with coercive high-control groups.¹⁸⁴

Inquiry evidence identified a number of structural limitations in the Scheme that are particularly relevant in the context of coercive high-control groups, which are discussed below. The limitations identified in Inquiry evidence fall into two broad categories: gaps in the Scheme's coverage, which determine which organisations fall within its scope; and gaps in the Scheme's internal architecture, which affect how allegations are handled where the Scheme does apply.

¹⁸⁰ Victorian Government, *Reportable Conduct Scheme*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/reportable-conduct-scheme>> accessed 9 April 2026.

¹⁸¹ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 3.

¹⁸² Victorian Government, *About the Social Services Regulator*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/about-social-services-regulator>> accessed 9 April 2026; Victorian Government, *Rapid Child Safety Review*, 2025, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/rapid-child-safety-review>> accessed 9 April 2026.

¹⁸³ Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 35; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 13.

¹⁸⁴ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 5.

Scope of the Scheme

As noted in Section 4.1.2, many coercive high-control groups do not fall within the scope of the Reportable Conduct Scheme. Inquiry evidence highlighted that a particular difficulty arises with groups that have informal structures—no clear organisational hierarchy, no registered business or services, no formal governance arrangements—but which nonetheless exercise a profound degree of authority over children's lives.¹⁸⁵

Section 16C of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) provides that the Scheme does not apply to an entity that does not exercise care, supervision or authority over children.¹⁸⁶ Inquiry evidence suggested that this threshold does not adequately capture the circumstances of children raised within many coercive high-control groups, where care, supervision and authority may be exercised through the group's communal life rather than through any formal organisational arrangement.¹⁸⁷

Inquiry stakeholders described groups in which children are born into and raised within a community, where any adult member may discipline any child and where all aspects of daily life are controlled by group leaders.¹⁸⁸ In such environments, the group as a whole exercises what might be described as functional control over children. That control operates across the totality of a child's environment, including their access to information, relationships, education, healthcare and the outside world.¹⁸⁹ It does not occur through any discrete organisational act or service that would be recognisable as the exercise of formal care, supervision or authority. Consequently, it may be difficult for groups, or outside authorities, to understand or recognise whether they have obligations under the Scheme or any other child safety framework.

Compounding these concerns, children in coercive high-control environments are often obscured from other mandatory reporters (see Sections 4.1. and 4.8 above). Inquiry stakeholders emphasised that children in coercive high-control groups often have limited, or coached, contact with external agencies such as educators, medical practitioners and others who may be subject to mandatory reporting obligations.¹⁹⁰ The Olive Leaf Network suggested child protection laws be examined to consider whether they apply to coercive high-control groups at all, noting that such groups 'by their nature often do not subscribe to external law or consider themselves part of general society'.¹⁹¹ CCYP also explained that the closed and secretive nature of these organisations makes it challenging to determine whether they fall within the scope of the Scheme.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁵ See Part 2.

¹⁸⁶ *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) s 16C.

¹⁸⁷ See Section 4.3.2.

¹⁸⁸ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Social control and isolation' and 'Developmental and environmental control'.

¹⁸⁹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Behaviours' and 'Behaviours directed at children and young people'.

¹⁹⁰ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 11; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 36; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice.

¹⁹¹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 35.

¹⁹² Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 5.

... the secretive and closed nature of these types of organisations means that it can be challenging to obtain information about governance structures of these types of organisations with some having interjurisdictional or even international components, this can lead to difficulties identifying the head of entity for the purposes of the Scheme. It can also be challenging to obtain enough information to ascertain whether an organisation falls under the coverage of the Standards.

Commission for Children and Young People, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups hearing, response to written questions on notice received 13 February 2026, p. 5.

CCYP raised similar concerns about determining whether organisations are required to comply with the Child Safe Standards, that are discussed further in Section 4.9.2 below.

A 2024 review of the Scheme by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) identified limitations of its current scope. The review acknowledged that it is not always clear how the s 16C threshold applies in practice.¹⁹³ Of particular relevance when considering how the Scheme may apply to coercive high-control groups, DFFH observed:

as some organisations may move in and out of exercising care, supervision or authority over children at different points in time, it is not clear how the scheme should apply in all situations.¹⁹⁴

DFFH agreed that s 16C may create challenges in determining an organisation's responsibility under the Scheme, providing an example of where this may be unclear:

it may be difficult for an organisation to know whether it must investigate an allegation about an employee that is made when the organisation is not in scope of the scheme due to s 16C, but the allegation is about conduct by an employee that happened when the organisation was in scope of the scheme. Similarly, it may not be clear how the scheme applies to an allegation about an employee made when an organisation is in scope of the scheme, in relation to conduct of an employee at the time when the organisation was not subject to the scheme.¹⁹⁵

The review identified this as an area requiring further work and noted an opportunity existed to amend the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act to clarify how s 16C applies in different situations.¹⁹⁶ Some evidence to the Inquiry also called for a further review of the Act's operation to assess if it is fit for purpose, including whether it has adequate capacity to address coercive high-control groups which may fall outside its scope.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Review of Victoria's Reportable Conduct Scheme*, Victorian Government, 2024, p. 8.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁹⁷ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 35; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 10.

Obligations to notify the Regulator and investigate reportable conduct

Sections 16M and 16N of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act require the head of an organisation to notify the SSR if they become aware of a reportable allegation and to ensure that allegation is investigated.¹⁹⁸ The Scheme puts the head of the entity in charge of the notification and investigation process, reflecting the Royal Commission's emphasis on organisational accountability. This is based on the premise that heads of organisations are best placed to identify, notify and respond to allegations involving their workers.¹⁹⁹

Inquiry evidence raised significant concerns that groups which may fall under the Scheme often fail to report or meaningfully investigate allegations of reportable conduct.²⁰⁰ In particular, it was reported that many coercive high-control groups actively prevent reporting to external authorities, and that child abuse or safety concerns are often used as mechanisms of control and domination.²⁰¹ These dynamics create a strong incentive not to notify authorities about reportable conduct under the Scheme.

CCYP identified additional factors that may limit compliance with the Scheme by coercive high-control groups, including:

- members being unlikely to report non-compliance or make mandatory notifications of alleged abuse
- a deep distrust of government and a possible disregard for the requirements of the Standards and Scheme as valid or applicable to them, particularly where they conflict with their traditions or practices
- the Standards and Scheme's reliance on organisational commitment to cultural change that these groups typically lack.²⁰²

Inquiry evidence raised concerns about the practical adequacy of the notification obligations in s 16M and 16N in circumstances where the heads of organisations are unwilling or unlikely to report allegations of reportable conduct.

Limitations of disclosure mechanisms and reliance on organisational self-reporting

The Scheme includes a limited safeguard under s 16O of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act, which permits CCYP to initiate its own investigation.²⁰³ Section 16L also allows any

¹⁹⁸ *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) s 16M(11).

¹⁹⁹ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Volume 7: Improving institutional responding and reporting*, 2017, p. 20.

²⁰⁰ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Legal and civic restrictions' and 'Sexual abuse and violence' and Section 4.5.

²⁰¹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Legal and civic restrictions' and 'Sexual abuse and violence'.

²⁰² Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

²⁰³ *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) s 16O.

person to ‘disclose a reportable allegation to the Social Services Regulator’.²⁰⁴ These provisions potentially provide some capacity for regulatory intervention where a head of organisation has failed to notify or investigate.

However, there is no explicit provision requirement for CCYP to respond to a disclosure made directly to it under s 16L, nor is there a power for the SSR to direct a head of organisation to investigate following such a disclosure. The Scheme therefore remains substantially dependent on heads of organisations fulfilling their own notification and investigation obligations.

Inquiry evidence also consistently indicated that ordinary adult members of coercive high-control groups are themselves unlikely to make disclosures to external authorities, due to indoctrination against government, fear of retaliation, and the threat of shunning or expulsion.²⁰⁵ In this context, the disclosure pathway in s 16L cannot be assumed to operate as a reliable alternative safeguard in coercive high-control groups, where organisational reporting fails. Nonetheless, Inquiry evidence of significant under-reporting to external authorities demonstrates there would also be value in strengthening investigation pathways under the Reportable Conduct Scheme.²⁰⁶

Limitations where allegations involve the head of entity

The Scheme’s reliance on the head of entity to report and investigate allegations of child abuse and misconduct, presents additional challenges where allegations involve the head of an organisation. While the premise that heads of organisations are best placed to respond to allegations is broadly sound in conventional settings, Inquiry evidence indicated that this does not hold in the context of coercive high-control groups.²⁰⁷

A number of people with lived experience provided evidence to the Inquiry alleging child abuse involving the head or senior leader of a group.²⁰⁸ In coercive high-control groups, leaders typically occupy a position of absolute or near-absolute authority. Concentrated leadership power, suppression of internal dissent, and strict control of information about the group’s internal conduct generally, including processes for responding to abuse allegations, are defining characteristics of these environments.²⁰⁹ This means that allegations against a leader of a coercive high-control group are likely to arise in circumstances where those responsible for responding are also the individuals most invested in suppressing scrutiny.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., s 16L.

²⁰⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Legal and civic restrictions’ and ‘Sexual abuse and violence’.

²⁰⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 5; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 32.

²⁰⁷ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Legal and civic restrictions’ and ‘Sexual abuse and violence’.

²⁰⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 12; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 12.

²⁰⁹ See Part 2.

Without a pre-nominated alternate, the Scheme leaves the initial point of contact for a serious allegation in the hands of those least able to respond independently or impartially.

CCYP raised concerns about the capacity of the Scheme to effectively manage investigations involving the head of an organisation. CCYP advised that, in these circumstances, it would 'apply a high level of oversight to the investigation'.²¹⁰ This may include requesting an 'investigation plan, risk management plan or conflict of interest plan for these matters'.²¹¹ However, CCYP noted:

Reportable conduct allegations notified to the Commission about the head of an organisation are not as common as for workers and volunteers in organisations. When the situation does arise it can take some time for an alternate contact to be identified, meaning that the Commission may initially have to contact the head of the organisation about an allegation involving them.²¹²

CCYP also raised this issue in its submission to the 2024 review of the Scheme and recommended that the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act be amended to require the nomination of an alternate person responsible for performing the role of the head under the Act, where the head of the organisation is the subject of an allegation.²¹³

Own-motion independent investigations of the Regulator

These agencies often directed me back to the very same school or clerical body I was reporting—creating an endless, self-referential loop of inaction and avoidance.

Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 13.

As discussed above, Inquiry stakeholders raised significant concerns about the unwillingness of coercive high-control groups to take child safety matters seriously.²¹⁴ The Olive Leaf Network submitted that:

government bodies and authorities have historically taken a hands-off approach with regard to the welfare of children within religious organisations, allowing the internal systems to prevail. These internal systems prevent reporting to outside authorities and the lack of oversight by government bodies allows for a vicious cycle of unfettered perpetration of abuse and concealment.²¹⁵

To address these concerns, Inquiry evidence called for improved avenues for instigating independent investigations where child safety concerns arise.²¹⁶

²¹⁰ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 8.

²¹¹ Ibid., pp. 8–9.

²¹² Ibid., p. 9.

²¹³ Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing: Review of Victoria's Reportable Conduct Scheme*, 2022, pp. 4–5.

²¹⁴ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Harmful behaviours directed at children and young people' and Sections 4.1, 4.4 and 4.5.

²¹⁵ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 46.

²¹⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, pp. 3–4; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 54; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 75.

Section 16O of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act gives the SSR powers to conduct own motion investigations into reportable allegations against an employee of an organisation subject to the Scheme. These may be initiated where:

- SSR considers it is in the public interest
- an organisation is unable or will not conduct the investigation
- in response to a complaint about the conduct of an investigation, such as inappropriate handling (if it is in the public interest).²¹⁷

While SSR cannot provide binding directions to a head of organisation about how to conduct an internal investigation under s 16N, s 16O provides a mechanism for it to conduct its own independent investigation where an organisation refuses to conduct an investigation or does not sufficiently investigate.

However, the practical value of own-motion investigations as an alternative investigation pathway is constrained. Guidance issued by CCYP indicated that the ‘threshold for conducting an [own motion] investigation is high and the Commission’s power [was] exercised rarely’.²¹⁸ Even where legal criteria for an investigation were met, CCYP’s decision to conduct an investigation remains discretionary and must be weighed against competing demands and limited resources—meaning own motion investigations were only used for the ‘most serious cases’.²¹⁹ CCYP publicly reports on its own-motion investigations. However, no detailed information is available about the nature of these investigations. It is therefore unclear whether any relate to coercive high-control groups.²²⁰

In the context of coercive high-control groups, where harm to children may be chronic, normalised and deliberately concealed, this threshold for conducting own-motion investigations may be poorly suited to identifying systemic risk. Inquiry evidence also highlighted the distinct challenges for regulators to engage with closed, distrustful and secretive groups, and the resource intensive nature of intervention.²²¹

Inquiry evidence points to a broader concern about independent oversight of coercive high-control groups, an issue examined further in Part 5.²²² More immediately for children and young people in these environments, the Scheme’s reliance on organisational self-reporting provides limited protection where reporting is unlikely to occur. This raises questions about the adequacy of the own-motion investigation

²¹⁷ *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) ss 16O(11)–(13).

²¹⁸ Commission for Children and Young People, *Information sheet 14: Commission’s Own Motion Investigations under the Reportable Conduct Scheme*, 2024, p. 2.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Commission for Children and Young People, *Annual report 2024–25*, 2025, p. 117. In 2024/25, CCYP completed 9 own motion investigations (18 since the Scheme commenced), had no investigations into the inappropriate handling or response to an investigation (with one concluded in 2022/23 and none commenced in 2024/25), and had 21 investigations active, including 2 newly commenced and 19 ongoing.

²²¹ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, pp. 5–6.

²²² Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 46; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50; Name withheld, *Submission 111*, p. 3; Rationalist Society of Australia, *Submission 226*, p. 4.

framework as an alternative pathway for investigation and oversight.²²³ The absence of any obligation on SSR to respond to disclosures made under s 16L, together with the practical constraints on the exercise of own motion powers, represents a gap that Inquiry evidence suggests warrants attention.

Improving understanding of sexual misconduct

Section 3 of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act identifies ‘sexual misconduct’ as a type of reportable conduct. Organisations subject to the Scheme are therefore required to report and investigate allegations of sexual misconduct against children by their workers or volunteers.²²⁴ Sexual misconduct under the Scheme includes ‘behaviour, physical contact or speech or other communication of a sexual nature, inappropriate touching, grooming behaviour and voyeurism’.²²⁵

In its submission to the 2024 review of the Scheme, CCYP raised concerns about how this definition operates in practice. CCYP explained:

In our experience, organisations investigating sexual misconduct often focus unduly on the subject’s of allegation intent or motivation, and whether the intent or motivation was for the sexual gratification or arousal of the subject of allegation. Combined with a poor understanding of grooming, this can lead an organisation to conclude that the alleged conduct was not sexual misconduct even where the investigation has found a pattern of inappropriate, overly personal conduct by the subject of allegation towards a child.²²⁶

CCYP proposed that the Act be amended to clarify that sexual misconduct can occur even where there is no finding that the conduct was for sexual arousal or gratification of the person who committed the alleged reportable incident.²²⁷

Inquiry evidence illustrates why this clarification is particularly important in the context of coercive high-control groups. The Inquiry evidence identified several forms of behaviour that may constitute sexual misconduct, without necessarily being motivated by sexual gratification. These include:

- **Children used in sexually exploitative conduct:** Inquiry evidence described ‘flirty fishing’/children being required to participate in, or witness, sexually exploitative behaviour directed at adults for the purposes of recruitment or financial gain, without understanding the nature of what was occurring.²²⁸

... encouraged female members to use sexual intimacy as a tool for proselytising and financial gain. While officially for adults, children were tragically exposed to, and sometimes directly involved in, its practices. Children were taught to give the “look of

²²³ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 15; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 43.

²²⁴ *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) s 3.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing*, p. 32.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 8–9.

love” and act in flirtatious ways and spend private time with “kings” or supporters. This perverse normalisation of sexualised behaviour as a transactional tool shattered our understanding of healthy relationships, boundaries, and consent.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 8–9.

- **Exposure of children to sexually explicit material:** Inquiry evidence described children being provided with, or repeatedly exposed to, sexually explicit material through group publications and private one-on-one sessions with adults.²²⁹

We were all shown “Use of a Doll in Auditing.” A film. ... Robotic recitation of scripts we could barely understand. Forced to ask: “Have you ever raped anyone?” “Have you practiced sexual perversion?” “Have you ever had intercourse with a family member?” Questions whose meanings our bodies were too young to comprehend. But whose emotional violence has left us literally scarred for life.

Serge Del Mar, *Submission 235*, p. 8.

- **Explicit sexual questioning of children by adult authority figures:** Inquiry evidence described children being subjected to explicit questioning by adult authority figures about the details of sexual contact, including what acts occurred and whether pleasure was experienced.²³⁰

I was taken to an Elders place, into a caravan in his yard, at night. I spent a long time in that caravan being questioned about my activities with this boy and being read scriptures from the bible outlining my sins. There were only two male Elders present & they wanted to know in detail what sexual things had taken place between me & this boy. It was a horrific experience. For the most part I didn’t even know what they were asking me. We were excluded from any health classes growing up.

Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 2.

Inquiry evidence showed that this kind of conduct (i.e., overly personal, sustained and conducted in deliberate secrecy) is a recognisable feature of how abuse develops in coercive high-control group environments.²³¹ Where belief systems are used to justify close adult-child relationships, and secrecy is framed as a sign of faith or moral compliance (rather than a warning sign),²³² organisations and investigators can struggle to characterise such behaviour as sexual misconduct.²³³ This may particularly be the case where there is no clear evidence that the conduct was motivated by sexual arousal or gratification.²³⁴

²²⁹ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 19; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, pp. 8–9.

²³⁰ Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, p. 19; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 9; Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 5; Serge Del Mar, *Submission 235*, p. 6.

²³¹ See Part 2 and Volume 2 for lived experience accounts describing ‘Emotional and psychological abuse’ and ‘Social control and isolation’.

²³² Name withheld, *Submission 131*.

²³³ Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing*, p. 18; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*.

²³⁴ Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing*, p. 18.

February 2026 changes to the Reportable Conduct Scheme

On 23 February 2026, a number of amendments to the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act took effect. In addition to transferring responsibility for administering the Scheme from CCYP to SSR as noted above at Section 4.9, it introduced several other substantive changes,²³⁵ some of which address, or partially address, some the concerns raised during this Inquiry.

In particular, the amendments addressed concerns raised in Inquiry evidence about:

- **The absence of any review or appeal pathway:** with the introduction of an internal review mechanism (s 16ZI) and a right of review by VCAT (s 16ZJ) for employees (noting that these review mechanisms do not extend to an alleged victim, parent or carer).
- **Limitations on the Regulator's information-gathering powers:** with the SSR now able to require information and documents from entities in relation to a reportable allegation or investigation (s 16N(2)).²³⁶

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Reportable Conduct Scheme is an important safeguard for children across Victoria. The Committee acknowledges the Victorian Government's ongoing reform efforts to strengthen child safety frameworks in recent years, including the transfer of regulatory responsibility from CCYP to SSR following the 2025 Rapid Child Safety Review. However, Inquiry evidence demonstrates that the Scheme continues to contain structural gaps that limit its effectiveness in addressing the unique dynamics of coercive high-control groups.

These gaps relate to:

- which organisations fall within the Scheme's scope
- who can trigger a regulatory response when allegations arise
- who controls investigations when the most senior figure in an organisation is the subject of an allegation
- what mechanisms exist to address inadequate investigations, including failure to act or respond to allegations.

In the context of coercive high-control groups, the Committee considers these gaps to be particularly acute.

Where a group exercises substantive control over every aspect of a child's daily life—including their access to information, relationships, education, healthcare, and contact with the outside world—the informal nature of that control should not exclude children from the

²³⁵ *Social Services Regulation Amendment (Child Safety, Complaints and Worker Regulation) Act 2025* (Vic).

²³⁶ *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) ss 16ZI–J, 16N

Scheme's protections. The Committee considers that the concept of functional control, introduced earlier in this Report, provides a useful framework for reviewing the scope of s 16C of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) and should inform future legislative review.

The Committee is deeply concerned that the Scheme is ill-equipped to manage allegations involving the head of an organisation. This gap has been identified by the CCYP previously and acknowledged by the Victorian Government's own review as warranting amendment, yet remains unresolved. The Committee considers the pre-nomination of an alternate contact to be a practical and straightforward reform and urges the Victorian Government to consider implementation.

The Committee is also satisfied that the combination of organisational non-compliance and member reluctance to make external disclosures, renders existing independent investigative pathways inadequate in coercive high-control environments. Strengthening s 16O to require the SSR to respond to disclosures received under s 16L, and empowering the SSR to direct investigations where organisations have failed to do so, would reduce reliance on the good faith of organisational leadership. The Committee acknowledges that any expansion of the SSR's obligations would need to be accompanied by an assessment of regulatory resourcing.

The Committee agrees with CCYP that the definition of reportable sexual misconduct under the Scheme should be clarified to better reflect the forms of harm documented in Inquiry evidence. The Committee considers that the clarification proposed by CCYP would respond to some of the concerns identified in the Inquiry evidence. Conduct that is overly personal, sustained and deliberately concealed, particularly in environments where adult authority is absolute, should not be excluded from the definition of sexual misconduct simply because it cannot be established that it was motivated by sexual arousal or gratification.

FINDING 52: Many coercive high-control groups may fall outside the scope of the Reportable Conduct Scheme. These groups often lack recognisable formal organisational structures, yet exercise functional control over the lives of children raised within them.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Victorian Government review the application of s 16C of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to assess whether it is fit for purpose, and consider:

- what amendments are required to ensure that organisations and groups exercising substantive control over the lives of children cannot fall outside the scope of the Reportable Conduct Scheme because of informal structures or the deliberate avoidance of formal organisational characteristics.
- whether the existing threshold of 'formal care, supervision or authority' should be supplemented by reference to 'functional control', including control over children's access to information, relationships, education, and healthcare.

FINDING 53: Where a reportable allegation concerns the head of an organisation, the Reportable Conduct Scheme does not require the organisation to have pre-nominated an alternate person to manage notification and investigation processes. Identifying an alternate contact in these circumstances can take considerable time, and the Social Services Regulator may have no option but to make initial contact with the subject of the allegation.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Victorian Government consider amendments to the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to require all organisations subject to the Reportable Conduct Scheme to pre-nominate a person authorised to perform the head of organisation's functions under the Act if the head of organisation is the subject of a reportable allegation.

FINDING 54: The Reportable Conduct Scheme relies heavily on heads of organisations fulfilling their own notification and investigation obligations. In coercive high-control group environments, organisational leaders are unlikely to notify the Social Services Regulator of allegations, and adult members are also unlikely to make disclosures to external authorities.

FINDING 55: Where organisational self-reporting fails, the Reportable Conduct Scheme lacks a reliable mechanism to ensure that allegations are independently investigated.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Victorian Government consider whether amendments to s 160 of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) are necessary to:

- require the Social Services Regulator to investigate a reportable allegation disclosed under s 16L
- empower the Social Services Regulator to direct an organisation to investigate a reportable allegation where it has failed to do so.

In considering any such amendments, the Government should assess if additional resourcing is required to enable the Social Services Regulator to meet any new legislative requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Victorian Government consider whether amendments are required to the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to empower the Social Services Regulator to issue binding directions to a head of entity regarding the conduct of an investigation.

FINDING 56: In coercive high-control environments, some forms of harmful conduct may not be recognised as sexual misconduct under the current operation of the Reportable Conduct Scheme. This includes exposing children to sexually explicit material or subjecting them to explicit sexual questioning by adult authority figures. Such conduct may fall outside the Scheme where there is no evidence that it was motivated by sexual arousal or gratification.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The Victorian Government consider amendments to the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to clarify that overly personal and intimate conduct in relation to a child can constitute sexual misconduct even where there is no finding that the conduct was for sexual arousal or gratification.

4.9.2 Child Safe Standards

For the Standards to be successful an organisation needs to actively engage with them and be committed to driving cultural change — often closed organisations can lack the commitment or motivation to engage with the Standards.

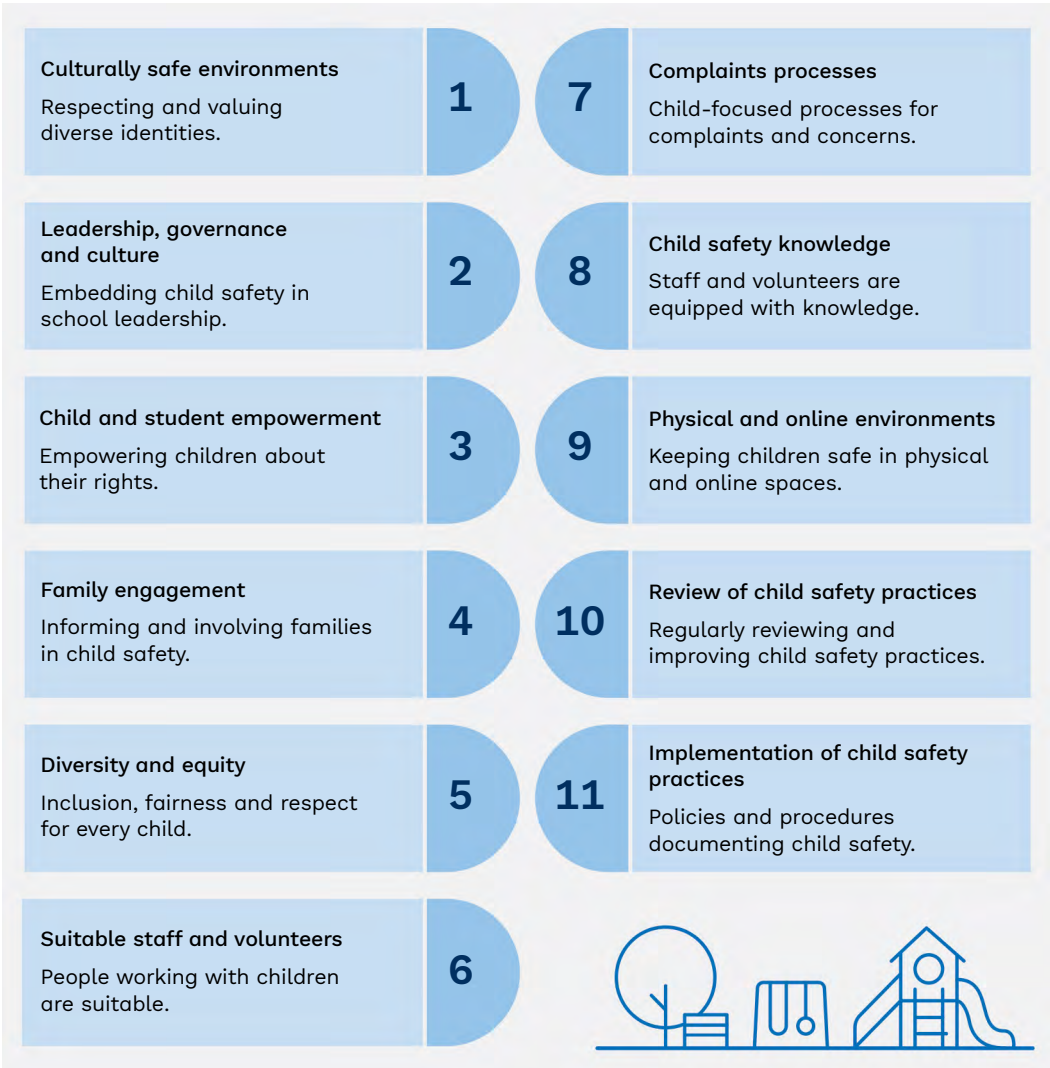
Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

The Child Safe Standards (the Standards) require organisations that provide services to, or employ, children to maintain cultures, governance structures, and practices that prevent and respond to child abuse. Compliance is mandated for sectors in Victoria prescribed in Sch 1 of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act, covering ‘up to 60,000 organisations across 47 sectors’.²³⁷ The Standards embed child safety in organisational leadership and governance, empower children to understand their rights, ensure workers are appropriately supported, and require complaints processes that are child-focused.²³⁸

²³⁷ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 2.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

Figure 4.1 Child Safe Standards



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee. Based on information from: Commission for Children and Young People, *The 11 Child Safe Standards*, (n.d.), <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/the-11-child-safe-standards>> accessed 10 April 2026.

Since February 2026, responsibility for administering the Standards has transferred from CCYP to SSR.

Scope of the Standards

An organisation or group needs to fall within scope of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act to be required to comply with the Standards.²³⁹ Compliance is triggered where two requirements are met: the organisation is an applicable entity listed in Sch 1 of the Act, and no exemption applies under s 22.

²³⁹ Ibid.

Schedule 1 of the Act covers a broad range of entities, including:

- **Education:** registered and non-registered schools, boarding services, senior secondary and foundation course providers, overseas student providers, student exchange operators, post-secondary institutions and providers.
- **Early childhood:** approved education and care services, approved children's services.
- **Children's activities and services:** coaching/tuition, counselling/support, youth organisations, cultural/sporting/recreational services, gym and play facilities, talent and beauty competitions, overnight camps, photography, babysitting, transport, and entertainment/party services (all specifically for children).
- **Health:** public and denominational hospitals, private hospitals, day procedure centres, multi-purpose services, community health centres, maternal and child health centres, mental health and wellbeing service providers, and disability service providers.
- **State-funded services:** entities receiving State contract funding to deliver early therapeutic intervention, drug/alcohol treatment, family violence or sexual assault services, parent/family support, housing/homelessness assistance, youth services, or child protection services.
- **Out-of-home care:** out of home care services under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic), and licensed child employers.
- **Civil society and public bodies:** religious bodies, charities, non-profit bodies, government departments, statutory bodies with public functions, and local councils.²⁴⁰

Section 22 provides an exemption from the Standards for entities otherwise covered by Sch 1 where they do not provide services or supervised facilities specifically for children, and do not engage children as contractors, employees or volunteers.²⁴¹ This exemption is unavailable where the entity is subject to the Reportable Conduct Scheme.²⁴²

This threshold presents practical enforcement challenges similar to those identified in the context of the Reportable Conduct Scheme (see Section 4.9.1 above). Before any compliance or enforcement action can be taken, regulators must first establish that an organisation is in scope and not exempt. Determining this often depends on a detailed understanding of the services and facilities an organisation provides—an exercise that is particularly challenging when dealing with institutions that are closed, insular and unwilling to provide information.²⁴³

These challenges are acute in relation to coercive high-control groups, many of which do not present as organisations in any conventional sense. They may lack

²⁴⁰ *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) sch 1.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, s 22(21).

²⁴² *Ibid.*, s 22(22).

²⁴³ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice.

registration, formal governance structures, named leadership, or identifiable service delivery arrangements that would readily place them within Sch 1.²⁴⁴ Where children's involvement occurs entirely within the communal or domestic life rather than through a recognisable organisational activity, the group may fall outside the scope of the Standards.

Limitations of the engagement-dependency model

Even where a group is within scope, the Standards rely on organisational engagement and internal cultural change to operate effectively. Compliance depends on organisations actively implementing the Standards.²⁴⁵ CCYP identified this as a core structural weakness when the framework encounters coercive high-control groups, observing that such groups are unlikely to provide the very engagement the Standards depend upon to function.²⁴⁶

CCYP also identified a critical barrier to engagement: it has no specific outreach or engagement strategies relating to children in closed communities, and must first be aware that an organisation exists, and is required to comply, before any engagement can occur.²⁴⁷ By their very nature, closed and insular groups are unlikely to come to regulatory attention or to disclose information about their activities.²⁴⁸ Inquiry evidence reinforced this point, identifying that many coercive high-control groups purposefully isolate themselves, avoid and distrust external authorities,²⁴⁹ making voluntary engagement unlikely.

In practice, this means that in coercive high-control environments where children may face heightened risk, the Standards are less likely to operate effectively. CCYP has acknowledged that the Standards and Scheme are not always the most appropriate frameworks for addressing immediate risk to children within insular and closed organisations. It has suggested that a coordinated multi-agency model may be more suitable in those circumstances.²⁵⁰ Broader whole-of-system responses to risks arising from coercive high-control groups are discussed in Part 5.

Symbolic compliance with the Standards by organisations within scope

Inquiry evidence raised a distinct concern about organisations that are formally within scope of the Standards but achieve only superficial or procedural compliance. Standard 2 requires child safety and wellbeing to be embedded in organisational leadership and governance, while Standard 3 requires children and young people to

²⁴⁴ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*.

²⁴⁵ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 6; Commission for Children and Young People, *Information sheet 6: Child Safe Standards and Reportable Conduct Scheme*, 2024.

²⁴⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ See Part 2, Section 2.3.6 and Sections 4.1.2 and 4.3.

²⁵⁰ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, pp. 17–18.

be enabled to participate in decisions that affect them.²⁵¹ Inquiry evidence suggested that these requirements may not be adequately implemented in organisations characterised by hierarchical decision-making, or where authority is concentrated within narrow leadership groups (e.g., leadership structures dominated exclusively by men).²⁵²

Inquiry evidence identified a risk that, in such settings, compliance with the Standards becomes largely symbolic rather than substantive, limiting their capacity to improve child safety outcomes. In response, several reforms were proposed to strengthen the effectiveness of the Standards, with a focus on improving implementation, accountability and child outcomes, including:

- **Strengthening participation and representation:** Amending the Standards to require inclusive participation in decisions about their implementation, including the participation of men, women and children within the organisation (or, for registered charities, all voting members), and requiring organisations to nominate a female contact person for child safety matters.²⁵³
- **Enhancing oversight and enforcement:** Introducing mandatory compliance audits for non-compliant organisations, and a broader range of additional enforcement options beyond the revocation of charitable status or tax concessions.²⁵⁴
- **Linking compliance to child workforce eligibility:** Making compliance with the Standards a prerequisite for employing workers in child-related roles, so that non-compliant organisations are prohibited from employing or continuing to employ workers in such positions.²⁵⁵
- **Adapting standards for closed environments:** Ensuring the Standards are applied effectively in coercive high-control groups, including by adapting the Standards to the dynamics of closed environments and mandating child-safety training for all individuals in leadership roles within those settings.²⁵⁶

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Child Safe Standards represent an important framework for embedding child safety across a wide range of Victorian organisations. However, the Committee notes that many coercive high-control groups are unlikely to fall within Sch 1 of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic). Groups that lack formal registration, defined governance structures, or identifiable service delivery arrangements, and whose engagement with children occurs through communal or family-based life rather than any recognisable organisational form,

²⁵¹ Commission for Children and Young People, *The 11 Child Safe Standards*, (n.d.), <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/the-11-child-safe-standards>> accessed 10 April 2026.

²⁵² Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 6; Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 4; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 16.

²⁵³ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 75.

²⁵⁴ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 54; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 75.

²⁵⁵ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 76; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 10.

²⁵⁶ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 54; Name withheld, *Submission 248*, p. 6; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 66.

are likely to fall outside the Standards' coverage altogether. This is not a marginal issue; it reflects the operating conditions of the environments described in the Inquiry evidence, with that evidence suggesting that children in these settings may be exposed to a risk of serious harm. The Committee is of the view that Sch 1 warrants review with this gap in focus.

The Committee notes that the Standards are designed to operate through organisational engagement, with compliance dependent on organisations actively implementing requirements and committing to cultural change. This engagement-dependent model poses a fundamental difficulty in the context of coercive high-control groups, which are typically characterised by resistance to external authority and deliberate avoidance of contact with government bodies. The Committee considers this a structural limitation of the framework as it currently operates, and not a resourcing or administrative matter that the 2026 transfer of regulatory responsibility from CCYP to SSR will resolve. Where an organisation is unlikely to engage voluntarily, the Standards cannot be expected to operate as intended, regardless of which body administers them. The Committee is of the view that the SSR requires an alternate engagement protocol that does not depend on organisational willingness as a precondition for regulatory action.

FINDING 57: Many coercive high-control groups are unlikely to fall within Schedule 1 of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) and are therefore not required to comply with the Child Safe Standards. The closed nature of these groups also means that regulators may have no awareness of their existence or activities.

RECOMMENDATION 10: The Victorian Government review Schedule 1 of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) to assess whether current criteria for determining which organisations are required to comply with the Child Safe Standards adequately captures organisations or groups that exercise authority over children through informal arrangements rather than formal service delivery.

FINDING 58: Even where a coercive high-control group falls within scope of the Child Safe Standards, the Standards depend on organisational willingness to engage and implement cultural change. This is unlikely where groups are characterised by resistance to external authority and deliberate avoidance of contact with government bodies.

RECOMMENDATION 11: The Victorian Government consider developing a protocol for identifying and engaging with organisations that pose risks to children and are resistant to current compliance mechanisms under the Child Safe Standards. The protocol should explicitly address coercive high-control groups and draw on multi-agency expertise.

4.9.3 Working with Children Checks

Working with Children Checks (WWCC) are a core component of Victoria's child safety framework. Established under the *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic), a WWCC is mandatory for adults who engage in *child-related work*, whether in paid or unpaid roles.²⁵⁷ Child-related work is defined as work that usually involves direct contact with a child;²⁵⁸ occasional or incidental contact does not qualify.²⁵⁹

Figure 4.2 summarises the categories of work specified as *child-related work*.

Figure 4.2 Child-related work categories



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee. Based on *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic) s 7(3).

²⁵⁷ *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic) s 121(121).

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, s 7(1)(b).

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, s 7(2).

The *Social Services Regulation Amendment (Child Safety, Complaints and Worker Regulation) Act 2025* (Vic) introduced new notification requirements, under which ‘employers and volunteer organisations will be required to notify the Regulator when they engage a WWCC holder’.²⁶⁰ These measures are intended to ensure real-time oversight and accountability,²⁶¹ but they had not yet commenced at the time of writing this Report.

WWCCs are designed to prevent individuals with known histories of conduct that poses a risk to children from working or volunteering in child-related roles.²⁶² However, Inquiry evidence identified important limitations in the effectiveness of WWCCs in coercive high-control group settings.

Checks as cover rather than protection

Several Inquiry stakeholders described circumstances in which adults held valid WWCCs while nonetheless engaging in, or facilitating, conduct that caused harm to children.²⁶³

Ryan Carey, Founder of Stop Religious Coercion Australia and a lived experience advocate, characterised WWCCs as a necessary but insufficient safeguard. He noted that checks identify only those who have already been detected and convicted, but cannot prevent harm by perpetrators whose conduct has not yet come to the attention of authorities. Ryan Carey emphasised that meaningful child safety depends on structural protections, including policies prohibiting one-on-one contact between adults and children, the use of observable spaces, and robust systems of governance, auditing and education. Without these protections, a check may create the appearance of safety without delivering substantive protection.²⁶⁴

I refer to them as ‘I haven’t been caught yet’ checks really. So they were waving this around that they were safe, but they were not. Unless you have policies and systems like a ‘never alone with a child’ policy, Sunday school classes that can be seen into—just correct procedures that other schools and workplaces have around children

Ryan Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

Similar concerns were raised by Mirriam Francis, a Director of Olive Leaf Network Australia, who also has lived experience. Mirriam Francis noted that, following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, many organisations did implement WWCCs as a reform measure. However, she gave evidence that in some settings, leaders with valid checks continued to engage in

²⁶⁰ Premier of Victoria, *Expanded Powers to Overhaul Child Safety System*, media release, 12 November 2025, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/expanded-powers-overhaul-child-safety-system>> accessed 13 April 2026. See: *Social Services Regulation Amendment (Child Safety, Complaints and Worker Regulation) Act 2025* (Vic) s 107.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Victorian Government, *The Working with Children Check explained*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/check-explained>> accessed 13 April 2026.

²⁶³ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

²⁶⁴ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

behaviours harmful to children, including conducting internal disciplinary hearings in which children were questioned in explicit detail about sexual conduct (see Section 4.5).²⁶⁵

Checks without verified child safe policies provide limited protection

Inquiry evidence raised concerns about the relationship between WWCCs and the presence of effective child safe policies. These concerns go beyond the operation of the Child Safe Standards and point to a more direct limitation on the protective value of the WWCC itself. A WWCC establishes that an individual has no known history of relevant offending; it does not provide any assurance about the safety of the organisational environment in which that individual operates. Inquiry evidence indicated that these two factors are closely linked.

A WWCC held by an adult operating in a group with no meaningful child safety procedures and policies offers materially less protection than the same check held in an organisation with robust, enforced operational safeguards.²⁶⁶ In environments where governance is weak or informal, WWCCs may function as a procedural credential rather than an effective child-protection tool.

Under the Child Safe Standards, organisations are required to implement policies and procedures to prevent and respond to child abuse. Standard 11 specifically requires that organisations document how they ensure their organisation is safe for children and young people.²⁶⁷ Under div 1 of the *Social Services Regulation Act 2021* (Vic), the SSR has the authority to issue improvement notices 'if it believes that [an] organisation is not complying with the Child Safe Standards'.²⁶⁸

However, there is no requirement for organisations to proactively lodge these policies with a regulator. Regulatory oversight is largely reactive, relying on inspections, audits and complaints. This means non-compliant organisations may attract limited or no proactive scrutiny unless a concern is raised or an allegation of harm is reported.

Inquiry evidence identified particular risks arising from this lack of transparency and proactive review in the context of coercive high-control group settings, including:

- **Policies may exist in form but not in practice:** Inquiry evidence described organisations that adopted child safety policies and WWCCs but were not observing those policies in practice. Regulators have limited capacity to detect this unless an incident is reported, and no clear mechanism to verify whether policies existed or were operational before an incident.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁵ Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

²⁶⁶ See Section 4.9.2.

²⁶⁷ Commission for Children and Young People, *Standard 11: Policies and procedures document how the organisation is safe for children and young people*, (n.d.), <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/the-11-child-safe-standards/standard-11>> accessed 13 April 2026.

²⁶⁸ Victorian Government, *The Social Services Regulator's powers under the Child Safe Standards: Enforcement actions*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulators-powers#enforcement-actions>> accessed 18 May 2026.

²⁶⁹ Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 7–8; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 15.

- **Published policies may lack enforceability:** Inquiry evidence suggested that where an organisation has no registered legal entity underpinning its stated commitments there is limited ability to intervene.²⁷⁰

In response to these gaps, Inquiry evidence called for more proactive oversight of child safe policies. For example, the Olive Leaf Network recommended legislative reform to enable auditing for compliance, and the application of child safety standards with 'mechanisms for external oversight and proactive outreach'.²⁷¹ Catherine Carey, a Founder of Stop Religious Coercion Australia and a lived experience advocate, similarly recommended that organisations be required to submit their child safe policies to a central register as a proactive measure, describing the existing system as only reactive.²⁷²

While the WWCC scheme requires that individuals be screened before engaging in child-related work, it does not require organisations to demonstrate that they operate a child safe environment. This creates a regulatory gap in which organisations may engage screened workers while maintaining conditions that expose children to risk. Across the Inquiry evidence, there were consistent calls for increased transparency and proactive regulatory engagement and oversight in relation to coercive high-control groups. Inquiry stakeholders emphasised that regulatory action should not depend on an incident as the trigger for intervention, as by that point, harm to children may have already occurred.²⁷³

Proactive assessment of child safe policies is not without precedent in Victoria. Under the National Quality Framework, early childhood services are subject to periodic assessment and rating of their child safe policies and practices by authorised officers, with results published on a national register. This demonstrates that a proactive compliance model is administratively feasible in child-serving settings.²⁷⁴ However, that model depends on services being registered and approved before they begin operating. A central concern raised in Inquiry evidence is that some coercive high-control groups deliberately structure their activities to fall outside registration and screening requirements, meaning neither WWCCs nor associated policy safeguards apply.

Evasion through structural design

Consistent with concerns raised about the Reportable Conduct Scheme and Child Safe Standards, Inquiry evidence expressed that WWCC requirements can be avoided entirely through deliberate choices about how a coercive high-control group structures

²⁷⁰ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 5; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, pp. 2–3.

²⁷¹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 54.

²⁷² Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

²⁷³ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 54; Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

²⁷⁴ Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority, *Assessment and quality rating of early childhood services*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/assessment-quality-rating-early-childhood-services>> accessed 13 April 2026; Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority, *Policies and procedures in early childhood services*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/policies-and-procedures-early-childhood-services>> accessed 13 April 2026.

itself and its activities. Section 7(1) of the Worker Screening Act sets a threshold for what counts as child-related work for which a WWCC is required: the work must take place at, for, or involving a service, body, or place—or must involve an activity, where there is direct contact with a child.²⁷⁵ This threshold applies only where the work also falls within one of the specified categories of child related work in Figure 4.2 above.

Inquiry evidence raised significant concerns that some coercive high-control groups obscure the nature of their contact with children, placing them beyond the reach of WWCCs and other child safety requirements.²⁷⁶ For example, Laura McConnell, a lived experience advocate, identified a number of structural features present within one group that, by design or effect, allowed it to operate outside child safety regulations, including requirements to hold a WWCC:

- adults exercising authority over children were characterised as house guests or relatives rather than workers or volunteers²⁷⁷
- activities were conducted in private homes rather than recognised premises²⁷⁸
- the group maintained no formal registration of any kind.²⁷⁹

Some Inquiry evidence suggested this avoidance is deliberate, including evidence of one group deregistering its sole legal entity shortly before the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse were made public.²⁸⁰

Sections 110 and 111 of the Worker Screening Act provide exemptions where child-related contact occurs only with children who are closely related to them (including siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents),²⁸¹ or where parents volunteer in activities attended by their own children.²⁸²

Inquiry evidence did not provide direct examples of groups actively evading WWCC requirements. However, the broader evidence concerning the dynamics of coercive high-control groups raises concern about their potential application in this context. As noted in Part 2 of this Report, dense family interconnections are a common feature of coercive high-control groups. Leaders and active members are often relatives of the children they interact with, and children's activities are frequently organised and supervised by group members within the same extended family networks.²⁸³ Inquiry evidence also shows that adult members commonly have informal responsibility for children who are not their own, particularly in circumstances where their own children are also present. This includes supervising children during group meetings or services,

²⁷⁵ *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic) s 7(1).

²⁷⁶ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, pp. 7–8; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 13; Name withheld, *Submission 143*, pp. 1–2; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

²⁷⁷ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, pp. 7–8.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also: Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 4.

²⁷⁹ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

²⁸⁰ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 8.

²⁸¹ *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic) s 111.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, s 110.

²⁸³ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, pp. 7–8.

providing care in communal settings, or assisting with the oversight of other members' children during group activities.²⁸⁴

This pattern of full family participation and informal child supervision arrangements reflects the loose organisational structures that are typical of coercive high-control groups, where boundaries between family life and group activity are deliberately blurred.²⁸⁵ In groups with these features, the statutory exemptions to child safety safeguards outlined may not apply to a significant proportion of adult-child contact, directly compounding the structural evasion problem.

Areas addressed by recent reforms

Recent legislative reforms address some of the concerns raised in Inquiry evidence.

The *Worker Screening Amendment (Strengthening the Working with Children Check) Act 2025* (Vic) introduced a suite of changes to strengthen the WWCC scheme. These reforms include:

- **Suspension:** WWC clearances must now be suspended where the Secretary of DFFH is moving to revoke a clearance and has been told by police that the person has been charged with, convicted of, or found guilty of a relevant offence, or has been the subject of a relevant disciplinary or regulatory finding (s 87A).
- **Cancellation powers:** The Secretary of DFFH can now cancel a clearance that was granted on the basis of false or misleading information, or that should never have been granted because the application was prohibited (s 93A).
- **Recognition of interstate exclusions:** If a person has been barred from working with children in another state or territory, that exclusion now automatically places them in the highest-risk category in Victoria—regardless of why they were excluded—and prevents them from applying for a Victorian WWCC (ss 60(1)(e), 82(1)(e), 129).
- **Preventing work during application assessment:** It is now an offence for a person to continue working with children while their WWC application is still being decided, unless they have been formally given an interim exclusion notice (s 121(2)(ab)).²⁸⁶

Together, these amendments address concerns raised in Inquiry evidence that individuals under investigation could continue working with children.²⁸⁷

Inquiry evidence also recommended introducing mandatory child safety training.²⁸⁸ Changes made by the *Social Services Regulation Amendment (Child Safety, Complaints and Worker Regulation) Act 2025* (Vic) included amendments requiring organisations

²⁸⁴ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 26; Clare Heath-McIvor, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30; Name withheld, *Submission 134*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 225*, p. 2.

²⁸⁵ See Sections 4.1 and 4.3.2, Part 2 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Creating dependency'.

²⁸⁶ *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic).

²⁸⁷ Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 10.

²⁸⁸ Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 18; Name withheld, *Submission 248*, p. 6.

that engage people in child-related work to notify the SSR of those engagements.²⁸⁹ The Act also introduces completion of mandatory online child safety training and testing as a prerequisite for a new WWCC to be granted.²⁹⁰ These provisions had not yet commenced at the time of writing this Report.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee notes that recent amendments to the WWCC scheme have addressed some of the areas of concern identified in Inquiry evidence. However, two significant issues raised remain unresolved.

First, the WWCC requirement applies only to adults engaged in child-related work within defined categories of service, body or activity. Inquiry evidence identified that some coercive high-control groups are structured in ways so that adults who exercise authority over children fall entirely outside this requirement. In these circumstances, no WWCC is required, regardless of how sustained, routine or significant that adult's contact with children may be. The Committee also notes that the family-connection exemptions in s 110 and 111 of the *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic)—while appropriate for healthy family circumstances—may apply to a disproportionate share of adult-child contact in groups characterised by dense kinship networks and informal shared supervision arrangements.

Taken together, these features can result in the WWCC scheme having little practical effect in precisely the settings where Inquiry evidence suggests children face heightened risk. The Committee believes that the definition of child-related work should be reviewed to consider whether it adequately reaches these circumstances, and whether a test focused on the nature and degree of authority exercised over children would better achieve the protective purpose of the scheme.

Second, while a WWCC confirms that an individual has no known history of relevant offending, it provides no assurance about the safety of the environment in which that individual operates. Inquiry evidence suggested that individuals holding valid WWCCs were nonetheless engaging in, or enabling, conduct harmful to children, in part because the organisations involved lacked effective supervision arrangements or operational safeguards. Although the Child Safe Standards require organisations to maintain child safe policies, there is no obligation to proactively lodge or demonstrate those policies to a regulator unless a concern is raised or an incident has occurred.

The Committee considers that this is a significant gap in the broader child safety framework. While the WWCC scheme and the Child Safe Standards sit within the same regulatory structure under the SSR, they do not currently operate together in a way that requires organisations to demonstrate a safe operating environment as a condition of engaging checked workers. The Committee notes that proactive policy assessment models are not administratively novel: the National Quality Framework in the early childhood sector provides a clear working example of such an approach.

²⁸⁹ *Social Services Regulation Amendment (Child Safety, Complaints and Worker Regulation) Act 2025* (Vic) s 107.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, s 98.

FINDING 59: Some coercive high-control groups are structured in ways that place them outside the scope of Victoria's child protection and safety framework. In these settings, children may be under sustained and significant authority of adults who are not required to meet any formal child safety requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Victorian Government review the definition of 'child-related work' under the *Worker Screening Act 2020* (Vic) to assess whether it adequately captures adults who regularly exercise sustained authority or functional control over children in informal group settings.

FINDING 60: Screening of adults who work with children provides limited protection where the organisational environment in which they operate lacks effective child safety policies or supervision in practice. While organisations subject to the Child Safe Standards are required to maintain child safe policies, there is no obligation to demonstrate those policies to a regulator unless a concern is raised or harm occurs. This creates a system in which individual screening requirements may be met, while organisational conditions remain unsafe for children, without detection until after an incident.

RECOMMENDATION 13: The Victorian Government consider whether current requirements need to be strengthened to:

- require organisations subject to the Child Safe Standards that engage adults in child-related roles to regularly lodge and update their child safe policies, including supervision arrangements and procedures for responding to disclosures, where indicated by risk, complaints or identified non-compliance, to support more proactive monitoring and enforcement
- improve the ability of the Social Services Regulator to proactively assess and intervene where organisations subject to the Child Safe Standards have inadequate child safe policies, without waiting for an incident to occur.

4.9.4 Child Protection

Child Protection in Victoria operates as a statutory service within DFFH, principally governed by the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic). Under the Act, a child is considered in need of protection where one or more prescribed grounds are established, including physical injury, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological harm, and neglect.²⁹¹ Victorian law and policy conceive responsibility for child safety as shared across families, communities, professionals, and government.²⁹² Mandatory

²⁹¹ Children's Court of Victoria, *Child Protection*, 2021, <<https://www.childrenscourt.vic.gov.au/family-division/child-protection>> accessed 10 April 2026.

²⁹² Better Health Channel, *Child Protection Service*, 2024, <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/child-protection-service>> accessed 10 April 2026.

reporting obligations to Child Protection apply to a broad range of professionals, and all adults are subject to a duty to disclose a reasonable belief that a child under 16 has been sexually abused by an adult.²⁹³

Inquiry evidence identified serious limitations in the capacity of Child Protection to fulfil its function in relation to children in coercive high-control groups. As discussed in Sections 4.1.2 and 4.8 above, many children in these environments have limited or no contact with mandatory reporters. These limitations therefore arise partly from systemic invisibility. However, they also reflect gaps in the preparedness and design of the Child Protection system when confronted with coercive high-control group settings.

Children presenting as safe

As discussed in Section 4.8.1, Inquiry evidence suggested that where Child Protection practitioners do encounter children from coercive high-control environments, those encounters are frequently inconclusive. Inquiry evidence described children raised in these groups may be indoctrinated to distrust outside authorities, to regard intervention as persecution, and to present a false picture of safety to professionals.²⁹⁴ Standard risk assessment tools which are designed to identify conventional indicators of harm are poorly equipped to detect abuse in circumstances where the absence of visible indicators is itself the product of deliberate group-wide conditioning.

The Committee asked DFFH how Child Protection supports practitioners to distinguish between concealed harm and genuinely low-risk situations where families involved with coercive high-control groups may present well externally. DFFH's response referred to the SAFER children framework, a 'guided professional judgement model' applied across all Child Protection risk assessments, but did not identify any additional guidance, tools, or training specific to this context.²⁹⁵

The SAFER children framework was revised in 2025 following a review of the literature, 'resulting in updates to the associated practice tools developed for the workforce'. However, DFFH confirmed that no 'specific risk factors' for coercive high-control groups were embedded in the framework.²⁹⁶

In the context of 'barriers to intervening in closed communities', DFFH identified several factors:

- Mistrust toward government
- Internal (to the closed community) norms including elder type leadership practices
- Language and communication

²⁹³ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Child protection*, 2025, <<https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/child-protection>> accessed 10 April 2026.

²⁹⁴ See Sections 4.1.2 and 4.8.1.

²⁹⁵ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions received 20 February 2026, pp. 4, 9.

²⁹⁶ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to written questions on notice, p. 13. See also *Lack of specialised capability and data* below.

- Limited access and physical isolation
- Fear.²⁹⁷

DFFH noted that these ‘barriers relate primarily to the capacity to gather evidence to support risk assessment and subsequent Court applications’.²⁹⁸

A significant barrier to accurate risk assessment is the language used by children raised in coercive high-control groups. Inquiry evidence described how children raised in these environments are often taught group-specific jargon that replaces ordinary language, making descriptions of harm/disclosures unrecognisable to outside professionals.²⁹⁹ Maria Esguerra from Olive Leaf Network Australia who has lived experience, explained how ‘loaded language’ can create a barrier for children being identified as requiring intervention from child protection agencies:

Basically, a cult child learns loaded language, and it is difficult to actually communicate with other people. For us, sex was called sharing. If I went to the police and said, ‘An uncle shared with me,’ that would not have made any sense to them, but it was child rape.³⁰⁰

Inquiry evidence also indicated that children raised in coercive high-control groups may genuinely lack the vocabulary or conceptual framework to recognise or describe their own experiences as harmful.³⁰¹ Where a child cannot name what has happened to them, or where their descriptions carry meanings that are unintelligible outside the group, standard assessment and interview approaches may fail to identify abuse. This limitation is not confined to child protection agencies, but affects multiple agencies and services responsible for responding and supporting people involved with coercive high-control groups. Whole-of-system capability building about coercive high-control groups is discussed in detail in Part 5.

Limitations of existing education and detection frameworks

The Department of Education indicated that children who are enrolled in school do receive education on safe and respectful relationships, including content on recognising and responding to coercive control, through the *Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships* and *Building Respectful Relationships* teaching and learning materials.³⁰² The Department noted:

The Respectful Relationships teaching and learning materials provide students with the social, emotional, and positive relationship skills to recognise unhealthy relationships

²⁹⁷ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to supplementary written questions on notice, 14 April 2026, p. 5.

²⁹⁸ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to supplementary written questions on notice, p. 5.

²⁹⁹ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Control and indoctrination’.

³⁰⁰ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*.

³⁰¹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 19; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 21–22.

³⁰² Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 13.

and behaviours and signs of abuse, and the strategies and skills to seek help and use protective behaviours, including how to recognise and respond to coercive control. This broad range of skills can be applied to group-based coercive control.³⁰³

However, the Department did not indicate that these resources specifically address the dynamics of coercive high-control group environments, such as the consistent indicators of harm to children raised within such groups identified in Inquiry evidence (e.g., indoctrination, spiritualised compliance, loaded language or the normalisation of abuse from infancy). The extent to which general coercive control education enables children to recognise and name harm arising from group-based coercion, rather than familial or intimate partner conduct, remains unclear. Improving school-aged children's understanding of group-based coercion is discussed further in Section 4.11 below.

While Victoria's child protection framework includes 'emotional or psychological harm'³⁰⁴ and neglect,³⁰⁵ Inquiry evidence showed that the forms of harm most common in coercive high-control group environments are psychological in nature and not readily visible as discrete, reportable incidents.³⁰⁶ These harms are therefore less likely to be detected by assessment approaches that rely on observable physical and behavioural indicators.

Victoria Police advised that there are currently no indicators or criteria used to identify cases as involving a coercive high-control group, and that investigators are reliant on victim or witness reports.³⁰⁷ Similarly, the Department of Education confirmed that its PROTECT guidance (its key framework for supporting schools to identify and respond to child abuse) is based on observable physical and behavioural indicators (PROTECT is discussed further in Section 4.10 below).³⁰⁸

Lack of specialised capability and data

Inquiry evidence identified a lack of specialised capability as a system-wide issue.³⁰⁹ Within Child Protection specifically, there are currently no specific training, risk assessment tools, or practice guidance for practitioners responding to children in coercive high-control groups.³¹⁰ As noted above, DFFH confirmed that the SAFER children framework does not include 'specific risk factors related to high-control or cult-like groups' and that these 'are not embedded in the framework'. It advised that this reflects a deliberate design choice to preserve the framework's applicability across a wide range of circumstances. DFFH also indicated that there are currently no plans

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic) s 162(161)(e).

³⁰⁵ Ibid., s 162(161)(f).

³⁰⁶ See Volume 2 and Part 2.

³⁰⁷ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 4.

³⁰⁸ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 5.

³⁰⁹ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 36; Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Elise Heerde, Certified Coach and Mental Health Practitioner, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Anke Richter, Director, Decult, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

³¹⁰ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to written questions on notice, p. 13.

to reform the legislative basis for Child Protection intervention in Victoria or to ‘develop specialist practitioners to manage these matters’.³¹¹

Inquiry stakeholders emphasised the need for building whole-of-system capability, rather than focusing on capability building within individual agencies or specific sectors.³¹² CCYP observed that no single agency currently holds the expertise required to respond effectively to coercive high-control group environments.³¹³ CCYP suggested that a ‘joined-up systems response’ that brings together expertise and skills from across Victoria’s service system, including Child Protection, health, housing, education, and disability services, would be more appropriate than expecting any one service to respond alone.³¹⁴

Although DFFH holds all relevant data on Child Protection referrals, assessments and investigations,³¹⁵ no data was provided to the Committee on referrals or investigations involving children in high-control group contexts (or on coercive high-control groups broadly), because no dedicated data collection in this area currently exists.³¹⁶ However, DFFH acknowledged it does receive disclosures/notifications relating to children in ‘closed communities, high-control or cult-like group settings’, but no further information was provided.³¹⁷

The lack of dedicated data collection means Child Protection’s exposure to children involved in coercive high-control groups cannot be measured, and the adequacy of its response to those children over time cannot be assessed or evaluated. While improving practice does not depend solely on data, identifying whether practice is effective does. Without a baseline, it is not possible to determine whether children in these settings are being appropriately identified, whether statutory intervention is being applied appropriately once contact is made, or whether outcomes for these children are improving. Addressing this gap is essential to support systematic monitoring, evidence-based decision-making, and continuous improvement in practice.

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

The Committee considers that Child Protection’s capacity to identify, assess and respond to children in coercive high-control group environments is underdeveloped. A critical weakness is the absence of reliable data. The Committee considers that DFFH should prioritise the development of data collection arrangements capable of identifying Child Protection involvement with coercive high-control groups. Without data on the scale, nature and outcomes of such involvement, it is not possible to properly assess whether the system is identifying children at risk, responding effectively, or improving over time.

³¹¹ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to written questions on notice, p. 13.

³¹² See Part 5.

³¹³ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 17.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 3.

³¹⁶ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 1; Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 1; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 2.

³¹⁷ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to supplementary written questions on notice, p. 1.

The Committee also notes that CCYP has suggested a coordinated multi-agency model to address risks to children in coercive high-control group settings. In the absence of a designated lead agency and an agreed protocol for responding to children at risk in coercive high-control group settings, a structural gap remains warranting urgent attention. Improving Victoria's whole-of-system response to protecting and supporting people affected by coercive high-control groups is discussed in more detail in Part 5.

FINDING 61: Child Protection services in Victoria currently lack the specialised training, practice guidance, data collection arrangements, and inter-agency coordination needed to effectively identify and respond to children at risk in coercive high-control group environments.

RECOMMENDATION 14: The Victorian Government develop and implement specialised training, practice guidance, risk assessment tools, and data collection arrangements for Child Protection practitioners working with children in coercive high-control group settings.

FINDING 62: Victoria's child safety framework was not designed to identify collective coercion, ideological control, or group-based systems of abuse, and does not currently provide adequate protection for children and young people in coercive high-control groups.

RECOMMENDATION 15: The Victorian Government consider reviewing Victoria's child safety framework to better identify and respond to children at risk in coercive high-control group environments.

4.10 Developing indicators of group-based coercion in child safety guidance

Inquiry evidence showed that group-based coercion presents in cumulative and patterned ways across multiple domains,³¹⁸ and that an effective response requires a shared understanding of risk indicators across agencies.³¹⁹ A fragmented or sector-specific approach to developing indicators risks inconsistency, with the same patterns of harm interpreted differently depending on which part of the service system a person encounters.

While Inquiry evidence emphasised the need for a whole-of system response (discussed in Part 5), it also identified specific opportunities to strengthen child

³¹⁸ See Volume 2 and Part 2.

³¹⁹ See Part 5.

safety frameworks, given the distinctive risks and harms faced by children in coercive high-control group settings (see Sections 4.1 to 4.8 above).

Child safety and wellbeing frameworks that include information for identifying and responding to children involved in coercive high-control groups within Victorian schools represent an area where sector-specific improvements could support earlier identification of children at risk.

As noted in Section 4.3.5 above, school disengagement is a recognised developmental and psychological harm experienced by children in coercive high-control groups, and schools that maintain a child's enrolment represent one of the few institutional settings where contact may be sustained over time. The Department of Education acknowledged that timely identification of disengagement is critical to keeping young people connected to education.³²⁰ The Department's *Schools' Guide to Attendance*, which underpins its attendance framework, identifies a range of early warning signs that teachers are expected to monitor. These include frequent lateness, missing lessons, and social or emotional difficulties.³²¹ However, the Guide does not include indicators relating to restricted socialisation or limited activities outside the group, which are markers that Inquiry evidence suggested may be particularly significant where a child is living in a coercive high-control environment.³²²

The escalation processes set out in the Guide are structured around the active participation of the student's parent or carer, with Student Support Groups designed to include the family as a key partner.³²³ Where a family's connection to a coercive high-control group is the source of concern, the reliance on family participation creates structural limitations in both identification and escalation that are not explicitly addressed in the current framework.

The Department of Education provide a range of tools to schools, including attendance dashboards 'to identify students who are at risk of disengaging from education and/or are leaving school early, and to consider appropriate supports to re-engage them back into education'.³²⁴ Where a student has five or more consecutive days of unexplained absence, schools are advised to escalate their response, including requesting welfare checks and using the Victorian Student Register to determine whether the child has transferred to another school or been registered for home schooling.³²⁵ The Department stated:

Schools should continue all attempts to locate a student whose whereabouts is unknown to ensure their safety and to meet their obligation for ensuring the engagement of all students enrolled in their school.³²⁶

³²⁰ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

³²¹ Department of Education, *School's Guide to Attendance*, Victorian Government, 2025, p. 6.

³²² See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Developmental and environmental control'.

³²³ Department of Education, *School's Guide to Attendance*, p. 6.

³²⁴ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

These tools were designed for general use and depend substantially on the child remaining enrolled and visible to the school system.³²⁷ Questions on notice sought information about how the current tools adapt to capture disengagement linked to family involvement in a high-control or closed community, especially where families avoid school contact or engagement altogether. The Department's response described existing tools and processes at a general level but did not explain how they adapt to circumstances where family connection to a coercive high-control group may be the underlying cause of disengagement.³²⁸

The PROTECT framework is another key opportunity for improving understanding of group-based coercion and its effects on children and young people. Inquiry evidence also suggested that the framework's indicators need to be improved to capture the real-world nature of the harms experienced in coercive high-control environments.

Box 4.2 Taking a closer look—PROTECT framework as an opportunity for identifying group-based coercion in schools

The Department of Education's PROTECT framework is the primary child-safety guidance resource for mandatory reporters in Victorian schools. It sets out how school staff are expected to identify and respond to child abuse and harm, and requires them to follow Four Critical Actions—identify, support, refer, and report—whenever they witness an incident, receive a disclosure, or form a reasonable belief that a child has been abused or is at risk of being abused.

PROTECT supports school staff to identify child abuse through observable physical and behavioural indicators, across all Victorian government schools. It underpins mandatory reporting training, including annual e-learning modules required to be completed by all school staff.

Limitations in identifying group-based coercion

The principal reliance on observable physical and behavioural indicators creates challenges in identifying harm arising from coercive high-control group environments. Where harm is psychological, ideological, or relational in character, and where families or groups are skilled at actively managing the way they present to external services, these indicators may not be triggered.^a

Inquiry evidence indicated that harm in these groups often accumulates gradually through patterns of ideological control, restricted access and psychological conditioning, rather than through discrete incidents. These patterns do not align well with the types of evidence the PROTECT framework currently supports reporters to act on.

(Continued)

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

³²⁸ Ibid.

Box 4.2 Continued

The Department advised that 'PROTECT guidance and training resources are designed to apply to all forms of harm and child abuse', but acknowledged that its approach is based on observable indicators.^b The Department did not clarify whether the framework addresses the unique indicators associated with coercive high-control groups, or whether it is capable of supporting reporters to distinguish between genuinely low-risk situations and those involving coercive high-control group dynamics.

Gaps in the current guidance

The Committee's review of the PROTECT guidance reinforces these concerns.^c The framework contains no dedicated category, indicator set, or procedural guidance specific to children in coercive high-control group settings. While some existing categories include indicators that partially overlap with these children's experiences, none appear to be framed in a way that would assist mandatory reporters to identify patterns of group-based coercion, or to understand why conventional approaches to identification, disclosure and engagement may be less effective in these contexts.

Key gaps identified include:

Lack of guidance tailored to children in coercive high-control group settings

- Indicator categories are not cross-referenced to account for the cumulative nature of harm in these settings.
- Guidance does not cover that a child's presentation may be actively shaped by the group, or where a child has no external frame of reference against which to measure their own experience (for example, no guidance is provided on how to engage with a student whose capacity to disclose may be constrained by group-instilled beliefs, loyalty, or fear of consequences).
- The template assumes the child can be engaged as a subject of enquiry in the ordinary way, and no guidance is provided on the particular difficulties of documenting disclosures from children in coercive high-control group settings (for example, it does not account for where a child may present with scripted or coached responses, where disclosure may have been preceded by group-imposed preparation, or where the child may not recognise their experience as abusive or have the language to describe the abuse accurately).
- Guidance does not assist reporters in recognising how potential criminal offences may present differently in a coercive high-control group setting (for example, harmful conduct may be framed in ideological terms).

(Continued)

Box 4.2 Continued

Framework assumptions are centred on individual perpetrators

- The template does not address the scenario where the alleged perpetrator is a community organisation, religious institution, or high-control group rather than an identifiable individual. The ‘details of alleged perpetrator’ section assumes a single named person with known contact details.
- The potential roles of parents or caregivers as participants in those dynamics is not covered (for example, the ‘engage the student and parents or carers’ section directs staff to contact parents as soon as possible—a step that may be contraindicated where parents are participants in the controlling group, and no qualification is included for circumstances where parents may be members of, or loyal to, the group responsible for the harm).
- The incorporated MARAM family violence identification and screening tool are designed for family violence perpetrated by an intimate partner or family member acting individually and do not address group-level coercive dynamics or ideologically motivated control exercised by a group over its members.

Risks associated with parent/carers notification

Under PROTECT’s Critical Action 3, school staff will in many cases notify parents or carers as soon as possible after they identify a concern, on the basis that this enables them to take steps to prevent further harm or abuse and to support the child. While school principals must seek advice from Victoria Police or Child Protection on whether notification to parents or carers is appropriate before notifying them,^d PROTECT generally assumes that notification promotes child safety.

The Committee notes that previous PROTECT guidance on *Identifying and Responding to All Forms of Abuse* in Victorian Schools identified four circumstances in which a school principal may be advised not to notify parents or carers, where:

- a parent or carer is alleged to have engaged in the abuse
- notification may expose the child to further or more severe abuse
- the child is a mature minor who has asked that their parents not be contacted
- notification is likely to prejudice an investigation by relevant authorities.^e

Inquiry evidence suggested these exceptions may not adequately capture the risks present when harm arises in a coercive high-control group context, where the parent or carer is involved in the coercive high-control group and the risk to the child arises from that group context. In such circumstances, notifying a parent or carer may alert the

(Continued)

Box 4.2 Continued

group to the disclosure and expose the child to group-level pressure, coercion or retaliation. Inquiry evidence indicated that, in some coercive high-control group settings, parents prioritise maintenance of group cohesion or adherence to belief systems over the wellbeing and safety of their children.^f

Unclear guidance and system capability

The Committee sought clarification from the Department on guidance for mandatory reporters in circumstances where families may be linked to coercive high-control groups. The Department advised that schools directly consult Child Protection or Victoria Police,^g and noted that it is ‘refreshing the PROTECT guidance to be clearer about reporting and referral pathways and ways for schools and their staff to support students’.^h The updated guidance is due in early 2026.ⁱ It remains unclear if the refreshed guidance will specifically address these circumstances.

In the absence of explicit guidance, school staff are left without a clear framework for assessing whether notification to a parent or carer associated with a coercive high-control group may place a child at greater risk.

Inquiry evidence also raised concerns about the capacity of protection agencies, such as Victoria Police and Child Protection, to adequately assess these risks.^j For example, Victoria Police advised that it has no training content which specifically covers recognition of coercive high-control group dynamics.^k It also acknowledged that distinguishing coercive and abusive practices from genuine practices is difficult and identified the absence of a clear lead agency as a key challenge.^l The practical consequence is that the protective purpose of the consultation step under Critical Action 3—to ensure that parent or carer notification does not place a child at greater risk—may not be consistently achieved where neither schools nor the agencies they consult have the specialised knowledge required to identify group-based coercive risk.

a. See *Volume 2* and Section 4.3.

b. Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

c. The Committee examined Department of Education, *PROTECT: Types of child abuse and what to look for: Supporting guidance*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/types-child-abuse>> accessed 10 April 2026; Department of Education, *PROTECT: Crimes against children: Supporting guidance*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/crimes-against-children-young-people>> accessed 10 April 2026; Department of Education, *PROTECT: Identify and respond to child abuse in the family: A template for Victorian government schools*, (n.d.), <[https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/Template-Identifying-and-Responding-to-Child-Abuse-\(Family\)-Gov.pdf](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/Template-Identifying-and-Responding-to-Child-Abuse-(Family)-Gov.pdf)> accessed 10 April 2026; Department of Education, *PROTECT: Identify and respond to child abuse in the community: A template for Victorian government schools*, (n.d.), <[https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/Template-Identifying-and-Responding-to-Child-Abuse-\(Community\)-Gov.pdf](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/Template-Identifying-and-Responding-to-Child-Abuse-(Community)-Gov.pdf)> accessed 10 April 2026.

(Continued)

Box 4.2 Continued

- d. Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 11. For example, see: Department of Education, *PROTECT: Identify and respond to child abuse in the community: Provide the right support at the right time*, (n.d.), <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/Protect-4-Critical-Actions-reference-sheets-Community-Gov.pdf>> accessed 10 April 2026.
- e. Department of Education, *PROTECT: Action 3 – Contacting parents or carers*, 2022, <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/action-3-contacting-parents-or-carers>> accessed 10 April 2026. Note, this information was superseded in 2026 with an update to the PROTECT website and guidance materials, however, this information does not appear to be included on updated guidance documents.
- f. See *Volume 2* and Sections 4.1.1, 4.3.1 and 4.3.2.
- g. Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 11.
- h. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- i. The Committee notes that the PROTECT was updated in March 2026, however it is unclear if this is guidance refresh the Department of Education was referring to in its response to written questions on notice.
- j. Lex de Man, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 13; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.
- k. Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, pp. 5, 7.
- l. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee acknowledges that the PROTECT framework reflects sustained investment in child safety in Victorian schools, and notes the Department of Education's advice that the guidance is being refreshed in 2026. The Committee considers schools to be a critical point of contact for children who may otherwise have limited or no visibility to the broader service system, and recognises the significance of the role that mandatory reporters in education settings play in identifying children at risk.

However, the Committee is concerned that the existing PROTECT framework is not designed to support mandatory reporters to identify the distinctive risk profile of children in coercive high-control group settings. The harm experienced by these children is cumulative and relational in character and may not manifest in the observable physical or behavioural indicators on which the framework relies. Children in these environments may also be conditioned to present as unharmed and compliant when interacting with outsiders, including school staff. The current PROTECT framework provides no dedicated indicators, contextual guidance, or procedural support tailored to support identification or risk for this cohort of children.

The Committee considers that the current refresh of PROTECT guidance presents a timely and significant opportunity to address this gap. Updated guidance should incorporate indicators specifically relevant to children in coercive high-control group settings, including:

- indicators that reflect the cumulative and concealed nature of harm

- the potential involvement of parents and caregivers as participants in coercive high-control group dynamics
- the risks associated with notifying parents or carers where they are committed members or supporters of a coercive high-control group
- the limitations of disclosure-based identification for this population.

The Committee notes that any indicators developed for the PROTECT framework should align with broader work on group-based coercion across the service system, as addressed in Part 5.

FINDING 63: The PROTECT framework, which is the primary child safety guidance resource for mandatory reporters in Victorian schools, does not include indicators, contextual guidance, or procedural direction specific to children involved in coercive high-control group settings.

RECOMMENDATION 16: The Victorian Government update the PROTECT framework to include specific guidance and indicators to assist mandatory reporters in Victorian schools to identify children at risk of harm due to involvement in coercive high-control groups, including clear decision-making guidance on managing parent or carer notification in a way that prioritises child safety. The Government should also consider whether this should be a mandatory component of child safety training in Victorian schools.

4.11 Strengthening protections for children and young people

Children and young people in coercive high-control groups often cannot recognise harm or ask for help. This is not by accident, but the result of the environments in which they are raised. Effective protections must address these conditions directly: educating young people early before harm takes hold, supporting those who leave to recover and rebuild, and enabling services to engage with at-risk communities before a crisis occurs.



Questionnaire insight

Questionnaire participants suggested: 'Education in high school and universities about what recruitment tactics look like in coercive groups'.

4.11.1 Building awareness among school-aged children

If students do not feel they have got permission from home to speak up, they are far less likely to. So hearing it from a lot of different places and getting that key messaging about speaking up across the board is going to be critical in those first couple of years, but then it is really skilling up, again, that ecosystem to see those flags early.

Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

Victoria's child safety system depends substantially on children being able to recognise harm and seek help. As outlined in Sections 4.1 to 4.3 above, children in coercive high-control groups are often systematically deprived the conditions that make this possible. However, for children who attend school, and for young people approaching the age at which deliberate recruitment most commonly occurs, schools are one of the most consistent and accessible points in which awareness-building can occur.

Inquiry evidence consistently identified education as a key prevention tool, noting that equipping young people with knowledge of coercive tactics and the skills to recognise manipulation could reduce their vulnerability to recruitment into coercive high-control groups.³²⁹ Education also plays an important role in promoting help-seeking behaviours and making pathways to support visible for young people already exposed to coercive behaviours.

Clare Heath-McIvor emphasised that it was important to educate young people on coercive behaviours beyond family violence contexts, noting that:

every person who is going to be in a relationship, a volunteer organisation, a church, a team, a club or a group scenario needs to know what coercive control looks like. We have started to move the envelope on intimate partner violence in this scenario. This inquiry gives us the impetus to begin to move toward an understanding of what healthy, non-coercive community looks like and what is completely unacceptable in any setting, no matter the belief system.³³⁰

Tore Klevjer, President of Cult Information and Family Support, argued for introducing awareness programs in schools, suggesting that a 'failure to inform students about coercive recruitment techniques should be regarded as institutional neglect'.³³¹

³²⁹ Jasmine Yuen, Victorian Director, Australian Christian Lobby, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 55.

³³⁰ Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

³³¹ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

Inquiry evidence proposed a range of measures to strengthen education and awareness among school-aged children. These proposals generally consisted of a mix of curriculum content and broader school-wide awareness activities. Proposed measures included:

- delivery of age-appropriate content across primary and secondary year levels covering coercive group behaviour, common coercive high-control group recruitment tactics, deception, isolation and indoctrination, and how to recognise warning signs³³²
- a focus on critical thinking skills, media literacy, and emotional resilience to help build capacity to recognise and respond to coercive behaviours³³³
- delivery of content by people with lived experience of coercive high-control groups³³⁴
- general awareness-raising beyond formal schooling, including at university orientation programs (see Section 4.11.2 below), sport and recreation settings, and online platforms.³³⁵

Professor Julie Cugin, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Australian Catholic University, noted that ‘you do not have to be 18 and at university to become involved with groups’, and called for ‘better preparation of students in high school’.³³⁶

Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer of BATForce, emphasised that schools can serve as an early detection point but cautioned against ‘silo[ing] information to young people’. Instead, Leigh Bartlett suggested that awareness education should be integrated, building from primary school. This would help children develop a grounded sense of personal agency and ‘what coercive control feels like, whether it is in a relationship or it is institutional’, before they reach the age at which they become less willing to speak out.³³⁷ On the need for sustained delivery, Leigh Bartlett highlighted that effective education awareness requires consistent, ongoing messaging as opposed to one-off delivery:

It has got to be key messaging in an ongoing way ... because it will just become another going in and telling young people, ‘This is another area.’ And if 90 per cent of the students are not feeling that at that particular time, it gets lost very quickly.³³⁸

³³² Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 5; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 117–118; Raphael Aron, Director, Cult Consulting Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 76.

³³³ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 5; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 117; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 27; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9.

³³⁴ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 7.

³³⁵ Elise Heerde, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Ulrike Schiesser, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, pp. 12–13; Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 14. See Part 5 for further discussion on raising awareness at a community-level.

³³⁶ Professor Julie Cugin, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

³³⁷ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 18–19.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Leigh Bartlett also noted that children become less likely to speak out by Years 5 and 6, and that protective skills must therefore be embedded early and reinforced over time to achieve lasting impact.³³⁹

Other jurisdictions have similarly recognised the importance of building awareness among school aged children. For example, in France, the Ministry of Education has been assigned a new role ‘to raise awareness among secondary school pupils of the dangers of therapeutic and sectarian abuses’.³⁴⁰

Respectful Relationships

The Inquiry sought information from the Department of Education about the extent to which group-based coercion is already addressed in the Victorian Curriculum, and where additional content might be best placed. The Department advised that existing Respectful Relationships teaching and learning materials equip students with skills to recognise unhealthy relationships and signs of abuse, respond to coercive control, and seek help.³⁴¹ The Department indicated that this ‘broad range of skills can be applied to group-based coercive control’,³⁴² but did not identify any existing content that addresses group-based coercion specifically.

In 2016, Respectful Relationships education became a core component of the Victorian Curriculum from Foundation to Year 12 following a recommendation of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. It is delivered across all government and Catholic schools, as well as many independent schools.³⁴³

Respectful Relationships provides the ‘basis for teaching and learning about safe and respectful relationships’ across Victorian schools.³⁴⁴ The Department supports delivery through the optional *Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships* and *Building Respectful Relationships* (Respectful Relationship curriculum) teaching and learning materials, which is available to all schools.³⁴⁵ Table 4.2 below shows the topics covered across the two curriculum sets.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 7.

³⁴¹ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 12.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Department of Education, *Respectful relationships*, 2026, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/respectful-relationships>> accessed 13 April 2026.

³⁴⁴ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 12.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

Table 4.2 Respectful Relationships curriculum

Topic/Unit	Resource	Year Levels
Emotional Literacy	Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships	Foundation–Year 12
Personal Strengths	Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships	Foundation–Year 12
Positive Coping	Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships	Foundation–Year 12
Problem Solving	Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships	Foundation–Year 12
Stress Management	Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships	Foundation–Year 12
Help Seeking	Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships	Foundation–Year 12
Gender and identity	Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships	Foundation–Year 8 (replaced by Building Respectful Relationships at Years 9–10)
Positive Gender Relations	Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships	Foundation–Year 8 (replaced by Building Respectful Relationships at Years 9–10)
Gender, Respect and Relationships	Building Respectful Relationships	Years 7–8
The Power Connection	Building Respectful Relationships	Years 9–10
Gender, Power and the Media	Building Respectful Relationships	Years 9–10

Source: Victorian Government, *Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships and Building Respectful Relationships*, 2025, <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/resilience-rights-and-respectful-relationships-and-building-respectful-relationships>> accessed 13 May 2026; Arc Education, *Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships*, 2021; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Respectful Relationships: Teaching resources*, (n.d.), <<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/cross-curriculum-resources/respectful-relationships/teaching-resources>> accessed 13 May 2026.

Respectful Relationships is more than a curriculum-based initiative. It operates through a whole-school approach that, alongside curriculum, ‘encourages schools to review their existing procedures and culture to ensure that they model respectful relationships and gender equality practices across the entire school community’.³⁴⁶ This means schools and their communities look at staff practices, classroom management, school events, sport programs, formals and other occasions, to ensure all aspects of a school’s operation and culture are underpinned by respect and equality.³⁴⁷

The Department described several areas covered under Respectful Relationships that align with some of the behaviours and risk factors identified in Inquiry evidence, including:

- recognising unhealthy relationships, behaviours and signs of abuse
- understanding and applying protective behaviours, including how to seek help

³⁴⁶ Department of Education, *Respectful Relationships whole-school approach*, 2024, <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/respectful-relationships-whole-school-approach>> accessed 13 April 2026.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

- recognising and responding to coercive control within interpersonal and family violence contexts
- developing social and emotional skills including resilience, confidence and positive relationship-building
- understanding the research and evidence around coercion and gender-based violence
- engaging safely in online relationships, including awareness of online safety risks and where to seek support.³⁴⁸

Including group-based coercion as a discrete element

That [awareness] is somewhere even in the curriculum, I guess, along similar lines of Respectful Relationships. It could even be an expansion of that ... there are actually lots of ways where it could just be fit in.

Renee Spencer, closed hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

Respectful Relationships was developed as a primary prevention initiative for family violence. Its focus is on gender equality and intimate partner relationships, including recognising and responding to coercive control.³⁴⁹ Group-based coercion operates through different dynamics—including authority structures, group identity, gradual and entrenched control, and collective enforcement of norms—that are not explicitly addressed in the current Respectful Relationships materials.³⁵⁰

Some Inquiry evidence suggested that Respectful Relationships should be expanded or updated, to better capture the dynamics of group-based coercion.³⁵¹ For example, Knowmore Legal Service noted that while coercive control in relationships is addressed, ‘education and awareness could be extended to include where a whole community may be complicit or contributing to harm’. Knowmore noted that by providing this type of education to young people involved in coercive high-control groups, it ‘could give them the knowledge and ability to identify that their experiences are problematic’.³⁵²

Sexual Assault Services Victoria similarly acknowledged Respectful Relationships’ resources as a positive development, but noted that such initiatives should also account for ‘cult dynamics’.³⁵³ It also raised concerns about some online communities that promote misogynistic content, noting that such environments often involve distrust of external institutions and adherence to closed, all-encompassing worldviews,

³⁴⁸ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, pp. 12–14.

³⁴⁹ Department of Education, *Respectful relationships*.

³⁵⁰ See *Volume 2*.

³⁵¹ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 4; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 7; Renee Spencer, closed hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

³⁵² *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 4.

³⁵³ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 7.

that can make conventional counter-messaging ineffective, as young people already immersed in such communities may be primed to dismiss it. These concerns reflect patterns similar to those described in Inquiry evidence about coercive high-control groups, where sustained group pressure, isolation from alternative viewpoints, and distrust of external authorities reinforce compliance and inhibit help-seeking. Sexual Assault Services Victoria advised that effective responses may need to draw on deprogramming and deradicalisation approaches rather than counter-messaging alone.³⁵⁴

The Department advised that the current Victorian Respectful Relationships curriculum covers recognising issues and skills which could be applied to group-based coercion.³⁵⁵ However, it did not identify any curriculum content that specifically focuses on group-based coercion.

Non-curriculum based opportunities

Awareness-building in schools is often framed in terms of curriculum content and staff guidance training.³⁵⁶ However, Inquiry evidence also pointed to the importance of the school environment itself as a place where information about help-seeking can be made visible to young people.³⁵⁷ For children in coercive high-control groups, school may be one of the few settings they regularly access outside the group's control. Whether that contact leads to help-seeking depends in part on whether information about support options is visible, accessible and clearly present in that environment.

Ryan Carey from Stop Religious Coercion Australia emphasised the importance of readily available information in schools and the broader community. Ryan Carey noted that young people need 'an ability ... to call a hotline or contact somebody safely', observing that for many children in these environments the situation can feel hopeless, and that clear, accessible pathways to help could make a material difference.³⁵⁸ Making help-seeking information visible in schools (e.g., what school-based support roles exist, how to access them, and where else to turn) supports a culture in which students are regularly reminded that help is available and seeking it is acceptable, regardless of messages they may receive at home.

The value of whole-school approaches that embed awareness beyond the classroom is already recognised in Victorian policy. As noted above, the Respectful Relationships initiative is explicitly designed as a whole-school approach that goes beyond curriculum content delivery. The Victorian Government describes Respectful Relationships as embedding a culture of respect and gender equality across the entire

³⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 7–8.

³⁵⁵ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 12.

³⁵⁶ See Section 4.10 and Part 5.

³⁵⁷ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49.

³⁵⁸ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

school community, from classrooms to ‘staffrooms, sporting fields, fetes and social events’.³⁵⁹ The Respectful Relationship’s resource kit for schools identifies a range of suggested non-curriculum strategies and supports to help achieve this, including:

- promotional posters and other communication materials, such as school newsletter excerpts, orientation and enrolment materials, and the school website
- extracurricular activities and school events such as sporting events, carnivals, school musicals and formals, designed to promote respectful messages
- assemblies, student-led forums and student action groups as opportunities for students to promote and take an active part in designing and implementing strategies across the school community.³⁶⁰

This existing framework provides a practical foundation through which awareness of group-based coercion could be embedded across the whole-school environment.

COMMITTEE’S VIEW

In relation to children who attend school, the Committee finds that current systems for identifying and supporting at-risk children were not designed with this cohort in mind. This is often compounded by the limited visibility of the harms they are experiencing. Attendance frameworks, escalation processes, and family engagement models assume a level of parental cooperation and child visibility that may not exist where family involvement in a coercive high-control group is itself the source of risk. While acknowledging the Department of Education’s existing tools and commitment to student wellbeing, the Committee considers that targeted attention to this gap would strengthen the system’s capacity to identify and support children who are most hidden from view.

The Committee does not consider it appropriate to prescribe detailed curriculum content. Decisions about age-appropriateness, pedagogy, sequencing, and teacher capability are appropriately matters for the Department of Education and curriculum authorities. However, based on the evidence before it, the Committee is satisfied that there is a clear and currently unaddressed gap in the Victorian curriculum in relation to awareness of group-based coercion among school-aged children.

The Respectful Relationships framework provides an established and appropriate vehicle for addressing this gap. It allows new content on group-based coercion to build directly on existing content, delivery structures and relationships already embedded in schools.

The Committee considers that the Department of Education should review the Respectful Relationships curriculum and resources to identify opportunities to introduce age-appropriate content on group-based coercion. Any such content should be developed with input from people with lived experience and relevant specialist expertise.

While the Committee acknowledges the Department of Education’s position that the broad skills taught through Respectful Relationships could be applied to group-based coercion, it does not consider this sufficient. The dynamics of group-based coercion differ in

³⁵⁹ Department of Education, *Respectful relationships*.

³⁶⁰ Department of Education, *Respectful Relationships: A resource kit for Victorian schools*, 2024, pp. 19, 24, 43, 49, 51.

material ways from the family violence and intimate partner contexts for which the existing materials were primarily designed. The Committee believes that young people are better equipped to recognise and respond to these dynamics when they are clearly named and explained, rather than left to be inferred.

Beyond formal curriculum content, the Committee considers that schools can play a broader role in awareness-building by making information about help and support clearly visible across the whole-school environment. For some children in coercive high-control groups, school may be one of the few settings they regularly access outside the group's influence. Ensuring that information about support options is accessible in that environment can reduce barriers to help-seeking and provide critical pathways to support. The existing Respectful Relationships whole-school approach provides an appropriate framework through which this can be achieved.

FINDING 64: Where a child's disengagement from school is caused by family involvement in a coercive high-control group, current school attendance frameworks have limited capacity to respond effectively or to re-engage the student.

FINDING 65: School is one of the few settings that many children in coercive high-control groups access regularly outside the group's influence. Building awareness of coercive group dynamics and available support through the school environment is an important means of reducing vulnerability to involvement in such groups and supporting those already experiencing group-based coercion to recognise harm and seek help.

FINDING 66: The Respectful Relationships initiative does not address group-based coercion as a discrete topic. While the general skills it develops are valuable, they do not adequately equip school-aged children to recognise the specific harmful characteristics and dynamics of group-based coercion.

RECOMMENDATION 17: The Victorian Government review the Respectful Relationships curriculum and resources to identify opportunities to introduce age-appropriate content on group-based coercion across primary and secondary school year levels.

4.11.2 Building awareness among university and other tertiary students

As demonstrated in Part 2 and *Volume 2* of the Report, young people at university are vulnerable to recruitment from coercive high-control groups.

In the 18 months since I became Coordinator of Chaplaincy at the university, I have become acutely aware of the threat which cults pose to staff and student welfare and of the need for effective measures to be put in place to deal with this threat. These organisations operate at a strictly local and individual level. The university,

on the other hand, is a large and multifaceted body, both a community and an institution, with all the complexity and diversity which this implies. By operating in the way they do, cults seek to take advantage of the difficulty which large bodies like universities have in responding at the institutional level to the threats that cults pose.

Rev Brendan Byrne, Chaplaincy Co-ordinator, Wellbeing Services, University of Melbourne, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

Inquiry evidence, including from universities and student associations, raised concerns about the vulnerability of university students (particularly first-year and international students) to recruitment efforts by coercive high-control groups. RMIT University, Australian Catholic University and the University of Melbourne all identified social isolation as the primary vulnerability exploited by recruiters. They noted that students new to Australia or Victoria often lack established social networks and are actively seeking connection and friendship.³⁶¹

International students can face compounded vulnerabilities, including physical isolation from family support,³⁶² and navigating cultural and language barriers that may increase isolation and dependence.³⁶³ In some cases, a person's visa status may be exploited to increase group control. For example, where working rights are restricted, continued residency depends on a relationship with a group member (including arranged marriage), or where a group has knowledge of a visa breach (e.g., where a person on a student visa is no longer studying).³⁶⁴

Inquiry evidence also raised concerns that universities, particularly large institutions, can present significant opportunities for coercive high-control groups to recruit due to the high proportion of international and interstate students and the scale of orientation activities.

... universities, especially large establishments such as the University of Melbourne, provide ample opportunities for cults and organised fringe groups due to the significant proportion of our students being either international or interstate. Out of the nearly 70,000 students at the University of Melbourne nearly 50 per cent are international students, and the risk this poses is exacerbated given the information on our orientation activities held at the start and in the middle of the year, where tens of thousands of students are new to Australia or Victoria. This information is publicly available.

Rhea Sankar, Education Academic Officer, University of Melbourne Student Union, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

³⁶¹ Dene Cicci, Executive Director, Students Group, RMIT University, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4; Professor Julie Cugin, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Joshua Stagg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

³⁶² Joshua Stagg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Sonika Agarwal, Education Public Affairs Officer, University of Melbourne Student Union, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*, p. 10.

³⁶³ Dene Cicci, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

³⁶⁴ Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*, p. 10.

The University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) shared the results of a survey its welfare department conducted which received responses from approximately 800 students. The survey found that 42% of international students reported experiencing loneliness, and nearly 50% of all students reported difficulty in establishing social networks on commencing university.³⁶⁵

UMSU also conducted a 'flash survey' during a one hour coffee catchup held in a non-teaching week before exams. The survey received 27 responses and asked whether students had 'been approached by a member of a cult on campus'. Eight students (29.6%) responded 'yes', and two (7.4%) responded 'maybe'.³⁶⁶ Reflecting on the results, UMSU commented:

From this short survey it is hard to draw wider conclusions, but the fact that 8 students out of 27 in one afternoon had had an interaction with a cult, or a group or a member they assessed as one, is a sign of a bigger problem. We urge the university or the government to carry out a wider survey if they require more student input during study period or o-week next year.³⁶⁷

Some Inquiry evidence also indicated that vocational education students share the same vulnerabilities to coercive recruitment as university students,³⁶⁸ and that VET providers have in some instances been used by coercive high-control groups as a vehicle for recruitment and member retention.³⁶⁹

Inquiry stakeholders proposed a range of measures to strengthen awareness of coercive high-control groups among university and tertiary students. These proposals focused on four key themes: the timing of information, the format and framing of communications, the trusted relationships through which information is delivered, and the adequacy of support services for students who have already been affected.

Orientation week as a key opportunity to raise awareness

Inquiry evidence consistently identified that the period before and immediately after arrival at university, particularly orientation week, as a critical window for awareness-building, but also as a period of significant information overload. Several people who provided Inquiry evidence reported that they, or people they knew, had been targeted by coercive high-control groups during orientation week activities on university campuses.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁵ Joshua Stagg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

³⁶⁶ University of Melbourne Student Union, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups hearing, response to questions on notice received 28 November 2025, p. 2.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Dene Cicci, *Transcript of evidence*; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*.

³⁶⁹ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

³⁷⁰ Ryan Manuel Halim, *Submission 266*, p. 3; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27; Sonika Agarwal, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

To reduce this risk, Inquiry evidence suggested raising awareness of coercive high-control groups should be incorporated into orientation activities.³⁷¹ Joshua Stagg, President of UMSU, emphasised that ideally awareness raising should have ‘multiple facets’, but that a ‘big part of it would be [UMSU] during orientation’. He referred to a past example where UMSU distributed flyers during orientation to warn students about scams.³⁷²

International students were repeatedly identified as a particularly vulnerable cohort for recruitment by coercive high-control groups. For these students, Professor Julie Cugin from Australian Catholic University noted the importance of raising awareness of coercive high-control groups and advised that the university already provide international students with ‘specific briefings ... prior to leaving where they are coming from’.³⁷³ However, Professor Cugin also cautioned about ‘information overload’ for students during this time period, stating:

There is just so much to take in, and I think that the main concerns are their academic achievements and the English requirements and being able to understand and make friends and find housing. There is so much on their mind that this may not be able to be immediately recalled when they come to campus.³⁷⁴

Professor Cugin explained that the University tries to address this challenge by delivering information through multiple formats, reminders, and peer-support (buddy) programs, both before and after students arrive at the campus. She emphasised the importance of balancing awareness raising with reassurance, to avoid unnecessarily alarming new students.³⁷⁵ Professor Cugin observed that these expanded education efforts had been effective, as they had seen ‘a lot less’ coercive high-control group activity on their campuses since the university ‘really ramped up this education program’.³⁷⁶

Framing awareness around risk indicators and help-seeking behaviours

Inquiry evidence suggested that awareness communications for university students are most effective when framed as practical safety information. For example, Dene Cicci, Executive Director of Students Group at RMIT University, reflected on the University’s approach to informing students about possible safety concerns:

if you were to look at RMIT’s webpage, we talk about a range of scams. We do not single them out by ‘coercive control’ or ‘religious cult’; we just list scams. The more simply that we can communicate these things – whether they are scams or not, but the things that might cause you to find yourself in a pickle, we communicate those simply and easily.³⁷⁷

³⁷¹ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 118; Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

³⁷² Joshua Stagg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

³⁷³ Professor Julie Cugin, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Dene Cicci, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

However, others suggested that more specific framing could also be beneficial. Rhea Sankar, Education Academic Officer for UMSU, advised that naming specific groups known to be active in the university context, rather than speaking only in general terms, could help students recognise a relevant encounter.³⁷⁸

Inquiry evidence showed that some universities and student associations have already taken steps to warn students about particular coercive high-control group activity on and around their campuses. For example, the Deakin University Student Association issued a formal written notice to students describing recruitment tactics associated with a high-control group reported to be operating across multiple campuses, and directing students to available support services.³⁷⁹ Other universities have similarly issued targeted warnings to students about groups they considered posed a risk to students.³⁸⁰

Inquiry evidence included suggestions that awareness materials directed at university students should address:

- recognisable recruitment behaviours, including unsolicited approaches in social settings, offers of friendship or belonging by strangers, invitations to off-campus events or study groups, and requests to keep contact private³⁸¹
- guidance on where to seek help, including trusted contacts on campus and available support services³⁸²
- barriers to help-seeking, particularly for some international students, including unfamiliarity with Australian institutions and, in some cases, concerns about disclosing matters to police³⁸³
- delivery across multiple channels, with messages revisited over time rather than provided as a single communication.³⁸⁴

Joshua Stagg from UMSU emphasised that providing information to students is most effective when it comes from trusted channels, such as ‘elected student peers, such as those in the union, or through the chaplaincy service’.³⁸⁵ Rev Brendan Byrne, Chaplaincy Coordinator at The University of Melbourne, indicated that:

³⁷⁸ Rhea Sankar, Education Academic Officer, University of Melbourne Student Union, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

³⁷⁹ *Deakin University Student Association: Cults on Campus Statement* (18 March 2026).

³⁸⁰ See, for example: RMIT University, *Scams targeting students – what they are and signs to look out for: Korean religious sect posing as bible study class*, 2026, <<https://www.rmit.edu.au/students/news/2023/oct/scams-targeting-students>> accessed 14 April 2026; University of Melbourne Student Union, *Cults on campus: How they’re targeting students*, 2022, <<https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/news/article/7797/Cults-on-Campus-How-Theyre-Targeting-Students>> accessed 14 April 2026; Rebecca Borg, “‘Dangerous’ cult-like group preying on Melbourne uni students”, *Herald Sun*, 17 August 2024, <<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/victoria-education/dangerous-cultlike-group-preying-on-melbourne-uni-students/news-story/3a6002a42e70a48d096faa959fd67d16>> accessed 14 April 2026.

³⁸¹ RMIT University, *Submission 281*, p. 5.

³⁸² Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

³⁸³ Dene Cicci, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

³⁸⁴ Professor Julie Cugin, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

³⁸⁵ Joshua Stagg, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 12, 16.

any resources which government can make available, including training and professional development, connection with recognised experts in the field of cult activity, and capacity to speak into the online and social media platforms in which cults are also active, would be most welcome.³⁸⁶

Similarly, Joshua Stagg noted that it may be important for the Victorian Government to have a presence on campus and provide information to students during orientation week.³⁸⁷

Inquiry evidence indicated that universities and student associations are already undertaking a range of awareness-raising activities to help students recognise and respond to deceptive recruitment by high-control groups. RMIT University reported delivering regular communications to students about coercive recruitment tactics and maintaining an online hub with practical guidance, including information for international students unfamiliar with risks in the Melbourne CBD.³⁸⁸ UMSU and Melbourne University's chaplaincy service described collaborating to produce educational materials, including a video resource.³⁸⁹ Like the Deakin University Student Association,³⁹⁰ the Australian Catholic University reported proactively communicating with all students about deceptive recruitment activity after incidents were identified on several of its campuses.³⁹¹ At the Australian Catholic University this included communications delivered through predeparture briefings for incoming international students.³⁹²

However, universities noted that the effectiveness of institutional-level efforts is limited by the evolving and adaptive nature of the recruitment practices of coercive high-control groups, and by the constraints of acting alone. Inquiry evidence identified a need for complementary government-led action to strengthen existing university efforts. This includes a coordinated public awareness campaign accessible to a diverse student population, improved information sharing between universities, Victoria Police and other community partners to identify emerging patterns of recruitment, and investment in research into contemporary recruitment practices to ensure education efforts remain current and effective.³⁹³ This is especially important as Inquiry evidence shows that recruitment by these groups is not confined to campuses, it also occurs in train stations, shopping centres, public spaces and online.³⁹⁴

³⁸⁶ Brendan Byrne, Chaplaincy Co-ordinator, Wellbeing Services, University of Melbourne, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

³⁸⁷ Joshua Stagg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

³⁸⁸ RMIT University, *Submission 281*; Dene Cicci, *Transcript of evidence*.

³⁸⁹ Brendan Byrne, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

³⁹⁰ *Deakin University Student Association: Cults on Campus Statement* (18 March 2026).

³⁹¹ Professor Julie Cugin, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

³⁹³ RMIT University, *Submission 281*, p. 5; Dene Cicci, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9; Joshua Stagg, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14. See Part 5.

³⁹⁴ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Opportunistic recruitment'.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is deeply concerned by reports of recruitment activities by coercive high-control groups on university campuses and in adjacent spaces, such as train stations and other locations across the Melbourne CBD. It is the Committee's opinion that action to better protect young university students in Victoria is urgently required.

The Committee recognises the efforts already being made by universities and student associations to protect students from deceptive recruitment by coercive high-control groups. However, these efforts can only reach so far. While universities can communicate with their own students, they cannot address the broader environment in which recruitment activities occur, such as in train stations, shopping centres, public spaces and online. Students who have not yet arrived on campus, or who are approached outside of university settings, may not be reached by university-specific communications. This is a community-wide problem and requires a response beyond individual institutions. Broader public awareness raising is considered in Part 5.

The Committee considers that the Victorian Government has an important role to play in supporting and strengthening the work already underway in the tertiary education sector to raise awareness of coercive high-control groups. Rather than leaving each institution to develop its own resources in isolation, a government-coordinated awareness campaign across the tertiary sector would provide consistent, trusted and current information that institutions could adapt and use.

The Committee also considers ongoing investment in research into contemporary recruitment practices to be critical, so awareness materials reflect how coercive high-control groups are currently operating. Without this, even well-resourced institutional programs risk becoming outdated. Part 5 considers the need for ongoing research into coercive high-control groups further.

FINDING 67: University students are vulnerable to recruitment by coercive high-control groups, and deceptive recruitment activity has been reported on and around university campuses across Victoria.

FINDING 68: Some universities and student associations are undertaking awareness-raising activities to protect students from deceptive recruitment.

RECOMMENDATION 18: The Victorian Government:

- explore opportunities to engage with universities to deliver awareness materials about the risks of coercive high-control groups
- in collaboration with the Australian Government, consider options to support universities and tertiary institutions to deliver coordinated awareness materials about the recruitment methods of coercive high-control groups. The materials should be developed in consultation with universities and student representative bodies.

4.11.3 Supporting young people to leave and recover

Young people who leave coercive high-control groups face significant and often immediate challenges in rebuilding their lives. In response to questions about *Understanding support service demand*, three of the four organisations asked ‘reported receiving requests for support from individuals aged 18 or under’.³⁹⁵

This Section examines the support available to young people at the point of exit and in the period that follows, including the longer-term recovery supports required for sustained reintegration. It also considers the particular circumstances of young people in the 18–25 age cohort, who often leave these environments in early adulthood carrying the impacts of a childhood shaped by coercion and control, but who fall outside existing child protection frameworks and are not well served by adult services.

18–25 cohort: service gaps in the transition to adulthood

The negative impact of abuse and coercive control within cults and organised fringe groups can persist for many years. We have seen through our work the need to ensure continuity of support for children and young people experiencing trauma and disadvantage, including as they transition into adulthood. Support needs do not simply stop when a person turns 18. Any joined-up systems approach should recognise this and ensure that ongoing support is available for young people who continue to experience vulnerability and require further assistance to effectively integrate into broader society.

Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 18.

Inquiry evidence made clear that the harm experienced by children in coercive high-control groups does not end at the age of 18. Young people who exit these environments in early adulthood often carry the accumulated effects of prolonged exposure to coercive and controlling behaviours, including educational deprivation, psychological harm and social isolation.³⁹⁶ Despite this, the service system they encounter is poorly equipped to recognise or respond to their particular circumstances.

Inquiry evidence identified several features of this service gap that warrant specific attention:

- **Support needs do not stop at 18:** The negative impacts of coercive control and abuse in coercive high-control groups can persist well into adulthood, and ‘support needs do not simply stop when a person turns 18’.³⁹⁷ Young people in the 18–25 cohort commonly face overlapping, acute and long-term needs (e.g., complex

³⁹⁵ Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Understanding support service demand: responses from four support organisations*, June 2026, p. 2. To assist in building a clearer understanding of the support services currently available to Victorians affected by coercive high-control groups the Committee asked four organisations to respond to 12 questions.

³⁹⁶ See *Volume 2* and Section 4.3.6.

³⁹⁷ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 18.

trauma, housing instability, financial hardship and limited practical life skills) that are not addressed through standard adult service pathways.³⁹⁸

- **Educational deprivation compounds disadvantage:** Many young people leave coercive high-control groups without recognised qualifications and foundational academic skills. This creates significant barriers to further education, employment, and participation in mainstream society.³⁹⁹ It also compounds existing vulnerability at precisely the point when young people are attempting to establish independence.
- **Barriers to income support delay exit:** Eligibility requirements for income support can create significant barriers for young people aged 18 or over, particularly where access depends on parental involvement and parents are also members of the coercive high-control group the young person has left.⁴⁰⁰ These barriers can delay exit and increase vulnerability at a critical point of transition.

The cumulative effect of these gaps is that young people aged 18–25 who exit coercive high-control groups encounter a service system that treats them as independent adults, without recognising that their needs arise directly from a childhood spent in a controlled and harmful environment. This cohort occupies a structural gap where they are no longer eligible for child protection supports, but are not adequately provided for by adult services that were not designed with their particular needs in mind.

Transition and exit support for young people aged 18–25

Many of the support needs of this cohort are shared with survivors of coercive high-control groups more broadly. The adequacy of the general service system response, including specialist trauma-informed services, survivor-led support, and dedicated exit pathways, is addressed in Part 5.

However, Inquiry evidence identified several challenges that are specific to young people aged 18–25, arising from exiting a coercive environment at or around the age at which child protection support ends. These include:

- **Absence of transition planning before adulthood:** Unlike other settings where vulnerable young people are supported to transition to adulthood—such as out-of-home care—there is no equivalent transition planning for young people in coercive high-control groups, unless they meet eligibility requirements for existing models.⁴⁰¹
- **Immediate practical vulnerability at point of exit:** Young people who exit coercive high-control groups in early adulthood often do so with no independent financial resources, no secure housing, limited employment history, and in many cases no familiarity with basic processes such as applying for income support. This acute vulnerability is a direct consequence of the conditions of their upbringing, yet the

³⁹⁸ See Part 2 and Section 4.3.5.

³⁹⁹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 31. See Part 2 and Section 4.3.5.

⁴⁰⁰ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.; BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 4; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 18.

service system they encounter is not designed to recognise or respond to their circumstances.⁴⁰²

- **Existing service categories do not fit their circumstances:** Young people leaving coercive high-control groups often present to homelessness or crisis services, but intake and screening tools are not designed to identify group-based coercion.⁴⁰³ For example, eligibility criteria for family violence services may not apply where harm has been perpetrated by a group rather than a partner or family member in a recognised domestic relationship.⁴⁰⁴ Victoria Police advised that there are no specific support services for individuals seeking to leave coercive high-control groups.⁴⁰⁵

Victoria has an established range of transition and post-care support programs for young people leaving the out-of-home care system. Programs available to this age cohort include:

- Better Futures, which provides individualised support across housing, education, employment, health and wellbeing, and community connections for young people who were in out-of-home care on a Care by Secretary Order, Long-Term Care Order, or Family Reunification Order, up to age 21.⁴⁰⁶
- Home Stretch, delivered under the Better Futures model, which provides an accommodation allowance enabling young people to remain with their carer or transition to independent living, up to age 21.⁴⁰⁷
- Housing First for Young People Leaving Care, which provides housing and wraparound casework support for young people at immediate risk of homelessness within six months of leaving care.⁴⁰⁸
- Transition to Independent Living Allowance, a one-off payment of up to \$1,500 for young people aged 15 to 25 who are leaving or have left care, administered in Victoria by Melbourne City Mission.⁴⁰⁹
- Lead Tenant program, which provides ‘semi-independent support and accommodation’ for young people aged 15–18 years who cannot live with their family because of abuse or neglect. The program involves a ‘volunteer lead tenant’ living in a residence with a small group of young people, providing them support/guidance to develop ‘independent living skills’.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰² Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 4; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*.

⁴⁰³ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁰⁴ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 2.

⁴⁰⁵ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 9.

⁴⁰⁶ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Policies and procedures*, 2026, <<https://fac.dffh.vic.gov.au/policies-and-procedures>> accessed 13 May 2026.

⁴⁰⁷ Premier of Victoria, *Home Stretch helping more young people leaving care*, media release, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/home-stretch-helping-more-young-people-leaving-care>> 22 June 2021.

⁴⁰⁸ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Children, youth & families: Housing First for Young People Leaving Care*, 2026, <<https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/housing-first-young-people-leaving-care>> accessed 15 April 2026.

⁴⁰⁹ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Children, youth & families: Leaving care*, 2022, <<https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/leaving-care>> accessed 15 April 2026.

⁴¹⁰ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to questions on notice, p. 15.

Eligibility for each of these programs is contingent on the young person having been in out-of-home care under a formal statutory order. For example, DFFH advised that a young person exiting a coercive high-control group setting would only be eligible for the Lead Tenant program if a Children's Court protection order placing them outside parental care had been made, and that the nature of the harm the young person had experienced is not itself a relevant eligibility criterion.⁴¹¹ Beyond transitional supports available, DFFH noted that for people aged 18 and over the available pathway consists of general 'community-based services and supports, including housing and homelessness programs, and family violence programs delivered by Community Service Organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations'.⁴¹²

As noted in Section 4.8, children in coercive high-control groups are often hidden from child protection systems and the harm they experience often goes unrecognised. As such, a young person raised in a coercive high-control group who exits in early adulthood is unlikely to meet eligibility thresholds for support programs, regardless of the severity of their circumstances.

The structured transition planning that exists for care-leavers has no equivalent for this cohort. The result is that some of the most comprehensive and well-resourced transitional supports available in Victoria are inaccessible to young people leaving coercive high-control groups.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is of the view that the vulnerabilities faced by young people in coercive high-control groups do not resolve at age eighteen. While the transition to adulthood brings legal independence, young people raised in coercive high-control groups often reach this milestone without the developmental foundations most young Victorians acquire through their adolescence. Young people leaving these environments often carry acute, overlapping and complex needs that current service systems are not well configured to meet. Extending child protection eligibility thresholds may not be the most effective mechanism for addressing the needs of young people aged 18 to 25 who have been involved in coercive high-control groups. As noted in earlier sections, the more fundamental issue is one of earlier identification—ensuring that children in these environments are identified and supported within the child protection system before they reach adulthood. For those who do reach adulthood without having received that support, the priority should be improving the capacity of adult-facing agencies to identify and respond to the particular needs of this cohort, rather than expanding the eligibility criteria for transition planning.

The Committee considers that improving the identification of children at risk in coercive high-control groups is a necessary foundation for better outcomes across the service system, including transition and post-exit support. The issues identified and recommendations made in this Part aim to improve the child protection system's ability

⁴¹¹ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to supplementary written questions on notice, p. 2.

⁴¹² Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to supplementary written questions on notice, pp. 3–4.

to identify and respond to children in these environments at an earlier stage. Earlier identification may also increase the likelihood that children and young people will be able to access formal support arrangements that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

However, the Committee acknowledges that improved identification alone will not address all of the challenges faced by young people who leave coercive high-control groups. Broader questions about whether the service system is adequately equipped to respond to the needs of people in or leaving these environments are considered in Part 5.

FINDING 69: The vulnerability of children and young people in coercive high-control groups does not end at the age of eighteen, and current service settings do not adequately account for the ongoing needs of young people exiting these environments.

FINDING 70: Children in coercive high-control groups are frequently not identified by child protection agencies, and are therefore unlikely to meet the eligibility requirements for transition support programs that require prior statutory involvement.

4.11.4 Building trust before crisis: improving proactive engagement

Building trust with communities before concerns reach the threshold for legislative intervention can support cultural change and increase the likelihood that at-risk children become visible to services at an earlier stage. Inquiry evidence highlighted the value of engagement approaches that focus on education, awareness and relationship-building, rather than enforcement alone.⁴¹³

Richard Baker, an investigative journalist who has reported on coercive high-control groups, recommended Victoria consider empowering regulators, including through providing appropriate resources and budget to ‘pre-emptively go into groups where there are not really any clear structures or governance or accountability frameworks, where you can clearly see power is vested in one person and you know there are a number of children in there’.⁴¹⁴

Tell us about your safety protocols, your procedures, your working with your children checks. What happens if an allegation is made? Do you have a framework for mandatory reporting disclosures? Do you understand the legislation? Do you understand what your obligations are? Because we take this very seriously.’ I think that would be getting out and hopefully getting ahead of the problem. I think there is that educative role, that the protection of young people and children is something this state takes seriously. We want to prevent sexual abuse and these awful situations

⁴¹³ Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 55; Paul Gratton, Pastor, Now Church Moe, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41.

⁴¹⁴ Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 55.

that unfortunately we see go through the courts and that. We want these groups to be able to recognise the warning signs and have that front of mind rather than it being an afterthought, and also because it is illustrative.

Richard Baker, Investigative Journalist, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 55.

Miriam Francis from the Olive Leaf Network Australia who has lived experience, explained that this kind of proactive engagement ‘does not need to be heavy-handed’. She emphasised that the goal should be to ensure children in coercive high-control groups receive an equal standard of safety to those in other institutions, through an approach grounded in education, awareness and gradual trust-building.⁴¹⁵ Maria Esguerra, also from Olive Leaf Network Australia, supported this view, contrasting proactive engagement with enforcement-led interventions. Drawing on her own childhood experience, Maria Esguerra explained that a slower, relational approach may have allowed information about harmful practices to surface over time, rather than remaining hidden.⁴¹⁶

Related insights were provided by Anke Richter, Director of Decult in New Zealand, whose research involved survivors of two different closed communities in New Zealand. Anke Richter noted a marked difference between survivors from an older community, who had no dedicated support on exit and in some cases had never disclosed their experiences, and more recent leavers from a different community who were met on exit by an organisation with specialist knowledge of their circumstances.⁴¹⁷ Anke Richter described the difference in outcomes as ‘really noticeable’, noting that having ‘people helping them to transition’ who ‘actually understand what they need’ made a meaningful difference.⁴¹⁸ While this evidence relates primarily to exit support, it points to a broader principle: protective responses are most effective when services have developed knowledge and relationships with a community over time.

CCYP explained that it has ‘minimal experience engaging with closed organisations via its role as a regulator for the Standards and Scheme’. It attributed this to the fact that engagement relies on needing to be aware an organisation exists before it can engage. However, CCYP described its ‘proactive sector-based approach to capacity building’ for organisations with obligations under the Standards and the Scheme, stating:

We do this by partnering with key stakeholders with broad reach, such as peak bodies, and actively working together to build knowledge about the Standards and Scheme, and about their legislative obligations. We have developed child safety resources specifically for religious and faith-based organisations and translated resources to support engagement and capacity building in diverse communities.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁵ Miriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 15.

Victoria Police similarly confirmed that it has ‘not engaged with community organisations, religious leaders or mental health services specifically in relation to identifying and responding to harmful cult-related activity’.⁴²⁰

DFFH advised that it ‘works with community-based organisations and The Orange Door to provide support and services to children and families’, including on building ‘proactive’ community led initiatives. It explained that the:

Child Protection program is delivered through DFFH Areas where proactive and preventative activities are led by local Area Executive Directors who work closely with communities, community service organisations and other government agencies.⁴²¹

DFFH noted that ‘these relationships are built over time, and rely heavily on trust’.⁴²²

Where communities operate with limited contact with external services, children within them are less likely to encounter trusted adults who can recognise indicators of harm and act on them. Proactive engagement, either with community leadership or through agencies with existing relationships with a community, offers a pathway for creating those connections before a crisis occurs. Where possible, this kind of engagement needs to be developed over time, grounded in genuine relationships rather than regulatory compliance; and approached carefully to avoid further harm or risk of stigmatising communities.

International insight: New Zealand and Canada

Some Inquiry stakeholders pointed to New Zealand as an example of how a more proactive, relationship-based approach can work in practice.⁴²³ In 2023, New Zealand’s Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Children) Evidence Centre published an evidence brief on *Safeguarding children in closed communities*. CCYP drew on this brief in its responses to the Committee’s questions on notice. The brief presents findings of a rapid review of online international literature on child protection responses in closed communities exhibiting coercive and controlling characteristics.⁴²⁴ It was prepared to support Oranga Tamariki practitioners in developing a holistic approach to the care and protection needs of children in those communities.⁴²⁵ It draws on overseas case studies and academic literature rather than New Zealand-specific data, and its conclusion explicitly acknowledges that documentation on effective intervention strategies in this context is limited.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁰ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 9.

⁴²¹ Child Protection, response to written questions on notice, p. 12.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Mirriam Francis, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 16–18; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*.

⁴²⁴ Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, *Safeguarding children in closed communities*, p. 20. The term ‘closed community’ is used in the Oranga Tamariki brief to refer to a community with people/members living together as a group in a location separated from the mainstream community in the area. A closed community may include a religious group, intentional group or cult.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., pp. 20–21.

The Oranga Tamariki brief identified several principles relevant to this Inquiry about proactive engagement with ‘closed communities’, including:

- successful interventions require time and strategies to develop working alliances and trusting relationships with victims, their parents and the community, including identification and use of agents, internal or external to the community, to adopt a nonconfrontational stance⁴²⁷
- child protection agencies should consider building rapport by offering general services, such as parenting education or child development support, in ways acceptable to the group, rather than approaching the community in an enforcement context⁴²⁸
- early community planning and partnership development with local social service agencies is important, noting that when large numbers of families are involved, regular communication among a specialised and integrated service team is essential⁴²⁹
- working directly with parents has shown positive outcomes in overseas case studies, such as appealing to them as individuals responsible for their children’s safety and development, rather than as passive followers of a leader. This approach has the additional effect of undermining the controlled communication channels through which leaders maintain authority over members.⁴³⁰

A Canadian case study examined in the international literature reviewed by the Oranga Tamariki brief demonstrates how these principles can operate in practice.⁴³¹

⁴²⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., pp. 3, 12.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., pp. 13–14.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

Case Study 4.1 Proactive government engagement and trust-building in a closed community—Canada

In the mid-1980s, child protection authorities in Quebec, Canada, responded to allegations of systematic physical abuse of children within a ‘closed religious group’.

When responding to the allegations, Canada’s Child Protection Agency made a deliberate decision not to confront the group’s leadership directly. Instead, social workers were assigned to work with individual family units, approaching parents as persons responsible for their children’s safety and development rather than as followers whose conduct was directed by a leader. Workers adopted a nonconfrontational stance from the outset, were instructed not to put children at risk by confronting parents with information children had disclosed, and were given the time needed to develop genuine working relationships with families before seeking any behavioural change.

Over approximately a year, workers built sufficiently trusting relationships with most families for parents to voluntarily accept changes to disciplinary practices and parenting approaches that were directly at odds with the group’s doctrinal requirements.

A secondary effect, although not the primary intention, was to disrupt the communication channels through which the group’s leader maintained authority over members. Parents who had privately doubted the group’s practices were given a context in which those doubts could be examined. The group dissolved within a year of the intervention concluding, and its leader was subsequently convicted of assault offences against children in the group.

The following features have been identified as critical to the intervention’s success:

- taking the time needed to build relationships, rather than seeking rapid resolution
- adopting a nonconfrontational rather than enforcement-led posture at the point of engagement
- working directly with parents at the family level, rather than engaging through the group’s leadership structure
- ensuring all relevant agencies—including police, child protection services and regulatory authorities—worked from a shared understanding of the situation
- consulting a specialist in coercive group dynamics throughout the process, which helped agencies avoid actions likely to escalate to confrontation.

Source: Dianne Casoni, Adriana Pacheco and Mike Kropveld, ‘State Intervention Against The Baptist Church of Windsor: From Law-Abiding Citizens to Perpetrators of Severe Child Physical Abuse’, *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 83–99.

Oranga Tamariki also acknowledged the limits of standard child protection frameworks, stating the ‘assumptions on which child abuse reporting regimes are based may not apply in closed communities’.⁴³²

The claims may not be identified and investigated through normal avenues and social contacts, such as via teachers, neighbours, or friends of the family. The accused, group or its leadership may not cooperate in taking action in relation to the claims. Similarly, authorities in some jurisdictions, such as in the United States, may encounter statute-of-limitation restrictions. In other cases, groups themselves may have investigated allegations before calling authorities, thereby inadvertently allowing perpetrators to hide or destroy evidence. Any intervention requires a multi-agency effort to be successful.

Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, *Safeguarding children in closed communities: Evidence brief*, 2023, New Zealand, pp. 14–15.

Although the international evidence base is limited, it points consistently to relationship-based, non-confrontational engagement as the approach most likely to create the conditions in which children in coercive high-control groups become visible to services before a crisis occurs.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

Throughout this Report, the Committee has emphasised the limited understanding of coercive high-control group dynamics across Victoria's support services and agencies, including child protection. Without this foundational knowledge practitioners are less equipped to recognise indicators of concern, assess risk accurately and identify the narrow windows for engagement that do arise. The Committee considers that building this expertise across Victoria's support services is a necessary precondition for more effective and proactive engagement.

When initial reports or contacts do occur they may represent one of the few opportunities for services to establish a relationship with a family before concerns escalate to crisis; and to identify other children who may be at risk. Inquiry evidence suggests that how agencies respond in these moments is critical. Non-confrontational, relationship-based approaches, grounded in knowledge of the community dynamics and developed over time, are more likely to enable ongoing engagement than responses perceived as adversarial. Making use of these moments of opportunity requires both the expertise to recognise them and agreed processes for acting on them.

While proactive engagement with communities where child safety risks exist is widely recognised as valuable, in practice it rarely occurs in Victoria. The Committee does not consider it appropriate to prescribe a particular model for proactive engagement. The international evidence base is limited, community contexts vary significantly, and poorly designed approaches risk stigmatising communities that are insular in character. A carefully designed approach requires considered design work involving relevant agencies,

⁴³² Ibid., p. 14.

practitioners and people with lived experience of coercive high-control environments. Proactive engagement would not only benefit children and young people in coercive high-control groups, but also has the potential to assist adults who are being harmed.

What the Inquiry evidence does establish is that the conditions for effective proactive engagement with coercive high-control groups are not currently in place in Victoria. In this context, such conditions include specialist practitioner expertise, the use of relationship-based approaches developed over time, effective coordination across relevant agencies, and a clear focus on children's rights and wellbeing. The Committee considers this to be a gap that the Victorian Government should address.

FINDING 71: Victoria's child-facing agencies lack the specialist knowledge, skills and shared practice base required to identify coercive high-control group dynamics or undertake proactive, relationship-based engagement with affected communities.

FINDING 72: Victoria has no systematic approach to proactive engagement with communities where children have limited visibility to child safety and protection services.

RECOMMENDATION 19: The Victorian Government invest in building specialist capability across child-facing agencies—including child protection, education, police and relevant oversight bodies—to improve understanding of coercive high-control group dynamics, indicators of risk, and culturally respectful, relationship-based engagement practices.

RECOMMENDATION 20: The Victorian Government develop an inter-agency framework for proactive engagement with communities in which children may have limited visibility to child safety and protection services, including coercive high-control group communities.

Part 5

Other opportunities to address the harms caused by coercive high-control groups



In this Part

Topics covered include:

- gaps in the current service system's capacity to identify and respond to people affected by coercive high-control groups
- the development of shared risk indicators and cross-agency coordination mechanisms for group-based coercion
- the role of lived experience peer support in recovery
- sector-specific gaps and reform opportunities in the mental health, housing, and policing workforces
- public awareness as a foundational prevention measure
- financial transparency and accountability for coercive high-control groups registered as charities
- the application of modern slavery and forced marriage offences to conduct occurring in coercive high-control group settings
- access to redress for people harmed in coercive high-control groups
- civil remedies, legal aid access, and whistleblower protections
- emerging risks from technology and online environments
- strengthening research and evaluation, ongoing monitoring, and public awareness.



What the Committee heard

Volume 1 (Parts 2 to 4) and *Volume 2* document the serious harms experienced by people in coercive high-control groups and the barriers to identifying and responding to those harms. Part 5 examines what an effective system response would require and where the current system falls short.



Inquiry evidence identified significant and interconnected gaps across Victoria's service system. Services most likely to be accessed by people in or leaving coercive high-control groups, such as mental health, housing, legal, welfare and policing services, were not designed with this cohort in mind. Frontline workers lack the training, shared indicators and referral pathways needed to identify group-based coercion when they encounter it. No single agency in Victoria holds the mandate, expertise or visibility to respond effectively. There is no cross-agency coordination mechanism, no shared risk framework and no structured pathway for sharing information about group-based coercion across the service system.

The support needs of people leaving coercive high-control groups are often complex and enduring. At the point of exit, they commonly face acute and overlapping needs, including safe housing, income support and access to mental health care, with no dedicated or capable crisis response available to them. Recovery is typically prolonged, non-linear, and multi-dimensional. Lived experience peer support was consistently identified as a necessary and distinctly effective form of support for this cohort.

Financial transparency and accountability were identified as significant gaps. Some coercive high-control groups operate as registered charities, including as Basic Religious Charities, which are exempt from key governance and reporting obligations. This limits the capacity of regulators to identify and respond when concerns about harmful conduct are raised.

Inquiry evidence also identified patterns of conduct in these groups that may amount to forced labour, servitude or forced marriage under Commonwealth law, but which have rarely been recognised or acted upon by enforcement agencies.

Survivors of institutional child sexual abuse in coercive high-control groups face compounding barriers to accessing the National Redress Scheme, including groups' deliberate avoidance of legal registration and the Scheme's institutional eligibility threshold.

Looking forward, evidence before the Committee pointed to the growing role of digital platforms as sites for recruitment and harm, the limited and fragmented state of research into coercive high-control groups in Australia, and the need for sustained public awareness that keeps pace with groups that adapt, rebrand and shift their methods over time.

What the Committee thinks

The Committee considers the current system response to coercive high-control groups to be fragmented and, in important respects, not fit for purpose. Inquiry evidence indicated that the primary gaps are not in service availability, but in the capacity of services to recognise and respond to a cohort with distinct and complex needs. Addressing this requires both targeted investment and systemic change.

No single agency currently has the mandate, expertise or visibility to respond effectively across all the domains in which harm occurs. The Committee's view is that the immediate priority should be to build system-wide capability, develop shared indicators and establish



coordination mechanisms across existing agencies, rather than create a new statutory body. Victoria's established frameworks and agencies provide a foundation on which a more coordinated response can be built, and the Committee considers that investment in that foundation should precede any determination about whether a dedicated body is required.

The Committee considers that lived experience peer support is not a supplementary measure but a core component of an effective service response. Inquiry evidence shows this support is currently provided without sustainable resourcing, with survivor-led organisations meeting significant demand on a largely volunteer basis. This is not a sustainable long-term arrangement.

On financial accountability, the Committee is persuaded by the Productivity Commission's analysis that no clear policy rationale justifies the Basic Religious Charity category, and that its removal would promote consistent regulatory oversight across all charities. The Committee is also satisfied that existing Commonwealth offences for forced labour, servitude and forced marriage are broad enough to capture conduct in coercive high-control groups. But the problem is not the law's scope, rather the extent to which it is being applied in practice. These are known challenges, and the Committee's recommendations in this Part reflect a clear view that they warrant action.

The Committee is conscious that effective reform cannot be treated as a fixed, one-time undertaking. Coercive high-control groups adapt, rebrand and shift their methods. Digital environments present growing and evolving risks. The evidence base remains limited. Sustained commitment—to research, awareness, monitoring and coordination—is a necessary condition for the reforms in this Report to achieve their intended effect over time.

Note: This Part relies on confidential Inquiry evidence received by the Committee that is not directly cited or attributed to protect participant privacy and safety. Readers should be mindful that this evidence supports aspects of the analysis, findings and recommendations in this Part. See *Important note on confidential evidence* in *How the Committee approached a complex task*.

5.1 Better support: improving service system responses

Criminal law is important, but it denounces harm after the damage is already done ... Meaningful change comes from challenging the status quo and strengthening the environment around people. Preventing harm requires coordinated systems, safeguards and cultural change.

Patrick McIvor, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

Parts 2 to 4 of the Report examine the harms experienced by people in coercive high-control groups, including children and young people, and the barriers to identifying and addressing those harms.

This Section considers the elements of what an effective whole-of-system response would require. It examines the capacity of Victoria's current service system to identify, respond to, and support people affected by group-based coercion; assesses the

structural conditions that impede a coordinated response; and outlines the changes to law, policy, and practice that Inquiry evidence indicates are needed. Although these issues overlap with Part 4 on children and young people, they are addressed separately here as they apply more broadly to individuals within coercive high-control groups.



Questionnaire insight

Questionnaire participants suggested dedicated support services including ‘counselling, housing assistance, education and career pathways’.

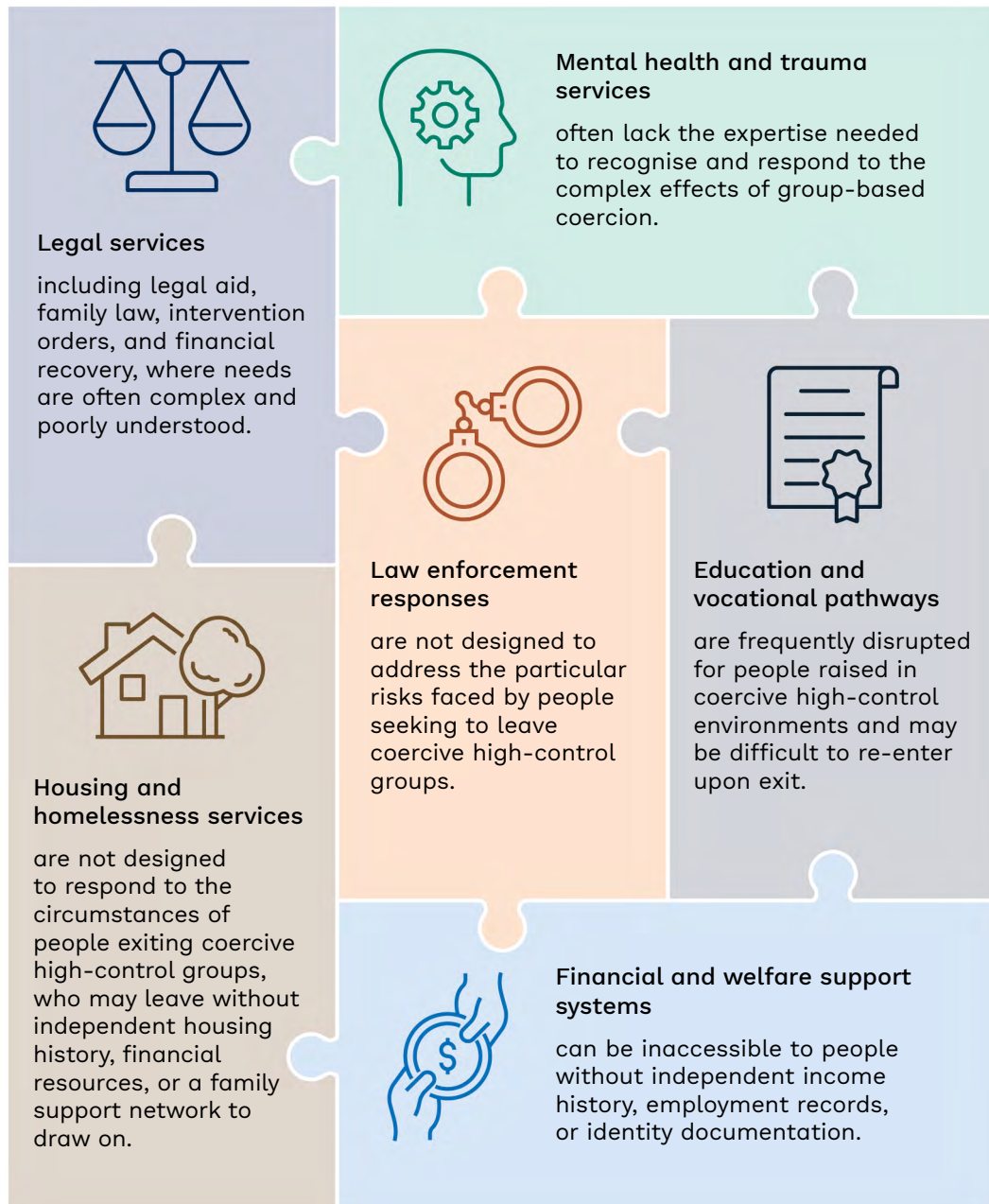
5.1.1 Gaps in current support services: a whole-of-system issue

Parts 3 and 4 show that harm in coercive high-control group contexts is rarely isolated. It often affects multiple areas of a person’s life, including child safety, family violence, mental health, education, financial security and housing, or any combination of these simultaneously.¹ People seeking to leave these groups often need to engage with and navigate several service systems at the same time, many of which are not set up to respond to the complexity, unique dynamics and risks involved.

Figure 5.1 shows gaps across a range of service areas which were identified in Inquiry evidence.

¹ See Parts 3 and 4.

Figure 5.1 Gaps across service areas



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee. See: Raphael Aron, Director, Cult Consulting Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 31, 42, 47, 62, 63; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 38, 87; Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 3; BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 4; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 27; Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 7; Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Name withheld, *Submission 131a*, p. 6; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026); Victoria Police, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 20 November 2025; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 115; Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Mary Hughes, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

A recurring theme across the Inquiry was that gaps in individual service areas cannot be viewed in isolation.² Inquiry evidence pointed to limited frontline capacity to recognise and respond to coercive high-control group dynamics, as well as the risk that siloed responses address immediate issues without identifying their underlying cause.³

5.1.2 Developing shared indicators and risk frameworks for coercive high-control groups

People leaving coercive high-control groups face a distinct set of compounding barriers—such as disrupted education, social isolation, financial dependence, language barriers and lack of identity documentation.⁴ These barriers highlight a core challenge for the service system: services most likely to encounter people affected by group-based coercion are not generally equipped to identify, respond to, or support them.

This reflects a systemic gap rather than a failure of an individual service or professional. Across agencies, sectors and disciplines, there is no shared framework for understanding group-based coercion—how it operates, how it presents, and how risk should be identified. Without that shared understanding, harm goes unrecognised, responses are inconsistent, and the cumulative nature of risk remains invisible to the system as a whole.

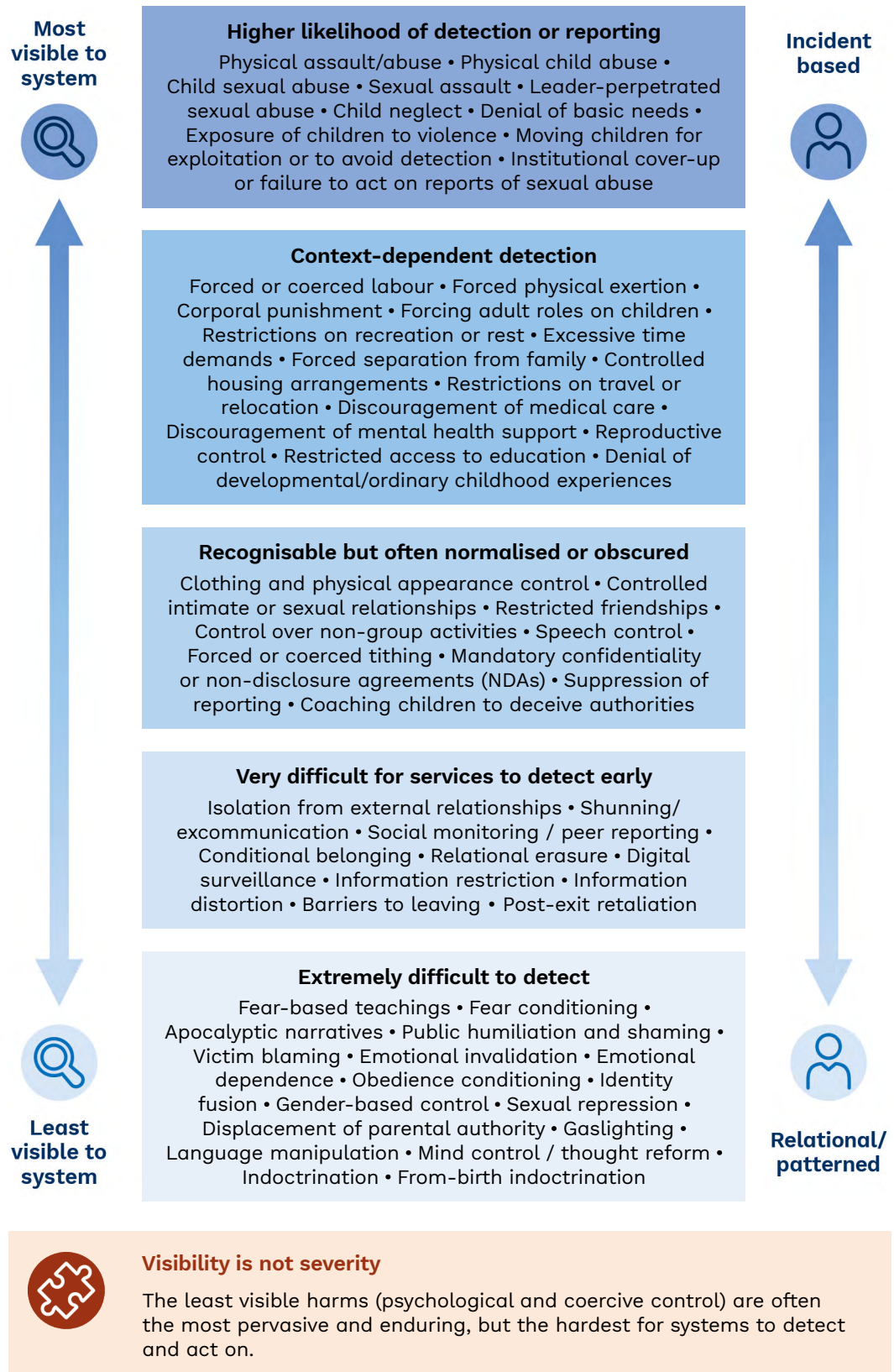
This Inquiry makes an important contribution to addressing this gap by establishing a clear evidence base of group-based coercion in Victoria to increase understanding. The next step is to translate that understanding into practical tools that can be consistently applied across the service system, including the development of shared indicators and risk frameworks that support consistent identification and coordinated responses.

² Commission for Children and Young People, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 13 February 2026, p. 17; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50; Clare Heath-McIvor, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

³ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 110; Statement from Dr Steven Hassan, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 85; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 49; Elise Heerde, Certified Coach and Mental Health Practitioner, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Victoria Police, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 20 November 2025.

⁴ See Parts 3 and 4 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Behaviour' and 'Behaviours directed at children and young people'.

Figure 5.2 The visibility gap between the individual and the support system



Source: Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee.

Where harm is patterned and cumulative, and where individuals may come into contact with multiple services, effective and consistent identification depends on a shared set of risk indicators across the system (not on each sector developing its own approach and working in isolation). Without this, services assess risk without a common language or an understanding of how their response connects with others, limiting overall effectiveness.

This principle is well established in a comparable area of Victorian policy. For example, the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework was developed in response to findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence which identified that fragmented, sector-specific responses allowed family violence risk to go undetected and resulted in inconsistent, non-cumulative assessments.⁵ MARAM is built on a shared understanding of family violence and its indicators, enabling a more consistent approach to risk assessment and management across the service system.⁶ A similar approach is required to address the harms associated with coercive high-control groups.

Under-recognition

We spend a lot of time telling young people, especially young women, that they should be believed when they say something, yet often that is a point where people are not believed. So if we are going to have a culture of believing young people when they present, we need to make sure that is a deep and authentic culture too.

Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

Understanding the harms caused by coercive high-control groups is not part of any standard professional curriculum in Australia.⁷ Unlike family violence or child abuse, it is not embedded in workforce education and training, clinical guidelines, or mandatory reporting frameworks. Where professionals do have relevant expertise, it is typically because they have independently sought it out to upskill.⁸

Inquiry evidence received from key government agencies and oversight bodies consistently showed that there was no system-wide understanding of coercive high-control groups.⁹

5 Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, *Legislative review of family violence information sharing and risk management report: Background*, 2023, <<https://archive.fvim.vic.gov.au/legislative-review-family-violence-information-sharing-and-risk-management/background>> accessed 23 April 2026. See also: Victorian Government, *MARAM practice guides and resources*, 2023, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-multi-agency-risk-assessment-and-management>> accessed 23 April 2026.

6 Victorian Government: *Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework*, 2023, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-multi-agency-risk-assessment-and-management>> accessed 23 April 2026.

7 Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Jane Kennedy, Registered Counsellor, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/ New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

8 Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

9 Department of Education, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 20 February 2026; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice; Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 20 February 2026.

In the education sector, Victorian teachers do receive training and resources to recognise indicators of harm, including through initiatives such as:

- the PROTECT guidance framework
- mandatory reporting e-learning modules
- Respectful Relationships training that includes content on coercive control.¹⁰

However, this does not appear to amount to a comprehensive or embedded understanding of coercive high-control group.

MARAM-nominated Victorian Department of Education staff also receive training from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare to ‘screen for family violence and make basic safety plans’.¹¹ However, this training does not appear to specifically consider coercive high-control group environments. More broadly, the identified resources do not appear to address the particular dynamics that distinguish these groups from other forms of harm, such as family violence or child abuse.

As noted in Part 3, Victoria Police does not deliver any specialised training to frontline officers or Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team (SOCIT) personnel to respond to the specific indicators of coercive high-control groups.¹² While the ‘*Behavioural Observation and Suspicious Activity Recognition (BOSAR) for police members below Sergeant rank and PSOs*’ training program on the Victoria Police Learning Hub assists police in identifying and responding to high-control behaviours,¹³ it is not tailored to group contexts. In SOCIT investigations, Victoria Police explained that there are:

no indicators or criteria used to identify cases as involving a cult/high-control group. Investigators are reliant on victim or witness reports to provide detail on the activity occurring which can enable further avenues of investigation to potential offences.¹⁴

The Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) has ‘not specifically examined the effectiveness of child safety and wellbeing frameworks’ to recognise risks of coercive high-control groups. However, it acknowledged that this is a ‘significant area of concern requiring attention’.¹⁵

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) confirmed that Child Protection does receive ‘disclosures or notifications relating to children in closed communities, high-control or cult-like group settings’.¹⁶ However, DFFH acknowledged that the SAFER children framework requires direct engagement with a child and their

¹⁰ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 4. See Part 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 5.

¹³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 16.

¹⁶ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to supplementary written questions on notice received 14 April 2026, p. 1.

parents at every stage, and that ‘barriers to engaging within closed communities, such as mistrust, isolation or limited physical access will impede Child Protection’s ability to undertake risk assessment’.¹⁷

DFFH acknowledged that ‘specific risk factors related to high-control or cult-like groups are not embedded’ in the SAFER children framework. However, it noted that this was to ‘enable the SAFER children framework’s wide applicability across a range of individualised circumstances’.¹⁸ It noted that ‘there are no current plans to reform the legislative basis for intervention in Victoria and there are no current plans to develop specialist practitioners to manage these matters’.¹⁹

These gaps extend beyond missing training content—they point to a deeper structural problem. Current systems are designed to detect misconduct by individuals within formal organisations, not collective group-based systems of abuse. If service providers do not know what group-based coercive control looks like, they will not recognise it. They will not know what questions to ask, how to interpret disclosures, or how to act on the information they receive.

This blind spot is reinforced by how harm in coercive high-control environments presents to the outside world. A joint submission from lived experience advocates noted that ‘when abuse is framed in ideological terms ... it is often misclassified on religious or cultural grounds’.²⁰ The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand observed that counselling and allied health practitioners often ‘shy away from considering if certain religious groups are abusive, predatory or cult-like, potentially missing key signs that an individual is being or has been manipulated and controlled’. They argued that ‘literacy around religious harm and recognition of coercive behaviours in religious groups is lacking at the community level’.²¹

Elise Heerde from The Religious Trauma Collective explained that individuals are often discouraged by their coercive high-control group from seeking professional help and are ‘warned that secular support would corrupt them’—or are ‘funnelled into pastoral counselling by unqualified individuals, whose advice can compound the harm’.²² The result is a system without ‘a unified framework’ where ‘patterns of coercion are missed, perpetrators remain unchallenged, and those affected are either misidentified or unsupported’.²³

Inquiry evidence showed that contact with services is rarely a single event for people in, or leaving, coercive high-control groups. Laura McConnell, a lived experience advocate, described leaving as ‘a very long leaving ... it is a multi-year, sometimes

¹⁷ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to supplementary written questions on notice, p. 4.

¹⁸ Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to written questions on notice, p. 13.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 36.

²¹ The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 1.

²² Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

²³ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50.

decade-long process', during which people incrementally test whether the system can be trusted before risking revealing more.²⁴

So there is this very long lead that happens, where they are testing who they can trust to talk to, what agencies they can go to. They may reach out along the way and say, 'One of my children is sick and I want to speak to a doctor. Do you have any you recommend?' Then I will say, 'Yes, there are some in your area that I think would be great for your family.' They are testing whether or not services can be trusted along the way. They are testing whether or not you can be trusted along the way. They may disclose to you, 'I'm scared that one of my children is being sexually abused. Where would I go if I'm scared of that?' I had one recently where I was like, 'Well, here is the sex crimes detective's name in Queensland, and I think you should call that number.' Then months later they will call back and say, 'I still haven't called that number but I can trust them, can't I?' And you will be like, 'Yes, you can.' So it is actually giving them tools all the way along to be like, 'These are trusted agencies, these are trusted doctors, these are trusted people who know your lingo, who know who we are and will treat you respectfully all the way along.'

Laura McConnell, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

5

Importantly, this caution is not incidental but is often shaped by the coercive high-control group environment itself.²⁵ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network described how distrust of external institutions is deliberately cultivated, with members taught from an early age that outside authorities are dangerous, corrupt, or hostile.²⁶ Sexual Assault Services Victoria noted that this 'sense of mistrust can persist even after someone has formally exited'.²⁷

Knowmore Legal Service told the Committee that 'distrust of institutions or agencies is common' among this cohort, and that 'legal systems are not set up in a way that supports people from closed institutions to seek justice'. They noted that in many cases, the most valuable thing a service can often provide is simply 'a space to be heard, understood and believed'.²⁸

The non-linear nature of leaving a coercive high-control group and disclosing harm has direct implications for professional practice. Professionals who understand group-based coercion will recognise that indirect or partial disclosures are not a sign of avoiding opening up about the topic, rather they may be the safest and sometimes only form of contact available for a person to communicate harm.²⁹ To respond effectively, system-wide frontline workers require training to recognise and respond to

²⁴ Laura McConnell, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

²⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Restrictions on education and information', 'Legal and civic restrictions', 'Sexual abuse and violence', 'Developmental and environmental control' and 'Exploitation'.

²⁶ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 11.

²⁷ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 3.

²⁸ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 2.

²⁹ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 53.

the impacts of group-based coercive control, 'which are often missed due to limited public and professional awareness'.³⁰ Building public awareness is discussed in Section 5.2 below.

Language as a barrier to recognition

Group-based coercion has unique features that professionals need to understand as distinct from other forms of harm.³¹ One of the most significant barriers to identification is language. In coercive high-control groups, language is often used to reinforce control and isolate members. It is typically highly exclusionary, frames the outside world as threatening, and often leaves individuals without ordinary vocabulary to describe their own experiences or seek help.

Inquiry evidence consistently identified these linguistic features of coercive high-control groups as a major barrier to recognition across external systems, including authorities, agencies and frontline services.³² This means disclosures can be misunderstood or missed entirely. Inquiry evidence identified several common language features across coercive high-control groups, including:

- **Loaded language:** groups routinely develop internal terminology that carries strong emotional or doctrinal weight. Where a member uses these terms when engaging a service or frontline worker, they may appear ordinary, and an untrained professional may miss their significance, and the seriousness of what is being communicated can go unrecognised.³³
- **Redefining ordinary phrases or words:** familiar terms may be assigned group-specific meanings that differ substantially from their ordinary usage. A professional hearing apparently ordinary language may not realise that the words are being used in a specialised sense that conceals the member's actual situation.³⁴
- **Thought-terminating phrases:** groups frequently use stock phrases or slogans that function to stop further reflection or questioning. Where a member defaults to these phrases in a professional interaction, what presents as a complete or satisfactory answer may in fact be a trained or rehearsed response that obscures harm, limiting opportunities for it to be recognised.³⁵

³⁰ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 49.

³¹ See Parts 2 to 4 and *Volume 2*.

³² Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35; Samantha Sellers, Registered Therapist and Clinical Supervisor, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 15–16; Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 6; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 4.

³³ Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 56; Name withheld, *Submission 28*, p. 7; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 67.

³⁴ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 12, 78–81; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 21, 67; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 112; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 17; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 19.

³⁵ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 12; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*.

- **Restricted access to external concepts:** groups actively discourage members from using language drawn from outside the group, meaning members may be unfamiliar with the vocabulary used by health, legal, or welfare services to describe harm. This can prevent them from recognising or responding to questions that appear straightforward to the professional they engage with.³⁶
- **Exclusive ‘us and them’ framing:** groups consistently characterise the outside world as threatening or corrupt, meaning that a professional or service may be perceived by a member as hostile rather than helpful. Responses that appear evasive, guarded, or inconsistent may reflect this conditioning rather than an absence of harm.³⁷

Professionals who can recognise these linguistic patterns are better placed to ask the right questions and interpret responses accurately. Without this knowledge, what may be a disclosure of sustained coercion and abuse may be misread as a minor interpersonal grievance, ideological practice, or a family matter outside professional remit.

These disclosures are often indirect. A young person may ask a teacher a sideways question. A parent may mention something at a medical appointment that raises a vague concern. A housing worker may notice patterns in a family’s situation that do not quite fit conventional categories. These are the critical moments for early identification and the very points at which the current system struggles to identify people at risk.

This has particular consequences for children and young people.³⁸ Inquiry evidence showed that children raised in coercive high-control groups may genuinely lack both the vocabulary and conceptual framework to identify or describe their own experiences as harmful.³⁹

Group-based coercion requires distinct indicators

Developing distinct indicators of group-based coercion makes it easier to identify harm and provide appropriate support. A system that properly understands this form of abuse is also better able to:

- build trust gradually rather than expect immediate disclosure
- ask safe, informed questions and avoid re-traumatisation

³⁶ Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 12; Steven Alan Hassan, *The BITE Model of Authoritarian Control: Undue Influence, Thought Reform, Brainwashing, Mind Control, Trafficking and the Law*, PhD thesis, Fielding Graduate University, California, United States, 2020 (provided by Nigel Denning, *Submission 231*, Attachment 5); Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 67.

³⁷ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 18–19; Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 7; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 3; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

³⁸ See Part 4, Section 4.2 to 4.6.

³⁹ See Part 4, Section 4.9.4.

- avoid responses that inadvertently reinforce the group's narrative that the outside world is hostile, like through stigma or judgement.⁴⁰

Existing risk identification frameworks were not designed with group-based coercion in mind and are likely to overlook it. Inquiry evidence pointed to several features of this harm that current frameworks do not adequately capture, including:

- harm that operates at a structural and organisational level, rather than through interpersonal relationships between individuals
- control exercised across multiple areas of a person's life simultaneously, rather than through discrete, isolated acts
- resistance to disclosure and deep distrust of external authorities, reinforced over time by the group
- the absence of conventional external markers of concern, with individuals and families often presenting well despite ongoing harm occurring.⁴¹

Modelling on existing assessment tools

Some Inquiry evidence suggested that existing risk assessment tools could inform the development of shared indicators for coercive high-control groups across Victoria's service systems. In particular, the approach taken under the Family Violence MARAM Framework was identified as a useful model, provided it is tailored to reflect the distinct features of group-based coercion.⁴²

Inquiry evidence noted that a key feature of the MARAM Framework is its use of evidence-based indicators that equip frontline staff to identify risks of family violence. This includes consistent terminology, shared conceptual frameworks, structured assessments and mechanisms for multi-agency information sharing.⁴³ A similar approach could be applied to group-based coercion by drawing on lived experience and existing research to develop indicators that reflect how harm in these environments actually presents.⁴⁴ Elise Heerde, a mental health practitioner and lived experience advocate, pointed to MARAM as a useful reference point for developing 'a multi-agency information-sharing framework' for group-based coercion.⁴⁵ Improving cross-agency information sharing is discussed further in Section 5.1.3 below.

⁴⁰ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 55; BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 2; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Anke Richter, Director, Decult, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 3.

⁴¹ See Parts 2 to 4.

⁴² Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50; Elise Heerde, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups hearing, response to questions on notice received 29 October 2025, p. 3; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁴³ Elise Heerde, response to questions on notice, p. 3; Patrick Mclvor, Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Elise Heerde, response to questions on notice, p. 3.

CCYP also identified MARAM as a framework which ‘may be of interest to the Committee when assessing how to manage the risks and issues posed’ by coercive high-control groups.⁴⁶ The Department of Education similarly referred to MARAM training in its response to questions on notice about preparing teachers to recognise children in coercive high-control group environments.⁴⁷

However, Inquiry stakeholders cautioned against directly extending MARAM’s existing indicators. The MARAM Framework was specifically developed for family violence⁴⁸ and does not translate neatly to group-based contexts. Patrick Mclvor, a lived experience advocate, suggested that the Victorian Government should ‘draw on the concept and structure of MARAM, not necessarily its indicators, because they do not necessarily apply’.⁴⁹

You cannot take intimate partner coercive control and say that a certain red flag in that automatically applies to a group, because it is just too different with the diversity of groups out there. ... it is not to grab MARAM and take their funding or to expand those concepts where they do not belong. There is parallel work that needs to be done to build similar insights but in a different context.

Patrick Mclvor, Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

Practical implementation challenges were also raised in Inquiry evidence. Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer of BATForce, noted that cumulative training demands on the frontline workforce mean that any assessment tools developed in this area should, where possible, seek to build on or integrate with existing frameworks rather than operate as wholly separate requirements.⁵⁰

Cultural considerations

Some behaviours that function as tools of control in coercive contexts may, in other contexts, reflect genuine care or cultural practice.⁵¹ Misidentifying these behaviours creates its own risks that can lead to serious harm.

A joint submission from lived experience advocates emphasised that in responding to group-based coercion ‘cultural and community life must be respected’. It warned that ‘tight-knit communities and cultural practices can be misunderstood as coercive. We must be careful not to target migrant, faith-based, or Aboriginal models of care that are not inherently harmful’.⁵²

⁴⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Victorian Government, *Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework: A shared responsibility for assessing and managing family violence risk*, 2021.

⁴⁹ Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁵¹ See Part 2 and Volume 2. See for example ‘Clothing’ under ‘Restrictions on personal freedom and expression’.

⁵² Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 45.

Knowmore Legal Service, a community legal centre with experience supporting survivors of institutional harm, noted that survivor-centred engagement models have proven effective in other contexts of serious institutional harm. For example, culturally safe engagement with Stolen Generation survivors ‘often includes having a fellow First Nations person walk alongside them’.⁵³ This model of peer-informed, community-led practice is directly relevant to developing training and risk assessment frameworks for group-based coercion. Sarah Steel, an author, podcaster and researcher on coercive control groups, recommended that any such training must be culturally informed and, where it concerns First Nations communities, Aboriginal-led.⁵⁴

Interdependence of indicators and legal reform

As noted in Part 3, building system-wide capacity must occur alongside legal reform. As support services and protection agencies build their ability to identify group-based coercion, there must also be clearly identifiable legal pathways to respond directly to their concerns (especially where conduct may be criminal).

Legal reform alone will not deliver its intended outcomes if the professionals responsible for identifying harm, supporting disclosures, and building the evidence needed to act, lack the capability to do so. These two elements are interdependent. A framework that addresses one without the other will not work.

Inquiry evidence illustrated this from both directions. As discussed in detail in Part 3, many stakeholders (including a significant number of people with lived experience) argued that the absence of a recognised legal category for group-based coercion leaves harmful conduct without a coherent legal response.⁵⁵ However, at the same time, a standalone legal offence will not be sufficient on its own. Inquiry evidence identified two key gaps that legal reform alone cannot resolve:

- **Existing legal tools are underused:** professionals who encounter group-based coercion often lack the awareness to recognise what they are seeing,⁵⁶ meaning existing legal options are not applied. Providing greater protections to people harmed by coercive high-control groups, including improving the application of legal tools, is discussed further in Section 5.3 below.

Frontline training is absolutely vital. Family court training is absolutely vital. They are not able to adequately recognise the dangers that happen in high-control cults.

Clare Heath-Mclvor, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

⁵³ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 4.

⁵⁴ Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ See Part 3, Section 3.5.1.

⁵⁶ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 7; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 40; Renee Spencer, closed hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 20–24.

- **A criminal law response alone is insufficient:** even where criminal conduct exists, individuals must also be able to access services that understand their situation and can support them to report and seek help. Broader support system awareness is needed to ensure harm is identified early and individuals are supported,⁵⁷ so that action can be taken. This demands a multi-pronged approach where the support service system is as equipped to identify and respond to group-based coercion as the legal system is to act on it (see Section 5.1.3 below).

A strong element of engagement is narrative therapy; helping people to understand what happened to them and make sense of it. A lot of clients experience shame and confusion, often asking themselves why they did not leave earlier or did not speak up. The sense making component is a valuable part of the help seeking process.

Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service (2 March 2026) p. 3.

Supporting staff to upskill

Developing risk frameworks for group-based coercion will only improve outcomes if they reach frontline workers in a form they can use in practice. Inquiry evidence from several Victorian agencies/services shows that none currently have purpose-built risk assessment frameworks or indicators for group-based coercion.⁵⁸ As a result, building capability in this area is likely to have significant resource and workforce implications. Any decision to introduce new training or risk assessment requirements must be made with a clear understanding of existing obligations on professionals.

In the education sector alone, the Department of Education identified multiple existing training obligations that overlap with the issues related to coercive high-control groups. These include compulsory Child Safe Standards training, annual mandatory reporting modules, Respectful Relationships training, MARAM training for nominated staff, and guidance on identifying family violence, grooming, and inappropriate staff conduct.⁵⁹ School staff who are prescribed information-sharing entities also have obligations under the Child Information Sharing Scheme (CISS) and the Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme (FVISS). This is a substantial workload, and similar obligations exist across health, community services and other regulated workforces.

Leigh Bartlett from BATForce, identified that where workers are required to navigate multiple frameworks simultaneously, the practical result can be a shallow familiarity with each rather than deep, applied knowledge. This is compounded by workforce instability where staff move on before training translates into sustained practice.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 54; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 4; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice; Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, response to written questions on notice.

⁵⁹ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

5.1.3 Building cross-agency coordination

Inquiry evidence makes clear that an effective response to coercive high-control groups cannot rely on individual agencies acting in isolation.⁶¹ The harms involved are rarely confined to a single domain, and no one agency holds the full range of powers, expertise, or visibility needed to respond. This Section considers the current structural barriers to coordination and the changes that are needed to address them.

Cross-agency coordination

As noted in Parts 3 and 4, there is currently no coordinated whole-of-government response to coercive high-control groups in Victoria. There is currently no coordinated whole-of-government response to coercive high-control groups in Victoria. Instead, agencies operate within their own remit, with no consistent mechanism to identify, escalate, or track concerns about coercive high-control groups across the service system.

Inquiry evidence showed that this lack of coordination between agencies often results in:

- disclosures being dismissed, duplicated, or transferred between agencies without resolution⁶²
- complaints being assessed in isolation against the presenting incident rather than as part of a broader pattern of group-based harm, causing the cumulative nature of the conduct to go unrecognised⁶³
- individuals encountering confusing and fragmented service systems when attempting to access support, with long wait times and no clear point of entry⁶⁴
- a lack of awareness among agencies of specialist support services available to people seeking to leave coercive high-control groups, limiting their ability to make appropriate referrals⁶⁵
- frontline workers who are aware of coercive high-control groups operating in their area having no formal pathway to document or act on concerns about these groups.⁶⁶

⁶¹ See Parts 2 to 5.

⁶² Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 66; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 51, 75; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 11; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 6, 16.

⁶³ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 74; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 16; Raphael Aron, Director, Cult Consulting Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, pp. 2, 4.

⁶⁴ BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 4; Mary Hughes, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6; Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁶⁵ Dr Ahona Guha, Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, closed hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 9; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

⁶⁶ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 50–51; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*.

Victoria Police confirmed that it has no formal protocols or memoranda of understanding in place to support multi-agency collaboration on coercive high-control group-related harm. It has also not engaged in targeted coordination with community organisations, religious leaders, or mental health services specifically in relation to identifying and responding to harmful activity by such groups.⁶⁷

CCYP observed that, given the breadth of issues associated with coercive high-control groups and the wide range of systems required to respond, it is unlikely that any ‘singular agency holds the relevant capability and expertise to effectively engage’.⁶⁸ It advised that effectively managing risks associated with coercive high-control groups requires ‘a coordinated approach from multiple government agencies’.⁶⁹

An effective response requires strong collaboration and information exchange between services engaging with vulnerable children and young people ... Rather, a coordinated multi-agency model may be more suitable when responding to immediate concerns raised about a cult or organised fringe group, comparable to models used in emergency management. In practical terms, when concerns about a cult or organised fringe group are identified and it is believed that children are at risk, identified relevant agencies with suitable skills and expertise could come together under an agreed protocol, outlining guiding principles and roles and responsibilities, to plan and coordinate engagement with children, families and organisations.

Commission for Children and Young People, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, response to written questions on notice received 13 February 2026, p. 17.

Existing whole-of-government frameworks demonstrate that this type of coordinated approach to complex, multi-domain harms is achievable. Approaches such as the MARAM Framework and the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse, were identified in Inquiry evidence as examples of how to build partnerships across government and the community, and ensure all relevant services are identifying, managing and responding to risk in a consistent and connected way.⁷⁰

Absence of a clear lead agency

A driver of this fragmentation is the absence of a clear lead agency. No central body in Victoria (or nationally) is responsible for supporting people affected by coercive high-control groups.

Some Inquiry evidence suggested this gap may create a practical obstacle to effective identification and response.⁷¹ Victoria Police advised that the absence of a clear lead agency means that issues associated with coercive high-control groups may ‘fall

⁶⁷ Victoria Police, response written to questions on notice, pp. 5, 9.

⁶⁸ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 17.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 18; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50.

⁷¹ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 6; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

between the responsibility' of several agencies, 'which makes it difficult to identify and respond to the harmful behaviours'.⁷²

Some Inquiry evidence called for the establishment of a dedicated coordinating body or independent commissioner to address this gap.⁷³ CCYP also noted that the risks associated with insular and closed organisations may require a central coordination agency to ensure effective coordination across multiple regulators and government agencies.⁷⁴

Information sharing

Another obstacle to identifying and responding to group-based coercion is the absence of any structured mechanism for sharing information. Inquiry evidence indicated that information about group-based coercion either circulates informally or not at all. When it does surface, it is often through channels that carry no formal authority and do not trigger a coordinated system response.

In the child safety context, CCYP observed that effective identification of at-risk children depends on those children being visible within service systems. Existing information-sharing schemes (e.g., CISS and FVISS) rely on this visibility.⁷⁵ However, as shown in Part 4, coercive high-control groups undermine this assumption.⁷⁶ Their insular nature limits the usual contacts with external services—the very points at which concerns are usually identified and investigated. Group members may also not cooperate or avoid engagement with external authorities.⁷⁷ Therefore, existing information-sharing frameworks have limited reach in these contexts without additional mechanisms to capture information from non-standard sources.

Inquiry evidence also identified a distinctive pattern in how information about group-based coercion reaches the service system. Individuals rarely make formal disclosures through established channels. Instead, information tends to surface through informal means, such as 'quiet warnings passed between frontline staff'.⁷⁸ Additionally, it is rarely identifiable from a single disclosure or incident because of the cumulative nature of group-based coercion.⁷⁹ The ability to detect it depends on the capacity to connect fragments of information that may be dispersed across multiple agencies, sectors, and from different individuals over time. Without a mechanism to bring those fragments together, patterns of harm remain invisible to any one agency and the cumulative picture that would justify a coordinated response is never assembled.

⁷² Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 6.

⁷³ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 9; Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 13; Name withheld, *Submission 111*, p. 3; Rationalist Society of Australia, *Submission 226*, p. 4; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁷⁴ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 18. For example, Austria has established the Federal Office for Cult Affairs, see Case Study 5.1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷⁶ Part 4, Section 4.8.

⁷⁷ Part 4, Sections 4.9.1, 4.9.2 and 4.11.1.

⁷⁸ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 50–51.

⁷⁹ See Part 2 and Part 4.

While Victoria has established information-sharing frameworks for other complex harms, none are fit for purpose for the unique dynamics of coercive high-control groups. Existing frameworks such as CISS and FVISS offer useful models, but Inquiry evidence indicated that a tailored information sharing framework for coercive high-control groups is needed.⁸⁰ Such a framework would need to:

- operate across the breadth of services and agencies that a person leaving a coercive high-control group may encounter⁸¹
- accommodate partial, indirect or informal disclosures about group-based coercion⁸²
- be grounded in clear shared indicators and risk frameworks to support consistent recognition of group-based coercion⁸³
- account for the limited visibility of people—particularly children—in coercive high-control groups who may have minimal or no engagement with the services on which existing reporting pathways depend⁸⁴
- extend to professionals and community-based advocates/groups who are not currently covered by existing information-sharing schemes who are uniquely positioned to identify risk of group-based coercion.⁸⁵

Cross-jurisdictional information sharing

When deliberating on the issue of cults, the Parliament of Victoria has a moral imperative to think beyond its borders. Cults in Victoria are actively exporting their harmful practices around the world, and have done so for many decades.

Mark Darbyshire, *Submission 263*, p. 1.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated that coercive high-control groups frequently operate across state and national borders, with their ability to relocate and maintain a cross-jurisdictional presence complicating regulatory and enforcement responses. Although most Inquiry evidence was received from Victorians, there was

⁸⁰ Rationalist Society of Australia, *Submission 226*, p. 4; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 26; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 46.

⁸¹ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 17; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 49; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 46; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 19.

⁸² Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50; Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 1; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) pp. 2–4.

⁸³ See Section 5.1.2.

⁸⁴ Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 14; Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, *Safeguarding children in closed communities: Evidence brief*, New Zealand, 2023, p. 14. See Part 4, Section 4.8.

⁸⁵ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 50. Also see, Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Understanding support service demand: Responses from four support organisations*, June 2026.

also significant input from across Australia and internationally, highlighting the transnational nature of some of these groups.⁸⁶

This creates clear challenges for information sharing.⁸⁷ For example, when a person is arrested or investigated for offences relating to activities of a coercive high-control group in another jurisdiction, individuals in Victoria may have relevant information but no clear pathway to share it. For example, Sexual Assault Services Victoria described the experience of a survivor who learnt through media reporting that their perpetrator had been arrested interstate but was unable to identify an avenue to share information with police or media from Victoria.⁸⁸

Inquiry evidence also raised concerns that groups may deliberately operate across jurisdictions, or relocate, to reduce the risk of scrutiny or prosecution.⁸⁹ Where this occurs, a response mounted within a single jurisdiction is unlikely to be sufficient. As Anke Richter, Director of Decult in New Zealand, noted jurisdictions should be learning from each other to understand the patterns and issues from coercive high-control groups, stating:

The parallels and the patterns are the same, and we need to learn from each other. And that is where I see you could put your feelers out and understand what we are doing in this space here while we are also looking at what you are doing in Australia. We are building these networks on the ground already, and they need to happen at a higher level as well.⁹⁰

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee recognises that no single agency currently has the mandate, expertise, or visibility to respond effectively to coercive high-control groups across all the domains in which harm occurs. Inquiry evidence makes clear that the absence of cross-agency coordination is not a minor gap—it is a structural feature of the current system. It allows harm to go undetected, disclosures to remain unresolved, and the cumulative nature of group-based coercion to remain invisible. This can be exacerbated in circumstances where coercive high-control groups control access to information and deter help-seeking behaviours.

The Committee acknowledges the proposals for a dedicated lead agency or independent commissioner, and the rationale for a permanent coordinating body. However, it considers that the immediate priority should be to develop system-wide capability, shared indicators, and coordination across existing agencies, rather than establishing a new statutory body at this stage. Inquiry evidence does not establish that a new agency is a prerequisite for

⁸⁶ See for example: Sue Winter, *Submission 2*; Thomas Boreham, *Submission 97*; Name withheld, *Submission 124*; Name withheld, *Submission 128*; Name withheld, *Submission 137*; Name withheld, *Submission 140*; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*; Brittany Fussell-Jones, *Submission 156*; Name withheld, *Submission 275*.

⁸⁷ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 17–18; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 8.

⁸⁸ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 8.

⁸⁹ Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 31. See Part 4 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Opportunistic recruitment' and 'Exploitation'.

⁹⁰ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 17–18.

improved outcomes. Victoria's established frameworks and agencies already provide a foundation on which a more coordinated approach can be built. The Committee considers that, in the first instance, the Victorian Government should invest in that foundation before determining whether a dedicated statutory body is required.

The Committee is of the view that effective cross-agency coordination requires two mutually reinforcing elements: a shared framework for identifying and responding to group-based coercion, and clear protocols for escalating and tracking concerns across agencies. Neither is currently in place. Inquiry evidence, including from Victoria Police, CCYP, and the Department of Education, confirms that agencies are operating without shared indicators, without agreed referral pathways, and without mechanisms to assemble the cumulative picture of harm that group-based coercion typically produces.

The Committee notes that designing an effective information-sharing framework for this context will require careful development. This includes clear guidance on thresholds for sharing, protections for those acting in good faith, and appropriate privacy safeguards. These are not reasons to delay reform, but reasons to invest in careful design. The Committee is satisfied that existing frameworks such as the CISS and FVISS provide useful models, but that a tailored framework is needed to address the distinctive features of group-based coercion—particularly the fragmented and informal way information surfaces, the limited visibility of affected individuals (especially children), and the need to include professionals not currently covered by existing schemes.

The Committee recognises the cumulative training demands already placed on Victoria's frontline workforce. While the Committee recommends a discrete risk indicator framework specific to coercive high-control groups, it considers that the framework should, where possible, seek structural consistency with existing tools—so that service providers can draw on familiar concepts and logic rather than approach the material as an entirely new body of learning.

The Committee also notes that effective cross-agency coordination depends on a shared understanding of what group-based coercion looks like. Without shared risk indicators, improved coordination alone will not be enough. Agencies may share information more readily but still assess risk inconsistently and fail to connect patterns across disclosures. The development of shared indicators and coordination mechanisms are therefore interdependent reforms.

Finally, the Committee recognises the cross-jurisdictional nature of the issue, as reflected in Inquiry evidence. Coercive high-control groups frequently operate across state and national borders, limiting the effectiveness of a response confined to Victoria. The Committee considers that the Victorian Government should engage with other jurisdictions and the Australian Government to understand their approaches and support a nationally consistent approach to information sharing and coordinated response.

FINDING 73: The services most likely to be accessed by people in or leaving coercive high-control groups were not designed with their distinct circumstances and risks in mind. This has created systemic gaps in the capacity and capability of services to identify and respond to group-based coercion.

FINDING 74: Understanding of the dynamics of group-based coercion is not embedded in any standard professional training or curriculum for frontline service providers in Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 21: The Victorian Government undertake a whole-of-system mapping of service gaps affecting people leaving coercive high-control groups. This mapping should identify services likely to be first points of contact, assess capacity and capability gaps across those services, and inform a coordinated plan for addressing them.

FINDING 75: The absence of shared risk indicators for group-based coercion means it is assessed inconsistently across the service system. Existing risk frameworks, including those for family violence and child protection, do not adequately capture the distinct features of group-based coercion.

RECOMMENDATION 22: The Victorian Government develop shared risk indicators for group-based coercion to be applied across Victoria's service system. In developing these indicators, consideration should be given to structural consistency with existing risk assessment tools to support workforce uptake and minimise additional training burden.

RECOMMENDATION 23: The Victorian Government explore options to develop a training framework for frontline workers to recognise and respond to group-based coercion. This should account for existing training requirements and be supported by a workforce sustainability plan.

FINDING 76: There is no structured mechanism in Victoria to share information about group-based coercion across agencies. This information typically surfaces through informal channels and in fragments, with no pathway to assemble a cumulative picture of harm.

RECOMMENDATION 24: The Victorian Government explore options for developing an information-sharing framework for group-based coercion, drawing on existing Victorian information-sharing models. The framework should:

- accommodate partial and informal disclosures
- consider extending information-sharing permissions to professionals not currently covered by existing schemes but well-placed to identify risk of group-based coercion
- establish clear thresholds and good-faith protections for information sharing
- include appropriate privacy safeguards.

The framework should be developed in conjunction with Recommendation 22 and Recommendation 23.

RECOMMENDATION 25: The Victorian Government work with other jurisdictions, including the Australian Government, to share jurisdictional approaches and develop nationally consistent approaches to identifying and responding to group-based coercion.

5.1.4 System gaps in meeting support needs of people who have left coercive high-control groups

Leaving a coercive high-control group does not end the harm for a person. As documented in Parts 2 to 4, its impacts often persist for years, continuing to shape people's lives well beyond the point of exit. This Section examines how the current service system responds to those ongoing needs, and where it falls short.

Inquiry evidence pointed to three intersecting gaps:

- a lack of dedicated crisis pathways at the point of exit
- a service system that lacks the understanding to identify and respond to this cohort when they present
- the absence of sustainable resourcing for lived experience peer support, that is currently filling much of this gap.

Immediate or crisis support

People leaving coercive high-control groups often have urgent crisis support needs but encounter an immediate support vacuum.⁹¹ Their practical needs at the point of exit are often acute. However, Inquiry evidence suggested no clear or dedicated crisis pathway for this cohort in Victoria. The issue is not simply a lack of immediate or crisis support services, but that the current system is not adequately designed to identify and respond to the unique dynamics of coercive high-control groups.⁹²

For example, Victoria Police confirmed that there are no specific support mechanisms available to assist individuals seeking to leave cults or coercive groups. While the Victoria Police e-Referral system 'may support individuals exiting cults or high-control groups', it contains no specific referral pathway for these circumstances.⁹³ Family violence responses may apply where relevant (i.e. family violence is also present), but Victoria Police noted that it would not be appropriate to extend those mechanisms more broadly to people leaving coercive groups outside a family violence setting, because they were not designed for these circumstances and doing so would place further pressure on an already strained system.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 70; Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 4; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 5. See Parts 2 to 4.

⁹² See Sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.3.

⁹³ Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice, p. 9.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Inquiry evidence showed that people's needs at exit are complex and varied, and that awareness of a clear exit pathway would assist. Dr Jill Aebi-Mytton, a counselling psychologist with lived experience, noted that leaving a coercive high-control group often involves housing insecurity, financial hardship, and loss of social support. For example, 'in some cases a cult leaver may not even know how to open a bank account'.⁹⁵ Sarah Steel, who has interviewed former members of coercive high-control groups, observed that 'awareness of a supportive exit pathway with dedicated services may assist in this incredibly difficult decision' for a person seeking to leave a group.⁹⁶

Elise Heerde from The Religious Trauma Collective, described an ideal exit pathway for people from coercive high-control groups as one where they 'already know what they are looking for', stating:

ideally the cult survivor will come out not needing to try and figure it out. We will already know what they are looking for. And as soon as they start looking for that, there will be services available free of charge that they can access immediately to be able to start to get support – like someone else has mentioned, having even a safe place that they could go to decompress, to have someone there to be able to talk them through what their potential options are. And again, ideally, there will be lots of potential options and lots of different services and supports available that they could access immediately with little to no financial cost for them, because most likely they will not have the finances to self-finance their recovery.⁹⁷

Jane Kennedy, also from The Religious Trauma Collective, emphasised that an ideal exit pathway must address 'the three most important elements ... protection, survival and healing'.⁹⁸

We tend to come in at the healing end — sometimes in the survival end. I guess it is about identifying the people best placed to respond to each of those components ...

Jane Kennedy, Registered Counsellor, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

For young people, Inquiry evidence identified a structural problem at service entry points. Leigh Bartlett from BATForce noted that young people are likely to present first through homelessness services or Centrelink, where existing psychosocial screening tools are not calibrated to identify group-based coercion. This is compounded, in part, by the fact that young people themselves often lack the language to describe their circumstances in terms or ways that those tools/systems recognise.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8.

⁹⁷ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

⁹⁸ Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

⁹⁹ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19–20. See also Sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 and Part 4.

Inquiry evidence strongly supported a *no wrong door* approach to immediate/crisis support to people exiting a coercive high-control group.¹⁰⁰ Knowmore Legal Service emphasised the importance of services being both ready and capable to respond and help people.¹⁰¹ Leigh Bartlett observed that a ‘no wrong door’ principle to crisis has been understood as a policy aspiration for decades but has not been operationalised in practice for this cohort.¹⁰² In practice, this means that wherever a person presents, the local service system has a shared agreement to connect them to appropriate help without requiring them to retell their story at every point of contact.¹⁰³

The gap in crisis response reflects a lack of system understanding rather than a complete absence of services. As outlined in Sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.3 above, services currently lack the shared indicators, training, and frameworks needed to recognise group-based coercion. Improving these foundations, including through the development of shared risk indicators and information sharing frameworks, would significantly improve the service system’s capacity to provide effective immediate and crisis support.

Role of lived experience peer support

The most used service that we provide is peer support. Survivors of high control groups can often feel isolated, alienated and experience overwhelming feelings that they may feel is difficult to discuss with someone who hasn’t had similar experiences. Often in high control groups a person is prevented or prohibited from speaking freely or may have experienced severe consequences or punishments for doing so. Peer support provides a space to safely speak freely about one’s experiences with someone who understands due to similar experiences.

Responses from Olive Leaf Network Australia, Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Understanding support service demand: Responses from four support organisations*, June 2026, p. 14.

In a service system that often lacks the understanding to recognise and respond to group-based coercion, many people turn to peers with shared experience rather than to mainstream services—partly out of necessity. Inquiry evidence described encountering services that responded to disclosures in ways that caused further harm.¹⁰⁴ While drawn from international experience in the United States, this example of a client’s experience provided by Dr Janja Lalich, Chief Executive Officer of the Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, reflects issues raised across the Inquiry:

Several months ago, a woman came to me who had been in a cult for 15 or more years. She lost all her money. She lost everything. There was sexual abuse in the cult. There was labour exploitation. Somehow she and her husband managed to escape and got

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 20; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 6; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 116; Dr Janja Lalich, CEO, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 3.

¹⁰² Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ See Sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.5 and Parts 3 and 4.

themselves to another state. She found a therapist, she went to this therapist and she told her whole story, her experience of 15 years involved in this and when she was finished, the therapist looked at her and said, 'Well, why didn't you leave?' ... We have done massive training here on domestic violence and set up shelters. We need to have that same kind of understanding among helping professionals and others who work in these fields. There is a desperate need for counsellors who truly know how to help survivors examine their experiences and heal.¹⁰⁵

Anke Richter, Director of Decult, similarly noted that people exiting coercive high-control groups 'often encounter practitioners unfamiliar with cultic trauma' and 'in worst cases ... are retraumatised by inappropriate curiosity'.¹⁰⁶

Inquiry evidence consistently showed that lived experience peer support is not simply a substitute for mainstream services, but a distinct and highly effective form of support for people exiting coercive high-control groups.¹⁰⁷ Catherine Carey, a Founder of Stop Religious Coercion Australia, told the Committee that 'having an organisation led by survivors who have the experience and the lived experience to be able to say, "I understand what you're going through. I know. I've been there myself, and I can help you get through it" — is a major factor' in recovery.¹⁰⁸ Samantha Sellers from The Religious Trauma Collective similarly identified people with lived experience as 'the people best placed to do some of that on-the-ground work', observing that they are already helping people leave and that 'if we can put resources in their hands to create spaces where those people can land, that will be a key part of that'.¹⁰⁹

The reason peer support carries particular weight for this cohort relates to the nature of coercive high-control groups themselves. Leaving such a group involves not just practical separation but the loss of an entire social world, belief framework, and sense of identity.¹¹⁰ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network described peer support networks as 'vital for long-term recovery and community building', recognising 'the unique value of shared experience in healing and validating trauma'.¹¹¹ The knowledge that another person has navigated the same experience—has left, has rebuilt, and can speak from within that reality—carries a credibility that cannot be replicated by traditional professional relationships.

¹⁰⁵ Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Catherine Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 47; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁸ Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

¹¹⁰ See Parts 2 and 4 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Recruitment tactics' and 'Behaviours'.

¹¹¹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 47.

One example of support provided by the Religious Trauma Collective is a structured peer support group for individuals recovering from religious trauma and high control environments. These groups provide a facilitated space by qualified professionals with lived experience where participants can explore experiences such as coercive control, loss of community, identity reconstruction after leaving a high control group, and the psychological impacts of group based coercive control.

For participants these groups may provide their first opportunity to speak openly about their experiences with others who understand the unique dynamics of high control religious environments. The groups focus on building safety, reducing isolation, increasing understanding of coercive control, and supporting individuals as they rebuild autonomy and wellbeing after leaving harmful environments.

Responses from The Religious Trauma Collective, Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Understanding support service demand: Responses from four support organisations*, June 2026, p. 18.

Despite its clear value, Inquiry evidence showed that this work is currently happening, but without formal recognition or sustainable resourcing.¹¹² Ryan Carey, a Founder of Stop Religious Coercion Australia, described survivor support networks as being assembled by ‘jerry-rigging’, emphasising the need for services to connect with peer support networks to support their work.¹¹³ Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, who shared their lived experiences with the Committee, noted that ‘there is currently no known cult survivor services or supports in the state of Victoria which are funded. They are all run pro-bono by survivor advocates’.¹¹⁴

Lived experience-led organisations and peer support networks consistently reported limited and insecure funding, and that their capacity to meet need is significantly constrained as a result.¹¹⁵ Samantha Sellers from The Religious Trauma Collective explained ‘they are just doing it unpaid and under-resourced’.¹¹⁶

In response to questions about service demand, four organisations providing support to people affected by coercive high-control groups indicated that they ‘do not receive any Victorian or Commonwealth government funding’. Two of these organisations provide lived experience-led support services.¹¹⁷ Olive Leaf Network Australia noted in its responses that it had ‘difficulty locating any grant that would be applicable’.¹¹⁸ Responses to the Committee’s questions demonstrated that:

¹¹² Ryan Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10; Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 28.

¹¹³ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 20.

¹¹⁵ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12; Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 8.

¹¹⁶ Samantha Sellers, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Understanding support service demand: Responses from four support organisations*, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ Response from Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Donations, fee for service income, and other non government sources were identified by organisations as their main sources of funding. Fee for service income and donations were most commonly ranked as the largest and second largest funding sources.¹¹⁹

The value of lived experience peer support is recognised in other areas of Victoria's human services system, such as family violence and mental health. For example, the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor's 2022 report on the *Crisis response to recovery model for victim survivors* identified peer support as a key part of victim survivor recovery, and recommended that insights from the mental health lived experience workforce be used to inform a framework and career pathways for the family violence lived experience workforce.¹²⁰ In the mental health sector, there has also been investments to build the supports, structures and career pathways needed for the development of lived experience workforces.¹²¹

Long-term support needs

Inquiry evidence shows that people who leave coercive high-control groups commonly face intersecting and long-lasting harms that cannot be addressed through crisis support alone.¹²² While immediate needs such as safe housing, income support, and acute mental health care are urgent, Inquiry evidence indicates that recovery typically takes many years and requires sustained, coordinated support across multiple areas of life.¹²³

I had worked for 10 years with no salary or superannuation and had no savings.

Since leaving, I have had to rebuild my life financially from nothing while trying to recover from the physical and mental illnesses that I have developed. I still experience PTSD, C-PTSD, suicidal ideation, chronic exhaustion and migraines. I experienced a period of homelessness and continued housing insecurity. I need ongoing therapy and medical appointments which places significant financial burden on myself and the healthcare system.

Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 4.

... it took over ten years for my new general practitioner to recognise that I was suffering generalised anxiety and to recommend and provide a health care plan to complete ten psychological sessions. Identifying the risk to me earlier would have increased my productivity, reduced the cost of treatment and prevented my risk to co-morbidities.

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 55.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹²⁰ Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, *Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms: Crisis response to recovery model for victim survivors*, 2022.

¹²¹ Department of Health, *Lived and living experience workforces (LLEWs) initiatives*, 2026, <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/workforce-and-training/lived-experience-workforce-initiatives>> accessed 30 April 2026.

¹²² See Parts 2 to 4.

¹²³ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*; Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 28; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 131a*, p. 5.

Leaving a coercive high-control group often involves the simultaneous loss of family, community, identity, employment, and housing (often without warning or preparation).¹²⁴ Many individuals have spent years or decades in environments where decisions about daily life, finances, and relationships were controlled or made for them.¹²⁵ As a result, they may lack foundational skills and knowledge that is important for independence, for example how to manage a rental agreement or access healthcare.¹²⁶

Inquiry evidence indicated that without sustained investment in building these capacities over time, the costs of early crisis support are likely to increase rather than reduce over time.¹²⁷ The complex and intersecting needs of this cohort means there is a long-term demand placed on Victoria's support services, including health, welfare, homelessness, family violence, community legal service, and vocational education providers.¹²⁸ These costs often fall across multiple service systems simultaneously. The full scale of this burden is not yet measurable.¹²⁹ Systematic data on the economic cost of coercive high-control groups does not yet exist.¹³⁰ However, the absence of this measurement does not diminish the reality of the costs; it simply means they accumulate without visibility or accountability.

Effective supports must focus on building long-term resilience and genuine independence. This includes pathways to access education and vocational training, financial literacy support, employment readiness assistance, and opportunities to rebuild social connections outside the group.¹³¹ Inquiry evidence emphasised that recovery is slow and should be survivor-paced. Effective support frameworks need to accommodate non-linear recovery rather than impose fixed timelines.¹³² Investing properly in addressing the needs of people exiting coercive high-control groups not only improves individual outcomes but reduces pressure and costs on the community and service system over time.

¹²⁴ See Part 2 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Social control and isolation', 'Labour and financial restrictions', 'Restrictions on relationships and social life', 'Housing and movement restrictions', and 'Exit barriers and post-exit harm'.

¹²⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Behaviours' and 'Harmful behaviours directed at children and young people'.

¹²⁶ See Part 4, Section 4.3.5.

¹²⁷ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 56; Commission for Children and Young People, response to written questions on notice, p. 18; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 116.

¹²⁸ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 37–39.

¹²⁹ Clare Heath-McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 4; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 55–56.

¹³² BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, pp. 3, 5; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 55.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee considers that the support needs of people leaving coercive high-control groups are not being adequately met by Victoria's current service system. The gaps identified in Inquiry evidence are not primarily gaps in service availability, but gaps in the capacity of services to recognise and respond to a cohort with distinct and complex needs. Addressing this requires both targeted investment and systemic change.

The Committee considers that people leaving coercive high-control groups should have access to a clear and capable crisis pathway—one that provides immediate support without requiring them to navigate multiple services or repeatedly explain their circumstances. Existing entry points, including domestic violence, homelessness and welfare services, should be equipped through training and improved screening tools to identify and appropriately respond when this cohort presents. The Committee considers that Recommendations 21 to 25 will strengthen the service system's capacity to provide timely and effective crisis support. Section 5.2 below considers how to build public awareness of support available to people affected by coercive high-control groups.

The Committee recognises the value of lived experience peer support in providing an effective service response. This support is currently provided on an unfunded, largely pro-bono basis. The Committee considers it important to explore options to support funding that would enable survivor-led organisations to deliver this support as part of a formalised service framework.

The Committee is concerned that the long-term support needs of people leaving coercive high-control groups create costs across multiple service systems that accumulate and are not currently measured or accounted for. Investment in building the independence and resilience of people at the point of exit from these groups is likely to reduce these downstream costs. The Committee considers that any service framework developed in response to this Inquiry should reflect the full continuum of need—from immediate crisis response through to long-term recovery—and should be designed in partnership with people with lived experience of coercive high-control groups.

FINDING 77: People leaving coercive high-control groups frequently have acute support needs at the point of exit, including safe housing, income support and mental health care, but lack access to a dedicated or capable crisis response.

FINDING 78: People leaving coercive high-control groups often experience overlapping, long-lasting harms that extend well beyond the point of exit and create demand across multiple service systems. The costs associated with these harms are not currently measurable due to the absence of systematic data collection and therefore accumulate without visibility or accountability.

RECOMMENDATION 26: The Victorian Government work with service agencies to embed a *no wrong door* approach to crisis support for people leaving coercive high-control groups, so that wherever a person presents, they are connected to appropriate assistance. This should include:

- developing a dedicated support framework that addresses the full continuum of need from immediate crisis response through to long-term recovery
- improving pathways that build independence and resilience, including through education, employment, financial literacy, and social reconnection
- ensuring services can accommodate non-linear, survivor-paced recovery rather than time-limited support programs.

FINDING 79: Lived experience peer support is an important and distinct component of an effective service response for people leaving coercive high-control groups. It is currently provided on an unfunded, pro-bono basis by survivor advocates, with no dedicated funding available in Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 27: The Victorian Government, including in collaboration with the Australian Government, consider options to support funding to lived experience-led organisations and peer support networks supporting people leaving coercive high-control groups and their families.

RECOMMENDATION 28: The Victorian Government establish a process to collect systematic data on the service needs, service use, and long-term outcomes of people who have left coercive high-control groups, to support evidence-based service planning and resource allocation.

5.1.5 Strengthening the response of specific frontline services

Building on the whole-of-system issues in Sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.4, this Section focuses on sector-specific gaps and reform opportunities in the psychological and mental health, housing, and policing workforces.

Psychological and mental health responses

Psychologists, a lot of the time, have no training in cult-related trauma or its developmental consequences.

Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

I used to work for a national crisis line here. We did not receive any sort of training around particularly group-based control and religious trauma. As therapists and practitioners, we are required to do a certain amount of upskilling and training every year, and whenever I find myself in those rooms, I go around in the morning and say who I am and what I do, and at lunchtime everyone's like, 'Oh my gosh! I could refer so many people to you.'

Jane Kennedy, Registered Counsellor, The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

The absence of specialist understanding of group-based coercion within the psychological and mental health workforce was one of the most consistent gaps identified in the Inquiry evidence.¹³³ Raphael Aron, a psychologist specialising in this area and Director of Cult Consulting Australia, described the most common situation he encounters is that a survivor has attended a psychologist who acknowledges they can provide some help but 'doesn't know anything about cults'. In Raphael Aron's view, improving practitioner training is the most significant gap to address:

If there is one gap that I would like to fill, it would be the opportunity to offer training programs for people in the helping profession so they are able to understand, as much as is possible within that context, what actually being involved in a cult is all about. That would relieve the pressure from us, and it would make the services available far more mainstream. If there was one thing which I could see as a service gap at the moment – there are probably many others, but the one that comes to mind – would be the lack of information that psychologists, counsellors and psychiatrists have when it comes to cults, often leading to misdiagnoses.¹³⁴

As outlined in Section 5.1.4, individuals who approach mental health practitioners without specialist understanding can be retraumatised. Some Inquiry stakeholders noted that the absence of recognised diagnostic categories for harm related to coercive high-control groups may further compound the problem. For example, on the specific topic of 'religious trauma' Jane Kennedy from The Religious Trauma Collective explained that 'there is no widely agreed upon definition for religious trauma internationally, there is no diagnosis of religious trauma ... it is not something that you will find in the [Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders]'.¹³⁵ This means that the conceptual and clinical vocabulary practitioners ordinarily rely on to identify and describe harm does not readily capture what survivors of group-based coercion have experienced.¹³⁶

¹³³ Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 9; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 17; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 42.

¹³⁴ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

¹³⁵ Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

While existing training in Victoria (and nationally) addresses complex trauma, it does not specifically cover group-based coercion.¹³⁷ Inquiry evidence identified an emerging body of specialist training, but access to it remains limited and it is often self-funded by practitioners.¹³⁸

Examples from Australia and overseas demonstrate both interest and demand. In New Zealand, training was delivered in collaboration with the Olive Leaf Network that brought together more than 80 mental health practitioners, including some from Australia.¹³⁹ Olive Leaf Network Australia also offers training for practitioners, including mental health workers to equip ‘them with the knowledge and sensitivity to identify, respond to, and support individuals impacted by cultic abuse’.¹⁴⁰

The Cult-Informed Professional Network, a network of survivor advocates and professionals across New Zealand and Australia, also reported providing training to approximately 500 health professionals on the ‘basics of cultic harms’. The Network’s submission highlighted:

- demand for deeper and more complex training is already emerging, with network members being invited to present to students, professionals, and agency workers, and to speak at conferences and host webinars
- this work is entirely volunteer-led and unfunded, which makes it ‘unsustainable’
- there is a number of health workers with little or no knowledge of this topic, a large population of people who need those workers to recognise and respond to their experiences, and few organisations currently doing the work to bridge that gap.¹⁴¹

Meli Community (Meli), a Victorian not-for-profit operating in the Barwon, Central Highlands and Wimmera South West regions, provided correspondence to the Committee describing its emerging work in this area. Meli advised that over the past three years it has seen increasing demand from ‘people who have left cults and high control groups’, with support needs primarily ‘centred on access to safe, affordable, housing, specialist family violence intervention/s, access to income support and referral pathways to training and education providers’. In response, Meli has begun collaborating with people with lived experience to develop a culturally appropriate, trauma-informed service approach. Leadership and practice staff have attended training to build awareness, and a more rigorous training program (supported by a Community of Practice drawing on lived experience expertise) is ‘under development’. Meli indicated that ‘this training will be made available across all Meli’s service delivery practitioners, with a particular emphasis on [their] specialist family violence and housing/homelessness services’.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Ibid.; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹³⁸ Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 3–4, 7; Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Cult-Informed Professional Network, *Submission 284*, p. 10.

¹³⁹ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁰ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 62.

¹⁴¹ Cult-Informed Professional Network, *Submission 284*, p. 10.

¹⁴² Bernadette McCartney, Executive Director, Services, Meli Community, correspondence, 27 April 2026, pp. 1–2.

Housing

Inquiry evidence identified housing insecurity as a common and immediate challenge for people leaving coercive high-control groups.¹⁴³ Many people leave without an independent rental history, savings, employment records, and in some cases, identity documentation. These factors can make it difficult to access standard housing assistance and in some cases ineligible for it.¹⁴⁴

The broader whole-of-system service gaps identified by the Committee and the corresponding recommendations, apply equally to the housing sector. In particular, housing services need stronger capability to identify group-based coercion, share information and appropriately respond to harms.¹⁴⁵ Housing and homelessness workers are among the frontline service providers who would benefit from greater awareness of coercive high-control group dynamics, including the ability to ask more targeted questions where circumstances do not fit typical patterns. Clear indicators of coercive high-control group involvement would assist workers to recognise need and connect people to appropriate support, including housing assistance or accommodation.¹⁴⁶ The absence of conventional housing or tenancy history should not, of itself, prevent access to assistance.

Young people are at particular risk of falling through the gaps in housing support. Inquiry evidence described instances in which young people seeking to exit coercive high-control groups were unable to access housing and income support because their parents or carers, who remained in or aligned with the group, presented misleading accounts of the home environment to service providers.¹⁴⁷ In these situations, workers need the tools and confidence to consider the possibility of group-based coercion (based on the presence of other risk indicators) and to give appropriate weight to the young person's account.¹⁴⁸

Victoria Police and frontline workers

First responders and frontline workers—such as police, family violence services and emergency health workers—are often the first point of contact for people in crisis or following exit from coercive high-control groups.¹⁴⁹ Sector-wide reform opportunities

¹⁴³ Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 7; Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 72–74; Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 5; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 38; Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 4; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 62; Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 57; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 11. See Part 4.

¹⁴⁵ See Sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.3.

¹⁴⁶ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 49.

¹⁴⁷ BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force), *Submission 58*, p. 4; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁸ Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁹ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 12; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 50–51; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9.

for first responders and frontline workers primarily relate to training and referral pathways, as addressed in Sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.4 above.

However, Inquiry evidence identified specific considerations for police. Unlike other first responders and frontline workers, police may encounter people at moments of acute safety risk, including where there are fears of retaliation or physical harm connected to leaving a group. Ryan Carey from Stop Religious Coercion Australia observed that people leaving coercive high-control groups ‘have feared for their physical harm’ and that law enforcement needs education in ‘how these groups operate and that these people might need to be put in a safe space’.¹⁵⁰

Inquiry evidence identified also pointed to a pattern of complaints from people affected by coercive high-control groups being dismissed or inadequately addressed, reflecting a lack of understanding of group-based coercion.¹⁵¹ Victoria Police acknowledged structural limitations in this area, including in its capacity to identify and respond to coercive high-control groups, due to an absence of indicators or criteria and no specialised training.¹⁵² Some Inquiry evidence also raised similar concerns about the Australian Federal Police.¹⁵³

Some Inquiry evidence called for the establishment of dedicated or specialist capability within Victoria Police to respond to potential criminal activity of coercive high-control groups, similar to existing models in family violence or counter-terrorism. These proposals reflect concerns that standard policing approaches are not well equipped to recognise and respond to the psychological, organisational, and often cumulative tactics and forms of harms associated with coercive high-control groups.¹⁵⁴

Standard policing models are ill-equipped to identify and investigate the nuanced tactics of high-control groups—psychological abuse, digital surveillance, and transnational evasion. A dedicated, multi-disciplinary unit will ensure that complaints of coercive control are handled with the expertise and urgency they demand.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 115.

Any allegations against an alleged cult leader or cult needs to be taken seriously by the Victorian Police. There should be a Cult, gang, and fringe/high demand groups investigative taskforce set up in the Victorian Police force.

Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 12.

Victoria Police has established specialist capability in other areas where harm is complex, multi-layered and group-based. These include Family Violence Investigation Units staffed by specialist investigators supported by intelligence analysts, and Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams with dedicated training focused on

¹⁵⁰ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹⁵¹ See Section 5.8 and Part 2 and Part 4.

¹⁵² Victoria Police, response to written questions on notice.

¹⁵³ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 66–67; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 21–22.

¹⁵⁴ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 115; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 12; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

victim engagement and offender management.¹⁵⁵ The Counter Terrorism Command, established to consolidate Victoria Police's core counter terrorism functions, similarly brings together specialist investigators, analytical teams, forensic psychologists and researchers. It is structured to understand and respond to threats involving group dynamics, psychological manipulation and ideological influence.¹⁵⁶ The Crime Group also conducts high-level specialist investigations into serious and organised crime, including capability built around gangs, financial crime, cybercrime, and child exploitation—areas where standard frontline responses were similarly assessed as insufficient without dedicated expertise.¹⁵⁷

These models share a common rationale, where harm involves group behaviour, psychological complexity, or entrenched power dynamics, effective responses require specialist capability—not generalist officers encountering them incidentally but investigators who understand these dynamics from the ground up.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is concerned that frontline workers who may routinely encounter people affected by coercive high-control groups are doing so without the knowledge, tools, or referral pathways to respond appropriately. The Committee emphasises that this observation is not a criticism of frontline workers themselves. Rather, it reflects that workers are operating in highly complex environments and are increasingly required to respond to specialised and emerging forms of harm without adequate systemic support, training or guidance. This gap disproportionately affects those most at risk, including children and young people, people in acute crisis at the point of exit, and those whose circumstances do not fit standard service assumptions. Across all frontline services, the Committee emphasises that being listened to and believed is itself a critical form of support. For many people leaving a coercive high-control group, it can be one of the most important things. Inquiry evidence makes clear that, beyond frameworks and systems, what people need at the point of first contact is a space to be heard, understood and believed.

The most significant sector-specific gap identified in the Inquiry evidence is the absence of specialist understanding of group-based coercion within the psychological and mental health workforce. People exiting coercive high-control groups who seek help from practitioners without this expertise risk misdiagnosis and retraumatisation. While emerging specialist training exists, it is limited in reach, largely self-funded by practitioners, and often delivered on a volunteer basis by under-resourced organisations. The Committee considers that the Victorian Government is well placed to help address this gap, including by exploring how existing continuing professional development frameworks can incorporate specialist content on group-based coercion and its developmental and psychological impacts. The Committee notes Meli's proactive approach to addressing concerns in their area, and encourages other regions to consider a similar response.

¹⁵⁵ Victoria Police, *Safe from Harm: Victoria Police Strategy for Family Violence, Sexual Offences and Child Abuse 2024–2029*, 2025, <<https://www.police.vic.gov.au/safe-harm-victoria-police-strategy-family-violence-sexual-offences-and-child-abuse-2024-2029>> accessed 30 April 2026.

¹⁵⁶ Victoria Police, *Victoria Police Counter Terrorism Strategy 2022–2025*, 2025, <<https://www.police.vic.gov.au/victoria-police-counter-terrorism-strategy-2022-2025>> accessed 30 April 2026.

¹⁵⁷ Victoria Police, *Crime Group*, 2026, <<https://www.police.vic.gov.au/crime-group>> accessed 30 April 2026.

The Committee notes that housing insecurity is a predictable and acute consequence of exit from coercive high-control groups for many people, particularly for young people in the 18–25 cohort (as noted in Part 4). Existing housing pathways and eligibility criteria were not designed with this cohort in mind. Housing and homelessness workers would benefit from greater awareness of the indicators and dynamics of coercive high-control groups, and from guidance on how to appropriately assess conflicting accounts between young people and parents or carers aligned with a group.

Inquiry evidence regarding Victoria Police’s capability to recognise and respond to group-based coercion is of particular concern to the Committee, given the critical role of policing in addressing harm and safeguarding individuals at risk. Victoria Police confirmed that there is no specific content in foundation training on coercive high-control group dynamics, no dedicated referral pathways, and no specific support mechanisms for people seeking to leave these groups. This is not a marginal issue. People leaving coercive high-control groups may face acute safety risks, and their experiences often involve patterns of behaviour that do not align with single-incident-based policing frameworks.

The Committee notes that Victoria Police has developed dedicated specialist capability to respond to other complex areas of harm, including family violence, sexual offences, counter terrorism, and serious and organised crime. These models recognise that harm involving group behaviour, psychological complexity or entrenched power dynamics require specialised expertise. The Committee considers that this same principle applies here. Victoria Police should establish a clear internal pathway to identify, escalate and respond to matters involving coercive high-control groups, supported by officers with relevant expertise.

FINDING 80: The psychological and mental health workforce lacks specialist understanding of group-based coercion and its developmental and psychological impacts. Without this knowledge, practitioners risk misidentifying or misdiagnosing harm and may inadvertently retraumatise the people they are trying to help.

FINDING 81: Specialist training on group-based coercion exists but is limited in reach, largely self-funded, and delivered primarily by unfunded volunteer organisations. There is no consistent pathway for incorporating this content into continuing professional development for frontline workers or mental health practitioners.

RECOMMENDATION 29: The Victorian Government work with relevant professional peak bodies to explore options to incorporate specialist content on group-based coercion and its impacts into continuing professional development frameworks for psychologists, counsellors, and allied mental health practitioners.

FINDING 82: People leaving coercive high-control groups often experience acute housing insecurity, compounded by factors such as the absence of an independent rental history, employment record, savings, or identity documentation, which limit their eligibility to access standard housing assistance. Young people leaving coercive high-control groups are at particular risk of falling outside housing support pathways.

RECOMMENDATION 30: The Victorian Government review, and where necessary update, housing support pathways and eligibility criteria to ensure they can identify and support people leaving coercive high-control groups. This should include ensuring existing pathways can recognise the unique dynamics and harms associated with coercive high-control groups.

FINDING 83: Victoria Police has no specialist training or indicators on coercive high-control group dynamics. Complaints involving coercive high-control groups are typically assessed against individual criminal offences rather than patterns of conduct, which limits recognition of patterns of harm and undermines effective response.

RECOMMENDATION 31: The Victorian Government support Victoria Police to establish a clear internal pathway for identifying and escalating matters involving coercive high-control groups to officers with appropriate expertise. This could include the development of targeted training, shared indicators, and referral pathways, drawing on models of specialist capability already established in comparable areas. Options include a dedicated unit, specialist capacity within an existing unit, or a designated liaison function.

5.2 Building public understanding and awareness: foundations for prevention

Preventing future harm requires proactively educating the public and building resilience in vulnerable populations

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 50.

Inquiry evidence shows that coercive high-control groups are not widely understood by the general public as a distinct form of harm.¹⁵⁸ This awareness gap leaves individuals and communities at risk because they cannot identify warning signs they have not been taught to recognise. Building public understanding of the risks and indicators

¹⁵⁸ See Section 5.1 and Parts 1 and 4.

of coercive high-control groups was identified as an important component of early intervention and prevention.¹⁵⁹

Inquiry evidence consistently called for public awareness and education as a foundational prevention measure. Education serves several key functions:

- equipping the community to identify concerning practices at an early stage, before control and coercion becomes embedded
- building individual resilience against recruitment and manipulation
- promoting help-seeking behaviours and avenues of support for people by increasing public promotion of harms and available supports.¹⁶⁰

While not a substitute for legal or regulatory reform, Inquiry evidence suggested that awareness and education are necessary preconditions for reform measures to be effective.¹⁶¹ The importance of building awareness is also discussed in Part 4, Sections 4.11.1 and 4.11.2, in relation to raising awareness among school-aged children and tertiary students.

Inquiry evidence proposed a range of approaches to public awareness activities, including a public hotline,¹⁶² a dedicated website,¹⁶³ social media campaigns,¹⁶⁴ and broader public campaigns.¹⁶⁵ While views on approach differed, several common themes emerged:

- **Government-supported awareness campaigns modelled on proven public health campaign methods:** campaigns should focus on early warning signs, recruitment tactics, and pathways to help, drawing comparisons with analogous areas of law (e.g., family violence and anti-fraud initiatives). Inquiry evidence emphasised that timing is critical; the period before a person becomes isolated from family and friends is when community awareness is most likely to enable intervention.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁹ Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 8; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, pp. 33, 37, 39; Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 28; Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 25; Name withheld, *Submission 259*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 4; Name withheld, *Submission 262*, p. 2; Shane St Reynolds, *Submission 25*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 55; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 50; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 12; Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 9; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 8; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, pp. 13–14; Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 12; Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 44*, p. 9.

¹⁶¹ Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 45; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 4.

¹⁶² Paul Gratton, Pastor, Now Church Moe, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 116.

¹⁶³ Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁴ Stephen Messer, *Submission 169*, p. 2; Ryan Manuel Halim, *Submission 266*, p. 31; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 77; Richard Baker, Investigative Journalist, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49.

¹⁶⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 249*, p. 2; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 55, 62; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 8; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 13; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 57; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 12; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, pp. 13–14; Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 8; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22; Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Maria Esguerra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

- **Conduct-focused, trauma-informed framing:** awareness activities must focus on patterns of coercive behaviour rather than on belief or group identity, and adopt a tone consistent with best-practice standards in family violence and institutional abuse contexts. Sensationalist or stigmatising messaging may be counterproductive, as it can reinforce internal loyalty and deter exit.¹⁶⁷
- **Targeted outreach to parents and carers:** parents and caregivers were identified as a priority audience for awareness activity, particularly to support recognition of children at risk.¹⁶⁸ Other related suggestions included educating parents who may be involved in a group about children's distinct rights and how those rights interact where group authority is asserted.¹⁶⁹
- **Engagement with online and digital platforms:** technology platforms should be part of broader awareness efforts, drawing on existing protocols for redirecting users toward safety resources. Government-supported initiatives to increase the visibility of information about recruitment tactics in digital environments was recommended. This approach is consistent with established strategies used for other forms of harm, such as self-harm, where platforms play a role in sharing targeted information and pathways to support.¹⁷⁰
- **Caution about broadcast media campaigns:** while government-supported awareness campaigns should draw on proven health approaches, it was suggested that caution is warranted in relying on television-style (or traditional media focused) campaigns. Such approaches may be less effective for this issue, given limited control over who receives the message and how it is interpreted, including by people currently in coercive high-control group environments.¹⁷¹
- **Supporting independent journalism and community voices:** investigative reporting, lived experience accounts, and watchdog activity may be important contributors to public understanding. There were some recommendations that governments consider supporting media coverage at the local and regional level.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 56; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 40.

¹⁶⁸ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 62; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 12; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 114.

¹⁷¹ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 4; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 56.

¹⁷² Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 12; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 56.

International insight: Austria

Inquiry evidence highlighted Austria's approach to raising public awareness on the dangers of coercive high-control groups as an international model for consideration.¹⁷³ Dr Janja Lalich from the Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, noted that the Austrian agency 'offers information for the public and the media on select topics, provides aid for researchers and students, provides services for survivors and families'.¹⁷⁴ Patrick Mclvor, a lived experience advocate, described the Federal Office for Cult Affairs as a 'catch point for a whole range of conduct, a triaging and a referral'.¹⁷⁵

Case Study 5.1 Austria's Federal Office for Cult Affairs (*Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen*)

Austria's Federal Office for Cult Affairs (FOCA), sometimes translated as Federal Office for Sect Issues, is an independent institution established under Austrian legislation. It commenced operations on 1 September 1998 and is subject to supervision by the Federal Chancellor's Office.^a FOCA operates autonomously as it is 'not subject to directives' and is not part of a ministry's structure. Ulrike Schiesser, Managing Director, advised the agency operates with an annual budget of approximately €790,000 and a staff of seven people.^b

FOCA's mandate is focused on dangers rather than belief. Ulrike Schiesser explained, 'it is not about if some group is a cult or not a cult, but cults or cult-like activities are measured by the dangers they might provide'.^c

FOCA's role is to document and share information about potential dangers from cults or similar activities, when there is reason to suspect their existence and when they threaten protected goods or interests which are worthy of special protection.^d FOCA handles approximately 500 cases per year.^e

FOCA may conduct research into a group to:

- highlight the existence of a threat to mental or physical health
- protect the 'integrity of family life'
- point out 'extreme financial entanglement'
- ensure that individuals are free to enter and leave a group
- ensure the wellbeing of children and young people involved.^f

(Continued)

¹⁷³ Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁴ Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁷⁵ Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

Case Study 5.1 Continued

The legislation requires that FOCA have reasonable grounds for suspicion of danger before taking action.^g

FOCA is ‘non-denominational’ and its services are free of charge and can be accessed anonymously. Ulrike Schiesser emphasised that ‘neutrality’ is a key part of FOCA’s work, particularly as a ‘state-run agency’.^h

FOCA’s awareness and educative work includes:

- **Public information and media engagement:** FOCA produces an annual report to the Austrian Parliament, engages regularly with media on emerging issues, and issues direct communications to schools and other institutions when a concerning group is identified as active.ⁱ
- **Professional training:** FOCA provides training for social workers, teachers, and others who work with children and young people. This includes guidance that children in coercive environments are often compliant and unobtrusive—and therefore less likely to be identified as at risk.^j
- **Case-based counselling and intelligence:** engagements from people who have left or remained within groups is the most valuable source of intelligence about how those groups operate and are used to support counselling and awareness-building.^k
- **Cross-agency and international coordination:** FOCA participates in working groups on topics including deradicalisation and children’s law, and maintains international partnerships with counterpart agencies, enabling comparison of emerging trends across jurisdictions.^l

a. *Federal Act on the Establishment of a Documentation and Information Office for Cult Affairs*, Federal Law Gazette Nr. 150/1998, <https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XX/I/1158/fnameorig_140051.html>.

b. Ulrike Schiesser, Managing Director, Federal Office for Cult Affairs (Austria), public hearing, Melbourne, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

c. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

d. Federal Chancellery, *Federal Office for Cult Affairs*, (n.d.), <<https://www.bundestkanzleramt.gv.at/en/agenda/youth/counselling-and-information/federal-office-on-sect-issues.html>> accessed 1 May 2026.

e. Ulrike Schiesser, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

f. Federal Chancellery, *Federal Office for Cult Affairs*; Ulrike Schiesser, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

g. *Federal Act on the Establishment of a Documentation and Information Office for Cult Affairs*.

h. Ulrike Schiesser, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

i. *Ibid.*

j. *Ibid.*

k. *Ibid.*

l. *Ibid.*

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee considers that the current level of public understanding about coercive high-control groups as a category of harm is insufficient. This gap contributes to delayed identification of risk and underuse of available protections. Public awareness activity is therefore warranted to complement legal and regulatory reform.

Any government-supported awareness activity must be carefully designed. The Committee considers that communication should focus on patterns of coercive conduct, rather than the beliefs or identity of particular groups. Sensationalist or stigmatising approaches risk reinforcing persecution narratives that coercive groups may use to deepen internal loyalty and deter exit.

The Committee notes that campaign design should reflect the specific characteristics of this harm. Broad-reach broadcast approaches are unlikely to be effective where there is limited control over audience and interpretation, including by people currently in coercive environments. More targeted, channel-appropriate strategies, including through digital platforms and health and community service settings, are likely to achieve greater impact.

Timing of awareness efforts is also critical. They are most effective before coercion and control becomes embedded, and when they reach not only individuals at risk but also those around them, enabling earlier recognition and intervention.

FINDING 84: The risks and harms of coercive high-control groups are not sufficiently understood by the general public, leaving individuals and communities without the knowledge needed to identify warning signs or seek help.

RECOMMENDATION 32: The Victorian Government:

- ensure that relevant government services provide clear, accessible and publicly available information on the indicators of coercive high-control groups, common recruitment tactics and available support pathways
- develop and implement a targeted public awareness campaign to promote community understanding of coercive high-control groups, including where to seek help.

5.3 Greater protections: strengthening accountability and legal responses

Part 3 examined the unique behaviours that characterise coercive high-control groups and considered how the law currently responds to those behaviours. Inquiry evidence pointed to a number of ways in which existing laws, and the accountability mechanisms that depend on them, could more effectively address the harms associated with coercive high-control groups.



Questionnaire insight

Questionnaire participants suggested:

- Legislation against religious coercive control
- Legislation against mandated shunning
- Create a body to publicly list, monitor and potentially ban coercive groups, with accessible mechanisms for people to report these groups
- Increased accountability for group leaders who cover up abuse or refuse medical treatment of members.

Inquiry evidence demonstrated that strengthening Victoria's response to coercive high-control groups requires action across both criminal law and broader accountability frameworks. Several gaps were identified: existing regulatory mechanisms operate with significant limitations; civil remedies remain inaccessible to many survivors; people who disclose misconduct lack adequate protection from retaliation; and some organisations are subject to minimal financial transparency and governance oversight, limiting opportunities to identify harm.

Addressing these issues in isolation would leave the framework incomplete. Sections 5.4 to 5.8 considers Inquiry evidence that identified a range of specific legal reforms that, taken together, are directed at strengthening the protections available to individuals harmed by coercive high-control groups and the accountability of the organisations and individuals responsible for that harm.

5.4 Financial transparency and accountability

As outlined in Part 2, financial exploitation in coercive high control-groups occurs both through direct exploitation of individuals and through broader systems and structures. A lack of financial transparency and accountability are key characteristics of these groups that create conditions that allow financial exploitation to occur.¹⁷⁶ Inquiry evidence raised concerns that the current financial transparency requirements for such groups are insufficient.¹⁷⁷

Of particular concern, is that some coercive high-control groups may operate as charities and access tax concessions and benefits, despite evidence of harm associated with group practices and a lack of genuine public benefit.¹⁷⁸ This suggests that current

¹⁷⁶ See Part 2, Section 2.3.8.

¹⁷⁷ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29; Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46; Karen Alsop, *Submission 60*, pp. 19–20; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 77; Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 24–25.

¹⁷⁸ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 3, 6; Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 99; Thomas Beanlands, *Submission 17*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 3; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 37–38; Cult Information and Family Support, *Submission 67*, p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 7; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 24–25.

financial transparency requirements may not provide regulators with sufficient visibility to identify harmful behaviour, allowing some of these groups to remain registered charities even where harm or misuse of funds may be occurring.¹⁷⁹

Under the current laws that allows them to operate with minimal transparency even to their own members. The reporting requirements are very lax. There is not a lot of information out there, and to qualify for it you actually do not have to demonstrate any public good.

Richard Baker, Investigative Journalist, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) is the national regulator of charities established by the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) (ACNC Act).¹⁸⁰ To maintain ACNC registration, most charities' activities must comply with Governance Standards¹⁸¹ and External Conduct Standards.¹⁸² Charities are also required to report to ACNC through an Annual Information Statement, and some charities may also be required to submit an annual financial report. Annual Information Statements and any financial reports are published on the ACNC Charity Register.¹⁸³

ACNC's regulatory approach is preventative and focuses 'on conduct that could erode risk to public trust and confidence in the charity sector'.¹⁸⁴ ACNC prioritises matters that involve risks to people, charitable funds and charitable assets, including:

- (a) conduct that harms people, particularly children and vulnerable adults,
- (b) misuse of a charity for terrorist purposes or to foster extremism, indirectly or directly,
- (c) financial mismanagement including fraud and significant private benefit, and
- (d) activities that put a charity at risk of having a disqualifying purpose, so they are no longer eligible to be registered with the ACNC.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

¹⁸⁰ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 1.

¹⁸¹ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *ACNC Governance Standards*, (n.d.), <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/for-charities/manage-your-charity/governance-hub/governance-standards>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁸² Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *ACNC External Conduct Standards*, (n.d.), <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/for-charities/manage-your-charity/governance-hub/acnc-external-conduct-standards>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁸³ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 2. See: Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Search for a charity*, (n.d.), <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/charity/charities>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁸⁴ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 2.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.; Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *ACNC Regulatory Approach Statement*, (n.d.), <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/raise-concern/regulating-charities/acnc-regulatory-approach-statement>> accessed 21 May 2025.

To prevent failures of charity governance and legal compliance, ACNC provides information, guidance and other supports. Where concerns or issues are raised, ACNC generally works with a charity to resolve them. However, will ‘act firmly’ in circumstances where:

- vulnerable people are at risk of harm,
- significant charity resources are at risk of loss or misappropriation,
- there is evidence of serious mismanagement, or
- there is a serious and/or deliberate breach of the ACNC Act or ACNC Regulations.¹⁸⁶

5.4.1 ACNC enforcement powers are limited

Anyone can raise a concern with ACNC regarding a registered charity. ACNC will investigate potential breaches of the ACNC Act, Governance Standards and External Conduct Standards. Where concerns fall outside ACNC’s jurisdiction, they refer them to the relevant authorities, such as state and federal police or other agencies, and monitor the outcome of those referrals.¹⁸⁷ ACNC also monitors media, receives referrals from other agencies, and undertakes proactive assessments based on risk and intelligence data.¹⁸⁸

The ACNC aims to respond in a way that is proportionate to the seriousness of the issues identified, with revocation of charity status considered only in the most serious of cases.¹⁸⁹

ACNC recognises the importance of ensuring that charitable status is not misused to shield harmful and exploitative conduct.

Sue Woodward, Commissioner, Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

However, ACNC’s enforcement powers are subject to constitutional limitations. Most can only be exercised where a registered charity is also a federally regulated entity.¹⁹⁰ ACNC can only make this assessment with legal advice from the Australian Government Solicitor and it does not have the power to require or compel a charity to provide information for this purpose. In cases where a charity does not comply with information requests, ACNC may be unable to determine whether a charity is federally regulated (i.e., that it has the necessary jurisdiction).¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, pp. 2–3.

¹⁸⁷ Sue Woodward, Commissioner, Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 9.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁰ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 3; *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) Part 4–2—Enforcement Powers; Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Federally regulated entity*, (n.d.), <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/topic-guides/federally-regulated-entity>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁹¹ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 3.

Where the ACNC cannot determine if a charity is federally regulated, and there is a serious or deliberate issue of non-compliance with Governance Standards, the only regulatory action available may be the revocation of that charity's registration.¹⁹² This is a 'blunt' mechanism, as a charity may continue to operate without remedying underlying issues and once deregistered, it will no longer be subject to regulatory oversight.¹⁹³

5.4.2 ACNC secrecy provisions

ACNC is subject to secrecy provisions¹⁹⁴ that prevent it from disclosing 'protected ACNC information'.¹⁹⁵ This includes information that:

- was disclosed or obtained under, or for the purposes of, the ACNC Act
- relates to the affairs of an entity
- identifies, or is reasonably capable of being used to identify, the entity.¹⁹⁶

These provisions mean that ACNC can rarely publicly confirm or comment on concerns received about a charity, including keeping the person who raised a concern updated about how the concern is being responded to, if it is being investigated, or the outcome of any action taken.¹⁹⁷

Inquiry evidence from people with lived experience identified secrecy provisions as a significant source of frustration, as individuals may be left without clarity about whether any action was taken or whether their concerns were resolved.¹⁹⁸ This lack of communication can undermine confidence that concerns are being taken seriously or that appropriate action is being taken.¹⁹⁹

At great personal and financial cost, we continue to lodge complaints without knowing if an investigation has or has not commenced. We do not know if our resources would be better spent pursuing other avenues of engagement with authorities.

Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 11.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid. Lived experience stakeholders raised concerns where coercive high-control groups exist outside formal frameworks, without registration, and noted the transparency and accountability challenges in these circumstances. See for example: Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*.

¹⁹⁴ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Secrecy provisions*, (n.d.), <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/topic-guides/secrecy-provisions>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁹⁵ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 5.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.; *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) s 150-15.

¹⁹⁷ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, pp. 5-6; Sue Woodward, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁸ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, pp. 11, 30; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278a*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹⁹ Productivity Commission, *Future foundations for giving: Inquiry report*, 2024, p. 338; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278a*, p. 3; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 100; Karen Alsop, *Submission 60*, p. 19.

ACNC Commissioner Sue Woodward acknowledged the challenges that secrecy provisions create for communication and trust between ACNC and people who raise concerns:

... we try to assure people that we do assess each one and we take them seriously – for us to then say, ‘Secrecy provisions means that we can’t tell you anymore, and even if you keep ringing us we’re not going to be able to tell you whether we’re investigating and the progress of that’ is quite confronting and not easy for people who have secrecy as part of how they have suffered abuse.²⁰⁰

Commissioner Woodward also emphasised the seriousness of the secrecy provisions, noting that a breach by ACNC staff carries a penalty of two years’ imprisonment.²⁰¹ She explained that the purpose of these provisions is to protect due process, allow for involvement of other agencies, and safeguard the reputation of charities while investigations are progressing and before any wrongdoing is proven.²⁰² While exceptions to the secrecy provisions exist, they apply only in limited circumstances.²⁰³

On 5 December 2025, the *Treasury Laws Amendment (Strengthening Financial Systems and Other Measures) Act 2025* (Cth) took effect, introducing an adjustment to the ACNC’s secrecy provisions.²⁰⁴ The amendment ‘allows the Commissioner to disclose that an investigation is taking place but does not permit disclosure of more information or reasons for investigation’.²⁰⁵ These powers apply only to new or ongoing investigations relating to a charity’s compliance with the ACNC Act, Governance Standards or External Conduct Standards.²⁰⁶ In early February 2026, the ACNC Commissioner used these new provisions to authorise the disclosure of an investigation into a group that was raised in Inquiry evidence.²⁰⁷

ACNC welcomed the amendment as a way to ‘increase public understanding of some ACNC investigations’.²⁰⁸ However, at a public hearing before the amendment was passed, ACNC Commissioner, Sue Woodward, emphasised that even with the change ‘a detailed test will need to be satisfied’ before any disclosure would be made.²⁰⁹ She noted that the amendment would allow only ‘very limited exceptions’ to the secrecy provisions, with a ‘very high bar’ for disclosures, and that the power would be exercised only in rare cases.²¹⁰

²⁰⁰ Sue Woodward, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

²⁰¹ Ibid.; *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) s 150-25.

²⁰² Sue Woodward, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

²⁰³ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Secrecy provisions*.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.; *Treasury Laws Amendment (Strengthening Financial Systems and Other Measures) Act 2025* (Cth).

²⁰⁵ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *ACNC confirms an investigation*, media release, <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/media/news/acnc-confirms-investigation>> 4 February 2026.

²⁰⁶ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Investigation disclosures*, 2026, <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/raise-concern/regulating-charities/how-we-regulate/investigation-disclosures>> accessed 23 April 2026.

²⁰⁷ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *ACNC confirms an investigation*, media release; Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Investigation disclosures*.

²⁰⁸ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *ACNC welcomes new laws to increase understanding of some ACNC investigations*, media release, <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/media/news/acnc-welcomes-new-laws-increase-understanding-some-acnc-investigations>> 3 December 2026.

²⁰⁹ Sue Woodward, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

²¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee notes that the amendment to the ACNC's secrecy provisions is untested, and that time is needed to determine the impact of allowing limited disclosure about ACNC investigations. Given the narrow scope of the amendment, the Committee considers it important to monitor its operation over time to assess whether it adequately addresses the concerns raised in Inquiry evidence. The Committee is of the view that this monitoring should assess whether the amendment builds trust among people who raise concerns about charities with ACNC. As part of this assessment, the Committee identifies the need to consider whether additional measures are required, including the adoption of a trauma-informed complaints process for people raising serious concerns.

FINDING 85: The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission's (ACNC) secrecy provisions are a significant source of frustration for individuals who have raised concerns about coercive high-control groups that are registered as charities. A lack of communication about whether concerns have been acted on or resolved can leave individuals feeling unheard, reducing confidence and trust in ACNC's regulatory role.

RECOMMENDATION 33: The Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government to review, by 31 December 2028, the impact of the amendment to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission's (ACNC) secrecy provisions that took effect on 5 December 2025, including whether it provides adequate transparency and communication for individuals who raise concerns about charities with the ACNC, and to consider the need for additional measures, such as a trauma-informed complaints process.

5.4.3 Basic Religious Charities

ACNC oversees approximately 64,000 registered charities. Of these, 13,872 have the sole charitable purpose of 'advancing religion', of which 7,742 self-identify as Basic Religious Charities (BRC).²¹¹

BRCs are subject to significantly fewer regulatory requirements than other registered charities. In particular:

- the ACNC Governance Standards do not apply to them
- the ACNC Commissioner is not empowered to suspend or remove a Responsible Person from them²¹²
- their reporting requirements are reduced.²¹³

²¹¹ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 4.

²¹² A Responsible Person is someone who is responsible for governing a charity. Generally, a charity's Responsible People are its board or committee members, or trustees (including insolvency trustees or administrators). Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Responsible Person*, (n.d.), <<https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/topic-guides/responsible-person>> accessed 21 May 2026.

²¹³ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 4.

Unlike other charities, BRCs are not required to:

- answer the financial questions in the Annual Information Statement submitted to the ACNC
- submit annual financial reports to the ACNC.²¹⁴

Because of this, the Australian Productivity Commission estimate that ‘one in six charities are not subject to important elements of the regulatory framework’.²¹⁵ Inquiry evidence suggested that some organisations registered as BRCs may operate as coercive high-control groups.²¹⁶ ACNC acknowledged that because of the reduced regulatory and reporting requirements, their capacity for oversight of BRCs is limited:

These reduced reporting obligations and the inapplicability of the Governance Standards significantly impacts the manner in which the ACNC can apply our regulatory approach and enforcement powers when concerns are raised, or issues arise in relation to BRCs.

We understand the differences between the obligations of BRCs and other registered charities could impact on the public’s trust and confidence in the charity sector as a whole. Previous reviews have considered the BRC exemptions.²¹⁷

Reviews conducted by the Australian Government that have examined BRC exemptions include, the Productivity Commission’s *Future foundations for giving* (2024) and Federal Treasury’s *Strengthening for Purpose: Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Legislative Review* (2018).²¹⁸

5.4.4 Productivity Commission, *Future foundations for giving* recommendations

In its 2024 report, the Productivity Commission examined Australia’s regulatory framework for charities,²¹⁹ and determined that while broadly sound, reforms were needed in certain areas. A key area for reform was the regulatory treatment of BRCs. The Productivity Commission found that:

- it could not identify a ‘policy rationale’ that justifies retaining the BRC category²²⁰
- requiring BRCs to meet the ACNCs Governance Standards and reporting requirements would provide a more transparent and consistent approach to regulation²²¹

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Productivity Commission, *Future foundations for giving*, p. 235.

²¹⁶ Richard Baker, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 77; Sue Woodward, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

²¹⁷ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 5.

²¹⁸ See: Productivity Commission, *Future foundations for giving*; Treasury, *Strengthening for Purpose: Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Legislation Review: Report and Recommendations*, Australian Government, 2018.

²¹⁹ See: Chapter 7 Productivity Commission, *Future foundations for giving*.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 236.

²²¹ Ibid.

- removing the concept of BRCs and any related exemptions from ACNC legislation would comply with s 116 of the Australian Constitution.²²²

Box 5.1 below details the Productivity Commission’s recommendations to ensure a sound regulatory framework.

Box 5.1 Select recommendations from the Productivity Commission, *Future foundations for giving: Inquiry report*

Recommendation 7.1—The Australian Government should amend the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) to remove the concept of ‘basic religious charity’ and associated exemptions, so all charities registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission are regulated in a consistent manner. This should include obligations to comply with principles-based governance standards and reporting requirements proportionate to size.

Recommendation 7.2—The Australian Government should:

- amend the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) (the Act) to enable the Commissioner of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) to require a charity to provide the information necessary to assess whether the charity is likely to be a ‘federally regulated entity’
- amend the Act to enable the Commissioner of the ACNC to require a charity undergoing revocation of its ACNC charity registration to evidence the intended or actual distribution of its net assets to an eligible entity unless that requirement is waived by the Commissioner
- work with state and territory governments to ensure the Commissioner of the ACNC has the necessary enforcement powers to fulfil their role within the regulatory framework for charities. This should include implementing or reforming laws, where necessary, to confirm that the Commissioner of the ACNC has standing to make applications in a state or territory Supreme Court for orders regarding the administration of charities, including the protection of assets held in trust for charitable purposes, regardless of a charity’s structure.

To date, these recommendations have not been implemented.

Source: Productivity Commission, *Future foundations for giving: Inquiry report*, 2024, pp. 240, 250.

²²² Ibid., p. 239. Section 116 of the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900* (Cth) states: ‘The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth’.

The Productivity Commission noted that the proposed changes ‘were reasonable, proportionate and necessary given community expectations around the transparency and accountability of all charities’, and that the anticipated administrative burden for BRCs to fulfill these requirements was low.²²³

The purpose of Recommendation 7.1 is to ensure ‘the consistent application of the ACNC’s regulatory framework ... to all charities’.²²⁴

A sound regulatory framework ... will only promote trust and confidence in the charitable sector, if donors, charities, governments and the public are confident the ACNC will exercise its functions when the need arises.

Productivity Commission, Future foundations for giving: Inquiry report, 2024, p. 242.

The Productivity Commission also observed the current requirement for ACNC to engage the Australian Government Solicitor to determine whether a charity is a federally regulated entity incurs a time and resource cost.²²⁵

The purpose of Recommendation 7.2 is to give the ACNC Commissioner the powers to compel charities to provide the necessary information, strengthening their enforcement powers.²²⁶ This would enhance the Commissioner’s ability, upon receiving a concern, to determine whether a group is a federally regulated entity. Where this is established, the ACNC would then be better positioned to exercise its enforcement powers, where appropriate.

In the context of this Inquiry, implementation of these recommendations would mean that any coercive high-control groups that are currently BRCs would need to comply with the ACNC reporting requirements and Governance Standards to:

1. operate on an not-for-profit basis and work toward its charitable purpose
2. take reasonable steps to be accountable to its members and provide them with a reasonable opportunity to raise concerns about how the charity is governed
3. not act in a way that could be dealt with as an indictable offence, or breach a law that has a civil penalty of a certain magnitude
4. take reasonable steps to ensure that the persons responsible for governing the charity (for example, its directors or trustees) are not disqualified from managing a corporation under the Corporations Act, or disqualified by the ACNC from being a Responsible Person of a charity
5. take reasonable steps to ensure that its responsible people understand and carry out certain duties, for example, act with reasonable care and diligence and disclose conflicts of interest
6. take reasonable steps to participate in the National Redress Scheme if involved in past conduct related to institutional child sexual abuse.²²⁷

²²³ Ibid., pp. 236, 237.

²²⁴ Ibid., pp. 242, 246.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 242.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 246.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 235; Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *ACNC Governance Standards*.

It is noted that some coercive high-control groups may not be classified as BRCs, but as other charities, meaning they are already subject to these requirements under existing regulatory frameworks.

Inquiry evidence identified significant concerns regarding the processes for appointing Responsible Persons and governance boards of coercive high-control groups, as well as how these bodies operated in practice. In particular, Inquiry evidence suggested these arrangements often lack transparency, independence and accountability, even after issues have been raised.²²⁸

Implementation of the Productivity Commission's recommendations would go some way to address the governance concerns identified in Inquiry evidence. Compliance with the Governance Standards would introduce important safeguards around the appointment of Responsible Persons in respect of coercive high-control groups that are currently classified as BRCs. In particular, Governance Standard 4 requires charities to take reasonable steps to ensure that those in governance roles are not disqualified from managing a corporation or from acting as a Responsible Person. This requirement would strengthen the integrity of governance structures by establishing a minimum threshold for suitability and accountability, reducing risks associated with opaque or inappropriate appointments.

Providing the ACNC with the power to compel charities to provide necessary information where concerns are raised, would further strengthen the Commissioner's ability to determine whether a group is a federally regulated entity. This, in turn, would enable the ACNC to exercise its enforcement powers, including in relation to coercive high-control groups that are registered charities.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee notes the findings and recommendations of the Productivity Commission's *Future foundations for giving: Inquiry report* and considers its analysis of the regulatory treatment of BRCs to be compelling. The Committee agrees that the existence of a distinct BRC category, exempt from key governance and reporting obligations, creates inconsistency within Australia's charity regulatory framework and limits transparency and accountability.

The Committee is particularly concerned that these exemptions apply regardless of risk or size, and may be relied upon by coercive or high-control groups registered as BRCs. Inquiry evidence suggests that the reduced oversight of BRCs can constrain ACNC's ability to respond effectively to complaints, investigate concerns, and take proportionate enforcement action where risks to individuals or charitable assets are identified.

The Committee is persuaded by the Productivity Commission's conclusion that no clear policy rationale exists for maintaining the BRC category, and that its removal would be consistent with constitutional requirements. The Committee further notes that the proposed

²²⁸ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 85; Karen Alsop, *Submission 60*, p. 19; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, pp. 3, 10; Jeremy Stein, *Submission 85*, pp. 2–4; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 23.

reforms were assessed by the Productivity Commission as reasonable, proportionate, and aligned with community expectations that all charities operate transparently and be subject to appropriate regulatory oversight.

The Committee also considers that ACNC's current reliance on the time-consuming and resource-intensive processes of engaging the Australian Government Solicitor to determine whether an entity is federally regulated undermines timely and effective regulation. Empowering the ACNC Commissioner to compel charities to provide necessary information would strengthen enforcement capability and avoid reliance on blunt regulatory mechanisms such as deregistration.

For these reasons, the Committee strongly supports the implementation of the relevant Productivity Commission recommendations and considers coordinated advocacy by the Victorian Government to ensure they are implemented to be warranted. The Committee notes that Recommendation 7.1 would promote the consistent application of the ACNC regulatory framework across all charities, which the Productivity Commission identified as critical to maintaining public trust and confidence in the sector. Recommendation 7.2 would further strengthen the ACNC's ability to act by equipping the Commissioner with information-gathering powers to more efficiently determine whether an entity is federally regulated and, where appropriate, exercise enforcement powers.

In the context of this Inquiry, the Committee considers that these reforms would represent a meaningful step toward addressing some of the governance concerns identified in Inquiry evidence about coercive high-control groups that fall within the ACNC's regulatory scope. In particular, requiring such entities that are currently registered as BRC's to comply with reporting requirements and Governance Standards—including safeguards on the suitability and conduct of Responsible Persons—would improve transparency, accountability and oversight. While not a complete solution, the Committee considers that their implementation would go some way toward mitigating the risks associated with opaque governance structures and inadequate accountability mechanisms identified in Inquiry evidence.

FINDING 86: Coercive high-control groups registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission as Basic Religious Charities are exempt from important reporting obligations and oversight mechanisms.

FINDING 87: Removing the concept of a Basic Religious Charity from the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) would improve transparency by bringing all registered charities under a consistent regulatory framework. Enabling the Commissioner of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission to compel charities to provide information to determine if they are a federally regulated entity would further strengthen accountability and enforcement.

RECOMMENDATION 34: The Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government to implement the following recommendations from the Productivity Commission's *Future foundations for giving: Inquiry report* (2024):

- Recommendation 7.1 – The Australian Government should amend the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) to remove the concept of 'basic religious charity' and associated exemptions, so all charities registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission are regulated in a consistent manner. This should include obligations to comply with principles-based governance standards and reporting requirements proportionate to size.
- Recommendation 7.2 – The Australian Government should:
 - amend the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012 (Cth) (the Act) to enable the Commissioner of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) to require a charity to provide the information necessary to assess whether the charity is likely to be a 'federally regulated entity'
 - amend the Act to enable the Commissioner of the ACNC to require a charity undergoing revocation of its ACNC charity registration to evidence the intended or actual distribution of its net assets to an eligible entity unless that requirement is waived by the Commissioner
 - work with state and territory governments to ensure the Commissioner of the ACNC has the necessary enforcement powers to fulfil their role within the regulatory framework for charities. This should include implementing or reforming laws, where necessary, to confirm that the Commissioner of the ACNC has standing to make applications in a state or territory Supreme Court for orders regarding the administration of charities, including the protection of assets held in trust for charitable purposes, regardless of a charity's structure.

5.5 Modern slavery and forced marriage

5.5.1 Modern slavery

The Criminal Code creates offences for slavery (s 270.3), servitude (s 270.5), forced labour (s 270.6A), debt bondage (s 270.7C) and related exploitation (div 270 and 271).²²⁹

Under s 270.6, a person experiences forced labour if, because of coercion, threat or deception, a reasonable person in their position would not consider themselves free to cease providing labour or to leave the place where they provide it.²³⁰ This applies whether or not escape is 'practically possible' or the person has attempted to leave.²³¹

²²⁹ *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) div 270 and 271.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, s 270.6(1).

²³¹ *Ibid.*, s 270.6(3).

Servitude offences under s 270.5 require, in addition, that the victim is significantly deprived of personal freedom beyond the labour relationship itself.²³² Section 270.11 provides explicitly that ‘victim consent or acquiescence’ is not a defence to any div 270 offence.²³³

The *Modern Slavery Act 2018* (Cth) separately requires large entities to report on modern slavery risks in their operations and supply chains but does not create criminal offences.²³⁴

Inquiry evidence raised concerns that while these frameworks are sufficiently broad to capture conduct occurring in coercive high-control groups, they have not been applied in practice in this context.

Exploitation framed as voluntary participation

Inquiry evidence described a consistent pattern in which labour in some coercive high-control groups is structured not as employment but as contribution to the group’s collective purpose. Members will perform unpaid or underpaid work (sometimes over extended periods) while becoming increasingly financially and practically dependent on the group.²³⁵

Our incomes were spent on budget’s created by [redacted] in [redacted], this often involved covering her own household expenses/utilities with followers money. Free labor (serving) was essential. I lost many precious and meaningful relationships with friends and family members after joining [redacted] group as we were told if there was any clash with activity outside the ashram and ashram activities it was due to a flaw in our consciousness and it was frowned on to not do all the daily activities.

Jane Simson, *Submission 154*, p. 1.

We spent thousands of hours being trained, but as children we were not capable of providing consent, we never received pay for the work, particularly the construction labour, that we did ... This was hours a week, every week, for 19 years and for no tangible outcome, except that the corporate benefited financially from my labour, and that of my families, and our congregation’s.

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 20.

²³² Ibid., s 270.4(1)(b).

²³³ Ibid., s 270.11.

²³⁴ *Modern Slavery Act 2018* (Cth) s 3.

²³⁵ See *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Labour and financial restrictions’ and ‘Legal and civic restrictions’.

Drawing on lived experience, Carli McConkey, drew attention to s 270.6 of the Criminal Code which defines forced labour, that a person need only, because of coercion, threat or deception, not consider themselves free to leave.²³⁶ Inquiry evidence suggested that the conditions of dependency, isolation and social consequence characteristic of coercive high-control groups may satisfy this test even in the absence of physical detention or an attempt to leave.²³⁷

Followers in some groups are known to perform low-paid or unpaid work for many years and are therefore reliant on the group for their basic needs, including accommodation. Followers' financial circumstances may leave them no choice but to live on cult properties.

Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 26–27.

Over a period of around 20 years, from 1991, the cult leader had hundreds of people pass through her “self development” programmes, scores of which became directly involved with her and her personal life. Although the cult disbanded from around 2013, she still has cult members to this day.

I became involved with the cult leader in May 1996 and escaped in January 2010, 13 and a half years later.

Over the course of those thirteen years, between my husband and myself we spent over \$70,000 in courses, handed over at least \$140,000 in cash directly deposited into the cult leader's personal bank account, and worked up to 22 hours per day, seven days a week – for no wages. We were sleep deprived, undernourished, and neglected our children at times, as we were made to constantly work and serve the needs of the cult leader.

Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, pp. 2–3.

This interpretation is supported by the structure of the law itself. The Explanatory Memorandum to the *Crimes Legislation Amendment (Slavery, Slavery-like Conditions and People Trafficking) Act 2013* (Cth), which introduced the current definition of coercion, recognised that exploitation ‘does not [always] involve abduction, violence or physical restraint’.²³⁸ It further noted that:

offenders often use subtle, non-physical means to obtain a victim's compliance, such as psychological oppression, the abuse of power or taking advantage of a person's vulnerability.²³⁹

²³⁶ *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) s 270.6. See: Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 19.

²³⁷ Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 26–27; Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 4; The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand, *Submission 185*, p. 3; Statement from Dr Janja Lalich, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 88; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 12.

²³⁸ Explanatory Memorandum, *Crimes Legislation Amendment (Slavery, Slavery-like Conditions and People Trafficking) Bill 2012* (Cth), p. 9.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

The 2013 reforms to div 270 sought to capture these dynamics, as previously it had proved ‘challenging to convince juries that the offender’s conduct constitutes the offence’.²⁴⁰

These same dynamics are reflected in Inquiry evidence. However, Inquiry evidence also indicated that, despite expanded definitions capturing physical and non-physical coercion, the application of modern slavery offences to coercive high-control group contexts remains challenging.²⁴¹

Inquiry evidence also highlighted s 270.11, which provides that consent is not a defence to modern slavery offences.²⁴² The Commonwealth Attorney-General’s 2023 *Targeted Review of Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)* found that the principle of the irrelevance of consent is not consistently understood or applied in the criminal justice process, and recommended that guidance be developed to support more consistent application.²⁴³ This gap in professional understanding is particularly significant in the context of coercive high-control groups, where an apparent willingness to participate may be taken to negate an offence, despite s 270.11 expressly providing otherwise.

The Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner (OAASC) noted that it is ‘unaware of any successful prosecutions in Australia relating to cases arising from coercive high-control groups’. The OAASC highlighted that a significant challenge in coercive high-control group cases is that ‘coercion is often psychological rather than physical’. While a person may subjectively experience intense pressure or obligation, the OAASC emphasised that ‘proving psychological coercion in an objective legal sense is difficult’.²⁴⁴

Protections for reporting and better understanding of victims: Victims often face unhelpful questions about why they did not leave exploitative environments, reflecting a misunderstanding of coercive dynamics, fear, and vulnerability. Victims, particularly migrants or visas holders, may fear repercussions for their families, with threats against loved ones functioning as a powerful deterrent to disclosure or cooperation with authorities. Many people report that they would not consider approaching the police or authorities until they were confident their family members were safe.

Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner (16 March 2026) p. 3.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴¹ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 67; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 20; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 45; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 41.

²⁴² Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 17. See also: Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 62; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 44.

²⁴³ Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department, *Targeted Review of Modern Slavery Offences in Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth): Findings report*, 2023, pp. 46–47.

²⁴⁴ *Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner (16 March 2026) p. 2.*

Alongside challenges in proving psychological coercion, the OAASC identified two additional challenges in distinguishing voluntary participation from forced labour in coercive high-control group contexts:

- Forced labour may arise where a person feels compelled to work because they fear consequences for refusing (under law, this is referred to as a ‘menace of penalty’).
- Distinguishing voluntary contributions from coercive financial expectations is difficult; concerns arise when non-compliance results in isolation, loss of status, or withdrawal of allowances.²⁴⁵

The OAASC noted that the use of funds and the consequences of non-participation are critical factors in assessing whether circumstances involving coercive high-control groups meet the legal definition of forced labour.²⁴⁶

The servitude threshold and the reasonable person test

Inquiry evidence identified a further legal difficulty specific to the servitude offence. Servitude requires that the victim be ‘significantly deprived’ of personal freedom beyond the labour relationship.²⁴⁷ The Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Targeted Review found that s 270.4 is:

undefined in both legislation and case law, and could be clarified through a non-exhaustive list of factors in legislation that might indicate significant deprivation. Additional guidance could assist criminal justice practitioners in distinguishing between servitude and forced labour.²⁴⁸

This ambiguity is particularly acute where the deprivation of freedom is produced not by physical confinement but by cumulative, systemic conditions, such as patterns of control, social dependency, and exit barriers that characterise coercive high-control groups.²⁴⁹

The Targeted Review also identified difficulties with the ‘reasonable person in the position of the victim’ test under div 270. The OAASC explained that when applying the reasonable person test, the question is whether a reasonable person ‘in the same position and relationship to the perpetrator, would have felt free to leave or refuse the work’.²⁵⁰ Stakeholders, including criminal justice professionals, reported concerns about the difficulty of applying this test in practice, particularly in ‘understanding the

²⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁴⁷ *Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)* s 270.4(1)(b).

²⁴⁸ Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department, *Targeted Review of Modern Slavery Offences in Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)*, p. 85.

²⁴⁹ See Part 2 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Emotional manipulation/grooming’, ‘Control and indoctrination’, ‘Emotional and psychological abuse’, ‘Fear-based control’, ‘Social control and isolation’, ‘Creating dependency’, ‘Restrictions on education and information’, ‘Labour and financial restrictions’, ‘Restrictions on relationships and social life’, ‘Housing and movement restrictions’, ‘Legal and civic restrictions’, ‘Exit barriers and post-exit harm’, and ‘Developmental and environmental control’.

²⁵⁰ *Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner* (16 March 2026) p. 2.

situational and personal vulnerabilities of victims and survivors'.²⁵¹ While Australia's definition of coercion is intended to capture subtle and nuanced forms of coercive conduct, including grooming, intimidation and controlling behaviour that diminishes autonomy, in practice, convictions have tended to involve more overt coercion.²⁵²

This is consistent with Inquiry evidence which showed that conduct amounting to overt criminal offences is more likely to be identified and acted upon. More subtle, coercive behaviours are less likely to be addressed, particularly where enforcement relies on investigators and prosecutors identifying, understanding and evidencing patterns of coercive behaviour.²⁵³

The Targeted Review also found that locating 'abuse of power' and 'taking advantage of a person's vulnerability' within the definition of coercion, rather than as standalone elements, limits their application. It recommended 'removing these terms from the definition of coercion, and establishing them as standalone means alongside coercion, threat and deception, would broaden the scope of the terms'.²⁵⁴

In the context of coercive high-control groups, where *abuse of power* and *taking advantage of vulnerability* must be subsumed within the ordinary meaning of *coercion*, there is a real risk that the more subtle and cumulative mechanisms of control in such groups will not meet the legal threshold—even though the legislative intent was to capture exactly this type of conduct. Inquiry evidence reflected this concern, with accounts consistently describing enforcement agencies declining to act on the basis that the arrangements appeared voluntary, without examining the conditions that had shaped that apparent voluntariness.²⁵⁵

The OAASC observed that the challenge of investigating or proving modern slavery offences is compounded by a broader pattern of investigative hesitancy. It noted that:

Low prosecution rates create hesitancy, deter investigations and slow case progression. These challenges are compounded by limited concrete evidence. As exploitation trends increasing rely on psychological control rather than physical restriction of movement and surveillance, cases are significantly harder to prove and typically require expert evidence.²⁵⁶

This reinforces the evidentiary difficulties already identified in the Targeted Review and is particularly acute in coercive high-control group settings, where cumulative mechanisms of control may not be readily visible to investigators without specialist knowledge of group dynamics.

²⁵¹ Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, *Targeted Review of Modern Slavery Offences in Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)*, p. 96.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁵³ See Part 3.

²⁵⁴ Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, *Targeted Review of Modern Slavery Offences in Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)*, p. 39.

²⁵⁵ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 68; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 16; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 20–22; Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8. See Part 3.

²⁵⁶ *Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner* (16 March 2026) p. 3.

Other workplace laws and regulators

The labour exploitation described in Inquiry evidence is not confined to Commonwealth modern slavery frameworks. Inquiry evidence raised concerns about the enforcement of workplace laws and regulatory oversight, pointing to a broader disconnect between the conduct occurring in coercive high-control groups and the legal protections that should apply.²⁵⁷

Under the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) has powers to investigate and enforce compliance with minimum employment conditions. Whether a person is an employee or a volunteer is determined by the substance of the arrangement rather than its label, with courts applying a multi-factor test focused on the real nature of the relationship.²⁵⁸

However, Inquiry evidence suggested that this statutory test has not been consistently applied to labour arrangements in coercive high-control groups.²⁵⁹ For example, Renee Spencer, who lodged a complaint in relation to her daughter, reported being advised by the FWO that the arrangement fell outside the Act and was not covered because it occurred in a context that was treated as voluntary. This was characterised as creating an effective two-tier system where ‘secular unpaid work must meet minimum standards or be recognised as employment’, while functionally identical arrangements in group settings (where ideologically framed) ‘can be entirely unregulated’.²⁶⁰

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (Vic) imposes a primary duty on any person conducting a business or undertaking to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the health and safety of workers.²⁶¹ Importantly, the definition of ‘health’ is defined to include psychological health, and these duties extend beyond employees to other persons, including volunteers.²⁶²

Inquiry evidence raised concerns that coercive high-control groups directing members to perform activities (undertake work) under conditions that would ordinarily attract regulatory scrutiny (including in relation to physical hazards, absence of training, and psychosocial risk), have not been subject to enforcement by WorkSafe Victoria.²⁶³

The concerns raised in Inquiry evidence about Fair Work and WorkSafe point to a pattern consistent with that identified in relation to the modern slavery framework: where labour exploitation is embedded in a group setting and participation appears

²⁵⁷ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 63; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 22.

²⁵⁸ *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) s 15AA. See also *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) s 682.

²⁵⁹ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 63; Patrick McIvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Renee Spencer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 22.

²⁶⁰ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 64.

²⁶¹ *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (Vic) s 21.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, s 5(1); 23(1).

²⁶³ Name withheld, *Submission 273*, p. 3; Elise Heerde, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*.

voluntary, enforcement agencies may treat the ideological framing of the arrangement as determinative. This can occur without examining whether the conditions of membership themselves undermine genuine voluntariness.²⁶⁴ The result is a pattern of non-enforcement that spans multiple regulatory failures and reflects a broader system gap, rather than a failure of any single framework in isolation.

5.5.2 Forced marriage

The forced marriage offence under s 270.7B of the Criminal Code applies where a person is caused to enter into a forced marriage.²⁶⁵ A marriage is considered a 'forced marriage' under s 270.7A where either party entered into it without freely and fully consenting because of coercion, threat or deception, or the victim was incapable of understanding the nature and effect of the ceremony.²⁶⁶ As with the div 270 labour offences, s 270.11 provides that consent or acquiescence is not a defence.²⁶⁷

Inquiry evidence described how, in some coercive high-control groups, marriage operates under conditions of group authority rather than individual choice,²⁶⁸ potentially meeting the legal threshold for a forced marriage. A joint submission from lived experience advocates characterised 'marriage as control' in some coercive high-control groups, noting that it can be used to 'entrench authority, regulate intimacy, and restrict exit'.²⁶⁹ In these circumstances, it was reported that 'spouses are expected to prioritise group loyalty, reinforcing surveillance and compliance within the home'.²⁷⁰ The submission further noted that 'narratives of family values and free will can obscure coercive dynamics that may meet legal thresholds for forced marriage, family violence, or modern slavery'.²⁷¹

Laura McConnell, a lived experience advocate, drawing on work with survivors, identified 'endogamy and coerced marriage' as among the harms experienced by individuals who sought help after leaving a coercive high-control group, particularly affecting women, LGBTIQ+ people and young people.²⁷²

²⁶⁴ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 42–43; Statement from Dr Janja Lalich, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 88; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 62; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 16; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 20.

²⁶⁵ *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) s 270.7B.

²⁶⁶ Or where either party is under 16 years of age. *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) s 270.7A(1).

²⁶⁷ *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) s 270.11.

²⁶⁸ Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 69; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 3; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Jeremy Stein, *Submission 85*, p. 5; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 7.

²⁶⁹ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 28.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2. See also: Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 69.

Inquiry evidence also raised concerns about the role of coercive high-control group leaders in directing or controlling marriage decisions of members. Some Inquiry evidence argued that leaders should not hold authority to approve or prevent marriages,²⁷³ noting that ‘control over deeply personal decisions is both unethical and dangerous’.²⁷⁴

The central legal difficulty identified in Inquiry evidence in relation to forced marriage concerns how to assess free and full consent in circumstances where a marriage has occurred in a group that exercises pervasive control over members’ social environment, relationships and life choices.²⁷⁵ The issue is not that all such marriages are necessarily forced in a narrow sense, but that the conditions of coercive high-control group membership, may severely constrain autonomy and foreclose meaningful alternatives.²⁷⁶ Further, the threat of significant consequences for non-compliance may undermine genuine consent in ways that do not appear to have been recognised or captured in the practical application of existing frameworks.²⁷⁷

In the context of Inquiry evidence received about the behaviours of coercive high-control groups (such as social exclusion, loss of community or other punishments),²⁷⁸ questions arise as to whether the threat of consequences for refusing a forced/directed marriage should be recognised as the relevant coercive mechanism engaging the forced marriage offences under s 270.7A.

The OAASC observed that prosecution is often not a desirable outcome for victims of forced marriage, with ‘fear, familial ties, and complex loyalties’ contributing significantly to under-reporting. This emotional complexity is further compounded where victims recognise that their family members may themselves have been coerced. The OAASC recommended a ‘civil protection framework ... particularly for young people at risk of forced marriage’. It noted that ‘Australia has been exploring a national forced marriage protection order scheme’.²⁷⁹

²⁷³ Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 276*, p. 9.

²⁷⁴ Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 10.

²⁷⁵ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, pp. 25, 28; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 19; Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 17.

²⁷⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 3; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 12; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 3.

²⁷⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 3; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 71.

²⁷⁸ See Part 2 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Behaviours’ and ‘Behaviours directed and children and young people’.

²⁷⁹ *Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner* (16 March 2026) p. 5. See: Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department, *Enhancing Civil Protections and Remedies for Forced Marriage: Consultation paper*, 2024, pp. 14–15, 23.

5.5.3 Barriers to application in the coercive high-control group context

Inquiry evidence indicated that forced marriage and slavery-like conduct occurring within coercive high-control groups may fall within offences under div 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code. However, Inquiry evidence also identified a consistent set of barriers that limit the practical application of these provisions in this context. Many of these factors also contribute to the broader under-utilisation of criminal law responses to coercive high-control groups, including:

- **Group framing of exploitation is treated as determinative:** apparent voluntariness or consent is often accepted at face value, without examining whether the conditions of group membership undermined its genuineness.²⁸⁰
- **Failure to recognise cumulative and non-physical coercion:** investigative thresholds have tended to require overt, singular coercive acts rather than recognising the cumulative and patterned forms of control that characterise coercive high-control groups.²⁸¹
- **Existing legal categories do not adequately capture group-based coercion:** prosecutors who seek to apply trafficking or slavery categories to coercive high-control group contexts must work against the design assumptions of those categories which were built around transactional or interpersonal coercion, rather than the unique systemic dynamics of coercive high-control groups.²⁸²
- **Barriers to victims and affected persons reporting:** reporting frameworks presuppose that a victim or affected party is able to initiate or support a complaint.²⁸³
- **Lack of specialist investigative capability or guidance:** in the absence of dedicated expertise, investigators are unlikely to identify when conduct in a coercive high-control group meets the div 270 and 271 thresholds. Complaints are therefore likely to be assessed using frameworks designed for different contexts.²⁸⁴

The Modern Slavery Act reporting framework may not readily extend to coercive high-control group settings. The Act requires large entities to report on modern slavery risks in their supply chains and has been applied almost exclusively to commercial and corporate contexts.²⁸⁵ Inquiry evidence raised concerns that labour exploitation in coercive high-control groups, including exploitation of children,²⁸⁶ may fall outside

²⁸⁰ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 44; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 67; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 20. See Parts 3 and 4.

²⁸¹ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 67. See Parts 2 to 4.

²⁸² Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 14; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 45. See Parts 3 and 4.

²⁸³ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 21. See Parts 3 and 4.

²⁸⁴ See Section 5.1 and Part 3 and 4.

²⁸⁵ *Modern Slavery Act 2018* (Cth) s 3.

²⁸⁶ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 66–68; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 12–25; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 5; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 33.

the scope of the Act as applied, with no clear mechanism by which group-based exploitation can be identified or addressed. In particular, the framework contains no third-party reporting pathway that would allow family members or former members to raise concerns about exploitation occurring within a coercive high-control group.²⁸⁷

The OAASC identified additional structural barriers compounding the under-utilisation of criminal law responses to coercive high-control groups:

- Individuals who do come forward face challenges in ‘gathering evidence and meeting legal thresholds, especially where abuse occurs behind closed doors and relies on control rather than physical force’.
- Many individuals do not prioritise prosecution, instead they want ‘to be listened to and believed, to receive support and validation, and to know that the harm they experienced will not happen to others’.
- Access to ‘long-term federal support is dependent on [Australian Federal Police] referral’, meaning individuals who are unwilling or unable to engage with law enforcement cannot access the Support for Trafficked People Program beyond 90 days.²⁸⁸

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee is highly concerned by Inquiry evidence indicating that people involved in coercive high-control groups may be subject to conduct capable of constituting modern slavery or forced marriage. However, the relevant legal frameworks—div 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code—fall within the Commonwealth’s jurisdiction. The Committee’s focus is therefore on whether these laws are being applied as intended and, where they are not, how this gap can be addressed.

The Committee is satisfied that the legal definitions are not the primary barrier. The forced labour offence under s 270.6 expressly does not require physical detention or a failed attempt to leave. Section 270.11 is unambiguous that consent or acquiescence is not a defence. The forced marriage offence does not require physical compulsion. Taken together, these provisions were designed to reach precisely the kinds of subtle, cumulative coercion evident in coercive high-control groups.

However, across multiple enforcement contexts a consistent pattern emerges. Where labour or marriage arrangements occur in a coercive high-control group context and appear voluntary, the ideological framing of those arrangements is often treated as determinative. Insufficient attention is given to whether the conditions of group membership themselves undermine genuine consent or voluntariness.

The Committee considers that this is not simply a problem of investigative resources or individual decision-making. The Commonwealth Attorney-General’s 2023 Targeted Review identified systemic gaps in the understanding and application of consent provisions across

²⁸⁷ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 12; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 105.

²⁸⁸ *Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner* (16 March 2026) pp. 2, 5.

the criminal justice process, as well as deficiencies in how the definitions of coercion are constructed. These are known problems that have not yet been addressed. The Committee acknowledges that, at the time of writing, the Australian Government has considered the findings of the Targeted Review and ‘agreed to develop potential legislative reforms to address the findings’, including undertaking ‘targeted consultations on proposed reforms in due course’.²⁸⁹

FINDING 88: The conditions of labour exploitation, financial dependency and social control characteristics of coercive high-control groups are capable of satisfying the definitions of forced labour and servitude under s 270.5 and 270.6 of the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth). The ideological framing of such labour as voluntary does not preclude these offences, and s 270.11 expressly provides that consent or acquiescence is not a defence.

FINDING 89: Marriage in some coercive high-control groups occurs under conditions that appear capable of engaging the forced marriage offence under s 270.7B of the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth). Inquiry evidence identified no instances in which this offence has been applied in this context.

RECOMMENDATION 35: The Victorian Government proactively engage with the Australian Government in any consultative processes arising from the *Targeted Review of Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) (2023). In doing so, the Victorian Government should draw on the evidence before this Inquiry to demonstrate how current Commonwealth frameworks appear to:

- have failed to capture labour exploitation, forced marriage, and other harmful conduct occurring within coercive high-control groups
- lack sufficient mechanisms to identify and respond to risks arising from coercive high-control groups, including because of the absence of accessible third-party reporting pathways
- require strengthening to ensure coercive high-control groups are clearly answerable under the law for relevant harmful conduct, supported by enhanced enforcement mechanisms and more effective investigative processes.

²⁸⁹ Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, *Targeted Review of Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth), 2024, <<https://consultations.ag.gov.au/crime/modern-slavery-offences>> accessed 4 May 2026.

5.6 National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse

The Inquiry received substantial evidence about the experiences of survivors of coercive high-control groups seeking redress for harm they suffered, particularly child sexual abuse.²⁹⁰

Inquiry evidence described the National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse (the Scheme) as an important development following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.²⁹¹ However, the evidence before the Committee indicated that the Scheme, as currently designed and administered, presents particular and compounding barriers for survivors of coercive high-control groups.²⁹² These barriers go beyond those experienced by survivors of abuse within more mainstream institutional settings.²⁹³

5.6.1 Barriers to accessing the Scheme

Knowmore Legal Service described ‘closed institutions’ as presenting some of the most challenging circumstances it encounters when assisting survivors to access redress.²⁹⁴ It identified two specific recurring legal barriers for this cohort:

- If a client mentions the word ‘cult’ or describes a cultic experience, they are often not believed.
- If a client describes how involved the group was in family life and how this contributed to the harm, abuse that occurred within the family is often considered ineligible under the National Redress Scheme because it does not fit the definition for ‘institutional abuse’.²⁹⁵

As Knowmore explained, eligibility for redress typically requires that the abuse occurred on premises associated with the group, or that the perpetrator held a formal role within it. Where group structures are informal or operate primarily through interpersonal networks rather than formal institutional arrangements, this threshold may not be met.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁰ Larissa Kaput, *Supplementary submission 278a*, p. 3; Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 4; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 5. See Part 2, Part 4 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing ‘Sexual abuse and violence’ and ‘Child abuse’.

²⁹¹ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 44.

²⁹² *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026); The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 44; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 8; Arieth Bullmann, *Submission 138*, p. 2; Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 7; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 5.

²⁹³ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 2; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 5.

²⁹⁴ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 1.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.* See also: The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 44; Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 5.

Knowmore also noted that most survivors from this cohort do not expect to be eligible for the Scheme at all. As a result, only a small proportion come forward, even where the harm experienced is significant.²⁹⁷

A further barrier identified in Inquiry evidence is the deliberate avoidance of formal legal structures by some groups. For example, Laura McConnell described years of attempting to progress a redress application without success. Laura McConnell noted that the group's refusal to register any entity is not accidental but a deliberate strategy enabling it to avoid legal accountability:

there is no way to pursue them for redress. It makes taking legal action, either criminal or civil, against leaders of the group very difficult as there are no formal leadership, employee or volunteer records. All funds are seemingly hidden in family trusts and family businesses, which the workers are not listed as directors or trustees of.²⁹⁸

This dynamic, where group assets exist but are deliberately structured to be beyond the reach of any accountability or compensation mechanism, was also identified in other Inquiry evidence.²⁹⁹

5.6.2 Scope limitations

Inquiry evidence raised concerns that, even where survivors can establish eligibility, the Scheme's scope (which is limited to institutional child sexual abuse) does not address the full range of harms experienced by children raised in coercive high-control environments.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network described patterns of harm including severe neglect, forced labour, educational deprivation, and profound psychological and emotional abuse, in which sexual abuse was not always the primary or only harm.³⁰⁰ An individual submission made a similar point, describing abuse inflicted within an organised group operating under centralised leadership and a shared belief system. However, because the group had no legal entity and had since dissolved, the submitter and their siblings were excluded from all existing Australian government compensation schemes for institutional abuse survivors.³⁰¹

A recurring issue identified in Inquiry evidence was the inability of groups to join the Scheme, or their deliberate avoidance of doing so. Bev Cox and Laura McConnell described a group that had been invited to join the Scheme following the Royal Commission but was unable to do so because it held no registered legal entity and declined to establish one. This left survivors with 'no accountability or transparency'

²⁹⁷ Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service (2 March 2026) p. 1.

²⁹⁸ Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 3.

²⁹⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 5; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 10. See Part 4.

³⁰⁰ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 45.

³⁰¹ Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 8.

and with ‘no redress for five years and counting’.³⁰² Laura McConnell expanded on this at a public hearing, explaining that:

I have personally spent the better part of the last decade submitting to the royal commission, encouraging others to submit, naming the group and trying to access redress. This has resulted in no outcome for Two by Twos survivors and has been an extremely distressing experience. None of our claims has been able to progress through that scheme to date.³⁰³

Sexual Assault Services Victoria recommended that access to the Scheme not be limited to survivors from ‘reputable’ institutions:

The Victorian Government should act as a ‘funder of last resort’ to allow survivors of child sexual abuse perpetrated in cults and organised fringe groups to access the National Redress Scheme when the responsible organisation is unable to pay redress or no longer exists.³⁰⁴

In this context, Sexual Assault Service Victoria also noted that the New South Wales Government already performs the ‘funder of last resort’ role for certain survivor cohorts.³⁰⁵

Knowmore identified difficulty securing government agreement to act as ‘funder of last resort’ for ‘closed institutions’ as a recurring barrier in assisting survivors to access the Scheme.³⁰⁶

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network highlighted that ‘inconsistent application of these “funder of last resort” mechanisms’ across Australian jurisdictions ‘creates inequity’.³⁰⁷ Research has similarly identified inconsistency between Australian governments in agreeing to act as funders of last resort under the National Redress Scheme.³⁰⁸ As funder of last resort coverage requires each jurisdiction to separately agree to be listed, survivors of abuse in institutions that fall outside any jurisdiction’s agreed coverage may be left without access to redress.³⁰⁹

³⁰² Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 16.

³⁰³ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

³⁰⁴ Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic), *Submission 209*, p. 7.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 1.

³⁰⁷ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 44.

³⁰⁸ Knowmore Legal Service, *Cult survivors deserve government support*, media release, <<https://knowmore.org.au/media-release-cult-survivors-deserve-government-support>> 19 February 2024; Claudia Long, ‘State and federal ministers fail to reach deal over compensation for sporting groups abuse victims’, *ABC News*, 5 December 2024, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-05/redress-scheme-sport-federal-government-state/104685782>> accessed 21 May 2026.

³⁰⁹ Australian Government, *Guides to Social Policy Law: National Redress Guide: 1.1.F.20 Funder of last resort*, 2026, <<https://guides.dss.gov.au/national-redress-guide/1/1/f/20>> accessed 11 May 2026.

5.6.3 Other redress avenues

Knowmore indicated that where the Scheme is not available or a person is ineligible, individuals may seek redress through alternative avenues, including the Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme. However, Knowmore noted that these alternatives are 'less fulsome'. It acknowledged that for people harmed by coercive high-control groups 'civil remedies may not be a suitable option for everyone. Sometimes there is nothing the justice system can offer'.³¹⁰ The Inquiry received limited evidence on alternative redress avenues.

Inquiry evidence identified a range of barriers that compound the difficulty individuals face when attempting to pursue any form of justice, including redress. These barriers were consistent with the broader challenges faced by the criminal justice system and support services in identifying and responding to harms by coercive high-control groups.³¹¹

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee acknowledges the National Redress Scheme as an important mechanism for recognising and responding to institutional child sexual abuse. However, Inquiry evidence indicates that the Scheme, as currently designed, does not adequately serve survivors of child sexual abuse in coercive high-control groups. The barriers are structural and cumulative: survivors may be disbelieved, assessed as ineligible, or left without any recourse at all because the group responsible has no legal entity and declines to establish one.

The Committee is particularly concerned by Inquiry evidence that some groups deliberately structure their affairs, including financial arrangements and refusing to register legal entities, to avoid accountability, including under the Scheme. In such circumstances, the 'funder of last resort' mechanism may represent the only viable pathway to redress.

The Committee notes that not all state governments have made the same commitment in this regard. This inconsistency means a survivor's access to redress may depend on where they happen to live rather than the nature or severity of the harm they experienced. That outcome is inequitable and in need of reform.

The Committee also notes Inquiry evidence that the Scheme's limitation to institutional child sexual abuse leaves a wide range of serious harms unaddressed—including severe neglect, forced labour, educational deprivation, and psychological abuse—experienced by children raised in coercive high-control environments. While reform of the Scheme itself is a matter for the Commonwealth, the Victorian Government is not without options. It can take steps to ensure that survivors in Victoria are not disadvantaged relative to those in other jurisdictions, and it can advocate through appropriate intergovernmental mechanisms for the Scheme's scope and eligibility criteria to be considered as part of any future review.

³¹⁰ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 3.

³¹¹ These barriers include the absence of formal registration and legal entity structures in some groups, which prevents both civil and criminal proceedings regardless of the strength of the underlying claim; the inapplicability of existing legal thresholds to cumulative, non-physical harm; and the absence of records connecting perpetrators to a community at a relevant time. See Sections 5.1, 5.4 and 5.5.

FINDING 90: The National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse does not adequately serve survivors of coercive high-control groups.

RECOMMENDATION 36: The Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government for a national approach that includes all jurisdictions for a ‘funder of last resort’ mechanism under the National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse for survivors of institutional child sexual abuse perpetrated by coercive high-control groups.

5.7 Civil remedy options (non-financial)

As noted in Part 3, the criminal law has significant limitations as a primary mechanism for addressing the harms experienced in coercive high-control groups. Inquiry evidence proposed that a combined criminal and civil approach may provide a more proportionate and accessible pathway to protection and accountability.

In relation to civil remedy options, Inquiry evidence identified several areas that could better support people from coercive high-control groups, including:

- civil protective orders analogous to family violence intervention orders (see Part 3, Section 3.6.3)
- civil penalties or enforceable undertakings applicable to registered organisations engaged in coercive practices
- expanded access to legal aid for civil claims arising from coercive conduct.

5.7.1 Civil penalties and enforceable undertakings for registered organisations

Where coercive high-control groups operate as registered entities, Inquiry evidence identified an absence of proportionate civil regulatory tools capable of intervening before criminal thresholds are met.³¹²

Inquiry evidence proposed that mechanisms such as civil penalties, enforceable undertakings, and compliance notices be made available for coercive practices by registered organisations. These tools could be calibrated according to the breadth, duration, and seriousness of the conduct involved,³¹³ providing earlier and more flexible avenues for intervention.

³¹² Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 53; Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), *Submission 41*, p. 3; Sue Woodward, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

³¹³ Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 53; Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 10; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, pp. 33–34.

5.7.2 Legal aid

It is very difficult for people coming out of cults to have any kind of legal support for abuses they suffered in the group, because these groups have deep pockets and they can just play the game until a person goes broke and gives up.

Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

Access to legal representation was identified as a significant barrier for some individuals seeking civil remedies. Inquiry evidence highlighted that legal processes—including intervention orders, defamation proceedings, custody disputes, and civil court and tribunal matters—may themselves be used by coercive high-control groups as tactics to silence dissent, discredit individuals and entrench control.³¹⁴

Knowmore Legal Service described the legal system as not being set up to support people from ‘closed institutions’ to seek justice. It noted that clients frequently come forward aware that legal options are limited and that the system is complex.³¹⁵ The combination of limited financial means, the need for specialist legal expertise, and the strategic use of legal processes against former members, creates a practical barrier to accessing civil remedies that may otherwise exist in principle.³¹⁶

As evidenced in Part 2 and *Volume 2*, the weakened financial position of most people at exit is itself a product of the coercive high-control group environment. For some, the costs of being in the group (i.e., large financial contributions, unpaid labour, and forgoing income over extended periods) can be substantial.³¹⁷ People typically leave without the means to self-fund legal action. Elise Heerde from The Religious Trauma Collective observed that services should be available to survivors at little to no financial cost ‘because most likely they will not have the finances to self-finance their recovery’.³¹⁸

One submitter described the use of ‘relentless court hearings’ as a continuation of coercion, stating:

I was manipulated into giving up thousands of dollars in the property settlement just to “keep the peace.” I relinquished my right to child support. At one point, I was facing homelessness. My children were withheld from me so that my ex could claim full Centrelink and child support benefits. I spent more than \$70,000 on legal fees and was unable to work for months as the abuse intensified—fuelled by relentless court hearings and ongoing coercive control. I endured approximately 40 court hearings in total.³¹⁹

³¹⁴ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 32; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, pp. 44–45; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 32; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 32.

³¹⁵ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service* (2 March 2026) p. 2.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 37; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 26–27; Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 2.

³¹⁸ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

³¹⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 131a*, p. 5.

Community legal centres and advocacy services were also reported as bearing significant costs in supporting people through legal proceedings.³²⁰

Inquiry evidence suggested that increasing legal aid and support for people from coercive high-control groups was an important area of reform.³²¹ Some Inquiry evidence proposed increasing legal support funding, including extending legal aid eligibility to cover matters relating to coercive high-control groups.³²² It was also suggested that specialist panels within legal aid commissions be established with expertise in coercive control, human rights, family violence and digital-rights litigation.³²³

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee heard that access to civil legal remedies is, in practice, unavailable to many people who leave coercive high-control groups. This reflects a convergence of disadvantages that are themselves a product of the coercive environment. People commonly leave with depleted financial resources and without savings, stable employment or secure housing.

Inquiry evidence demonstrates that legal processes are among the tools that may be used by coercive high-control groups to maintain control after exit. Prolonged and costly proceedings can exhaust financial resources, deter disclosures, and perpetuate coercive dynamics through formal legal channels. The Committee notes Inquiry evidence observed that the legal system does not appear to be structured to support people from coercive high-control groups to seek justice, and that where community legal centres become involved they absorb significant costs in providing assistance in complex and specialist matters.

The Committee considers that these barriers operate together to deny effective access to remedies. Current legal aid eligibility and service structures were not designed with this cohort in mind, and the evidence points to a gap requiring attention.

FINDING 91: People who have experienced harm in coercive high-control groups face significant practical barriers to accessing civil legal remedies. Current legal aid eligibility and service structures do not adequately address the specialist needs of this cohort.

³²⁰ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 37; Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 62.

³²¹ Tore Klevjer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23; David Hyland, *Submission 150*, p. 5; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, pp. 32, 38; Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 4; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 116–117; Name withheld, *Submission 131a*, p. 5; Serge Del Mar, *Submission 235*, p. 11.

³²² Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 8; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 116–117.

³²³ Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, pp. 116–117.

5.8 Whistleblower protections

Inquiry evidence showed that many people who come forward with information about harm in coercive high-control groups are often motivated not only to give account of their own experiences, but to protect those who remain under the group's control or may face similar harm in the future.³²⁴ Inquiry stakeholders described their decision to come forward—to this Inquiry and to support services—as a deliberate act of disclosure aimed at protecting others, and identified themselves, in that sense, as whistleblowers.³²⁵ At the same time, Inquiry evidence also indicated that many people in this position did not feel safe making disclosures to protection agencies or services. Barriers included fear of not being believed, fear of retaliation or reprisal, and a lack of confidence that agencies or services would understand the nature of the harm experienced.³²⁶

People who come forward with information about harm in coercive high-control groups occupy a position that does not align neatly with conventional whistleblower frameworks. In most contexts, a whistleblower is a person with an employment relationship to an organisation who reports misconduct within an organisation through recognised internal or regulatory channels.³²⁷

However, as demonstrated through the significant engagement with this Inquiry, many people harmed by coercive high-control groups seek to disclose harm outside internal channels, which are typically controlled by the group itself. They are rarely employees using formal organisational processes, rather, they are former members, survivors or other affected individuals raising concerns externally to authorities, media or other survivors.³²⁸ Inquiry evidence showed that the barriers to disclosure and the forms of retaliation in these contexts, can differ from those addressed by conventional whistleblower laws. Understanding these differences is essential to assessing what protections may be needed.

5.8.1 Challenges in speaking out

Inquiry evidence described a number of challenges facing those who seek to come forward and disclose harm associated with coercive high-control groups, including:

- **Loss of relationships and community:** leaving a coercive high-control group can result in the immediate loss of family, friendships and community connections. The

³²⁴ *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service (2 March 2026)* p. 2.

³²⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 193*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 19; Karen Alsop, *Submission 60*, p. 21; Roselyn Owen, *Submission 94*, p. 11; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 45.

³²⁶ The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 44; Name withheld, *Submission 193*, p. 5; Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 17; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*; Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 7.

³²⁷ *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012 (Vic)*; *Corporations Act 2001 (Cth)*.

³²⁸ Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, pp. 14–15; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 3; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; *Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service (2 March 2026)* p. 2; Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Understanding support service demand: Responses from four support organisations*.

prospect of this outcome deters many people from exiting and further discourages others from speaking publicly.³²⁹

- **Legal action:** organisations with significant resources may initiate defamation proceedings, regardless of merit, to impose substantial legal and financial burdens on individuals. Fear of legal action was identified as a primary deterrent to affected people not lodging complaints.³³⁰
- **Non-disclosure agreements:** often characterised as mechanisms used to protect organisations and limit exposure, rather than as standard legal safeguards.³³¹
- **Absence of internal reporting pathways:** attempting to raise concerns within a coercive high-control group often results in the person being treated as the source of the problem, leading to demonisation and isolation, while those responsible for harmful behaviour face no consequences.³³²
- **Financial and personal cost:** speaking out about harm can involve significant financial cost as well as personal risks including surveillance, harassment, and lasting impacts on security and wellbeing.³³³

5.8.2 Applicability of current complaint pathways and whistleblower protections

Victoria's primary whistleblower protection framework, managed under the *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012* (Vic), is directed at disclosures of misconduct by public sector bodies and officers. It does not apply to private organisations, religious bodies or community groups.³³⁴

At the Commonwealth level, the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth) provides some protections for disclosures of misconduct by incorporated entities.³³⁵

Inquiry evidence suggested that many coercive high-control groups are unincorporated, and that incorporated associations whose activities are primarily religious or community-based may not meet the definition of a trading or financial corporation required to access whistleblower protections.³³⁶ Even where the legislation technically applies, the Corporations Act framework is oriented toward financial and corporate misconduct and administered by the Australian Securities and Investments

³²⁹ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1; Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2. See Part 2, Part 4 and Volume 2 for lived experience accounts describing 'Social control and isolation' and 'Exit barriers and post-exit harm'.

³³⁰ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 22; Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 44; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 25; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 17. See Section 5.7.2.

³³¹ Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 13; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 38; Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 51; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 76.

³³² Roselyn Owen, *Submission 94*, p. 4. See Part 4 and Volume 2 for lived experience accounts describing 'Legal and civic restrictions' and 'Sexual abuse and violence'.

³³³ Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 55; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*.

³³⁴ *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012* (Vic).

³³⁵ *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth).

³³⁶ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 11; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 36.

Commission, which does not have a specific mandate or capability in relation to coercive high-control environments.³³⁷

The result is that people seeking to report harm associated with coercive high-control groups face a lack of clear, consistent and trusted complaint pathways, with existing options often not perceived as safe or equipped to handle their disclosures. They must navigate multiple disconnected agencies, with no single body responsible for receiving and responding to disclosures of this kind.³³⁸

Dr Lani Roy, a psychologist and social worker with lived experience, highlighted an Australian Institute of Criminology-funded study on the victimisation of whistleblowers, indicating that ‘whistleblowers face significant retaliation from organisations, especially those holding less power within organisations’.³³⁹ The study found:

None of those interviewed, be they whistleblowers or those who dealt with them, indicated that the protections offered by whistleblower legislation were effective in preventing and deterring acts of retaliation and reprisal.³⁴⁰

Inquiry evidence proposed a range of reforms to address these gaps, including:

- extending whistleblower protections to cover disclosures about coercive high-control groups³⁴¹
- introducing anti-Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation legislation to prevent defamation proceedings being used to silence good-faith disclosures³⁴²
- creating a limited qualified exemption from defamation liability for complaints lodged through official channels³⁴³
- establishing a centralised, publicly accessible complaints mechanism through which individuals could report (including anonymously) and be directed to the appropriate agency without needing prior knowledge of the regulatory landscape.³⁴⁴

³³⁷ *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth).

³³⁸ See Section 5.1.

³³⁹ Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 32.

³⁴⁰ Inez Dussuyer, Russell G Smith, Anona Armstrong and Kumi Heenetigala, *Understanding and responding to victimisation of whistleblowers*, report for Criminology Research Advisory Council, Criminology Research Grants, 2018, p. 8. The study drew on semi-structured interviews with whistleblowers and individuals responsible for receiving or managing disclosures, and focused on understanding experiences of retaliation.

³⁴¹ Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 32; Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 8; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalic, *Submission 40*, pp. 53–54.

³⁴² Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 34; Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 32. The Human Rights Law Centre describes Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation as ‘strategic litigation against public participation, are legal actions initiated by (or threatened to be initiated by) powerful entities – including individuals, corporations, and governments – aimed at silencing dissent, stifling community activism, and intimidating those who speak out in the public interest’ (See: Human Rights Law Centre, *Stop the SLAPP: Protecting Free Speech in Australia*, 2024, p. 6.).

³⁴³ Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 22.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26. See Sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

The Committee acknowledges the significant barriers faced by people seeking to disclose harm associated with coercive high-control groups, and the absence of clear, trusted and fit-for-purpose reporting pathways capable of supporting and protecting them when they do. Inquiry evidence demonstrates that these barriers are not incidental, but in many cases, are deliberately engineered consequences of the same control dynamics that define coercive high-control group environments.

Throughout Part 5, the Committee has identified broader improvements to Victoria's service systems and investigative response. In particular, the Committee's recommendations relating to shared indicators and risk frameworks, are intended to improve recognition of coercive high-control group harm across agencies. These measures are expected to improve the capacity of professionals and institutions to receive, recognise, and respond to disclosures of harm.

The Committee considers that a more capable and coordinated system-wide response would itself help reduce some of the barriers to disclosure identified in this Section, by providing clearer pathways and better-equipped responders for people who come forward.

5

FINDING 92: Existing whistleblower protection frameworks are primarily designed for employees reporting through internal organisational processes, not disclosures of harm associated with coercive high-control groups that are typically made externally to authorities, media or other affected individuals, without protection against retaliation. Strengthening Victoria's broader service system response would improve support for individuals making disclosures and help reduce some of the barriers to safe reporting.

5.9 Future readiness: Preparing for emerging risks

The preceding sections of this Report have examined the harms caused by coercive high-control groups and the current capacity of Victoria's laws, institutions, and services to identify and respond to those harms.

This Section looks forward. An effective response to coercive high-control groups cannot be treated as a fixed, one-time undertaking. It requires ongoing attention to emerging digital risks, the development of a stronger evidence base, and sustained public awareness that keeps pace with a changing landscape.

5.9.1 Technology and online environments

The use of technology by coercive high-control groups to recruit, control members and conceal their activities is addressed in other parts of this Report.³⁴⁵ However, the digital environment is not static. The risks it presents are increasing and evolving in ways that require active and ongoing attention.

³⁴⁵ See Part 2 and *Volume 2* for lived experience accounts describing 'Online and digital' and 'Surveillance and monitoring'.

Raphael Aron from Cult Consulting Australia, observed that the internet is ‘a two-edged sword’. It can be useful for those researching a group they suspect may be harmful, but also a tool that draws people toward harmful groups through ‘literally thousands of sites’.³⁴⁶

RMIT’s Digital Ethnography Research Centre identified a substantial increase in ‘fringe group and cultish activity online’. It described digital settings as ‘increasingly the “starting point” of fringe group and extremist behaviour in the 2020s’.³⁴⁷ The Centre noted that groups formed in this way ‘can be harmful to other digital users, and that even those which are relatively harmless are themselves at risk of predatory recruitment by more extreme groups’.³⁴⁸

Many coercive high-control groups have adapted to the digital environment in ways that make them harder to identify and respond to (i.e., reducing formal hierarchies, avoiding the terminology most likely to attract platform moderation, and developing in-group language that communicates harmful norms while evading detection).³⁴⁹ In this context, the problem does not simply persist; it actively adapts in response to attempts to address it. The Centre also observed that efforts to shut down online activity of groups have generally proven ineffective as a standalone measure, with groups tending to ‘re-form quickly in another setting or under an alternative name’.³⁵⁰ For example, a group banned on Facebook may reconstitute itself on Telegram under a slightly different name, and later establish a presence on a private website or encrypted messaging service, each time retaining its membership and ideology while evading detection.

Inquiry evidence identified limitations of existing arrangements for regulating online safety and digital platforms. While Australia has developed a broadly robust online safety framework, it is not always able to prevent the formation of, or exposure to, online coercive high-control groups.³⁵¹ Nor does it ‘provide the necessary care infrastructures, education and training to help people who have been exposed or harmed by such groups’.³⁵²

For school-aged children, the Department of Education identified a ‘range of resources to support schools to help ensure students have the skills and knowledge to be safe online and guidance on where to go for support if needed’.³⁵³ However, the information provided to the Inquiry did not indicate that the content of these resources directly addresses the risk indicators and dangers of coercive high-control groups.³⁵⁴

³⁴⁶ Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

³⁴⁷ RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, *Submission 241*, p. 1.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ Department of Education, response to written questions on notice, p. 13.

³⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

Emerging technologies present additional risks that are not yet fully understood. Inquiry evidence noted that developments such as AI-generated imagery and deepfake videos increase the potential for sophisticated deceptive content,³⁵⁵ while remote individual profiling techniques enable more targeted approaches to influence and recruitment.³⁵⁶

5.9.2 Strengthening evaluation and research

Inquiry evidence highlighted that the current body of research on coercion and high-control groups is limited. There is a lack of studies focused on the Australian context³⁵⁷ and the topic remains ‘under-recognised and under-researched’.³⁵⁸ While there is an established body of work on coercion with a family violence lens,³⁵⁹ and a broader range of academic work of coercive high-control groups,³⁶⁰ the lack of shared language, understanding and consistent conceptual frameworks limits the practical utility of this research.³⁶¹ Inquiry evidence also identified a need for more published data related to coercive high-control groups to inform ‘potential solutions to this problem’.³⁶² The need for more data is also discussed in Section 5.1.4.

As outlined in Part 1, understanding the dynamics of coercive high-control groups is necessary for an effective response for Victorians. To strengthen the relevant evidence base and improve policy development, Inquiry evidence suggested the Victorian Government fund new studies and research projects into coercive high-control groups.³⁶³

³⁵⁵ RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, *Submission 241*, p. 1.

³⁵⁶ Steven Alan Hassan, *The BITE Model of Authoritarian Control: Undue Influence, Thought Reform, Brainwashing, Mind Control, Trafficking and the Law*, p. 113.

³⁵⁷ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 118; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 7.

³⁵⁸ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 48.

³⁵⁹ See for example: Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Coercive Control Literature Review*, 2023, <<https://aifs.gov.au/all-research/research-reports/coercive-control-literature-review>> accessed 21 May 2026; Victorian Government, *Research agenda and program*, 2023, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/research-agenda-and-program>> accessed 21 May 2026.

³⁶⁰ See for example: Erin Martine Sessions and Bernard Doherty, “‘Cults,’ coercion, and control: Rhetoric, reality, and the return of “brainwashing”?”, *Implicit Religion*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2023; Massimo Introvigne, *Brainwashing: Reality or Myth?*, Cambridge University Press, 2022; Catherine Wessinger, “Cults’ in America: Discourse and Outcomes”, in Stephen J. Stein (ed.), *Cambridge History of Religions in America: Vol. 3, 1945 to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, 2012; Steven Alan Hassan, *The BITE Model of Authoritarian Control: Undue Influence, Thought Reform, Brainwashing, Mind Control, Trafficking and the Law*; Janja Lalich, *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *A Narrative Exploration of the Lived Experience of Being Born, Raised in, and Leaving a Cultic Group: the Case of the Exclusive Brethren*, PhD thesis, Middlessex University/Metanoia Institute, 2018.

³⁶¹ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 48; Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

³⁶² Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2. See also: Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 12; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 15; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 7; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 5.

³⁶³ Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 29, 33; Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 48; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 5; RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, *Submission 241*, p. 10; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 7; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 7; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 119; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 12; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, pp. 15, 20; Name withheld, *Submission 184*, p. 5; Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 38; RMIT University, *Submission 281*, p. 5.

Suggested areas for studies and research included the impacts:

- of coercive high-control groups on the broader community³⁶⁴
- of being born into a coercive high-control group³⁶⁵
- of coercive high-control groups on children and young people³⁶⁶
- of leaving a coercive high-control group, considering both psychological and support needs³⁶⁷
- on health outcomes for people with lived experience of coercive high-control groups including:
 - mental health³⁶⁸
 - long- and short-term health impacts³⁶⁹
 - deaths from medical neglect or suicide³⁷⁰
- on human rights impacts of coercive high-control groups, including forced labour and modern slavery.³⁷¹

Inquiry evidence reflected a range of views regarding research priorities, including differing perspectives on the extent to which research should focus on specific groups.³⁷² However, Inquiry evidence identified a clear need for further research into recruitment practices,³⁷³ how to identify coercive high-control groups,³⁷⁴ and the risks and contexts in which group-based coercion exists.³⁷⁵

A commitment to robust, ongoing research is essential for crafting effective laws, interventions and public health strategies.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 118.

³⁶⁴ Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 48; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 118; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 7; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 5, 51.

³⁶⁵ Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 1.

³⁶⁶ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 1; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 7; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 51.

³⁶⁷ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23; Dr Ahona Guha, Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups hearing, response to questions on notice received 24 November 2025, p. 1; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 12.

³⁶⁸ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20; Dr Ahona Guha, response to questions on notice, p. 1; Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 118; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 76.

³⁶⁹ Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5; Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 15; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, pp. 5, 51.

³⁷⁰ Patrick Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

³⁷¹ Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20; Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 74.

³⁷² Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36; Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

³⁷³ Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 118; RMIT University, *Submission 281*, p. 5.

³⁷⁴ Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23; Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

³⁷⁵ Australian Sangha Association, *Submission 71*, p. 5; Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 12; Name withheld, *Submission 117*, p. 7.

Inquiry evidence suggested that new studies and research projects would benefit from a breadth of approaches, multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary, using both quantitative and qualitative data.³⁷⁶ There was support for research undertaken in partnership with universities, including the application of ethical frameworks to minimise harm to participants. The ‘weight’ of peer-reviewed research, particularly studies with formal ethics approval and publication in academic journals, was also highlighted.³⁷⁷

5.9.3 Ongoing monitoring and maintaining public awareness

As noted in Section 5.2 above, raising public awareness is an important component of preventing harm and supporting responses to coercive high-control groups. However, this cannot be treated as a one-time effort. The landscape is not static: groups evolve, rebrand, and adopt new methods; new groups emerge; and the environments in which recruitment and harm occur continue to change. Sustained investment in public awareness and monitoring is necessary to ensure that the Victorian Government’s response remains relevant and effective over time.

Inquiry evidence emphasised that public awareness plays a protective role at multiple levels. For individuals and families, it provides the knowledge needed to recognise warning signs before a person becomes deeply embedded in a group.³⁷⁸ For service providers and frontline workers, it supports earlier identification and more appropriate referral. For the broader community, it helps reduce stigma and scepticism, that can otherwise prevent people from coming forward or being believed.³⁷⁹

Inquiry evidence also highlighted that the early contact with a group is the period when awareness-based interventions are most likely to be effective, and that this window may be narrow.³⁸⁰ It is important that public awareness remains relevant to the contemporary and emerging challenges of coercive high-control groups. For example, as noted in Section 5.9.1 above, technology and online environments represent a growing and evolving area of concern in relation to coercive high-control groups.

Sustaining public awareness requires more than a single campaign. Inquiry evidence demonstrated that groups change their names, adopt new recruitment approaches, and shift between different communities and platforms.³⁸¹ As a result, information can quickly become outdated. A community wellbeing approach—supporting ongoing dialogue between survivors, service providers, and the broader community—offers a more durable and responsive model than periodic public campaigns alone.³⁸²

³⁷⁶ Dr Ahona Guha, response to questions on notice, p. 1; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 119; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 48.

³⁷⁷ Dr Janja Lalich, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2, 4–5; Jane Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 119; The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 51.

³⁷⁸ Name withheld, *Submission 203*, pp. 11–12; Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 45.

³⁷⁹ Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Elise Heerde, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 9; Anke Richter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

³⁸⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 11.

³⁸¹ Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 2; Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 105; Raphael Aron, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26; RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, *Submission 241*, p. 1.

³⁸² Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Leigh Bartlett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

COMMITTEE'S VIEW

This Inquiry has documented serious and ongoing harm to Victorians caused by coercive high-control groups—harm that is frequently hidden, poorly understood and inadequately supported by existing frameworks.

Across child safety, legal protections, service provision, and systemic coordination, the Committee has found that the current response is fragmented and, in important respects, not fit for purpose in addressing harms arising in coercive high-control group settings.

Section 5.9 has addressed three key dimensions of preparedness that will be necessary for a sustained and effective response: the digital environment, the research base, and the need for ongoing monitoring and awareness.

In relation to technology and online environments, Inquiry evidence indicated that digital platforms have become a significant site for the recruitment and operation of coercive high-control groups. Existing online safety frameworks were not designed with these harms in mind and as currently configured, do not adequately address them. Regulatory interventions targeting online activity have generally proven insufficient on their own, as groups can readily reconstitute quickly under new names and in different settings.

Addressing the digital dimensions of coercive high-control group harm requires a combination of regulatory attention, education in critical digital literacy, and investment in care and support infrastructure for those who have been exposed or harmed online. The Committee also notes Inquiry evidence relating to emerging and not yet fully understood risks and considers that these require active and ongoing monitoring. The Committee is of the view that existing online safety arrangements need to be reviewed to assess their adequacy in responding to the specific harms associated with coercive high-control groups.

In relation to research, Inquiry evidence identified a significant gap between the scale of the harm and the depth of the evidence base. Research into coercive high-control groups in Australia is limited, fragmented across disciplines, and hampered by an absence of shared language and consistent definitions. This makes it difficult to assess prevalence, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, or develop policy responses grounded in reliable evidence. The Committee considers this gap reflects structural challenges, including the hidden nature of these groups, barriers to survivor participation in research, and a lack of coordinated investment. A stronger evidence base requires deliberate action, including support for multidisciplinary research, partnerships with tertiary institutions, and appropriate ethics oversight.

In relation to public awareness and ongoing monitoring, the Committee accepts that public awareness plays a direct protective function. However, for awareness efforts to remain effective, they must be current and responsive to change. As coercive high-control groups rebrand, shift platforms, and develop new methods, information can quickly become misleading or irrelevant. The Committee considers that a sustained, community-based approach—supporting ongoing engagement between survivors, services providers and the broader public—is more likely to provide durable protection than periodic campaigns alone.

FINDING 93: The digital environment is an increasingly significant setting for the recruitment and operation of coercive high-control groups. Existing online safety frameworks were not designed to address these harms and are not adequate to prevent exposure to, or provide appropriate support for, those affected by coercive high-control groups operating online.

RECOMMENDATION 37: The Victorian Government, in consultation with relevant Commonwealth bodies and the eSafety Commissioner, review the adequacy of existing online safety frameworks in responding to the specific harms associated with coercive high-control groups. This review should also consider the education, training, and care infrastructure required to support those exposed to or harmed by such groups online. Following this, coercive high-control groups should be explicitly included in any future reviews of these frameworks.

FINDING 94: The current body of research on coercion and high-control groups is developing but remains limited and fragmented. Differences in terminology and approaches across disciplines hinder the development of a consistent and shared understanding. Strengthening the evidence base through coordinated, multidisciplinary research would support a clearer insight into the prevalence, tactics, and impacts of coercive high-control groups, enhance the effectiveness of policy responses, and contribute to prevention through increased awareness.

RECOMMENDATION 38: The Victorian Government support new targeted research to strengthen the evidence base on coercive high-control groups, including their prevalence, tactics, impacts, and the effectiveness of reforms, in partnership with tertiary institutions.

FINDING 95: Sustained and ongoing public awareness of coercive high-control groups is a necessary component of prevention.

RECOMMENDATION 39: The Victorian Government develop and implement a model for sustained public awareness of coercive high-control groups that moves beyond periodic campaigns, supports ongoing engagement with survivor communities and service providers, and is regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changes in how such groups operate.

Concluding remarks for *Volume 1: Crossing the line*

Taken together, the Findings and Recommendations across *Volume 1* reflect the Committee's view that the harms caused by coercive high-control groups in Victoria are serious, affect a significant number of people, and are not adequately addressed by the current system.

Meaningful reform will require sustained commitment across government and jurisdictions, including legislative reform, investment in services, improved coordination, and ongoing monitoring and research to ensure that responses keep pace with a problem that does not stand still.

The Committee commends this Volume of its Report to the Victorian Government and expresses its appreciation to all those who contributed evidence, particularly the survivors and family members who shared their experiences. The Committee recognises the courage required to come forward and hopes this Inquiry has provided a space in which those experiences could be safely shared, heard, and believed.

Volume 2: In their words stands as a testament to that courage. It is, in their own words, the account of those who came forward—individuals who spoke openly and bravely about their experiences.

The Committee hopes that the reforms outlined in *Volume 1* of its Report will contribute to a system in which others can expect the same: to be heard, supported, and believed wherever and whenever they seek help.

Appendix A

About the Inquiry

A

A.1 Submissions

Number	Individual or organisation
1	Mix Carpenter
2	Sue Winter
2a	Sue Winter, Supplementary submission
3	Name withheld
4	Name withheld
5	Daniel Torridon
6	Vicky Tsiaras
7	Lucy Browne
8	Name withheld
9	Vern Houle
10	Lisa Pinson
11	Name withheld
12	Barbara Maccarrone
13	Grahame Gee
14	Name withheld
15	Name withheld
16	Pawel Swiergiel
17	Thomas Beanlands
18	Name withheld
19	Name withheld
20	Name withheld
21	Elise Heerde
22	Name withheld
23	Name withheld
24	Name withheld
25	Shane St Reynolds
26	Sarah Bacaller
27	Name withheld
28	Name withheld

Number	Individual or organisation
29	Confidential
30	Stop Religious Coercion Australia
31	Name withheld
32	Name withheld
33	Name withheld
34	Confidential
35	Name withheld
36	Name withheld
37	Daniel Reiher
38	Name withheld
39	Warrick Stephens
40	Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renne Spencer and Dr Janja Lalic
41	Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC)
42	Gary Fiechtner
43	Meg Lambert
44	Australian Christian Lobby
45	Name withheld
46	Name withheld
47	Name withheld
48	Confidential
49	Confidential
50	Confidential
51	Confidential
52	Renee Spencer
53	Heidi Campbell
54	Name withheld
55	Miriam Francis
56	Maurice Jurgens

Number	Individual or organisation
57	Confidential
58	BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force)
59	Number not used
60	Karen Alsop
61	Confidential
62	Name withheld
63	Confidential
64	Confidential
64a	Name withheld, Supplementary submission
65	David Griffiths
66	Van Pham
67	Cult Information and Family Support
68	Name withheld
69	Paul Mitchell
70	Paul Gratton
71	Australian Sangha Association
72	Name withheld
73	Confidential
74	Leanne Treloar
75	Confidential
76	Name withheld
77	Confidential
78	Confidential
79	Wendy Jasper
80	Name withheld
81	Laura McConnell
82	Name withheld
83	Name withheld
84	Confidential
85	Jeremy Stein
86	Confidential
87	Presbyterian Church of Victoria, Church and Nation Committee
88	Name withheld
89	Name withheld
90	Bev Cox and Laura McConnell

Number	Individual or organisation
91	Confidential
92	Randell Green
93	Annie Boehm
94	Roselyn Owen
95	Name withheld
96	Name withheld
97	Thomas Boreham
98	Name withheld
99	Australian Christian Churches
100	Name withheld
101	Megan Gotts
102	Name withheld
103	Clare Heath-Mclvor
104	Name withheld
105	Name withheld
106	Confidential
107	Byron Avietti
108	Confidential
109	Name withheld
110	Name withheld
111	Name withheld
112	Catherine Carey
113	Confidential
114	Confidential
115	Milton Oliver
116	Name withheld
117	Name withheld
118	Miviludes
119	Number not used
120	Confidential
121	John Cleverdon
122	Name withheld
123	Elizabeth Gibbons
124	Name withheld
125	Confidential
126	Alister McKeich

Number	Individual or organisation
127	Name withheld
128	Name withheld
129	Name withheld
130	Confidential
131	Name withheld
131a	Name withheld
132	Anastasia Yules
133	Name withheld
134	Name withheld
135	Javan Worrall
136	Name withheld
137	Name withheld
138	Arieth Bullmann
139	Name withheld
140	Name withheld
141	Esther Rockett
142	Name withheld
143	Name withheld
144	Name withheld
145	Confidential
146	Kelly Maguire
147	Catalyst Baptist Church
148	Name withheld
149	Name withheld
150	David Hyland
151	David Whitaker
152	Thiruranjan Tharmarajah
153	Marisha McAuliffe
154	Jane Simson
155	Name withheld
156	Brittany Fussell-Jones
157	Name withheld
158	Stuart Alsop
159	Name withheld
160	Confidential
161	Name withheld

Number	Individual or organisation
162	Name withheld
162a	Confidential, Supplementary submission
163	City Builders Church
164	Confidential
165	Confidential
166	Confidential
167	Confidential
167a	Confidential, Supplementary submission
168	Confidential
169	Stephen Messer
170	Keith Thompson and Bernard Doherty
171	Name withheld
172	Name withheld
173	Jill Aebi-Mytton
174	Jim Spencer
175	Religious Freedom Alliance
176	Name withheld
177	Patrick McIvor
178	Confidential
179	Confidential
180	Name withheld
181	Name withheld
182	Olive Leaf Network Australia
182a	Olive Leaf Network Australia, Supplementary submission
183	Chinese Christian Pastors
184	Name withheld
185	The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand
186	Ben Shenton
187	Sarah Steel
188	Secular Party of Australia
189	Carli McConkey
190	Name withheld
191	Name withheld
192	Name withheld

Number	Individual or organisation
193	Name withheld
194	Confidential
195	Confidential
196	Confidential
197	Confidential
198	Confidential
199	Confidential
200	Elizabeth Kendal
201	Belinda Young
202	Name withheld
203	Name withheld
204	Casey Seventh-day Adventist Church
205	Andres Chiriff
205a	Confidential, Supplementary submission
206	Confidential
207	Name withheld
208	The Victorian Children of God/ The Family International Survivors Network
209	Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic)
210	Confidential
211	Name withheld
212	Confidential
213	Confidential
214	Confidential
215	Sandra Dawson
216	Name withheld
217	Naresh Nayak
218	Confidential
219	Name withheld
220	Lachlan Walker
221	Adam Van Wirdum
222	Name withheld
223	Name withheld
224	Confidential
225	Name withheld

Number	Individual or organisation
226	Rationalist Society of Australia
227	Cult Consulting Australia
228	Freedom for Faith
229	Victorian Trades Hall Council
230	Name withheld
231	Nigel Denning
232	Confidential
233	Name withheld
234	Name withheld
235	Serge Del Mar
236	Mary Hughes
237	Dr Lani Roy
237a	Confidential, Supplementary submission
238	Jaime Simpson
238a	Jaime Simpson, Supplementary submission
239	Name withheld
240	Confidential
241	RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre
242	Name withheld
243	Name withheld
244	Dave Hoar
245	Name withheld
246	Name withheld
247	Name withheld
248	Name withheld
249	Name withheld
249	Name withheld
250	Name withheld
251	Name withheld
252	Falun Dafa Association of Australia Victoria Branch
253	Clayton Coombs
254	Confidential
255	Amanda Morgan
256	Alexander Burns

Number	Individual or organisation
257	Andrew Rawlings
258	Name withheld
259	Name withheld
260	Feminist Legal Clinic
261	Name withheld
262	Name withheld
263	Mark Darbyshire
264	Name withheld
265	Name withheld
266	Ryan Manuel Halim
267	Kevin Manning
268	Name withheld
269	Australian Post-Mormon Community
270	Samson Rising
271	Number not used
272	Name withheld
273	Name withheld
274	Name withheld
275	Name withheld
276	Name withheld

Number	Individual or organisation
277	Aiden Bowers
278	Larissa Kaput
278a	Larissa Kaput, Supplementary submission
278b	Larissa Kaput, Supplementary submission
279	Confidential
280	Confidential
281	RMIT University
282	New South Wales Council of Churches
283	Name withheld
284	Cult-Informed Professional Network
285	Name withheld
286	Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church
287	Name withheld
288	Inform
289	The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
290	Name withheld
291	Confidential

Additional information

Number	Individual or organisation	Date received
1	Notes from Committee briefing with Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission	23/06/2025
2	Victoria Police: Response to written questions on notice	20/11/2025
3	Commission for Children and Young People: Response to written questions on notice	13/02/2026
4	Department of Education: Response to written questions on notice	20/02/2026
5	Notes from Committee meeting with Knowmore Legal Service	2/03/2026
6	Deakin University Student Association: Cults on Campus Statement	18/03/2026
7	Notes from Committee meeting with the Office of the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner	16/03/2026
8	Department of Education: Response to written supplementary questions on notice	2/04/2026
9	Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department: Information on national responses to harms associated with coercive group behaviour	2/04/2026
10	Meli Community: Correspondence to the Committee	27/04/2026

Number	Individual or organisation	Date received
11	Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing: Response to written questions on notice	20/02/2026
12	Child Protection, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing: Response to supplementary written questions on notice	14/04/2026
13	Understanding support service demand: Responses from four support organisations	03/06/2026

A.2 Public hearings

Melbourne, Wednesday 23 July 2025

Name	Position	Organisation
Ryan Carey	-	-
Catherine Carey	-	-
Gloria	-	-
Name Withheld	-	-
Richard Baker	Investigative Journalist	-

Melbourne, Monday 13 October 2025

Name	Position	Organisation
Laura McConnell	-	-
Renee Spencer	-	-
Clare Heath-Mclvor	-	-

Melbourne, Monday 20 October 2025

Name	Position	Organisation
Dr Ahona Guha	Clinical and Forensic Psychologist	-
Elise Heerde	-	-
Raphael Aron	Director	Cult Consulting Australia
Lex de Man	-	-
Ben Shenton	-	-

Melbourne, Tuesday 21 October 2025

Name	Position	Organisation
Dr Janja Lalich	Chief Executive Officer	Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion
Jane Kennedy	Registered Counsellor	The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand
Samantha Sellers	Registered Therapist and Clinical Supervisor	The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand
Elise Heerde	Certified Coach and Mental Health Practitioner	The Religious Trauma Collective – Australia/New Zealand
Tore Klevjer	President	Cult Information and Family Support
Mike Southon	Executive Director	Freedom for Faith
Kojo Akomeah	Board Member	Freedom for Faith
Paul Gratton	Pastor	Now Church Moe
Jasmine Yuen	Victorian Director	Australian Christian Lobby
Rev. Phi Duong	Senior Pastor, Western New Community Baptist Church	Australian Christian Lobby

Melbourne, Wednesday 5 November 2025

Name	Position	Organisation
Maria Esguerra	Director	Olive Leaf Network Australia
Miriam Francis	Director	Olive Leaf Network Australia
Anke Richter	Director	Decult

Melbourne, Monday 10 November 2025

Name	Position	Organisation
Dene Cicci	Executive Director, Students Group	RMIT University
Professor Julie Cugin	Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor	Australian Catholic University
Ulrike Schiesser	Managing Director	Federal Office of Cult Affairs (Austria)

Melbourne, Monday 17 November 2025

Name	Position	Organisation
Sue Woodward	Commissioner	Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC)
Cate Bennett	Assistant Commissioner, General Counsel and Regulatory Services	Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC)
Suhanya Mendes	Director, Legal and Policy Directorate	Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC)
Joshua Stagg	President	University of Melbourne Student Union
Sonika Agarwal	Education Public Affairs Officer	University of Melbourne Student Union

Name	Position	Organisation
Rhea Sankar	Education Academic Officer	University of Melbourne Student Union
Brendan Byrne	Chaplaincy Co-ordinator, Wellbeing Services	University of Melbourne

Melbourne, Monday 1 December 2025

Name	Position	Organisation
Mary Hughes	-	-
Patrick McIvor	Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant	-
Leigh Bartlett	Executive Officer	BATForce (Barwon Adolescent Task Force)

All public and name withheld submissions, additional information and hearing transcripts, are available on the Committee's website at:
<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg>.

The Committee also gathered evidence through an anonymous questionnaire that received 317 responses. An insights document and interactive report on these responses, are available on the Committee's website at:
<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg-questionnaire-insights>.

Appendix B

Comparison of Victoria and Australian jurisdictions with standalone coercive control offences

The Table below compares Victoria with Australian jurisdictions where coercive control has been criminalised as a stand-alone offence. It highlights key features relevant to the Committee's consideration of coercive control laws in family violence contexts, and their relevance to group-based coercion (see Part 3 of this Report). These jurisdictions were compared as Inquiry evidence suggested that a stand-alone approach could be used as a model for a group-based coercion offence. It is acknowledged that Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory, Tasmania, and Western Australia include coercive control or coercive controlling behaviors in legislation that defines family violence or domestic abuse.¹ The Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia have also indicated they will introduce stand-alone coercive control offences, but reform is still underway.²

-
- 1 *Family Violence Act 2016* (ACT), *Domestic and Family Violence Act 2007* (NT), *Family Violence Act 2004* (Tas), *Family Violence Legislation Reform Act 2024* (WA).
 - 2 The Australian Capital Territory introduced the Crimes (Coercive Control) Amendment Bill 2026 in May 2026, seeking to create a stand-alone criminal offence for coercive control. See: Crimes (Coercive Control) Amendment Bill 2026; ACT Government, *Making coercive control a crime*, June 2026, <<https://www.act.gov.au/law-and-justice/law-reforms/making-coercive-control-a-crime>> accessed 24 June 2026. Western Australia undertook consultation on the State's current legislative response to coercive control in 2024. *Family Violence Legislation Reform Act 2024* (WA) amended the *Restraining Orders Act 1997* (WA) to recognise coercive control in the context of family relationships. However, no legislation has been introduced to create a stand-alone offence. See: Government of Western Australia, *Coercive control consultation*, 12 April 2024, <<https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/departments-of-justice/commissioner-victims-of-crime/coercive-control-consultation>> accessed 14 April 2026.

	Victoria	New South Wales	Queensland	South Australia
Measure	<i>Family Violence Protection Act 2008</i> (Vic)	<i>Crimes Act 1900</i> (NSW)	<i>Criminal Code Act 1899</i> (Qld)	<i>Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025</i> (SA)
Overview of legislative framework and commencement status	Family violence protection orders/safety notices are available for 'family violence', defined to include 'coercive' behaviour. ^a	Amendment to the Crimes Act came into effect in February 2024 introducing a criminal offence for coercive control. ^b	Amendment to the Criminal Code came into effect in May 2025, introducing a standalone offence of coercive control. ^c	Amendment to the Criminal Law Consolidation Act received royal assent in September 2025 and will commence after consultation—date of commencement not yet set. ^d
Stand-alone coercive control offence?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
How is coercive control defined?	Behaviour that controls or dominates and causes the recipient to feel fear for the safety or wellbeing of themselves or another person. ^e 'Coercive' is not defined.	Violence or threats against, or intimidation of, a person, or coercion or control of the person, intending to coerce or control. ^f 'Coercion or control' is not defined.	Behaviour that controls or dominates and causes the other person to fear for the safety or wellbeing of themselves or another person. 'Coerce' is defined as compelling or forcing a 'person to do, or refrain from doing, something'. ^g The Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce, which was established to investigate coercive control prior to the new offence, stated that there is 'no single definition of coercive control', but it generally refers to 'behaviours designed to control another person'. ^h	Behaviour that has, or that a reasonable person would consider is likely to have, a controlling impact on another person. ⁱ
Individual act/ pattern of behaviour	Not specified—provision applies to 'behaviour'.	'Course of conduct' required—defined as engaging in behaviour repeatedly and/or continuously. ^j	'Course of conduct' required—behaviour must occur on more than one occasion. ^k	'Course of conduct' required. ^l
Additional elements required		A reasonable person would consider the course of conduct likely to cause fear of violence or serious adverse impact on capacity to engage in ordinary day-to-day activities. ^m Intention to control or coerce. ⁿ	Course of conduct is reasonably likely to cause harm in all the circumstances. ^o Intention to control or coerce. ^p	A reasonable person would consider the course of conduct to be likely to cause the other person physical or psychological harm. ^q The person intends the course of conduct to have a controlling impact on the victim. ^r

	Victoria	New South Wales	Queensland	South Australia
Measure	<i>Family Violence Protection Act 2008</i> (Vic)	<i>Crimes Act 1900</i> (NSW)	<i>Criminal Code Act 1899</i> (Qld)	<i>Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025</i> (SA)
Forms of coercive control covered include	There is no standalone coercive control offence but the Act criminalises coercive behaviours including: - Physical/sexual abuse - Emotional/psychological abuse - Economic abuse - Threatening behaviour 'Coercive' behaviour - Control/ domination causing fear for safety.^s Victoria's Crimes Act and other pieces of legislation also criminalise behaviours associated with coercive control.^t	- Threats to harm another person/a child - Economic abuse - Behaviour that shames, degrades or humiliates - Tracking or monitoring a person's activity - Destruction of property - Behaviour preventing connections or otherwise isolating a person from participating in cultural/spiritual ceremonies/practice or expressing their identity - Behaviour depriving a person of liberty or unreasonably controlling or regulating day-to-day activities Non-exhaustive list—these are only examples.^u	- Physical/sexual abuse - Emotional/psychological abuse - Economic abuse - Threatening behaviour - Unauthorised or unreasonable surveillance - Stalking, intimidation, harassment - Making a person dependent on or subordinate to another - Isolating a person from family, friends or sources of support - Controlling, regulating or monitoring day-to-day activities - Frightening, humiliating, degrading or punishing a person Non-exhaustive list—these are only examples.^v	A person's behaviour will be taken to have a controlling impact if it restricts one or more of the following: - Freedom of movement - Freedom of action - Ability to engage in social, political, religious, cultural, educational or economic activities - Ability to make choices with respect to their body - Ability to access the justice system, basic necessities, support services, property they own - Any other aspect of their life as may be prescribed by regulations. A person may restrict another person by: - Physical restriction - Verbal or psychological restriction - Removing the means by which a person is able to do something - Deception - Any other behaviour that, directly or indirectly, significantly impairs the person's ability to do something The Act provides examples of behaviours which may have a controlling impact by restricting another person.^w

	Victoria	New South Wales	Queensland	South Australia
Measure	<i>Family Violence Protection Act 2008</i> (Vic)	<i>Crimes Act 1900</i> (NSW)	<i>Criminal Code Act 1899</i> (Qld)	<i>Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025</i> (SA)
Relationships covered	Applies to 'family members' which includes (past/present):^x • Spouse/domestic partners • Intimate personal relationships • Relatives • Child/parent or guardian relationships • Includes where the perpetrator regards the person as being like a family member if it was reasonable to have that regard, having regard to the circumstances of the relationship, including the following: • Nature of social and emotional ties between the persons • Whether the two people live together • Reputation/cultural recognition of the relationship as being like family in either person's community • Duration of relationship and frequency of contact • Financial dependence/interdependence between the two people • Any other form of dependence or interdependence • Provision of responsibility or care • Provision of sustenance or support between the two people.	Applies to 'intimate partners' (past or present), defined as:^y • Married • De facto partners • Intimate personal relationship, whether or not sexual in nature.	Applies to a 'domestic relationship', defined as:^z • An intimate personal relationship—meaning spousal, engagement or couple • A family relationship • An informal care relationship.	Applies where the two persons are 'in a relationship', defined as being: • Married • Engaged • Domestic partners • In some other form of intimate personal relationship in which their lives are interrelated and the actions of one affects the other.^{aa}

	Victoria	New South Wales	Queensland	South Australia
Measure	<i>Family Violence Protection Act 2008</i> (Vic)	<i>Crimes Act 1900</i> (NSW)	<i>Criminal Code Act 1899</i> (Qld)	<i>Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025</i> (SA)
Applicability to group settings	- Only applies to individual relationships - Inclusion of ‘de facto’ family member relationships may apply to members of a group - Some of the circumstances of the relationship which may be considered may exist in coercive high-control group settings, particularly dependence, social and emotional ties and provision of sustenance and support.	- Only applies to individual relationships ‘Intimate personal relationship’ could apply to two members of a group.	Criminal offence for engaging in domestic violence to aid a respondent.^{ab} The following elements are required: - A domestic violence order (DVO)/ police protection notice/release conditions against the respondent. - The person engages in domestic violence against the named person in the DVO. - The behaviour is engaged in with the intent of aiding the respondent. - The person knew or ought reasonably to have known the other person was the named person in the DVO. Does not matter whether respondent knew of behaviour.	Could only apply to individual members of a coercive group where they are in some form of ‘intimate relationship’ in which their lives are interrelated and the actions of one affects the other.

a. *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) s 5(1)(a)(v).

b. *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54D.

c. *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld) s 334C.

d. *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA).

e. *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) s 5(1)(a)(vi).

f. *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54D(1)(a).

g. *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld) s 334B.

h. Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce, *Options for Legislating Against Coercive Control and the Creation of a Standalone Domestic Violence Offence: Discussion Paper 1*, Queensland Government, 2023, p. 3.

i. *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA) s 20C(1).

j. *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54G.

k. *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld) s 334C(1)(b).

l. *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA) s 20C(1).

m. *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54D(1)(d). The ‘reasonable person’ standard assesses what the defendant considered against what a hypothetical reasonable person would have considered in the circumstances. This contrasts with ‘intention’ which seeks to determine what the defendant’s actual state of mind.

n. *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54D(1)(c).

o. *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld) s 334C(1)(d).

p. *Ibid.* s 334C(1)(c).

q. *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA) s 20C(1)(d).

r. *Ibid.* s 20C(1)(b).

s. *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) s 5(1)(a).

t. *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) s 21A (Stalking). This includes behaviours such as surveillance, tracing a person’s use of internet, email or other electronic communication, and ‘entering or loitering’ outside a person’s residence.

u. *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54F.

v. *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld) s 334B.

w. *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA) s 20B.

x. *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) s 8.

y. *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 54C.

z. *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* (Qld) s 13.

aa. *Criminal Law Consolidation (Coercive Control) Amendment Act 2025* (SA) s 20B(1).

ab. *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* (Qld) s 179A.

Appendix C

Alternative text for figures

How the Committee approached a complex task

Figure 1.1 Key stages of the Inquiry

Horizontal timeline showing seven stages of the Inquiry process:

1. Inquiry referred to the Committee in April 2025
2. Committee invited public input, 29 April 2025
3. 317 questionnaire responses, 291 submissions and 13 additional documents received
4. 8 days of public hearings
5. Further research and report drafting
6. Report tabled in July 2026
7. Government response due within 6 months.

Part 2: Consistent patterns of control and the harms they cause

Figure 2.1 Types of coercive high-control groups

Four interlocking, circular sections, one for each type of coercive high-control group. There are four interlocking arms in the centre of the graphic. The four types of groups are explained in the following text.

Figure 2.2 Common characteristics and harmful dynamics of coercive high-control groups

Eight interlocking, colourful puzzle pieces, one for each type of characteristic/dynamic. The eight types of characteristics/dynamics are explained in the following text.

Figure 2.3 Seven common target areas of recruitment into coercive high-control groups

Seven, interlocking, colourful puzzle pieces, one for each common target area of recruitment. The seven types of target areas are explained in the following text.

Part 3: Reforming the law to respond to group-based coercion

Figure 3.1 Spectrum of influence

Three, horizontal, green, orange and red rectangles connected by left-to-right triangular arrows. The rectangles represent a spectrum. Respectful influence is at the green end of the spectrum and controlling influence is at the red end of the spectrum. Three types of influence, one for each rectangle, are explained in the following text.

Part 4: Improving protections for children and young people

Figure 4.1 Child Safe Standards

Eleven numbered, blue, rectangular shapes arranged into two columns. There's one shape for each of the Child Safe Standards. The 11 standards are explained in the following text.

Figure 4.2 Child-related work categories

Nine colourful icons and text arranged into two columns. Each icon represents a child-related work category. The nine categories are explained in the following text.

Part 5: Other opportunities to address the harms caused by coercive high-control groups

Figure 5.1 Gaps across service areas

Six interlocking, colourful puzzle pieces, one for each of the gaps across support service areas. The gaps are explained in the following text.

Figure 5.2 The visibility gap between the individual and the support system

Five vertically stacked blue rectangles. The stack represents a spectrum. Each box features a grouped list of harmful behaviours with the top group being incident based experiences that are most visible to the support system and the bottom group being relational/patterned experiences that are least visible to the support system. The groups and behaviours are explained in the following text.

Support services

The Committee recognises that the experiences and information contained in this Report may be distressing to read, especially for those whose experiences are directly or indirectly referenced.

Please take care of yourself and read this Report with consideration to your own wellbeing.

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, please contact 000.



If you require support, the following support services are available:

- **Lifeline** – Call [13 11 14](tel:131114), available 24/7, or visit <https://www.lifeline.org.au>.
- **Kids Helpline** – Call [1800 55 1800](tel:1800551800), available 24/7, or visit <https://kidshelpline.com.au>.
- **Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service** – If you or someone you care about is living with the effects of abuse, neglect, violence or exploitation, call [1300 657 380](tel:1300657380), available 9 am to 5 pm 7 days a week, or visit <https://blueknot.org.au>.
- **Sexual Assault Crisis Line** – Call [1800 806 292](tel:1800806292) or contact your local sexual assault service (<https://peak.sasvic.org.au/servicemap>).
- **Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team (SOCIT)** – Visit <https://www.police.vic.gov.au/sexual-offence-child-abuse-teams-centres>.
- **Victims of Crime Helpline** – Call [1800 819 817](tel:1800819817), available 8 am to 7 pm Monday to Friday and 8 am to 5 pm Saturday, Sunday and public holidays, or text [0427 767 891](tel:0427767891), or visit <https://www.victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au>.
- **13YARN** – Call [13 92 76](tel:139276) to talk with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporter, or contact enquiries@13yarn.org.au.
- **Australian Federal Police** – If you or someone you care about are experiencing or have experienced modern slavery, call [131 237](tel:131237), or visit <https://www.afp.gov.au/crimes/human-trafficking-and-people-smuggling/human-trafficking-and-slavery>.

(Continued)

During the Inquiry, the Committee was made aware of allegations of child sexual abuse. To support individuals affected, the Committee provided them with information about available referral pathways to report child sexual abuse or seek support.

This information has been published on the Committee's website to assist anyone wishing to report or disclose experiences of child sexual abuse, or who need help:

<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg-reporting-child-sexual-abuse>.

Support organisations that provided Inquiry evidence and may also be able to provide support, include:

- **Cult Consulting Australia** – Call [03 9523 2299](tel:0395232299), or visit <https://www.cultconsulting.org>, or email info@cultconsulting.org.
- **Cult Information Family Support Inc.** – Call [0423 332 766](tel:0423332766), or visit <https://www.cifs.org.au>, or email info@cifs.org.au.
- **The Olive Leaf Network Australia** – Visit <https://au.oliveleaf.network>, or email support@au.oliveleaf.network.
- **Religious Trauma and Cults (formerly The Religious Trauma Collective)** – Visit <https://religioustraumaandcults.com>, or email contact@religioustraumaandcults.com.

Thank you

The Committee heard from a range of stakeholders who shared their experiences and put forward ideas. The Committee thanks everyone who participated in the Inquiry for their time, interest and contribution. The expertise of individuals and organisations was integral to the Committee's work.

Visit the Committee's website to access the evidence received: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg>

Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee

Parliament of Victoria
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne Victoria 3002

+61 3 8682 2843
lsic.assembly@parliament.vic.gov.au
parliament.vic.gov.au/lsic-la

