



Legislative Assembly
Legal and Social Issues Committee

Volume 2 | In their words

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>



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(until 17 June 2026)



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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.

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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.

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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 16O 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.

Introduction

Volume 1: Crossing the line examined what coercive high-control groups are, how they operate, and what the evidence tell us about the harm they cause. It also made recommendations to the Victorian Government to address these harms.

Volume 2: In their words presents the evidence of people who experienced that harm directly.

The quotes included in this Volume are selected examples drawn from a much larger body of evidence. They are not intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive.

Voices, experiences and patterns of harm across diverse settings

This Volume draws on the evidence provided throughout the Inquiry. It brings together the accounts of people who were recruited into or born into coercive high-control groups, who lived under their control, and who carry the consequences of that experience. It includes evidence from family members and friends who witnessed harm unfolding in the lives of someone close to them, often without having the language to describe what they were seeing or knowing where to turn.

The Inquiry evidence related to a broad range of groups operating across many parts of community life, including religious organisations, wellness and personal development programs, commercial enterprises, and community groups. The evidence covered groups that differ in size, structure and stated purpose. It shows that the relevant distinction is not what a group believes, but how it treats its members. This Volume is organised around that focus.

The breadth of the Inquiry evidence is significant. While coercive high-control groups are often assumed to be a narrow or fringe phenomenon that is easily identifiable and unlikely to affect most people, the evidence does not support this view. People encountered these groups through universities, workplaces, health and wellness settings, community organisations, and social networks. Those affected came from varied backgrounds, education levels, and life circumstances. Across the Inquiry evidence, what they commonly shared was vulnerability, such as periods of transition or difficulty, that made offers of community, purpose, or support appear genuine. The Inquiry evidence is consistent on this point: vulnerability to coercive recruitment reflects the ordinary range of human experience and should not be understood as a personal failing.

Volume 2 documents the methods groups use to recruit members, the tactics they employ once recruitment is underway, the behaviours used to maintain control, as well as the particular vulnerability of children and young people—including those born or raised inside these groups who never had the opportunity to choose their involvement at all.

The Committee acknowledges the significance of the evidence presented here. Contributing to a formal parliamentary process requires people to recount experiences that caused serious harm. Some did so publicly. Others sought privacy. All of it has been treated with care.

Their accounts are the basis of this Volume of the Committee's Report and, together with evidence from experts, community organisations, concerned citizens, academics and all other contributors, have shaped every Committee finding and recommendation made.

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.



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.

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



Families and relationships

Recruitment occurring through existing personal relationships and family structures, where trust, obligation, or emotional dependency already exists.



Public spaces

Recruitment initiated in open, everyday environments where interactions appear casual, spontaneous, or socially acceptable.



Social participation

Recruitment happens through social or community activities that focus on friendship, belonging and shared interests, with harmful beliefs or expectations only revealed later.



Digital and online environments

Recruitment conducted through online platforms that enable targeted outreach, sustained contact, and reduced external oversight.

**Educational, therapeutic or institutional settings**

Recruitment occurring within institutions associated with authority, care, or education, where trust is presumed.

**Organisational and community-based settings**

Recruitment achieved by building connections, including by embedding members, with other organised groups or community networks to gain access, legitimacy, and influence.

**Life-transitions and adjustments**

Recruitment targeting individuals experiencing major life transitions that reduce social supports and increase reliance on external assistance.

Three types of harmful behaviours

**Psychological harm**

Behaviours that manipulate or damage a person's mental and emotional state.

**Personal restrictions**

Behaviours that limit a person's autonomy, agency, or access to basic resources and opportunities.

**Physical harm**

Behaviours that directly compromise physical health or safety.

Recruitment methods

Coercive high-control groups make deliberate choices about where they look for members and through what channels they make contact. Many people had no idea who they were dealing with at the point of first contact.

The recruitment methods outlined below reflect common and recurring practices identified across the Inquiry evidence. They demonstrate the range and adaptability of recruitment techniques used by coercive high-control groups, and how they interact and build over time.

The lived experience examples included are a limited selection, intended to evidence the real-world impacts of these practices on individuals, families and communities.



Relational recruitment*

Trusted networks • Romantic or intimate relationships

* See also 'Developmental and environmental control' in Behaviours directed at children and young people.

Trusted networks

Method: Through friends, family members, work colleagues or acquaintances.

Target area: Families and relationships

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... it could be through family members or friends or acquaintances that they have at their workplace. These are the most effective ways of recruitment, because technically they have known the people for a while ...

Gloria, closed hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025,
Transcript of evidence, p. 20.

“ Bringing colleagues and friends from university to youth groups and public talks, is something I witnessed and participated in. Usually it would be younger people (e.g., school or university friends, people in their young 20s bringing in friends and colleagues), who would bring people they knew into group activities.

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



Romantic or intimate relationships



Method: Through romantic or intimate relationships, including dating relationships that later transition into group involvement once emotional dependency is established.

Target area: Families and relationships

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ My partner told me he could only marry another “spirit-filled” person. At the time I didn’t comprehend that this wasn’t a preference – there was no alternative. I was confused that I was expected to conform to a spiritual requirement that I had no power over.

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

“ I entered a relationship with someone I genuinely loved and trusted — but I didn’t realize that I wasn’t just dating him. I was unknowingly being lured into a relationship with an entire high-control religious system ...

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



Public approach

Approached/presence in a public space • Misleading pretext • Invitation to an introductory or generic activity • Front organisations • Youth activities • Charity or community event

Approached/presence in a public space



Method: Recruiters/members approach individuals in public spaces, including streets, stations, campuses, shopping centres and festivals.

Target area: Public spaces

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ During Orientation Week at Parkville campus in the city, I was approached by two people I assumed were just two out of the many students roaming around—which let my guard down. The older one initiated most of the conversations and questions to follow. He began by asking to take a photograph of them, which quickly segued to questions of ethnic background, then to exchanging phone numbers. It went to asking about my religion at some point ...

Ryan Manuel Halim, *Submission 266*, p. 3.

“ Whenever we were at school, or at events, or just talking to friends or neighbours, we were constantly pressured to “witness” to our peers, our teachers, and basically any non-Jehovah’s Witnesses members of the public.

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 18.

“ ... door-to-door visits, standing in public places with displays and literature, and initiating informal conversations by building trust under the guise of friendship. The goal is to invite people to meetings and engage them in Bible studies intended to convert them.

Name withheld, *Submission 83*, p. 2.

“ ... music festivals can also be targeted for recruitment – I’ve spoken with multiple survivors who came across their cult at the Mind Body Spirit Festival; the Hare Krishnas often hold stalls at events such as the National Folk Festival; and the Twelve Tribes had a presence at the Woodford Folk Festival for many years.

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

(Continued)

“ It was talked about from the pulpit that we should witness to people at school, workplace, while shopping, in the street, neighbours etc. In fact there was a certain air of status for those who witnessed and brought the most new cult members along to our meetings.

Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 4.

“ ... they do not hesitate to accost potential recruits on campus or in public spaces such as shopping malls and train stations ...

Brendan Byrne, Chaplaincy Co-ordinator, Wellbeing Services, University of Melbourne, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

Misleading pretext

Method: Recruiters/members use misleading pretexts (e.g., false surveys or casual chat) to begin conversations.

Target area: Public spaces

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Recruiters often use tactics like requests for directions, surveys, or casual conversation, sometimes in public places like Melbourne Central Station or university campuses, before suggesting further contact.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 2.

“ The girl would start a conversation and try to chat, saying I like your skirt or something else, asking for help. Then it'd turn onto oh we should meet up, we should do this ... I'd say it was pre-meditative to approach a young girl by herself in the city, especially since I wear a cross necklace.

Name withheld, *Submission 20*, p. 1.

“ ... the way that he recruited me was through a survey that he said was from uni, but in reality it was not. The survey questions included three types of emoji: prayer hands, a dancing person in a red gown and a plane. He asked me to pick one of the emojis, and that piqued my interest. I picked the prayer hands because I grew up in a Christian family. From then on the conversation went into the area of religion ...

Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.



Invitation to an introductory or generic activity

Method: Recruiters/members invite individuals to generic 'Bible studies', 'workshops', or 'coaching sessions' without disclosing the true organisation behind them.

Target area: Social participation

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I “invested” in coaching and programs, believing I was making a strategic investment in my future and business. Instead, I experienced sustained emotional manipulation, coercion, lies and deception.

Wendy Jasper, *Submission 79*, p. 79.

“ Recruitment occurs primarily through personal networks and innocuous-sounding “communication” or “energy” workshops. Former members describe progressive indoctrination involving intensive schedules (up to six days per week), incremental financial commitments, and framing of outsiders as hostile.

Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 6.



(Continued)

- “ The majority of UM members were recruited through the following gateways:
- directly by an ‘Esoteric Healing’ practitioner or UM member who invited or referred them to a UM event or UM service;
 - singing workshops or community choirs run by a UM affiliated musician, [redacted];
 - events run by promotional front enterprises such as Esoteric Women’s Health or the UM charities;
 - women’s ‘wellbeing’ groups, men’s groups, and ‘support groups’ for cancer patients, people with eating disorders, or sexual abuse survivors, run by or commandeered by UM promoters; and
 - professional support groups or networking groups targeting health professionals and teachers, offering support to ‘self-care’.

Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 9.

- “ I was recently attending a Bible class 3x week on Mon/wed/fri for about 3 hours each time from 6.30pm – 9.30pm. I was unaware of the organisation running this Bible study and was told that they are just a “non-denominational” Bible study. Things didn’t add up in the group when I was told not to share social media or contact details with others in the class, that my job and uni were not as important as attending this class and should be pushed aside and that I could not talk about the contents of this class to friends and family due to possibly “confusing them”.

Name withheld, *Submission 14*, p. 1.

- “ Indoctrination occurs through intensive, mandatory Bible study sessions (often lasting many months or years) ...

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

Front organisations

Method: Front organisations are used to facilitate access to potential recruits.

Target area: Social participation

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ My experience with this cult was through the consulting room of my psychologist. I never thought attending therapy would expose me to harmful indoctrination into a very harmful organisation.

Name withheld, *Submission 180*, p. 1.

- “ His ‘meditation’ group which served as a shop front to draw in potential cult members consisted of him talking about himself and his adventures, then some healing and a small amount of meditation.

Name withheld, *Submission 45*, p. 2.

- “ I attended their international training school in Australia once a year. There was an element of vulnerability in my life; I was ill and in an abusive marriage. This pushed me towards the group ... I quickly became marinated or entangled in their ways, developing a pseudoidentity and a trauma bond with the leaders [redacted], and the church group.

Sue Winter, *Submission 2*, p. 1.

- “ These are not independent charities. They are recruitment pipelines. Their involvement in schools, councils, and even NGOs must be thoroughly investigated.

Name withheld, *Submission 100*, p. 4.



Youth activities

Method: Youth groups, camps and school-based activities are used as pathways for engagement with young people.

Target areas: Social participation; Educational, therapeutic or institutional settings

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ 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.

“ I was recruited when I was five ... Initially the neighbour, a mother of four teenagers the same age as my elder siblings, invited me to the youth group. The youth group is for children aged 5 to 7.

Amanda Morgan, *Submission 255*, p. 2.

“ When I was in 14 or 15 my family and I bumped into some people from the church and they enticed us to attend their Youth Group. My siblings and I started going to this Youth Group under the guise of fun, games and friends.

Megan Gotts, *Submission 101*, p. 1.



Charity or community event

Method: Charity or community events are used to build rapport or gain credibility with participants and community leaders.

Target areas: Public spaces; Social participation

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... sometimes they run an event for recruitment purposes. This event disguised as a random casual social event sometimes can be that, sometimes it can also be a random casual Christian event—it really depends on what the team is. This is to help the recruit bond with the recruiters or to make them meet a Bible teacher inside that event. It really depends on the purpose from each person. ... they did run a lot of charity events for PR purposes or just to rub shoulders with other political figures or community leaders.

Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.





Establishing social bonds/relationships

Friendship and relationship building

Friendship and relationship building

Method: 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.

Target area: Social participation

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Members were all encouraged to speak with, invite out for ‘fellowship’ (anytime spent together socially together) and engage with the new member as much as possible. This helped the new member feel like they had an instant community around them, and to help ensure that they had less time to spend with their pre-existing friends and family.

Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

“ I was a lonely kid who had always struggled socially, but when I visited my brother in [redacted], everyone was interested in me. There were so many young people there. When I visited we went on beach trips, camping trips, and did fun youth group games. I loved the music on Sunday mornings (I usually visited on a weekend), and the way everyone there just seemed so filled with purpose and connection. I began to idealise [redacted] and the Church. When I went home, I was isolated and unhappy.

Patrick McIvor, *Submission 177*, p. 1.



Online/digital

Social media • Online courses or programs

Social media

Method: Recruiters/members use social media or apps, such as dating apps, to initiate contact with individuals who express particular interests or identities. For example, groups target online communities seeking alternative belief systems or ‘truth-seeking’ content.

Target area: Digital and online environments



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... they also recruit people through social media. It could be Bumble or Tinder or Instagram. They approach people who, for example, follow a Christian account on Instagram, and then they send a message to them saying ‘I happened to see you on this account’ and stuff like that to start the conversation.

Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

“ The main recruitment method seems to be via YouTube. The members all seem to be searching for something ... they somehow get invited to this private Bible study. That makes them feel special and included as most YouTube channels don’t become interactive in that way.

Name withheld, *Submission 275*, p. 2.

“ The group used a front on social media YouTube in a channel called ‘A Voice in the Desert’ to animate the teachings of Jesus. The videos were very well made and convinced me to reach out and thank the creators as the message they presented seemed to be good.

Daniel Reiher, *Submission 37*, p. 1.

Online courses or programs

Method: Low-cost online courses or programs entice individuals to become more involved by gradually increasing financial or time commitments.

Target area: Digital and online environments

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ 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.

“ I was drawn in by their free online courses, and these were courses on spirituality, with things like meditation and astral projection. As is common with most cults, the true nature of the cult in terms of some of the high-risk and high-control behaviours only became real once you progressed to approximately the third or fourth course within the sequence, by which time you had usually spent about six months within the cult.

Dr Ahona Guha, Clinical and Forensic Psychologist, closed hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 1–2.





Institutional infiltration

Education settings • Entering faith communities

Education settings

Method: Some groups seek access to school grounds or public education settings to interact with students, particularly university students.



Target areas: Educational, therapeutic or institutional settings; Public spaces

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I was recruited into a Pentecostal church through Powerhouse Bible College (now known as Hillsong College), which entered my public high school to “preach the gospel”.

Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 4.

“ Allowing access to impressionable students like I was, under the guise of entertainment or religious education, provides fertile ground for grooming, spiritual coercion, and indoctrination.

Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238a*, p. 2.

“ ... one of my staff came to me and said, ‘My 17-year-old son’s going to a university, and there’s this group that’s trying to get him into some form of religion.’ ... So I asked a question: does that learning institution have some forms of checks and balances with the groups that interact with the young people who are susceptible? And they did not. They were allowed on the campus, so they came on campus.

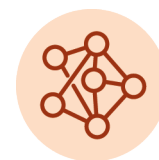
Lex de Man, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

“ I have had reports from three of our seven Australian campuses – campuses in Melbourne, North Sydney and Strathfield – of Shincheonji members recruiting new members by pretending to be students of ACU. Members of this group, which has been referred to as a cult, have approached our students with harmless sounding requests for directions or doing a survey, trying to elicit contact details, or saying something like ‘I’m new to Australia. I’m new to university. Can I buy you a coffee?’ They then attempt to bring students to off-campus Bible study sessions with other young people, and their inducements of friendship and cultivating a sense of belonging has been attractive for, often, first year or, in particular, international students, who are quite vulnerable.

Professor Julie Cugin, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Australian Catholic University, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

Entering faith communities

Method: Some groups enter churches/religious institutions using false identities and participate before attempting to influence members by introducing alternative belief systems.



Target area: Organisational and community-based settings

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ We have witnessed members of such groups attempting to recruit within our congregations. Some of our church members have even been drawn into these cults.

Chinese Christian Pastors, *Submission 183*, p. 1.

“ ... the differences between these groups and mainstream Christianity is not always initially apparent, even to those who are familiar with Christian beliefs or who are a part of mainstream churches. For example, a Sydney-based pastor has reported that members of EL have joined local churches (apparently sometimes using false names), enthusiastically participated and even been baptised or become part of the leadership before it has become apparent that they have other divergent beliefs.

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

Recruitment tactics

Recruitment tactics are the deliberate techniques coercive high-control groups use to identify, approach and progressively draw in potential members. Unlike recruitment methods, they describe what is being targeted in potential recruits and the recruitment strategies used to bring people in.

The recruitment tactics outlined below reflect common and recurring approaches identified across the Inquiry evidence. They provide insight into the varying ways individuals are targeted by coercive high-control groups.

Understanding how these tactics operate, overlap and reinforce each other, is critical to recognising recruitment pathways, identifying early warning signs, and informing prevention, education and response strategies.



Crisis-based recruitment

Targeting vulnerability • False or misleading solutions • Exploitation of therapeutic contexts

Targeting vulnerability

Tactic: 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.



Target area: Life-transitions and adjustments

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ People do not ‘join’ cults. Individuals or families in vulnerable stages of their lives are recruited via coercive and deceptive methods to become involved with a seemingly legitimate group or movement.

Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 13.

“ These people could *smell* vulnerability. They had a sixth sense for it. They knew exactly who was broken, who was unsure, who was searching for connection, and they pounced [original emphasis].

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 9.

“ That year became a turning point—not by her own choosing, but due to a vulnerable series of events that left her emotionally raw and isolated: a painful breakup, a stolen car, and a break-in at her flat. In that vulnerable state, a university lecturer—someone she trusted—stepped in, not just with practical help, but by placing her in what she described as a “safe” environment. In reality, it was the beginning of a long-term entanglement with a high-control religious group known as The New Covenant of [redacted].

Name withheld, *Submission 105*, p. 1.

(Continued)

“ My parents were recruited in 1972 shortly after losing my older brother [redacted], when they were young, uneducated, and financially struggling. The JW's recruited them during their most vulnerable moment by promising they would see their deceased son again in “Paradise Earth” after Armageddon. This promise of resurrection exploited their grief and gave them false hope while simultaneously providing them with a structured belief system that became their substitute for formal education.

Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 1.

“ Workers in isolation, acute crisis or high stress situations are some of the most vulnerable to appeals by cultic and fringe organisations. Without access to professional help, they will seek support and affirmation wherever they can find it.

Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 229*, p. 10.

“ I was a vulnerable young man with pre existing childhood trauma when I met Fusion. I was ripe for the picking – a prime target, nerdy and desperate for someone to tell me I was OK that I was good at something.

Name withheld, *Submission 98*, p. 3.

False or misleading solutions

Tactic: Groups/leaders position themselves as an immediate and absolute solution to distress or crisis, then progressively increase demands.

Target area: Life-transitions and adjustments

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ We were always to be on the lookout for a time to do this, when people told you of their struggles, we were to be there ready to tell them the solution.

Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

“ One of the biggest drawcards for this church was the belief in the healing power of God. They would often tell people who were sick or dying that if they came along to this church they could be healed by God.

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

“ ... for a young vulnerable woman who was very controlled by her own family, the thought of being able to be free and leave my body was very exciting. I think that is probably one of those things that drew a lot of New-Age seekers into the cult. Those were the two introductory courses, and they were the most innocuous. And then you did the third course, which was essentially where they laid out their entire theology ...

Dr Ahona Guha, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.



Exploitation of therapeutic contexts

Tactic: Recruitment can occur in therapeutic contexts, especially when a trusted authority introduces the group. This differs from ethical practice, which maintains clear boundaries and avoids promoting group affiliation.

Target area: Educational, therapeutic or institutional settings



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I was seeing a therapist called [redacted]. She kept telling me about workshops called path of love and that I should go. I eventually did 3 weekend workshops. The 3rd was the last I attended as they played a recording of ohsho who was the leader of a cult from the 80s/90s. I didn't realise this was part of it.

Kelly Maguire, *Submission 146*, p. 1.

“ A method of recruitment that I haven't seen discussed extensively but is potentially one of the most egregious is recruitment that involves a healthcare professional. A Victorian interviewee who spoke with me for my podcast went to see a psychologist in Melbourne for help with childhood trauma unrelated to any kind of cult experience. Her therapist attempted to recruit her into a known cult ...

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

“ My physical and mental health were continuing to get worse but according to my therapist [redacted] I just wasn't doing enough qigong and was probably cheating in my dietary restrictions and fasting. I was required as a consequence to do more psychotherapy and more fasting and more qigong. I suggested I should see a gp but no that would mess with the groups energy if prescribed medication so I was to follow his advice to continue regular fasting, qigong and psychotherapy with him.

Name withheld, *Submission 243*, p. 2.



Deception-based recruitment

Incremental disclosure

Incremental disclosure

Tactics: 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.

Target areas: Social participation; Organisational and community-based settings

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

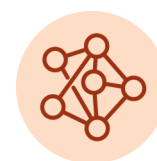
“ The time commitment demanded escalated dramatically, consuming evenings, weekends, and eventually impacting her work and personal life. This aligns with reports of SCJ members being kept intensely busy, sometimes justified by slogans like being “too busy to sin”. Simultaneously, a systematic process of isolation began. She was actively discouraged and eventually pressured to sever ties with family, long-standing friends, and her previous church community.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 2.

“ New members were to be treated as ‘babes in Christ’ and only to be ‘feed on the milk of the word, not the meat.’ This meant that many of the group's more hardline practices were glossed over, so as to not scare off newer members before they are firmly enmeshed in the group.

Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

(Continued)



“ I was recently attending a Bible class 3x week on Mon/wed/fri for about 3 hours each time from 6.30pm – 9.30pm ... About 3 months in they had to change rooms due to a supposed “plumbing issue” and once in the new room were told that the teachers couldn’t afford this rent and we should “donate” 60/mnth to assist with paying the rent otherwise the Bible class will not be able to continue. I believe this is a form of coercion and control and isolated me from my friends and family. I barely slept or had time to shower or basic hygiene and was burnt out and suffered in multiple areas of my life.

Name withheld, *Submission 14*, p. 1.

“ When I began studying to become a JW the teachings were superficial and pleasant. You are loved unconditionally and supported constantly. Once you are baptised the pressure to conform in every part of your life, increases gradually and is threatened with consequences. My faith, knowledge and conscience become irrelevant when they disagree with the self appointed leaders of the organisation.

Name withheld, *Submission 18*, p. 1.



Opportunistic recruitment

Targeting isolation and loneliness • Expanding into more isolated areas

Targeting isolation and loneliness

Tactics: 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.



Target areas: Families and relationships; Life-transitions and adjustments

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ We were both members of our local CFA and on an occasion to drop off some training documents to him, he asked what was wrong. I immediately burst in to tears and poured my heart out about feeling lonely and depressed. Ryan listened patiently and then told me he knew of a place that could help me. I was initially sceptical, but decided that I had nothing to lose by going once.

Catherine Carey, *Submission 112*, p. 1.

“ Mum was a vulnerable migrant from Holland, isolated, unable to speak English well, and trapped in an abusive marriage. The Jehovah's Witnesses offered her belonging, direction, and promises of safety, but they also took control.

Name withheld, *Submission 246*, p. 1.

“ They knew who to target. They didn't go after the strong. They went after the lonely. The grieving. The freshly divorced. The addicted. The incels. The disabled. The poor. The people who had lost their homes, their jobs, their loved ones and were desperate for belonging. Desperate for something to make sense. And the cult offered just enough love, just enough answers, just enough community to secure their trust. And once they trusted them, they were susceptible to influence.

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 9.

Expanding into more isolated areas

Tactic: 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.



Target area: Public spaces

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ The followers (Friends) are widely spread across the state, although there is a tendency towards rural and regional communities.

Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 5.

“ ... there were very big recruitment drives in the 1930s and 40s in rural and regional areas. To be fair, there are followings in places like Burwood, Greensborough and Doncaster here in the city, but the isolation of some of those rural properties, like the Colac one for instance, means you do not see them from the road – it is a family farm. These places were set up generations ago in order to hold these meetings each year. I think these places are a bit of a hangover from the recruitment drives. The families are so deeply entrenched that those farms, held in family names, are still used as a base, and I think will continue to be used as a base going forward because they are isolated and they are able to hide there without anybody really paying attention or being able to ask too many questions.

Laura McConnell, public hearing, Melbourne, 13 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

“ They continue to attend ‘musters’, which are four-day events in remote areas of central Victoria, away from phone reception, to ensure they can’t be ‘listened to’ by the government or people who disagree with their views.

Name withheld, *Submission 239*, pp. 1–2.

“ In certain rural or suburban communities, Miviludes has observed the installation of structured communities or groups that initially present themselves as spiritual collectives, eco-village projects or wellness centers. Once established, these groups can exert pressure on local authorities (applying for subsidies, occupying communal buildings), sow mistrust of public services (town halls, schools, social centers) or generate tensions with the surrounding population.

Miviludes, *Submission 118*, p. 4.



Emotional manipulation/grooming

Love bombing • Blurring/removing personal boundaries

Love bombing

Tactic: 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.



* ‘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.

Target area: Families and relationships

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ What survivors have told me from many of these ones is that love-bombing feeling of ‘Hey, you’re one of us now and we’re your family,’ and over time that love-bombing then seems to turn into a leash, a control, that people feel.

Richard Baker, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

- “ Love bombing was very common, using excessive warmth and deeply spiritual language to build rapid attachment, loyalty and dependence. What appeared to be connection and community was in practice a structured assimilation model, where belonging became conditional on service, giving and compliance. Inside the system obedience was framed as faith, and questioning leadership was treated as if you were questioning God himself. Those who complied were celebrated, while those who slowed down or spoke up were sidelined or labelled as divisive. It was psychological conditioning that left people anxious, ashamed and terrified of losing belonging.

Elise Heerde, public hearing, Melbourne, 20 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

- “ If someone whose needs are not being adequately met in these areas is exposed to such love bombing, it can overpower their judgement and they may ignore their intuitions that would have otherwise alerted them that something was not quite right.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 17.

- “ Early praise and attention flooded in whenever I toed the line, whenever I gave the right answers and said the right things. But the moment I stepped even slightly outside the expected path, that affection dried up. Their love was a leash, not a lifeline.

Name withheld, *Submission 4*, p. 3.

- “ ... various members of the congregation reached out to me by calling or texting me to check on my welfare and express concern about my lack of meeting attendance. Some of these members I had barely even spoken to the whole time we had been in the congregation. The pressure was intense.

Name withheld, *Submission 104*, p. 4.

Blurring/removing personal boundaries

Tactic: 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.

Target area: Families and relationships

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ Vulnerable members of the community are typically more likely to have difficulty asserting their boundaries or knowing how to politely decline further visits.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 18.

- “ ... no area of your life is out of bounds, including what you do to earn a living, what you do with your income, what you do with your time, what you do in the bedroom, what you eat, whether you smoke or drink, what you wear, what you read, watch or listen to, nor do you have a right to any privacy when it comes to any of these areas that they believe they have ownership of.

Name withheld, *Submission 273*, p. 8.

- “ Power dynamics in the client-practitioner relationship create risks of dependency and potential exploitation. Clients may perceive practitioners as possessing special knowledge or healing abilities, rendering them vulnerable to coercive control ... risk of boundary violations and sexual misconduct, with increased vulnerability during states of psychological openness ...

Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 14.





Demographic-based recruitment

Targeting vulnerable cohorts • Targeting faith or cultural communities

Targeting vulnerable cohorts

Tactic: Groups focus on certain cohorts or people who may be more likely to be socially isolated or seeking community, such as young people and international students.

In some cases, groups apply internal criteria that exclude certain cohorts, such as individuals with disabilities, financial instability or mental health challenges.

Groups with genuine intentions prioritise inclusion and adapt support rather than screening for utility or compliance.

Target area: Organisational and community-based settings

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ When I joined I was 19. I had been through some very traumatic events before that. I was isolated from my friends from school, and I was ripe to be sucked into a cult, I would say. There were many, many people—it was not uncommon for school teenagers to join and then be placed with another family from the cult so that they could help them attend more meetings, and eventually many of them were completely cut off from their external families.

Catherine Carey, public hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

“ ... their inducements of friendship and cultivating a sense of belonging has been attractive for, often, first year or, in particular, international students, who are quite vulnerable. The group have left flyers around our university and posters in different eateries, in libraries, in toilets and other common spaces. They do often attend student club events, and they openly refer to these as a fishing pool. This is how students and parents of students have reported the situation to us and how that first contact comes about.

Professor Julie Cogin, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

“ The GRC had a large contingent of migrants as first generation attendees, all joining up upon immigrating to work at Shell, Alcoa or Ford. Many of these migrants were from war effected countries post WW2, giving them an additional layer of trauma that cultic groups are able to exploit.

Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 2.

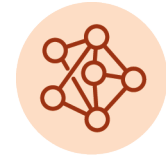
“ I am an international student, and last year I volunteered with UMSU welfare, where we ran free lunches every Thursday. While running one of these lunches I was approached by a young woman who asked me if she could have some food. The conversation quickly shifted to our religious beliefs. She told me she was from a religious college in Richmond, and she wanted me to visit her college with her right then and there. She told me she had heard and could speak to God. When I politely declined, she put her hand on my shoulder and prayed for me for a couple of minutes. If I was new to the country and if I was religiously inclined, this would have worked on me, and this is only one of a few instances that we face.

Sonika Agarwal, Education Public Affairs Officer, University of Melbourne Student Union, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

“ ... no specific people that are being targeted, but they do have recruitment criteria: people without disability—and this is included in discrimination technically—people without financial struggle, people without any sort of problem, basically, mental health problems included. Also, they are targeting people who are Australians, or at least who have a minimum three-year visa. This is from my experience last time, but the recruitment criteria will always change, because at one point in 2022 they were only recruiting Australians.

Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

Targeting faith or cultural communities



Tactic: Recruiters/members may target culturally or religiously aligned communities, using assumptions about receptiveness to faith-based messaging. This can extend to targeting faith leaders so they can reach and influence their congregations.

Target area: Organisational and community-based settings

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... they approach people who tend to look like people who are going to church—friendly faces—or maybe from a certain ethnicity, let us say African, because Africans are pretty big on church; Filipinos as well. So people who look like that.

Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

“ They hover around the margins, posing as legitimate religious organisations, deflecting questions about their structure, origins and purpose with evasive non-answers ... they even attend the worship services of main line faith communities in order to try and identify those they think might be vulnerable to recruitment.

Brendan Byrne, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

“ ... they are really overtly recruiting and targeting vulnerable young people, specifically people from non-Australian backgrounds who come here to study, and particularly kids from Christian homes, inviting them to Bible studies and that sort of thing.

Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 21 October 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.



Structured recruitment

Recruitment quotas

Recruitment quotas



Tactic: Groups set recruitment targets or quotas and apply pressure, sanctions or loss of status when members fail to meet expected recruitment levels. This tactic can include the use of internal checklists, reporting tools, and communication channels to monitor and coordinate recruitment.

Target area: Public spaces

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Members are pressured to meet quotas in distributing publications on the streets and YouTube views.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 3.

“ ... guilt trips that you weren't doing enough if you weren't selling or recruiting enough. We were told a 'no is only a no for now' – keep on asking people to join, repeatedly.

Name withheld, *Submission 162*, p. 12.

(Continued)

“ When I was a child, we had to write how many pieces of literature we sold, how many hours we were out in ‘field service’ (witnessing), how many people we had committed to visit again, and how many bible studies we started. If we didn’t do enough ‘hours’ we felt bad. Each month the hours quota was reset and we had to start from scratch.

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, pp. 18–19.

“ The fishing stage requires recruiters to get the contact details, especially phone numbers, of the target recruit to be considered as a fish—it is a target recruit, yes. They even have a checklist of it, and they even have a follow-up list on that. And then after that, at the meeting stage, they also have a checklist and a reporting list on how we can proceed with this person, and then they normally share about this target recruit with their adviser to know what the best way is to manipulate them to get them into Bible study.

Gloria, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

Behaviours

Behaviours are the mechanisms through which coercive high-control groups establish and maintain control over members after recruitment. They differ from recruitment tactics in that they are not aimed at drawing people in, but at maintaining involvement by influencing how members think, act, relate to others and understand themselves.

The behaviours documented in this Section reflect common and recurring experiences identified across the Inquiry evidence and operate across a range of domains: psychological, physical and personal restrictions.

Understanding how these behaviours operate, overlap and reinforce each other is important to recognising coercive control, identifying harm early, and informing legislative, regulatory and support responses.

Individual behaviours may not, in isolation, amount to coercion or harm. It is the pattern, persistence and the environment in which the behaviours occur collectively that defines it.



Control and indoctrination

Mind control/thought reform • Indoctrination • Language manipulation • Obedience conditioning

Mind control/thought reform

Behaviour: Manipulation of beliefs, language, and reasoning to suppress critical thinking and enforce ideological conformity.

Unlike genuine educational or spiritual formation, which encourages questioning and independent reflection, thought reform punishes doubt and narrows a person's capacity to think outside the group's framework.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... didn't just influence my thoughts – they also infiltrated my dreams, my nervous system, and my sense of safety in the world. From a young age, I suffered recurring nightmares rooted in the graphic and violent imagery used ...

Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 2.

“ ... we were not just taught certain beliefs, we were completely immersed in it ... Conditioning our minds before I was even able to think critically for myself. These teachings becoming my belief, my understanding and absolute truth about the world I was living in.

Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 2.

“ The process of formation, initiation and induction training deadened my brain, disengaged me from myself, my family, friends and from the real world and introduced me to a state of constant anxiety to perform and to keep awake amid the exhaustion of the day's routine.

Mary Hughes, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 December 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

(Continued)



“ Through years of intense indoctrination from birth, their minds were programmed with an ‘us-versus-them’ worldview, where any outsider, especially law enforcement, was painted as a demonic agent of the ‘System’ sent to destroy them. They had no external frame of reference to understand what was normal or that their experience was harmful; instead, they were filled with phobias about the outside world and taught that any punishment they received was divinely sanctioned discipline.

Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 85.

“ My choices, movements, thoughts, and feelings were all regulated by the group’s leadership. I was discouraged from making independent decisions, punished for questioning authority, and repeatedly told that my thoughts and emotions were influenced by “the devil.” This left me without a stable internal compass, which took years of psychological support to begin rebuilding.

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

Indoctrination

Behaviour: 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.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I was in a state of vulnerability; not just as a person experiencing mental health concerns, but as someone oblivious to the indoctrinations peppered throughout therapeutic interventions.

Name withheld, *Submission 180*, p. 1.

“ With strict and repetitive indoctrination, members are conditioned away from critical thinking. Doubt is suppressed as we are told to “bring our thoughts into captivity”. There are warnings to be careful not to let the corruption and depravity of the world infiltrate our homes through media and technology.

Name withheld, *Submission 223*, p. 7.

“ 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.

Name withheld, *Submission 129*, p. 3.

“ 2x2 members are so deeply indoctrinated that they find it hard to understand why “outsiders” would not want to be a part of the group given they have this knowledge of so called “truth”.

Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 8.

“ ... taught me to see humanity in a black and white narrative, wherein an us vs them narrative was stark, and blind obedience to the groups teaching was the only means by which one could avoid being “left behind” within the apocalyptic scenario ...

Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 3.



Language manipulation

Behaviour: Redefining or restricting language to neutralise dissent, reframe harm as care and turn criticism inward. This can include terminology used by specific groups with meanings only known to group members.

Groups with genuine intentions may develop shared terminology, but they do not use language to obscure harm or prevent members from accurately understanding/describing their experiences.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Those who understand the figurative language receive atonement for their sins and salvation. Those who do not understand the figurative language become outsiders and because their sins are not atoned for, they do not receive salvation.

Appendix B of submission ('Parables exam questions'), Ryan Manuel Halim, *Submission 266*, p. 35.

“ Loading the language is the use of jargon internal to (and only understandable by) the group. Constricting language constricts the person. Capacities for thinking and feeling are significantly reduced.

Nigel Denning, *Submission 231, Attachment 1*, p. 9.

“ ... thought-terminating clichés, that is, when a Jehovah's Witness hears them, it causes them to stop in their tracks and forget their initial concern – inoculation against taking congregants action to stop crimes and human rights abuses.

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 12.

“ The practice of looking up misunderstood words in Scientology's own Tech Dictionary can function as a thought-terminating cliché by discouraging questioning and critical analysis. Additionally, it involves the use of loaded language, reinforcing emotional associations and making it harder for individuals to challenge or explore alternative perspectives.

Name withheld, *Submission 28*, p. 7.

Obedience conditioning

Behaviour: Training members to equate compliance with moral worth and disobedience with guilt, danger, or spiritual failure.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I was told that if I submitted total obedience to him, he would 'take me by the hand and 'lead me to heaven'. I was discouraged from questioning anything—from doctrine to abuse. The message was simple: submission is salvation ... This doctrine of absolute obedience created the perfect environment for what I now recognise as systematic grooming.

Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 16.

“ After a particularly difficult 'spiritual guidance session,' I had rebelled the following week and refused to go into his bedroom again. [Redacted] took me aside a few weeks later and impressed on me about how I'd "grievously hurt" his feelings and how I had committed "mortal sins of grave disobedience" ...

Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 16.

(Continued)

- “ We were constantly reminded that we were sinners. By being obedient, we would be saved, and we would save others from hell through our prayers. That was our work. Manipulation of me was possible because of my insecurity, my self-doubt and low self-esteem.

Mary Hughes, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.



Emotional and psychological abuse

Gaslighting • Public humiliation and shaming • Emotional invalidation • Forced self-disclosure

Gaslighting

Behaviour: Deliberately causing individuals to doubt their perceptions, memories or beliefs to maintain control.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ Leadership had full control over how interactions were recorded and interpreted ... This method of handling sensitive matters not only obstructed accountability but created a culture of institutional gaslighting, where individuals were regularly misrepresented in official records and denied the right to respond or correct the narrative.

Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 9.

- “ When individuals are reported on, they may be confronted with the contents of the report, which might contradict their own perceptions of events or actions. This confrontation can make them doubt their own memory or understanding of the situation, leading to confusion and self-doubt.

Name withheld, *Submission 28*, p. 14.

- “ The student/instructor answered and the main instructor got quite upset at her answer as he believed that she was trying to act superior, when it didn't look or sound like that at all. He proceeded to belittle and attack her verbally. He put the blame on her, “Do you think I want to do this? I don't want to do this, you're making me, you're wasting everyone's time”. It took about 1 hour of gaslighting and put downs, while she was clearly upset, until he let her leave.

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

- “ The final tipping point for me was when I discovered how many girls had been sexually exploited by [redacted]... On the one hand he'll say it was tantra and spiritual and in the next breath he denies it and says that the women are all crazy and none of it ever happened.

Name withheld, *Submission 276*, p. 6.



Public humiliation and shaming

Behaviour: Shaming or reprimanding individuals in front of others to enforce conformity and deter dissent.

Domain: Psychological harm



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Teachers and clergy reinforced this by publicly shaming me for wearing shorts or pants on school grounds—one even mentioning it in front of my daughter’s entire class. This wasn’t just dress code enforcement; it was a character assassination of me designed to drive a wedge between me and my children.

Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 11.

“ Culture of public shaming, including the Senior Pastor reading written complaints in open office and requiring staff to respond with their thoughts about the person complaining, the current HR Manager creating a wall of shame dedicated to the mistakes and difficulties a staff member was facing ...

Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 4.

“ Hours of being shouted at, insulted, threatened, harassed and exposed in front of the entire ensemble, selected individuals in individual sessions, and group denunciation and defamation sessions.

Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, p. 6.

“ Shaming of women seeking or undergoing higher education.

Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 1.

“ I had to attend all mattings, but sit at the back, as someone marked as disciplined, and as a shaming exercise and example to others of what would happen to you if you stepped out of line.

Name withheld, *Submission 246*, p. 4.

“ They were also regularly subject to ‘confronts’ where the Kenja group surrounded them and shouted at them – often shaming them for a certain action such as wearing a skirt that was deemed too short. This had significant emotional impacts on the girls.

Name withheld, *Submission 283*, p. 7.

Emotional invalidation

Behaviour: Dismissing, minimising or reframing expressions of harm and discomfort as a misunderstanding or disobedience.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Those who left the church were labelled “divisive” or “of the devil.” Even when former elders or experienced professionals raised concerns, they were dismissed or discredited.

Stuart Alsop, *Submission 158*, p. 2.

“ My experience of managing a mental health challenge was dismissed and minimised by the older male minister who was responsible for allocating ministers to districts. I realised that my health would quickly deteriorate again in a system where the senior ministers had no understanding of the human needs of others, so I felt I was left with no option but to leave the ministry.

Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 3.

“ I brought it up with my mother. I wanted her to acknowledge it. Not even to take responsibility, but to just see it. Hear it. The pain. The consequences. The blood on the hands of the movement she was a part of. Her response: “*Don’t be ridiculous. Lots of people kill themselves*”. There was no awareness or reflection. No sorrow. No space to consider the decades of harm she helped enable. No acceptance that she was present in the lives of many of those children. She held a role in their upbringing. She saw what was happening, or at least saw enough, and said nothing. To me, that single sentence sums up everything that’s still wrong. The complete detachment. The minimisation. The callousness. That moment was the end of any illusion I had left about who she is [original emphasis].

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 16.



Forced self-disclosure

Behaviour: 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.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ The social bonds, however can become coercive and oppressive where followers have shared highly personal and potentially compromising information in group confessional settings and find that the information can be used against them.

Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 11.

“ I was drafted. As a child “auditor.” At age 12. Forced to interrogate adults. So-called “peers.” ... All while adults watched. Video recorded. Took full contemporaneous notes. Nodded. Instructed.

Serge Del Mar, *Submission 235*, p. 7.

“ She is expected to confess her sin to the elders (all men) and if they determine that a “committee of elders” (formerly a “judicial committee”) is to be formed, then she will meet with 3 men who will ask very detailed and probing questions of her.

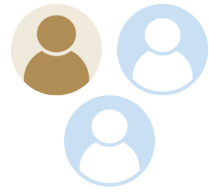
Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 23.

“ Confessions in some cults are obtained during one on one interrogation, video recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions are preserved on record by the cult indefinitely. These confessions are then used by the cult to further control and manipulate them, highlighting their perceived flaws and reinforcing their dependence on the cult for “salvation” or “correction.” This can be deeply shaming and traumatic.

Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 66.

“ Auditing: a form of coercive confession where personal secrets are recorded and often later used against individuals ... Strips children of personal boundaries by encouraging disclosure of intimate thoughts under pressure and surveillance.

Name withheld, *Submission 100*, pp. 2–7.



Fear-based control

Fear-based teachings • Fear conditioning • Apocalyptic narratives

Fear-based teachings

Behaviour: Use of catastrophic threats (i.e., damnation, apocalypse, punishment) to compel obedience and suppress questioning.

Belief in judgment or consequence alone does not constitute coercion; coercion arises when fear is deliberately intensified and personalised to control behaviour typically to someone’s personal detriment.

Domain: Psychological harm



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Members continue to be subjected to fear-based and apocalyptic teachings into adolescence, instilling deep anxiety about the consequences of disobedience, sin, or leaving the group ... which is routinely cited to justify the authority of church leadership. This constitutes a clear form of spiritual abuse, using divine punishment and fear of eternal damnation to compel submission and suppress critical thinking.

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

“ There is a strong fear of death and the end times, that I and many of my friends experienced as children and continue to as adults. Some friends told me the fear of death was the main reason they were baptised ... These teachings created fear from a young age to obey the rules and follow the expectations of the group, because if you do not follow them well enough, you will be left unprotected when Armageddon comes.

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

“ ... often used the threat of and fear of insanity and suicide to keep people in line. We were all told in no uncertain terms that leaving the Family or talking about it to outsiders would result in the person going mad.

David Whitaker, *Submission 151*, p. 3.

“ I was taught to believe their souls were in danger. I feared they would go to hell if I didn't get them saved. How could I possibly disclose what was happening to me when doing so might undo the chance I believed I had to bring them to God?

Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, pp. 5–6.

Fear conditioning

Behaviour: Conditioning members to associate dissent, exit or non-compliance with severe emotional, social or existential consequences.

Domain: Psychological harm



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Fear was a potent tool – fear of spiritual damnation if she left, fear of disappointing the group, fear of losing the only community she had left. Critical thinking was actively suppressed through intense indoctrination and the discouragement of external information sources.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, pp. 2–3.

“ ... members of the 2x2 group experience significant fear and anxiety stemming from intense pressure to meet rigid expectations around appearance, meeting attendance, behaviour, and language. This environment fosters chronic stress, due to the constant threat of punishment or social exclusion for non-compliance.

Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 14.

“ Emotional distress is framed as proof of spiritual failure, creating an environment of spiritual terror.

Samson Rising, *Submission 270*, p. 61.

Apocalyptic narratives

Behaviour: 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.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Rejection of having children reflects apocalyptic indoctrination and loss of previously held life aspirations.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 27.

“ This apocalyptic worldview was not just a background belief – it shaped every part of my childhood. It controlled what I was allowed to read, watch, celebrate, or even say. I was forbidden from participating in birthdays, holidays, national events, school social events, and after-school activities.

Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 1.

“ I did not need to worry about graduating, getting married, or having children because the end of the world as we knew it was imminent. There was no emphasis on financial literacy or long-term planning.

Name withheld, *Submission 207*, p. 2.



Social control and isolation

Isolation from external relationships • Shunning/excommunication

Isolation from external relationships

Behaviour: 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.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ She was actively discouraged and eventually pressured to sever ties with family, long-standing friends, and her previous church community. These external relationships are consistently framed by SCJ as negative influences, obstacles to spiritual progress, or even as belonging to “Satan”.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 2.

“ I was instructed not to interact with people outside of the church family because that leads to the devil.

Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 3.

(Continued)



“ He builds intense psychological walls between members and their loved ones by portraying outsiders as dangerous, brainwashed, or spiritually toxic. He frames any concern from family as persecution, and warns that loving words or intervention strategies are simply manipulative traps.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 40.

“ People were moved around a lot. I was moved to several different high schools and then sent to England in year 12. After four years in England I was sent back to Australia. This stopped members from forming close long term relationships with outsiders. She later sent me back to England in an effort to destroy my relationship with my wife who has never been involved in the cult.

David Whitaker, *Submission 151*, p. 2.

Shunning/excommunication

Behaviour: Withdrawing social, emotional or familial contact as punishment for dissent or exit.

Choosing personal boundaries differs from organised, collective exclusion designed to inflict psychological harm or force return.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I supported a woman in my congregation who was in a custody dispute with her estranged husband ... During that year, I stopped attending meetings and faded out of the religion entirely. The social consequences were devastating. I was fully shunned by my family and anyone from the congregations who knew me.

Barbara Maccarrone, *Submission 12*, p. 2.

“ While they thought they could still recruit me, I was favourable to them, but once they realised I had definitely left the faith, I was completely shunned.

Name withheld, *Submission 134*, p. 5.

“ At 20, I was in a crucial developmental stage where I needed to feel worthy of love and acceptance as an adult. Instead, through my ostracization I learned that seeking independence – was so unacceptable I had to be completely cut off.

Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 22.

“ I was excommunicated and shunned out when I was 19 years old in 1999. The group claims not to excommunicate or to shun. Instead, what they do is very slowly through social exclusion and social isolation push you out if you do not adhere to the group's unwritten rules and standards.

Laura McConnell, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.



Creating dependency

Emotional dependence • Identity fusion • Conditional belonging • Boundary violations

Emotional dependence

Behaviour: Structuring relationships so that validation, belonging and self-worth depend on group approval.

Domain: Psychological harm



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ What is harder to grasp and appreciate is that people don’t join high-control groups or cults where these harms are clearly seen, they join communities where they can be known and belong. They then find these damaging behaviours were hidden, denied or justified and belonging is threatened when people raise questions or challenge authority.

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

- “ ... individuality didn’t matter; my sense of self was defined by obedience. Any decisions I made had to be vetted by my overseers and “prayed over and confirmed with prophecy” by myself and the “shepherds,” but the ultimate decisions were always made by the shepherds. Many times, I wanted to do something different and struggled with decisions that were made for me, but I ultimately had to submit to what I was told.

Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 66.

Identity fusion

Behaviour: Blurring personal identity with group identity.

Strong identification with a group is not inherently harmful; coercion occurs when personal identity is suppressed.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ ... group identity tends to override individual selfhood ...

RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, *Submission 241*, p. 2.

- “ Individuality is discouraged in favour of conformity to the group identity and mission. Personal goals, aspirations, and even relationships.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 7.

- “ Group identity supersedes individual identity ... whilst you might have a Spaniard, a Korean, a Malaysian and an American all dressed in their own cultural attire whilst worshipping, they have no real diversity of thought. Any such real diversity of thought would be a threat to “the unity of the congregation” and would either be stamped out or the individual would leave.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 15.



Conditional belonging

Behaviour: Making acceptance, love or status contingent on compliance and loyalty.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ Opportunities for involvement—whether through ministry roles, leadership positions, or public recognition—were not offered based on gifting, character, or calling, but were instead conditional on maintaining personal favour with the Senior Pastor.

Kevin Manning, *Submission 267*, p. 5.

- “ My parents consistently prioritised the church and its leaders above my safety and well-being. Their love for me was conditional, transactional, and tied to compliance.

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



(Continued)

“ The message was clear: no matter how much you did, it was never enough. There was always more preaching to do, more studying, more sacrifices to make. Every failure, every doubt, every missed meeting felt like a mark against my record. Love, I came to realize, was never unconditional. It was transactional. You were loved when you performed. You were loved when you obeyed. Love could be withdrawn the moment you hesitated.

Name withheld, *Submission 4*, p. 2.

“ ... there were moments where he would have utter fear and panic about being caught or seen with me by friends and family in public. He would tell me that he could lose everyone in his life because he was not dating someone from the same religion and would often break down over the conditional love his family and friends were showing. Something I didn't understand.

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

Boundary violations

Behaviour: Ignoring or overriding personal, emotional or physical boundaries.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Students were required to disclose personal matters across a wide spectrum including romantic relationships, sexual activity (or perceived temptation), gender, alcohol consumption, financial struggles, and mental health conditions. These disclosures were often not voluntarily offered but actively pursued by staff and leaders under the guise of “spiritual accountability.” ... Any discomfort or boundary violation was reframed as part of their spiritual refinement and preparation for leadership.

Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 7.

“ As children we were also taught from a young age to submit unquestioningly to authority, to never challenge or speak out against adults, and to see every member of the church as spiritually trustworthy simply by virtue of their position or attendance. This blind trust removes natural protective boundaries and fosters a dangerous environment where grooming can occur under the radar.

Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 3.

“ The combination of vulnerable clients seeking healing and mission-driven organisational cultures could facilitate boundary violations through power imbalances.

Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 7.



Restrictions on education and information

Information restriction • Information distortion • Restricted access to education

Information restriction

Behaviour: Limiting access to external media, alternative points of view or other critical sources of information.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... restricted information by discouraging higher learning or engaging in research outside ...

Name withheld, *Submission 207*, p. 4.

“ Social control manifests when organisations ... [implement] information restrictions that limit access to media, news, books, and external perspectives.

Dr Lani Roy, *Submission 237*, p. 18.

“ Cults often isolate recruits from outside information. Newspapers, books, television, and web access are all censored, ensuring that the only reality the recruit gets to experience is the one presented by the cult.

Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 31.

“ ... forbidden from reading outside sources about their own religion. All critical materials (including news articles and government reports) are labelled as “apostate lies,” and members are taught to avoid them at all costs—even when such information may protect them.

Name withheld, *Submission 80*, p. 7.

Information distortion

Behaviour: Misrepresenting external criticism or evidence to protect the group narrative.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... deliberately withholds information about its history and when it releases information it distorts it to appear more acceptable. By publishing its own diluted and censored versions of history, it gaslights members troubled about the deception.

Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, p. 18.

“ ... redefining words and challenging universally accepted meanings, and substituting his own definitions to shield himself from accountability. By weaponising semantics, he seeks to distort reality, evade legal standards, and maintain doctrinal authority over his followers.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 88.



Restricted access to education

Behaviour: Discouraging or preventing formal education, training or qualifications not aligned with group goals.

Domain: Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I was discouraged from education and despite finishing school with exceptional scores took a job and didn't go to university.

Name withheld, *Submission 82*, p. 3.

“ Some leaders even advise against attending university, suggesting that spiritual obedience is more important than personal ambition or education. This is particularly the case for women and girls.

Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 10.



(Continued)

“ Never a Catholic school—that was completely out of the question. There were some that homeschooled as well. But the majority are at state schools where they know they are not going to be getting religious education and they know they can pull their kids out of sex education classes and things like that, so that is where most of them go. No higher education for girls—it was frowned upon for a very long time. A few people did pursue that. I have heard now it is completely just forbidden.

Catherine Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

“ Further education is limited with attendance at a university forbidden. The highest level of education or qualification they can study for, is an Advanced Diploma in Accounting or Business Administration. Only selected utilitarian subjects are allowed.

Jill Aebi-Mytton, *Submission 173*, p. 2.



Labour and financial restrictions

Forced or coerced labour • Excessive time demands • Restrictions on recreation or rest • Forced or coerced tithing

Forced or coerced labour

Behaviour: Requiring unpaid or underpaid work presented as service, duty or spiritual obligation.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I worked for the cult leader for ten years for no pay (forced labour).

Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 7.

“ As children, we were the primary workforce for the cult’s fundraising arms, forced to engage in daily “witnessing” (proselytizing and soliciting donations) on the streets of foreign cities.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 33.

“ ... individuals were then recruited to work for him, particularly in psychic phone operations, but were underpaid, manipulated, and made to feel “spiritually privileged” to be working with him.

Thiruranjan Tharmarajah, *Submission 152*, p. 2.

“ I got no payment for anything. No money was kept on my person; it was all handed in, and if I had to get a taxi, I had to ask for the taxi money and return the receipt with the change before nightfall that day. I had no access to money, nor to my passport. We did not have any free access or use, and neither did we receive payment for anything.

Mary Hughes, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

“ ... a lot of these young people up there working are doing 14, 15, 16 hour days regularly. They don’t get paid. There’s no superannuation. There’s no workers comp.

Lived experience quote, Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 5.



Excessive time demands

Behaviour: Mandating attendance at frequent meetings, training, recruitment or labour activities to the extent that it dominates daily life.

Enthusiastic participation differs from structured overload that prevents rest, reflection or external engagement.

Domains: Personal restrictions; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ She lost her job as a data analyst at a major bank due to the extreme time demands placed on her by SCJ.

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

“ I had to endure a very difficult schedule serving in the Spanish congregation because I was taking the group out in service 2 to 3 times a week and there was days that I could only sleep 3 hours or even no sleep at all.

Andres Chiriff, *Submission 205*, p. 2.

“ Attendance at annual circuit and district conventions, which were often held in large outdoor venues during the peak of summer heat were mandatory to maintain good spiritual standing. These 3 annual events lasted anywhere from 3 to 8 days, generally beginning at 9:00 a.m. and lasting until 9:00 p.m. with parents struggling to keep their children quiet for hours while sitting in the sun.

Name withheld, *Submission 207*, p. 2.

“ 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.

“ ... the number of hours that need to be spent working, studying teachings or engaging in practices that fully occupy the mind can also keep questions at bay.

Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 6.



Restrictions on recreation or rest

Behaviour: Limiting or prohibiting hobbies, rest, holidays or non-group activities.

Committed involvement differs from deliberate exhaustion as a control tactic.

Domains: Personal restrictions; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I was never allowed to do any extracurricular activities, be it sport, disco’s, hobbies.

Name withheld, *Submission 19*, p. 1.

“ 24/7 availability for any activity until total exhaustion, little to no time for breaks, meals, rest, regeneration or even holidays.

Name withheld, *Submission 35, Attachment 1*, p. 7.



(Continued)

“ Holiday’s must be approved by the pastor and if you attended to visit another affiliated assembly it had to be made known to the Geelong Pastor & the pastor of the assembly you were visiting. Gatherings of more than 6 adults at any one time outside of approved meetings & camps was prohibited. Seen as an opportunity for idle gossip.

Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 4.

“ Seeking rest or questioning the workload was met with concern about your “heart posture.” Taking a break was framed as selfish, unless it was pre-approved and temporary. Even then, you were often contacted and asked to return to serve because “you’re just so anointed” or “we think you’ve had enough time”.

Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 6.

Forced or coerced tithing

Behaviour: Mandated financial contributions that may lead to financial strain and are coerced through fear or monitoring.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Members were required to pay tithes and add substantial offerings. This put enormous financial pressure on the membership.

Grahame Gee, *Submission 13*, p. 14.

“ I gave faithfully, even when I was struggling financially, because of the internalised fear that God would withdraw protection or favour.

Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 2.

“ While the standard ten percent of our income was the baseline, the messaging we received was laden with coercive language, urging us to contribute even more to ensure the church’s growth. It was made abundantly clear that true submission to the leadership required us to go beyond the norm and give generously, reinforcing a culture where financial support was equated with spiritual commitment.

Name withheld, *Submission 33*, p. 1.

“ ... the pressure to give is reinforced through fear-based teachings and subtle peer surveillance ...

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

“ Those that don’t tithe are told that any negative experience in life can be associated with their lack of financial contribution at a base rate of 10% of their gross incomes.

Name withheld, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

“ 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.

“ Additionally, he insisted on tithing, suggesting that financial misfortune or even bodily harm could result from failing to contribute.

Naresh Nayak, *Submission 217*, p. 1.





Restrictions on personal freedom and expression

Clothing • Physical appearance • Speech • Behavioural conformity rules

Clothing

Behaviour: Mandating specific clothing, colours or styles, or prohibiting certain attire such as jeans or casual wear.

Cultural or religious dress practices become coercive when non-compliance results in punishment, exclusion or shame.

Domain: Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I was forced to wear dresses and skirts when attending church gatherings and whenever I wore suit pants it was heavily discouraged and shunned.

Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 1.

“ The church is particularly judgemental of young women and their appearance. There is a lot of control about what you wear. The church published articles in their magazines and even brochures with pictures of what is appropriate. This includes: skirts below the knee, sleeves that cover the shoulders, dresses that don't cling to the body and anything 'flashy'. As young women we wanted to show our own style, but Mum would be pulled aside and admonished if anything seemed out of line. My younger sister wore a skirt above her knee to the supermarket once, and my Mum burned it.

Name withheld, *Submission 82*, p. 2.

“ The appropriate way to dress was another big topic especially for women lest we lead men astray with our skin. Always cover up. Skirts or dresses were deemed the most appropriate.

Name withheld, *Submission 47*, p. 4.

“ The dress code of the group is very complex and would take too long to list. It is a very important part of the group and identifier for other members when they notice each other by their clothing in public. When an “interested friend” starts attending events, in their first visit, they will likely not be wearing clothes that meet the dress code, but will quickly start to adapt to the dress code in future visits, because of the pressure to fit in.

Name withheld, *Submission 190*, pp. 4–5.



Physical appearance

Behaviour: Regulating grooming, hair, makeup or physical presentation to enforce conformity.

Domain: Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Women must not cut their hair or wear it in a stylish manner. This includes no obvious hair dye. Women must not wear make-up, jewellery (other than a simple watch and wedding band), must not pierce their ears, or have tattoos.

Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 6.

“ Strict modest dress code; plain corporate appropriate attire. Male Suit + Tie, no beards, no long hair. Female, modest dress or long skirt + blouse. No trousers, no heavy makeup, no flashy jewellery.

Name withheld, *Submission 76*, p. 1.



(Continued)

“ For men, anything other than short-back-and-sides military style haircut was deemed unacceptable, and at one stage it was preached that even beards were un-Christian.

Alistair McKeich, *Submission 126*, p. 2.

“ In 2022, at the age of 75, for the first time I had a hair cut over which I had control. It was traumatic to experience the care and concern of the hairdresser who asked me how I wanted to look. Seeing myself in the mirror I was shocked. I did not know myself.

Mary Hughes, *Submission 236*, p. 8.

“ Women are discouraged from wearing “immodest” clothing and criticised for wearing trousers, jewellery, make up and having short hair. None of these rules are written down as they are in some groups. Instead, there are a lot of “unwritten rules” about these things. People who break these unwritten rules may be openly criticized for doing so, or there may be preaching happen about these matters.

Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 3.

Speech

Behaviour: Limiting what individuals can say, ask or express, including banning criticism or questioning.

Domain: Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ To survive I’ve gained learned behaviours to mute, restrain and redact myself and my speech, creating a fractured sense of self and with the outwardly compliant “safe” self and the silenced real self, hidden away for years. To speak has been to risk physical confrontation with my father and/or emotional/verbal abuse.

Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 2.

“ ... children in the cult were coached extensively to lie to outsiders about their experiences, to protect the group.

Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 4.

“ When I asked how she was feeling or what she thought about something, she’d deflect and redirect the focus onto me. It was subtle, but deeply unfamiliar. For the first time, I began to suspect she was being coached.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 20.



Behavioural conformity rules

Behaviour: Imposing rigid norms for posture, movement, punctuality or conduct, including during meetings and services.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Every aspect of our behaviour was monitored for compliance and conformity: deportment, posture, silence in walking and movement, modulated voice. This extended even to ‘custody of the eyes’, to suppress curiosity or to dare to form a question or a critique.

Mary Hughes, *Submission 236*, p. 5.

“ ... no one was allowed to move from the city of the cult you belong to, I have always been curious about traveling and moving but staying ... was my only option if I wanted to be accepted and still have my family.

Name withheld, *Submission 202*, p. 1.



(Continued)

“ I experienced firsthand physical force and discipline of smacking by Sunday School teachers if I didn’t listen, be separated from my class or friends by sitting with the older kids, placed on a chair at the back of the Sunday School hall or dragged in my sleeping bag with foam mattress and pillow into a pitch black Sunday School room by myself with the door closed during evening services. All this happened because I might have got caught talking to my friends / classmates.

Name withheld, *Submission 265*, p. 2.



Restrictions on relationships and social life

Restricted friendships • Controlled intimate or sexual relationships • Forced separation from family

Restricted friendships

Behaviour: Discouraging or prohibiting relationships with non-members or former members.

Domain: Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I was not allowed to attend school camps, sleepovers, formals, or birthday parties. I did not tell my school friends about the church because I was deeply ashamed. I wanted to feel normal. I spent most of my school years lying about why I could not attend social events, pretending I had a full and exciting life outside school. In reality, I went home to isolation and fear.

Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 1.

“ I wasn’t allowed to have close friends outside of the organization; “worldly” people, we were taught, could only corrupt us and pull us away from Jehovah.

Name withheld, *Submission 4*, p. 1.

“ All 5 children continued going to church with Mum. We made friends there, however outside of that our lives were challenging as we stood out from our peers at school – we didn’t celebrate holidays, we weren’t allowed to visit our school friends (they were considered ‘worldly’ and therefore bad and potentially dangerous companions) ...

Name withheld, *Submission 82*, p. 1.

“ I was not allowed to make friends at school. Being a social and positive person, people were drawn to me and I wanted to be friends. I would play with other children but constantly monitor myself to not get too close. I would feel guilty if I had too much fun or began to like the other children too much. I was told to constantly ‘keep separate from the world’ and that if I had to spend time with worldly people, I should use those opportunities to ‘witness’ to them (try to convert them).

Name withheld, *Submission 104*, p. 1.

“ People I had served alongside for over a decade cut contact with no explanation. Former friends no longer returned messages. I was quietly excluded from events, team communications, and even casual conversations. The message was clear: those who disengage are no longer part of the “spiritual family”.

Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 12.



Controlled intimate or sexual relationships



Behaviour: 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.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ The church’s control over relationships was devastating. Premarital sex was forbidden, and I was coerced into marrying my now-ex-husband after engaging in premarital sex due to pressure and naivety, despite not wanting to. The marriage was unhappy, and sex was distressing, as enjoyment was deemed “vulgar.” This shame around sexuality persists, contributing to emotional trauma.

Name withheld, *Submission 262*, p. 1.

“ ... in some branches of the church, kissing your boyfriend/girlfriend could also result in a forced marriage.

Name withheld, *Submission 245*, p. 3.

“ I was then placed in an endogamous arranged marriage with a gay conversion survivor. We were not allowed to have any intimate experiences before marriage, and I was to trust God by walking down the aisle first. We were told divorce wasn’t an option, and this was the will of God for us.

Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Submission 103*, p. 19.

“ Relationships with the young men wasn’t allowed until I was 17 years of age and 18 years for the men. Pastor [redacted] permission and parents’ consent was the absolute must for any dating. There were rules and restrictions in dating, marriage within the church.

Name withheld, *Submission 265*, p. 3.

Forced separation from family



Behaviour: Encouraging or requiring reduced/no contact with family members deemed unsupportive or ‘outsiders’.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ She was actively discouraged and eventually pressured to sever ties with family ... This deliberate isolation is a hallmark tactic of high-control groups, designed to increase the individual’s dependence on the group for all social, emotional, and spiritual needs, making it significantly harder to question the group or leave. The group effectively becomes the member’s entire social network and support system.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 2.

“ ... he needed to keep no contact with Mum or the others ... he couldn’t reply to my email even on the issues of basic livelihood, like Uni admission, fee, and visa stay, etc. And suddenly I found all the doors of JGD Buddhism were closed, I couldn’t get hold of [redacted], and no source to know how my son was for months.

Name withheld, *Submission 191*, pp. 3–4.

“ Your own family and outside friends are a direct threat to the cults’ influence and need to have their ability to access you reduced at every opportunity.

Stop Religious Coercion Australia, *Submission 30*, p. 2.



Restrictions on medical or psychological care

Discouragement of medical care • Discouragement of mental health support

Discouragement of medical care

Behaviour: 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.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ They were refused access to medical care outside the group, and were taught to refuse and deplore use of medication. Adults would instead pray for and over children and conduct exorcisms on children, as well as sometimes physically punishing children for remaining ill.

Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 2.

“ We were actively discouraged from seeing doctors by the church because science and doctors were “of the devil” and would make us question our faith, and if we were to go to doctors it would lead us astray from god. We were not supposed to talk to anyone other than parents and the pastor about any health or mental health issues.

Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 1.

“ An example of medical care which is preached against in the group are abortions. Abortions are an absolute no-go in the group under any circumstances. If it is found that you have had an abortion, you would be at risk of being disfellowshipped.

Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 4.

“ Members were to avoid medicine and Doctors. Instead, members were required to trust in God for healing. This had catastrophic consequences or anyone who fell seriously ill. I remember a mother who had a four-year-old and 14-year-old daughter who developed breast cancer. She did not seek treatment and as a result died leaving her daughters without a mother. To fall sick was seen as proof you had sinned and therefore there was a lot of shame around becoming sick. My family and I experienced this when my twin brother developed epilepsy as a teen. He did not respond to the prayers for healing and the seizures increased in intensity. One month short of our 21st birthday he had a massive seizure at night and ended facedown in the pillow suffocating.

Grahame Gee, *Submission 13*, p. 3.

“ By denying access to conventional medical care and insisting on faith healing, the group controlled the life and death of its members, punishing doubt and reinforcing dependency.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 84.



Discouragement of mental health support

Behaviour: Framing counselling, psychiatry or therapy as a moral failure, weak or disloyal.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ There was preaching about mental illness and diagnoses which were told to be a lie and anyone with autism or ADHD are just kids that misbehave and must be smacked to fix it (I was diagnosed with ADHD at 18, I always had a feeling I had it but it was very looked down on).

Name withheld, *Submission 202*, p. 2.

“ Mental Health issues are largely ignored or denied, and you are seen as spiritually defective. Medication and psychological support are discouraged for mental health conditions – instead, you’re encouraged to pray more because the Holy Spirit is the counsellor.

Name withheld, *Submission 211*, p. 2.

“ Mental health intervention was completely taboo. In my later years I learned that a few friends had sought therapy but I was sworn to secrecy as it was considered a spiritual weakness if we needed to go to ‘the world’ for help and couldn’t just pray it away.

Name withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 4.



Surveillance and monitoring

Social monitoring/peer reporting systems • Digital surveillance

Social monitoring/peer reporting systems

Behaviour: Monitoring members’ behaviour, relationships and thoughts through reporting systems or peer observation.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Members monitor each other to ensure everyone is following the rules. It is encouraged to call out others to “save” them from their sin.

Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 5.

“ We were taught to report on each other. Even as children.

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 5.

“ Members were actively encouraged / pressured to ‘dob’ on others for bad behaviour of bad thoughts.

Name withheld, *Submission 245*, p. 2.

“ Peer reporting, leadership check-ins, and spiritual “accountability” measures are used to monitor behaviour, beliefs, and relationships. Non-conformity is quickly noticed and addressed, fostering fear, self-surveillance, self-censorship, and a culture of control masquerading as care.

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

Digital surveillance

Behaviour: Monitoring online activity, social media use or communications.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ My parents tracked my phone when I got one but never did so to my brother. They would check where I was when I was at work and if I was somewhere they deemed “unusual” I got interrogated on all the details as to why I was there, what I was doing there etc ... All my messages, emails, social media were read and checked daily (this did not occur with my brother and his privacy)

Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 1.

“ I was subjected to surveillance. My phone calls were listened to. My father said if someone was about to step in front of a truck you have the right to hold them back as an excuse to monitor my thoughts.

Name withheld, *Submission 111*, p. 1.

“ Many families will have tracker apps on their children’s phones, even when they are adults. In my experience, my parents used this to make sure we were not possibly sinning.

Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 6.

“ 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.

“ Hayley shared with me that the phone she was using was not PBCC-approved, and so had to be kept secret ... She was accessing social media and the internet with an alias and on an unsanctioned phone because, if the PBCC learned of it, it would result in her being ‘disciplined’ in some form, with consequences potentially as severe as excommunication.

Name withheld, *Submission 287*, p. 1.



Housing and movement restrictions

Controlled housing arrangements • Restrictions on travel or relocation

Controlled housing arrangements

Behaviour: Pressuring, forcing or requiring members to live with other group members.

Communal living differs from housing dependency that restricts freedom of movement.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Having to accommodate workers in the home on a regular basis for days or weeks at a time.

Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 12.

“ After university ... she was expected to live in share-housing with other young OI members.

Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 4.

“ UM followers are encouraged to befriend each other and share experiences, to cohabit in shared housing, to develop romantic relationships within the group, and start families together.

Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 11.



Restrictions on travel or relocation

Behaviour: Preventing or denying permission to move cities, states or countries.

Domain: Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ 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 ... He called us the next Tuesday to ask us for our decision and I told him we were still moving to [redacted]. He seemed shocked and thought that not being allowed to come to the meetings on the weekend would have changed our minds.

Name withheld, *Submission 8*, p. 6.

“ Every aspect of life is controlled, from where you live, where you buy a house, who you marry, where you work, where and when you travel, the type of cars allowed and even the colour of these cars; there are expectations to be followed around all of these.

Name withheld, *Submission 285*, p. 3.

“ Exerted his influence over what kind of jobs people should have, instructing people to move into the ashram, humiliating those who wanted to leave.

Name withheld, *Submission 276*, p. 14.

“ The way my family members (and I suspect other members) financially contribute to the church and the subsequent hold the church has on them, inhibits their ability to move away from or exist outside the church.

Name withheld, *Submission 247*, p. 1.

“ I was told by a pastor that ... You can't travel, it wouldn't be good for you as you still have some things to see. You can't move away! You can't go to (a named particular town).

Name withheld, *Submission 234*, pp. 2–3.

“ 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.

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



Sexual, bodily and gender-based control

Sexual repression • Gender-based control • Victim blaming • Reproductive control

Sexual repression

Behaviour: Restricting sexual identity or expression through shame, surveillance or moral condemnation.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... teachings around sexual purity, modesty, and rigid gender roles may lead to repressed sexuality ...

Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, p. 15.

“ Multiple exorcisms were performed on me because I “was defective” and “a jezebel” for being gay ...

Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 6.



(Continued)

“ I have been aware of continuing gay conversion therapy that is well hidden and denied when questioned but is a major topic of the tier 3 inner circle leaders. They are instructed to deny that gay conversion therapy exist publicly but is encouraged very privately. This is mostly practiced in a “Pray the gay way” in very small groups setting or one on ones sessions.

Name withheld, *Submission 46*, p. 2.

“ I was ambushed ... turning up to my family home when I was in my late teens, to perform an exorcism on me get rid of the lesbian spirit, and ensure I married a man approved by my parents.

Name withheld, *Submission 219*, p. 3.

“ When I came out as gay at 21-years-old, I was pressured to meet with an RCI pastor who told me he believed homosexuality could be caused by consumption of pornography, that I should not discuss my sexual orientation with other RCI members, and that celibacy, “conversion” to heterosexuality and/or marriage to a woman were potential ways to avoid ex-communication.

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

Gender-based control

Behaviour: Imposing rigid gender roles that limit autonomy, agency or self-worth.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... a rigid, patriarchal structure in which men are given all formal authority, while women are expected to remain submissive and supportive. Only baptized men may hold leadership roles such as elders, ministerial servants, or teachers within the congregation, while women are excluded from decision-making positions regardless of experience, education, or capability.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 23.

“ ... girls were raised to be housewives and the boys were raised to be construction workers or to be window-washers ...

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 58.

“ ... girls are valued predominantly for motherhood and marriage. Some women may enter ‘The Work’ (clergy) but their roles can never be as senior as men in The Work. Women Workers are also subservient to the men Workers. Women are rewarded for adhering to strict gender roles – having the most pristine home that Workers can visit, the best meals for Workers, the best behaved children in Meetings. To aim for something other than motherhood was considered strange, ‘demonstrating the wrong spirit’.

Laura McConnell, *Submission 81*, p. 2.

“ ... restrictions upon a trans-person’s right to use a restroom, and their wider involvement in Church.

Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, p. 21.



Victim blaming

Behaviour: Holding victims responsible for abuse or misconduct perpetrated by leaders or members.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ They engage in religious manipulation by interpreting doctrine in a way that shames the victim and protects the perpetrator. At a retreat, I was pressured to do a “general confession” in case I played a part in my own abuse. Their victim-blaming strategy left me feeling very ashamed and confused as I was made to feel responsible ...

Name withheld, *Submission 193*, p. 3.

“ Women were frequently called out as the ‘tempters of men’ and that women need to be modest to protect men from themselves (i.e. victim blaming).

Name withheld, *Submission 245*, p. 4.



Reproductive control

Behaviour: Excessively influencing/controlling decisions about marriage, childbirth or family planning, including access to information.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Pregnancy is discouraged and can lead to expulsion, this puts undue control over reproductive rights and family planning.

Name withheld, *Submission 272*, p. 62.

“ Sections on biology and reproduction were removed or blacked out.

Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 11.

“ Forced into motherhood at 19 due to the cult’s ban on contraception ...

Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 62.

“ Hayley tells me that contraception is not allowed in the PBCC, so they quietly but successfully employed the ‘rhythm method’ until they felt ready to have children. They secretly use a contraceptive method now that their family is complete in their eyes, but cannot divulge this to anyone else in the community.

Name withheld, *Submission 287*, p. 2.





Legal and civic restrictions

Suppression of legal/mandatory reporting • Mandatory confidentiality or non-disclosure agreement (NDAs) • Control over non-group activities

Suppression of legal/mandatory reporting

Behaviour: Discouraging or preventing contact with police, courts or external authorities.

Domain: Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ The other elders in the congregation knew of his bad behaviour and discouraged the girl and her family from going to the Police.

Name withheld, *Submission 36*, p. 1.

“ Often the crimes are disclosed within the organisation to people who are mandated to report, but this is ignored in favour of their own internal laws. Records which may support a person’s case are held out of reach and there is no support or assistance provided to someone who is seeking criminal or civil remedy.

Miriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 4.

“ 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*, p. 3.

“ Abuses occurred behind closed doors, often with no external witnesses, police reports, or medical documentation. The group actively discouraged contact with “The System,” ensuring that evidence was internalised and kept hidden.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 40.



Mandatory confidentiality or non-disclosure agreement (NDAs)

Behaviour: Using legal instruments, such as NDAs, to silence individuals and restrict disclosure.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ One of the most damaging aspects of this system in my own recovery was the requirement to sign a staff contract that included a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) and a non-disparagement clause. This clause effectively prohibited me from speaking openly about my experience, even after I left employment. It silenced me legally, emotionally, and relationally especially in a context where the people enforcing it were the same ones who had once called themselves my “spiritual family”.

Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, p. 13.

“ Victims or defectors may be forced to sign agreements under coercion or threat, silencing them from reporting abuse. Confidential settlements are used to bury allegations without admitting fault.

Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 45.

(Continued)



- “ Members invited to disciplinary counsels are not fully informed about the specific charges they face, the evidence assembled against them, or the rationale behind the decisions made by the disciplinary council. This quasi-legal proceeding prohibits members bringing legal counsel, and a refusal to cosign any confidentiality agreement means the council will go ahead without the accused, meaning the only opportunity to defend oneself comes at the cost of one's legal right to record the interaction.

Australian Post-Mormon Community, *Submission 269*, p. 21.

Control over non-group activities

Behaviour: Discouraging civic or social participation or engagement outside group-approved activities.

Domain: Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ Strictly politically neutral to the point that even “political opinions” are viewed as a failing that a person needs to work on in order to root out. This removes members from the voting population and contributes more broadly to a sense of disconnect. Many former members have said that they never felt like they were a part of the community at all until they realised that these issues which affected them were open to them to think about and express opinions on.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 19.

- “ I wasn't allowed go to religious education classes in school because their teachings were “wrong” and they were trying to “lead me away from my salvation”. I wasn't allowed to attend school camps because I would be exposed to “worldly people” and people who would entice me away from the church.

Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 1.

- “ They also preach against joining unions and against being involved in politics or voting. Being involved with any of those things would lead to social punishment within the group and potential disfellowshipping.

Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 4.

- “ Participation in normal societal systems was discouraged. I was moved into group-controlled housing, required to perform unpaid labour, and denied opportunities for consistent education and employment. When I did attempt to gain training or connect with others outside the group, I was closely monitored and often punished for independent engagement.

Name withheld, *Submission 233*, p. 8.

- “ I was not allowed to participate in after-school sports, despite frequent invitations from school coaches. I was not permitted to attend school dances, participate in after school clubs or extracurricular activities as this would put me in harms way because of “bad associations with worldly people”.

Name withheld, *Submission 207*, pp. 2–3.





Physical violence*

Physical assault/abuse

* See also 'Child abuse' in Behaviours directed at children and young people.

Physical assault/abuse

Behaviour: Intentional use of physical force causing pain, injury or fear.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Whilst I was in the cult I endured physical abuse from my parents (smacking on arms, legs and bottom with hand and wooden spoons) and brother (punching, kicking, stabbing with knives on multiple occasions (for no reason other than just because), whipping with metal chain and rope (again for no plausible reason) ...

Name withheld, *Submission 22*, p. 3.

“ The cult leader began bashing me up almost every day until I was black, blue, and then yellow, with bruises from her punching me, hitting me, kicking me, slamming folders over my head, and pulling my hair out, leaving tufts of it all over the office floor – in front of 10 other women at times (battery in company).

Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 6.

“ She kept hitting me until I was woozy and dizzy and honestly felt a bit drunk because of how much she had shaken me and hit me. I threw up, even though I hadn't eaten anything all day the vomit came out purple and there was a horrible metallic taste in my mouth.

Name withheld, *Submission 251*, p. 2.



Sexual abuse and violence*

Sexual assault • Leader-perpetrated sexual abuse • Institutional cover-up or failure to act on reports of sexual abuse

* See also 'Child abuse' in Behaviours directed at children and young people.

Sexual assault

Behaviour: Any non-consensual sexual act.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I went to hug him before I left (which was normal for me) and instead of the paternal embrace that I was used to, he kissed me on the lips. It was disconcerting, and I almost thought I’d imagined it. Then he did it again. Now my heart was racing and I was flooded with anxiety and starting to feel off balance, a strange mix of vulnerability and fear. He then leaned in and quite forcefully put his tongue in my mouth. It was bizarre, it was stupefying, it was gross, clumsy and invasive.

Name withheld, *Submission 276*, p. 13.

“ I was lying on cushions, and he told me that I have ‘man fears’ from past lives, and he would clear this bad energy- he then laid on top of me simulating sex (grunting and moving) and I could feel an erection on my leg. I was not scared as I was hypnotized, but I was shocked and revolted by his actions.

Name withheld, *Submission 45*, p. 3.

“ During his trips to India, and with the full knowledge of senior disciple [redacted] molested me on multiple occasions as an adult. These incidents were unwanted, violative, and deeply traumatic.

Naresh Nayak, *Submission 217*, p. 3.

“ It’s a patriarchal cult my best friend confided in me which of her 7 children were conceived by marital rape. I reported her husband to the elders and was disciplined for speaking out of place and her husband was asked to do extra bible study.

Name withheld, *Submission 11*, p. 3.

Leader-perpetrated sexual abuse

Behaviour: Sexual abuse or exploitation committed by individuals in positions of spiritual or organisational authority.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm

**Examples from Inquiry evidence:**

“ He was assigned to me by my senior leader, reinforcing a power dynamic in which I was expected to submit to his pastoral authority ... As is typical in adult clergy abuse, the grooming was insidious, confusing, and coercive.

Elise Heerde, *Submission 21*, pp. 9–10.

“ Sexual coercion by a religious leader often circumvents traditional ideas of consent; it doesn’t always involve physical force or explicit threats. Instead, it depends on power imbalances, spiritual manipulation, and emotional dependency to force compliance. In these situations, the victim may seem to agree, but that agreement is influenced by fear, obligation, and the internalisation of authority. It is not genuine consent; it is compliance under coercive circumstances.

Jaime Simpson, *Submission 238*, p. 1.

“ As he had nominated himself as my “spiritual director,” I had to ‘meet with him for advice’ in one-on-one sessions – in his bedroom at the [redacted] church grounds (the priests lived on the church premises at that time). It was there he would force me to sit on his knee, touch me inappropriately and sexually abuse me. From memory, I was approximately 14 or 15 when this started.

Marisha McAuliffe, *Submission 153*, p. 8.

Institutional cover-up or failure to act on reports of sexual abuse



Behaviour: Failure to report abuse to authorities, enabling ongoing harm.

Domain: Psychological harm; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ At 20, I attempted to report one of many incidents of sexual abuse I had experienced from a young child until 17. I was terrified I would burn in hell if I didn’t confess. I was not believed as a victim, or supported. Instead, I was made to sit alone in a cold room, directly across from the pastor. He forced me to say, word for word, what had happened and what I had supposedly “done.” There was no safeguarding, no third-party support, no confidentiality, and no recognition of the trauma I had just disclosed. After extracting a full confession, the pastor told me I was being kicked out of the church. I was blamed. I was exiled.

Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 2.

“ There is a deeply troubling culture of silence surrounding CSA [child sexual abuse] and sexual assault within the 2x2 group, where reports of abuse are often minimised, hidden, or entirely ignored. Overseers frequently avoid reporting incidents to law enforcement, behaving as though their spiritual authority exempts them from legal responsibility.

Bev Cox and Laura McConnell, *Submission 90*, pp. 15–16.

“ I was the victim of a serious crime committed by someone within the group. (Sexual assault and Rape) When I attempted to report it, I was blamed for what happened. I was explicitly told that if I went to the police, I would lose my connection to God, my family, and my entire community.

Lachlan Walker, *Submission 220*, p. 4.

“ In my own congregation, there have been at least six victims of child sexual abuse over a span of decades. These cases were mishandled, swept under the rug, and never properly addressed. Victims were not offered proper support, and in many instances, the perpetrator was allowed to remain in the congregation.

Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 1.



Physical punishment masking as discipline

Forced physical exertion • Denial of basic needs

Forced physical exertion

Behaviour: Compelling individuals to perform strenuous exercise (e.g. running, planking) or physical activities, to demonstrate devotion or as a punishment.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ As time went on, it was less about acting and more about strenuous physical exercises and psychological discussion. We were told to push through the pain and discomfort of the physical work as it was told to be an essential part of acting. It led to burning out and even muscle injury.

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

“ ... the intense schedule and pressure can lead to physical health issues such as chronic exhaustion and sleep deprivation, as suggested by the “too busy to sin” mentality.

Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 10.

Denial of basic needs

Behaviour: Preventing or limiting access to basic needs, such as toilets, food or water.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... we couldn’t even use the toilet unless we asked someone to unlock the door to the admin building for us, thus my children and I had to go to the toilet in the bush outside ...

Carli McConkey, *Submission 189*, p. 9.

“ In the Children of God, even food was spiritual. It wasn’t something you earned or your parents provided for you—it was something you begged for on the street, in markets, from strangers ... One example is from when I was 12 and we used to busk on the streets to raise money. One day, we came home empty-handed. My mother told me we were going hungry because I hadn’t smiled enough while singing.

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 4.

“ ... dietary restrictions weren’t enough for me apparently, I was required to do fasting techniques to help purify my energy and always told to do more and more qigong. Especially during fasting I was told to do 8 hours or more qigong daily.

Name withheld, *Submission 243*, p. 1.

“ ... no food for the entire duration of the time dictated by the leader ... was supposed to be a 7-day dry fast (no water either). Maybe they could have just about gotten away with that in America, as it is winter there at the time. But my husband was in Australian summer and he was forced to drink some amount of water otherwise it wouldn’t have been viable. Dry fasts are very dangerous.

Name withheld, *Submission 275*, pp. 2–3.

“ ... instruct members on how much toilet paper they can use, the standard being two sheets per bowel movement is sufficient.

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 21.





Exit barriers and post-exit harm

Barriers to leaving • Post-exit retaliation • Relational erasure

Barriers to leaving

Behaviour: Creating emotional, social, financial or existential obstacles that make exit feel impossible.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ For some, fear of retaliation, social collapse, or losing children makes leaving perilous. For others, the fear of existential consequences – such as spiritual death, moral failure, or loss of meaning – is equally powerful. Telling someone to “just leave” ignores these risks and can reinforce harm. Even well-meaning responses can retraumatise or further isolate.

Patrick McIvor, Clare Heath-McIvor, Renee Spencer and Dr Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 55.

“ The moment you disagree with the organization, all relationships within it cease to exist. This creates a prison-like environment where the cost of questioning or leaving is the loss of everyone you’ve ever loved.

Name withheld, *Submission 68*, p. 5.

“ Anyone who questioned the time, money or methods involved was framed as unsupportive, limited, or holding me back. Within the coaching culture, doubt or critique was treated as failure, a sign that you were not ready, had blocks to work through, or unwilling to fully commit to your goals and social impact. Leaving the program was equated with giving up.

Wendy Jasper, *Submission 79*, p. 1.

“ The systematic financial disempowerment of followers makes them dependent on the group for their survival and can prevent them from leaving.

Esther Rockett, *Submission 141*, p. 27.



Post-exit retaliation

Behaviour: Continuing attempts to exert control even after leaving, such as social isolation, condemnation, harassment, reputation attacks and threats of legal action.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ An individual who leaves or dissents is labelled a “backslider” to justify the punishment. He or she is then subjected to complete social isolation, even by their closest family. This is followed by a deliberate campaign of defamation and abuse to destroy character and serve as a powerful warning to any remaining members.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 25.

“ Those who do leave are often ignored, vilified, or spiritually condemned by their families and former friends. For those seeking to make their own choices (such as termination), the public condemnation, harassment and ongoing vilification can be dangerous and life-threatening.

Name withheld, *Submission 131*, p. 10.



(Continued)

“ The obsession with these ex-members, many of whom had been threatened into silence, lasted years.

Clare Heath-Mclvor, *Submission 103*, p. 5.

“ Threats of lawsuits or legal action are used to intimidate victims and critics into silence.

Olive Leaf Network Australia, *Submission 182*, p. 44.

Relational erasure

Behaviour: Treating former members as if they no longer exist to enforce silence and deter others.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Leaving cost me my family. My daughter, still inside, hasn't spoken to me since.

Vern Houle, *Submission 9*, p. 1.

“ When she left, my parents wrote me a letter expressing that they felt like she had died. It was an incredibly traumatic time. My family cut my sister out of their will, we missed her wedding and first child birth.

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

“ Leaving meant losing not just the belief system, but my sense of family, belonging and safety. I live with a heavy grief for my parents and relationships I wished I could have and have attempted to manufacture into healthy and stable interactions and connections for years.

Name withheld, *Submission 230*, p. 2.



Behaviours directed at children and young people

Children who are born into and raised in, or young people who are drawn into, coercive high-control groups face harmful behaviours that are distinct from those experienced by adults. Adults who join these groups generally do so with an established identity, existing relationships, and some capacity to potentially recognise coercive pressure. Children and young people often do not. Those born into coercive high-control groups have never known another way of life. Those recruited or brought in at a young age are still developing the very capacities that coercive high-control groups systematically target and suppress.

The full range of harmful behaviours identified in *Volume 2* applies to children and young people. Children experience psychological harm, physical abuse, personal restrictions, financial exploitation, and the full suite of coercive practices documented, often with greater severity and a reduced ability to escape or less skills to recover.

The behaviours identified below reflect additional harmful behaviours that are experienced directly by children and young people, or that operate in a materially different way when the target is a child not an adult.

The behaviours described reflect patterns identified consistently across the evidence received by the Committee. They are not isolated incidents or the conduct of individual bad actors. They are deliberate practices, often structurally embedded in group doctrine and reinforced by group culture, that shape the entire experience of childhood within these environments.

The lived experience examples included in this Section are a limited selection, drawn from submissions and testimony received by the Committee. They are intended to illustrate the real-world impact of these practices on children, young people and their families.



Developmental and environmental control

Parental recruitment • From-birth indoctrination • Displacement of parental authority • Coaching children to deceive protective authorities • Denial of developmental and ordinary childhood experiences

Parental recruitment

Impact: Children are raised in coercive high-control groups (either born into or their parents were recruited).

Target area: Families and relationships



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ ... from the minute I was born, I might have lived in the state of Victoria, but I answered to the cult and the cult leader.

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

“ I was not recruited into this group as I was born into this group. This is the experience of the majority of members ... so my whole world view has been formed and coloured by the culture, beliefs and behaviour of the group.

Name withheld, *Submission 159*, p. 1.

“ Raised within a system of extreme coercive control, our childhoods were marked by systemic abuse, psychological manipulation, and profound deprivation.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 6.

“ The majority of attendants are there because they were born into the church or are extended family members of existing congregants. Being a generational member makes it extra difficult to extricate yourself from the community because of the fear of being cut off from family entirely.

Name withheld, *Submission 211*, p. 1.

“ I was born into the church. I never knew anything else but life in the church.

Name withheld, *Submission 225*, p. 1.

From-birth indoctrination

Impact: Conditioning children from infancy (or a very young age) to accept group doctrine as absolute truth, interrupting normal processes of identity formation and critical thinking skill development.

Unlike adults who join groups, children in these environments have no prior identity or belief system to draw on.

Target area: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ I wasn't recruited into the group, as I was born into it, but I was taught the methods of recruitment by Christadelphians. It was common to start recruiting through distributing leaflets from a young age and be taught in youth group talks how to preach to people outside the group, as a young teen.

Name withheld, *Submission 190*, p. 1.

“ They would preach of this calling being the highest calling. They would speak about leaving mother and father, your career, your country and giving your life for your whole life, to bring the Gospel of Jesus to souls throughout the world ... This is the message I have heard from birth.

Belinda Young, *Submission 201*, p. 1.

“ I was told that I had to recruit my friends and the people around me or else they would burn in hell. As an isolated child you believe that, because you believe what your parents are saying, because they believe it 100%.

Ryan Carey, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

“ I cannot speak extensively on external recruitment, as I was born into the group. However, I witnessed the way new members were drawn in — often vulnerable people, clearly down on their luck, who were immediately 'love bombed.' This mirrored my own experience growing up — everything felt like love and community at first, but once you reach an age where you're able to think and act independently, the control and abuse begin.

Lachlan Walker, *Submission 220*, p. 2.



Displacement of parental authority

Impact: 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.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Churches ... are telling persons under 18 years old that the pastor and his wife are their ‘real parents’ because they are their spiritual parents.

Lucy Browne, *Submission 7*, p. 1.

“ Subtle abuse was constant, of particular note instructors would tell us (and particularly targetting the younger members) that our parents didn’t love us because we were artists and couldn’t understand or love us. One member came in one day to say that they had divorced themselves from their parents and were praised for taking such a step.

Name withheld, *Submission 35*, p. 2.

“ ... strategy of enforced isolation systematically destroys members’ pre-existing social networks. Relationships with parents, siblings, spouses, and friends are deliberately undermined and often severed completely, causing immense pain, grief, and a sense of loss for both the member (should they eventually leave) and their families.

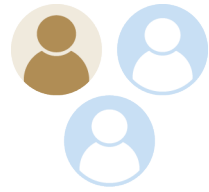
Name withheld, *Submission 38*, p. 9.

“ These distorted dynamics of parental care create fertile ground for groups to assume increasing control over children’s lives, often by reshaping familial roles and systematically displacing parental authority ... Children are groomed away from their parents through spiritualised narratives that cast dissenting caregivers as unsafe, corrupt, or enemies of the group ... From early childhood – often from birth – group leaders or senior members may come to exert full psychological and existential authority over the child, replacing parental authority and shaping identity through ideological socialisation.

Lived experience quote, Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Janja Lulich, *Submission 40*, p. 34.

“ His teachings about hating one’s family, about casting loved ones as enemies of truth—they were too deeply embedded. And the way he frames outsiders, especially questioning parents, as being demonic ...

Renee Spencer, *Submission 52*, p. 48.



Coaching children to deceive protective authorities

Impact: 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.

Domain: Psychological harm



Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ In the most extreme cases, children have been effectively taken – indoctrinated to distrust or deceive their own parents and coached to present a false picture of safety to teachers and professionals ...

Patrick Mclvor, Clare Heath-Mclvor, Renee Spencer and Janja Lalich, *Submission 40*, p. 34.

- “ They taught us what to say if the authorities ever came. Over and over, we rehearsed what to say, how to smile, how to protect our abusers. Safety wasn't just absent, it was inverted. The people who hurt us claimed they were saving us. The people who could help us were framed as the enemy!

Name withheld, *Submission 205*, p. 5.

- “ The minor cult children were psychologically incapable of identifying their own experiences as abusive or viewing the police as rescuers. Through years of intense indoctrination from birth, their minds were programmed with an 'us-versus-them' worldview, where any outsider, especially law enforcement, was painted as a demonic agent of the 'System' sent to destroy them.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 85.

- “ ... view all authorities as ultimately being a part of Satan's system and therefore they are not to be trusted, when they feel threatened, they will lie to protect the organisation.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 7.

Denial of developmental and ordinary childhood experiences

Impact: 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.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ I am 31, but I have missed some developmental milestones in terms of learning to set appropriate boundaries, learning how to express myself and how to even determine what I want ... I don't really know how to make friends in “the world” as it is something that I have practiced not doing my whole life.

Name withheld, *Submission 258*, p. 24.

- “ I had no idea how to be a 'normal' kid. I didn't know how to make friends or understand the unwritten rules of the outside world. I had felt like an outsider inside the cult, and now I was an outsider in mainstream society.

Deidentified survivor testimonial, The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 71.

- “ It felt like I had landed on a totally different planet and had to learn a new language and way of living ... I would describe this as one of the hardest things I had to do.

Name withheld, *Submission 246*, p. 4.

- “ Driving past vibrant places like the waterslide park, roller-skating rink, or McDonald's on Sundays, I envied other children playing freely, wondering what a 'normal' Sunday felt like. These experiences ingrained a sense of exclusion and longing for a life I couldn't have.

Name withheld, *Submission 261*, p. 1.

- “ I still find it hard to know who I am at all when I was always told who and what to be ...

Name withheld, *Submission 202*, p. 2.





Exploitation

Moving children for exploitation or to avoid detection • Forcing adult roles on children

Moving children for exploitation or to avoid detection

Impact: Moving children across state and international borders as a deliberate strategy—to facilitate labour or sexual exploitation in unfamiliar environments, sever ties with potential protective relationships, and to evade law enforcement and child protection agencies across jurisdictions. Children in these circumstances may lack citizenship documentation or knowledge of how to seek help.



Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ People were moved around a lot. I was moved to several different high schools and then sent to England in year 12. After four years in England I was sent back to Australia. This stopped members from forming close long term relationships with outsiders.

David Whitaker, *Submission 151*, p. 2.

“ A young child in Australia was sexually assaulted. Instead of receiving protection or justice, she was made to believe it was her fault, moved overseas to be near the perpetrator, silenced, and ‘audited’ to deal with the trauma. The perpetrator was never held accountable.

Name withheld, *Submission 157*, p. 2.

“ We believed that we were relocating there to be with our mother. Instead, we were placed into a child warehousing facility in Los Angeles. For the rest of my childhood, I rarely saw my mother ... I was kept in the Scientology facilities while I was being prepared for a life of labour ...

Miriam Francis, *Submission 55*, p. 2.

“ Children were frequently moved between communes in Victoria, interstate, and across international borders with little to no notice. This constant dislocation served multiple exploitative purposes ... The constant movement of both children and adult perpetrators was a highly effective method for evading law enforcement and child protection agencies.

The Victorian Children of God/The Family International Survivors Network, *Submission 208*, p. 33.

“ The group’s members frequently moved locations during the night and early hours of the morning. This meant that authorities could not track the abuse that was taking place.

Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 2.

Forcing adult roles on children

Impact: Assigning children adult responsibilities—including caregiving of younger children, missionary activities, and financial labour—in ways that deprive them of normal developmental stages and reinforce dependency on the group rather than building genuine life skills.



Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ As an eldest, homeschooled child in a large, fundamentalist family with patriarchal roles, I was parentified. I helped educate and care for my younger siblings and undertook a heavy load of housework. This included hours of scrubbing cloth nappies every day, babysitting, cleaning, cooking, and then taking on a full schedule of church-related volunteer activities.

Clare Heath-McIvor, *Submission 103*, p. 6.

“ One example is from when I was 12 and we used to busk on the streets to raise money. One day, we came home empty-handed. My mother told me we were going hungry because I hadn't smiled enough while singing.

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 4.

“ At age 8, I cleaned bricks and helped build roads ... On weekends, we focused on selling religious literature from door-to-door.

Larissa Kaput, *Submission 278*, p. 6.



Child abuse

Physical child abuse • Child neglect • Exposure of children to violence • Corporal punishment • Child sexual abuse

Physical child abuse

Impact: Intentional infliction of physical injury on children, including striking infants and young children.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ The leaders of the group would also physically assault my children for anything they perceived they did wrong. They would also lock the little ones in rooms if they cried and they would not let them out until they apologised to them.

Daniel Reiher, *Submission 37*, p. 2.

“ There is a toddler. About 12 months old. Sitting in a highchair, strapped in, unable to move. And beside him, an angry screaming adult man with his hand open and rising. Then falling. Hard. Again. Again. At least 20 times. The child trying to pull away, the utter terror in their face.

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 14.



Child neglect

Impact: Failure to provide adequate supervision, care, medical attention or protection.

Domains: Psychological harm; Personal restrictions; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ Children growing up in this environment are denied autonomy and appropriate safeguarding. Education is replaced with indoctrination. Emotional, psychological, and physical neglect is normalised.

Name withheld, *Submission 100*, p. 2.

“ ... emotional neglect by my parents (left alone with my difficult feelings and told to pray to god about it).

Name withheld, *Submission 88*, p. 1.



(Continued)

- “ They can have ripple effects across generations, with children raised in cultic environments often facing identity confusion, lack of education, medical neglect and other forms of abuse.

Sarah Steel, *Submission 187*, p. 4.

Exposure of children to violence

Impact: Forcing children to witness abuse inflicted on siblings, parents or others.

Domain: Psychological harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ There’s a particular kind of damage from witnessing harm that you are powerless to stop, especially when you’re a child yourself. It gets into your wiring. No matter how much time passes, part of you is still watching.

Name withheld, *Submission 203*, p. 14.

- “ My younger sister’s assault by a predatory older man in the church was equally devastating. The pastor’s directive not to report it to police led to her brutal beating by my parents, which I witnessed, resulting in my PTSD.

Name withheld, *Submission 262*, p. 1.



Corporal punishment

Impact: Use of objects (e.g. belts, sticks) or bodily force to punish children or adults for perceived wrongdoings.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

- “ ... i witnessed and experienced first hand, the physical abuse of children, and the encouragement from the cult to use physical beatings against children for perceived ‘wrongdoings’ ...

Mix Carpenter, *Submission 1*, p. 1.

- “ ... I was dragged into the kitchen during meetings and beaten. Other members of the congregation were within earshot. No one intervened. The abuse was reinforced by scripture. Verses such as ‘train up a child in the way he should go’ were used to legitimise extreme physical punishment. If a child left the church, it was blamed on the parents for not disciplining them enough. Beating your children was seen as an act of devotion.

Name withheld, *Submission 3*, p. 1.

- “ ... would get belted every week or two weeks for laughing too loud, falling asleep in the meetings, opening eyes during prayer. Intense violence was probably every two months or so.

Name withheld, *Submission 76*, p. 2.

- “ Discipline was physical, often severe, and started young. Children quickly learned to fear adults in the church, not just for correction but for survival.

David Hyland, *Submission 150*, p. 1.



Child sexual abuse

Impact: Sexual exploitation or assault of minors, including failure to protect or report abuse.

Domains: Psychological harm; Physical harm

Examples from Inquiry evidence:

“ A pivotal moment occurred when my daughter, then just six years old, approached me after a church service, visibly distressed. She confided in me, asking me to intervene with [redacted], the 20- year-old son of our pastors, who had inappropriately kissed her. My heart sank as she recounted how he had held her tightly, preventing her escape, and kissed her in a manner that was both alarming and adult-like.

Name withheld, *Submission 33*, p. 2.

“ The Family International not only normalised child sexual abuse but incorporated it into core parts of its doctrine. In The Family International, young children were forced to engage in sexual activity with each other. Adults in the cult were also permitted to sexually assault children, using threats of violence. My client was sexually abused by adults and fellow children in ways that have had profound, intense impacts on her life.

Name withheld, *Submission 242*, p. 1.

“ I know when we were raided that there were trunks of material that was taken. It was sexually explicit material. It was grooming material that we were looking at. I have put some in the submission. I am sorry you had to see that, but I did want to show the graphic nature of the material we were seeing our whole lives, and of course there were lots of things in real life that we were seeing and being exposed to.

Maria Esguerra, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 5 November 2025, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.



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

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.

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.

**Adopted by the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria, East Melbourne
3 July 2026**

Appendix A

About the Inquiry

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	Number	Individual or organisation
257	Andrew Rawlings	277	Aiden Bowers
258	Name withheld	278	Larissa Kaput
259	Name withheld	278a	Larissa Kaput, Supplementary submission
260	Feminist Legal Clinic	278b	Larissa Kaput, Supplementary submission
261	Name withheld	279	Confidential
262	Name withheld	280	Confidential
263	Mark Darbyshire	281	RMIT University
264	Name withheld	282	New South Wales Council of Churches
265	Name withheld	283	Name withheld
266	Ryan Manuel Halim	284	Cult-Informed Professional Network
267	Kevin Manning	285	Name withheld
268	Name withheld	286	Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church
269	Australian Post-Mormon Community	287	Name withheld
270	Samson Rising	288	Inform
271	Number not used	289	The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
272	Name withheld	290	Name withheld
273	Name withheld	291	Confidential
274	Name withheld		
275	Name withheld		
276	Name withheld		

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>.

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>

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