

Recruitment methods and impacts of cults and ‘organised fringe groups’



An inquiry by the Legislative Assembly
Legal and Social Issues Committee

Guidance note
April 2025

This Inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone’s beliefs, whether religious or otherwise.

Many groups, including new religious movements, bring people together who share similar beliefs, and offer real community, meaning, and support to their members—and have a positive impact on their members’ lives.

What we’re focused on are those groups that use techniques that can harm individuals emotionally, psychologically, financially, or even physically.

Harmful or abusive practices can happen in any group—religious or not—and our concern is with those actions, not the beliefs behind them.

Recent events in Victoria have raised concerns about the techniques being used by certain groups to attract and retain members, and whether they amount to coercion that should be criminalised.

Religious freedom does not grant a licence to cause harm. There is a distinction between genuine religious practice and harmful behaviour. The physical and psychological harms associated with cults was addressed in a 1998 report of the Model Criminal Code Law Officers Committee established by the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General.¹ It stated clearly that if a religious organisation intentionally causes significant harm, it should be held criminally liable, just like any other individual or group:

If a religious organisation does that, it, like anyone else, should be guilty of the appropriate criminal offence. “Freedom of religion” is not freedom, for example, to defraud, nor is it freedom to cause significant psychological or psychiatric harm to any person.

As part of this Inquiry, we will consider whether the law can adequately protect people when cults or manipulative groups are proven to have caused harm that should be criminalised.

¹ This report was produced as part of a project to develop a national Criminal Code.

What is a ‘cult’?

There is no universally accepted definition of the term *cult* (sometimes also referred to as ‘sects’, or ‘new’ or ‘fringe’ religious movements). The word *cult* is regularly used in public discourse to describe groups—often religious or spiritual—perceived as extreme, secretive, or harmful. However, its meaning varies widely depending on cultural, social, or personal perspectives. Given the strong negative connotations the term *cult* carries, especially when applied to new/fringe religious or ideological movements/organisations, caution is essential when using the term. Labelling a group as a cult without clear, objective criteria can lead to stigma, misrepresentation, and potential infringement on rights such as freedom of belief or association.

A widely adopted definition in the research of cults is provided by West and Langone (1986):

a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgement, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, etc.), designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community.

What is an ‘organised fringe group’?

The Committee understands the term *organised fringe groups* to include groups that employ cult-like tactics, but which may not necessarily be theologically based or religious in nature.

What are the known recruitment methods of cults?

Cults and other ‘organised fringe groups’ use a variety of tactics and methods to recruit new members. *Tactics* describe the strategies used to shape how potential recruits think, feel, and behave. *Methods* describe the specific ways these strategies are put into action. These tactics and methods are designed to attract attention, build trust, and gradually influence individuals to join and remain within the group.

Recruitment strategies often focus on people going through vulnerable periods in their lives, such as times of emotional stress, identity crisis, or social disconnection. These groups may present themselves in positive or harmless ways—such as offering self-improvement programs or spiritual guidance—before slowly introducing their core beliefs and practices.

While not every group uses the same approach to recruitment, there are common patterns that help explain how individuals may be drawn in.

Tactics used to recruit new members

Below are some known tactics used by these groups to recruit new members:

- **'Love bombing':** Overwhelming new recruits with affection, praise, and attention to create emotional bonds.
- **Offering belonging and purpose:** Appealing to people seeking meaning, identity, or community, often during vulnerable life stages.
- **Using front groups:** Presenting as self-help, wellness, religious, or social organisations to mask the group's true nature.
- **Deceptive messaging:** Avoiding full disclosure of beliefs or practices at the outset; using vague or appealing language.
- **Peer recruitment:** Leveraging social networks to build trust and credibility (friends, colleagues, family members).
- **Targeting the vulnerable:** Approaching people in emotional, financial, or psychological distress.
- **Gradual indoctrination:** Slowly introducing core beliefs and increasing commitment through rituals, group activities, or study sessions.
- **Controlling time and information:** Isolating recruits from outside influences and overwhelming them with group activities or doctrine.
- **Manipulating emotions:** Using guilt, fear, or shame to enforce conformity and discourage doubt or dissent.
- **Promising transformation or salvation:** Offering exclusive access to truth, enlightenment, or protection from existential threats.

Methods used to recruit new members

The methods used to recruit also vary widely. It is common for cults to use multiple methods and avenues to recruit new members.

Below are some of the known methods cults have recruited new people into their group:

- **Inviting people to a free seminar or workshop:** Often advertised as personal development, meditation, wellness, or leadership training.
- **Using social events to build rapport:** For example, potlucks, yoga classes, book clubs, or youth groups as soft entry points to build trust.
- **Isolating recruits from outsiders:** Discouraging time with 'negative' family or friends. Framing dissenters as toxic or unenlightened.
- **Asking recruits to commit small, then escalating:** Starting with minor tasks and building up to financial or full-time commitments (foot-in-the-door technique).
- **Promising secret or higher knowledge:** Withholding information until the recruit is 'ready', to create mystery and appeal.
- **Using charismatic leaders or influencers:** A magnetic central figure or persuasive speakers who draw in recruits with personal stories.

- **Creating insider language and symbols:** Special terms, dress codes, or gestures that foster a sense of exclusivity.
- **Staged testimonials and fake success stories:** Members share rehearsed transformation stories to inspire trust and hope.
- **Exploiting social proof:** Events are packed with enthusiastic members to give the illusion of legitimacy.
- **Offering to help solve a personal problem:** Recruiters target emotional vulnerabilities with promises of support.

What are the known behaviours and methods of control used by cults towards members?

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission identified that cults often exhibit some—but not necessarily all—of the following behaviours. It is these patterns, rather than the group’s beliefs alone, that are used to distinguish cults from other religious or ideological groups:

- **Controlling leadership:** Leadership, usually an individual, which claims special powers or authority and demands total obedience from members.
- **Isolation:** Members are often cut off from family, friends, and outside information, and are told outsiders are dangerous or untrustworthy.
- **Loss of personal autonomy:** Members may be expected to give up personal goals, like education or career plans, to focus fully on the group’s mission.
- **Secrecy and deception:** The group may hide its true beliefs or identity from newcomers and use misleading names or tactics to recruit and raise money.
- **Exploitation:** Members may be required to work long hours for little or no pay and may have their money or resources controlled by the group.
- **Emotional and psychological manipulation:** The group or leadership may use tactics like emotional pressure, sleep deprivation, and intense group activities to weaken independent thinking and create dependence.

Alongside the behaviours outlined above, cults may also use coercive control tactics or subject members to abusive behaviours. Members may experience various forms of abuse, including emotional, psychological, financial, physical or sexual. The group may monitor behaviour, restrict movement, control relationships, and punish disobedience.

Several recent inquiries or investigations into coercive control legislation in family and domestic violence settings have received evidence on the use of coercive control tactics by cults. *Coercive control* refers to a pattern of ongoing, often hidden, abuse to dominate and intimidate someone; generally applied to abuse in family or domestic violence situations. It can involve emotional, psychological, financial or other non-physical forms of abuse.

Cults can use coercive control as a method of abuse towards members, alongside other behaviours or actions. The following Table outlines some of the possible behaviours or actions cults may use to harm or control their members. It is not an exhaustive list of behaviours, and these will be used to varying degrees across groups and experienced differently by individuals.

Possible behaviours or actions of cults towards members

Category	Behaviours/Actions
Psychological control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation from family and friends • ‘Love bombing’ • Thought reform / ‘brainwashing’ • Guilt trips for questioning actions or beliefs—‘loyalty tests’ • Fear-based tactics • Confession and public shaming • Gaslighting • Us-vs-them mentality
Behavioural control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigid daily routines • Obedience training • Restrictions on freedom (movement, dress, communication) • Surveillance by peers • Sleep deprivation • Fasting or strict dietary rules
Information control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited access to media • Propaganda promoting cult worldview • Rewriting history • Discouraging critical thinking
Emotional/spiritual exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claims of divine authority • Religious language to justify abuse • Promises of exclusive salvation • Induced phobias (fear of leaving)
Financial exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory donations or tithes • Pressure to give up assets • Unpaid labour
Sexual and physical abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coerced sexual relationships • Arranged/forced marriages • Physical punishment • Child abuse or neglect (often disguised as ‘spiritual practice’)

What are the **impacts** of cults on individuals?

Harmful behaviours by cults are ultimately aimed at coercing members into obedience and ensuring total control. Through their actions, cults systematically erode individual autonomy to serve the interests of the group and/or its leader.

Cults can cause significant physical and psychological harm. In some cases, individuals have experienced serious injury or death because of abuse, medical neglect, or dangerous practices promoted within the group. Control tactics are used by cults to enforce conformity and can cause enduring trauma on members. Understanding the full spectrum of these harms is central to the Committee’s work.

While the nature and severity of harm can vary, individuals affected by cults often experience lasting emotional, psychological and financial consequences. The following Table outlines some of the possible impacts of cults on individuals. It is not an exhaustive list of impacts, and these will be experienced differently by individuals.

Some of the impacts of cults on individuals

Category	Impact	Description
Psychological	Guilt and shame	Intense feelings of guilt and shame from not meeting group and/or leaders’ expectations, often compounded by beliefs that such failures result in spiritual consequences, such as the threat of damnation or loss of salvation.
	Distrust of others	Pervasive distrust of the ‘outside world’, leading to distrust towards law enforcement, health and other support services. This distrust can continue even for individuals who leave groups.
	Phobias	Irrational fears related to leaving the group or outsiders.
	Depression, PTSD, and other mental health challenges	Stress and trauma leading to depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
Social	Isolation	Severed ties from family and friends due to cult isolation.
	Difficulty reintegrating	For individuals who leave, difficulty reintegrating/reconnecting into society.
	Financial exploitation	Members may be pressured to make large donations, surrender personal assets, or take on debt to support the group or its leaders.
	Economic dependence	Restricted from income earning or maintaining employment, increasing members’ reliance on the group for basic necessities.
Developmental (Children and young people)	Identity confusion	Confusion from restrictive or controlled upbringings.
	Low self-esteem	Lack of external interaction hinders self-esteem development.
	Mental health and cognitive development challenges	Restrictive environments can contribute to mental health issues and/or delay cognitive development in young people.