**Webinar transcript**

# The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic and family violence

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## Presenters:

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* Sandra Creamer (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Alliance)
* Anne Hollonds (National Children’s Commissioner)
* Justice Gill (Federal Circuit & Family Court of Australia)
* Acting Inspector Melissa Dwyer (Queensland Police Service)
* Melinda Tynan (Department of Social Services)

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**MICHELE ROBINSON:**Hello, everyone and behalf of ANROWS, I welcome you to today's webinar looking at the impact of COVID-19 on Family and Domestic Violence. My name is Michele Robison and I'm the director of Evidence to Action at ANROWS. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands across Australia on which we meet today on behalf of ANROWS pay our respects to Elders, past present and emerging. Wherever we are today, we are on unceded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land, and I pay my respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present here today. Today's webinar is a panel discussion followed by a live Q&A. Please submit your questions about the panel discussion today and we will try to enter as many questions as we can. We have given ourselves half an hour extra today because there is much interest. Resources are available in the handout section of go to webinar, you will see five handouts including the report, and a very high level table providing a summary of the findings, which is a very useful resource. And then there are three related fact sheets. If you would like to access closed-captioned, please click on the link provided in the chat box. The webinar will be recorded, and it will be available on the ANROWS website as soon as possible. You can subscribe to Notepad our fortnightly E newsletter, to be notified when it's available. There will be a survey that will pop up at the completion of the event, and we appreciate your feedback. And your response for help in making the webinar going forward better. Today of the topics can be confronting. Some participants may find it distressing. It is important to take care of yourself. If you would like to access support you can contact 1800 RESPECT – 1800 737 732 or Lifeline – 13 11 14.

COVID-19 has raised issues about the 'shadow pandemic' of domestic and family violence against women and children. We have looked at research being conducted on domestic and family violence, and in particular, intimate partner violence. The research demonstrates that frontline services are responding to more complex matters. There have been an increase of barriers for victim-survivors accessing support. Today I had the great pleasure of watching a report commissioned by ANROWS. Intimate partner violence during the COVID 19 Pandemic, a survey of women in Australia. This research led by Hayley Vauxhall and Anthony Morgan represents the most comprehensive survey of Family and Domestic Violence experienced by women in Australia experiencing balance in the first 12 months of the pandemic. One of the primary aims of the study was to measure the impact of COVID on women's experiences of intimate partner violence. Two of the things look that were where abuse is already present at the start of the pandemic. We'll be looking at responses across police, health and legal sectors, and discuss what we know of how the pandemic has affected children who live with domestic and family violence. I would love to introduce you to the panel, we have Anthony Morgan, research manager at the Australian Institute of Criminology. Professor Sandra Creamer, CEO of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance, Justice Gill from the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia. Anne Hollonds, the National Children's Commissioner from the Australian Human Rights Commission. Melinda Tynan will be joining us from the women safety policy branch at the Department of Social Services. Acting Inspector Melissa Dwyer, from the Domestic and Family Violence and Vulnerable persons command in the Queensland Police Service. OK, welcome everybody. Thank you so much for joining us today. And the very generous donation of your time. To begin with, I'd like to turn to you, Anthony. Could you tell us about the research and the findings that you've established?

**ANTHONY MORGAN:**  
Sure. Thanks, Michele. And good afternoon everyone. Before I begin I would like to pay my respects to the Ngunnawal the land I am on today, and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. It's a real privilege to be part of this esteemed panel and to speak about our latest research. I would like to acknowledge the funding from ANROWS, my research partner Dr Hayley Vauxall. And extend our thanks to our survey partners at Roy Morgan. We are releasing the findings of more than 10,000 women in Australia and their experiences of family and domestic violence in the 12 months of the pandemic. This builds on the research of another colleague in the Australian Institute of Criminology, Doctor Rick Brown, back in 2020. At that stage there was already concerns about the effects of Family and Domestic Violence in a pandemic, and the shadow pandemic as it was called. The difficulty of course, is that it can be very hard to measure a problem that is often so well hidden. Even more so, in a pandemic. Back in 2021, we looked at indicators of partner violence using official sources such as police reported crime data. The aim of the survey we are publishing today was to try to capture the experiences of a large sample of women who had not necessarily had contact with police or other support services and to explore their experiences of violence. There is another report on the experiences of women safety to be released at a later date. What this explains a story and the nuance nature of the types of violence women experience and how partner violence has been impacted by the pandemic. We conducted a survey online using a blended sample, combining a smaller probability sample with a larger nonprobability sample. This means we were able to sample a large survey of women around Australia, representing a greater portion of females who had been in a relationship in the previous 12 months. You'll hear me refer to the survey participants rather than women more generally, (UNKNOWN) not to generalize beyond that, otherwise, very large sample of respondents. and I encourage people to read the report, to get the full picture of those who were in unsafe situations at home.

I'm sure you will see that the results are concerning and is important to look at the effects on people experiencing partner violence as we is locked down is in some states. One in 10 women had experienced violence by their partner in the previous 12 months. Most often, respondents said, this included being pushed, shoved or grabbed but also included more extreme forms of violence. The number who had experienced physical violence said that there partner had used strangulation. One third said a weapon had been involved. Some said that a firearm had been involved, as a way to threaten the victim. And we know this was much more common among women in regional areas. What is even more concerning is what we found regarding the more invisible forms of violence, statistics that are really captured in sources of data. One in 12 women that responded to the survey had experienced sexual violence. Most often, a partner that threatened or forced them to take part in sexual activity.

One in three women who responded to the survey had experienced at least more than one form of emotionally controlling behaviour. This included different forms of financial abuse, verbally effusive behaviours, stalking, monitoring, socially abusive behaviours all reproductive coercion. It is important to consider that these were rarely behaviours are considered in isolation, they were part of a pattern of behaviour. Really troubling, given the economic consequences of the pandemic for many people was that the most common form of these abusive behaviours were financial abuse. Almost 20% of women who completed the survey experience this in some form. This included keeping financial information from the respondent, making major purchases from the respondent's money, without talking to them, keeping money from them, and pressuring the respondent to give them money. We know that one of the results of the pandemic was that people are able to access superannuation. 1.1 million women applied to access superannuation early. One intent of the women said that they were pressured by the current or former partner to give them access to their superannuation. This meant that there was abusive partners who are exploiting the scheme to get support. This was a concern that was raised at the beginning. Since COVID-19 first affected Australia, partner violence has increased. But this is difficult to measure. What we do measure, similar to the survey last year, is how often women experience the onset or escalation of violence. What I mean by this is how many women had never experienced violence from their current or most recent partner, experienced violence of the first time, or a most women who experienced violence before February 2020, how many had it experienced in severity or frequency.

This time around we limited it to women who had been in partnerships for 12 months or more, so that we could see if it had been a result of the pandemic rather than simply coinciding. Among women who had been in relationships for more than 12 months and who had not experienced relationship prior to the pandemic, three quarters had experienced violence the first time, what might had experienced actual violence for the first time and emotional violence for the first time. What is more concerning is that those who experience first-time violence wearing long term relationships, and it was not uncommon for some to be in relationships for more than 10 years. Among those who had experienced violence of the first time, 2/5 set it was getting worse, and this is true for all sorts of violence, physical, sexual and other types of abuse. Up to 60% of women who had experienced or the one type of violence and been in a relationship for more than 12 months that it was either the first time the partner had been abusive or it had increased in frequency or severity. So the question is why has the violence change for so many women? It is easy to point to lockdowns and the fact that so many people have been forced to stay home but the reality is, it is much more complex than that. But it is clear that the pandemic has coincided with the violence and the fact that many women have participated in the survey, and for some violence to others. One of the important insights from this study is that fact that victim survivors identified as contributing to changes in violence. We separated women who said that the violence was an upward trajectory and a smaller group that that violence is on a downward trajectory.

We focus mainly on the upward trajectory. We asked about individual level factors, relationship factors and external interventions. Overall, this is important, no one factor was identified by more than one third of the group, which shows that it is difficult to identify one single factor that the pandemic is responsible for. The most common factor was the mental and physical well-being of the victim and their partner, financial stress and changes to employment status. This shows the emotional and financial toll of the pandemic and its impact on violence. Around one in ten women said their drug and alcohol use and one in seven said that partners drug and alcohol use had contributed to an increase in violence. Unsurprisingly, family stress, relationship conflict and the amount of time spent at home were commonly identified as having a contribute to increasing violence. So too was the level of contact with family and friends. Among women who said they had children at home, around 15% identified home-schooling and increased childcare responsibilities as factors that had contributed to an increase in violence. Other nonpandemic factors were also identified by women and it was clear that it was a combination of different factors that came together in what was an extremely stressful period. External interventions were very rarely identified as a factor in the changing pattern of partner violence experienced by respondents and this was true of both up and down with trajectories I think there is a very good explanation for this finding. Before I hand over to Inspector Dwyer, I want to highlight the findings around formal help seeking among women who experienced physical or sexual violence. This is one of the most significant pressing concern to emerge in the last 13 months. Women who had sought advice or support from a government or non-government service. One quarter of respondents said they were unable to seek assistance on at least one occasion when they wanted to, due to safety concerns. What's more, among these women, one in three had not been able to seek support from police or other services despite wanting to. And this group is particular concern, the women reaching out were unable to get help. Sadly, Al report shows a disturbing and complex pattern of violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows the scale as we move to the next stage of the pandemic. Thank you, Michele.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Thank you so much, Anthony, that was a fantastic overview of a very complex piece of research. As you pointed out, the findings show that many women who wanted to seek help, were unable to, due to safety concerns, which left a significant proportion without formal safety services. Mel, I think this is a great segue into what you are going to present. Have to introduce you again, Acting Inspector Dwyer, how has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted police response to family and domestic violence. You're coming from Queensland, and your comments will draw on your experience in Queensland, but if you have any broader, national observations, that would be really helpful. Welcome.

**MELISSA DWYER:**  
Thank you, I think it's important to acknowledge that this comes from a Queensland context. – Apologies my phone is ringing.

The Queensland context is going to be very different to what is happening in New South Wales and Victoria, given our lockdown periods have been significantly different. It was hypothesised by non-government organisations, and DV service providers that there will be an increase in PV preparation, and others saying there will be a significant increase. It's incredibly important for the QPS to know that the environment, and we as a policing organisation could really, proactively implement some initiatives and activities to enhance victim safety, and hold perpetrators to account. It was really important for the QPS to understand what the context would look like. But what was interesting is the QPS didn't see an increase in DV penetration increased solely due to COVID-19. We wondered why this was likely, noting we had limited lockdown periods here since the commencement of the pandemic. And the QPS had implanted a raft of initiatives and practices to try to overcome what those anticipated increases would look like. Initially, during March 2020, it's important to understand we observed a slight decline in police applications, and private applications for DV orders. As well as recorded breaches of domestic violence orders. That contrasted to the provision of increased rates. Whilst trying to understand the reduction, it was theorised that quarantine and self-isolation posed significant barriers for victims and survivors to report, which is what Anthony mentioned previously. To give you context in terms of the stats, we had a valuation over March to June, four month period from 2019, then again in 2020. Then again in 2021. So, the same periods were evaluated, and what we saw, from 2019 to 2020, we saw a slight reduction in DV reductions for some this is at the height of the pandemic, what Queensland considers the height of the pandemic. In 2021, we saw a significant increase of 26% of police applications. But for DV private applications, where applications are taken by a victim at a courthouse, there was, again, from 2019 and 2020, a decrease, a 10% decrease. Interestingly the trend has continued to 2021 over the same March, June period. Of a 13% decrease. Police applications have significantly increased, but private applications remain lower than what we had previously understood. Strangulation charges remained relatively stable in Queensland, but we did notice a significant increase in policing activities, and holding perpetrators to account in breach of domestic violence orders. We saw, respectively, a 23% increase, and a 37% increase. We hypothesise as to why our DV breaches, these are breaches of orders, whether they are police or private, we hypothesise as to why that was the case. In Queensland, like many parts of the country, we had a lot of people at home. So, a lot more people were able to provide police with information that DV was occurring within the communities, and it enabled police to take action against the perpetrators. That was one of the indicators as to why we put down such a significant increase in the police activities. The total DV occurrences, which are calls to police for assistance, over the same periods, interestingly, they increased year on year, and that is a significant trend in Queensland which has been occurring since 2015. So, there has been a marked increase in the requirements for police responding to calls for services. So we saw a 10% and a 30% increase, which are significant factors we think about DV in Queensland.

We also hypothesised why there was such a marked decrease in the private applications, and we put it down to a possible explanation. Of the closure of courts. Difficulties for victims to attend court. Likewise, across Australia, courts were held remotely, so there is still work to be done to find out why private DV applications decrease. Like all jurisdictions across the country, police pay an important part in the COVID-19 response, we saw significant numbers of police deployed to border checkpoints, quarantine hotels, and other COVID-19 safety-related activities. What is important to note is that while we undertook the other activities, our response to DV is increasing, and we hold perpetrators to account and take out more applications to enhance victim safety.

I guess the big question, the most audience members want to know is, what have the police done to improve police practices, and other long-term initiatives we have implemented, that are going to be part of BOU. Queensland implemented, proactively, we enhanced our online DV report system for domestic and family violence, and we did in two ways. We are the only policing in the country with the online reporting activity.

We implemented a safe and effective way for DV victims to report, that is a non-urgent response, and a SMS text messaging service as well. The SMS text messaging service enables high risk DV victims to preregister with police, to offer an alternate way for communication to occur with police. The portal went live in 3 April 2020, that is the online response capability. Here are some startling stats for everyone. Around about 7700 online contacts with police since 3 April, and they are not specific to DV, but they include DV. Of the 7700, 1200, roughly, for domestic and family violence, and those calls, 1200 calls resulted in police being dispatched to the persons addressed to investigate domestic and family violence. Of the 1200, 242 resulted in police taking action for breach of domestic violence order, and 64 resulted in an application being taken up by police. That really addresses the issues identified by Anthony, the ultimate methods we can implement to guarantee victim safety, and another option to contact police. The statistics show the need for a discrete source for reporting DV in the future, we say it has removed potential barriers for reporting of DV by victims. It has enhanced the reporting capability for victims during COVID.

I would take a moment, if I could, to address Anthony's commentary in relation to the DV escalation, or commencement during COVID, and whether the police, at least in Queensland saw an increase in complexity. What I can say from the outset is the Queensland context seems to indicate Anthony's indication that DV occurred for the first time once COVID commenced, and the complexity also increased. So, if we look at the data from March to June, over four months, you might recall that police application significantly increased. Brand-new applications commenced by police, that require a court to overview the DV applications, and to make a determination as to whether an order is necessary or desirable. The trend, over the four month period, was replicated over 12 months.

For the QPS members responding to a DV call for service, like everywhere else in the country, the police undertake a risk assessment, and look at risks present with an investigation. The first looks at what Anthony was talking about, severity and frequency. In 2019 the following stats were obtained, and addresses that matter, of the 20,500 police applications, 3,500 showed severity alone, and frequency was shown in 16,000 of the applications. Where the matters were combined, severity and frequency, the total was around 2,000. In 2020, the severity increased from 3,500 to 4,000 of the applications. Frequency increased by about 2000, but in 2020 we saw a slight decline. So, I throw in a lot of stats that you, so what does it really say? It confirms the appearances of women surveyed that severity and frequency are increasing. With regards to complexity, 88% of responders in a Queensland University of Technology Centre for Justice report, drawn from a nationwide survey, indicated that the complexity had actually increased in that report.

It increased, anecdotally, our conversation with many of the DV specialist offices across Queensland confirmed complexly had increased, and we were finding more and more combinations of physical and non-physical forms of domestic and family violence. There have obviously been impacts on policing during COVID-19, as I'm sure you can well appreciate. In Queensland, we have a correspondent model where a DV specialist service provider attends with police, close to the time of the DV incident, and provide a combined service, each relying on our unique skills and the response to victims and their children. If that has been impacted, we saw correspondence were not able to attend with police in person to the incident, and that police were going to the incidents by themselves.

With our DV specialists working at police stations we have had to implement our safe to call and safe to message. So, understanding when it's safe to call the victim, making sure that we are not actually enhancing risk. We have had to change the way in which we question victims with regards to complexity matter. An understanding that the nature of DV might be different during COVID-19. The current forms of perpetration, having to wear PPE could be difficult building rapport with victims and children, the impact of COVID-19 on policing has been significant but I am incredibly proud to say that Queensland Police Service put into place and fantastic initiatives, but unfortunately it didn't extend to PPE so there are some things that will impact on our initiatives moving forward. I can say has been a significant increase in police responses, our upward trajectory continues and we prioritise and focus deterrence strategies. So, relying on some best evidence to engage with victims and perpetrators in a really proactive way.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
That has been great, Acting Inspector Dwyer, focusing on the deterrence has been a great takeaway and I think I will use that as a segue to move over to Justice Gill. Hello, welcoming into the conversation, Justice Gill.

**JUSTICE GILL:**  
Thank you, Michele.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Thinking about the way how Acting Inspector Dwyer talked to us about the Queensland Police Service, how has the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia responded to Family and Domestic Violence in particular to issues of safety?

**JUSTICE GILL:**  
I guess there are two major issues to deal with and the first is access to the court at all and secondly is the triaging process that is available. Because the first challenge that was thrown up was whether or not courts would be able to continue to function, whether or not people would continue to be able to bring cases before the court, and have those cases heard. Because if there was a delay in the court capacity to function for the duration of COVID pandemic, that would have a terribly significant impact on anyone who required the attention of the court to attempt to set things right. First question was how would we attempt to provide the Access to Justice so we do not have entrenched delays for people seeking relief.

There was a rapid move on the court of part from face-to-face hearings across to either telephone hearings or online hearings, and that brought about capabilities that the court previously had not exercised to the same degree. And it is something that is beneficial in generally having a face-to-face capacity to have it will conduct their proceedings before the court, there is better capacity to interrogate the evidence, there is better capacity for people to generally participate, but when that is not available, then it is necessary to move to what is the next best option. And for contested matters, that was a move across to using video linking facilities. Now, the issue there was trying to ensure that people had both access to the court, but access to the court in a way that did not compromise them presenting their cases to the court, so those were the things that needed to be held in balance. And that requires an ongoing assessment by the court in each instance as to whether or not the facilities that were available are sufficient to do justice in that particular instance. And I think the general experience of the court is that those needs were able to be satisfied, in the move across to the video link. We do not say that it is the best option, I still think that in general terms, the best option is going to be face-to-face hearings, but the capacity to move to that so quickly is quite important. And there were some beneficial aspect that came out of that.

The first is that it gave them or gives, a flexible range of people being able to access the courts. It is not just people in the capital cities that access the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, people from the regions need to access it, too. So the capacity to engage in an online manner adds to the flexibility of response, which can again be used to ensure that there are adequate safety plans in place for the litigants. And the second is that the Courts experience in using videoconferencing facilities has opened the door to being more flexible in terms of how it is that we conduct ordinary litigation, and facilitate people having a safe space within which they can participant in the court proceedings. Whether or not, they are being examined as a witness, participating as a party or otherwise. So there were some benefits that came out of that. The second aspect is the question of triaging, and there are two general methods of triaging in courts. And we will deal firstly with the standard method, which is effectively an opt in method. In the sense that somebody says, This case is urgent, needs to be dealt with urgently." Then the triaging process will be dealt with urgently. In the last 12 months, the parties have to fill in a child abuse notice, or risk of family violence notice out, that seeks to be dealt with quickly to assess the case and see how quickly it needs to be dealt with. To assess what resources need to be put into that.

And where a person identifies those issues within that form, to start the evidence gathering process, so that a welfare agency can immediately be notified of those issues, and produce what information the welfare agency might have. That's the standard form of triaging. It is the opt in form, that requires somebody to say, My case is urgent. The court is also piloting the lighthouse project and the process, in Parramatta, Brisbane and Adelaide, it is not an opt in process but it is a built in triaging process. It uses an on-line, confidential screening tool that doesn't become part of the evidence before the court but is used as a process of working out how the case will be managed within the court. In developing the online screening process we have recognised by the court, that there are potential access issues for that, and it was necessary to build in what protections could be built in, and have them built in so that it could be accessed in a protective manner. That involved some of the technology that was being used, so building safeguards in the technology so that if somebody uses that online screening tool, there are at least some mechanisms in place to protect that from being used against them. The second thing is that when people cannot use the online screening toll, they are not cut out of the benefits of using the triaging process. Because through the National Enquiry Centre, people can complete the screening form via telephone, so it is giving them flexible, online access to the screening tool but also non-online access to cover as many bases as possible. So with the screening tool and enables a number of things to happen, safety planning outside agency referral to take place, and enables the court to engage in differential case management to see how quickly we can bring the case on, what resources need to be brought into play, what expert evidence can be garnered at an early stage of the proceedings. It's a pilot program at the moment, it's operating very effectively.

It is a triage process across all the space in the courts, and it needs to be remembered that both of Federal circuit of Australia are dealing with family violence on a daily basis. The importance of having different triaging mechanisms available.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Thank you. And those registries outside of area where there are ongoing lockdowns, were those triaging methods are face-to-face, it's outsourced to an agency or that was all done online?

**JUSTICE GILL:**  
It is an online or through the telephone contact centre, into the online tool. So that way with COVID-19 restrictions, restricting people to the actual core buildings, the process that has been put in place for COVID-19 have been designed to liberate people from having to attend a court to have justice done in their individual cases. So, it is tailored as best as it can to giving a just outcome, but also giving them access to the outcome.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
And as a pilot project, how long is the pilot outcome of the evaluation period?

**JUSTICE GILL:**  
Until the end of next year, and the Lighthouse Project is undergoing continual evaluation in terms of the approach.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Thank you. You very much for the explanation of how the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia have responded. Anne Hollonds, we have spoken about the Queensland police response and Justice Gill about the court response when responding to Family and Domestic Violence and the response during COVID. How has COVID-19 impacted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, especially those who are experiencing Family and Domestic Violence and what has been the frontline response?

**SANDRA CREAMER:**  
Good morning, I am one (unknown term) country, thank you for having me on the panel. One of the concerns has been the effect on remote communities.

And I will just get that up because, I have been speaking to some of the ladies. With the online challenges and changes that have happened, it is very difficult to access any services for our women in remote communities. We know that for a start, there are a lot of social issues, and things that were available beforehand. But now it's even more harder for our women. One of the issues, when it came to services, they couldn't access a lot of those services, especially our women in remote communities, we know that mostly, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote communities and all other communities went into lockdown. That was important for us so we could kick COVID out, but what happened was a lot of our women were unable to seek assistance, they were unable to escape domestic violence. We have a lot of women who live in remote communities. We know those remain communities, I have gone out there myself, they are five or six hours to travel into town and you need a car. Not everyone has a car in the remote communities so they are not able to leave and have to stay there. The sad part is they have to stay in those communities. And some of those communities, they do not always have state police on them. They have just community policing is communities. So this is very difficult for any of our women out there. And one of the sad things is that as we were just listing before, the changes within the courts and how technology was used and how phone services are used, in remote communities technology is very hard.

So in some of those communities they only have a community phone. And it is good luck trying to even get any internet services, because you have to go and stand with your mobile phone, in a certain spot, under the internet satellite, and at times you cannot even get that. I've been out the communities that I haven't been able to get any services at all. With all of that, any online applications regarding domestic violence or anything like that, it was just very hard for women. And then you have these only online applications, a lot of the remote communities have traditional language. English is the third language. When I go out to the communities, they say to me, What does this mean? We don't understand when it is written in English." It should be written in the language they understand. But even if they did have access, some can't understand the translation of English to their own languages, which can make it very difficult. The courts and the legal system, justice system, it needs to be able to get more information out in a different language, especially when you're looking at the Torres Strait. When they use the 19 languages, we need to start looking at that. Because COVID will be around for a while. And these are the changes to be taken into consideration by the justice system, courts and police.

So the information can reach – a woman can understand what is being translated, and if they go to phone someone, if they get access to a phone, they will have more access to what the questions are, and what they are phoning about, or changes that have been made. It is very concerning. I have seen this out in remote communities, I just came from a remote community myself. I didn't have any phone access at all, internet was very slow, and for me I found it difficult. But, how hard is it for those women in domestic violence? If you have a community phone, out in the middle of those communities, some of those phones, and if there is domestic violence taken out, the woman has to go and use the community phone, and she may not be able to make it to the phone line. These are some of the difficulties they are having. Accessing, and not even knowing what you're getting into. For most of our women to get access to front-line services, they have to be a lot of changes to that, because they can't access them. This is women overall. But what happens, to seek assistance for them, they have to then look at how to do this. Some services I know, and I spoke to some services down in the ACT, their concern was that the services themselves, when they were going out there, our women, our services were locked down. The services that were providing services to these women, they are in lockdown themselves, and they had to then deal with their own family issues, as well as schooling and everything, and then dealing with high risk clients and who they couldn't see. So, what we did in the region 11, in Rockhampton, and they did this around Alice Springs, and remote communities, was doing food drop-offs, so you could go and see, and go out to somebody. Hey, how are you going, we're just checking in to see if you are OK."

That was limited for people to do. It is how we had to change some of our ways of doing that. And some of the ways was how to bring in strategies for this. Where can women go when they need a safe space? If they need to report something? If they are not able to let somebody know. We need to look at hospitals, having a code in, or even the post office. Everyone goes to the post office. But as I say, not everyone goes to the police. Not everyone is going to report to the police, because with front-line services being delayed in going to communities, not even reaching communities, there is also a big concern – one of the things about access was about the children. You have women who are already in domestic violence, and with the children, one of the impacts was with the child, if they were in the process of getting the car back, and there's been domestic violence, the children have been removed. One of the issues was that they were not able to have any phone linkups, or any sort of face-to-face meeting. Because everyone was in lockdown. So, those families, those orders – with child safety issues – I'd heard of a lady who was traumatised because she could not access her children. What happened was her orders were extended, because family services were not – in some communities, not happened in Queensland – family services were not monitoring those accesses. It was up to the carers to make sure there was a phone, or face-to-face, so they were not being monitored by family services. And what happens to the women who had just had new babies, going into care, and not having the attachment to those children?

And this is why – I can't tell you what the data is, because we don't know for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, simply because of the ripple effects of children being removed, not being able to see children or anything like that. So, what happens, if the women have a drug and alcohol problem, and they're trying to get the children back, the services, they couldn't access at all. And that was a big concern for a lot of women and mothers who had the children removed because of domestic violence. And it was happening in their communities and their home. And you have to remember, we have communities – we had even more overcrowding of houses. So, you have to your different families in the housing, we know there is poor people in the house, and you are locked down, and have limited access to anything, internet, or even access to getting support for yourself, it will create a lot of anger. Living in that sort of environment with anyone, it will affect anyone mentally. And mental health issues can be sky-high. And then you don't have family support, other family supporting families, say out in the community. Family support in Alice Springs that you used to go to. That's concerning, as well as food shortages for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

And I know, when you are out in the remote communities, when you have to fly in from a plane, and there are orders in place, there are huge, huge, huge airfares.

And if you are bringing a woman in from one of those communities, during the lockdowns, then what happens is when they want to go back, they don't have the money to be able to pay those airfares back to the communities. So what are they going to do? They will say nothing. So, we need to take into consideration all the different impacts for women in the communities, but also the impact of court orders. And that applies to women with domestic violence, and children. And this is really concerning, and even more concerning, because of the mental health that is affecting our women and even our men. We have already had intergenerational trauma, and then you have this on top. And when you have not been able to see your children, the concern is, sadly, if you have a child in care due to domestic violence, and you're trying to get your child back, and the orders are extended, and there is a breach or something of those orders, what happens is the orders can turn into long-term care. Those are the different things we need to take into consideration. Rather than saying there will be a long-term order on this mother, her child will be removed. We need to have a look at the changes, that the child isn't placed in a long-term order, especially if it was near the end, and COVID came in. Children were placed in long-term orders, the women are more traumatised, and you will not have – you're going to have arguments between the husband and the wife, and the different partners, because they will be blaming each other for the long-term orders on the children. And it is a whole circle. These are the impacts that are happening. For our front-line services, especially, as I said, they are on lockdown, they can't see the women and the children, and do anything face-to-face. They are dealing with their own issues. So, the stress placed on front-line services at that time is absolutely huge. And all of the people working with them. And this is how it is for us. I'm glad that I can share some of this information, because we need to have a collective thing on how we look at these orders, what will happen. COVID will be on for a long time, we don't know what can happen next week, but we need to look at how we can make changes. Like I said, we need to start translating into different languages, so that those who are able to access, that they understand what they are accessing, online technology or something like that. There needs to be a whole shift in considering language barriers, food shortages out in communities, and how to access mental health services. Not even accessing them online. How do we do that? We need to start building more skilled people within our own people in the communities. We need to start having well-trained people out there. We need to bring in people so they can cope with the pressures and issues out in their communities. Thank you.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Thank you so much, Sandra, it's really important to accessing those barriers to services, from an infrastructure perspective, but also, as you say, also understanding the language that is being used. You raise incredible points about children, and the impact of children, not only those experiencing and living with domestic violence, but the whole system that sits around them, in terms of child protection, and the issues in rural and remote communities. So, that's a nice segue into introducing the National Children's Commissioner, Anne Hollonds. Welcome Anne. We've just heard in great and important details from Sandra, children are victims and survivors of family violence, and the pandemic has altered their day-to-day lives. Anne, how has it impacted children living with domestic and family violence, and what do we understand this, and what the responses have been?

**ANNE HOLLONDS:**  
Thank you, Michele, thank you to my fellow panellists. What an interesting set of presentations this has been, I would like to start by acknowledging that I am joining from the lands of the Cammeraygal people of the Eora Nation, and I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and future. We are excited, on these lands, to be coming out of – semi out of lockdown today. It's an exciting day today for all of us, and also to all of you joining in. Thank you to ANROWS for inviting me, congratulations to Anthony and Hayley and everyone at the Institute for this fabulous research. So, I've been asked to cover the experiences of children. I am gonna just cover three things on three issues. One is COVID, the second is listening to children, and policy and system reform. We know that COVID has amplified the risk to children, and the failures of the broken systems which are meant to be helping families to keep their children safe and well. We know that experience of domestic and family violence is a form of child maltreatment, and we know that where there is child abuse and neglect, there is usually domestic and family violence in the extended family network.

During COVID lockdowns, the usual protections are absent, neighbours, family, schools, extracurricular activities have not been fess up during COVID lockdown, children are largely invisible and exposed to violence, as well as all the stresses that come from adult issues, drug and alcohol, financial and housing stress. The children, there is no escape. Last year, we saw child abuse notifications increase after lockdowns are lifted in children again became more visible outside the home. We are seeing younger children more distressed, experiencing more complex mental health difficulties, increased rates of self-harm, suicide ideation, eating disorders and admissions to emergency departments. We are also seeing increased calls, especially from young children to Kids Helpline and other phone lines. Many children are struggling and there may be not enough support for their well-being at home, and they are facing challenges in coming months and years, it is definitely not over yet.

We recently consulted targeted consultations with young people and families, to form the consultation plan for the national framework for protecting Australia's children. Some of the emerging themes that came out of the consultations reflected the multilevel problems, and the siloed services, that they have to do battle with. There are many barriers and it's quite hard for these kids and their families to find the help they need. I heard a lot about violence at home, in the neighbourhood streets, at school. It is sad that many children do not feel safe at school and it is a bit of a lottery as to what support is available, depending on where you are born. Like with basics like housing out of reach for many of the and the families we spoke to. COVID has amplified these problems and many children and their families are doing it tough right now. I was shocked for example of how many young mothers under 21 years old I met around Australia who are homeless, having escaped violent relationships and are now couch surfing or living in short-term refuges or caravan parks with their babies and toddlers. The lack of affordable housing right across the country is making it very hard for these young people who are also parents to be able to keep themselves and their children safe and well, and this of course has gotten worse because of the rental prices increasing during COVID. How can we even get to the first step of protecting young mothers and their children if they have nowhere to live? Other issues that came up with lack of access to mental health services, and lack of public transport to get to services. I wanted to say a little bit about listening to children. The vulnerability of children is quite often used as a reason not to listen to them.

But children who are silenced are never protected. It is we, the adults, who make children vulnerable and put them at risk. By not listening, by not building capability in evidence-based and effective practices, by not reforming our policy and service systems, and by not making the well-being of children and national priority in this country. Why is it important to listen to children about matters affecting their lives? Well, because they have useful and sometimes surprising insights. Because policy informed by the people it is meant to help is better policy. And because it is a human right for children, under article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the rights of the child, too, quote express their views on issues that affect them and have these views taken into account. One of the reasons this is critical is children have unique needs that are not always addressed by policy focused on the views expressed by adults. I was really pleased to see the work being done to ensure the participation of children as part of the all of family approaches developed in the Patricia and Stacy projects, building on the safe and together model by the US, as you know and you can find on the ANROWS website, these are ground-breaking initiatives being led in several state jurisdictions now to provide integrated responses across child protection, Family and Domestic Violence, mental health, drug and alcohol and family law systems. We are now more alert to the fact that adult focused services need to have children in the sights, but this realisation is yet to be standard practice, and really, the decades of specialisation, and rigid silo practice of policy and practice has not served children and their families.

A systemic whole of family approach with children as the priority is needed to ensure children do not fall in the gaps between service systems. There are a few studies that actually amplify the voices of children who have experienced domestic and family violence and what I would commend to you is by the ACT children's Commissioner, and you will find that on their website. The study reinforced the fact that children can have a range of complex and sometimes conflicted feelings and reactions and it is particularly difficult when there is a difference between what children need and what their mothers need. Children told me they are cautious about speaking up to anyone, particularly if there might be a mandatory reporter, such as a teacher, because of fear of being removed from their families and their homes. These barriers to getting help raise questions about the way the systems operate to potentially further traumatised children. And finally, just a few reflections on policy and service system reform, like Sandra, I am on the National Plan Advisory Group, and I have been making the point that children need to be visible in the next plan. Instead of the National Plan only targeting women, and their children, as an afterthought, we need integrated policy and service systems in order to be able to act with greater precision, with and for children and their mothers. And I believe that it is only when we properly recognise women and men, as mothers and fathers, that we begin to be able to see children as both victims and survivors in their own right.

From policy perspective, the childhood years should be recognised as unique, because development is rapid and dynamic, and both positive and adverse experiences have a powerful effect on the developing child. Children do not exist in isolation, but rather in relationships within which their development happens, and the connection of children to their parents, grandparents and carers enables children's policy when applying a system lens when applying a generational policy at the same time, a multiplier effect with my policy can promote child well-being and development, simultaneously preventing adult problems and greater economic costs later on, as well as supporting the well-being of adults in the family right now. We have an opportunity right now, with at least 11 different national strategies in development affecting children and their families, and we need more horizontal connectedness between these to ensure that they are going to be effective. In a short time as Australia's Commissioner for children I have realised that children are not a national priority in this country. It is adult's issues which dominate and take centre stage, with issues for children in visible or peripheral are best. This results in a serious lack of coordination in leadership and portfolios across jurisdictions and often a failure to recognise there is no area of domestic policy that doesn't impact on children and their families. This was seen recently at the women's safety summit where children were dealt with like another intersectional issue, with no special focus at the two-day summit itself. It took a great deal of lobbying to get even one line into the women's safety Summit Statement on children needing to be ratified as victims and survivors in their own right. Because children are not a national priority, we are failing to fix long-standing tell safety and well-being problems such as the ever-increasing numbers of children removed from their homes and placed in out-of-home care with poor lifelong outcomes. Because policy is so firmly siloed we failed to make the connections between harms experienced in childhood and the adult problems we are trying to prevent such as domestic and family violence.

Preventing childhood violence is not only a human rights issue for children, it is also critical for preventing violence and other problems in adult hood. That is why we need more research, and more evidence informed early action to fix the broken systems, and inadequate policy, which results as I said in young mothers escaping violence finding themselves homeless. If we are serious about preventing violence against women, We must get serious about preventing all forms of violence in childhood. We need to act to ensure children's needs a more visible during the pandemic and plan for their well-being for the postcode that decade. The road to recovery from COVID-19 now requires close attention to the need of children and their families especially those children have suffered or missed out on critical support. We need upstream investment to prevent longer term problems, and to reduce the human and economic costs down the road. An understanding of the unique needs of children requires we build system unique capabilities such as these Stacey project, and we need to make sure these services, the wraparound, holistic all of family services are available to children and their families all across the country. COVID has taught us that big problems require courageous national leadership and coordination. We need to better understand how our systems are failing our children and their families and how we, and our current ways of operating may actually be supporting the conditions that keep things the same. Thank you, Michele.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Thank you so much, Anne. And before I segue back to Anthony, the evidence base that you are speaking of, Anne in terms of understanding domestic and family violence with children, is the first priority that ANROWS is funding, and there are eight or nine projects that are looking specifically at that issue. And you say, it is the system's response. And I think, Anthony, what do you think are the key policy take a ways from that research?

**ANTHONY MORGAN:**  
Thank you to the panellists for some staring and quite complex commentary around the issues that we are facing. I'll shot my words a little bit. in terms of the time that we have available. But in terms of implications of policy and practice, beyond reinforcing the steps to ensure women back safety, drawing attention to the areas we need to focus on right now, especially as we are starting to ease restrictions in some state, but also going on with the National Plan. In terms of focus, priority, firstly, I don't need to say a whole lot about this right now but I think the research really does highlight the importance of proactive measures to support victims survivors and to stop the violence. I genuinely think it would be naive to think as restrictions ease we would see this problem start to dissipate. There will be people who choose not to return to kind of normal levels of mobility because of fear of becoming ill or if they have particular health conditions. We saw patterns of socially restrictive behaviours among the women that we surveyed which suggests they will still find themselves having their movements restricted by their partners in times well beyond COVID. I also touched on this before, the idea that particularly nonphysical forms of abuse, not being types of abuse that are in isolation. It was much more common to see women report multiple times of abuse, both within the broad categories like verbal abuse, but also across categories. Around 60% of women said they had experienced one type of emotional abuse, they might have experienced verbal abuse but also socially or financial abuse. This is common. We also see perpetrators are adapting. In regards to the superannuation, we might see other financial schemes like this as we are adapting opposed the world, so we need to keep an eye on partners trying to maintain financial control. Another thing is how pervasive the role of technology was in terms of how controlling behaviour from abusive partners. Around one third of women who had experienced controlling behaviour said technology played a part in this. So, that equates to more than one in ten women who had responded to our survey. This included things like accessing social media accounts without consent, stalking apps installed on their devices and taking sexual images without their consent.

It is hard to gauge how much this has been impacted by the pandemic from our survey but certainly there is other data to suggest that it has been. But I think it's another reason we need to be cautious as restrictions, A is given it off as an opportunity for abusive partners to continue to exert control over their partner and we make it clear really clear in our report I think that efforts to reduce partner violence must prioritize addressing tech enabled abuse. Finally, I need to touch on a couple of points, especially those made by Sandra and Anne about both children and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. It gets really important, to make clear the experience of violence and abuse outlined in the report will not be shared equally by all women and children for stop we include questions about children, and with the analysis we are doing about that, the findings and not just the exposure of violence, but their own experience of violence are startling. We know from the previous research, and the second report released in the next few months, it is high for certain sections for the community. And not all women who were able to safely participate in our research, nor can we reach all vulnerable parts of the community. Whenever we talk about these policy and practice recommendations This point was made more articulately by Anne and Sandra, we need to think about the people who are most at risk, and the consequences of any measures those women who are especially vulnerable, women and children who are especially vulnerable.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Thank you very much, Anthony. I would like to bring in Melinda Tynan, who we have on the line. Melinda is the director of Women's Safety Policy Branch in the Department of Social Services. Are you with us, Melinda?

**MELINDA TYNAN:**  
Yes, I am.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Welcome to the conversation. Thank you for joining us. In light of the research findings, it would be great to hear from you in terms of how these are going to help inform or shape the work of the department that you are involved with, going forward.

**MELINDA TYNAN:**  
Thank you.

When I was thinking about the session, I was thinking about a couple of the programs that were particularly affected by COVID over the last few months, and how we have attempted to respond to those.

Several things bring to mind. One is the support for trafficked people program, that the Department of Social Services funds as part of the whole of government response, in response to human trafficking and forced marriage.

It is a relatively small program, and relatively (inaudible) product, we might say. It is clear that, quite early on, in the pandemic, that the program – because victims of human trafficking and slavery and forced marriage, who would normally be accessing the program, even though they don't come to us in enormous numbers, because of the structure and the way that they – the pathways that they need to access to arrive into the program. They are a little limited. It was clear that they were going to be some effects of the pandemic on the program. In terms of, number one, the cost of housing, for a lot of those victims of trafficking and forced marriage, they will need to be in hotel accommodation, which is a fairly normal kind of situation for people in those circumstances. And in the circumstances of the pandemic, it was a lot more complicated, and a lot more expensive. And a hotel accommodation was becoming increasingly limited. So, we had to start factoring all of that into our budgeting, and the way that we have structured the program. It forced us to do a lot of work. It is a program that is administered for us by the Australian Red Cross. And we have to work very closely with the Red Cross, very quickly, to 1st of all give them a funding increase, to increase the immediate increase in the cost of housing. And also to think about other alternatives to housing for emergency and crisis housing as well. I think it is interesting that both Sandra and Anne have mentioned housing as a key issue around pandemic responses.

In the centrality of that is a COVID response is something that has become the front of my mind. The other program that the Department of Social Services manage is the temporary Visa holders experiencing violence pilot, which was a new program developed at the beginning of this year. In response to the pandemic. It was developed, partly as a result of the calls for better services for temporary Visa holders experiencing violence of the last decade. But also, the pandemic brought the needs of the cohort into relief. Suddenly, because of the – again, the shortage of housing and crisis accommodation, for women in those circumstances, they often didn't have the funding to afford to pay a co-contribution to, say, women's refuge. For a lot of those people, they face destitution, and are not able to access any form of government support. So, it required us to think urgently, in the absence of a great deal of quantitative data to rely on the qualitative data available. And also, using some of the data that the AIC provided for the research survey during the pandemic. So, I think that that is for us a learning experience around how – I don't want to use the word agile, because I don't think most government services are particularly agile – but trying to access Commonwealth funding to respond quickly is never simple. But, to try to think as creatively and collaterally as possible in terms of housing options.

In the model of the pilot, in particular for temporary Visa holders was particularly important. We did with that pilot was not only find access to financial support for increased housing costs, but legal and migration support as well through immigration lawyers in an effort to enable people to sort through all the various legal issues that were also part of the complex dilemma. So, that is probably our major learning. It is a whole bunch of other issues, from a departmental level, and a policy perspective, have come to the fore as a result of the pandemic. I like Queensland police discussion around alternative reporting, that's an issue that has come to the fore during a pandemic for obvious reasons. People with restricted access to transport, and other means reporting. But also gender and disaster is one of the other issues that has come to the fore as well. With the decade of research from the bushfire inquiries, and the effect of natural disasters on reporting rates of domestic violence, and the incidence of domestic and family violence, post natural disasters, they have come to the fore as well, and I note the development of the national recovery and resilience agency. As the part of a new government response in that area. In thinking that the pandemic is part of the disaster scenario is really important. And something that we are certainly paying close attention to.

So, that is a quick overview.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
That has been really helpful, thank you. We will go straight to questions, now. We have a few that have come in. We have picked up my phone. Anthony, the rest of the panel as well, but I will start with you on this one – what, from your research, was the most significant protective factors for women?

**ANTHONY MORGAN:**  
It's a difficult one to answer. Because of the nature in which a large-scale survey is conducted. I think, what I would say, I guess there was a significant minority of women who reported that the violence they were experiencing is what we characterise as a downward trajectory. Across the board, the different forms of abuse, as they described it, decreasing in severity or frequency.

It was interesting, as many of the key tripping factors see the trajectory of violence were similar to those that were reported by those women who said the violence was increasing. The ones that stand out to me were a significant number of respondents said the partners drug and alcohol use was part of it declining. That there is research around alcohol consumption, which is just as mixed as the research in family violence, but changes in consumption patterns is likely something to have improved for some people. I also think that there are probably changes around people's financial situation, which depart from what we might have expected. There are some fairly significant impacts across the board, but not everyone is worth off as a function of the pandemic. And some people have transformed their small business, and done innovative things, which minimise the impact, or even improve their financial situation. So, I won't say protective measures, that's not something we specifically look at, but changes with the pandemic which, for many women who think experience a decrease in violence, that had a factor.

In many circumstances, while violence decrease, it may have been because the pandemic was exerting the control that the partner may would have in terms of restricting their movement or contact with family and friends. Again, I keep talking about complexity, but it is a complex picture.

The findings are quite distressing, but it is not entirely bad news. There are examples, and cohorts of women, in our sample, completed the survey, who said that their situation had improved during the pandemic.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Did any of the other panellists involved in front-line services, for example, have any evidence of that as well?

Where there had been a better outcome for women in terms of domestic and family violence?

OK, next question. This is for you, Mel. Is the safety of the victim and children, further enhanced with the online capability, and the potential for the perpetrator to have access to the victims and children internet and email and form submitted through a computer history search? This is your online reporting capability, I think.

You are on mute.

**MELISSA DWYER:**Sorry, technical issues. Yes, it's an interesting question, if I understand the question correctly, what role does technology facilitated abuse impact on the capability to report DV to the QPS through the online response. We have not seen any instances of technology facilitated abuse impact upon the online reporting capability. But that is not to say that it has not occurred, it's just that we are not aware of it, we have not been advised by victims it is the case, and investigations have not revealed any applications being imposed or put onto those facilities. Whether mobile phone, iPad, computers impacted. There is nothing to say it has impacted, but the police take into account the issues that may be experienced by the victim, when they are advised to us. But I guess, that is where the rubber hits the road for us, sometimes victims, and as we are all experienced in this field, we know that victims don't always know they are being tracked generally, it starts with a bit of an uneasy feeling, or some concern that the perpetrator is aware of conversations they have been having in private, and that generally leads to victims undertaking their own assessment. When the indication is made to police, police interrogate the device and check whether there are any tracking devices on it or not. But at this stage, we haven't seen any indication that that is the case.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Thank you, Mel. And there are many, many more questions, but we don't have time for them. Just to confirm, the data was not breaking down on a state-by-state basis? Was it, there was one quick question I thought you might be able to answer with the yes or no.

**ANTHONY MORGAN:**  
Isn't in the report, is more complicated than that but it is something we are looking at. Just as a tease.

**MICHELE ROBINSON:**  
Great, we're looking forward to that. This is part one of a two-part report. We look forward to the report coming out. Again, congratulations to you, to Hayley and to the AIC coming up with such a critical report during COVID as we come out of lockdown. I like to thank the panel for giving up your time today but also for the very generous contribution of your insight and knowledge on the areas you have spoken to today. Thank you to the audience. It has been a great audience. It has been a very important conversation, for both policy and practice. And I think the insights that we have will assist as we come out of lockdown, for those of you on the call who are part of Freedom Day in New South Wales and those who are in Victoria and will be coming out shortly. The webinar will be available on the ANROWS website so you can view the recording and also share with your colleagues. There is an exit survey, if you could please do that as you leave the webinar. And for any researchers who are tuning in, if you would like to register your research on the RAR, the register of active research on the ANROWS website that compiles an active picture of all of the research being undertaken in the violence against women sector. Thank you all again. We really appreciate you joining us and taking part today. And thank you so much to the panel. I am Michele Robinson and on behalf of ANROWS, thank you so much, and goodbye.