

Transformative justice approaches to domestic, family and sexual violence: A scoping review

This is an ANROWS summary of the scoping review of international evidence in: *Transformative justice approaches to domestic, family and sexual violence: A scoping review* (Lane et al., 2026).

CONTEXT

Domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFSV) is a serious public health issue and human rights violation with devastating consequences for individuals, families, and communities across Australia and globally (World Health Organisation, 2023). Structural inequalities such as colonisation, racism, poverty, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, gender inequality and precarious visa status create and sustain the conditions in which DFSV occurs, and shape who is most affected.

Despite sustained investment in criminal legal responses such as policing, criminalisation, and incarceration, rates of DFSV in Australia remain unacceptably high (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). These responses also cause harm, particularly for people already exposed to structural inequalities (Malins & Caulfield, 2025).

Transformative justice (TJ) is a community-led approach with roots in Indigenous, Black and People of Colour communities, and in feminist, queer and trans, and disability justice movements. It seeks to create safety and focuses on healing and accountability without reliance on criminal legal systems (Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2018). Little consolidated research exists on how TJ is defined, practiced or evaluated in the context of DFSV. This scoping review is, to our knowledge, the first to map TJ approaches to DFSV specifically and draws on 61 sources published between 2005 and 2025.

This In Brief summarises findings from [Transformative justice approaches to domestic, family and sexual violence: A scoping review](#) (Lane et al., 2026), from the ANROWS commissioned project, [We Keep Us Safe: Co-designing community-led responses to domestic, family and sexual violence among people with a history of criminalisation and drug use](#). The scoping review maps how TJ is defined, practiced and evaluated in the context of DFSV across 61 peer-reviewed and grey literature sources published between 2005 and 2025.

What is transformative justice?

- TJ is a **community-led approach** to responding to violence and abuse. It seeks solutions that are survivor-centred, community-based and able to address violence without causing more harm and **without reliance on criminal legal systems** (Mingus, 2019).
- TJ is not a single program or model. It is a flexible set of values, principles and practices that can be adapted to meet the goals, needs and priorities of individual victim-survivors and the communities in which they live.
- While TJ shares some overlapping commitments with restorative justice (RJ), including accountability and repair, there are important distinctions between the two. TJ operates outside of criminal legal processes and focuses on transforming the structural conditions in which violence occurs in the first place.
- TJ is not new and reflects **long-standing practices by communities** for generations. What is new is the increase in visibility of these practices within research and policy about responses to DFSV, and in academic literature.

How does TJ conceptualise violence differently?

- Across the reviewed literature, violence is consistently understood as structural, relational and institutional, rather than solely interpersonal.
- Structural forms of violence, including incarceration, racism and criminalisation, featured as frequently as physical, psychological, and intimate partner violence. This points to a significant shift away from the incident-based approaches that dominate current DFSV policy and practice.
- For many victim-survivors, criminal legal responses including policing, courts and child protection are themselves sources of harm. TJ names these systems as sites of ongoing violence.
- By understanding violence as structural, TJ argues that **punitive, individualised responses cannot create safety** while the conditions that produce violence remain unchanged.

What does TJ look like in practice?

A range of documented practices exists for responding to DFSV without police or criminal legal intervention.

- **Community accountability** processes work with both victim-survivors and those who caused harm. They centre the healing and safety of victim-survivors, while working with the person who caused harm to understand their actions, make amends, and change their behaviour. These processes do not require direct engagement between the two parties and are shaped by the wishes of the victim-survivor.

- **Pod mapping** involves pre-identifying trusted networks that can be activated during crisis, offering a practical alternative to calling police.
- **Mutual aid** meets immediate practical needs, including housing, transport, food, childcare, and accompaniment to appointments, while building the community connections and resources needed to respond to and prevent violence.
- **Community education**, including workshops, community discussions and reading groups. This education builds shared knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to different forms of violence and increases political awareness of the structural causes and consequences of violence. Freely accessible resources like the [Creative Interventions Toolkit](#) offer practical guidance for communities.

How is TJ informing practice in formal and institutional settings?

- TJ principles have been applied in healthcare, DFSV services, family therapy and legal scholarship. These examples show that TJ can inform formal practice without losing its core commitments, provided community leadership is upheld.
- In neonatal intensive care, TJ principles have been used to shift responses to DFSV. Rather than treating violence as an individual risk factor, clinicians are encouraged to recognise the structural conditions shaping family vulnerability, including racism, poverty and criminalisation (Klawetter et al., 2024).
- Within anti-violence services, parallel support processes have been developed – one for victim-survivors and one for people who cause harm – demonstrating how TJ-informed practices can operate within formal settings while remaining community-centred (MacGregor & Broekstra, 2020).
- The Cultural Context Model, used in family therapy, addresses the intersections of gender, race, class and community norms rather than treating violence as an individual problem (Murphy, 2022).
- The literature cautions that formalising TJ without community direction risks replicating the very systems it seeks to move beyond.

Recommendations for policy

- **Review the impacts of criminal legal responses to DFSV**, with the aim of reducing reliance on responses that evidence shows may cause further harm. Redirect investment toward community-led, non-carceral approaches where appropriate, including housing, income support and other supports that can prevent violence.
- **Fund community-led organisations without controlling them.** Long-term, flexible funding enables relational, survivor-led responses to DFSV that cannot operate under short-term or compliance-driven models.
- **Invest in the structural conditions that make safety possible.** Housing, income support, healthcare, education and legal decriminalisation should be recognised and funded as DFSV prevention, not treated as separate policy domains. All DFSV funding should be subject to intersectional analysis to ensure it reaches the full diversity of victim-survivors.
- **Do not co-opt or institutionalise TJ.** The literature consistently cautions that state-led administration or standardisation of TJ risks undermining its community-based foundations. Government's role is to fund and step back – not to design, evaluate or own community-led responses.

Recommendations for practice

- Develop and strengthen non-criminal justice referral pathways alongside existing responses, particularly for communities for whom contact with criminal legal systems causes additional harm.
- Draw on practice examples documented in this review – including parallel support processes and culturally specific therapeutic models – as starting points for integrating TJ principles into existing service delivery.
- Build relationships and share knowledge with grassroots and non-carceral organisations. Collaboration across services, including those working outside criminal legal frameworks, strengthens collective capacity to respond to DFSV in ways that do not cause additional harm.

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