

Addressing barriers facing survivors of family violence in rural and regional Victoria

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The level of justice and support for people experiencing family violence in rural and regional Victoria should not be dictated by their postcode, according to Deakin University law researchers.

The challenges faced by non-government and government agencies responding to family violence in regional and rural areas face is a major issue that must also be addressed, researchers with Deakin's Centre for Rural Regional Law and Justice (CRRLJ) state in their submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

"Where a woman lives should not impact on the level of support and justice she receives when faced with family violence," Deakin law researcher Amanda George said.

"Yet our research has shown that women in rural and regional Victoria are three times more likely to experience family violence than women in metropolitan areas and their postcode can also impede the level of support they receive.

"It is imperative that both the rates of family violence and the risk to survivors in regional and rural places are recognised and reflected by spatially appropriate justice resource allocation."

The submission argues that justice system resources as well as health and support services (including specialist women's and family violence services and perpetrator programs) are typically less available outside metropolitan regions.

Where they do exist, they are commonly overburdened and under-resourced, the researchers highlight in their submission, which is based on their research reports into women's experiences of surviving family violence. As a result there is an urgent need for a range of services that address and reflect the specific barriers and 'postcode justice' issues that

survivors of family violence in rural and regional areas face, including:

- extension of specialist family violence courts, court services and related programs;
- increased presence and funding of legal advocacy/support services;
- extension of specialist police and further training for generalist officers;
- greater accountability of court and police services;
- further attention to police and court obligations to survivors when a Family Court order exists;
- revised responses to potential child abuse; and
- enhanced responses to the growing practices of technology-facilitated abuse and stalking.

Among the other issues tackled in their submission, the researchers highlighted the need to address the inadequate responses to child abuse, technology-facilitated abuse and stalking and the confusion and accountability issues that exist between courts and police services.

"Problems can arise when police and magistrates perceive family law and family violence matters as tangled (though separate) issues and when children are not named on Family Violence Intervention Orders," said Dr Bridget Harris, who now works at the University of New England.

"This can signify a failure to recognise how danger impacts on, and is posed to survivors and their children, as well as a failure to recognise the legacies of family violence.

"The notion of 'escaping' violence is tenuous at best; it is not uncommon for women and children to be contending with trauma and ongoing violence after intimate relationships have ended and formal responses have begun.

"Compounding the issue, approximately 13 per cent of survivors in our research reported discovering their children had been sexually abused by their former partner, and they described problems with accessing support and with state responses."

While technology has the potential to play an important role in administering justice from a distance and increasing access to advocates, it has also been found to be a tool for abusers in attempts to intimidate, control, harm and punish survivors.

"The overwhelming majority of the women interviewed for our Landscapes of Violence study experienced technology-facilitated abuse and a significant proportion experienced technology-facilitated stalking, yet it was rare they felt this was sufficiently acknowledged and addressed by police and magistrates," Dr Harris said.

"Improving responses to technology-facilitated abuse and stalking is vital. Women in rural and regional places are at face greater danger and safety risks than women in metropolitan areas.

"They are more visible to their abuser and often under greater surveillance; have fewer transport options; are more likely to encounter homemade weapons and firearms; and have less access to support services, police and emergency assistance."

Ms George said that while specialist police were viewed positively, they were difficult to access.

"Experiences with generalist police were polarised, indicating divergence from the Code of Practice," she said.

"This meant for victim survivors that their experience of police was dependent on the luck of the draw regardless of the Code of Practice.

Greater access to specialist family violence police and greater training of generalist [police](#) is imperative.

"Traditional court structures and practices are not designed to deal with the particular characteristics of [family violence](#).

"While many magistrates were well regarded, women, support workers and lawyers have identified magistrates that were inappropriate at best and improper at worst. And current court complaint procedures are inadequate. Further training of court workers, diversity within the judiciary and transparent independent accountability mechanisms are necessary to address these issues."

More information: A copy of the submission is available at [www.deakin.edu.au/ data/asset ... ically-Available.pdf](http://www.deakin.edu.au/data/asset ... ically-Available.pdf)

Provided by Deakin University

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