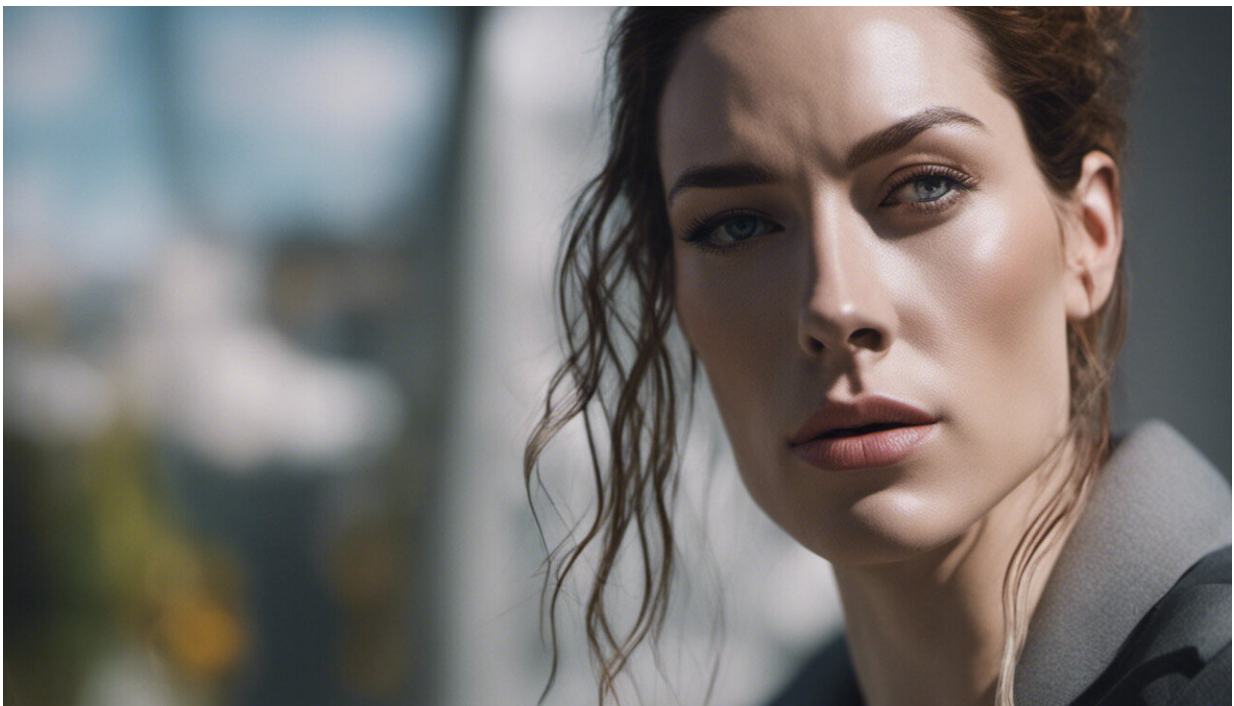


# Health practitioners are missing opportunities to identify domestic violence perpetrators—this is what needs to change

February 2 2023, by Nicola Helps and Kate Fitz-Gibbon

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Identifying perpetrators of domestic and family violence is critical to ending violence against women.

Practitioners across different sectors, including mental health, alcohol

and drug services, have a vital opportunity to "screen" clients to identify if they've experienced or perpetrated [domestic violence](#).

However, our [new research](#) reveals practitioners across a range of services are missing opportunities to identify people who choose to perpetrate violence.

The research, led by Griffith University's Silke Meyer, reveals there's significant work to be done to embed [screening practices](#) across a range of different services.

States and territory governments across Australia have repeatedly committed to increasing [perpetrator](#) accountability. This research shows we need to improve the training of practitioners across various sectors to ensure perpetrators are consistently identified at the earliest opportunity.

## Identifying and assessing risk

People who perpetrate domestic violence routinely come into contact with a range of services for other, often co-occurring issues, such as [mental health concerns](#). Each contact with a service presents an opportunity to screen for perpetrators of such violence, and to support the safety of victim-survivors.

Screening for potential perpetrators involves practitioners reviewing available information and asking questions. It can require them to identify warning signs that may signal the perpetration of violence.

Practitioners use [risk assessment tools](#), such as [Victoria's Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework](#), as well as their professional judgment. This is highly skilled and challenging work.

Without effective screening and risk assessment practices, people who

perpetrate violence may go undetected, may not be referred to intervention services, and their ongoing risk of violence remains unaddressed.

Our research found missed opportunities are evident in [child protection](#), health settings, mental health settings, drug and alcohol interventions, and in corrections.

## **We need to invest more in training**

Our findings demonstrate that enhancing specialist training increases practitioners' likelihood of screening. Yet practitioners in our study reflected on the often limited training available. One corrections staff member commented:

"People coming into our agency generally don't have a good understanding of domestic and [family violence](#), and it's something that they're learning either on the job or through a DV person [...] There's nothing really consistent, as a whole agency."

Practitioners consistently said they want more domestic violence training. This will require substantive investment in specialist workforce training across all relevant service sectors.

[In our study](#), mental health practitioners were least likely to report regular screening of clients for potential domestic violence perpetration. Practitioners described [mental health services](#), in particular emergency settings and crisis responses, as fast-paced and under-resourced.

A mental [health practitioner](#) told us:

"Everybody's under the pump, and you just see people [...] meeting just the bare minimum to cover your back and meeting the minimum

standards."

This environment increases the likelihood that perpetrators will be missed.

Increased resources, specialist training, and improved information sharing across the [mental health](#) system as well as other services is needed to ensure perpetrators are more consistently identified, their risks assessed and monitored.

Also, the need for improved practices doesn't stop at the point of identifying risk. Practitioners in our study said there are limited services available for referrals. There's a need for more early intervention referral options for domestic violence perpetrators.

The study also highlights the importance of organizational leadership and the need to prioritize risk assessment of domestic violence as "core business". Practitioners in these service settings are well placed to screen potential perpetrators for use of violence. Embedding this in everyday practice will ensure screening occurs at every opportunity.

## **Achieving perpetrator accountability**

This study [focused on Queensland](#) and to a lesser extent Victoria. However, the research findings have national importance.

Launched in 2022, [Australia's National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032](#) includes a key principle to hold perpetrators to account. To achieve this goal we must ensure they're identified at every opportunity.

Australian governments are currently preparing the first five-year Action Plan. This strategy will identify the actions needed to progress the

National Plan's goal to eliminate gender-based [violence](#) in one generation. Our research highlights why consistent and improved screening and risk assessment processes must be included.

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