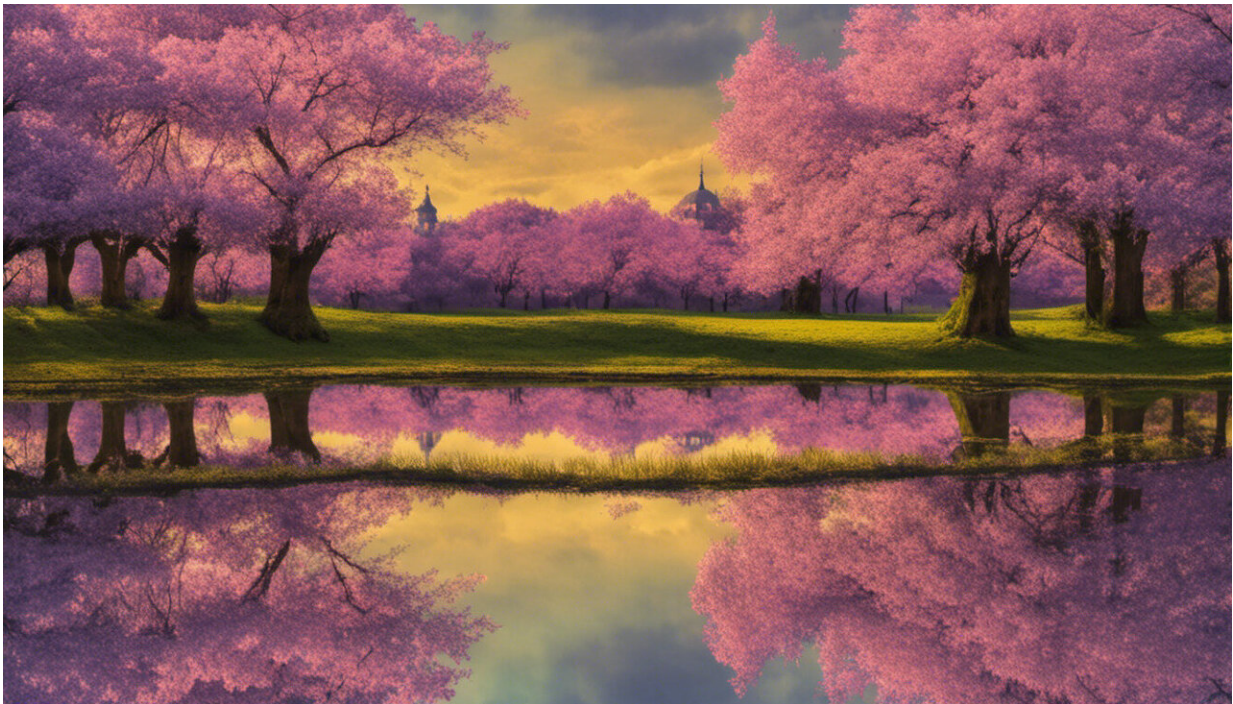


# We need to be cautious when assuming CCTV will prevent family violence

June 20 2017, by Caitlin Overington

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

This year's Victorian state budget included a A\$1.9 billion package to tackle family violence. Part of this was a statewide [Personal Safety Initiative](#), which expands a trial of installing technology – such as CCTV, personal alarms and security doors – in the homes of at-risk women.

The Victorian government is to be commended for recognising that support for victims should be increased. However, a reliance on security infrastructure to resolve embedded social problems may be misguided.

In May, Sydney man Max Spencer was [arrested and charged](#) with breaching an apprehended [violence](#) order following the death of his girlfriend, Hayley McClenahan-Ernst. The circumstances of her death are still being treated as suspicious.

Spencer pleaded not guilty to breaching the order. CCTV footage later emerged, and [has been widely circulated](#), of the couple kissing and holding hands in the hours before her death.

Such footage will likely become significant if Spencer maintains his not-guilty plea to any charges. Without speculating further on this case, key issues regarding the use of CCTV in responses to [family violence](#) must be reconsidered.

## **How CCTV and other cameras may be used**

A [recent report estimated](#) more than 160,000 people experienced family violence in Victoria in 2015-16. This cost the state A\$5.3 billion in 2015-16. \$2.6 billion of this stemmed from individuals' pain, suffering, physical and psychological health impacts, and loss of income.

In this context, the \$17 million announced for the installation of technology like CCTV seems relatively minor.

Following a "[successful](#)" pilot program, CCTV installed in victims' homes was commended for reducing intervention order breaches, and for working as evidence in court to demonstrate when breaches did occur.

Participants in the trial also said they felt safer in their home with CCTV. This is significant, particularly as family violence is a [key driver of homelessness](#). The UK has [implemented similar measures](#).

Visual evidence has a [lot of currency](#) in criminal and civil proceedings. Victoria Police [is trialling](#) body-worn cameras when attending family violence incidents for this reason. CCTV may also be useful in [courtroom settings](#) to reduce the need for a victim to encounter their offender.

While technology may be used well in these instances, the expansion of such programs necessitates a closer consideration of risks.

## **Importance of introducing safeguards**

While short-term disruption can occur, CCTV's long-term effectiveness in deterring criminal behaviour is still [inconclusive and disputed internationally](#).

Because CCTV does not tackle the underlying causes of violence, [displacement of crime](#) also often follows. In the context of family violence, this means that while a victim may be temporarily safe in her home, [leaving for work](#) – for example – may become riskier. This might mean new forms of isolation.

How CCTV is positioned around the property is also significant. If it is only facing outside, then a camera can misinterpret the conditions in which someone enters the home.

Family violence can be coercive in more ways than sexual and physical aggression. Economic and [psychological](#) violence is prevalent, and these behaviours will not be visible to a [camera](#). CCTV may not be able to capture subtle forms of manipulation, or, say, threats to self-harm.

Family violence is also complex and traumatic for victims. Feelings of shame or a belief that it "might get better" can also come into the mix.

If footage emerges of a victim talking to, engaging with or inviting in a perpetrator, this may be used against a victim to shift blame and [perpetuate myths](#). CCTV footage used as evidence must be properly safeguarded to prevent this.

The idea of cameras placed inside the home also has extreme implications for proportionality and privacy.

Finally, CCTV cameras used in the Victorian trial were connected to static internet addresses. Victims were not provided direct access – instead, they were given an application on their phone to check the cameras before going outside or coming home.

But, for a security device, CCTV cameras are notorious for their poor security. Many thousands [have been hacked](#) in one go. Before installing any sort of surveillance device into the homes of thousands of vulnerable families, strict cyber-security measures need to be adhered to and properly evaluated.

## **Where we should focus our attention**

Like an apprehended violence order, the installation of CCTV cameras in the most extreme cases of family violence may be beneficial in [temporarily disrupting](#) threat of physical abuse. However, it is not likely to have meaningful long-term effects. Nor will it work at a statewide level.

Instead, the Victorian government should be encouraged to continue leading its investment in the integration of social and health services, and to focus on [shifting attitudes](#) as a better prevention strategy.

To best support this, media outlets have an ethical duty in focusing on these policies, and must therefore consider the implications of needlessly circulating CCTV images. Future court proceedings and future public engagement with the causes – and best preventions – of [family](#) violence depend on this.

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