

Domestic violence disclosure schemes: Part of the solution to improving women's safety or an administrative burden?

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The spotlight is yet again shining on the national crisis of violence against women in Australia, and the calls for increased action and

improved responses to all forms of domestic, family and sexual violence has intensified over the last three weeks.

With the need for a perpetrator register or a disclosure scheme emerging as one option to improve women's [safety](#), Monash University and University of Liverpool researchers have published a [study](#) examining whether such schemes actually improve women's safety.

Domestic violence disclosure schemes (DVDS) provide a mechanism—for victim-survivors, individuals who feel at risk, and/or an individual's friends and [family members](#)—to apply for information about whether a person has a documented history of domestic violence. The schemes can also involve police proactively providing information to protect potential 'high risk' victims from harm from their partner.

Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon, who led this research, said the study revealed significant gaps in terms of both timeliness of data sharing and also the lack of follow-up supports and safety planning provided to applicants.

"This study represents the first examination of the operation of the domestic violence disclosure scheme in Australia," said Professor Fitz-Gibbon. "It raises significant questions as to the value of the scheme, and serves as a word of caution for other states and territories that are currently considering this approach."

The research team, including Professor Sandra Walklate and Dr. Ellen Reeves from University of Liverpool, interviewed scheme users, relevant practitioners, academics and policymakers in Australia and New Zealand to generate the evidence required to inform decisions about the introduction of a DVDS.

Despite the often used political justification for disclosure

schemes—that it provides women with the information they require to secure their safety—this study found that of the applicants interviewed, the majority had already experienced abuse and since separated from their partner when they accessed the same. For these applicants, the information disclosed did not necessarily come as a surprise, but rather a confirmation of suspicions they already held.

"Applicants in this study did not necessarily require the information disclosed to them to support immediate safety planning and relationship decision making, but rather to confirm decisions they had already made about the viability of their intimate partner relationship and their safety in it," Professor Fitz-Gibbon said.

Sharing information with no follow up may put the applicant at greater risk of harm and represents a missed opportunity to keep the victim-survivor's risk in view.

In Australia, only South Australia has a domestic violence disclosure scheme. NSW piloted a scheme in 2016 but it was discontinued in 2018. No other state or territory has as yet introduced a scheme, although several have considered a scheme.

Professor Fitz-Gibbon said DVDS carry significant resourcing implications; administrative workload, data sharing, training, support services and access.

"The specialist domestic, family and [sexual violence](#) sector are calling for an urgent increase in funding to ensure they can support the safety needs of victim-survivors across Australia. At a time when funding for services is falling short across the country, it is imperative to critically question what policies are supported. While several practitioners described the value of the scheme—whether it is the best use of resources in a chronically under-funded sector was of paramount

consideration," she said.

With national and state conversations currently underway around implementing reforms to end violence against women and children, this study assists policymakers in understanding not only what works, but also what policy approaches may be less effective.

This research calls not for the introduction of a DVDS but for evidence-based policies and adequate funding for wraparound specialist [support services](#) to support safer outcomes for victim-survivors.

More information: Informed and safe, or blamed and at risk? Examining the merits and limits of domestic violence disclosure schemes in Australia and New Zealand. figshare.com/s/b165586bb566ea80a899

Provided by Monash University

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