

Delayed Support, Heightened Harm: The Impacts of Long Wait Times for Specialist Family Violence Services

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Introduction

This report outlines the impact of dangerously delayed and inadequate service responses on the lives of victim-survivors of family violence. Victim-survivors and family violence practitioners alike have expressed their frustrations with being unable to access or offer consistent and responsive service responses due to lack of, or changes in, funding and resources (Safe & Equal, 2025).

Victim-survivors have shared that a severely lagging service response has impacted on:

- A decreased likelihood of engaging with formal help-seeking behaviour, with untimely service provision being deemed pointless and unacceptable (Campbell et al., 2024; Carman et al., 2023; Fitts & Soldatic, 2024; Safe & Equal, 2022, 2025)
- The confirmation of narratives of worthlessness, shame, and isolation installed by people using violence (Carman et al., 2023; Lohmann et al., 2024; Vasil, 2023)
- High levels of distress, rejection, and abandonment (Campbell et al., 2024; Carman et al., 2023; Fitts & Soldatic, 2024; Safe & Equal, 2022, 2025; Vasil, 2023)
- An increased likelihood to experience poverty and financial instability and dependence, inability to access affordable and secure housing, and greater complexity of mental health challenges (Bailey et al., 2020; Carman et al., 2023; Meyer & Stambe, 2021; Vasil, 2023)
- Greater challenges to finding safety and freedom from family violence, as systemic barriers inhibit victim-survivors from being able to move out of survival mode (Carman et al., 2023; Meyer & Stambe, 2021; Vasil, 2023)

- Increased likelihood to face barriers to accessing formal supports as risk factors are heightened and exclusions to services based on eligibility criteria become more likely (Bailey et al., 2020; Carman et al., 2023; Vasil, 2023)
- Greater strain on the protective parent/child relationship including increased likelihood of maladaptive coping behaviours exhibited by children (Bastian et al., 2025; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017).

The likelihood, severity, and nuance of these outcomes is impacted by the diverse range of experiences of marginalisation of victim-survivors, such as the added precarity experienced by migrant women with insecure visa status, the compounding effects of structural disadvantage faced by Indigenous women, or the increased complexity of finding affordable housing for women sole-parenting their children (Carman et al., 2023; Meyer & Stambe, 2021; Vasil, 2023).

Adequately funding and resourcing specialist family violence services has a direct impact on increased ability to find and maintain employment and stable housing and decreased impact of trauma on mental health and the protective parent/child relationship.

Conversely, there is a high likelihood of untimely service responses heightening risk factors and consequently over-burdening all areas of the system (Safe & Equal, 2022, 2025).

Continuing to underfund specialist family violence services calls into question the validity of government commitments to ending family violence as outlined through both the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022) and Tasmania's Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan (2022).

The impact that an untimely service response has on the lives of victim-survivors directly mirrors the consequences of experiencing coercive control by a person using violence (Lohmann et al., 2024).

Services being adequately funded and resourced will decrease the chance of re-presentation of victim-survivors to the response system (and often to police or the justice system) and act as a preventative mechanism by minimising additional distress, trauma, and risk experienced by victim-survivors and their children, as they navigate the impacts of family violence, in addition to the services providing support that aligns with the 'response' and 'recovery/healing' pillars (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; Safe & Equal, 2025).

Discouraging Help-seeking: How an untimely service response reinforces tactics of abuse and consequences of family violence

Victim-survivors have reported experiences with untimely service responses that mimic tactics of coercive control employed by people using violence, and a compounding effect of commonly internalised narratives that exist as a consequence of experiencing family violence. This stands in direct contradiction to the values, principles, and vision outlined in Tasmania's Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan (2022).

Committing to national plans to end violence against women in public-facing settings while actioning a reality that endorses untimely service responses through lack of funding creates an empty and false narrative of government action. Failing to follow through on promises of funding and resourcing facilitates a help-seeking experience that mimics being on the receiving end of common tactics of coercive control employed by people who use violence, such as gaslighting, betrayal of trust, isolating victim-survivors, destruction of self-worth, and the instituting of internalised stigma and shame (Carman et al., 2023; Lohmann et al., 2024). Victim-survivors report similar experiences of distress, abandonment, rejection, and stigmatisation upon learning that they are unable to engage with support services due to lengthy wait times or lack of available resources, reiterating the narratives often instilled by people using violence that victim-survivors are not good enough, not worthy of support, and nobody else will care for them (Campbell et al., 2024; Carman et al., 2023; Vasil, 2023). Failing to directly oppose these narratives is inconsistent with the pillar of prevention as outlined by the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022), as it condones violence against women and children by mimicking the violence.

Frustration and dissatisfaction with current funding models are shared by victim-survivors and practitioners alike, who have expressed that the lack of, or changes in, funding and the inconsistent and untimely service delivery that is facilitated by this is unacceptable (Bailey et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2024; Safe & Equal, 2025). This speaks to the demand for, and eagerness to provide, the support desired by victim-survivors looking to begin the recovery process from family violence. The reputation of the help-seeking experience being one of frustration and dissatisfaction further hinders early intervention strategies, as victim-survivors deem engagement with services pointless if they are unable to receive service in a timely manner (Bailey et al., 2020; Fitts & Soldatic, 2024).

Combined with the understanding that many victim-survivors find taking the first step of reaching out for support requires an immense amount of courage to overcome stigma and shame around family violence, an untimely service response and the impact this is proven to have on the lives of victim-survivors provides an unacceptable additional barrier to an already complicated and challenging process of recovery (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; Safe & Equal, 2025; Vasil, 2023). This is particularly concerning given the large emphasis placed on early intervention by the National Plan.

The Tasmanian Action Plan (2022) clearly states that the way people using violence behave is not acceptable and yet lack of funding and resourcing to specialist family violence services incites the same response in victim-survivors as the actions of people using violence. Adequately funding and resourcing specialist family violence organisations supports the both the Tasmanian Action Plan's and the National Plan's (2022) first pillar of prevention, as it works to address the underlying drivers of violence against women by refusing to inadvertently condone and mimic behaviours of violence against women and children.

Moving from safety to freedom: the toll of being 'stuck' in survival mode

An integral part of working with(in) trauma-informed, person-centred, specialist family and sexual violence frameworks and knowledge is to be led by victim-survivors around why they wish to engage with support services, and what they wish to gain from this support. The importance of this is reflected in the Tasmanian Action Plan (2022-2027) through the principles of partnership and transformation and voice and diversity, and summarised in the title, 'Survivors at the Centre'.

Victim-survivors have shared several key points on what is important to them in the recovery process from family violence; the necessity of safety, the desire for freedom, and the importance of consistent and timely support from services in being able to achieve both measures (Bailey et al., 2020; Carman et al., 2023; Lohmann et al., 2024; Meyer & Stambe, 2021; Vasil, 2023).

While basic steps towards recognising these points have been made, any meaningful response is hindered by a lack of resources for specialist family violence organisations and the resultant untimely and inconsistent service response.

Recovery from family violence was deemed impossible without safety. One victim survivor shared "it is very difficult if not impossible to recover when I was just trying to stay alive - bare basic survival mode doesn't promote recovery and healing." (Burgman et al, 2022, p.752). Victim-survivors identified key factors necessary for safety; financial independence and recovery, safe housing and social support, and effective mental health support (Carman et al., 2023). Systemic barriers were reported as a major challenge to finding safety, with victim-survivors citing inaccessible welfare payments, ineffective and unaffordable mental health support, and a lack of secure housing as major concerns when working to move out of survival

mode and into safety (Bailey et al., 2020; Carman et al., 2023; Meyer & Stambe, 2021).

Without safety, victim-survivors spent an increased length of time in survival mode impacting across several domains, with the financial consequences of experiencing family violence cited as the hardest to recover from (Carman et al., 2023; Meyer & Stambe, 2021; Vasil, 2023). Many victim-survivors are faced with the choice to stay in their abusive and violent relationships, or leave and risk poverty, a choice that is made harder by untimely and inaccessible support from underfunded and overburdened services (Summers, 2022).

The reasoning given for financial consequences being so severe is the interconnected relationship between experiencing family violence, trauma and mental health, ability to engage with, and sustain employment or financial stability, and ability to access affordable and secure housing (Bailey et al., 2020; Carman et al., 2023). Specialist services who were understanding of this cyclical relationship and the nuances of experiencing family violence were cited as integral to the recovery process, highlighting the important role that timely service provision plays in supporting victim-survivors to find safety. (Carman et al., 2023). Importantly, victim-survivors' definition of safety extended beyond a crisis framing of safety to an ongoing and life-long process, again highlighting the need for consistent and accessible specialist services that support victim-survivors throughout this process (Carman et al., 2023).

Closely related to (and entirely dependent on) the concept of safety, victim-survivors reported being highly interested in acquiring freedom (Carman et al., 2022). Victim-survivors definition of freedom included freedom from the perpetrator and abuse, freedom to make their own choices, freedom from past and persistent memories, freedom from victim mentality, and freedom from trauma symptoms and other troubling emotions (Carman et al., 2023).

Along with time spent in safety, receiving adequate mental health support from specialised FDV services has been cited as integral to the recovery journey and the pursuit of these freedoms (Carman et al., 2023; Fitts & Soldatic, 2024; Lohmann et al., 2024). Services that recognised the systemic and cultural drivers of violence against women, utilised strengths-based and trauma-informed practice, and were resourced to be able to respond in a timely manner were again reported as best placed to support the process of acquiring freedom (Bailey et al., 2020; Carman et al., 2023; Lohmann et al., 2024).

Timely service provision in accessing these freedoms was also linked with a strengthening of the protective parent/child relationship, and a decrease in the impacts of trauma and likelihood of engaging with violence as adults for child victim-survivors, highlighting the importance of supporting protective parents to engage with specialist mental health support as part of child-aware and child-safe practice (Bastian et al., 2025; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017).

By contributing to a prolonged period of time spent in survival mode, an untimely service response assists the continuation of family violence as a phenomenon of crisis and systemically hinders victim-survivors from moving forward with their lives. Considering the impact that specialist and timely mental health support for victim-survivors has on their experiences of safety, survival, and freedom, it can be understood as both a proponent of early intervention, response, and recovery and healing, and is highlighted as a priority in ending family violence (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; Our Watch, 2021).

Who is holding the risk: Exacerbated consequences of FDV

A pillar and important theme of the National Plan (2022) is that of stopping violence against women and children as early as possible to reduce severity, escalation, and reoccurrence of family violence. Facilitating untimely service responses through lack of funding works in direct contradiction to this by exacerbating both pre-existing barriers to support and consequences of experiencing family violence in the lives of victim-survivors (Bailey et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2024; Carman et al., 2023; Lohmann et al., 2024; Meyer & Stambe, 2021; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017; Vasil, 2023).

Common barriers to accessing family violence support include lack of available transport options, inability to engage with services due to financial instability and consequences, concerns around safety, privacy, and confidentiality (particularly in regional and rural areas), lack of available and culturally safe services, and not meeting eligibility requirements (Bailey et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2024; Carman et al., 2023; Fitts & Soldatic, 2024; Meyer & Stambe, 2021; Vasil, 2023). All of these barriers to access are exacerbated by being unable to access timely specialist support, asking questions of systems and governments that place responsibility for risk management at an organisational level while maintaining direct control of the resources required to minimise risk factors.

One example of this is the previously outlined relationship between mental health and financial stability and independence. Victim-survivors have shared that being able to access specialist mental health support in a timely manner is integral to achieving financial stability and independence (Campbell et al., 2024; Carman et al., 2023; Vasil, 2023). Financial autonomy is linked to both the underlying drivers and reinforcing factors of violence against women as outlined by Our Watch (2021), signifying that increased likelihood of

experiencing poverty due to an untimely service response is likely to also increase risk factors and the complexity of challenges faced by victim-survivors (Safe & Equal, 2025). An increase in complexity and severity of the consequences of family violence also translates to a higher level of specialisation and knowledge being required to provide adequate and relevant support, increasing the demand for organisations to provide services beyond funding and resources constraints (Safe & Equal, 2022, 2025).

In addition to this, intersecting experiences of marginalisation add a nuanced and compounding component to barriers to access and consequences of family violence, contributing to a widening of existing disparity (Meyer & Stambe, 2021; Vasil, 2023). The experiences of migrant women fleeing family violence exemplifies the importance of a timely service response, and the impact of intersecting marginalised identities. An untimely service response after first contact was reported as inciting experiences of isolation and dependence and contributing to an increase in risk, trauma, and upheaval in migrant victim-survivor's lives by increasing likelihood of visa complications and deportation, ongoing financial challenges due to inability to engage with employment, and a lack of accessible housing options and informal support systems (Vasil, 2023). Migrant women were also less likely to reach out for support until a crisis event occurred, partly due to the reputation of services as unable to offer specialised and timely support (Vasil, 2023) highlighting the impact of adequate funding across all pillars of the National Plan (2022) in encouraging a sector reputation of accessible and timely service responses.

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