

CATALYSTS OF CHANGE

Understanding the pivotal role interventions and service pathways play in helping LGBTQ men who have used family violence overcome barriers to change their behaviour



While there is growing awareness about family violence in LGBTIQ+ relationships and community, little is known specifically about how gay, bisexual, trans, and queer men (GBTQ) men who have used violence come to recognise their behaviour as harmful, how they engage with services or what processes they go through to change their behaviour and commit to a life of non-violence.

Catalysts of change: interventions and service pathways for gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (GBTQ) men who have used family violence in Victoria, Australia is a study conducted by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) at La Trobe University in partnership with Thorne Harbour Health and Switchboard Victoria. It highlights the unique challenges and barriers GBTQ men face in overcoming family violence and details how GBTQ men engage with service pathways.

The findings have significant implications for policy and practice and include the identification of specific factors contributing to family violence within this group, the effectiveness of tailored intervention programs, and the critical role of inclusive service pathways. The study emphasises the need for specialised support structures that understand and address the complexities of GBTQ identities and experience.

This practice guide outlines the research outcomes of the study and underscores the importance of LGBTIQ+ family violence services, along with associated therapeutic, legal, and helpline services in Victoria.

Practitioners in mainstream family violence services have the opportunity to learn from specialist LGBTIQ+ service responses that have proven effective. Policymakers might consider how specialist service providers could be further supported to strengthen their work.

KEY FINDINGS

This study found that GBTQ men face specific challenges when seeking assistance to change their behaviour. These challenges are compounded by limited awareness or understanding of family violence in GBTQ relationships among a wide array of stakeholders, including service users, practitioners, and various community and institutional entities. Alongside this, a lack of tailored service options, experiences of discrimination, and intersecting issues like

substance use, mental health, and homelessness further complicate the process of accessing appropriate assistance.

The research also found LGBTIQ+ service providers and individual practitioners in Victoria play a central role in helping users of violence overcome these barriers, through early intervention, engagement and GBTQ-focused service provision.

Barriers to service engagement for GBTQ men

Family violence occurs across all sectors of society and in all types of relationships with the same devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. Yet, while GBTQ men experience family violence at similar levels to the general population, awareness of it is not widespread, which at times has resulted in misidentification of users of violence and victim survivors, especially in the initial stages of service engagement.

The study found that GBTQ men who have used violence in intimate or family relationships have complex and sometimes contradictory understandings of their harmful behaviour, often initially considering it to only be physical violence.

However, GBTQ family violence can also include:

- Stalking (including the use of digital spyware)
- Emotional and psychological abuse
- Sexual Assault including Image-based sexual assault and abuse,
- Financial control,
- Identity abuse and coercive control (such as threatening to reveal someone's sexual/gender identity or sexually transmitted infections & blood borne Viruses status to family, an employer or social circle.

Some individuals have difficulty in recognising their use of violence, identifying themselves as victims, or attributing their violent behaviour to factors such as anger, alcohol and drug (AOD) use, and "toxic" relationships. Additionally, the available family violence service options for LGBTIQ+ individuals are limited and usually operate



within a framework that typically perceives family violence through the lens of a heterosexual cisgender male perpetrator and a heterosexual cisgender female victim.

GBTQ men also encounter barriers to accessing appropriate services with mainstream Men's Behavioural Change Programs (MBCPs), including experiences of discrimination, stigma and judgement. In addition, co-existing issues such as substance use, mental health challenges, and homelessness, present obstacles that complicate the accessibility of services and interventions.

IMPORTANCE OF LGBTIQ+ SERVICE PATHWAYS AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Early engagement with legal professionals, family violence practitioners and AOD counsellors, can be instrumental in identifying GBTQ men who have used violence, engaging them in services and creating the conditions in which they might seek to reflect on and change their behaviour.

While there are mainstream services available, the study shows that services tailored specifically to the needs of GBTQ men gain the trust of users of violence and help with concerns about entering potentially hostile or unsafe service environments.

Individual practitioners who can tailor and adapt family violence services to the needs of GBTQ people, including trans and gender diverse participants, create safe environments that encourage behaviour change and establish a continuing supportive relationship and connections.

In Victoria, LGBTIQ+ community-controlled organisations Thorne Harbour Health and Switchboard Victoria play a crucial role in helping GBTQ men overcome the barriers they face in accessing help for family violence.

Thorne Harbour Health – MBCP program

Thorne Harbour Health's MBCP program is the first in Australia with an LGBTIQ+ framework and helps GBTQ men understand their use of violence and provides ways for them to change their behaviour and live a life of non-violence.

The study's findings indicate that individuals who have engaged in violent behaviour often perceive a sense of safety and support from practitioners at Thorne Harbour Health and fellow participants in the program.

Many of the men interviewed in the study expressed scepticism regarding the ability of mainstream programs, which include heterosexual participants, to provide the same quality of service to GBTQ men.

Switchboard Victoria – Rainbow Door

Rainbow Door is a specialist helpline run by Switchboard Victoria providing information, support, and referrals to LGBTIQ+ people. The study found that referrals about GBTQ men engaged in family violence were sometimes made from court, legal or mainstream family violence services.

In some cases, referrals were a result of people who were using violence reaching out to Rainbow Door directly for support with legal matters or their mental health, without yet acknowledging their use of violence.

As Rainbow Door is also a referral service, it helps people to access service providers that work specifically with GBTQ men, such as Thorne Harbour Health's family violence programs.

HOW TO ENSURE SERVICE PATHWAYS ARE CATALYSTS OF CHANGE

As the response of service can significantly shape the extent to which a user of violence accepts the need to change, interventions tailored to the needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals, relationships and communities have the potential to be catalysts of change for GBTQ men who have used family violence. The study found there are ways to improve how services respond.

Effectively addressing GBTQ family violence demands a shift in roles for some practitioners in mainstream family violence and legal settings. Practice guidelines are urgently needed to work with GBTQ users of violence, addressing diverse situations and challenging stereotypes.

More broadly, creating inclusive narratives is also vital for fostering informed and supportive societal responses. A holistic, multi-faceted approach is essential for effectively addressing GBTQ family violence and recognising the importance of accountability-focused programs, like MBCPs, emphasises the need for additional service options, such as AOD and mental health counselling, to provide comprehensive support.

Recommended next steps to improve outcomes for GBTQ family violence

The findings from this report have significant implications for policy and practice. There is a potential for services to be developed further to help more users of violence to be identified,

engage with services and be encouraged to commit to changing their behaviour.

For that to happen, awareness about how family violence occurs and affects GBTQ men needs to be increased. A critical next step in that process involves training for the family violence sector workforce, including police, legal professionals, counsellors, and family violence practitioners, to better identify and respond to GBTQ perpetrators of violence. This training should extend to building knowledge about appropriate referral mechanisms for specialist LGBTIQ+ services.

To ensure inclusivity, embedding more LGBTIQ+ family violence specialists in mainstream services and fortifying relationships with, and pathways to, specialist LGBTIQ+ services is also crucial.

Creating opportunities for practitioners and professionals to develop a nuanced understanding of power, control, and coercion in relationships involving GBTQ men will help.

Additionally, building capability for AOD intensive case management and dual diagnosis work is essential, enabling users of violence to address co-existing issues alongside behaviour change efforts.

This report provides a significant contribution to increasing understanding of how GBTQ users of violence might be better engaged in services and encouraged to change their behaviour, in ways that support the wellbeing of victim survivors and others at risk of violence.

