



# Criminalising coercive control in South Australia – Engagement with young people

## A summary of initial consultations

On 25 January 2023 the Department of Human Services (DHS) held an engagement session with young people and organisations representing or working with young people to discuss their views around criminalising coercive control and to gain an understanding of the implications of this legislation, once it takes effect. Participants included youth organisations, organisations working with young people, and young people themselves.

Prior to the session, participants were provided with discussion paper – Criminalising coercive control in South Australia - implications for young people. This paper provides a definition of coercive control, explains the unintended consequences that legislation may have and asks a number of questions for participants to consider.

**This is a summary of the key themes and issues raised by participants.**

*Please be aware that the content in this document may be distressing or raise issues of concern for some readers. There are a range of services available if you require support after reading this paper. Lifeline provide 24/7 crisis support and can be contacted on 131 114. Beyond Blue also provide support services and can be contacted on 1300 224 636. Confidential information, counselling and support services can also be accessed through 1800RESPECT.*



## **Young people's understanding of coercive control and how it presents in their relationships**

Participants generally agreed that most young people would not know what coercive control means. They expressed difficulty defining coercive control, agreeing it can present itself differently across relationships. In intimate partner relationships, young people are more likely to try and control what a partner wears, or who they can see or socialise with.

Participants found the description of non-physical forms of violence difficult. Young people often romanticise coercive controlling behaviours, rather than viewing them as dangerous, for example, 'they're just protective of me'.

Participants agreed that respectful relationships education was vital, and that education should begin in early education and continue throughout schooling. Advertising and education mechanisms should depict situations young people can see themselves in, so they are able to relate and connect the messaging with their own relationships.

Agencies working with young people also described seeing coercive controlling behaviours within friendship groups and within family relationships.

Photo sharing and image-based abuse is the number one issue in schools at present, according to participants, and many young people are not aware that it is illegal.

Another issue of concern is the use of technology-facilitated surveillance amongst young people, particularly in relationships but also within friendship groups. Participants are aware that young people will ask their partner to keep their location on because they feel more comfortable knowing where they are, and that it has become quite normalised. The justification, 'if you aren't doing anything wrong, why take it off' is common.

Some young people engaging in this behaviour are not aware that it is controlling or that it can lead to dangerous, potentially lethal controlling behaviour.

## **Effective means of communication to educate young people about coercive control, compared with healthy, respectful relationships**

A participant working with children in an education capacity found it most useful to have young people explore different scenarios and discuss whether they are healthy or unhealthy – for example, is it ok to check your partner's phone?

Other participants raised the importance of an engaged teacher to run respectful relationships education – as well as the importance of a whole-of-school approach. Further to this, a whole-of-community approach is ideal, one that engages parents and services to further embed the learning.

The importance of culturally safe education was also raised, for Aboriginal as well as multicultural young people. Education campaigns must be culturally diverse and not create the opportunity for some young people to feel separate from it.



### **Effective social media campaigns**

Having an online presence that can lead to discussions in friendship groups was highlighted as an important means of communication, but any education mechanism must have input from young people in the design and the messaging. Young people don't want to just be educated; they want to be involved in the change process.

One young person emphasised the importance of campaigns that 'scare you' – referencing smoking television advertisements, road safety advertisements etc. Advertising that creates a strong emotional response in the viewer is more powerful.

The power of sport was raised as an important 'hook' for young people to initially engage them, then use the influence to provide tools to raise awareness and change behaviours.

Any education material must have consistent messaging through social media channels, particularly Tik Tok.

While social media is a vital mechanism to reach young people, the importance of face-to-face education in conjunction with online messaging was highlighted as being important.

Developing an App was suggested as an effective communication tool for young people, with information they can absorb in their own time, with links to support services. An App could provide information on coercive control and respectful relationships, in multiple languages, and link to appropriate and available services and information.

The importance of indirect messaging in places that young people frequent was also raised, such as nail salons, bus stops and shopping centres - as perpetrators may go through their phones.

### **Next steps for government**

Participants agreed they would like to see government facilitating a whole of community approach to addressing gendered violence and coercive control.

Non-government organisation representatives would like to see better collaboration and referral processes between services, and mapping and coordination of service provision.

The importance of primary to tertiary respectful relationships education was also raised as a vital requirement, as well as the need for additional funding for services to allow for an increase in people requesting assistance as a result of the legislation. This investment is required in regional, rural and remote areas where there are often no services to access for young people.

The group thought that having alternative first responders, such as local service providers or youth specific services, being involved in schools and having an understanding of the issues facing young people would be beneficial. This would assist to normalise support seeking and encourage systems within schools that encourage teachers to act on reports.



Some participants considered that training for police in issues affecting young people would be helpful as their experiences have been that police will not see violence in their relationships as family and domestic violence.

A government-led advisory committee with representatives from multiple sectors that meets regularly to oversee implementation would be highly beneficial.

