

1 Audit summary

1.1 Introduction

Family violence has serious physical, emotional and financial consequences for individuals, families and the community. Men are the main instigators of violence against women, children and other vulnerable people. Family violence is common in all sections of the community, with estimates that it affects one in three Australian women. It is the main cause of preventable death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15–44 years, and costs Victoria about \$2 billion annually.

1.1.1 Background

In 2002 the government released the *Women's Safety Strategy* and set up the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence. In 2005 the committee recommended integrating services through a multi-agency system, rather than using shared information and processes to coordinate information across agencies.

The 'integrated response' to family violence incorporates Victoria Police, the Department of Justice, the Magistrates' Court of Victoria, the Department of Human Services and the Department of Planning and Community Development.

In 2004 Victoria Police introduced its Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence (the Code), which is an important part of Victoria's family violence reform strategy—the *Integrated Family Violence Strategy*.

The Code enforces a mandatory police response to family violence reports and introduced new practices, including compulsory risk assessment and management procedures for all family violence incidents. The new practices required police to take greater action when responding to incidents, assessing immediate and future risks to the victim and responding appropriately using one or more of the three options prescribed in the Code.

Within police, the central Family Violence Unit is responsible for coordinating police participation in the integrated approach; while the operational discharge of the Code is undertaken by police at the regional level. Under the Code, police provide the first official response to a family violence incident, and act to secure the victim's immediate safety and refer them to support services and interventions as appropriate.

1.2 Audit scope and objectives

The objective of the audit was to determine whether Victoria Police provides safety and support services to victims and perpetrators of family violence and reduces the impact of family violence in the community.

The audit reviewed police compliance with the operational, investigatory and administrative requirements of the Code. Detail about how police manage these responsibilities is given in Part 4 of this report. The audit also examined whether using the Code has safeguarded victims of family violence and resulted in better outcomes for them and perpetrators. The findings are detailed in Part 5. Governance arrangements for managing family violence are reviewed in Part 6.

Specifically, we examined whether:

- police family violence functions comply with the Code's requirements
- there is evidence of improved outcomes for victims and perpetrators as a result of the police's approach to family violence
- the Family Violence Unit develops and applies strategies that improve police responses to family violence incidents
- police work effectively with government and non-government agencies and the community in providing and referring people to family violence services.

The audit included:

- a review of police policy documents and operational guidelines
- interviews with senior police, command and operational police
- a review of data collection, evaluation and reporting of family violence statistics.

The audit was conducted at police headquarters, regional police offices and a number of metropolitan, regional and rural police stations.

1.3 Conclusions

Compliance with the Code

Introducing major change is challenging for any organisation, particularly a big one that is spread over a large area. Victoria Police has more than 11 000 sworn officers in 339 police stations across the state, so making changes to policy and procedure under the Code was a significant challenge.

Police are responding to all family violence reports as specified under the Code. However, police are not always complying with the Code's requirement of using a referral option, as it was used in only 78 per cent of incidents attended by police.

The introduction of the Code has been supported through suitable training. Within 18 months of its introduction, Victoria Police had trained 6 500 operational police and employed 10 regional family violence advisors and a designated family violence liaison officer for every 24 hour police station.

Activity

Since its introduction there has been a marked increase in police response activity, including a 14.5 per cent increase in the number of family violence incidents attended between 2003–04 and 2007–08.

Police spent much more time attending family violence incidents in 2007–08, 107.3 minutes, compared with an average of 35.5 minutes in 2004–05, before the Code was introduced. This represents an increase of 202.3 per cent. On this basis the cost of police attendance for reported incidents in 2004–05 was \$2 504 878 and \$9 935 811 in 2007–08, an increase of 296.7 per cent.

The number of intervention orders that police applied for has almost trebled since the introduction of the Code, indicating a more proactive approach to securing the safety of victims.

Outcomes achieved

Although activity data that Victoria Police collect indicates that it is complying with Code requirements, the information does not show how effective this has been, particularly in terms of improving outcomes for victims of family violence or breaking the cycle of violence.

The increasing incidence and use of the Code's civil and criminal options shows that police are looking after the safety of victims of family violence. They are applying for high numbers of intervention orders under the civil option; and under the criminal option they have laid record numbers of criminal charges against perpetrators.

It is difficult to determine how much high levels of police activity have improved victim safety. Police analysis of court data indicates the proportion of police-initiated intervention orders granted. However, this analysis does not show intervention order trends. Court data also reveals that breaches of intervention orders continue to increase.

The number of family violence-related charges for crimes against the person, including assaults, has increased during this period at a rate significantly higher than the annual growth rate in reported family violence incidents. This shows that police have been actively prosecuting offenders, and reflects the more thorough level of investigation applied under the Code resulting in the identification of crimes associated with family violence that were previously not reported.

Also the number of repeat attendances at family violence incidents has remained at around 32 per cent.

Police need to do more detailed research and analysis about how they respond to family violence incidents to find out whether the actions they take through the civil and criminal options of the Code improve the safety of the victims of family violence.

Police monitoring and analysis of referral data was insufficient. Given service agencies cooperation is variable and police's primary focus is on the crisis response to incidents, the analysis of referral data can determine whether appropriate referrals for the victims and perpetrators of family violence were made. Given that making referrals is the most common option under the Code, this is a serious gap in police information and analysis.

Without this information the Victoria Police cannot identify patterns in the type of referrals made, or assess the effectiveness of specific referrals to agencies; and, therefore, cannot evaluate whether the referrals improve outcomes for victims of family violence or break the cycle of violence.

Ongoing public investment in family violence strategies requires a rationalisation for every initiative and their effects that are supported by valid explanations and indications of the medium and long-term impacts. This data is not available.

Governance and management

The central Family Violence Unit is responsible for developing and maintaining best practice and procedure for police responses to family violence. Although the audit found many examples of local initiatives and process improvements at the divisional and regional levels, there wasn't a system-wide approach to continuous improvement for targeting good practice across Victoria Police. The unit should be more proactive in monitoring the police response to family violence, including developing performance measures and evaluating the Code's achievements.

Family violence advisors and liaison officers play an important role in applying the Code and informing police of major developments and trends in family violence. Given the specialist knowledge that the full-time advisors develop, there is increasing demand for them to be actively involved in training police and liaison officers.

There is a growing expectation that liaison officers should be involved in analysing family violence data and planning local initiatives; in addition to their role as a source of information and knowledge for their operational colleagues. Accordingly, liaison officer positions should be strengthened by making their positions subject to competitive applications.

1.4 Recommendations

Victoria Police should:

- introduce spot checks across all police regions to determine compliance with the Code's completion and quality assurance requirements for the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management Report (the L17 form)
- establish benchmarks for timely and accurate completion of the L17 form to use for comparative purposes across and between regions
- set up and monitor benchmarks for the costs and time taken to manage the operational and administrative functions associated with the investigation of family violence incidents. **(Recommendation 4.1)**
- routinely measure and report the rate at which police-initiated applications for intervention orders are granted by the court
- include questions in the survey of family violence victims to judge whether police actions and intervention orders secured their safety
- work closely with the courts' administration and share data that illustrates the success rate of police applications for intervention orders. **(Recommendation 5.1)**
- in conjunction with courts' administration, develop a system that identifies and collects the findings of criminal prosecutions related to family violence. **(Recommendation 5.2)**
- establish protocols with service agencies to monitor formal referrals and track access to services, particularly among repeat offenders. **(Recommendation 5.3)**
- review family violence data collection and identify data gaps that stop effective performance measurement, including outcomes specified in the Code
- establish baseline measures and targets that align with family violence objectives and strategies aimed at breaking the cycle of family violence. **(Recommendation 5.4)**

The Family Violence Unit should:

- determine whether the Code is effective and is creating better outcomes for the victims and perpetrators of family violence. **(Recommendation 6.1)**
- develop a continuous improvement framework that identifies and encourages good practice for police responses to and management of family violence matters. **(Recommendation 6.2)**

Victoria Police should review its regional structure for family violence and the roles of family violence advisors and liaison officers to:

- enable advisors to play a bigger role in promoting good practice and training police
- make liaison officer positions subject to a competitive application process. **(Recommendation 6.3)**