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**Abstract** | Focused deterrence approaches to domestic violence have been developed in the US to increase offender accountability and ensure appropriately targeted responses to victims.

While innovative, the model has strong theoretical and empirical foundations. It is based on a set of fundamental principles and detailed analysis of domestic violence patterns and responses.

This paper uses recent Australian research to explore the feasibility of adapting this model to an Australian context. Arguments in favour of the model, and possible barriers to implementation, are described.

Based on an extensive body of Australian research on patterns of domestic violence offending and reoffending, and in light of recent developments in responses to domestic violence, this paper recommends trialling focused deterrence and ‘pulling levers’ to reduce domestic violence reoffending in an Australian pilot site.

## Policing repeat domestic violence: Would focused deterrence work in Australia?

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Despite significant investment by government in new methods of preventing domestic violence reoffending, levels of violence experienced by victims remain unacceptably high. In 2017–18, around one in five offenders proceeded against by police had at least one domestic or family violence related offence (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019), while rates of self-reported domestic violence victimisation—which are less susceptible to changes in reporting—have remained relatively stable since 2005 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017).

There is widespread agreement that achieving a long-term, sustainable, population-level reduction in domestic violence requires investment in primary prevention (Department of Social Services 2019), and there is early evidence of success in changing attitudes (Webster et al. 2018). However, with one woman killed every nine days and one man killed every 29 days by an intimate partner (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019), more than 320,000 victims of domestic violence a year (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017) and police attending a domestic violence incident every two minutes (Blumer 2016), effective short-term responses are critical to ensure the safety of current and future generations of victims.

Unfortunately, interventions designed to reduce domestic violence in the short term have been found to have limited effectiveness. Programs that provide effective support for victims do not necessarily reduce repeat offending or even victimisation (Dowling et al. 2018a; Mazerolle et al. 2018). Men's behaviour change programs have moderate success (Babcock et al. 2016). And police responses to domestic violence can reduce offending, but not in all circumstances, and there is little rigorous evidence from Australia (Dowling et al. 2018b; Mazerolle et al. 2018).

There is now growing support overseas for programs applying a focused deterrence model to reduce different forms of violence (Abt 2019). Briefly, this approach involves strategically applying law enforcement, providing social services and mobilising the community's moral voice, informed by detailed problem analysis (Braga, Weisburd & Turchan 2018). Recently, the Intimate Partner Violence Intervention (IPVI) has applied a focused deterrence approach in several US communities to address domestic violence. Early pilots have shown evidence of its effectiveness in reducing the most severe forms of domestic violence reported to the police (Sechrist & Weil 2018; Sechrist, Weil & Shelton 2016).

In response to recent well-publicised calls to seriously consider the potential of intervention models based on focused deterrence (Hill 2019), this paper draws on the latest Australian research to examine if and how this approach could be incorporated into policing methods used in Australia. For the purpose of this paper, domestic violence is defined as physical and non-physical forms of violence and abuse (eg psychological, financial and verbal) targeted at current or former intimate partners.

## Focused deterrence and 'pulling levers': Strong theoretical and empirical foundations

Originally conceived as a project to reduce youth gun homicides in Boston, widely known as Operation Ceasefire (Braga et al. 2001), the focused deterrence framework has been implemented in dozens of cities across the United States. It has been used to address 'gang' violence, gun violence, drug market violence, prison violence and, most recently, domestic violence.

### Program components and underlying theory

There are several program components that underpin the focused deterrence approach to violence, irrespective of the setting. These are:

- identifying a specific crime problem to be prioritised for action;
- establishing an inter-agency group involving local agencies such as police, corrections and social services;
- undertaking detailed analyses of data on offenders and groups;
- communicating directly with targeted individuals and groups to notify them that they are being closely monitored, inform them of the consequences of their behaviour and highlight action taken against other offenders;
- improving victim and offender access to support services and offering support to offenders to help them change their behaviour; and
- drawing on the full suite of legal actions available to law enforcement and other agencies to stop the offending behaviour of the most prolific and serious offenders (the 'pulling levers' component).

Although focused deterrence models are led by local law enforcement agencies, in close collaboration with partner agencies, this approach extends beyond traditional notions of deterrence within criminal justice settings. While deterrence traditionally relies on formal detection, prosecution and punishment to deter offenders, focused deterrence relies on sanctions perceived as swift and certain—factors that influence behaviour more than punishment severity (Kennedy, Kleiman & Braga 2017). Importantly, while the focus is on holding offenders accountable, procedural justice and increasing the perceived legitimacy of authorities are seen as integral to encouraging compliance (Dai, Frank & Sun 2011; Epstein 2002; Nagin & Telep 2017). Further, community voices are mobilised to oppose violence as a means of informal social control. Finally, the focused deterrence model requires the provision of support services before legal action is taken, rather than post-charge or conviction, as is often the case with criminal justice interventions.

### **Evidence of effectiveness**

There is compelling evidence that focused deterrence approaches are effective in reducing a range of violent crime types (Braga et al. 2001; Braga, Weisburd & Turchan 2018; Sechrist, Weil & Shelton 2016). Early results from Operation Ceasefire demonstrated a reduction of more than 60 percent in youth homicide (Braga et al. 2001). A recent systematic review of focused deterrence approaches observed a positive result in 19 out of 24 included studies, while the meta-analysis, which pooled the results from multiple studies, revealed a statistically significant, moderate effect on crime (Braga, Weisburd & Turchan 2018). It was particularly effective in reducing serious violence among persistent reoffenders, including those involved in group violence.

In their meta-review of community violence prevention strategies, Abt and Winship (2016) concluded that focused deterrence strategies had the largest direct impact on crime and violence of any of the interventions they reviewed. Recently, Abt (2019: 87–88) argued:

...nothing works as well to reduce urban violence as focused deterrence...It does not work perfectly, it does not work every time, but it works better, on average, than anything else out there.

## **Applying focused deterrence to domestic violence: The Intimate Partner Violence Intervention strategy**

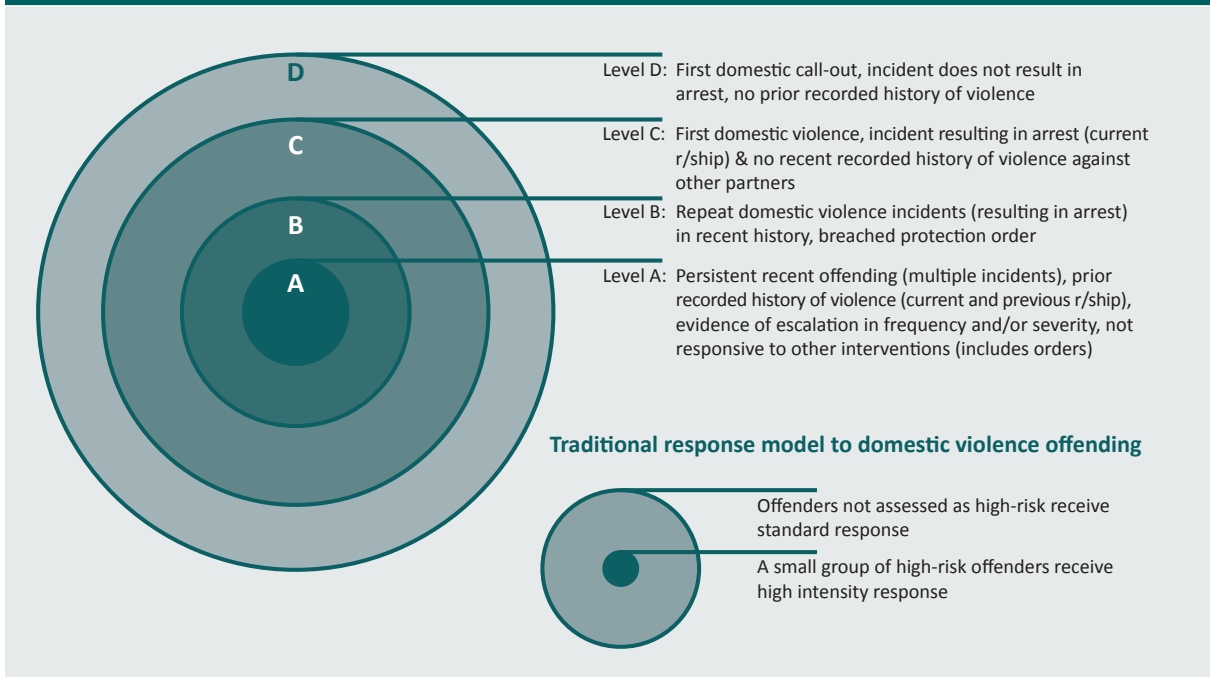
Kennedy (2004) examined whether the focused deterrence/pulling levers approach to street group violence could be adapted to the problem of domestic violence. He argued that traditional approaches to domestic violence placed too great a burden on the victim while demonstrating little evidence of effectiveness. Further, there was evidence that, as with other forms of violence, a small group of domestic violence offenders were responsible for a disproportionate number of incidents and the most serious offending. The most prolific domestic violence offenders also tended to be generalist offenders, also committing other types of crime. Kennedy (2004) therefore argued in favour of developing a focused deterrence and pulling levers strategy specifically for domestic violence.

This led to the development of the IPVI. Detailed descriptions of the model are available elsewhere (see National Network for Safe Communities 2017; Sechrist, Weil & Shelton 2016). Briefly, the IPVI draws upon the same focused deterrence model used for other types of violence, but with some specific adaptations that ensure its relevance to domestic violence. This includes a ‘parallel affirmative outreach’ response to victims, while still focusing on offender accountability. The direct, face-to-face communication with offenders that is central to the focused deterrence model remains a major part of the strategy; however, this is supported by direct communication with victims as well. When action is taken against the offender, immediate outreach is provided to victims, both to assess their safety and to offer support services.

Underpinning this approach is an offender hierarchy—a set of criteria for determining the nature and intensity of responses to be targeted at an offender and victim (Figure 1). More prolific or more serious offenders are prioritised for action and receive more intensive responses. The most dangerous offenders may be incapacitated through any legal means possible, whether for domestic violence offences or other actionable offences, such as breaching community-based orders or weapons offences (the ‘pulling levers’ approach). Other offenders receive a less intensive response. Figure 1 shows the IPVI hierarchy adapted using Australian data on patterns of repeat offending reported to the police. For comparison, it also illustrates the more traditional response, whereby high-risk offenders receive a high intensity response, while other domestic violence offenders receive a standard legal response.

Examples of actions that may be taken by law enforcement are presented in Table 1. Note that these examples—which, once again, may be tailored to the local setting—are not unique to the IPVI. The unique feature of the IPVI is the highly structured and parallel delivery of intervention and support services for both the offender and the victim.

**Figure 1: Offender hierarchy (example only)**



Source: Adapted from Teicher & Ott 2019

Note: Criteria are examples only; criteria should be developed based on detailed analysis of offender and offending patterns within local areas

**Table 1: Law enforcement actions and parallel victim outreach protocol (example only)**

Level	Law enforcement action	Victim outreach protocol
A	Legal action by any means available. Law enforcement may employ ‘pulling levers’ non-domestic-violence actions that do not require victim cooperation or that produce more effective sanctions than domestic violence options.	Victims assessed on-scene for emergency needs and offered all available support and services.
B	Offender must attend ‘call-in’ meeting where they receive moral and legal message against domestic violence as well as offer of help. Law enforcement message includes an explicit warning about enhanced agency attention offenders are now exposed to, including ‘pulling lever’ actions mentioned above.	Victim receives notice before offender is called in. Victim advocates conduct risk assessment and safety planning.
C	Police meet with offender face-to-face to communicate deterrence message explaining IPVI and legal consequences of further offending such as increased bail conditions (or revoking bail), enhanced prosecution, and tightened probation conditions.	Victim notified of available services. Victim advocates make in-person visits to offer services.
D	Offender receives letter from the police detailing close police monitoring, community moral message against domestic violence and personal legal consequences of further offending.	Victim receives letter from the police explaining IPVI and available services. Victim advocates conduct outreach.

Note: This protocol is based on the IPVI offender hierarchy reported by the National Network of Safe Communities (2017), rather than the modified hierarchy reported in Figure 1

Source: National Network for Safe Communities 2017: 3

Although the level of intervention that offenders and victims receive is dictated by the offender’s assessed likelihood of reoffending, it is important to note that all domestic violence offenders and victims are subject to some level of response. This means that all offenders, even first-time or low-level offenders, are the subject of legal and community sanctions, and all victims receive some level of support. In this way, focused deterrence represents a shift in the way we respond to all domestic violence incidents that come to the attention of the police, not just those involving the most prolific and dangerous offenders and the most vulnerable victims.

The actions undertaken as part of a focused deterrence model, such as those described below, are in addition to any criminal justice responses to recorded violence, such as arrest and prosecution for physically assaulting a partner. Focused deterrence models are not intended to replace formal legal proceedings.

Consistent with the focused deterrence model, the intended actions of police and partner agencies are directly communicated to offenders and victims. Offenders are told what to expect if the behaviour continues and, critically, police and their partners follow through on the promised course of action.

A central feature of the IPVI, and focused deterrence models more generally, is the ‘call-in’. This forum gives all partners involved in the project, including prominent community representatives (eg victims of crime advocates), an opportunity to confront offenders about their behaviour, explain what will happen if it continues and offer support to help them change their behaviour. Call-ins also allow representatives to communicate strong community norms that persistent abusive behaviour will not be tolerated. Specifically, community representatives tell offenders:

- domestic violence affects everyone, not just you and your partner;
- violence and abuse is wrong and is not consistent with our community values—the community condemns your behaviour in the strongest terms;
- the community cares about what happens to you and wants to help you; but
- if you reoffend, the community stands behind the police and supports them to protect victims from further violence.

Outside of the call-in, contact between the police and partner agencies with offenders and victims occurs on an ad-hoc basis, particularly when risk of violence increases. Lower-risk offenders and victims may not be required to attend in-person meetings with the IPVI partners. Instead, the core messages of call-ins (including community norms against domestic violence) are communicated through letters, or in-person contact with police officers.

The IPVI remains a relatively new intervention approach, and there has been limited evaluation of its impact. Results from the pilot site in High Point, North Carolina indicate a significant reduction in serious domestic violence—most notably, a substantial fall in intimate partner homicide (Sechrist, Weil & Shelton 2016). Moreover, there was a reduction in calls to police for domestic violence, a decrease in arrests, and a decrease in victim injuries related to domestic violence arrests (Sechrist & Weil 2018). Based on these early results, the IPVI has been identified as a promising approach to reducing domestic violence offending and related harms, and the US Office on Violence Against Women has provided funding to replicate the High Point model in other locations (Office on Violence Against Women 2018).

## Would this work in Australia?

The section that follows draws on contemporary Australian research exploring both patterns of domestic violence offending and reoffending reported to the police, and the efficacy of police responses to domestic violence, to describe the arguments in favour of piloting a focused deterrence model in a local context. It also considers potential barriers to implementation.

### Arguments in support of the focused deterrence approach

#### *Repeat domestic violence offending is concentrated among certain offenders and places*

Australian research shows that a relatively small proportion of domestic violence offenders are responsible for a disproportionate number of incidents (Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019; Kerr, Whyte and Strang 2017; Millstead 2016). For example, Millstead (2016) found that over a five-year period, seven percent of offenders in Victoria were responsible for 31 percent of all reported domestic violence incidents. Meanwhile, in the Northern Territory, eight percent of couples accounted for 35 percent of all reported incidents over a four-year period (Kerr, Whyte & Strang 2017). A relatively small number of perpetrators also appear to be responsible for the majority of domestic violence related harm. Sherman and colleagues (2016) found that two percent of domestic violence offenders reported to the police in Western Australia were responsible for 50 percent of the associated harm.

Likewise, although it impacts all communities in Australia, repeat domestic violence offending is concentrated in certain places (Di Bartolo 2001; Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Rahman 2018). Victims in the most disadvantaged communities are significantly more likely to experience repeat domestic violence than those living in the least disadvantaged communities, based on studies of both officially reported and self-reported violence (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Rahman 2018). Di Bartolo (2001) found that the average number of police domestic violence calls was higher in areas characterised by lower levels of employment and family income and higher measures of multiple disadvantage. This may reflect a broader issue of structural disadvantage and the lack of informal resources and support (Voce and Boxall 2018), meaning police contact provides an important opportunity to intervene and improve access to vital support services.

This research suggests that more intensive interventions should be directed at more prolific offenders and offenders in communities where harm is concentrated to generate the most significant reductions in violence.

### *Repeat domestic violence offending rates are persistently high*

A recent review of Australian domestic violence offending studies (Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019) showed that estimates of domestic violence reoffending are remarkably consistent. When measured using police apprehension data, around half of offenders committed a further domestic violence offence within four years (Kerr, Whyte & Strang 2017; Millsteed & Coghlan 2016). Studies using court conviction data reported general offending rates (ie not limited to domestic violence offending) as high as 60 percent within three years (Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019; Trevena & Poynton 2016). Further, the re-analysis of Tasmanian data reported by Morgan, Boxall and Brown (2018) showed that more than half of all police-recorded domestic violence incidents (54%) in 12 months involved a recidivist offender. Therefore, it is vital to develop interventions that hold perpetrators accountable and break the cycle of abuse experienced by many victims.

### *Risk of repeat offending and threat to victim safety is highest in the short term*

While rates of repeat offending are high, they are not evenly distributed over time (Boxall & Morgan 2020; Kerr, Whyte & Strang 2017; Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018; Poynton et al. 2016). Australian research conducted by Morgan, Boxall and Brown (2018) showed that the risk of repeat offending peaks in the weeks and months immediately following an offence. More specifically, the probability of reoffending peaked at around four weeks following the index incident. Similar results were found in a larger sample of adolescent domestic and family violence offenders (Boxall and Morgan 2020). This evidence suggests that swift responses that protect victims during this highest risk period offer the best opportunity to reduce repeat victimisation.

Indeed, over the past 10 years, government strategies have reinforced the importance of timely responses to hold perpetrators accountable (NSW Department of Attorney-General and Justice 2012). Police-issued protection orders (Australian Law Reform Commission 2010) and the Fast-Tracking Initiative of the Magistrates Court of Victoria, in which criminal proceedings for family violence matters are finalised within 16 weeks (Magistrates Court of Victoria 2014), are examples of practices introduced to provide a rapid response to domestic violence to protect victims from further harm.

### *Risk increases with each repeat offence*

Much of the research into the risk of repeat offending has based the assessment of risk on a single event, taking into account prior history, situational factors, and offender, victim and relationship characteristics (see, for example, Fitzgerald & Graham 2016). What is evident, however, from recent research is that risk is not static. Instead, the risk of repeat domestic violence offending increases with every incident of violence. This pattern has been observed among both adult domestic violence offenders and young people who use family violence, and in different jurisdictions (Boxall & Morgan 2020; Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018). The intensity of responses therefore needs to increase with each reoffence, and in response to escalating violence (eg non-fatal strangulation, threats to harm children), which is consistent with the approach taken by the IPVI.

### *Prior violence is a strong predictor of future violence*

The maxim 'past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour' is as true for domestic violence offending as it is for offending more generally (Bulbeck et al. 1997; Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Millstead & Coghlan 2016; Trimboli 2015). Two recent Australian studies have found that the frequency of prior offending is a strong predictor of reoffending within six months (Boxall & Morgan 2020; Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018). Even when other factors are controlled for, prior offending is an important risk factor for reoffending, as shown in several studies of the predictive validity of risk assessment tools used in Australia (Dowling & Morgan 2019; Mason & Julian 2009; Millstead & Coghlan 2016; Ringland 2018). Prior breaches of protection orders are also a clear risk factor for future violence (Mason & Julian 2009).

### *Domestic violence offenders are often generalist offenders*

There are undoubtedly factors that contribute to domestic violence that are unique to this type of offending (Fulu et al. 2013). These include attitudes towards violence against women (and women more generally), the power imbalance between male and female partners (particularly financial) and adherence to gender stereotypes (Fulu et al. 2013; Heise 1998). However, many of the risk factors for domestic violence are similar to those for other forms of violence and for crime more generally (Capaldi et al. 2012). It is unsurprising, therefore, that many domestic violence offenders are 'generalist' offenders, meaning they commit a wide range of offences (Boxall, Payne & Rosevear 2015; Millstead & Coghlan 2016; Ringland & Fitzgerald 2010). Weatherburn and Rahman (2018) found that two-thirds of domestic violence offenders in New South Wales had a conviction for a non-domestic violence offence. Meanwhile, Dowling, Boxall and Morgan (forthcoming) found that more than nine in 10 male domestic violence offenders proceeded against by the NSW Police Force had been proceeded against for other types of offences.

While Weatherburn and Rahman (2018) concluded that strategies designed to deter or incapacitate domestic violence offenders might help to reduce other forms of crime, it is also possible that policing strategies targeting other types of criminal offending might help to reduce domestic violence. This is part of the rationale for the pulling levers component of the focused deterrence approach, where other legal sanctions are used to deter or incapacitate offenders, particularly when there are barriers to the successful prosecution of domestic violence offences.



### *Traditional legal responses to domestic violence do not always reduce short-term violence*

Police perform a vital role as frontline responders to domestic violence incidents, and act as the gateway to the criminal justice system. Police have at their disposal a number of legal responses that may help to reduce the short-term risk of repeat offending. The most obvious of these is arrest and removal of the offender from the home. They can also detain an offender in custody for a period of time, release them on bail, or oppose bail when they appear in court. Police may also perform targeted patrols or compliance checks in relation to protection orders and bail conditions.

Despite the important role of police as first-responders, there is limited Australian research on the impact of police practices on domestic violence offending (Dowling et al. 2018a). Further, the international research on police responses has produced mixed results. We know that mandatory arrest practices (common in the US) can be harmful to victims (Sherman & Harris 2013) and that the impact of arrest is variable (Mazerolle et al. 2018). Conversely, victim reporting to police and police attendance at domestic violence scenes may be effective in reducing repeat violence (Dowling et al. 2018a).

Protection orders are a common legal response to domestic violence in Australia, and the number of orders granted by courts in several jurisdictions over the past few years has increased (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2019; Crime Statistics Agency 2020). They are intended to act as a specific deterrent to further abuse, particularly during high-risk periods (eg during separation, post-arrest and prior to court). Overall, only a minority of protection orders are breached by offenders (Poynton et al. 2016). A recent systematic review found that protection orders can reduce the prevalence and severity of repeat domestic violence (Dowling et al. 2018b). However, the same study found that orders are less effective in certain circumstances, including where offenders have a history of violence, or when victims have ongoing ties to the offender (eg shared children or ongoing relationships).

Taken together, these findings suggest that traditional criminal justice sanctions for domestic violence may not prevent repeat domestic violence, at least not in all circumstances. Criminal justice sanctions like protection orders, arrest and incarceration remain an important component of the focused deterrence approach, particularly given the emphasis on offender accountability; however, these sanctions are supported by clear deterrent messages, a tailored response to both offenders and victims, and strong community messaging.

### *A focus on procedural justice leads to better outcomes*

A key concept underpinning the focused deterrence approach is procedural justice, which emphasises the importance of neutrality, respect, fairness and giving people a voice during police encounters with offenders, victims and members of the public (Tyler 2011). International evidence on the importance of procedural justice is growing, with a clear relationship between citizen perceptions of police legitimacy, trust and confidence, and satisfaction with police and with outcomes from interactions with police (Donner et al. 2015). There also appears to be an association with increased legal compliance (Nagin & Telep 2017). There is evidence that these findings also apply to domestic violence matters, with some research showing an association between procedural justice and increased satisfaction with legal outcomes among both victims and offenders (Gover, Brank & MacDonald 2007). There is even evidence that, when police act in a procedurally fair manner when arresting domestic violence perpetrators, rates of subsequent violence decrease (Maxwell et al. 2019; Paternoster et al. 1997). These findings even extend to domestic violence offenders who have been incarcerated as a result of their violence (Maxwell et al. 2019).

### *Focused deterrence is consistent with contemporary Australian responses to domestic violence*

To the best of our knowledge, focused deterrence and pulling levers approaches have not been implemented in Australia in response to any type of crime. However, similar programs have been implemented.

In the early 2000s, South Australia Police trialled a new approach targeted at reducing repeat domestic violence victimisation. The model was adapted from work undertaken by West Yorkshire Police in the United Kingdom (Hanmer, Griffiths & Jerwood 1999; Lloyd, Farrell & Pease 1994) and involved classifying victims into a three-tier system, primarily using the number of prior incidents. An evaluation of the program found that repeat victimisation decreased, and there was an overall eight percent reduction in the rate of domestic violence (Morgan 2004).

More recently, the NSW Police Force implemented Operation Solidarity in Bourke as part of the larger Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project, a major focus of Hill's (2019) recent argument in favour of short-term responses to domestic violence. Operation Solidarity involves a combination of home visits, proactive enforcement of protection orders, and engagement with support agencies to provide offenders and victims with access to services. Early evaluation results suggest a reduction in short-term repeat victimisation (Moore 2018), while the impact assessment of the overall Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project conducted by KPMG (2018) revealed that both the number of domestic violence incidents and the reoffending rate among domestic violence offenders had fallen significantly since Operation Solidarity was implemented.

These are not the only examples of proactive policing models targeting high-risk offenders currently operating in Australia. Several jurisdictions have now implemented high-risk offender targeting teams or case prioritisation that allows for more proactive and intensive responses to prolific and serious offenders. These jurisdictions include New South Wales (Family and Community Services 2019), Queensland (Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women 2019), and Victoria (Victoria Police 2019).

Similarly, integrated responses to domestic violence—involving two or more agencies, including police, working together to deliver a coordinated service to victims of domestic and family violence—are well established in Australia. They have been subjected to extensive evaluation, with some promising results (Breckenridge et al. 2016). This includes second responder programs, in which police and victim advocates visit victims after the initial police response to provide information and support. Second responder programs are effective in increasing victim disclosure of violence and use of support services; however, there is mixed evidence on whether they reduce repeat violence (Dowling et al. 2018a; Mazerolle et al. 2018).

What distinguishes these current practices from focused deterrence is the latter's highly structured approach to targeting both offenders and victims, the deliberate and direct communication of risk and social norms as a way of deterring repeat offending, and the parallel delivery of graduated interventions to offenders and victims as part of a single response model. Further, focused deterrence models ensure that all domestic violence offenders are subject to some level of legal and community sanctions and messages—not just those at highest risk.

## Limitations of the model and issues to consider

### *Relevance of a model developed in the United States*

Context is important. What works in the United States may not work in Australia, or it may need to be changed to suit the local context.

Different actors would need to be involved in delivering an Australian model, which may vary between states and territories and communities. Consideration will also need to be given to community representatives, and how a call-in process might operate. These are all vital issues to consider to ensure that a focused deterrence model could motivate behaviour change among offenders.

The offender hierarchy—including the thresholds for moving between categories and the information that is included when making these assessments—would have to incorporate risk assessment tools and frameworks used by local police agencies (Dowling & Morgan 2019; Mason & Julian 2009; Millsteed & Coghlan 2016; Ringland 2018), and state and territory and national risk assessment principles and guidelines (Toivonen & Backhouse 2018). It is important that different systems are not in conflict with one another. This is particularly important given the significant investment in the development and refinement of risk assessment tools across the country. It is imperative that this hierarchy be developed to suit the local context using local data, particularly as there is evidence of geographic variation in rates of repeat offending (Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019).

### *Balancing certainty with complexity*

In a focused deterrence model, the nature and intensity of the response to both offenders and victims is based on the offender hierarchy and the likelihood of further violence. This hierarchy is also central to the deterrence messages for offenders; they are told explicitly that if they continue to offend they will be subject to increasingly serious sanctions.

This highly structured approach, and the emphasis on swift and certain responses, is critical to offender accountability and changing the behaviour of perpetrators. And, as this paper has outlined, it is well supported by evidence regarding patterns of repeat offending.

However, there is also growing recognition of the complex dynamics within abusive relationships. Relying on simple models of reoffending may risk undermining efforts to protect victims from further harm. Like most risk assessment tools, the offender hierarchy is based primarily on the likelihood of further reoffending; however, it does not identify those offenders whose violence is escalating in severity. Both dimensions of risk need to be considered. For example, an integrated risk assessment tool developed by Dowling and Morgan (2019) for ACT Policing includes 10 items for predicting repeat domestic violence within six months, and a series of 'red flags'—factors associated with more severe violence. These 'red flags' include strangulation, coercive controlling behaviour, alcohol/drug use and mental health problems. Police can use these items to prioritise cases for immediate, intensive intervention, regardless of the offender's risk rating.

Further, there is increasing recognition that desistance from offending, including domestic violence, does not happen over a short period. Most offenders do not just stop offending; rather, desistance is a process involving periods of de-escalation and relapse (Maruna 2001). There has been limited consideration as to how this desistance process should be accommodated within the offender hierarchy, or how interventions designed to reduce domestic violence should respond to violence that decreases in frequency or severity, but does not stop entirely.

### *Perceptions of police among highest risk populations*

The effectiveness of the focused deterrence approach hinges, at least in part, on the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement. The negative perceptions of police in certain communities in Australia, such as among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Cunneen 2006), LGBTQI+ people (Miles-Johnson 2015) and culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Sivasubramaniam & Goodman-Delahunty 2008) have been well documented. Negative perceptions of law enforcement are also common among victims of domestic violence more generally (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017; Ragusa 2013). The reasons for these perceptions are complex and have been influenced by both historical and contemporary events. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the origins of these perceptions, which have been subjected to extensive analysis elsewhere (see, for example, Cherney 1999; Cunneen 2008).

These negative perceptions may undermine the effectiveness of interactions between police and offenders or victims from these communities. However, the focused deterrence model has been applied in largely black communities in the United States, where there is a long history of racial tensions with law enforcement (Brunson 2007). As Kennedy, Kleiman and Braga (2017) have written, even in this context it has been possible to effectively acknowledge past harms while also engaging positively with offenders in some of the most disaffected communities.

There may be challenges associated with communicating deterrence messages to certain groups. Effective implementation of focused deterrence messages in Australia will require partners—including law enforcement—to acknowledge past harms and to follow through on promises made with respect to offers of help and support, for both victims and offenders.

### *Tension around the use of incarceration*

There is also a need to manage the risks associated with the use of incarceration, and the potential for 'net-widening'. Evidence shows that toughening policies on domestic and family violence may have contributed to the steep rise in imprisonment (Weatherburn 2018). Few would argue against holding offenders accountable, and incarceration has obvious benefits in protecting victims from persistent violent offenders. There are undoubtedly circumstances where incarceration is the only option available for protecting the safety of victims. However, it is not the only penalty available. Swift and certainty are far more important than the severity of the punishment. Kennedy, Kleiman and Braga (2017) argue that strict enforcement of community-based sentences and order violations may also work effectively.

The issue of incarceration (and criminal justice sanctions more broadly) is particularly important to consider for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who may be disproportionately targeted through focused deterrence models. This is not by design but a function of Indigenous over-representation in both domestic violence offender and victim populations (Hulme, Morgan and Boxall 2019). Indigenous people are over-represented in every stage of the criminal justice system, controlling for other factors (Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018). Any criminal justice response to domestic violence, particularly if it is led by police, requires careful planning to ensure that already marginalised communities are not disproportionately targeted and negatively impacted as a result. The same is true of focused deterrence models.

### *Responding to coercive controlling behaviour*

The IPVI aims to reduce overall levels of recorded domestic violence by focusing on the most serious and prolific violent offenders and victims at the greatest risk of harm. Offenders are targeted on the basis of their contact with police for domestic violence offending. As a police-led multi-agency response, it is necessarily narrowly focused on the public safety outcomes it sets out to achieve. It may not—at least not directly—reduce coercive controlling behaviour by offenders who commit only non-physical forms of violence, such as psychological abuse, which is less likely to come to the attention of police (Kennedy, Kleiman & Braga 2017; Voce & Boxall 2018). But this is not to suggest that these other forms of violence are ignored when police, victim support services and other agencies come into contact with offenders and victims as part of this model. The question for practitioners is how to take these other behaviours into account when the offender hierarchy is applied and the level of intervention determined, particularly in light of recent evidence regarding the history of coercive controlling behaviour in cases of femicide (Monckton Smith 2019).

It is well recognised in Australia and internationally that physical and non-physical forms of domestic violence are harmful and have significant impacts on victims and their families (Coker et al. 2000; Lacey et al. 2013). This is reflected in the broad definitions of domestic violence included in state and territory legislation, as well as the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children. That focused deterrence models are likely to primarily deal with physically violent domestic violence offenders and their victims should not preclude a trial in Australia.

### *Integration with other responses*

Focused deterrence is not an alternative to other methods of reducing violence, such as primary prevention and perpetrator interventions (eg men's behaviour change programs). These programs fulfil a vital role as part of a holistic approach to preventing domestic violence. However, they operate on different time frames and at different stages. Primary prevention, focused on issues such as increasing gender equity and promoting healthy and respectful relationships during adolescence, aims to achieve generational change in attitudes towards women (Department of Social Services 2019). Similarly, perpetrator interventions have a longer term focus and can take months or even years to finalise.

Responses to domestic violence must address the different drivers of violence, the intersection between domestic violence victimisation and other vulnerabilities, and the different forms of violence and abuse that can occur. No intervention can reduce all forms of violence. Granted, focused deterrence approaches will not influence offender attitudes towards women, but this is not necessary to produce short-term behavioural change and reduce the immediate risk to victims. Interventions like focused deterrence must be delivered alongside primary, secondary and tertiary responses targeting individuals and communities, and these interventions should not be seen as being in competition with one another. Focused deterrence has the potential to fulfil an important role in preventing the recurrence of violence and abuse in the highest risk period following a report to police (Boxall & Morgan 2020).

## Conclusion

A strong evidence base, derived from a growing body of Australian research, supports the adoption of a focused deterrence approach to domestic violence. The same patterns of violence and offender characteristics that motivated David Kennedy to develop the IPVI exist within Australian communities and offender populations. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that many of the characteristics of domestic violence used to inform the development of the IPVI—namely, the concentration of offending, the high rates of repeat offending, the generalist nature of prolific offenders, and the dynamic nature of risk—are not unique to the United States. Rather, contemporary research indicates that the conditions necessary to implement a focused deterrence regime are equally relevant in Australia.

This approach is not a significant departure from contemporary policing responses that have been implemented in Australia. Several police agencies have already implemented high-risk targeting teams, and partnerships between law enforcement and support services are a feature of Australian responses. The distinction between these responses and focused deterrence is the highly structured approach to targeting offenders and victims for intervention, the shared focus on both offender accountability and support for victims, the delivery of graduated responses based on the recent history of violence and risk of reoffending, and the emphasis on mobilising community voices to oppose violence by prolific offenders. Consistent with current Australian practice, all domestic violence victims and offenders are the subject of an intervention, albeit of varying intensity, not only those assessed as being at highest risk.

The strong theoretical and empirical foundation of focused deterrence approaches makes a compelling case for piloting it in Australia. Nevertheless, there are potential challenges to implementation that need to be taken into consideration when designing programs. However, they should not act as barriers to trialling this approach. None of the issues identified in this paper is insurmountable.

The evidence presented here suggests there would be benefit in testing the focused deterrence and pulling levers approach to reducing domestic violence reoffending in an Australia pilot site. This would need to be developed with a local community, supported by willing partners, implemented with fidelity to the IPVI (and principles of focused deterrence more broadly), and subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

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