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# SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN TASMANIA: STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

There is an absence of Tasmania-specific data around sexual violence, evidence critical to obtain funding for local service provision. To address this gap, Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) based in southern Tasmania—in partnership with the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (TILES)—have conducted the first Tasmanian study of its kind. Interviews were conducted with nine community members and 21 stakeholder participants. This paper summarises stakeholder perspectives on the scale of sexual violence, its nature, barriers to seeking help, and potential solutions.

The authors would like to thank the stakeholder participants for sharing the collective stories of their clients and their insights into the systems in which they operate. Thanks also go to the project funder for enabling these experiences to be shared.

**Read the full report [here](#)**

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## Introduction

Consultation for Tasmania's third *Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan* is currently underway. A key gap in enabling robust planning is a lack of localised data to inform this plan, including data on the scale and nature of sexual violence in Tasmania. This Tasmanian study, the first of its kind, conducted by SASS in partnership with TILES, comprised semi-structured interviews with nine community members and 21 stakeholder participants in the south of the state. Stakeholders include key frontline and other professionals, community leaders and key advocacy groups. Research was approved by the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee (project ID 26555).

The study focused on the Sandy Bay/South Hobart, Huonville, and Clarence Plains/Rokeby regions. This aimed to include the experiences of diverse communities, including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), migrant and refugee; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual+ (LGBTIQA+), or sex, sexuality or gender diverse;<sup>1</sup> and disability.

The project outputs are an overarching report and two briefing papers. This second briefing paper focuses on the perspectives of 21 stakeholders interviewed as part of the study, providing a snapshot of key findings. A [separate briefing paper](#) focuses on the perspectives of community members.

## Method and participants

Zoom interviews were undertaken with 21 stakeholder participants identified through project team networks and internet searches. Transcripts of interviews were provided to stakeholders for review and clarification. Transcripts were thematically coded around the research questions. Top-line themes were then analysed to identify the main issues discussed. A key limitation of the study is that some perspectives were not well represented. More work is needed to identify issues of concern and approaches to best support Aboriginal, CALD, migrant and refugee communities in responding to and preventing sexual violence.

The 21 stakeholders interviewed worked in roles representing and/or providing services to: children and young people (up to 25 years); women; families; women in crisis and experiencing family violence; prisoners; children and families of prisoners; victims of crime; LGBTIQA+ people; homeless people; migrants; people with disabilities; and police. Table 1 shows the distribution of

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'LGBTIQA+' is used throughout.

stakeholder participants according to the location of services provided, with most stakeholders operating in organisations providing services state-wide or to multiple areas of Tasmania.

Table 1: Stakeholder participants areas of service (n=21)

Region	Number of stakeholders
State-wide or multiple regions	13
Huonville	3
Sandy Bay/South Hobart	3
Clarence Plains/Rokeby	2

Across the interviews, regions were relatively well represented, and a wide range of perspectives covered; except for Aboriginal and CALD/migrant perspectives.

## Findings

### Types of sexual violence, context and prevalence

Both stakeholder and community member participants identified that sexual violence includes a broad spectrum of acts ranging from coercion to physical force. Based on this broad definition, sexual violence was considered to be highly prevalent and pervasive throughout the community. Stakeholders suggested that sexual violence is more commonly perpetrated where there is a pre-existing relationship between offenders and survivors,<sup>2</sup> rather than between strangers.

Stakeholders described an underlying pervasive culture of sexual violence, in which individuals experience different forms of sexual violence. Generally, it was considered that this culture was not unique to Tasmania, although some stakeholders identified specific norms or a prevalence of sexual violence in some areas of Tasmania. The idea of a culture of sexual violence was described as playing out in structural norms and gender based attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Families, intimate partnerships and sexual cultures among young people were identified as the contexts in which sexual violence is most prevalent.

Experiences of sexual violence by children and young people were discussed by stakeholders, with many providing services or advocacy to children, young people or families. This was discussed in a range of contexts including: children or teenagers experiencing violence, the

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<sup>2</sup> Terminology for people who have experienced sexual violence varies. We use 'survivor' throughout the paper while acknowledging the range of ideas and preferences that can inform different language choices.

common experiences of young people when they start to form relationships and learn about consent, when online dating, and in social contexts where alcohol and drugs are involved.

Young people were also discussed in the culture of the family as a site for sexual violence, stakeholders noting that there can be a range of positive and negative family influences. Some stakeholders identified that sexual violence that can exist in families, where there was a normalisation of sexual violence within intimate partner relationships, which can operate as modelling behaviour for boys and young men. Close-knit communities can exacerbate the influence of these cultural values. Stakeholders also identified the links between being exposed to or experiencing sexual violence growing up then going on to experience further harm or perpetuate violence in adult relationships.

Stakeholders commonly described sexual violence as a form of family violence. It was identified as another way in which violent partners exercised power and control in intimate and family contexts. Stakeholders noted that these types of sexual violence are less visible in society and less readily identified or named as sexual violence by those who experience it:

I do work a lot in that in the area of family violence. Sexual violence is something that gets named up or recognised much later in the journey, as well. It's not something yet they may recognise immediately as coming under, you know, that kind of umbrella.  
(SP16, state-wide)

This lack of recognition complicates disclosure and help-seeking.

## Seeking support

Stakeholders were asked a range of questions about support seeking, including barriers, and pathways. These responses included their experiences in supporting survivors through help seeking from specialised services, such as SASS.

### Barriers

Barriers to seeking support and/or reporting experiences of sexual violence was a critical issue. Stakeholders raised a range of challenges around seeking help. Shame, guilt and self-blame were described as creating barriers to accessing services and justice. A lack of understanding of sexual violence within a relationship context was also seen as a barrier to seeking help. This was accompanied by a fear of not being believed because the sexual violence was committed within a relationship.

Women or people, people who are experiencing sexual violence, within intimate partner relationships, marriages, long term relationships, they don't seek help.

Because of our belief system that it's your duty, and that's what you should do, and no one believes them. (Stakeholder Participant [SP] 1, state-wide)

Stakeholders suggested that help-seeking was easier when the perpetrator was not a family member or partner.

Stakeholders also discussed service-level barriers for help-seeking. People who experience harm have a lack of awareness of the services available, particularly by young people who experience sexual violence, was a recurrent theme. Further, it was commonly noted that people can be ashamed to be seen entering a dedicated sexual assault service, particularly in small or close-knit communities.

The desire for discretion and a lack of trust were the key barriers raised by Huonville and Clarence Plains/Rokeby stakeholders. In reference to challenges for LGBTIQ+ and CALD/migrant people, concerns were raised about privacy, given small communities, and culturally capable services. Stakeholders noted Aboriginal communities avoid service engagement due to a fear of having their children removed by government authorities.

The absence of appropriate supports for disabled people was identified as a barrier with some stakeholders identifying their own weaknesses in this area. This included an absence of wraparound support for disclosing and navigating processes, particularly when reporting to police. Stakeholders also noted the most vulnerable and isolated disabled people at risk throughout communities, with no access to any supports.

The importance of survivors' trust in the service, including a therapeutic relationship between the survivor and the counsellor was emphasised. In this regard, a major point raised was when a relationship has been established and the counsellor leaves, or the service closes, and they need to re-tell their story and rebuild rapport and trust with the counsellor and/or service. Concerns were also raised about waiting lists to access support services, limited service periods, and capacity/resource issues.

## **Pathways**

Stakeholders described a variety of pathways for survivors seeking assistance, including friends and family, trusted adults, general practitioners, and police. Trusted people in survivors' lives are often the first point of disclosure for someone who has experienced sexual violence.

The pathways to help-seeking were understood as being dependent on the survivor. Stakeholders noted that disclosures to services and authorities may take some time depending on the perceived seriousness of the sexual violence; while in others, it may be a stop-start process as the survivor gradually comes to terms with the violence.

I think that that can be heavily influenced by when testing the water, that type of thing. So when they're sussing out what actually has happened to them, when they're trying to work those types of things out and some of the responses that they get, but I actually do think that ... people that I'm supporting, that I've been supporting for a long period of time, and it might come out, even if it's historical, if they feel safe, if they trust, and if you support them through that, then they're highly likely to see support. (SP16, state-wide)

A key theme was that seeking help is an individualised process, and it would be impossible to establish a 'one size fits all' approach. Finding the right referral pathway for the context of each survivor means that referral needs to be iterative and have multiple trajectories to match each person.

## **Improving support services**

Stakeholders were asked to identify gaps in sexual violence support services and what improvements could be made to contribute to sexual violence prevention.

### **Addressing sexual violence**

Stakeholders identified that the current siloing of service delivery means that most organisations are focused on one aspect of social harm, when harms commonly co-exist, and organisations should collaborate according to 'whole of government' problem-solving policies. The partitioning of core business, however, causes a lack of knowledge of what each service does, and how they manage disclosures of sexual violence. For example, there appeared to be a general assumption that SASS is in some way involved in each sector, but there was not necessarily a clear understanding of its capacity and remit. Multiple stakeholders noted that the most marginalised groups were often excluded from services. There were also service delivery gaps identified in the Huonville and Rokeby/Clarence Plains regions.

Stakeholders noted the lack of collaboration and communication between organisations and the challenges around this. For example,

... communication between agencies would facilitate things a lot more. Having processes so everyone's got the same expectations around how things work, particularly around scope of practice, where does my responsibility end, and then become someone else's. Because of the pressures, I think there's—that there can be a lot of pushback, probably between everyone. (SP9, state-wide)

Possible solutions identified by stakeholders included well networked and flexible solutions to support the most marginalised community members, including warm handovers,<sup>3</sup> and embedding specialised services within broader services. One suggestion was outreach workers being available to chat at a community centre or youth centre once a week. This sort of suggestion was particularly common in the context of Rokeby/Clarence Plains and Huonville.

## **Preventing sexual violence**

There were a range of suggestions on how to prevent sexual violence, which covered the broadest of structural issues (such as tackling gender inequality in the media) to the individual (such as addressing power imbalances within families).

Stakeholders suggested that education in schools needed to start earlier, be contextually specific, up to date, and to be 'brave' when discussing child sexual abuse and pornography. The importance of inclusive perspectives was noted in discussions of sex education, particularly LGBTIQ+ experiences. Stakeholders also raised the importance of this sort of education for disabled people, and avoiding assumptions they will not have sex.

Stakeholders also identified a general inability to talk about healthy sexual relationships and sexual violence, in individual, family and community contexts. It was suggested that there was a need for more explicit information on what constitutes 'sexual violence' and how to respond throughout the community, such as in nursing homes, workplaces, schools, churches, sporting clubs and community groups. Increasing the knowledge and awareness of sexual violence in these specific social contexts is not only about how those spaces could be places where individuals might feel safe to disclose, but also acknowledgement of the broader contexts where sexual violence occurs. This approach was seen as holding particular potential for Huonville and Clarence Plains/Rokeby.

Noting intimate relationships and families as the contexts in which sexual violence is most prevalent, stakeholders identified the need for primary prevention to focus more on education and training for families to learn how to sustain positive, healthy relationships. This was identified to be important as both from the perspectives of adults in the family, but also children and young people, who are directly influenced when there is sexual violence in the familial environment.

We can't just leave it up to schools and say 'oh well school is gonna deal with it, or that or some program's gonna deal with it' ... What we know is parents do it better. If we

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<sup>3</sup> Warm handovers refer to conscientious, person-centred and reflective case transfer techniques depending on the client's specific needs. This may be a verbal pre-briefing on the client's history, needs and ongoing interventions with the incoming professional and a humanising recount of said professional to the client prior to an escorted face-to-face introduction.

can get parents healthy enough, they do it better. Not the government. (SP20, state-wide)

It was also noted that more support is needed for young people who engage in problematic sexual behaviour.

## Implications for practice

The findings from this study begin to provide the evidence needed to develop targeted responses to address the unique nature of sexual violence in, and needs of, local Tasmanian communities. It is intended that findings from this project will inform the Tasmanian Government's new family and sexual violence action plan. It is also anticipated the study's findings will be used to refine and develop the services already provided in southern Tasmania.

Barriers to disclosure were identified in many contexts. For those hesitant to directly approach specialised sexual support services, but first disclose to a different service, warm handovers may bridge supports across the sector. SASS may be handling initial crisis support well, but could consider either extending this or including a service that can accommodate more long-term and more complex support.

Recommendations for SASS include incorporating training and community education campaigns education which demonstrates what sexual violence looks like within intimate partnerships and families. The necessity to enhance prevention in the context of family and parenting capacity was also emphasised.

Stakeholders discussed a range of prevention options including education and awareness training for the broader community. Information in schools, workplaces, sporting clubs, community and religious groups must be relevant and explicit. Huonville and Clarence Plains/Rokeby provided opportunities where building support and knowledge for local community members to become referral pathways can strengthen regional response. SASS can consider working with relevant organisations and family planning to conduct outreach workshops for residential homes and other disability service providers around sex education, consent and supports for those living with a disability.

It is critical that further research be co-developed with Aboriginal and CALD communities to ensure processes are culturally safe and appropriate. This is a key step in developing culturally safe and accessible services for these Tasmanians. In addition, future research into sexual violence in Tasmania can include participants beyond southern Tasmania and collaborate with local service providers in the north and north-west, such as Laurel House. Combined with different methods for data collection, this will identify broader Tasmanian experiences.

## About SASS

Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) is a multi-faceted support service for survivors, those affected by sexual violence, and perpetrators within Tasmania. Services include counselling and crisis support, assistance for accessing the National Redress Scheme and therapeutic services for young people displaying problematic sexual behaviour. SASS uses both preventative and intervention strategies for harm-minimisation, through individual counselling, workplace educational training, and sexual assault first-aid support workshops within the community. SASS also provides policy feedback and consultations for service providers and organisations for related matters within the community.

## About TILES

Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (TILES) is committed to excellence in law enforcement research. Collaborative research that links academics with practitioners is a hallmark of that research. The Institute focuses on four strategic priorities namely research, teaching, communication, and professionalism.

**TILES Vision** | To achieve an international reputation for excellence in law enforcement research.

**TILES Mission** | To conduct and promote evidence-based research to improve the quality of law enforcement and enhance community safety.