

GROUP-BASED COERCIVE CONTROL: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Presenter

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Public Hearing

Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised
Fringe Groups

Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee

SUMMARY OF BEYOND BELIEF

Submission No 40



Many of us have been left to explain our own harm - without language, recognition, or protection.

This submission asks Parliament to change that. It argues that what's often dismissed as “religious freedom” or “lifestyle regret” is, in fact, a patterned, preventable form of harm.

CO-DESIGN PROCESS

Written contributions totalling more than 12,000 words were received from 64 survivors, family members, practitioners and community members, supplemented by numerous informal conversations across survivor networks.

Key aims, themes and definitions were developed through survivor-led round-table discussions, followed by iterative validation, feedback and revision.

Contributor insights shaped the definitions, models and recommendations, with changes made in response to participant input.

A broader public conversation reached over 6,000 people across TikTok, Instagram and Facebook, many with personal connections to the issues; this informed refinement but was not treated as structured co-design data.

The final submission was endorsed by more than 900 survivors, family members, friends, practitioners and allies.

LIVED-EXPERIENCE INSIGHTS

Across many of the lived-experience contributions, frequent themes included a view that there is “no legislation”, “nothing done”, and survivors are “not believed”.

Survivors frequently linked their suffering to systemic inaction as much as to perpetrators.

Contributors described grooming of minors, jurisdictional evasion, and institutional inaction - particularly by police, courts, ACNC, CCYP and child protection.

Some reported ongoing harassment after exit, with no clear legal remedy.

We also mapped 205 survivor-identified coercive acts against Victorian and Commonwealth law.

- The vast majority fall outside existing legal protections or are functionally not addressed.
- Non-physical coercion is largely unrecognised.
- The mapping showed that while the reportable conduct scheme appears to offer protections for children, neither the scheme nor the CCYP is equipped to detect or address the patterned, cumulative abuse seen in high-control groups.

BEYOND THE 'CULT' FRAME

Beyond Belief also explored the usefulness or otherwise of "cult" as a descriptor. For some of us, *cult* remains a helpful shorthand. But in law, policy, and service delivery, the term remains imprecise, stigmatising, and often unhelpful. Across jurisdictions it has failed to help survivors get justice, protection, or recognition.

That's why this submission moves toward a **behaviour-based** frame. It focuses on the methods of control - not the belief system - and argues for a belief-neutral response that protects rights without silencing survivors.

RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Recruitment is deceptive, often framed as healing, activism, or spirituality. For many, “recruitment” occurs at birth.

Control is layered and sustained, often enforced by the group itself - not just one person.

The impacts are profound, ranging from trauma and financial loss to estrangement, stigma, and systemic failure.

We mapped over **200 survivor-reported coercive acts** and found that most fall outside or between existing laws.

GROUP-BASED COERCIVE CONTROL

A person using coercive control within a group context - such as a religious, spiritual, wellness, political, or personal development group.

This occurs when *individuals or leadership figures* inside the group use patterned, sustained tactics to reshape a person's autonomy, identity, relationships, or worldview.

While similar in form to coercive control in intimate relationships, this form of harm occurs in non-domestic settings and may involve collective enforcement or systemic pressure across many aspects of life.

GROUP-BASED COERCIVE CONTROL

We asked survivors:

Does the [language] of group-based coercive control feel accurate to your experience?

23 (72%) answered, *“yes, completely”*

6 (19%) *“mostly”*

2 (6%) *“somewhat”*

1 (3%) *“not really”*

No one answered *“not at all”*

An additional 32 respondents opted to provide brief contributions and were therefore not asked this question.

We recognised that **coercion** is common and occurs in many ways across the community, and that in some limited circumstances, it is lawful and justifiable. Many coercive practices are already illegal or strictly regulated in Australia.

Coercion in Australia			
Interpersonal <i>Examples:</i> Family violence Child abuse Grooming Elder abuse Sexual assault Image-based abuse Stalking Threats Blackmail Harassment	Transactional <i>Examples:</i> Human trafficking Wage theft Modern Slavery Service manipulation in NDIS Financial control in aged care Coerced consent in healthcare	Regulated <i>Examples:</i> Police use of force Involuntary mental health treatment Family law decisions Guardianship orders Restrictive practices Correctional systems Court-mandated treatment	Group-Based <i>Examples:</i> Religious cults Therapeutic cults High-control MLMs Separatist groups Corporate cults Health misinformation networks New Age authoritarian groups

DRAWING A LINE

Likewise, it is somewhat normative for people to routinely seek influence, status and control in social settings.

For these reasons, neither *coercion*, nor *control* are sufficient as standalone markers of unlawful conduct.

A legal definition of group-based coercive control needs to distinguish between ordinary power dynamics and patterns that remove another person's functional freedom.

DRAWING A LINE DOMINATION ACROSS EVERYDAY LIFE

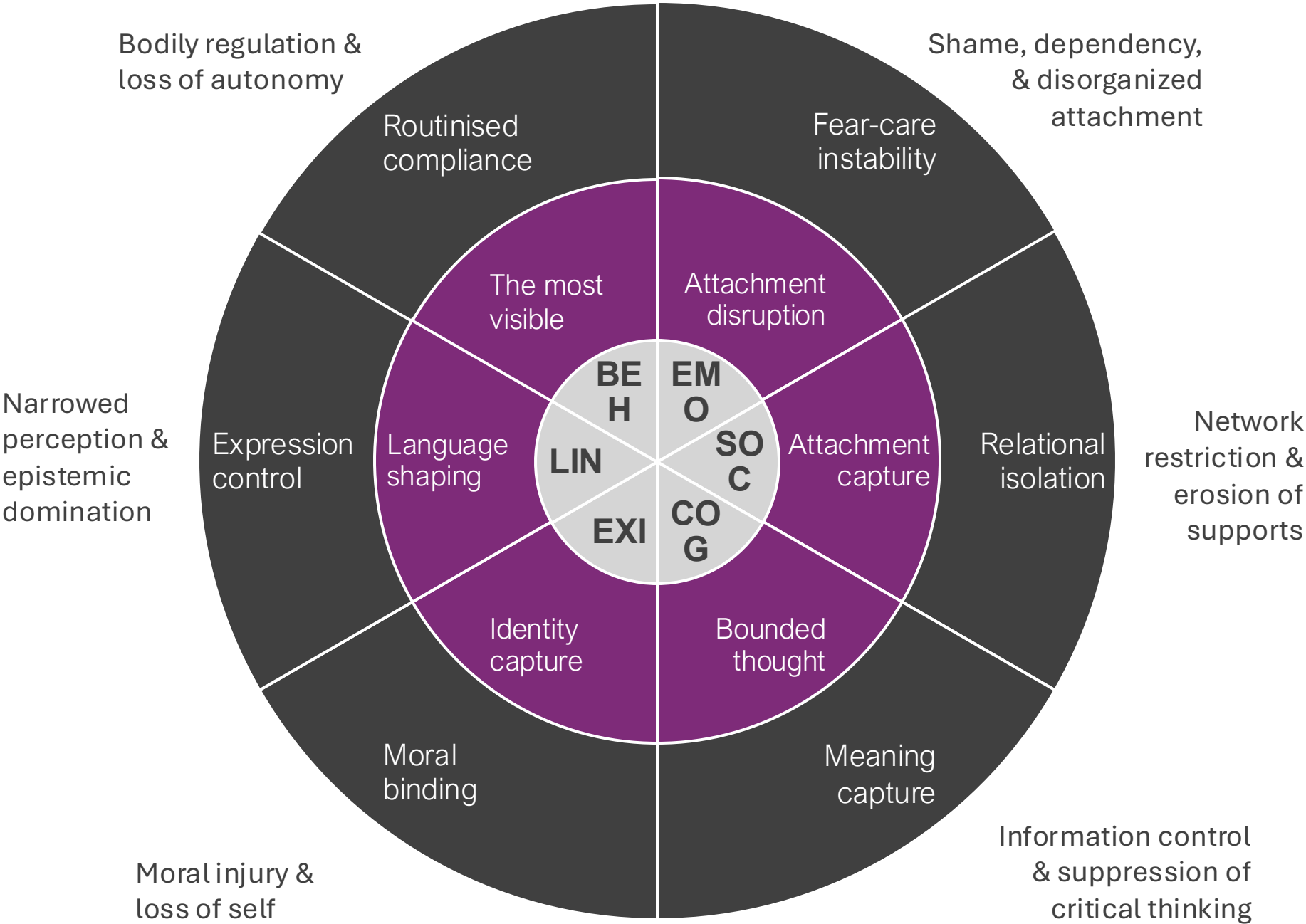
Group-based coercive control forms the architecture of abuse.

As it accumulates across life domains, it becomes a serious harm in its own right and a scaffold for other criminal conduct.

Summary: Domains of group-based coercive control

(Synthesised from core works by Lifton, 1961; Singer, 2003; Hassan, 2018; Lalich, 2004; Langone, 1993; Stark, 2007; Stein, 2017; Feliciano, 2023)

BEH Behavioral
EMO Emotional
SOC Social
COG Cognitive
EXI Existential
LIN Linguistic



IMPAC

TACTIC

BEH

EM
O

LIN

SOC

EXI

CO
G

Suppressed autonomy; heightened compliance; reduced capacity for independent decision making; fear-based self-regulation; physical exhaustion or injury.

Disorganised attachment; chronic shame; fear of rejection; emotional numbing; dependency on leaders for reassurance; impaired ability to trust relationships outside the group.

Surveillance; forced participation; ritualised routines; behavioural conditioning; compelled labour; enforced schedules; physical or sexual violence, threatened or enacted.

Induced guilt; love-bombing followed by withdrawal; shaming; gaslighting; prescribed emotional states; humiliation; threats or use of physical or sexual violence to enforce emotional compliance.

Inability to describe coercion while inside the group; internalised self-censorship; limited emotional vocabulary; difficulty narrating experiences after exit; reliance on group-approved language for identity.

Loaded language; suppression of alternative terms; clichés that close down reflection; renaming dissent as betrayal or negativity; redefining harm as growth.

Isolation; monitored communication; social shunning; engineered relationship breakdowns; control of intimate partnerships; enforced dependency; group-based punishments or public call-outs.

Loss of social capital; fragmented family ties; intensified dependency; loneliness; fear of exile; diminished ability to seek help during crisis.

Fear-based ideologies; conditional belonging; sacred narratives that justify harm; moral absolutism; leader-deification; imposed life purpose or calling.

Information restriction; doctrinal filtering; loaded language; black-and-white thinking; fear-based prohibitions on questioning; chanting, music, breathwork or visualisations to induce altered states and embed belief.

Identity diffusion; moral injury; dependency on the group for meaning; fear of spiritual or existential annihilation on exit; guilt or shame tied to perceived moral failure.

Reduced critical capacity; overreliance on group doctrine; confusion when faced with conflicting evidence; cognitive dissonance; difficulty integrating alternative worldviews after exit.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

(Maslow, 1970)

Self-actualisation

Personal growth, fulfilment, realising potential, creativity.

Esteem needs

Respect, recognition, achievement, self-esteem, status.

Love and belonging

Friendship, family, intimacy, social connection, community.

Safety needs

Physical safety, security, stability, health, predictable environment.

Physiological needs

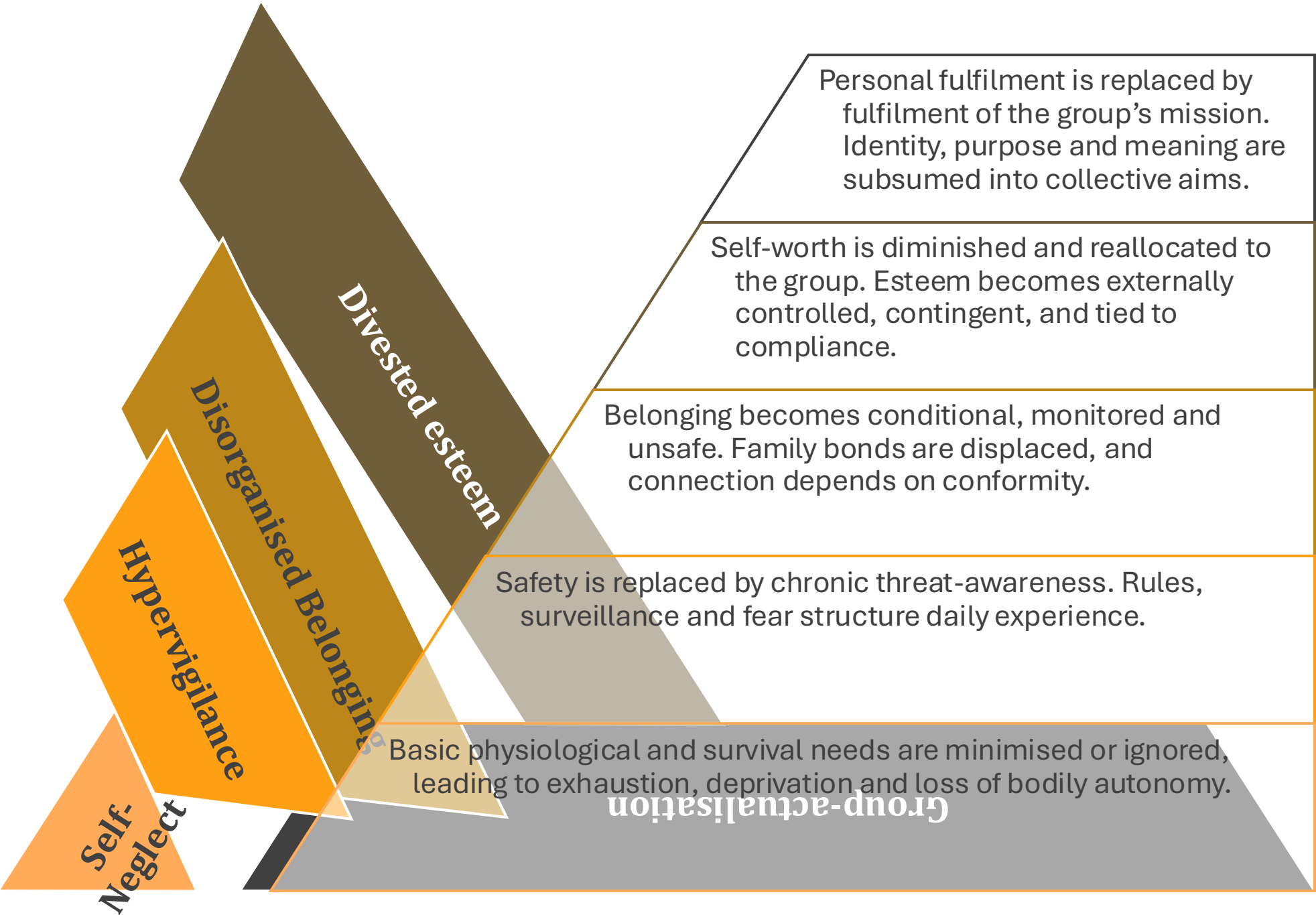
Food, water, sleep, shelter, breathing, basic bodily survival.

Maslow's hierarchy shows how human needs build toward autonomy and fulfilment.

Coercive groups invert these needs and reorganise them around the group.

Maslow –
Inverted

(a conceptual
illustration, not a
formal model)



EXISTING PROTECTIONS

Existing laws address many individual incidents that occur in some high-control groups, but they do not capture the cumulative patterns that define high-control groups.

A legal definition for group-based coercive control would not replace current protections - it would fill the gaps between them and support multi-agency responses that recognise patterned conduct.

Coercive control is a serious harm in its own right *and* a scaffold for other criminal conduct.

Legislation is needed to address gaps and support multi-agency coordination.

VACCA, VACCHO, VALS

E.g. Aboriginal child and family services, child protection, cultural safety, rights violations.

Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission

E.g. Charity governance, director suitability, revocation of charity status.

NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission

E.g. Restrictive practices, exploitative providers, service coercion, pseudo-therapies.

Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency

E.g. Professional misconduct, pseudo-therapies, exploitation by registered practitioners.

Commission for Children and Young People

E.g. Reportable Conduct Scheme, cultural safety, Child Safe Standards (does not investigate the alleged conduct itself).

Child Protection (DFFH) & Family Court

E.g. Child protection, family violence.

Wage Inspectorate Victoria

E.g. Child employment

Victoria Police

E.g. Blackmail, stalking, assault, threat to kill or inflict serious injury, rape, sexual assault, fraud.

Office of the Public Advocate

E.g. Guardianship, substituted decision-making, abuse of people with disabilities.

Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission

E.g. Elder abuse, financial exploitation, coercive care relationships.

Australian Federal Police & Australian Border Force

E.g. forced marriage, human trafficking, slavery, sexual servitude, supporting terrorism.

Consumer Affairs Victoria

E.g. Residential tenancies, misleading or deceptive conduct, unconscionable conduct, pyramid schemes, improper fundraising, incorporated associations, scams.

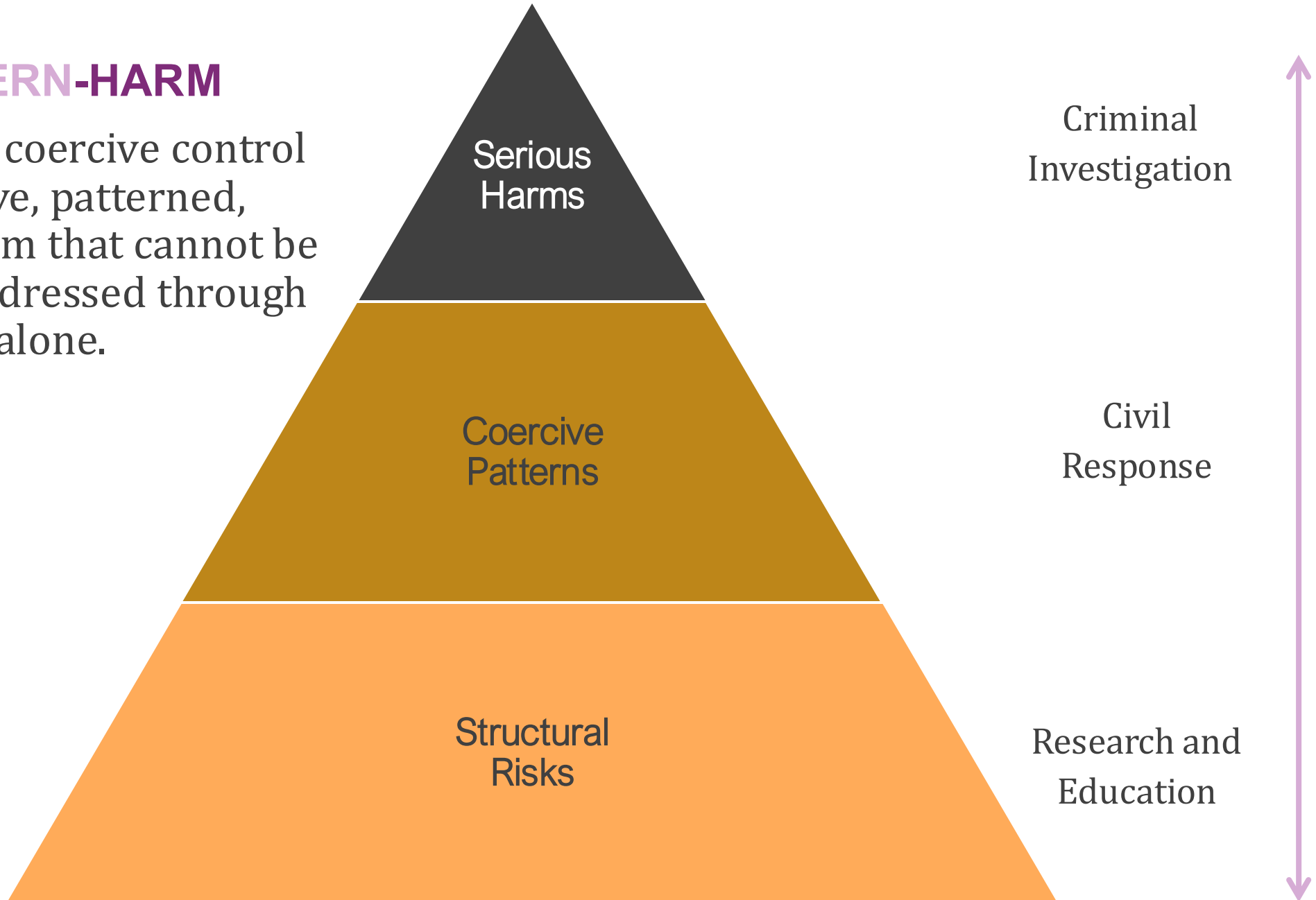
We believe coercion should only be used when lawful and justifiable

LAWFUL	Authorised	Is the use of coercion permitted under relevant legal, contractual, or duty of care obligations (eg. civil, fiduciary, or statutory responsibilities)?
JUSTIFIABLE	Reasonable	Is the purpose of the coercive conduct rational, defensible, and compatible with human dignity, freedom, and equality?
	Necessary	Is coercion required to fulfil a duty or prevent harm, or could a less intrusive option suffice?
	Proportional	Is the degree and type of coercion proportionate to the harm or objective pursued?

(Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006)

RISK-PATTERN-HARM

Group-based coercive control is a cumulative, patterned, totalising harm that cannot be effectively addressed through criminal law alone.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Only one of our 16 recommendations concerns criminalisation.

Preventing harm requires coordinated systems, organisational safeguards and cultural change.

Meaningful protection comes from shifting norms and strengthening the environments around people, not from criminal law alone.

Lived-Experience Leadership

1. Establish a Lived-Experience Ministerial Advisory Committee to guide policy, education, and regulatory responses.
2. Prioritise survivor-led organisations in service design, training, and public messaging.
3. Embed co-design in all systemic responses.

Recognition and Research

4. Introduce a legal definition of coercive control that captures group-based patterns.
5. Fund independent, interdisciplinary research into group-based coercive control.

Support for Exit and Recovery

6. Fund specialist trauma-informed services for people leaving coercive groups and for affected family members.
7. Train frontline workers to recognise and respond to group-based coercive control.

Multi-Agency Coordination

8. Establish a permanent, statutory office of an Independent Commissioner for Coercive Group Harm, with full structural independence and a direct reporting line to Parliament.
9. As a transitional measure, an independent Implementation Monitor could oversee reform rollout, coordinate agencies, embed survivor-informed practice, and report to Parliament on progress and emerging barriers.
10. Create a dedicated multi-agency framework for information sharing and coordinated prevention and response to group-based coercive control, modelled on MARAM.
11. Introduce a statutory duty for prescribed professionals and entities to report or escalate concerns when they become aware of information that may reasonably indicate a pattern of group-based coercive control.

Legal and Regulatory Reform

12. Create tiered civil and regulatory tools to intervene before criminal thresholds are met.
13. Introduce a targeted criminal offence of a person using coercive control causing serious harm, applicable in group-based and non-intimate contexts.
14. Establish appropriate limitation periods and trauma-informed processes for complaints of group-based coercive control.
15. Ensure protections against retaliation and reprisals, including capacity for complaints to be made anonymously or by third parties where appropriate.
16. Undertake a statutory and operational review of relevant regulators to assess and address gaps in their powers, scope, and mandates for responding to coercive group environments.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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