



SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN TASMANIA: COMMUNITY MEMBER 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 between April and June 2022. This paper summarises community member perspectives on the scale of sexual violence, its nature, barriers to seeking help, and potential solutions.

The authors would like to thank the community members participants for sharing their stories. Thanks also go to the project funder for enabling these experiences to be shared.

Read the full report [here](#)

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Contact: Dr Jess Rodgers c/o tiles.admin@utas.edu.au

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 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. 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; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual+ (LGBTIQA+), or sex, sexuality or gender diverse;¹ and disability.

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

Method and participants

Community member participants were recruited through SASS and TILES Facebook, Twitter and Instagram advertisements. This promotion targeted people over the age of 18 years, of any gender, living or working in regions of focus. Interviews were undertaken by Zoom and face to face. Transcripts of interviews were provided to participants for review and clarification. Transcripts were thematically coded around the research questions. Top-line themes were then analysed to identify the key 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.

Regions and broad demographics of the nine community member participants were collected to identify how experiences varied (Table 1). Some community members did not identify with any of the demographic categories. Some participants had experienced sexual violence which informed their responses to interview questions.

¹ The term 'LGBTIQA+' is used throughout.

Table 1: Community member participant region and demographics (n=9)

Region	Number of participants
Clarence Plains/Rokeby	4
Sandy Bay/South Hobart	3
Huonville	2
Demographic	Number of participants
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	1
CALD/Migrant	1
LGBTIQA+	4
Disabled	7

Note: Demographic totals are greater than 9 as some community members selected multiple categories.

Findings

Types of sexual violence, context and prevalence

For community member interviewees, the term '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. Community members commonly suggested that sexual violence is more frequently perpetrated where there is a pre-existing relationship between perpetrators and survivors,² rather than between strangers.

Community members identified the diverse ways sexual violence occurs. Some emphasised that sexual violence can be a combination of physical acts and violating behaviour that affects people's psychological and emotional wellbeing. Others focused on physical acts, such as rape, or identified the impact of non-physical harm, such as threats, coercion, and blackmail.

Many community members identified structural enablers as well as individual forms of sexual violence, the former often serving as a context for the occurrence of the latter. Examples of such structural forms of sexual violence included victim-blaming, gender stereotypes, discrimination, and sexism, as well as community attitudes around sexualised behaviour.

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

Sexual violence was understood as occurring in the absence of consent. That is, sexual violence was described as occurring when people use physical force, disrespect someone's boundaries, or take control of a situation through coercion and manipulation.

Community members suggested that sexual violence is most prevalent in intimate partnerships, families and other relationships where there is an imbalance of power (such as relationships in educational and institutional contexts). For example:

When kids experience sexual violence, it's at the hands of adults. And it's incredibly pervasive in Tasmania ... Sexual violence within romantic relationships is definitely real. And it happens more often than people dare to even believe. (Community member [CM] 4, Clarence Plains/Rokeby, LGBTIQ+, Disabled)

Community members believed that sexual violence within Tasmania is highly prevalent, but tends to go unrecognised because of how normalised it is. Most community members knew someone that had experienced sexual violence.

Seeking support

Community members were asked a range of questions about support seeking for experiences of sexual violence, including barriers (actual and perceived), pathways, and levels of awareness and experiences of seeking help from specialised services, such as SASS.

Barriers

Community members raised a range of challenges around seeking support and/or reporting experiences of sexual violence.

Community members identified trauma from sexual violence as a barrier to help seeking. The timing of reporting or help seeking was seen as dependent on the impacts on the individual. Adding to the difficulty of disclosure is the lack of understanding by broader society. Some community members suggested that it may take time for some people to understand that they have experienced sexual violence. This can be due to not understanding the boundaries of consent, being unaware of what constitutes 'sexual violence', or having experiences that normalise sexual violence. Social taboos about discussing sexual activity, feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and fear of not being believed were also identified barriers to help-seeking.

A lack of access to counselling services was an issue for community members who had sought support following experiences of sexual violence. Discretion was the key service issue raised by Huonville community members. Those in the Clarence Plains/Rokeby region noted a distinct lack of local services. Both noted difficulty in accessing services beyond the immediate region due to

transport/distance challenges. For LGBTIQ+ and CALD/migrant community members, concerns were raised about privacy, given small communities, and culturally capable services.

Pathways

Community members understood pathways to help-seeking as being dependent on the survivor, and the individual impacts of sexual violence.

Overwhelmingly, community interviewees stated that a survivor would reach out to a trusted family member or friend in the first instance. Reporting behaviours were described as survivors telling often no one else other than their family or friend, with informal disclosure often occurring within conversations about contemporary issues. Where such disclosures occur, survivors might then be encouraged to seek out a counsellor from a known service (for example, a school counsellor in the case of children or a social worker with whom they already have a relationship). Help seeking was thus described as a process.

The first action, maybe talk to their family members or close friends, then seek professional help from those services. And yes, some of them, very little of them may go to the police and seek legal address. (CM10, Sandy Bay/South Hobart, LGBTIQ+, CALD/Migrant)

It was considered rare for survivors to report sexual violence to police, particularly when the perpetrator was known to them. Police were not seen by community participants as a common pathway to support options.

Tas Police do not offer you any form of anything when these things happen. They want they want an interview, if they can hound you. But other than that, you might as well be on your own. (CM3, Sandy Bay/South Hobart, Indigenous, LGBTIQ+, Disabled)

Community participants also viewed criminal justice processes as daunting.

Experiences with support services, including SASS

While all except one community member participant had heard of SASS,³ the range of services provided by SASS were not well known in the wider community. It was suggested that this lack of knowledge results in people hesitating to reach out for support, or reaching out too late to access services.

³ Recruitment methods included SASS's Facebook page.

I don't actually know if we have another service in Tassie for sexual assault specifically.

I just don't know, I haven't heard of one before. (CM6, Huonville, LGBTIQ+, Disabled)

Community members broadly agreed the recipient of initial disclosure having knowledge of support services was a leading factor in survivors seeking further support.

Most community members were aware of SASS's in-house crisis support services and some were aware of the workshops being undertaken in schools. One mentioned the phone line. SASS was not discussed beyond those contexts and services. Community participants who were familiar with SASS had generally positive feedback.

Some community members expressed frustration with the administrative restrictions of access to SASS, including waiting lists and the 12-month limit on support. Comments from community members demonstrated the complexity of their needs. Whilst their initial contact was often positive, they require a commitment to long-term support from SASS, including consistent case workers who listened and understood their experiences, and who could provide ongoing support over an extended period. Waiting lists and staff turnover impacted on the healing journey of survivors.

Improving support services

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

Addressing sexual violence

Community members identified service gaps, high turnover and a lack of staffing across a range of support services that form part of the response to sexual violence. They also indicated that a lack of service integration results in siloes. Where too many services interact with one client, this can lead to survivors feeling overwhelmed and disconnected. This also compounds trauma in having to re-tell their story multiple times.

It was suggested that a person-centred pathway was needed in some cases to ensure that survivors have assistance in deciding what help they need each step of the way. Other suggestions included non-crisis support, in the form of 'open door' service, where people can contact SASS when they feel comfortable. This could be a drop-in service where individuals can explore their options or find information about whether their experience is sexual violence. These options were described as important when survivors were coming to terms with harm they experienced. Online options for accessing support were also suggested, to assist with concerns about privacy.

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).

Discussion of prevention focussed on the need for greater education on what sexual violence is, what it looks like, and the contexts in which it occurs. It was suggested that increased knowledge of these matters could assist to minimise shame and embarrassment, facilitate bodily autonomy, encourage healthy sexual communication in relationships, and aid people to recognise when they have experienced sexual violence. In general, community members emphasised that sex and sexual violence are still considered to be private issues that are not discussed openly, which creates an air of secrecy and shame for survivors.

Other community members emphasised that sexual health, consent, and relationship workshops in schools need to be standardised across public and private sectors, have relevant and context specific information, and be available for children of all ages. Community members noted the importance of including LGBTIQ+ perspectives. Some suggested that education in schools needed to actively disrupt what kinds of relationships families might consider 'normal'. This was extremely important for community members who experienced child sexual abuse or had family histories involving intimate partner violence.

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 help bridge services across the sector.⁴ For those seeking anonymous engagement, online support services such as chats and web forums offer an option. SASS, in collaboration with relevant organisations, may consider strategies for regional outreach in the Clarence

⁴ 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.

Plains/Rokeby and Huonville regions. This could involve embedding in local services in a drop-in context, providing more discreet initial engagement.

Longer term specialised support was identified as a key gap. SASS may be handling initial crisis support well, but could possibly consider either extending this or including a service that can accommodate potentially long-term and more complex support.

Education was widely discussed in reference to prevention with community members noting the necessity of sexual health, consent, and relationship workshops with relevant and inclusive information. SASS may want to review workshops to consider whether changes are required to bring a stronger focus on positive consent models operating in a wide range of relationship contexts.

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.

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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.