



## Editorial Introduction

This is the second of two briefs based on an Australian Research Council (ARC) discovery investigation on new ways to prevent gender-based violence. The first provided an overview of a world-first study into how the unique model of women's police stations in Argentina responds to and prevents gender-based violence. This follow-up brief overviews the team's findings from two surveys that sought to discover what Australia could learn from women's police stations.

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## What Australia Can Learn from Women's Police Stations to Prevent Gender Violence

Kerry Carrington, Máximo Sozzo and Vanessa Ryan

### Introduction

Women's police stations are a unique invention that emerged in Latin America in the mid-1980s in response to the demands of women's rights movements and were specifically designed to respond to victims of gender-based violence (Carrington et al., 2020; Carrington, Guala, et al., 2020; Carrington, Sozzo et al., 2020). They adopt a gender perspective and work in multi-disciplinary teams with social workers, counsellors and lawyers to respond to the women who seek their assistance. They also provide childcare and offer victims a gateway to other support. Notably, they do not prioritise a criminal justice response over the wishes of those who seek their services, so do not rob victims of their agency (Goodmark 2018).

Our Australian Research Council (ARC) funded research team conducted three months of field research in Argentina, interviewing 100 employees from 10 women's police stations. The results revealed that women's police stations prevent gender violence in three main ways: 1) by denaturalising violence and empowering women to break the cycle; 2) by partnering with the community to transform the local norms that sustain violence against women; and 3) by working collaboratively with other local organisations to produce a local roadmap (Carrington, Guala et al., 2020). To read more about their unique approaches to policing and preventing gender violence, visit the [project web page](#).

This briefing paper provides an overview of our research into what can be learned from these unique approaches to improve the policing and prevention of gender violence in Australia. To explore whether the innovative strategies used by the specialist police stations in Argentina could improve the way in which gender violence is responded to in Australia, we conducted two surveys: a community survey ( $n = 566$ ) and a workforce survey ( $n = 277$ ).

The workforce survey recruited information-rich respondents who work, research or volunteer in the gender violence sector ( $n = 277$ ). A total of 1,149 email invitations were distributed to police officers, non-government organisations (NGOs) and government-funded peak bodies and agencies in sexual, domestic and family violence across Australia. The survey was open from 12 March to 26 October 2019.

The community survey recruited participants aged 18 years and over across Australia through Facebook advertisements ( $n = 566$ ) to ensure the 'broadest possible generalisability' (Kapp et al., 2013, p. 2). Over a one-month period, the survey reached a total of 243,957 unique individuals, resulting in 384,447 impressions and 5,360 link clicks.

Facebook samples driven by scientifically constructed algorithms are representative of the wider population and are thus methodologically reasonably sound (Amon et al., 2014; Chataway, 2019, p. 6; Fricker, 2016).

## Key Findings

One key question asked in both the workforce and community surveys was: 'In your opinion, which aspects of women's police stations (in Argentina) could improve how Australian police stations respond to victims of gender violence?'. In total, 12 aspects characteristic of the Argentinian context were provided. Overall, the workforce respondents responded positively to 11 aspects. (responses ranged from 41–86%) (see Figure 1). Of these, they strongly and positively endorsed nine aspects. Only one aspect (i.e., operating from suburban houses) received a response below 50%.

The community respondents were less enthusiastic than the workforce respondents. Their levels of endorsement of the aspects varied between 32% and 67%. Only three aspects received endorsements below 50 percent (see Figure 1). However, there was a considerable level of agreement that the following nine aspects could improve how Australian police stations respond to victims of gender violence:

1. Working in multi-disciplinary teams with lawyers, counsellors and social workers;
2. Collaborating with local agencies to prevent gender violence;
3. Providing emergency support to victims of violence;
4. Designing police stations specifically to receive victims;
5. Providing childcare and a space for children;
6. Undertaking violence prevention work in the local community;
7. Providing specially designed interview rooms for victims;
8. Working with victims to break the cycle of violence; and
9. Working with offenders to break the cycle of violence.

One of the most contentious aspects of women's police stations is whether police units that respond to domestic and sexual violence should adopt a gender perspective and whether they should only employ women (Bull et al., 2019; Hautzinger, 2003, 2016). Just over half (56%) of the workforce respondents were of the view that police stations should be '[s]taffed predominantly by female police officers'. Conversely, just under half (46%) of the community respondents shared this view.

The respondents were also asked whether the police should '[w]ork from a gender perspective that understands domestic violence is a cycle'. An analysis of the respondents who selected either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' in response to this statement revealed a high level of support from both the workforce (88.8%) and community (68.7%) respondents (see Carrington, Sozzo et al., 2020).

Adopting a gender perspective is a fundamental requirement of women's police stations in Argentina. In Argentina, police must have this professional capacity and thus are provided with the requisite mandatory training. Notably, 78% ( $n = 216$ ) of the Australian workforce survey respondents indicated that they would like more specialist training on how to respond to gender violence (see Carrington, Sozzo et al., 2020).

## Discussion of Results

Our research adds to a growing body of evidence that specialised police stations that offer a multi-disciplinary response to gender-based violence widen victims' access to justice (Amaral et al., 2018, p. 3; Carrington, Guala et al., 2020a; Hautzinger, 2003; Jubb et al., 2010; Miller & Segal, 2018; Natarajan, 2005; Pasinato, 2016; Perova & Reynolds, 2017; Sardenberg, 2010 Santos, 2004, p. 50). This body of research suggests that women's police stations:

1. Enhance women's willingness to report gender violence, which increases the likelihood that action will be taken to prevent re-victimisation;
2. Provide a holistic emergency

response, that broadens women’s access to counselling, health, legal, financial and social support;

3. Empower women to liberate themselves from the subjection of the cycle of domestic violence thereby preventing re-victimisation; and
4. Undertake prevention work with the community to disrupt the patriarchal norms that sustain gender violence.

This body of research has also consistently shown that women are more comfortable reporting to women police officers in a family friendly environment. Female police officers are uniquely placed to gain the trust of women. Further, unlike other women, female police officers have the additional advantage of acting with the authority of the state when advocating on behalf of female

victims (Bull et al., 2019).

Police women who negotiate the divide between gender and justice are simultaneously both regulators of the social order and ‘engines for change’ whose work challenges patriarchal norms that sustain gender violence (Carrington et al., 2020a).

### Recommendation

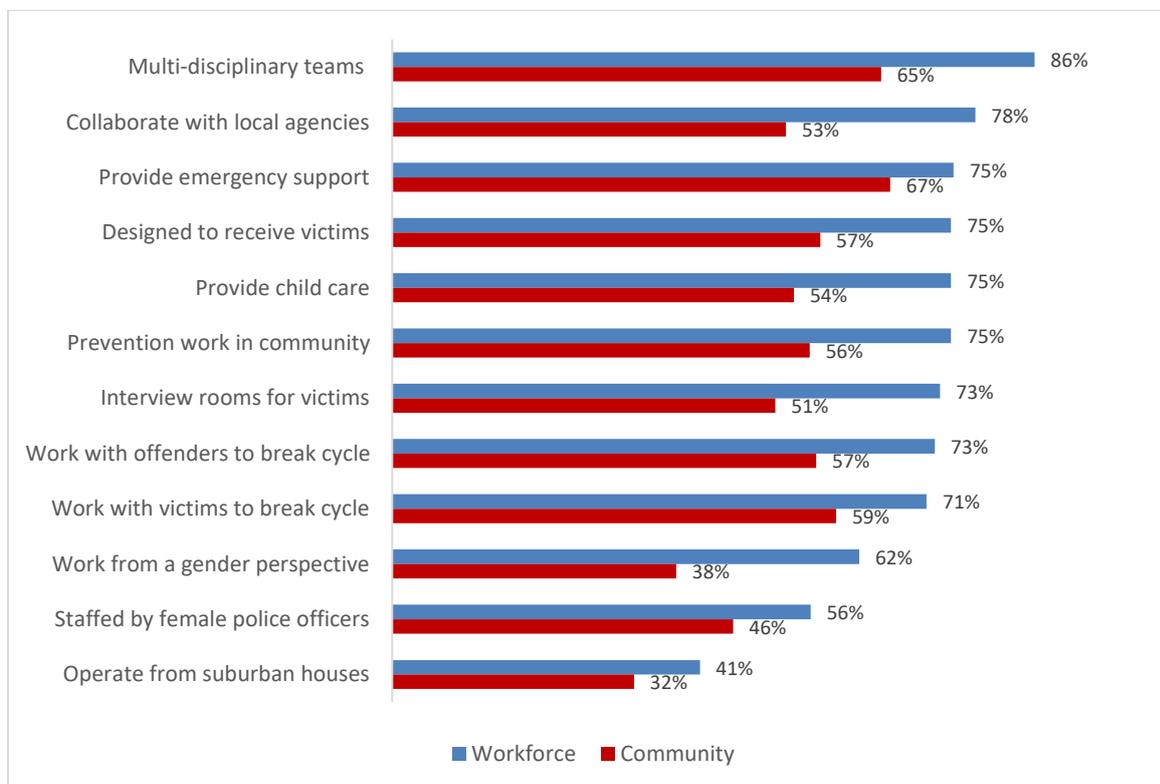
An overwhelming majority of both the community and workforce survey respondents thought that Australia could benefit from adopting some aspects of how women’s police stations in Argentina operate. These unique South American innovations could address some of the issues apparent across Australian jurisdictions. This is particularly important, given the shadow pandemic to the COVID-19 pandemic in which there has been

increasing rates of gender violence across Australian jurisdictions (Boxall et al., 2020; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020; Carrington, Morley et al 2020).

If appropriately staffed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous multi-disciplinary team members who have been trained to work from both gender and culturally sensitive perspectives, police stations designed to specifically respond to gender violence have the potential to significantly enhance the policing of gender violence across Australia. Given these promising prospects, it is recommended that Australian jurisdictions undertake a trial in which specialised police stations are staffed by multi-disciplinary teams to assess their feasibility.

For further information and specific recommendations, consult the [report](#) (Carrington Sozzo et al., 2020b).

Figure 1: Positive response rates in relation to the question that asked: ‘Which of the following aspects of women’s police stations could improve how Australian police stations respond to victims of gender violence?’



Source: What can Australia learn from Women’s Police Stations Workforce Survey Data (n = 277) and Community Survey Data (n = 566). Note: Positive = Strongly Agree or Agree.

## About the Project

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