

## Queensland Police grappling with 'concerning increase' in domestic violence by officers but most victims aren't reporting, advocates say

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New figures revealing a "concerning increase" in Queensland police officers accused of domestic violence likely underestimate the true scale of the problem, advocates say.

*(ABC News: Patrick Williams)*

They've often been threatened with guns, stalked with high-tech tracking equipment and warned that no one will believe them if they call for help — so many don't.

Victims of domestic violence by police officers have long faced unique challenges reporting and escaping abuse. Now, in Queensland, a fresh picture of their plight is emerging, with new data revealing relatively few serving officers have been charged with domestic violence offences in the past two years and hardly any perpetrators sacked.

Documents obtained by ABC News under Freedom of Information reveal there were 52 applications for domestic violence orders (DVOs) against Queensland police officers in 2020 and 2021 and eight officers charged with DV offences.

The figures reflect what Chief Superintendent Virginia Nelson of Ethical Standards Command described as a "concerning increase" in "member-involved domestic violence", which she attributed to a greater willingness among victims to report abuse and better responses from the Queensland Police Service.

## Queensland police officers accused of domestic violence

Serving officers named as respondents on DV orders, charged with DV offences

Year	DVO apps	DVOs issued	Officers charged
2020	23 (20 males, 3 females)	6 (gender unknown)	2 (2 males)
2021	29 (20 males, 9 females)	10 (gender unknown)	6 (5 males, 1 female)

Table: ABC News • Source: [QPS via RTI](#)

But the uptick, between 2020 and last year, involves only a small proportion of QPS employees — and the data may instead support frontline workers' observations that, [as in other states](#), victims are generally reluctant to report domestic violence by police and when they do, they are too often disbelieved or [dismissed while alleged perpetrators are protected](#).

"It's like they're experiencing coercive control on steroids," said Julie Sarkozi, practice director of Women's Legal Service Queensland. "Coercive control is a set of behaviours designed to intimidate, terrify and isolate someone. But if you've got the resources of the state to leverage in order to do that ... you can say to someone, 'It doesn't matter where you go, I'll find you. I've got police stations all over this state that can locate you and tell me where you are, and who will believe me, because I have the credibility of this uniform'."



Police should not be allowed to investigate DV allegations involving colleagues from the same station or within "their sphere of influence", says Julie Sarkozi. (*ABC News: Lexy Hamilton-Smith*)

Not all of the 52 DVO applications against QPS officers resulted in final orders being issued; Ms Nelson said there were six officers named as respondents on final orders in 2020 and 10 in 2021. As of May 23rd, she said, there were 12 active domestic violence orders against serving officers.

And it's unclear whether any of the eight officers charged have been convicted in court and how many remain employed by the QPS. However, Ms Nelson said two officers had been dismissed since January 2020 "after recording allegations of domestic violence".

"Even one" police officer subject to a domestic violence order "is really bad for us", Ms Nelson said. "We don't want those people in our organisation. If they are committing domestic violence ... [it's] totally inconsistent with the office of constable and with our values as an organisation and there is zero tolerance."

QPS officers subject to domestic violence orders are prohibited from carrying firearms and are "immediately" removed from frontline duties, she added: "They'll never respond to a call for service associated with domestic and family violence."

## **'No one's going to believe you'**

Still, survivor advocates say the figures likely underestimate the number of QPS officers perpetrating domestic abuse, particularly because it can be difficult for [police to take action against their own](#).

For context, in the year ending June 2021, there were roughly 35 domestic and family violence [offenders per 10,000 persons in Queensland](#). Yet of about 12,200 officers employed by the QPS, just two were charged in 2020 (roughly 1.6 per 10,000) and six in 2021 (roughly 5 per 10,000).

"It's congruent with what the women we support advise — most never take out a domestic violence order or report offences," said Rosie O'Malley, chief executive of the Domestic Violence Prevention Centre.

"They don't feel safe reporting to police what's happening to them, they don't trust the information will be kept confidential, that if she reports, her entire life will be upended because most of their social supports are through police friends and families and she believes she will be ostracised."

It comes just days after a [new Commission of Inquiry](#) began examining QPS responses to domestic and family violence — a key recommendation of the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce last year.

The Inquiry will consider the extent to which "cultural issues" within the QPS influence the way police investigate DV and how these have contributed to the over-representation of First Nations people in the criminal justice system. It will also examine the adequacy of QPS's complaint handling processes to ensure community confidence, [among other matters](#).

The Taskforce [heard disturbing accounts](#) of how domestic violence allegations involving police officers are handled. Victims reported they had experienced coercive control, stalking, intimidation, systems abuse and conspiracy to murder, and that their perpetrator's training and access to police weapons and systems were used to intimidate and threaten them.

Some who did report to police said officers were unsupportive and failed to investigate their allegations, leaving them with the impression that "the police 'club' was protecting the perpetrators".

"Perpetrators will use arguments like, 'Don't you dare say anything to anybody ... because my job will be put at risk, because I'll be stood down ... and that will have ramifications for me and for you,' Ms Sarkozi said. "Threats are often made [such as], 'I've been a police officer for five years, I have a clear record, no one's going to believe you — you've got depression, you've got anxiety, problems with drinking'."



Most victims of domestic abuse by serving police don't report violence or apply for protection orders, says Rosie O'Malley. *(ABC Gold Coast: Tara Cassidy)*

## **Victims say perpetrators aren't being held to account**

The QPS told the Taskforce that all allegations of domestic violence against employees were "thoroughly investigated" and acted on if required, and that complaints were investigated in line with various laws and operational policies. DV matters involving police officers required oversight from senior supervisors, it said, and conflicts of interest were managed with multi-step guidelines.

But victims — and even a former police officer — insisted these policies weren't always followed, with some claiming perpetrators in police ranks had been shielded from accountability and that officers had been tasked with investigating colleagues they were friends with.

The Taskforce concluded QPS processes for managing DV allegations involving employees were "not adequate" to maintain public confidence in investigations, and that police were not disclosing and mitigating conflicts of interest when investigating complaints.

Ms Sarkozi said police should not be allowed to investigate domestic violence allegations involving colleagues from the same station or within "their sphere of influence". The complaints system must also be improved, she added, so that police are "held to a higher ethical standard": complaints alleging officer misconduct or corruption should be investigated independently, with rigorous protocols for managing sensitive information and conflicts of interest.

Chief Superintendent Nelson said it was troubling that victims weren't seeking help from police. "It concerns me greatly because we're meant to be here for everybody," she said. "Everybody should have access to their police service and they should be able to feel safe. And if they're not feeling safe, and



they can't access the services that we provide ... then that is concerning."

But she said she was hopeful a series of recent developments — including the findings and recommendations of the Taskforce — had increased focus on the issue within the QPS and in the broader community and would encourage more victims to come forward.

For instance, she said the QPS had amended its operational procedures last year to stipulate that when police initiate or become aware of DV proceedings involving an employee, the actioning district must send a briefing note to Ethical Standards Command for consideration of stand down or suspension action. This change would help plug "gaps" in the police response, she said — for instance, when victims make private applications for protection orders, which may not necessarily come to police attention.



Chief Supt Virginia Nelson says committing domestic violence is inconsistent with the QPS's values. (ABC News: Isabella Higgins)

## **QPS considering Victoria Police's investigative model**

As for experts' concerns about police investigating DV matters involving close colleagues, Ms Nelson said some investigations were transferred to other stations or districts on a case-by-case basis, and "more serious" matters were investigated by Ethical Standards Command.

Still, she said the QPS was considering whether it could establish a dedicated unit tasked with investigating domestic violence by employees — along the lines of [what was introduced by Victoria Police](#), which last year launched a standalone policy and specialist team that handles high-risk cases involving serving officers.



The Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce found QPS processes for managing DV allegations involving employees were "not adequate" to maintain public confidence in investigations. (ABC News: Chris Gillette)

"We're looking at [whether] that model would even fit in Queensland, because we're vastly different to Victoria, our police services are different ... and our legislation is different," Ms Nelson said. "[But] I'm not closed to the idea, I'm open to it, and I think we need to have a look at what that might look like for Queensland."

In the meantime, victims and their advocates are pinning their hopes on the Commission of Inquiry being able to identify and pave the way for crucial reforms – though some experts have this week [raised concerns its June 24 deadline for submissions is too short](#).

"Without second guessing the results of the Inquiry, I think part of the issue that will be identified is that the culture and attitudes towards domestic violence have to change so that it's taken much more seriously within the police force itself," Ms Sarkozi said.

"What's at stake is that women and children continue to be at risk because they lack confidence ... in police systems to successfully manage allegations about police officers, to investigate in a non-partisan way ... And while those attitudes remain, people are failing to seek help, and failing to get safe."

***Editor's note: An earlier version of this story quoted QPS Chief Supt Virginia Nelson as saying the CCC had in February or March 2022 changed its classification of domestic violence complaints against police from "misconduct" to "corrupt conduct". The QPS confirmed this detail with ABC News however a spokesperson has since advised they were mistaken — the CCC classification has not changed.***

