

Beyond Belief

RESPONDING TO CULTS AND HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS IN VICTORIA



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We recognise that many could not participate in this process: those who remain silenced or surveilled, those still entangled in systems of control, and those who have lost their lives to suicide following the cumulative harms of coercive environments. This document is informed by their absence as much as by the voices we were privileged to include.

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ABOUT THE COLLABORATING ORGANISATIONS

Survivors of Coercive Cults and High-Control Groups is an advocacy collective comprising individuals with lived-experience of coercive, high-control environments. Drawing on years of sustained advocacy across legal, policy, and support sectors, members have contributed to law reform, public policy, research, media engagement, and peer support initiatives. The collective exists to ensure survivor-informed perspectives shape systemic responses to coercive control in group contexts.

Stop Religious Coercion Australia is a national advocacy initiative founded by survivors of the Geelong Revival Centre. The group works to raise public awareness of religious coercion and its impacts, and advocates for legal and policy reform to prevent the misuse of spiritual authority to control, isolate, or harm. Its members collaborate across faith, legal, and survivor sectors to support rights-based protections for those affected by high-demand religious groups.

Janja Lalich, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Sociology, is an international authority on cults, extremism, and coercion. She specialises in self-sealing, or closed, systems (cults, narcissistic relationships, human trafficking, ideological extremism) with a particular focus on recruitment, indoctrination, and methods of influence and control. She has been an avid contributor to the field for more than 30 years through her research, publications, presentations, and social media.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry has been co-designed by survivors of cults and high-control groups, in partnership with families, mental health professionals, and advocates. It proposes a new regulatory paradigm - group-based coercive control - to respond to cultic abuse and other forms of organised coercion through a belief-neutral, behaviour-focused framework grounded in human rights, trauma theory, and lived experience.

Part 1 responds to the Inquiry's terms of reference by documenting how coercive groups recruit, control, and harm. It outlines:

- **Recruitment strategies** that exploit trust, identity, and unmet needs through deception, grooming, and affective manipulation;
- **Control mechanisms** that erode autonomy through patterned psychological pressure, identity restructuring, and peer surveillance;
- **Impacts** that are often cumulative, enduring, and unrecognised - including disrupted development, trauma, family estrangement, and systemic dislocation.

Part 2 introduces group-based coercive control as a framework capable of capturing harm that is collective, sustained, and embedded in closed or ideologically framed settings. This paradigm focuses not on what groups believe, but how coercion is enacted, justified, and enforced. It offers four practical tools to inform reform:

- The *Group-Based Coercion Matrix* (Appendix A), which assesses the breadth and legitimacy of coercion across six domains;
- The *Risk-Pattern-Harm Model* (Appendix B), which supports tiered, proportionate legal responses;
- Legal Mapping Tables (Appendix C), identifying where current laws fail to prevent or remedy coercive harm;
- Model Survivor Journeys (Appendix D), illustrating how coercion unfolds across varied identities and life contexts.

Part 3 presents 16 recommendations across five areas: lived-experience leadership, formal recognition, recovery support, legal reform, and systemic oversight. These include:

- Embedding survivor voices in advisory and training roles;
- Developing a legal definition of group-based coercive control;
- Funding specialist trauma services and exit pathways;
- Introducing civil and regulatory tools to address coercive patterns before criminal thresholds are met.

The submission concludes that group-based coercive control is a preventable, systemic harm. Victoria's leadership in addressing family violence and institutional abuse provides a strong foundation for recognising and responding to coercive patterns embedded in ideologically framed, non-state group contexts. Survivor-informed reform offers a principled path forward - centred not on suppressing belief, but on safeguarding autonomy, accountability, and human dignity.

RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

How They Recruit

Recruitment into cults and high-control groups typically begins with deception. Offers of belonging, healing, purpose, or transformation are presented as open and empowering, while the group's true agenda remains hidden. These entry points are designed to disarm, drawing people in under the guise of wellness, spirituality, activism, or personal growth, while concealing the coercive dynamics that lie ahead

STRATEGIC TARGETING

Groups often target individuals undergoing life transitions, trauma, identity crises, or social disconnection. These moments of vulnerability create openings for influence, belonging and gradual entrenchment. (Lalich, 2023)

PERSONALISED LOVE-BOMBING

New members are flooded with affection, validation, and promises of belonging - establishing dependency before coercion becomes apparent. Recruiters often reflect back a person's language, values, or identity - often aligning with their aspirations or perceived marginalisation, especially in progressive or spiritual contexts. (Coates, 2012; Goldberg, 2006; Lalich, 2004; Stein, 2017).

DECEPTION AND WITHHOLDING

Groups present an appealing public identity that masks their coercive practices. Core practices, control tactics, or leadership structures are often revealed incrementally, after emotional investment has been secured. (Singer, 2003; Lalich, 2004; Langone, 1993).

MANIPULATION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY AND GROUP SOLIDARITY

Early messages begin to separate the recruit from external sources of knowledge, accountability, or support. Groups may position themselves as uniquely enlightened, persecuted, or redemptive - legitimising control as a form of care or higher purpose. (Lalich, 2004; Coates, 2012; Stein, 2017).

"My brother ran away to join a cult, groomed by old men into joining the day after he turned 18 and jumped in a van to Victoria without letting anyone know. Exactly as they told him to do so."

EXPLOITATION OF TRUSTED INSTITUTIONS

Recruitment through schools, universities, support services, churches, or online forums: These platforms are used to give legitimacy and lower the guard of potential recruits. Grooming through 'helping' roles, including by group associates who are registered professionals: Offers of support, healing, employment, mentorship, or spiritual growth often mask intentions to isolate and dominate.

RECRUITMENT BEGINS TO ESTABLISH DEPENDENCY

The recruitment phase often already initiates subtle control: Over identity ("you were meant to be here"); Over knowledge ("you just don't understand yet"); Over emotion ("you finally belong"). These early dynamics create psychological and social dependencies that become harder to exit as control intensifies. (Coates, 2012; Lalich, 2004; Hassan, 2000).

"I was targeted because of my vulnerability. My identity was stripped to conform to the leader's desire. They operated as a club out of the university campus."

RECRUITMENT AS RELATIONSHIP:

AFFECTIVE, GRADUAL, AND ENTRAPPING

Unlike kidnapping or sudden conversion, most recruitment into high-control groups involves a slow build-up of trust, emotional investment, and shifting norms. Often, people join because of personal connections, not doctrine. These bonds are later leveraged to enforce conformity (Coates, 2012)

"My experience is with an animal rescue and registered charity. They recruit almost exclusively vegans and vegetarians. Because there are vulnerable animals involved... they know leaving will lead to the animals suffering even more."

How They Control

The way we understand coercive control in cults has changed significantly over recent decades. For too long, the harms caused by such groups were minimised, reframed as lifestyle regret, reframed as personal disillusionment, or ignored altogether. Survivors were pathologised or portrayed as naïve, disgruntled, or complicit. But growing evidence, much of it grounded in the direct testimony of survivors, has helped understand these experiences as systematic, patterned, and preventable abuses of power.

FOUNDATIONAL WORKS: THOUGHT REFORM AND COERCIVE PERSUASION

Much of the early work in this space came from clinical, psychiatric, and social psychological researchers studying ideological control. Edgar Schein (1961) introduced the term "coercive persuasion" to describe how behavioural compliance is shaped through situational control and enforced dependency. Robert Jay Lifton (1961) developed the concept of "thought reform" to show how totalist systems suppress autonomy through confession, ideological purity, and self-renunciation. Margaret Singer (1976, 1995) expanded and popularised the concept of "coercive persuasion" to describe how high-demand groups use deception, isolation, and sustained psychological pressure to wear down personal agency.

Scholars in the new religious movements (NRM) field challenged this work, reframing cults as benign religious communities and accusing critics of moral panic or anti-religious bias. This approach often discredited and denigrated survivors, cloaked abuse in the language of religious freedom, helping to obscure the real and often profound suffering endured by those inside such groups. The tension between belief-based and behaviour-based framings continues to shape the discourse today.

LIVED-EXPERIENCE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL MODELS

From the 1990s onwards, lived-experience voices became more prominent. Steven Hassan, a mental health counsellor and former member of the Unification Church, developed the BITE model (Behaviour, Information, Thought, Emotion) to show how compliance can be achieved without overt force (Hassan, 2000; 2018). Around the same period, sociologist Janja Lalich (2004) published *Bounded Choice*, introducing a distinct theoretical model grounded in survivor accounts and sociological analysis. Her work examined how totalistic group environments erode critical thinking, reshape identity, and suppress dissent by creating internalised systems of meaning and authority. These frameworks align with related concepts such as cognitive dissonance, identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966; Kroger, 2007), and internalised domination, which help illuminate the psychological mechanisms through which consent can be constrained and autonomy undermined in high-control settings. Lalich's "bounded choice" model was particularly influential in explaining how consent is compromised within closed systems of meaning where all alternatives are delegitimised.

BROADENING THE FRAME

More recently, trauma-informed frameworks have deepened our understanding of how coercion affects the body and mind. Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk have shown how prolonged psychological control fragments identity and compromises emotional regulation (van der Kolk, 2014; Herman, 1992/2015). Alexandra Stein has applied attachment theory to group dynamics, demonstrating how coercive systems manipulate both fear and care to foster dependency - particularly through disorganised attachment (Stein, 2017).

A growing body of research supports the recognition of coercive control as a patterned, cumulative, and relationally flexible form of harm. Stark (2007) reframed domestic abuse as a system of entrapment, shifting focus from isolated incidents to patterns. Duron et al. (2021) found that professionals readily identified coercive tactics - such as isolation, surveillance, and gaslighting - across a range of victimisation contexts, not limited to intimate relationships. Dubrow-Marshall and Dubrow-Marshall (2020) highlight the continuity of coercive dynamics across intimate, institutional, and ideological settings, advocating for a spectrum-based understanding.

This erosion of autonomy is also captured by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs. In cults and coercive environments, these needs are systematically undermined, producing outward compliance while eroding the internal conditions required for genuine consent. The framework helps explain why survivors often describe profound fragmentation beneath the surface of apparent conformity.

These developments parallel the shift seen in domestic and family violence policy. The Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) marked a turning point by recognising coercive control as a patterned form of entrapment, rather than a series of isolated incidents. Research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) reinforces that coercive control involves the cumulative erosion of autonomy and consent through fear, dependency, and sustained manipulation (AIFS, 2023). While some NRM-aligned scholars continue to question the application of this framework to group contexts - at times dismissing it as superficial or disingenuous (e.g., Sessions & Doherty, 2023) - Feliciano (2023) offers clear empirical validation. Her findings support a belief-neutral, operationally useful lens capable of capturing the dynamics of control in diverse group contexts.

To shift the discussion into a more regulation-ready frame, this submission introduces the **Group-Based Coercion Matrix**, a tool for assessing both the *breadth* and *legitimacy* of coercion. The Matrix draws on six core domains of coercion - cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, existential, and linguistic - and applies the principles of lawfulness, reasonableness, necessity, and proportionality from Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. [See Appendix A for the full Matrix.]

Impacts on Individuals

BEYOND WORDS: THE AFTERMATH WITHOUT A NAME

The harms caused by cults and high-control groups are not only psychological, relational, or material - they are also ecological and epistemic. Survivors often describe years of confusion, shame, and silence, not only due to the abuse itself, but because they lacked the language, frameworks, or recognition to name it. As Fricker (2007) explains, epistemic injustice arises when people are disbelieved or denied the tools to make sense of their own experiences - particularly when harm is obscured by ideology or moral authority. When survivors seek help, they are frequently met with minimisation, disbelief, or diagnostic labelling, and their experiences reframed as personal failure or spiritual crisis, rather than as organised coercion (Rosen, 2014; Coates, 2010; Jenkinson, 2016; Goldberg, 2006; Winell, 2011).

Leaving such groups can cause profound disruption across identity, relationships, worldview, and mental health. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, these harms are systemically embedded - distorting relationships from the family unit to broader institutional and social structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As Foucault (1977) observed, domination is often maintained not through overt violence, but through surveillance, internalised discipline, and control over meaning. Coercive groups operate in this way - shaping not only what people do, but how they see themselves and the world (Lifton, 1989; Lalich, 2004). The resulting harm is cumulative, layered, and enduring (Jenkinson, 2016; Winell, 2011).

Common impacts reported by survivors include:

SYSTEMIC DISLOCATION UPON EXIT

Depending on breadth of coercion and resulting enmeshment, survivors can simultaneously lose family, belonging, meaning, self-worth, self-concept, housing, employment, and community (Coates, 2010; Jenkinson, 2016; Lalich, 2004).

FAMILY DISLOCATION

Survivors frequently report estrangement from parents, children, or siblings. Coercive groups often demand loyalty through severed family ties, leading to isolation, ideological conflict, or rejection by members who remain (Lalich, 2023).

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

Substance use as a form of affect regulation, trauma numbing, or existential relief, particularly when exiting without adequate social or therapeutic supports (van der Kolk, 2014; Lohmann, 2023)

"I was in mental health crisis for many years, always on the edge of a breakdown, I felt suicidal and plagued by a fear that the world was about to collapse."

PERSISTENT FEAR, SHAME AND SUICIDALITY

The period following exit from a coercive group can carry acute risk of suicidality, particularly when identity disorientation, relational collapse, and fear of retaliation converge to create a sense of inescapability (Lalich, 2023). This aligns with the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, where thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness drive suicidal desire (Van Orden et al., 2010). As Herman (2015) notes, prolonged trauma erodes the sense of self, safety, and connection - leaving many survivors profoundly isolated and psychologically at risk (Goldberg, 2006; Winell, 2011).

"We miss [him] so much. The impact has been incredibly profound."

GRIEF AND IDENTITY LOSS

Survivors commonly grieve the loss of identity, community, purpose, and belonging that were once central to their lives. A diminished sense of purpose, identity confusion, and difficulty with self-advocacy and personal growth often persist well into recovery (Herman, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014; Jenkinson, 2016).

"I have struggled with persistent thoughts of suicide since leaving this environment. The cult controlled everything I did."

SEXUAL SUBJUGATION AND GENDERED CONTROL

Women in high-control groups are often subjected to gendered and sexualised forms of coercion, including pressure to marry, submit sexually, or reproduce. These practices are frequently obscured by moral doctrine or institutional logic, and normalised within closed group dynamics. As Lalich (1996) argues, and as evidenced in institutional grooming studies (Kent & Raine, 2019), gendered coercion and sexual subjugation of children often take place under patriarchal authority and ideological framing."

"I struggle with low self-esteem and really struggle to have intimate relationships. I struggle with money and financial security. I am still in therapy."

SERVICE GAPS AND RETRAUMATISATION

Mainstream services often fail to recognise or appropriately respond to the complex dynamics of coercive control. Disbelief, minimisation, and disempowering interventions can mirror earlier coercive dynamics - compounding harm through secondary victimisation and retraumatisation, and delaying recovery (AIFS, 2023; Herman, 1992; Lohmann, 2023)

MARRIAGE AS CONTROL

In many groups, arranged marriage is used to entrench authority, regulate intimacy, and restrict exit. Arranged, early, or ideologically mandated unions may be framed as spiritual duty or moral obligation, while undermining genuine consent. Spouses are expected to prioritise group loyalty, reinforcing surveillance and compliance within the home. Though some describe these marriages as fulfilling, such fulfilment may rest on treacherous foundations - reflect a bounded reality shaped by dependency, socialisation, and constrained choice (Lalich, 1997; Palmer, 2011). Narratives of family values and free will can obscure coercive dynamics that may meet legal thresholds for forced marriage, family violence, or modern slavery - engaging child protection, migration, and criminal justice systems (Anti Slavery Australia, 2024; Australian Red Cross, 2025).

“Endogamy [marrying within cults] is a main contributor to the power and control of institutional coercive control.”

DISRUPTED ATTACHMENT

Cults often exploit attachment vulnerabilities to enforce dependency and control (Stein, 2017), with insecure patterns increasing susceptibility to controlling relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Coates, 2010). Children raised in cults are at risk of disorganised attachment due to fear-based, conditional caregiving (Bowlby, 1973; 1980; Siegel, 2012; van der Kolk, 2014), which can undermine core capacities for self-regulation, relational safety, and identity integration.

I could have accomplished so much more in my life and been a much better person.”

DISRUPTED DEVELOPMENT

Chronic coercion during formative years can derail key developmental tasks, impairing emotional regulation, identity formation, and core aspects of personality development. Exposure to persistent fear and controlling relationships disrupts attachment and self-organisation, increasing vulnerability to relational instability and trauma-related difficulties across the lifespan (Erikson, 1950; Siegel, 2012; Goldberg, 2006).

“No one should have to go through life without parents or unconditional love. A lot of us have never experienced that. I hope with this it changes that for future children and teenagers in these places.”

DISRUPTED LIFE TRAJECTORIES

Group-based coercion often distorts the development and expression of practical life skills. Education and employment pathways may be interrupted or narrowly shaped, leaving survivors with hidden deficits in independent judgment, boundary-setting, and navigating unfamiliar systems. Skills are frequently cultivated in service of compliance, over-functioning, or group-defined roles rather than genuine autonomy. These distortions may remain masked until tested by real-world demands, complicating recovery and reintegration (Jenkinson, 2016; Winell, 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2017).

"It was the worst thing that ever happened to us; my brothers and I were prohibited from free thought and learning for the entirety of our childhoods, with our education and exposure to 'normal' Australian life strictly controlled and monitored. I had a massive identity crisis in high-school which resulted in me being kicked out of home at age 15. I'm still suffering from lifelong depression and anxiety problems even now, when I'm free and in my 30s."

DISRUPTED RELATIONSHIPS

Coercive group dynamics often leave survivors with lasting difficulties in trust, emotional regulation, and connection. Social isolation is common, shaped both by severed networks and internal barriers to forming new relationships. Intimacy may be distorted by blurred boundaries, role-based conditioning, and harmful norms around gender, sexuality, and control. Survivors may struggle to distinguish coercion from care, or autonomy from abandonment, and may tolerate or re-enact harm in close relationships (Siegel, 2012; Kent, 1994).

COMPLEX TRAUMA

Survivors commonly exhibit symptoms consistent with CPTSD. Though research remains limited, several studies and clinical accounts note elevated trauma rates post-involvement. Rosen (2014) identifies higher PTSD indicators than in general or military populations. Lohmann (2023) links coercive control to complex trauma. Clinical accounts by Jenkinson (2016), Healy (2017), Goldberg (2006), and Winell (2011) describe systemic trauma, while Mapel (2006) highlights identity rupture in post-monastic adjustment. These findings align with CPTSD models (Herman, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014).

"Every friend I had made over my life immediately stopped speaking to me."

SURVEILLANCE

High-control groups increasingly exploit digital technologies to extend their reach into members' private lives. ICT is used to recruit, indoctrinate, and enforce compliance through surveillance, forced account access, spyware, and social media monitoring. Fake accounts may be used to infiltrate networks or target families. Members are often expected to report on each other, fostering mistrust and internalised control. These tactics can persist beyond formal involvement. Similar dynamics have been documented in family violence contexts, where digital technologies are used to enforce coercive control (MacDonald, Truong, Willoughby, & March, 2023).

"I continue to be harassed by these people. I was only in the cult for about three years but have been harassed by them for more than 20 years. I've almost given up on the idea of having a normal, happy life."

MEDICAL COMORBIDITY

There is a well-documented comorbid relationship between PTSD, depression or anxiety, and chronic pain and illness. Individuals with both PTSD and chronic pain experience both more severely and face higher instances of other mental health issues, substance abuse, hyperalgesia and poor pain coping. This relationship is currently thought to be bi-directional. (Hooten, 2016)

PHYSIOLOGICAL IMPACTS

A person's natural drive toward homeostasis (Cannon, 1932) can be disrupted in coercive environments that generate chronic fear, hypervigilance, and identity instability (van der Kolk, 2014; Porges, 2011).

"I am now on a disability support pension due to severe cPTSD caused by the impacts of the cult."

Impacts on Families

The damage of coercive cults and high-control groups is not limited to the person who is directly involved in the group, though family and friends may struggle to self-identify as victims. Nevertheless, the far-reaching and disruptive effects on them may include:

FAMILY ENMESHMENT

Survivors often report siblings being groomed or recruited, or parents joining the group - entrenching group ideology within the home. Protective roles may be compromised or inverted, with group dynamics reshaping family hierarchies and undermining parental authority. Survivors may face blurred boundaries, delayed exit, and deep relational rupture, particularly when family members remain loyal to the group post-exit (Lalich, 2023; Coates, 2010; Jenkinson, 2016).

THREATS AND INTIMIDATION

Families have faced intimidation, including threats of defamation or legal action from group-aligned members (Kent & Raine, 2019; Lalich, 2023; Singer & Lalich, 1995).

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

Parents and relatives have been defamed, with their careers, social standing, or relationships damaged as a result (Lalich, 2004; Kent, 1994; Jenkinson, 2016).

FAMILY COURT COMPLICATIONS

Family court systems often struggle to recognise or respond effectively to cult overlays or group-based coercive dynamics, contributing to unsafe parenting orders and prolonged custody disputes (Kent, 2019; Coates, 2010; Lalich, 2023; Jenkinson, 2016).

FAMILY ESTRANGEMENT

When family roles are reshaped around group loyalty, meaningful connections can fracture. Group involvement often leads to estrangement even across extended kinship networks - between parents and children, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins - resulting in deep and enduring relational loss. (Winell, 2011; Lalich, 2023; Coates, 2010; Jenkinson, 2016)

"Losing my family and friends and being shunned by these people who I thought loved me unconditionally made me suicidal."

BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

Family members are frequently subjected to harassment and exclusion, often labelled as traitors or enemies of the group. Some report covert surveillance, including recorded conversations, accessed emails, and tracked devices - creating a climate of fear and hypervigilance (Singer & Lalich, 1995; Kent, 1994; Jenkinson, 2016; Coates, 2010).

RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN

Group pressure often contributes to separations or divorce, especially when one partner refuses to join or seeks to leave (Goldberg, 2006; Lalich, 2023; Coates, 2010; Winell, 2011).

COST OF SPECIALIST INTERVENTION

Recovery-focused interventions can be financially burdensome, placing additional strain on families already dealing with trauma, legal costs, or disrupted livelihoods (Jenkinson, 2016; Healy, 2017; Lalich, 2023; Winell, 2011). The lack of publicly funded, specialist support further limits access and prolongs harm.

LEGAL SYSTEMS ABUSE

Numerous accounts describe coercive groups exploiting legal processes - such as intervention orders, human rights complaints, and civil court or tribunal proceedings - to silence dissent, discredit departing members, and entrench control. These tactics have been used to restrict child contact, generate confusion or delay, and obstruct scrutiny by professionals. Such misuse of the legal system can re-traumatise families and erode trust in protective mechanisms (Coates, 2010; Kent, 2019; Jenkinson, 2016; Lalich, 2023).

“My privacy was violated in every possible way - emails, phone calls, even private, in-person conversations were recorded so the cult leader could eavesdrop. It wasn’t just our child they controlled; it was our entire family. Some of us felt so unsafe, we installed security cameras due to physical stalking.”

Impacts on Children

Children raised in cults face distinct and compounding vulnerabilities (Coates, 2010). Despite a suite of child protection laws and institutional safeguards in Victoria, including the Reportable Conduct Scheme, Child Safe Standards, and mandatory reporting obligations, these protections are routinely circumvented. Survivor accounts make clear that systems designed to prevent institutional abuse often fail when harm occurs in informal, ideologically shielded, or tight relational environments. (Douglas, 2018; Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2024)

These are not unregulated or disorganised settings. On the contrary, coercive groups often maintain strict internal control systems in which abuse is collectively enforced, concealed, and ideologically or spiritually justified - creating an ecosystem of impunity (Singer & Lalich, 1995). Many of these groups operate under the protective veil of religious tolerance, cultural pluralism, and parental rights, limiting external scrutiny and obstructing intervention (Kent & Raine, 2019). In many cases, children are born into closed systems and socialised from infancy within structures that suppress critical thinking, deny access to external worldviews, and equate dissent with moral failure (Goldberg, 2006; Stein, 2017), leading to difficulties forming coherent identities and prolonged adjustment challenges after exiting (Lalich & McLaren, 2017).

"I was sexually molested by a Worker [Truth 2x2 authority figure] when I was 11. I was blamed for wearing a knee-length denim skirt and told I must have been encouraging it. I was raped at 19 by a man in the cult and became pregnant. My mother demanded to know who the father was, and I told her. I was forced to marry him, lest I have no family or any hope of God's salvation. I pleaded with my dad not to make me do this. He said everything would be better for me and the baby if I did the right thing and married, or Hell awaited with weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. When my daughter was two, she was raped by her father. I took her and left the cult and was shunned from that point on. No family. No friends. No cousins. I did reach out to some. I was told to go to my parents and ask for forgiveness for the shame I had brought to them before they would ever talk to me again."

PARENTAL ENTRAPMENT AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF AUTHORITY

The role of parents in these environments can be understood along a victim-perpetrator continuum. Some parents knowingly facilitate domination and abuse. Others act within the context of their own coercion - complying with harmful norms while also being isolated, dependent, or spiritually manipulated themselves. Others join

with sincere intentions, believing they are acting in their child's best interest, though their judgment is shaped by distorted group logic. (Coates, 2010; Lalich, 2004; Stein, 2017). In such contexts, coercive indoctrination can undermine agency and moral responsibility by shaping individuals' beliefs and motivations in ways that preclude autonomous judgment (Tiffany, 2022).

Single parents are particularly vulnerable to entrapment. Many are drawn into high-control groups by the promise of material, emotional, or spiritual support – help in raising a child in the absence of other available supports (Jenkinson, 2016; Stein, 2017). But over time, this support becomes contingent upon conformity (Lalich, 2004). Refusal to comply may mean losing housing, employment, community, spiritual belonging, or even custody of their child (Lalich, 2023; Coates, 2010). In these circumstances, many parents feel they have little choice but to participate in harmful practices (Winell, 2011; Stein, 2017).

These distorted dynamics of parental care create fertile ground for groups to assume increasing control over children's lives, often by reshaping familial roles and systematically displacing parental authority. From a family systems perspective, such environments can foster emotional enmeshment and inhibit the development of healthy individuation, particularly where anxiety and dependency are managed through rigid hierarchical control rather than relational differentiation (Bowen, 1978).

Children are groomed away from their parents through spiritualised narratives that cast dissenting caregivers as unsafe, corrupt, or enemies of the group (Lalich, 2023; Coates, 2010). From early childhood - often from birth - group leaders or senior members may come to exert full psychological and existential authority over the child, replacing parental authority and shaping identity through ideological socialisation (Goldberg, 2006; Lalich, 2023). This undermines the normative processes of identity development, which rely on opportunities for exploration, autonomy, and relational consistency (Kroger, 2007).

"It's been five and a half years since my son left. I've seen him twice. My husband, once. We know he is homeless, eats out of bins, works long hours as a slave to the leader with little or no pay. He is mentally abused. He is autistic and brainwashed."

Parents who attempt to leave with their children often face coordinated retaliation, including false and deceptive reports to child protection services aimed at discrediting the parent and severing family bonds (Coates, 2010; Kent, 1994, 2019). In the most extreme cases, children have been effectively taken - indoctrinated to distrust or

deceive their own parents and coached to present a false picture of safety to teachers and professionals (Kent, 2019; Goldberg, 2006).

“My 12-year-old daughter ran away to be part of the cult. She was at least with her father, but then he was managed out of the group. She then left to live with the pastor and his wife, and reported us to DHS as unfit parents (claims that were investigated and defeated). But we couldn’t do much to get her back. She has ostracised all of us – parents, siblings, uncles, cousins. She stayed and married within the cult. I’ve suffered with severe mental illness for many years as a result. I’ve tried requesting mediation (etc) to see my grandchildren. I sent a present for my most recent grandchild and got served with an AVO. This was defeated in court.”

COLLECTIVE ENFORCEMENT AND THE INVERSION OF PROTECTION

Survivors have described being threatened or sanctioned when raising concerns about the welfare of children (Kent & Raine, 2019; Lalich, 2023). Individuals who attempted to alert leaders to physical, psychological, or sexual abuse were warned not to involve outside authorities (Douglas, 2018; Kent & Raine, 2019; La Gamma et al., 2024). These threats were often framed as rebellion or disloyalty, reinforcing a culture of silence and fear (Lalich, 2004; Winell, 2011).

This harm is not incidental. It is often the result of deliberate, collective enforcement (Lalich, 2004; La Gamma et al., 2024). Group leaders, parents, and senior members may actively collude to suppress disclosures and obstruct detection (Kent & Raine, 2019; Lalich, 2023; Douglas, 2018). Children themselves are frequently enlisted into the group’s system of internal surveillance - expected to monitor and report on one another, enforce conformity, and participate in the shaming or punishment of peers who question practices or fail to comply with prescribed thoughts, emotions, language or behaviours (Goldberg, 2006; Lifton, 1989; Lalich, 2004; Stein, 2017).

In such environments, the mechanisms of accountability are inverted: loyalty is rewarded, secrecy is spiritualised, and disclosure is framed as betrayal. This perverse moral order undermines the protective roles of family, peers, and even mandated professionals - leaving children without access to safe adults or meaningful recourse.

In certain Victorian cases, individuals affiliated with coercive groups have occupied professional roles such as social workers, youth workers, or police officers, and have misused their authority either to recruit vulnerable families or to suppress scrutiny - by obstructing investigations, influencing court processes, or undermining external intervention.

“A former cop associated with the group I escaped told my ex-husband “You’ll be fine”. Inexplicably, even with his written admission to the rape, the case was closed. No charges. Nothing.”

“I witnessed a community corrections officer direct an offender to attend Narconon as part of their conditions, warning that failure to comply could result in breach proceedings and possible imprisonment.”

SYSTEMIC FAILURES IN LAW AND OVERSIGHT

The legal and regulatory framework is not equipped to respond to systemic, ideologically embedded abuse. Despite important protections introduced under Victoria’s Reportable Conduct Scheme, recent reviews acknowledge that the Scheme only applies to organisations that exercise care, supervision or authority over children - excluding informal or unincorporated groups - and suggests clarifying its scope in legislation (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2024). Many coercive groups are informal, unincorporated, or deliberately evade oversight. Others ignore reporting obligations, using insularity, moral authority, and mistrust of mainstream systems to suppress disclosure. Even when children engage with mandated reporters, they may be coached to conceal abuse or denied unsupervised contact with outsiders. (Douglas, 2018; Kent & Raine, 2019; Stein, 2017)

When abuse is framed in ideological terms - such as exorcism, auditing, ritualised food deprivation, or public shaming - it is often misclassified on religious or cultural grounds. This is not merely a failure of classification, but a moral failure to confront systemic harm concealed by claims of faith or culture. Too often, religious freedom is invoked to avoid scrutiny of politically or culturally sensitive cases. (Kent & Raine, 2019; La Gamma et al., 2024; Winell, 2011).

The Human Right’s Commission didn’t know what to do with my complaint.

These failures are not technical oversights; they represent an unacceptable misalignment between existing safeguards and the nature of coercive harm in high-control groups. Current systems are designed to detect misconduct by individuals within formal organisations. They are not designed to identify collective coercion, ideological control, or group-based systems of abuse - and as a result, they

leave children in these environments profoundly unprotected. (Douglas, 2018; Kent & Raine, 2019).

LASTING HARMS AND INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACT

The impacts on children raised in coercive groups are deep, formative, and difficult to repair. They are raised in systems that equate obedience with safety and frame dissent as betrayal or damnation, while still developing the psychosocial capacities needed to identify abuse or seek help. The betrayal of care by trusted adults - parents, leaders, and peers - is compounded by the abandonment of statutory authorities, leaving children with no safe point of recourse. This dual betrayal profoundly disrupts a child's capacity for trust, autonomy, and identity formation. These long-term difficulties are consistent with research on individuals raised in restrictive religious groups, who report disrupted identity development, strained relationships, and enduring emotional harm. (Lalich, 2023; Erikson, 1950; Coates, 2010; Goldberg, 2006; Stein, 2017).

"My family was in the hierarchy of the church, the Democratic Labor Party, and active in the Right to Life movement. My brother has been up on sexual harassment charges a number of times and is still in the hierarchy of the group. All sorts of service providers were in the cult, and often paedophiles. I think sexually molesting children gave them complete control in the family first, then the community bolstered their ambitions for political control."

Impacts on the Community

Beyond individual and familial trauma lies a significant and largely unquantified public burden. The social and economic costs of coercive groups do not end with their members. They are externalised quietly and cumulatively onto public systems and community services, from healthcare to welfare, legal aid, and housing.

While survivors carry the immediate impacts - dislocated or disrupted education, employment, family life, and health - the broader community bears deferred costs of crisis responses, long-term care, and social recovery. Further research is needed to systematically identify or account for these impacts. What exists in the meantime is a growing dark figure of unmet need and unmeasured cost.

The economic burden of coercive control is compounded by the transfer of wealth and labour to group leaders under the guise of purpose, care, or community. Survivors report being pressured into large donations, unpaid labour, coerced purchases, and forgoing income - costs that can amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars and take decades to recover from. (Lalich, 2004; Coates, 2012; Donovan & Poudel, 2024)

These harms are not limited to individuals. Coercive groups often operate under religious or charitable exemptions, avoiding income tax, GST, and local council rates despite providing no genuine public benefit. This shifts the financial burden onto frontline services and the wider community.

These hidden costs - personal, public, and intergenerational - represent a failure of recognition, regulation, and remedy. Without reform, the economic weight of coercive control continues to fall where it does not belong: on survivors and the public.

LONG-TERM HEALTH SYSTEM BURDEN

Medicare bears significant costs for survivors requiring prolonged medical and psychological support, often related to complex trauma, dissociative disorders, and chronic mental or physical health conditions.

risk-taking behaviours, or mental health crises following group involvement.

EDUCATIONAL RECOVERY AND RE-SKILLING

Survivors affected by educational neglect or group-imposed limitations often require community education and vocational training to rebuild their lives and support their families.

HOMELESSNESS AND FAMILY VIOLENCE SERVICES

Survivors of coercive groups may require access to homelessness or family violence services, particularly when exit involves loss of housing, financial dependence, or intimate partner abuse. These pathways are consistent with findings on post-exit vulnerability and recognised within multi-agency risk frameworks (Douglas, 2018; Victorian Government, 2018; Coates, 2010).

SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH REHABILITATION

Rehabilitation services are accessed by survivors experiencing substance abuse,

EMPLOYMENT AND CHILDCARE VULNERABILITY

For many survivors, leaving brings disruption to career, concurrent with collapse of support systems, resulting in increased reliance on welfare, childcare assistance, and transitional services (Coates, 2010; Jenkinson, 2016; Lalich, 2023).

LEGAL SYSTEM PRESSURES

Community legal centres and advocacy services bear the cost of supporting survivors navigating defamation threats, intervention orders, custody disputes,

or family court proceedings linked to group dynamics. Recent notable cases include:

Benhayon v Rockett (NSW, 2018), *Spencer v McKay* (VIC, 2023), and *Lakaev v McConkey* (TAS, 2024)

"I feel immensely guilty for trying to involve my friends and get them to come to meetings because that was the only way I was allowed to associate with them."

SYSTEM CAPTURE BY COERCIVE GROUPS

The harms of coercive groups extend far beyond those who identify as core survivors. Many individuals encounter such groups in their outer orbit - as acquaintances, occasional participants, clients, employees, or extended family. While they may not experience the same depth of enmeshment, they are often exposed to coercive treatment, manipulated complicity, or moral injury. They may be persuaded to exclude a loved one, carry out harmful policies, ignore abuse, or participate in practices they would otherwise reject. (Lalich, 2004; Foucault, 1977; Douglas, 2018).

This risk is particularly serious when coercive groups unduly influence or infiltrate public systems, such as political parties, publicly funded programs, or advisory and oversight bodies. In some cases, individuals affiliated with high-control groups have secured roles in commissioned services, consultative panels, or regulatory structures, enabling them to shape policy, redirect funding, or suppress scrutiny in ways that reinforce coercive dynamics. The risk is further compounded when members hold positions of authority in regulated professions - such as social work, teaching, healthcare, or counselling - where professional standing can be used to legitimise abuse, access vulnerable individuals, or shield the group from accountability.

"Children and teens in my group were raised with the aim of covertly taking control of media institutions to serve the cult leader's agenda. At least six of them ended up working at the same newspaper. One of the group members is now the editor."

GROUP-BASED COERCIVE CONTROL: A BEHAVIOURAL FRAMEWORK FOR LEGAL AND REGULATORY REFORM

Why the 'Cult' Frame Fails

The term *cult* has long been used to describe many coercive group environments. For survivors, it remains a useful descriptor. But in law, policy, and service delivery, the term remains imprecise, stigmatising, and often unhelpful. It invokes images of fringe extremism or charismatic leaders, obscuring the systemic and patterned nature of the harm. Worse, its use is often met with defensiveness or dismissal, disingenuously framed as an attack on religious or cultural practice.

This ambiguity limits institutional responses. While survivors speak fluently about control, domination, and harm, the absence of a clear legal or operational definition for *cult* creates a void - where serious abuse may be dismissed as eccentricity, or survivors are forced to defend the legitimacy of their beliefs rather than the violence of their experiences. The danger in focusing on definitional clarity rather than coercive behaviours is this: no victim should be required to prove their group is a cult in order to prove that the coercive behaviours they endured caused harm.

To move beyond this conceptual impasse, we undertook a detailed mapping of group-based coercive acts. Drawing on lived experience accounts, research literature, and expert consultations, we identified a sample of 205 distinct coercive acts that are commonly experienced in cults and high-control groups. Each act was grounded in survivor narratives and validated to ensure that it met a defensible threshold for coercion - requiring not just influence, but pressure, consequences, or enforced compliance.

We mapped each of the 205 coercive acts against existing Victorian and Commonwealth laws spanning criminal, civil, human rights, and sector-specific frameworks. The analysis revealed significant - and often alarming - gaps. The vast majority of coercive acts involving psychological pressure, social domination, or group-based control fall between legal siloes. Some are partially addressed under laws designed for other contexts (e.g. family violence, employment), while others remain entirely unregulated. In most cases, the law either does not apply or is not enforced.

Several recurring themes emerged, highlighting the need for reform:

- **Non-physical coercion is unrecognised:** Tactics like threats of divine punishment, enforced obedience, and moral framing of dissent are central to control but legally invisible.

- **Criminal thresholds are too high:** Intervention typically requires physical harm or imminent danger, excluding early-stage coercion and delaying protection.
- **Public protections don't extend to private groups:** Laws like the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities (Vic) don't apply to private or religious entities outside government contracts.
- **Institutional safeguards are misused:** Religious exemptions, charity status, and confidentiality provisions are routinely exploited to avoid oversight.
- **Survivors are structurally silenced:** Spiritual shaming, social exile, reputational threats, and retaliation deter disclosure and isolate survivors post-exit.

These are not isolated oversights. They reflect structural gaps - both definitional and regulatory - that allow group-based coercion to persist with impunity.

A detailed summary of the 205 coercive acts and their legal mapping is provided in Appendix C: Legal Mapping Tables.

"There needs to be more action taken against those who use coercive control to manipulate vulnerable people."

What is Coercion?

Coercion refers to the use of force, threats, or duress to compel someone to act in a certain way, typically against their will. It may involve physical, legal, or moral pressure and can be actual or implied. Coercion may take the form of compulsion, manipulation, or intimidation through force or threats of harm (American Psychological Association, n.d.; Garner, 2019; Oxford University Press, n.d.).

COERCION IS RECOGNISED AND REGULATED ACROSS SOCIETY

Across many areas of Australian law and policy, coercion is already recognised as harmful and subject to legal regulation. Frameworks addressing family violence, elder abuse, human trafficking, mental health, disability services, and workplace exploitation all recognise that coercion can be ongoing, non-physical, and deeply damaging. Many of these systems have evolved in response to public inquiries, shifting from incident-based models to more sophisticated understandings of coercive patterns.

Table 1 - Locating Group-Based Coercive Control Within Broader Patterns of Coercion

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

Table 1 shows that coercion is not confined to any one sector. From domestic violence to modern slavery, from restrictive mental health practices to coerced consent in healthcare, the law has increasingly recognised transactional coercion, and more recently, that coercion can occur through patterned behaviours over time - not only through isolated incidents.

THE LAW IS STILL BLIND TO COLLECTIVE, SYSTEMIC COERCION

Despite this progress, one significant domain of coercion remains largely unrecognised and unregulated: **group-based coercive control**. This form of harm occurs when **individuals, operating within the structure of a group**, use sustained pressure, manipulation, and control to dominate others. The coercion is often distributed across roles, justified through ideology, and reinforced through group norms, practices, or routines. Responsibility may be distributed, but the coercive acts are still carried out by people - *not abstractions* - within a collective context.

Current legal frameworks were not built to detect coercion that is:

- dispersed across roles and relationships;
- embedded in ideology or practice;
- legitimised by claims of culture, faith, or pseudoprofessional status;
- enforced by peer surveillance, moral pressure, and fear of exclusion.

These limitations reflect a deeper structural issue: while coercion is widely criminalised in interpersonal or transactional contexts, it remains legitimised when exercised through institutions. As Marenin (2019) argues, coercive control lies at the core of criminal justice - sanctioned as a necessary function of governance despite its moral

complexity. This contradiction enables some forms of coercion to persist unchallenged when disguised by institutional, ideological, or cultural legitimacy.

Calls to address these blind spots are growing internationally. In the United Kingdom, The Family Survival Trust (2022) has proposed new legislation to recognise controlling or coercive behaviour in wider community settings, including religious, cultural, and ideological groups.

Without dedicated definitions and remedies, the law fails to recognise these environments for what they are: systems of domination. Victims of group-based coercion are left legally invisible - unseen, unprotected, and unheard.

"I want them to be held accountable."

What is Coercive Control?

Coercive control is a repeated pattern of behaviours that limit a person's freedom, autonomy, and sense of self. Coercive control can involve fear, surveillance, isolation, dependency, and ongoing psychosocial pressure - not necessarily physical violence. It is designed to dominate, disorient, and disable independent thought or action. (Stark, 2007; Stark & Hester, 2019; Duron et al., 2021; Feliciano, 2023).

What Group-Based Coercive Control Offers

Group-based coercive control offers a belief-neutral, behaviour-focused alternative. It shifts the emphasis from what a group believes to *how* individual people within groups use coercive control.

Group-Based Coercive Control is the use of sustained, patterned coercive tactics by an individual within the context of a group, to suppress, restructure, or dominate a person's autonomy, identity, relationships, language, emotional life, and capacity for independent thought. Group-based coercive control uses sustained, patterned tactics to shape how people think, behave, and relate to the world. It does not necessarily rely on physical violence, instead relying on psychosocial pressure, ideology, and group-enforced rules.

Challenges in Responding to Group-Based Coercive Control

The risk of overreach in coercive control legislation calls for a proportionate, tiered legal framework. In their critique of recent coercive control offences introduced in New South Wales and Queensland, Cowey, Bartels, and Boxall (2025) caution that criminalisation without procedural safeguards or attention to individual context may lead to unintended and unjust outcomes. A tiered approach - escalating from prevention and civil intervention to criminal prosecution where necessary - offers a more proportionate and effective response.

This requires clarity about what constitutes unlawful coercion. Not all coercion is inherently harmful or illegal. In many areas of life - such as parenting, healthcare, or public safety - certain forms of coercion are both necessary and lawful. Setting limits, enforcing safety protocols, and exercising delegated authority can all involve coercive elements that are justified, proportionate, and regulated. As Marenin (2019) notes, coercive social control sits at the heart of how criminal justice operates - raising difficult questions about where legitimate authority ends and harmful domination begins.

The following section outlines key issues that any effective and proportionate regulatory response must address.

CRIMINALISATION ALONE WON'T WORK

Criminal law is too blunt an instrument to address the layered and often nuanced nature of group-based coercion. Many groups engage in coercive or harmful conduct that does not meet current criminal thresholds. Broad-brush labels like “cult” and an overreliance on criminal justice responses risk conflating lawful but harmful behaviour with criminal wrongdoing - undermining both the proportionality and precision required for effective legal intervention.

SOME ENABLERS ARE ALSO VICTIMS

Some individuals enable harm under pressure, manipulation, or dependence. Enforcement should focus on those most capable of autonomous judgement and thus most culpable (Tiffany, 2022). As Elkington (2022) notes, current legal frameworks often fail to reflect diminished culpability in cases of coerced offending.

“CONSENT” CAN BE COERCED

Victims may appear compliant or even supportive of the group. But this can be a survival strategy. Australian and Victorian law already recognise in areas like sexual offences, family violence, modern slavery, change or suppression practices, and wage theft that consent given under coercion is not genuine .

“I now carry deep shame for how I systematically helped disconnect people from their autonomy and called it discipleship. I thought I was building faith. Instead, I was reinforcing a system built on fear, control and conditional belonging.”

GROUP LEADERS OFTEN HIDE BEHIND OTHERS

Coercive leaders often set up fake boards or list others as responsible parties to shield themselves from liability. These “directors” are sometimes victims too - drawn in through dependency or coercion. As Elkington (2022) notes, the law often fails to account for diminished culpability in such cases.

CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY LIFE MUST BE RESPECTED

Tight-knit communities and cultural practices can be misunderstood as coercive. We must be careful not to target migrant, faith-based, or Aboriginal models of care that are not inherently harmful.

SURVIVORS CAN FACE SERIOUS RISKS WHEN SPEAKING OUT

Leaving a coercive group often means losing family, community, housing, and personal safety. Some face threats or intimidation. Survivors need strong legal protections and psychosocial supports to report safely.

INTERAGENCY GAPS

Government agencies face difficulties cooperating at the best of times. Even more so in this context, no single agency is positioned to see the full picture. Many groups already exploit gaps between regulators, charities commissions, police, and social services.

RELIGIOUS AND HUMAN RIGHTS CLAIMS ARE DISINGENUOUS

Some groups claim protection under religious or other human rights to avoid scrutiny. Human rights are not an excuse to shield harm or control.

FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION IS COMMON BUT HARD TO RECOVER

Many survivors lose homes, savings, inheritances, or income. Coercive leaders often structure finances to avoid accountability. Civil remedies must be available to help survivors rebuild.

MINIMAL PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE WARNING SIGNS

Many people don't know what coercive control looks like in a group setting. Prevention requires public education, not just criminal penalties after harm has occurred.

THE GOAL MUST BE PREVENTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The purpose of reform is not punishment for its own sake, but safety, prevention, and justice. This means targeting harmful behaviours, not belief systems, and supporting those affected to recover.

STRETCHING LEGAL FRAMEWORKS TO ADDRESS GROUP-BASED COERCION

In the absence of a dedicated legal framework for group-based coercive control, prosecutors often rely on adjacent legal categories - such as trafficking or slavery - to pursue justice. However, these categories may not map cleanly onto the layered and identity-based coercion used by high-control groups. As Donovan and Poudel (2024) show in their analysis of the NXIVM prosecution, trafficking narratives were strategically mobilised to make coercive group dynamics legible to the court, raising important questions about the adequacy and fit of existing legal constructs.

Tools for Policy and Reform

This submission introduces four practical tools that give operational effect to the paradigm of group-based coercive control:

Appendix A: Group-Based Coercion Matrix – Assesses the breadth and legitimacy of coercive tactics across six domains, drawing on human rights standards.

Appendix B: Risk–Pattern–Harm Model – Proposes a tiered legal framework that distinguishes between structural risks, patterned behaviours, and resulting harms.

Appendix C: Legal Mapping Tables – Maps survivor-reported coercive acts against existing Victorian and Commonwealth laws, highlighting enforcement gaps.

Appendix D: Model Survivor Journeys – Provides narrative case studies that illustrate how coercion evolves across different contexts and identities.

Together, these tools can inform the development of an integrative policy framework: grounded in lived experience, responsive to legal blind spots, and aligned with Victoria’s commitment to rights-based, trauma-informed reform.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Lived-Experience Leadership

Policy and service design must be led by those who have experienced group-based coercive control firsthand. Survivors of group-based coercive control hold essential expertise necessary for addressing the complexity, breadth, and cumulative harm of coercive systems - insight that is critical to designing effective, ethical, and trauma-informed responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 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

Group-based coercive control is a patterned and relational form of abuse that remains under-recognised and under-researched. Existing literature is fragmented, often confined to cultic studies or family violence, limiting broader conceptual development.

A more integrated, interdisciplinary approach is needed, drawing from cultic studies, coercive control, trauma, developmental, ecological, criminological, and attachment-based frameworks, as well as lived-experience insights. Emerging models, such as Alexandra Stein's (2017) application of attachment theory, highlight the importance of understanding how coercive dependency is formed in totalist relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Introduce a legal definition of coercive control that captures group-based patterns.

Current legal protections are incident-based and fail to account for the cumulative, patterned, and totalising tactics used by coercive groups to dominate a person's thoughts, behaviours, emotions, relationships, and existence. These environments do not rely on isolated incidents of harm but on systemic control over meaning, identity, and autonomy, often masked as care, spiritual guidance, or moral duty. The proposed definition must:

- Extend beyond intimate partner contexts to include organised collectives, authoritarian group structures, and ideologically bounded systems that exert sustained coercive control.
- Recognise non-physical coercion - including spiritual and psychological threats, enforced dependency, ritualised submission, and the restructuring of thought and identity - as harmful when used to entrap, subordinate, or erase individual autonomy.
- Be responsive to cumulative patterns of domination, not purely contingent on single incidents or conventional thresholds of violence or abuse.

5. Fund independent, interdisciplinary research into group-based coercive control.

Support for Exit and Recovery

To support survival and long-term recovery from group-based coercive control, we recommend investment in trauma-informed services tailored to the complex and enduring needs of survivors, including identity re/construction, social re/connection, and developmental recovery. We use “re/” to acknowledge that while some survivors are rebuilding what was lost, others - particularly those born into coercive groups - are developing identity, autonomy, and non-coercive social relatedness for the first time, having never experienced secure attachment or relational safety within the group (Jenkinson, 2016; Stein, 2017; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023).

These services must also address the high prevalence of suicidality, complex psychological and physical comorbidities, as well as significant barriers to re/integration following exit. Frontline workers across sectors require training to recognise and respond to the impacts of group-based coercive control, which are often missed due to limited public and professional awareness. Survivors may face multifaceted challenges in the aftermath, including housing instability, health concerns, substance use, legal precarity, and disrupted education or employment pathways (Herman, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014; Jenkinson, 2016; Coates, 2010; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 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

BUILD A COORDINATED RESPONSE

The wide-ranging impacts of group-based coercive control do not confine themselves to any single system. Survivors commonly experience harm across religious, educational, health, housing, legal, and financial domains - yet institutional responses remain fragmented, reactive, and poorly coordinated. In the absence of a unified framework, patterns of coercion are missed, perpetrators remain unchallenged, and those affected are either misidentified or unsupported.

Given the cross-sectoral and relational nature of group-based coercive control - and the lack of any single body with the mandate, capability, or cultural competence to respond - we recommend the establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Coercive Group Harm as a permanent statutory authority reporting directly to Parliament. The Commissioner would be independent from ministerial oversight, and would hold enduring responsibility for oversight, coordination, and accountability across relevant sectors - including health, housing, residential tenancies, labour, education, justice, policing, and human rights - ensuring that coercive group harms are not dismissed or siloed due to sectoral blind spots or enforcement gaps.

As an interim measure, a time-limited Implementation Monitor should be appointed to guide the design, implementation, and cross-sector integration of a proportionate, rights-based response.

SHARE INFORMATION TO SEE THE PATTERNS

In parallel, a dedicated multi-agency framework for information sharing and coordination should be developed, drawing on the risk-based infrastructure of the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework. Like family violence, group-based coercive control often presents in patterned and cumulative ways, rather than through isolated incidents. The framework should therefore be grounded in risk indicators, structured assessments, and safety planning principles, supported by the legislative foundations of the Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme (FVIS) and Child Information Sharing Scheme (CISS).

Additional reforms are also needed to ensure such a framework can be applied in contexts that fall outside traditional family or caregiving relationships. This includes the introduction of a statutory duty for prescribed professionals and entities to report, share, or escalate credible information indicating group-based coercive control.

This means not only building on the existing list of professionals already covered under FVIS and CISS - such as teachers, police, registered health professionals, child protection staff, and AOD and family violence services - but also recognising the unique disclosure patterns associated with group-based coercion.

Survivors often do not disclose through formal channels. Instead, information surfaces through emails to local council CEOs, informal discussions with trusted AOD workers, or

quiet warnings passed between frontline staff. Many professionals are already aware of coercive or cultic groups operating in their region or sector but lack any lawful or procedural mechanism for documenting or responding to concerns. In some cases, this has resulted in unofficial internal referral blacklists or avoidance practices - without corresponding systemic intervention or oversight.

BEYOND THE USUAL CHANNELS: A THOUSAND QUIET WARNINGS

For this reason, the duty to report must also extend to executive-level staff in local government, pastoral or spiritual care providers, managers in publicly funded services, staff in regulatory and oversight bodies, and workers in cultural, religious, or community-based organisations with privileged access to vulnerable populations. These professionals are often uniquely positioned to detect emerging patterns of coercion or community harm but are currently unsupported by any formal reporting pathway or threshold guidance.

To operationalise this duty, statutory clarification is needed to guide decision-making - for example, by introducing a test such as “reasonable grounds to believe a pattern of group-based coercive control exists”. A central coordination point or multi-agency triage body should also be designated to receive such concerns, facilitate appropriate responses, and prevent the dismissal, duplication, or handballing of responsibility across agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

The Commissioner should hold enduring responsibility for prevention, oversight, systemic accountability, and coordination across relevant sectors - including mental health, AOD services, health, housing, residential tenancies, labour, education, justice, policing, and human rights, with powers to:

- Monitor, research, and investigate systemic patterns of coercive control
- Receive confidential reports, complaints, and third-party disclosures
- Refer matters to relevant agencies (e.g. police or DFFH) and escalate where there is failure to act
- Coordinate reforms and oversight across health, justice, education, and human rights
- Develop and promote standards, training, and prevention frameworks
- Report findings to Parliament and publish public reports to support transparency

9. As a transitional measure, an independent Implementation Monitor could:

- Track the rollout of legal and regulatory reforms.
- Coordinate inter-agency work to identify early gaps and overlaps.
- Ensure survivor-informed practice is embedded in future service and legal development.
- Provide periodic reports to Parliament on progress and persistent barriers.

10. Create a dedicated multi-agency framework for information sharing and coordinated prevention and response to group-based coercive control, modelled on MARAM and supported by FVIS and CISS legislative powers.

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.

This duty should apply not only to existing FVIS and CISS professionals - such as teachers, police, health workers, and family violence or AOD staff - but also to those uniquely positioned to detect group-based coercion. These include professionals such as local government executives, pastoral or spiritual care providers, managers of funded services, regulatory and oversight staff, and workers in cultural or community organisations.

Legal and Regulatory Reform

Group-based coercive control is a complex, patterned harm that cannot be effectively addressed through criminal law alone. A one-size-fits-all legal approach risks misidentifying perpetrators, targeting non-abusive groups, and failing to account for the nuanced dynamics of coercion. Effective responses must distinguish legitimate authority from exploitative domination.

Drawing on Braithwaite's (2002) model of responsive regulation, we propose a tiered framework that responds proportionately to the breadth and severity of harm:

RECOMMENDATIONS

12. Create tiered civil and regulatory tools to intervene before criminal thresholds are met. Victoria should establish measured and responsive civil and regulatory mechanisms such as:

- Protective and exclusion orders for coercive group contexts, akin to family violence orders.
- Civil penalties, enforceable undertakings or compliance notices for coercive practices in registered organisations (e.g. charities, religious institutions, NDIS providers).
- These tools should be informed by a risk-pattern-harm model, enabling proportional responses based on the breadth, duration, and seriousness of coercive conduct.

13. Introduce a targeted criminal offence of a person using coercive control causing serious harm, applicable in group-based and non-intimate contexts.

The offence should target sustained patterns of domination resulting in serious harm.

14. Establish appropriate limitation periods and trauma-informed processes for complaints of group-based coercive control.

Survivors of coercive group contexts frequently face profound structural and psychological barriers to disclosure, including public shaming, retaliation for complaints, and enforced collective silence. These coercive practices often persist well beyond the period of direct involvement in the group, leading many survivors to delay disclosure until years after exit. In keeping with trauma recovery theory, disclosure is not a singular act but a process that unfolds in stages of safety, remembrance, and reintegration (Herman, 2015).

- 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 - including VEOHRC, Consumer Affairs Victoria, the Health Complaints Commissioner, and other relevant bodies - to assess and address gaps in their powers, scope, and mandates for responding to coercive group environments.**

Existing regulators are not sufficiently equipped to address patterned coercive harm. A review of their mandates - led by the Independent Commissioner and informed by survivor input - is needed to identify gaps and strengthen cross-sector responses.

Cautions and Missteps to Avoid

MEETING SURVIVORS WHERE THEY ARE

Supporting people affected by coercive control requires trauma-informed, culturally competent, and non-judgmental practice. Exit is rarely immediate or straightforward. Survivors may remain entangled due to fear, family ties, finances, or because the group has come to meet core needs for purpose, belonging, and identity. Coercive groups often invert Maslow's hierarchy of needs - presenting existential meaning as a survival necessity, while framing safety, rest, and autonomy as secondary or even selfish.

In this context, services must uphold autonomy over urgency. Survivors need help to make sense of their experiences, including clear language and frameworks that map what has happened - building insight without pressure, and affirming the survivor's pace and choices.

Judgment for staying, complying, or being slow to act is counterproductive. Many acted under coercion, fear, or distorted group logic. All survivors - regardless of the timing or nature of their exit - deserve support for recovery and change.

For some, fear of retaliation, social collapse, or losing children makes leaving perilous. For others, the fear of existential consequences - such as spiritual death, moral failure, or loss of meaning - is equally powerful. Telling someone to "just leave" ignores these risks and can reinforce harm. Even well-meaning responses can retraumatise or further isolate.

A harm minimisation approach, grounded in safety, autonomy, and readiness, offers a more ethical and effective path. It recognises that disengagement may be gradual, partial, or indirect, and focuses on reducing harm while supporting long-term recovery and agency.

These principles align with established harm minimisation and trauma-informed frameworks across alcohol and other drug services, sexual and reproductive health, and family violence prevention, as well as emerging best practice in responding to coercive control (AIFS, 2023; Department of Health, 2022; Herman, 2015; Marlatt, 1996; Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, 2017; Our Watch, 2021; Pauly, 2008; Ritter, 2006; Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016).

RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

How governments speak about cults and coercive groups matters. The language used in inquiries, media releases, and public briefings shapes not only public perception but the safety and recovery of those most affected. Poorly framed communication can alienate current members, retraumatise survivors, and stigmatise those with partial or no culpability.

Framing the terms of reference as an inquiry into "cults and fringe groups" risks reinforcing a discourse of othering and deviance, which can obscure the systemic nature of the harms involved. This language may misrepresent coercive group practices as rare

or marginal, rather than as socially embedded, patterned, and often enabled by institutional gaps. It risks shifting public attention toward the content of belief rather than the dynamics of coercive conduct - and in doing so, may divert focus from the structural reforms needed to address organised patterns of abuse.

This framing also risks worsening the shame, moral injury, and isolation that often characterise recovery. Many survivors already experience profound loss, disconnection, and grief. Public language that sensationalises or stigmatises these harms deepens that wound and discourages help-seeking.

Public communication on coercive groups needs to shift toward a trauma-informed, survivor-centred tone - one that avoids reductive framing, stays focused on coercive conduct rather than fringe beliefs - and reflects the complexity of coercive environments.

Future public engagement by departments, inquiries, or ministers should model the same care we now expect in responses to family violence and institutional abuse. This includes clear guidance, internal protocols, and training to ensure respectful, safe, and principled communication.

ON PUBLIC EXPOSURE OF COERCIVE GROUPS

While public exposure can play a vital role in raising awareness and holding harmful groups to account, it must be approached with care and nuance. A government register of cults is *not* being recommended, as it risks shifting attention from coercive behaviours toward the policing of belief, lifestyle, or association. Such a register could inadvertently legitimise unlisted groups that continue to cause harm, while unfairly stigmatising others - especially individuals still entrapped within them.

Public exposure also carries risks for survivors, families, and culturally marginalised communities. Sensationalist or mislabelled coverage can result in discrimination, harassment, or vigilante action from well-meaning but misinformed individuals. Furthermore, coercive groups often rely on persecution narratives to reinforce internal control; premature or ill-considered exposure can entrench loyalty and fear, making it harder for members to exit safely.

Nonetheless, targeted public warning notices may be a valuable tool - *if used proportionately and with due care*. A case-by-case approach is recommended, grounded in a nuanced understanding of the specific group's dynamics and considering potential safety implications for vulnerable individuals. Such warnings should strike a balance between the protective value to the broader community and the potential for unintended harm, prioritising factual accuracy, clarity, and survivor-informed ethical practice.

Independent researchers, journalists, and advocacy organisations continue to play a critical role in documenting and exposing group-based coercion. When conducted ethically and with survivor safety at the forefront, investigative reporting, testimony, and watchdog activity significantly contribute to public understanding - and are

invaluable sources of intelligence for regulators seeking to identify patterns, assess risks, and intervene appropriately.

Importantly, susceptibility to coercive control is universal (Milgram, 1963; 1974). No one is immune. Effective responses must reflect this, avoiding simplistic labels and focusing instead on patterns of harm.

A CAUTION ABOUT MANDATORY PUBLIC DISCLOSURE OF BELIEFS OR PRACTICES

Some have proposed mandatory disclosure statements - akin to product disclosure forms in consumer law - to address the deception often present in group recruitment. While well-intentioned, such measures are not fit for purpose in the context of coercive control.

Disclosure regimes are designed for commercial transactions, not ideological or relational abuse. They rely on assumptions of good faith, voluntary engagement, and market logic - assumptions that do not hold in coercive environments. Expecting a coercive group to warn prospective members of its own manipulation is akin to expecting a domestic violence perpetrator to open a relationship with a written notice stating that he intends to love-bomb, isolate, and gaslight his partner. Coercion, by nature, involves concealment.

Mandatory disclosure risks enabling superficial compliance - providing coercive groups with a government-scripted legitimacy shield. It may also place unnecessary burdens on ordinary community organisations, while reinforcing persecutory narratives in high-control groups already suspicious of state intervention.

AVOIDING ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH PHOENIXING

While Australian law prohibits *illegal phoenix activity* (the deliberate liquidation of a company to avoid financial obligations such as taxes, debts, or employee entitlements), the law does not capture the broader practice of *reputational phoenixing* observed in many cults and high-control groups. In such contexts, leadership often dissolve or rebrand an organisation to distance themselves from public allegations, institutional scrutiny, or survivor disclosures, while core structures and abusive practices remain unchanged. This strategic rebranding is not unlawful unless linked to financial misconduct, but it serves to obscure accountability, frustrate civil claims, and enable harmful actors to re-establish influence under a different legal entity. Survivors are retraumatised as their abusers re-emerge in community, educational, therapeutic or commercial settings with apparent impunity.

To prevent ongoing harm, enforcement responses must extend beyond corporate entities. Individual directors or leaders involved in coercive practices should face regulatory consequences, including disqualification from future directorships, fit and proper person assessments, and restrictions on their ability to control or influence new entities - regardless of the group's legal status or stated purpose.

CONCLUSION

We extend our sincere thanks to the *Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee* for its careful consideration of the evidence, lived experience, and expert insights brought forward through this process. As the volume and quality of other submissions to this Parliamentary Inquiry are no doubt making clear, the harms inflicted by cults and high-control groups are devastating, longstanding, and no longer deniable.

Victoria has undergone a generational shift in its understanding of coercion, control, and institutional abuse. Successive inquiries and reforms - across family violence, institutional child abuse, disability, mental health, elder abuse and human rights - have matured our legal and policy frameworks to a point where public recognition of group-based coercive control is not only possible, but a natural next step in the State's ongoing commitment to justice, safety, and systemic accountability.

Victoria is uniquely positioned to lead the world in responding to this complex and enduring form of harm. In genuine partnership with survivors and lived-experience experts, what once seemed impossible is now within reach.



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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Group-Based Coercion Matrix

Despite clear conceptual overlap, there is limited published research that systematically integrates coercive control theory with cultic studies. Existing literature remains largely siloed - developed either in the context of family or intimate partner violence, or within the study of high-demand groups - without sustained interdisciplinary synthesis.

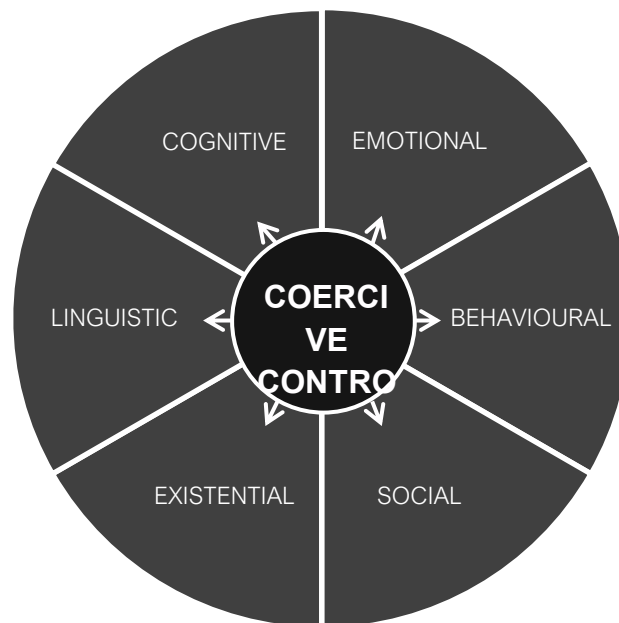
Considering this gap, we undertook a thematic synthesis of five foundational models to identify common warning signs of coercive group environments. Using an inductive process, we extracted observable behavioural codes (see Table 1) from the core works of Lifton, Singer, Hassan, Lalich, and Langone, focusing on identifiable strategies of control rather than ideological content.

Table 2 - Inductive coding of mechanisms of domination and control in coercive groups

Psychological structuring	Compelled confession	Unaccountable leadership	Normative enforcement
	Guilt manipulation		Routine control
Social influence	Doctrinal supremacy	Justifies harm	Social contact control
Goal-driven indoctrination	Suppression of doubt	Guilt/shame manipulation	Bodily regulation
Repetitive indoctrination	Cognitive restriction	Support severance	Behavioural conditioning
	Loaded language	Enforced dependency	Information censorship
Social context manipulation	Erasure of experience	Forced recruitment	Deceptive messaging
	Doctrine over identity	Financial exploitation	Information segregation
Peer-enforced norms	Out-group denial	Time domination	Internal surveillance
Belief modification	Denial of personhood	Social restriction	Doctrinal absolutism
Behaviour modification	Leader worship	Existential dependency	Binary cognition
Psychological coercion	Ideological supremacy	Leader centrality	Critical thought suppression
Environmental coercion	Punishment of dissent	Leader reverence	Thought-terminating language
Communication control	Mental disruption	Ideological totalism	
Environmental isolation	Cognitive overload	Salvation promise	Fear and guilt manipulation
Spiritual manipulation	Behavioural control	Structural control	
Divine legitimization	Identity prescription	Hierarchical reinforcement	Phobia conditioning
Moral absolutism	Group elitism		Emotional volatility
Exclusion by purity	Us-vs-them framing	Peer thought shaping	

These codes were then deductively clustered into six thematic domains of control: **cognitive, emotional, social, behavioural, existential, and linguistic**. From these codes and themes, a working group of survivor-advocates selected and refined a list of warning indicators. This list was further reviewed and validated by numerous survivors and lived-experience experts across diverse group contexts.

Figure 1 - Domains of Group-Based Coercive Control



Although Evan Stark's (2007) coercive control model - originally developed for intimate partner violence - was not part of the initial synthesis, one indicator relating to patterned conduct was added afterwards due to its conceptual relevance and resonance with group-based control dynamics.

The resulting warning signs reflect patterns of pressure, dependency, and control that are widely recognised by survivors. Despite differences in ideology - religious, political, therapeutic, or commercial - coercive groups tend to operate in alarmingly similar ways.

As pressure intensifies across these six domains, a person's reality reorganises around the group. Identity, meaning, and relationships become so enmeshed with the system that leaving feels impossible. This state - what Lalich (2004) calls a *bounded reality* - makes exit not just difficult, but psychologically and socially dangerous.

The warning signs outlined in Appendix B highlight the structures and tactics that enable coercive control to become normalised - regardless of a group's stated beliefs or intentions.

BREADTH OF COERCION

Breadth of coercion refers to the range and interaction of domains in which coercive tactics are used. In the Group-Based Coercion Matrix, these tactics are assessed across six domains: cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, existential, and linguistic. Each reflects a distinct way autonomy can be suppressed, dissent neutralised, or identity restructured. A domain is only scored where coercion - defined as pressure, threat, or enforced compliance - is clearly present. Mere influence does not meet the threshold.

This approach draws from and extends established models. The MARAM Framework (Victorian Government, 2020) defines coercive control as a patterned use of fear, intimidation, and abuse to erode autonomy and induce dependency. Stark (2007) frames it as a liberty-deprivation regime: cumulative, entrapping, and aimed at domination, not just harm.

In parallel, Lalich's (2004) theory of bounded choice explains how ideological systems in high-control groups enclose individuals in closed worlds. Within these settings, people's thoughts, relationships, and sense of self are shaped by the group's logic and reinforced through compliance, surveillance, and fear. Coercion here is not limited to behaviour - it is existential and epistemic, restructuring how people think, feel, and relate.

Group-based coercive control unfolds through these interlocking domains. It is not simply that a group is coercive, but that individuals within the group structure enact coercive tactics that are mutually reinforcing. When multiple domains are activated, the effects compound: identity fragments, dependency deepens, and harm becomes harder to name or escape.

Understanding coercion in this way helps distinguish isolated influence from systemic control. It improves risk assessment, centres survivors' structural experiences, and supports proportionate legal, civil, and preventative responses.

Table 3 - Domains of Coercive Control Used in the Group-Based Coercion Matrix

Behavioural	Control over conduct, routines, and physical autonomy to enforce conformity and suppress resistance. Tactics may include surveillance, forced participation, ritualised routines, behavioural conditioning, compelled labour, and physical or sexual violence, whether threatened or enacted.
Emotional	Control over emotional expression, experience, and attachment. Tactics may include induced guilt, withdrawal of affection, public shaming, gaslighting, prescribed emotional responses, and the use of physical or sexual violence - whether threatened or enacted - to instil fear or emotional compliance. These mechanisms undermine emotional autonomy, suppress dissent, and foster dependence on group validation.
Social	Restriction or restructuring of a person's social world to enforce group conformity and dependency. Tactics may include isolation, surveillance, monitored communication, enforced relationship loss, manipulation of friendships and family ties, or the control of intimate relationships - including pressuring individuals to enter, maintain, or conceal violent or unwanted partnerships.
Cognitive	Manipulation of thought, belief, and reasoning processes to suppress critical thinking and enforce ideological conformity. Tactics may include information restriction, loaded language, black-and-white thinking, doctrinal filtering, the use of fear or threats to prevent questioning, and experiential practices - such as chanting, music, yoga, breathwork, or guided visualisations - used to induce altered states and embed belief.
Existential	Manipulation of identity, meaning, and moral worldview to create dependency and suppress autonomy. Tactics may include fear-based ideologies, conditional belonging, imposed purpose, moral absolutism, or the justification of violence as spiritual discipline or sacred duty.
Linguistic	Regulation of language and expression to shape perception, limit dissent, and reinforce group authority. Tactics include loaded language, thought-terminating clichés, redefinition of terms, and suppression of alternative vocabulary.

Note: These domains were informed by thematic analysis of over 50 mechanisms of group-based domination drawn from established frameworks in cultic studies and coercive control. Key mechanisms include: belief modification, doctrinal supremacy, internal surveillance, emotional volatility, enforced dependency, identity prescription, cognitive restriction, information control, moral absolutism, and more. A full mapping of mechanisms to domains is available upon request.

LEGITIMACY OF COERCIVE CONDUCT

Under Victoria's *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic), public authorities may only limit a person's rights when their actions are *lawful, reasonable, necessary, and proportionate*. These four principles, outlined in section 7(2), provide a structured test for assessing whether coercive conduct is justified.

Currently, this standard applies to government bodies, police, public schools and hospitals, and non-government organisations delivering services on the state's behalf. It does *not* apply to coercive conduct by private individuals or unregulated groups - such as cults - unless they are formally engaged in state-funded service delivery.

This leaves a critical gap. Groups that exert coercive control - through fear, manipulation, surveillance, and dependency - often replicate harms that would be unlawful in public systems, yet avoid accountability.

We propose applying the Charter's four-part proportionality test as a regulatory benchmark. No person or group should be permitted to engage in sustained, coercive behaviour aimed at domination. Like public bodies, private actors should only be allowed to use coercive means where their actions are *clearly lawful*, serve a *legitimate purpose*, are *necessary* (e.g., to prevent harm or fulfil a duty of care), and are *proportionate* in both scope and impact.

ASSESSING LEGITIMACY

Not all coercion is unlawful or harmful. In many settings, limited forms of coercion are both *lawful* and *justifiable*.

Table 4 – Assessing Legitimacy in the Group-Based Coercion Matrix

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 legal 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?

Coercive conduct that fails the *authorised* test should not proceed to further justification. This threshold ensures that coercive practices within group contexts are based in a *lawful purpose* and not used to dominate, abuse or exploit members.

Appendix B: Risk–Pattern–Harm Model

A FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONDING TO GROUP-BASED COERCIVE CONTROL

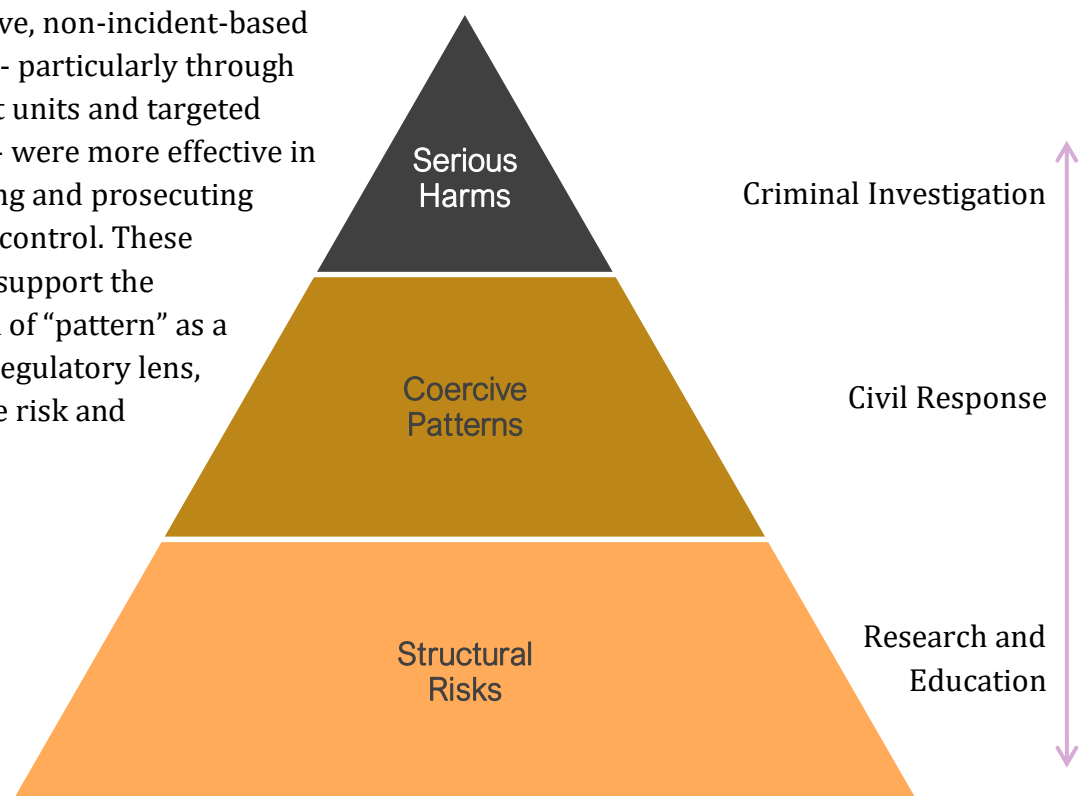
Group-based coercive control is a complex, patterned form of harm that cannot be effectively addressed through criminal law alone. A uniform legal response risks misidentifying perpetrators, targeting non-abusive communities, and obscuring the dynamics of coercion. Effective regulation must distinguish between belief and behaviour, between legitimate authority and exploitative control, and should account for the shades of culpability often present in coercive groups (Tiffany, 2022). As Elkington (2022) notes, legal frameworks should account for diminished culpability where coercion blurs the line between victim and perpetrator.

We propose a tiered regulatory framework grounded in Braithwaite’s (2002) model of responsive regulation. This enables proportionate responses at three levels: preventing structural risk, interrupting coercive patterns through civil mechanisms, and criminalising the most serious harms.

Pattern-based identification is essential.

Brennan and Myhill (2022) found that UK

police forces which recognised cumulative, non-incident-based patterns - particularly through specialist units and targeted training - were more effective in identifying and prosecuting coercive control. These findings support the inclusion of “pattern” as a distinct regulatory lens, alongside risk and harm.



STRUCTURAL RISKS

Structural risk factors do not, in themselves, constitute abuse. But when they limit independent thought, entrench dependency, or concentrate authority in unaccountable actors, they create fertile conditions for coercive control. These factors - such as social isolation, ideological enclosure, and institutional power asymmetries - reflect broader ecological vulnerabilities, not just interpersonal dynamics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Features commonly observed in coercive group settings include:

- Charismatic or controlling leadership
- Leader who answers to no one (or fake accountability structure)
- Opaque decision-making or financial practices
- People are recruited deceptively
- Intense group commitment demanding loyalty, time, labour or cost
- Members' personal experiences are invalidated by the group
- Strict ideology that shapes every part of life
- Us-vs-them thinking
- Shared in-group language, rules, and practices

These elements are not unique to harmful groups. Religious, activist, or therapeutic communities may also display them in benign or even beneficial ways. What marks them as risk factors is how they function - especially when they suppress dissent, restrict external contact, or enforce conformity through fear or dependency (Lalich, 2004).

For example:

- Charismatic leadership becomes high risk when coupled with a lack of accountability, or when charisma is used to override dissent or critical thought (Lalich, 2004).
- Shared in-group language may foster belonging, but also serves as a marker of ideological enclosure, where language itself is used to regulate perception and restrict independent judgment (Lifton, 1961).
- Us-vs-them thinking is not inherently coercive, but when paired with surveillance, purity demands, or punishment rituals, it reinforces dependency and fear-based conformity (Stein, 2017).

Structural risk factors should not automatically trigger alarm. But when they co-occur with punished dissent, social isolation, or enforced conformity, they warrant scrutiny as potential indicators of developing or entrenched coercive control.

INDICATORS OF GROUP-BASED COERCIVE CONTROL

Each of these reflects a specific, evidence-informed pattern of coercive control identified across multiple frameworks. Their presence signals not just elevated risk, but the likely operation of a coordinated system of control - marked by epistemic and existential domination, enforced dependency, erosion of autonomy, and the systematic suppression of dissent (drawing on MARAM; Stark, 2007; and the frameworks of Lifton, 1961; Singer, 2003; Lalich, 2004; Hassan, 2018; and Langone, 1993).

Dissent or questioning is punished

Group surveillance, monitoring, or reporting on members

Members must suppress their old identity or self

Members are systematically isolated or exhausted

Group uses fear, guilt, or phobia to control people

Group enforces strict purity or perfection

Public confessions are used to shame or punish

It's hard or dangerous to leave

Questioning the group brings punishment or exclusion

Coercion through patterns of domination

Threats or acts of physical violence to instil fear or enforce obedience

Threats or acts of sexual violence to control through degradation or false intimacy

"When I was 16, the pastor told me I was demon- possessed because I disagreed with him, and said he'd punch me in the face if I didn't admit it. I looked to the three other adults in the room for help - none of them flinched. They acted like it was completely normal."

Appendix C: Legal Mapping Tables

IDENTIFICATION OF COERCIVE ACTS

This project undertook a systematic mapping of coercive patterns described in survivor testimony, academic literature, and legal cases. Drawing on grounded theory principles and survivor-led analysis, we identified 205 distinct coercive acts that, when taken together, reflect recurring patterns of domination within coercive group environments. These acts were extracted and categorised using iterative coding of narrative data, with particular attention to practices that undermine autonomy, relational safety, epistemic agency, and identity integrity (see Table 5 for full list).

While many of these practices do not meet legal thresholds as isolated acts, their patterned and cumulative use across life domains reflects a broader system of control aimed at dominating autonomy, identity, and relational freedom. It is this cumulative, coercive structure - not individual incidents - that defines the harm and impunity survivors routinely face.

MAPPING TO LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Each act was then assessed against relevant Victorian and Commonwealth legislation to determine the presence, partiality, or absence of legal protection. This process drew on publicly available statutes, regulatory frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms across civil, criminal, and administrative domains. Acts were assessed strictly on the basis of their explicit content - without assuming contextual factors not specified - and mapped according to whether a clear and enforceable legal response exists. Protective thresholds for children, people with disabilities, and other recognised vulnerable groups were noted where applicable.

CLASSIFICATION OF LEGAL COVERAGE

Legal coverage was classified into four categories:

- **Substantial:** Clearly and consistently covered under existing law;
- **Partial:** Covered only in specific contexts or when threshold conditions (e.g. violence, formal duty) are met;
- **None/Minimal:** Harms that lack legal recognition or fall within regulated domains but have no functional enforcement or remedy.

Some acts have multiple enforcement pathways (though in practice, many slip through the cracks). “Multiple agencies” indicates that more than one body may have enforcement responsibility.

LAWS POTENTIALLY ENGAGED

- Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)
- Crimes Act 1958 (Vic)
- Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic)
- Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010 (Vic)
- Equal Opportunity Act 2010 (Vic)
- Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001 (Vic)
- Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)
- Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (Vic)
- Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic)
- Working with Children Act 2005 (Vic)
- Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Vic)
- Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (Victoria) Act 2009
- Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022 (Vic)
- Disability Act 2006 (Vic)
- National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013 (Cth)
- Aged Care Act 1997 (Cth)
- Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 (Vic)
- Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth)
- Wage Theft Act 2020 (Vic)
- Australian Consumer Law
- Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012 (Cth)
- Corporations Act 2001 (Cth)
- Migration Act 1958 (Cth)
- Surveillance Devices Act 1999 (Vic)
- Wrongs Act 1958 (Vic)
- Guardianship and Administration Act 2019 (Vic)
- Medical Treatment Planning and Decisions Act 2016 (Vic)
- Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1996 (Vic)
- Marriage Act 1961 (Cth)
- Modern Slavery Act 2018 (Cth)

KEY ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

- Victoria Police
- Australian Federal Police (AFP)
- Australian Border Force (ABF)
- Office of Public Prosecutions (Victoria)
- Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions (CDPP)
- Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC)
- Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)
- Consumer Affairs Victoria (CAV)
- Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO)
- Wage Inspectorate Victoria (WIV)
- Health Complaints Commissioner (HCC)
- Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC)
- NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission
- Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA)
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)
- Commission for Children and Young People (Victoria)
- Office of the Public Advocate (Victoria)
- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC)
- Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT)
- Magistrates' Court of Victoria
- Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (FCFCA)

FINDINGS

This mapping revealed a stark pattern: the vast majority of coercive practices fall outside existing legal protections or are only conditionally addressed. Even where significant psychological, relational, or economic harm is present, legal thresholds are often unmet unless physical violence, sexual abuse, or fraud is involved. As a result, survivors face systemic barriers to recognition, remedy, and redress - and are frequently met with institutional disbelief, dismissal, or inaction.

Several structural themes emerged from the analysis:

NON-PHYSICAL COERCION IS SYSTEMATICALLY UNRECOGNISED

Existential threats, enforced obedience, and moral framing of dissent are central tools of domination but are not actionable under current law.

CRIMINAL THRESHOLDS ARE TOO HIGH

Legal intervention often requires evidence of physical injury, imminent danger, or discrete criminal acts - thresholds that fail to capture patterned, cumulative coercion. As a result, early-stage coercive dynamics remain legally invisible, leaving survivors without timely protection.

"The group held exorcisms to 'heal' gender identity and sexual orientation. I went to the police. Three different police officers dismissed me, saying they didn't know if it was in their remit."

PUBLIC LAW PROTECTIONS DO NOT APPLY TO PRIVATE OR INFORMAL GROUPS

Instruments like the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities (Vic) offer no remedy against private entities or religious groups that operate outside public contracts.

Legal and institutional mechanisms are routinely misused: Charity status, religious exemptions, and legal confidentiality are exploited to shield coercive environments from oversight.

ISOLATION AND SILENCING AFTER EXIT

Retaliation, spiritual shaming, reputational harm, and social exile are common post-exit. These patterns were evident in our mapping of coercive acts, and are consistent with Douglas's (2018) analysis of how legal systems can be weaponised to continue coercive control and suppress disclosure.

Table 5. Legal mapping of 205 distinct coercive acts identified in survivor testimony

Code	Coercive Act	Level of Legal Protection			Enforcement Pathways
		Adults	Children	Group-Specific (eg. CALD, Disability)	
W001	Enforcing racial or cultural conformity through exclusion or white supremacy	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	CCYP, VEOHRC
W002	Sexually assaulting a person through force, coercion, threat, or exploitation of power imbalance	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W003	Trafficking a person by means of deception, coercion, or abuse of vulnerability	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W004	Blackmailing a person by threatening to disclose information or cause harm unless demands are met	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Police
W005	Forcing or coercing a person into marriage without full, free, and informed consent	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W006	Coercing gender or sexuality conformity under threat of spiritual consequences	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W007	Enforcing compulsory heterosexuality and pathologising queer identities as spiritual deviancy	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W008	Dishonestly directing public or charitable funds toward private benefits	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W009	Obstructing or influencing government compliance checks or audits through coordinated deception	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W010	Corporal punishment	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W011	Grooming a child or vulnerable person to facilitate sexual abuse, exploitation, or control	Partial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W012	Weaponising child protection systems by coaching children to report parents falsely	Partial	Substantial	Substantial	CCYP, DFFH
W013	Offering 'miracle cures' or deliverance rituals in place of medical care	Partial	Substantial	Substantial	HCC, CCYP
W014	Exploiting disability or psychological distress to induce compliance or extract labour	Partial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W015	Withholding medical care or discouraging evidence-based health decisions in favour of group practices	Partial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W016	Requiring approval for medical decisions, including for children, from non-qualified spiritual authorities	Partial	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W017	Threatening children with physical violence or weapons to enforce compliance	N/A	Substantial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W018	Withholding child access or contact unless the parent complies with group expectations	Substantial	Partial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W019	Coercively reassigning gender roles, pronouns, or relational status to align with group norms	Substantial	Partial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W020	Normalising the withdrawal of care or social support as punishment for perceived disobedience	Partial	Partial	Substantial	CCYP
W021	Manipulating members to rationalise or reinterpret abusive conduct as loving correction or spiritual discipline	Partial	Partial	Substantial	DFFH, CCYP
W022	Misrepresenting services or support (e.g. healing, NDIS support) to gain control over individuals lives	Partial	Partial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W023	Conducting unsolicited or coercive exorcisms on children, disabled individuals, or those in distress	Partial	Partial	Substantial	Multiple agencies
W024	Coercing individuals to abandon cultural, familial, or kinship practices under threat of existential consequences	Partial	Partial	Substantial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W025	Imposing medically unapproved or high-risk healing practices under spiritual pretext	Partial	Substantial	Partial	Multiple agencies

W026	Shaming or punishing those with mental health conditions or neurodivergence	Partial	Substantial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W027	Extracting labour, care, or financial contributions from members in psychological or physical crisis	Partial	Substantial	Partial	Multiple Agencies
W028	Using religious exemptions or charity status to evade scrutiny of coercive conduct	Partial	Partial	Partial	ACNC, CCYP
W029	Manipulating or falsifying internal reports, logs, or data to conceal harm or inflate impact	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W030	Recruiting members using deceptive front organisations or undisclosed religious affiliations	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W031	Enforcing surveillance of members contact with outsiders through chaperoning, monitoring, or reporting	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W032	Imposing restrictions on movement, travel, or communication under threat of existential consequences	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W033	Monitoring personal correspondence, social media, or phone use without informed consent	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W034	Preventing access to independent counselling, medical advice, or external grievance mechanisms	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W035	Misusing legal processes (e.g. NDAs, court threats, complaints) to intimidate or silence members	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W036	Shaming or punishing survivors for speaking publicly about harm after exiting the group	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W037	Coaching members to deceive authorities, funders, or external assessors about internal conditions	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W038	Refusing to acknowledge harm or abuse when reported by current or former members	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W039	Forcing or coercing public declarations of identity change without informed consent	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W040	Requiring secrecy or surveillance duties (e.g. watching others) as part of belonging or loyalty	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W041	Imposing collective silence or non-disclosure about deaths, abuse, or mental illness within the group	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W042	Leveraging survivor silence or fragmentation to deny or discredit systemic patterns of abuse	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W043	Prohibiting civic participation (e.g. voting) under existential or moral threat	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W044	Disseminating false or misleading information to discredit former members or whistleblowers	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP, Federal Court
W045	Punishing, shaming or publicly humiliating individuals for doubt, dissent or hesitation	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W046	Subjecting members to staged rituals, exorcisms, or public interventions under duress or without consent	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP, Police
W047	Obstructing or intimidating individuals who attempt to contact police, media, or legal advocates	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP, Police
W048	Orchestrating collective verbal attacks, prayer assaults, or denunciations against dissenters	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP, Police
W049	Coaching members to conceal symptoms of harm, distress, or coercion during external reviews or interviews	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP, Police
W050	Restricting or manipulating information about legal entitlements, protections, or complaints processes	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W051	Prohibiting access to independent review or redress	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W052	Instructing or coercing individuals to sever contact with family, elders, or community supports	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W053	Retaining or misusing confidential disclosures shared in pastoral or therapeutic settings to enforce compliance	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W054	Restricting movement or travel through control of finances, logistics, or threats of spiritual consequences	Partial	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W055	Applying coercive financial pressure to extract donations beyond members means	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W056	Manipulating members into surrendering control over their income, assets, or financial decision-making	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies

W057	Coercing individuals to take on debt or financial risk under group pressure or to demonstrate commitment	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W058	Requiring unpaid labour under threat of spiritual punishment, social exclusion, or role revocation	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W059	Forcing individuals to perform labour or duties despite illness, exhaustion, or psychological distress	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W060	Using children as leverage, e.g. threatening separation, custody loss, or harm to control adult behaviour	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W061	Isolating or separating families across group boundaries to disrupt kinship solidarity	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W062	Imposing conditions of group conformity in exchange for material support or accommodation	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W063	Requiring compliance with group rules to access children, spouses, or family members	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W064	Imposing renaming or name-changes as a condition of belonging or submission	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W065	Retaining personal documents, IDs, or records to restrict members capacity to leave	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W066	Using group hierarchy to override informed consent in medical, financial, or relational decisions	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W067	Obstructing access to children, spouses, or care arrangements to punish exit or resistance	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W068	Creating economic dependency through unpaid internships, volunteer 'training', or informal apprenticeships	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W069	Using unpaid labour to support for-profit activities under the guise of charity or community service	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W070	Promising healing through payment, obedience, or submission to leadership	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W071	Compelling members to disclose shame or trauma histories publicly or privately under the guise of healing	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W072	Enforcing rigid gender roles and gender hierarchies under threat of existential consequences	Partial	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W073	Thwarting or withholding access to essential resources (housing, food, transportation) to maintain dependency	Partial	Partial	Partial	VCAT, CCYP
W074	Demonising grievance, or failing to provide accessible grievance pathways	Partial	Partial	Partial	VCAT, CCYP
W075	Enforcing communal living or shared housing	Partial	Partial	Partial	VCAT, CCYP
W076	Coercing public confessions of perceived disloyalty, doubt, or sin to shame and control members	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W077	Restricting access to employment or education to maintain dependency or deprive outside perspectives	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W078	Imposing reputational destruction or vilification of members who express concerns, leave, or resist control	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W079	Requiring members to renounce education, aspirations, or qualifications	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W080	Denying members the right to exit peacefully without retaliation	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W081	Tokenising marginalised identities (e.g. queer, disabled, Indigenous) to deflect scrutiny and attract converts	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W082	Imposing gender-based restrictions on leadership, voice, or bodily autonomy	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W083	Retaliating against those who raise complaints through demotion, exclusion, or public shaming	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W084	Treating survivors as traitors, mentally unwell, or spiritually deceived to undermine their credibility post-exit	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W085	Suppressing cultural, gendered, or racial knowledge that challenges group orthodoxy	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W086	Using religious or spiritual exemption claims to justify unlawful or harmful practices	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W087	Creating or exploiting language barriers to prevent members from seeking help or understanding rights	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP

W088	Requiring participation in acts that violate conscience or deeply held beliefs to prove loyalty	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W089	Refusing to acknowledge internal diversity or difference to enforce ideological purity	Partial	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W090	Using interpersonal relationships (e.g. marriage, sponsorship) as mechanisms of surveillance or entrapment	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	ABF, CCYP
W091	Engaging in ‘missionary’ or outreach work that covertly recruits into high-control environments	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W092	Demanding confession of wrongdoing from members, despite knowing they are not at fault	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W093	Coercing moral responsibility for third-party welfare (e.g. animals) to prevent exit	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W094	Embedding insider language to inhibit recognition of abuse or block disclosure	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W095	Coercing decisions around reproduction, including pressure to have children or restrict contraception	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	CCYP, VEOHRC
W096	Using fasting, sleep deprivation, or extended ritual participation as tools of submission or compliance	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	DFFH, CCYP
W097	Encouraging or enforcing separation from "unsaved," "corrupted," or "unawakened" family members	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W098	Encouraging disavowal of biological family in favour of assigned pseudo-family structures	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W099	Conducting spiritual 'diagnosis' or character judgments without consent or recourse	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W100	Framing members’ failure to recover from trauma, illness, or disability as failure, impurity or contamination	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	Multiple agencies
W101	Enforcing inner vows or lifelong commitments extracted under conditions of vulnerability or deception	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	VCAT, CCYP
W102	Singling out single women or mothers as scapegoats	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC
W103	Denying members access to legal information, outside media, or independent sources of knowledge	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W104	Withholding education or exposure to critical thinking to maintain ideological control	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W105	Coercing members to renounce previously held beliefs or identities under threat of exclusion	None / Minimal	Partial	Partial	VEOHRC, CCYP
W106	Strategically grooming minors for estrangement timed to their 18th birthday	N/A	Partial	Partial	CCYP
W107	Defaming external professionals (therapists, advocates, lawyers) as threats to spiritual alignment	Partial	N/A	Partial	Federal Court
W108	Withholding key information about group beliefs, practices, or expectations until after recruitment	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W109	Using testimonials of healing or salvation to pressure disclosure or compliance in others	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W110	Imposing group-based sanctions for individual dissent (e.g. punishing a family for one members exit)	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W111	Blocking or threatening disaffiliation processes (e.g. informal apostasy penalties)	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W112	Coercing participation in acts of obedience to demonstrate loyalty under threat of existential consequences	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W113	Imposing hierarchical demotion or exclusion for expressing independent views or questioning doctrine	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W114	Claiming sovereign or extra-legal status to compel submission, deny accountability, or suppress dissent	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W115	Coercing participation in political activism or spiritual practices	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W116	Exerting spiritual or relational pressure to elicit financial giving that compromises autonomy or wellbeing	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W117	Shaming or punishing individuals for retaining personal financial independence or private resources	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W118	Punishing, shaming, or demoting individuals who attempt to withdraw from assigned roles or duties	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP

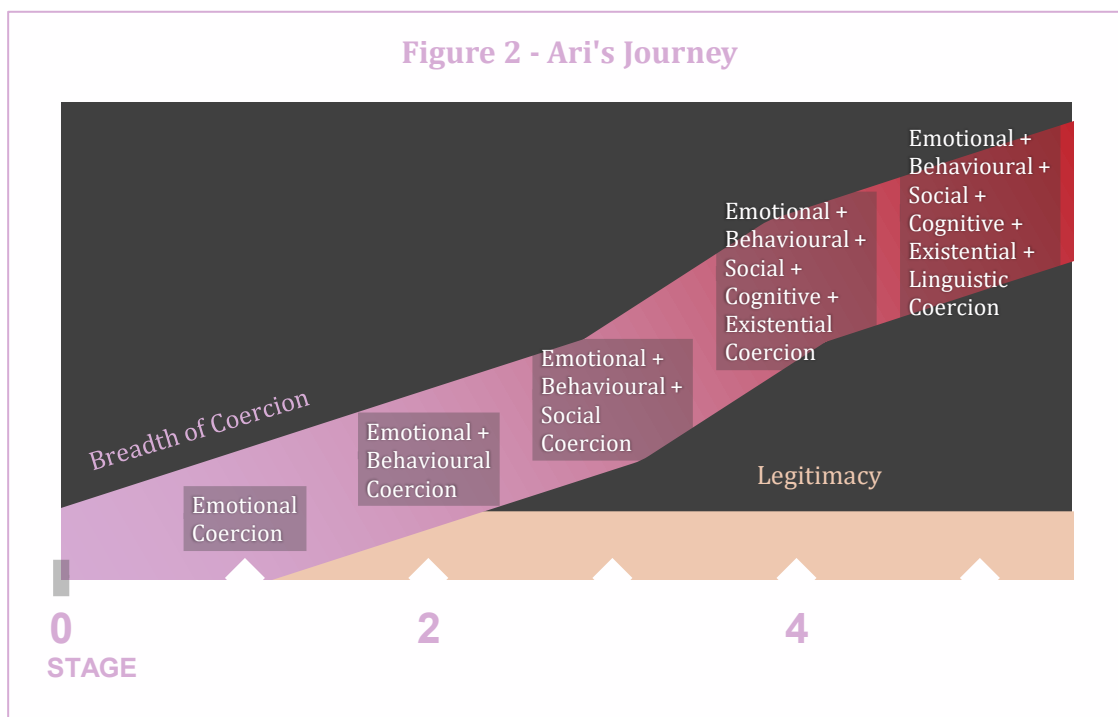
W119	Enforcing group-based isolation during crises or questioning as a means of reindoctrination	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W120	Framing non-compliance as moral impurity, deviance or evidence of demonic influence	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W121	Using group ceremonies or public spectacles to enforce conformity and silence dissent	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W122	Requiring permission from leadership to make basic life decisions (e.g. employment, housing, relationships)	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W123	Positioning group leaders as sole interpreters of sacred texts or moral truth to override individual conscience	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W124	Using promised rewards or threatened consequences to secure complicity in coercive practices	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W125	Rewriting personal narratives or life histories to fit group ideology	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W126	Requiring group approval before members can seek independent advice or advocacy	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W127	Constructing dependence on the group through the withdrawal of external relationships or identity anchors	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W128	Systematically discrediting individuals memories or perceptions as corrupted or mentally unwell	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W129	Employing gaslighting tactics to destabilise members sense of reality and autonomy	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W130	Embedding belief that suffering is a divine test or consequence of disobedience to justify harmful conditions	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W131	Withholding pastoral or emotional support from members who express concern or boundary-setting	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W132	Teaching that separation from the group leads to illness, madness, or existential punishment.	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W133	Requiring members to adopt group language or thought structures under threat of exclusion	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W134	Banning or restricting books, music, symbols, or cultural practices not aligned with group ideology	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W135	Framing external authorities (e.g. police, social workers) as evil, deceived, or agents of persecution	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W136	Imposing secrecy codes or sworn confidentiality about group operations, harms, or beliefs	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W137	Thwarting the ability to leave by attaching spiritual, reputational or economic penalties	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W138	Framing critical thinking, questioning, or doubt as disobedience or demonic influence	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W139	Promoting dependence on the group for core identity (e.g. "you are nothing without the group")	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W140	Teaching that obedience to leadership must override personal values, conscience, or legal obligations	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W141	Using repetitive messaging, chants, or mantras to enforce submission or emotional dissociation	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W142	Applying collective punishment (e.g. all members sanctioned due to one person's perceived failure)	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W143	Using esoteric teachings or 'hidden knowledge' to create hierarchical access to truth and foster dependency	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W144	Requiring social media promotion, group branding, or performative loyalty displays as a condition of belonging	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W145	Requiring submission of diaries, journals, or personal reflections for leader review or behavioural monitoring	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W146	Gaslighting survivors post-exit by denying previously enforced practices or rewriting group history	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W147	Treating leadership decisions as infallible and beyond question	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W148	Framing increased suffering or hardship as evidence of impurity, disloyalty or doubt.	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W149	Promoting total submission to group or leader as the only path to safety or fulfilment	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP

W181	Promoting 'holy suffering' or redemptive pain to justify continued victimisation	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W182	Imposing guilt, threats or punishment for disobedience, or questioning or leaving the group	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W183	Withholding organisational transparency (e.g. finances, policies) from members to conceal misconduct	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W184	Orchestrating staged testimonies or success stories to manipulate recruitment or suppress disclosures	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W185	Normalising deception or omission when interacting with outsiders	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W186	Requiring members to disclose private personal information for coercive purposes	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W187	Misrepresenting group practices, hierarchy, or commitments to new recruits	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W188	Relocating group operations across state lines to evade scrutiny or accountability	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W189	Coercing survivors into silence through threats of divine retribution or communal disgrace	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W190	Preventing access to literature	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W191	Framing family disunity caused by the group as evidence of divine punishment, consequence or purification	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	CCYP
W192	Discouraging or obstructing therapy or mental health support outside the group's influence	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	HCC, CCYP
W193	Using claims of divine favour or miraculous outcomes to override rational risk assessment	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	HCC, CCYP
W194	Using group pressure to shame or expel dissenters	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	Multiple agencies
W195	Imposing loyalty oaths, written covenants, or spiritual contracts to restrict future autonomy	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	VCAT, CCYP
W196	Using selective scripture or cultural teachings to justify internal hierarchies and gender roles	None / Minimal	Partial	None / Minimal	VEOHRC, CCYP
W197	Denying roles as punishment for prioritising conscience or wellbeing over group control	None / Minimal	Partial	N/A	CCYP
W198	Pressuring members to monitor and report others beliefs or conduct to leadership	None / Minimal	Partial	N/A	CCYP
W199	Placing members under the control of overseers who monitor and report their beliefs, doubts, or actions	None / Minimal	Partial	N/A	CCYP
W200	Requiring children to monitor or report their parents' moral alignment	None / Minimal	Partial	N/A	Multiple agencies
W201	Punishing children for questioning leaders or teachings, or for showing interest in outside perspectives	N/A	Partial	N/A	DFFH, CCYP
W202	Exploiting childhood obedience and parental authority to impose group ideology	N/A	Partial	N/A	Multiple agencies
W203	Using ideological justifications to normalise abusive parenting	N/A	Partial	N/A	Multiple agencies
W204	Requiring children to participate in rituals or practices beyond their developmental capacity	N/A	Partial	N/A	Multiple agencies
W205	Using children as tools of group visibility or legitimacy without informed parental consent	N/A	Partial	N/A	Multiple agencies

Appendix D: Model Survivor Journeys

These survivor-informed vignettes apply the patterned coercive acts identified in Appendix C to illustrate how illegitimate coercive control operates to achieve total domination across the life domains outlined in Appendix A.

ARI – THE DEVOTED RECRUIT



Stage 0: Recruitment

A 15-year-old named Ari is invited by a friend to attend a young men's empowerment group that promotes discipline, growth, and brotherhood. He finds the environment energising, and early sessions include motivational talks, exercise, and praise for showing initiative. He is encouraged to see himself as "chosen." Ari feels affirmed and inspired. Parents support his involvement, seeing it as character-building.

Stage 1

Ari is expected to share deeply personal struggles during circle time. Non-participation is framed as "masking" or "ego." Others model vulnerability, creating pressure to conform. Ari receives praise for weeping and is told it shows readiness for leadership.

Ari feels conflicted but validated.

Stage 2

Ari is given a strict daily regimen - early wakeups, cold showers, meal prepping, mandatory meetings. Deviation brings public correction. He must seek permission to join other activities and is told outsiders "weaken discipline."

Ari is proud of his discipline, but increasingly fatigued. Tells his parents they "don't understand the mission."

Stage 3

Ari is told to fast from social media and distance himself from friends who question the group. His parents are labelled as "disempowering," and his phone is monitored. Obedience is praised; disobedience pathologised.

Ari is withdrawn. Stops seeing old friends. Language and worldview increasingly shaped by the group.

Stage 4

Doubts are framed as demonic deception. Ari is told leaving would "curse" his destiny and bring spiritual harm to others. Compliance is positioned as a sacred duty.

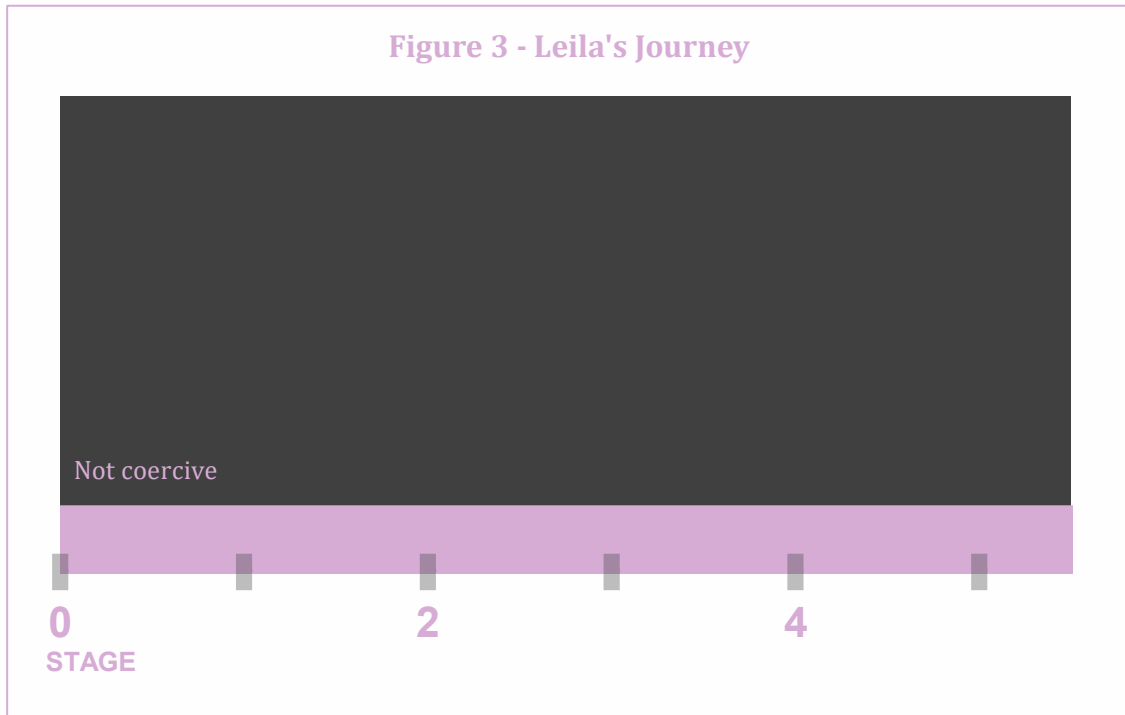
Ari is fearful and devout. Panic arises at the idea of leaving. His identity is now bound to the group's validation.

Stage 5

Ari becomes a mentor. He repeats teachings, disciplines younger recruits, and speaks almost exclusively in group idioms. Independent thought is gone. The group defines his relationships, routines, and worldview.

Ari is fully enmeshed. Self-surveillance replaces external pressure. He cannot imagine life beyond the group.

Figure 3 - Leila's Journey



Stage 0: Recruitment

Leila, a single mother in her 40s, attends a women-led healing retreat. She's drawn in by the focus on empowerment and trauma recovery. She shares her story in a circle and is praised for her openness. Leila feels heard and validated. Curious about the community's language and practices.

Stage 1

In weekly circles, Leila explores emotional blocks and spiritual growth. When she questions a practice, the facilitator invites reflection without judgment. Her openness is affirmed.

Leila's feels supported, but senses an unspoken expectation to align. Begins engaging more deeply.

Stage 2

Leila tries a 30-day "vibration fast" with diet, screen time, and social limits. It's optional but valued. When she breaks a rule, her group partner encourages her without blame.

Leila finds the structure helpful, though the framing sometimes feels excessive.

Stage 3

A family member voices concern. Leila brings it to the group and is met with empathy, not pressure. Some suggest her sister's view reflects her own wounds. Others stress personal choice.

Leila feels affirmed in setting boundaries, and still able to reflect critically.

Stage 4

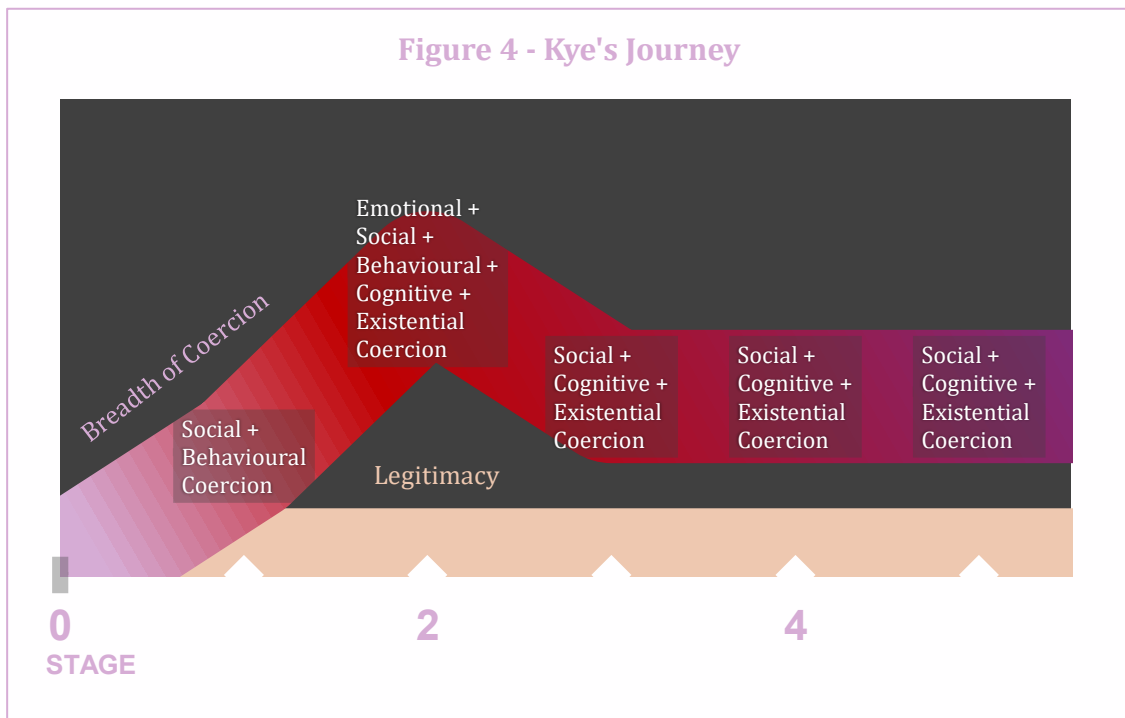
Leila's daughter resists attending rituals. The group suggests both compassion and ancestral insight. Leila decides to give her daughter space.

Leila feels torn, but free to decide. Feels her parenting is respected.

Stage 5

Leila co-facilitates meditations and experiments with light language. She adopts some phrases, but also questions them. Doubts are met with curiosity, not correction.

Leila is deeply involved, with autonomy preserved. Feels she can leave or pause without fear.



Stage 0: Recruitment

Kye is invited to a youth camp. Leaders disingenuously frame his Aboriginal identity as “the fulfilment of prophetic destiny” for revival. He is prayed over and platformed as a visible sign of the group’s divine mission. Kye feels conflicted but flattered. Unsure whether he is being welcomed for who he is or used to project legitimacy onto the group.

Stage 1

Kye is asked to testify at conferences, dress conservatively, and avoid “worldly influence.” His Aboriginal identity is framed as fulfilling prophecy - but only if expressed within the group’s aesthetic. When he hesitates, he is told “the devil always attacks the chosen.” Social rewards follow obedience.

Feels recognised but begins monitoring himself to belong. Pressure mounts to conform without dissent.

Stage 2

Kye’s family raises concerns. He’s told his “spiritual family” comes first. Leaders speak of “generational curses” and “breaking bloodlines” implying that his cultural roots are spiritually compromised.

Kye is pulled between kinship and loyalty - trapped in a double bind where rejecting the group feels like betraying his calling, but staying means distancing from family and culture. He becomes isolated and anxious about leaving.

Stage 3

Kye quietly leaves the group. He receives persistent messages from group members. He is mentioned in sermons as “a son who will return.” Members visit him without warning and post his name in prayer chains. Leaders tell him “God isn’t finished with you yet.”

Kye is watched, spiritually monitored. Pressure intensifies. Kye feels guilty and unsafe.

Stage 4

Photos of Kye are still used in group materials. Despite having left, the group publicly refers to him as one of their own. He is described as part of the “heritage of revival.” Requests to remove his name are ignored. He is spiritually spoken for, without voice.

No longer present but not released. Identity colonised and narrated. Kye feels unable to reclaim full autonomy.

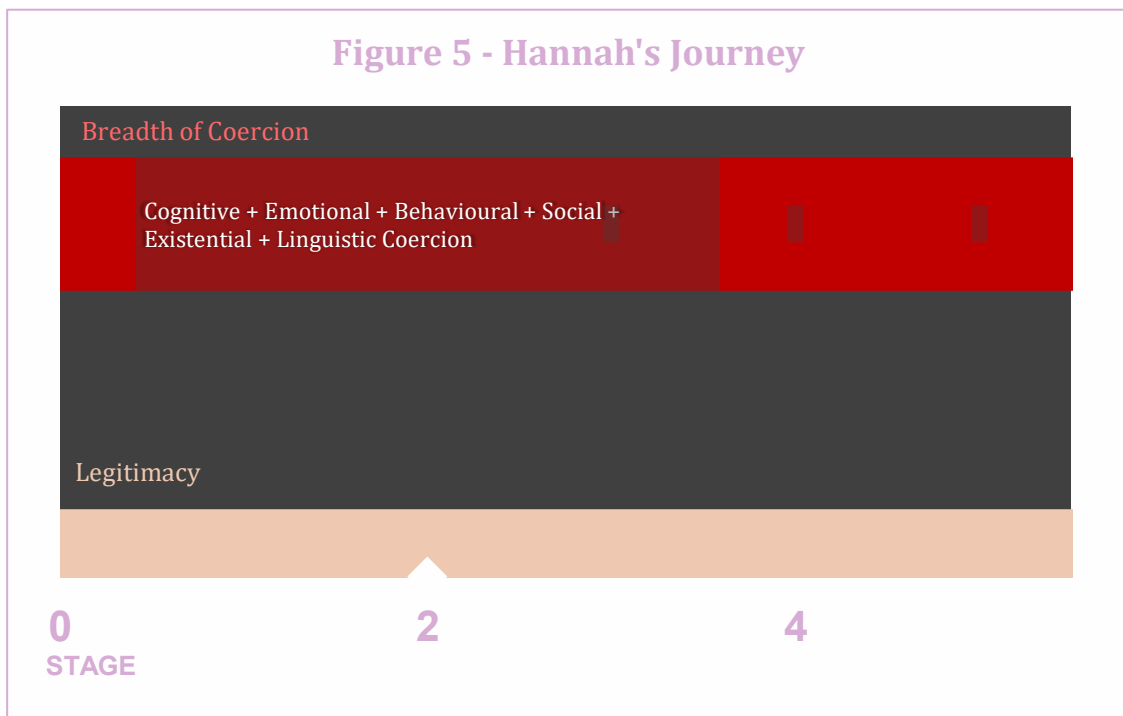
Stage 5

Kye shares his story with a friend. He begins to reframe the experience as exploitative. But even now, contact from the group persists, and they still refer to him as “one of ours.”

Kye is reclaiming autonomy and grieving lost sense of importance in the group.

HANNAH – DAUGHTER OF THE PROPHET

Figure 5 - Hannah's Journey



Stage 0: Born into the group

From infancy, Hannah is publicly described as “an arrow in the hand of a warrior,” destined to uphold her father’s vision. She is praised for spiritual sensitivity, made to pray in meetings, lead worship, and learn submission as a divine calling. Spiritual affection is openly conditional on her compliance. No alternative worldview is accessible. Hannah feels special, but perfectionistic. Her identity is fixed before she can choose it.

Stage 1

Hannah starts asking critical questions and asserting preferences. She is publicly accused of being demon possessed, of “rebellion,” and is forced to fast, apologise, and attend deliverance prayer. She is told she risks losing salvation and her family. Women are assigned to “watch her spirit.”

Hannah feels terror and guilt. Begins self-monitoring. Loss of basic relational safety.

Stage 2

After “repenting,” Hannah is elevated as a model daughter. She leads services and is constantly praised for purity and loyalty. But she’s also closely watched. Women in the group are told to monitor her “feminine influence” and to report any “disrespect” to male leaders. Her public image becomes a group asset.

Hannah lives two lives - polished on the outside, dissociated within. Charm becomes survival.

Stage 3

Without full understanding, Hannah is placed as a co-director or trustee on group businesses and nonprofits. Her father calls this “covering the ministry.” She is told that if legal trouble comes, she will “bear the shield” for the vision. Opting out would be seen as betrayal.

Hannah is afraid and confused. Over-functioning as a mask. Too loyal to say no. Too afraid to question.

Stage 4

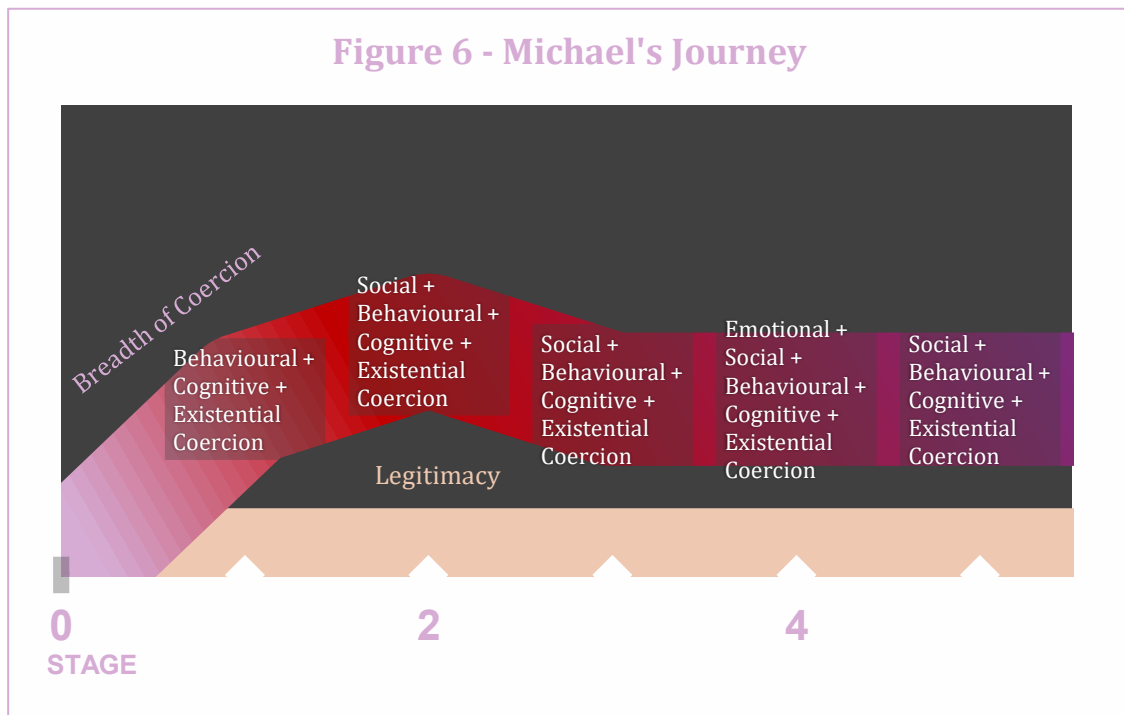
Hannah attempts suicide. Admitted to psychiatric care, she discloses coercion, but a group member who is a social worker tells clinicians she is delusional. The group sends “advocates” to monitor her mental health follow-ups. She is coached on what to say. Her disclosure is reframed as paranoia and dismissed.

Hannah is abandoned by systems. Feels like her voice is disappearing. Begins believing she can’t be helped.

Stage 5

Hannah returns. She now preaches about deliverance and obedience. She disciplines others for the same questions she once asked. She quotes her father’s teachings verbatim. Her entire life - beliefs, appearance, choices - is regulated from within. She watches herself constantly.

Hannah appears compliant. But inside, the self has collapsed into the group.



Stage 0: Recruitment

Michael, a gay man in his early 30s with intellectual disability, is allocated an NDIS support worker who helps with cooking and budgeting. The worker's family invites Michael to a Sabbath dinner. The welcome is warm and inclusive. Michael feels welcomed and finally included. Feels safe and accepted for the first time in a long while.

Stage 1

Subtle shifts begin. Michael is encouraged to pray about his "temptations." His sexual orientation is reframed as a spiritual test. The support worker says everyone has their "cross to carry."

Michael feels guilty for being who he is. Trust in the support worker deepens, even as shame grows.

Stage 2

Michael is told to delete queer content from his phone. Support hours are increasingly spent in Bible study. He's warned that if he returns to the "gay lifestyle," support may be withdrawn.

Michael feels torn. Believes he must choose between care and identity.

Stage 3

Michael is taken to a healing night. Several people lay hands on him to cast out "the spirit of Baal." He's told not to speak to anyone about the experience.

Michael is ashamed and traumatised. Begins avoiding any mention of the event and tells no one.

Stage 4

After a mental health episode, Michael tells a clinician about the prayers. The support worker claims he misunderstood. Michael is unsure what really happened. No formal complaint is made.

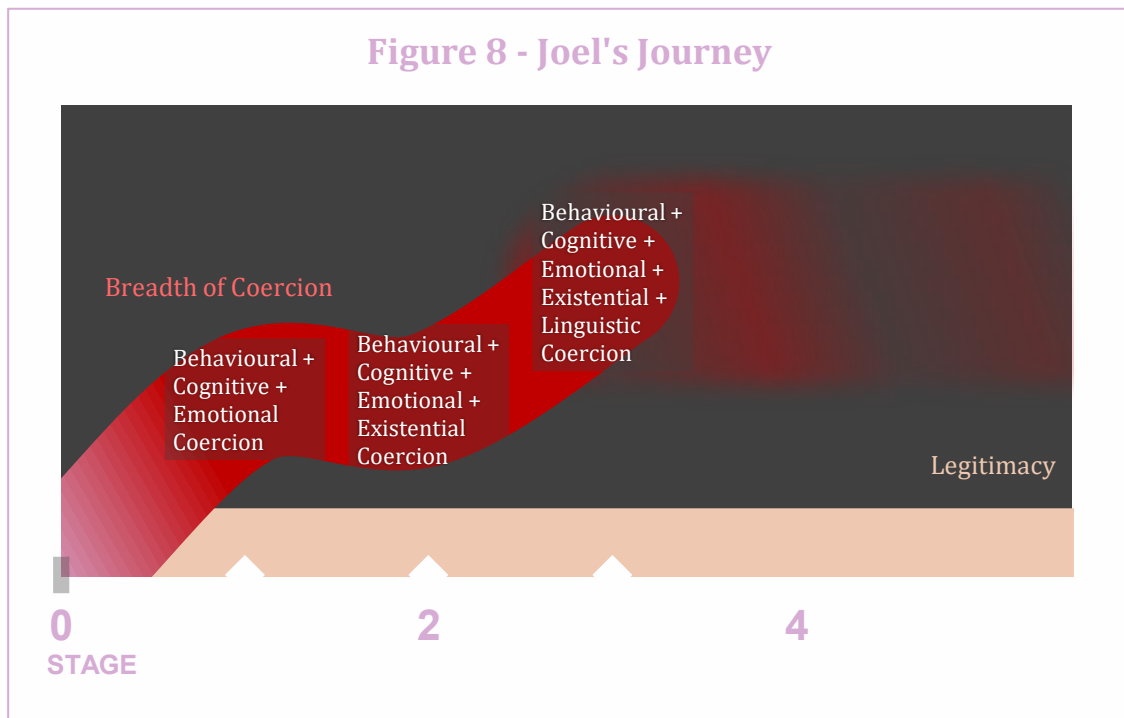
Michael doubts himself and withdraws further. Questioning his memory and judgment.

Stage 5

Michael receives a new support provider but avoids queer spaces. He fears being "wrong again." The original worker remains active in the sector. Michael never reports him.

Michael is isolated. The line between care and coercion still feels unclear. Healing is slow and solitary.

Figure 8 - Joel's Journey



Stage 0: Recruitment

Age 10. Joel's father gets a job in a new town. Looking to build connections, the family joins a local church found via Google. The website looks conventional. The group welcomes them enthusiastically. Joel is shy and sensory-sensitive and finds the noise and shouting in worship intolerable. Joel is anxious but compliant. Parents frame his discomfort as a phase.

Stage 1

Age 11. Joel begins refusing to stand or sing during worship. Leaders interpret this as rebellion. He is publicly called out from the microphone: "This spirit of resistance will break in Jesus' name." Older boys are encouraged to "help him become a man." Pushing and humiliation follow.

Joel feels shame and confusion. Begins internalising that he is the problem.

Stage 2

Age 12. Joel becomes increasingly withdrawn. On days when he refuses to get out of bed, young men from the church are sent to his home to drag him up and force him to do unpaid labour at the pastor's property. He dissociates, sometimes vomits from stress. His parents are told, "You mustn't coddle that spirit."

Physically forced, psychologically absent. The body moves; the self hides.

Stage 3

Age 12. Joel is told he must be "baptised in the Holy Spirit." One Sunday night, older boys surround him during a youth revival. They scream in his face in tongues, lay hands on him, and shout "Let go!" When Joel tries to leave, they block him and laugh. Under mounting pressure and fear, he breaks down, mimics their sounds, and cries uncontrollably. The room erupts in celebration.

Joel dissociates during this. He feels shame, relief, and fear. Later, he assumes it was necessary, because "it worked."

Stage 4

Age 14. Joel collapses at home, refusing to return. His parents, finally alarmed, speak against the group's methods. They are excommunicated. The family is publicly denounced. Joel is never mentioned again. The group says, "We tried - the spirit resisted."

Joel is relieved but has no language for what happened. Silence settles in.

Stage 5

Now 29 years-old, Joel sees a psychologist for anxiety and sleep issues. He describes his childhood as "pretty good" but says he was always "the problem." He has unsettling gaps in his memory, and doesn't remember the assaults or the public shame. He displays signs of PTSD and dissociative symptoms, and is struggling to stay in a job for longer than 6 months. The psychologist can't locate a traumatic narrative.

Fragmented memory. Internalised blame. Invisible survivor.

