

# Two Countries, Shared Challenges: Coercive Control of Older People Through an Australian Lens

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Presentation for the Restoring Dignity Addressing Coercive Control of Older Adults in Canada, May 12, 2026

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# Introductions



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# Content of the Presentation today

- Our research
- Information on the Australian National Plan and Australian state and territory laws
- Nomenclature and defining coercive control
- Where to from here?
- Two case studies

# Our Research: Coercive Control of Older People

**Team:** Catherine Hungerford, Denise Blanchard, Helen Hickson, Heather Lovatt and Maree Bernoth

**Method:** Semi structured interviews with 9 community members

**Published paper:** *Coercive control and older people: towards definitional consistency.* Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect

**Definition:**

A subtle and covert abuse of power involving a persistent pattern of controlling and manipulative behaviours, including threatened or actual physical, psychological, social, emotional, sexual, economic, and/or medical maltreatment or exploitation that isolates, creating dependency and/or fear in the victim and reaps benefits, tangible or intangible, for the perpetrator (Hungerford et al, 2025).

# Australian National Plan to End the Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People 2026-2036

- Australia's national plan recognises coercive control as a core dynamic of family and domestic violence, not only intimate-partner violence.
- The Plan presents a shared definition and broadens the scope beyond partners to include family members and carers, - but is that broad enough?

## **Key national points** (page 15):

- Coercive control is recognised as a **pattern of abusive behaviour** involving domination, isolation, monitoring, threats, and financial control.
- It emphasises **intersectional impacts**, including age-related vulnerability.
- The Plan **guides** states/territories in embedding coercive control into law, policy, and service responses. Because criminal law is state-based, protections differ across jurisdictions (similar to Canada).



# Summary of state and territory laws

State	Laws	Implications	Comments
Queensland	Queensland has criminalised coercive control through recent reforms, and crucially, the offence applies to <b>family members and informal (unpaid) carers</b> , not just intimate partners	This directly captures common elder-abuse scenarios involving adult children or relatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Even with the extension of laws, they don't capture all possibilities such as use of technology and casual relationships.</li> </ul>
New South Wales	<p>NSW has introduced a standalone coercive-control offence, but it is <b>limited to intimate-partner relationships</b>.</p> <p>NSW Government announced last week that it will criminalise any tracking or stalking via technology with a five-year jail term.</p>	Implications are coercive control by adult children, grandchildren, siblings, or carers is <b>not criminalized</b> .	<p>Entities charged with protecting older people are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The <b>Ageing and Disability Commission</b>, which investigates abuse, neglect, and exploitation of older people</li> <li>Civil remedies (e.g., financial abuse pathways)</li> <li>However, our research showed how ineffective these entities are in keeping the older person safe.</li> </ul>
Other States and Territories	Most jurisdictions are reviewing or consulting on coercive-control laws, but none (other than QLD) have yet criminalised coercive control in a way that explicitly includes elder abuse.	Reform discussions consistently highlight that <b>elder abuse is commonly perpetrated by adult children</b> and that excluding older people from coercive-control laws leaves major gaps.	<b>Specialist family violence services are concerned that coercive control laws will impact family members and victim survivors</b>



# Nomenclature - Difficult to legislate if there is no common terminology

Our research found

- There is a lack of clarity, understanding and agreement about definition of CC in older adults
- Lots of different terms, that don't quite connect with DFV language eg perpetrator might be son/daughter or carer
- There is a lack of understanding about what CC is and is not, it is often subsumed in psychological abuse and financial abuse
- Our definition:

*A subtle and covert abuse of power involving a persistent pattern of controlling and manipulative behaviours, including threatened or actual physical, psychological, social, emotional, sexual, economic, and/or medical maltreatment or exploitation that isolates, creating dependency and/or fear in the victim and reaps benefits, tangible or intangible, for the perpetrator (Hungerford et al, 2025).*

# Next steps for our Research Team

- Presentations at Australian Elder Abuse Conference Stand Up & Speak Out, July 2026
- Two papers being prepared for publication
- Possible areas for future research
  - Older people who have experienced coercive control
  - Understand the lens of culture and coercive control
  - Understand experiences in health services around confidentiality and sharing information (also see Bernoth et al, 2014)
  - Mapping legislation and influencing policy
- Seek funding and collaborations to support and enhance our research

# References

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Bernoeth, M., Dietsch, E., Burmeister, O. K., & Schwartz, M. (2014). Information management in aged care: Cases of confidentiality and elder abuse. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 122(3), 453-460.

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