

Independent review of sexual harm prevention and response at Monash Residential Services: Summary Report

Monash University

15 November 2024



Nous Group acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, who maintain their culture, country and spiritual connection to the land, sea and community.

This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan and our aspirations for respectful and productive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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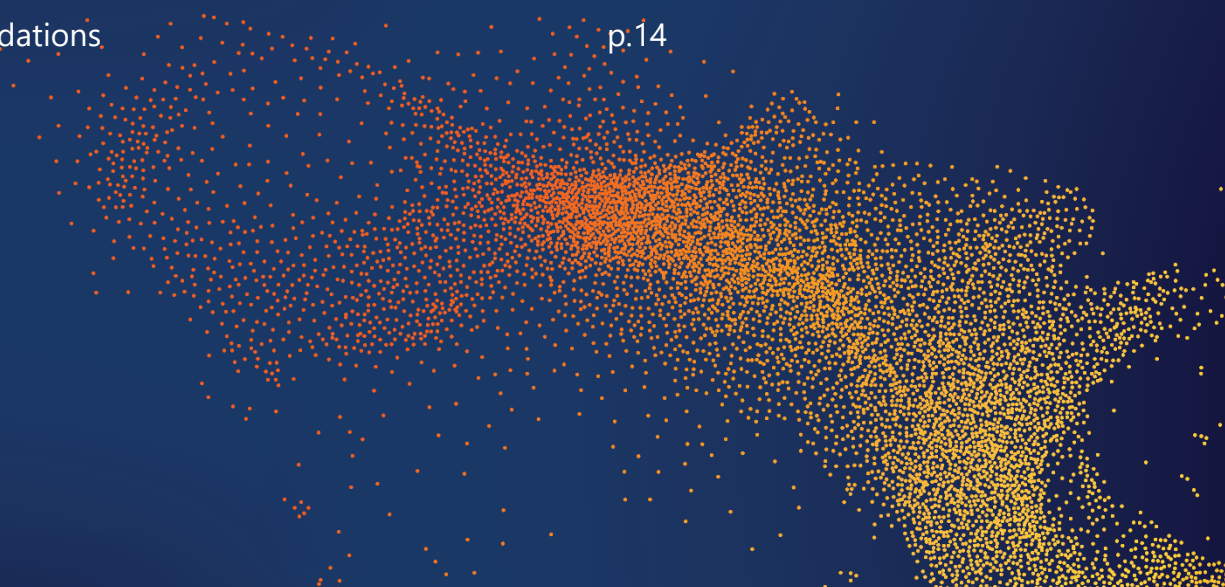
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1 SUMMARY OF THE REVIEW

This document presents a summary of findings from an independent review of sexual harm prevention and response at Monash Residential Services (MRS) conducted by consulting firm Nous Group (Nous). We are delighted to be able to share this summary with you.

Thank you to the MRS representatives and residents who shared their perspectives and experiences with us through interviews or surveys. Your insights have been invaluable to the review's findings and recommendations.

This document is a summary version of a full review report delivered to MRS and Monash University.

If you would like to find out more about the review and its detailed findings, please contact:

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About the review

Monash University (Monash) engaged Nous to conduct an independent review of the effectiveness of sexual harm and gender-based violence prevention initiatives and response processes at MRS.

The review was commissioned as part of Monash's Action Plan in response to the 2021 National Student Safety Survey (NSSS)¹ and demonstrates Monash's ongoing commitment to addressing sexual harm and gender-based violence.

Why did Monash commission the review?

In 2016 the Australian Human Rights Commission conducted a national survey on experiences of sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities². In 2021, the Social Research Centre conducted a National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) on the safety and wellbeing of students.

Both surveys identified a concerning prevalence of sexual harm and gender-based violence at Australian universities. The surveys identified that students who lived in university owned or affiliated residential accommodation were more likely than their peers to have been sexually assaulted or sexually harassed.

In 2018, Monash University commissioned an independent review of its sexual harassment and sexual assault policies and response pathways, including those at MRS.³ Six years have passed since the that review. This review provides an opportunity to assess the impact of initiatives and changes implemented over the past six years and identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement specific to MRS.



¹ Social Research Centre, National Student Safety Survey, 2021, (accessed 15 August 2024). <https://www.nsss.edu.au/>

² Australian Human Rights Commission, Change the Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities, 2017, (accessed 25 September 2024). https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/AHRC_2017_ChangeTheCourse_UniversityReport.pdf

³ Worklogic, Independent Review of Monash University's Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault Policies and Response Pathways, 2018 (accessed 15 August 2024). https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1514456/Independent-Review-of-Monash-University-Sexual-Harassment-and-Sexual-Assault-Pathways.pdf

What data did the review collect?

Interviews

with a selection of stakeholders, including:

- MRS staff
- Monash staff
- MRS resident advisors
- Support services (e.g. counsellors)

Resident survey

distributed to all MRS residents between 11 and 22 September 2024. The review received **1,131 responses from MRS residents (one-third of residents)**.

Site visit

to two MRS halls and the MRS offices at Clayton Campus in October 2024.

Desktop and document review

of an estimated 40 MRS, Monash and sector documents, including policies and procedures, disclosures data, approaches of and similar reviews at other universities and sector reports.

A note on the review's scope

The review was conducted between late May and early November 2024. All data was collected while Residential Support Team Officer (RSTO) roles operated and the findings presented reflect this. The review notes that RSTO roles are changing to Residential Life Support (RLS) roles and recommendations have been developed with this in mind.

The review's primary goal was to assess the effectiveness of prevention initiatives and response processes at MRS.

The below activities were not in scope for the review.

- **Audit of Monash's and MRS' policies and procedures that relate to sexual harm and gender-based violence.** The review accessed policies and procedures to broadly understand approaches at both Monash and MRS.
- **Examination of the content of training programs at Monash or MRS.** The review's assessment of the effectiveness of these programs was largely derived from consultations and the review's survey.
- **Examination of Monash's operations and functions more broadly.** The review's assessment of relevant units and committees such as the Safer Community Unit (SCU) and Respect at Monash Advisory Committee was high-level with the view of understanding all services available to residents, not reviewing the nature or effectiveness of those services.

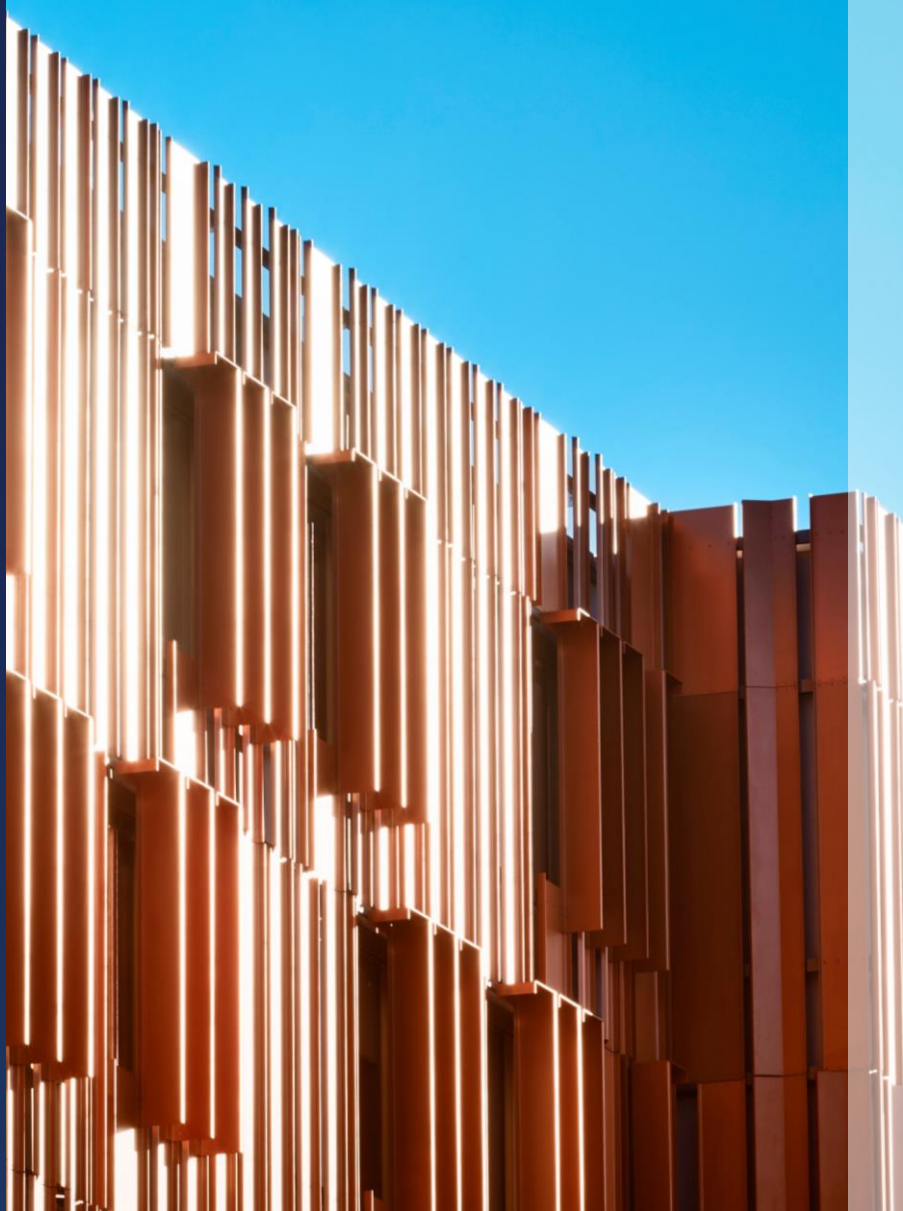
2 FINDINGS

The review found that MRS' prevention initiatives and response processes are effective overall and there have been ongoing improvements since 2018.

Residents report a positive culture at MRS that prioritises safety and respect, and believe MRS is supportive of its diverse community of 3,000 residents.

A minority of residents continue to experience sexual assault and harassment. Sexual harm is a systemic social, cultural and structural problem that persists in almost all facets of society. MRS' sphere of influence is limited to the residents it serves. Refer to Page 9 for further detail.

Within its sphere of influence, there are opportunities for MRS to fine-tune prevention initiatives and response processes. Refer to Page 14 for recommendations.




MRS residents actively engage in conversations about consent, boundaries, and respect, which creates a safer and more supportive environment. Access to counsellors, reporting mechanisms, and trusted authorities can empower residents to speak up against violence and get the help they need.

Survey free-text response

Snapshot of survey findings

The review deployed a survey to MRS residents to understand experiences of sexual harm and gender-based violence and perspectives on the effectiveness of MRS' prevention initiatives and response processes. A snapshot of findings is below.

1131 SURVEY 
RESPONDENTS, representing a response rate of just over one-third of MRS residents

64% FEMALE

33% MALE

3% GENDER DIVERSE

65% INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

19% LGBTIQA+

95% OF RESIDENTS 
FEEL A SENSE OF BELONGING AT MRS

94% OF RESIDENTS
FEEL SAFE AT MRS

89% OF RESIDENTS
FEEL MRS IS TRYING HARD TO PROTECT STUDENT SAFETY


3% HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ASSAULT WHILE BEING A RESIDENT AT MRS*

4% HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL HARASSMENT WHILE BEING A RESIDENT AT MRS*

**These do not indicate the proportions of sexual assault or harassment that occurred on-site at MRS. Survey questions asked about experiences of sexual assault in many spaces: at MRS, at another Monash-affiliated residence, at an MRS-affiliated event or at a non-residence event with other MRS residents*

"There is an abundance of obvious support networks established to help in times of crisis"
- Survey free-text response

"The culture is very respectful and the training is well thought out"
- Survey free-text response

19 TRAINING PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO RESIDENTS 

Sexual assault, sexual harassment and bystander experiences

Among survey respondents...

3% reported at least one experience of **sexual assault** while they had been a resident at MRS.

4% reported at least one experience of **sexual harassment** while they had been a resident at MRS.

9% reported that they had **witnessed or been disclosed to** about at least one incident of sexual assault or sexual harassment while they had been a resident at MRS.

Prevalence of sexual harm as reported in the review's survey is lower than the average for residents at Australian university accommodation

- Reported sexual assault and harassment among NSSS respondents who lived at student accommodation or residences was 8.8 per cent and 24 per cent respectively.⁴ These are higher than reported among residents at MRS residents in this review (3 and 4 per cent).
- This could indicate MRS' successes in cultivating an environment that actively prevents sexual harm and gender-based violence.
- The questions asked residents about experiences of sexual harm during their time as a resident, not just on-site at their residence. Not have occurred at their residence. This was done to give an overall picture of the incidents occurring in the broader lives of MRS residents but means the review could not outline the number of incidents that occurred specifically at MRS.

Some populations experienced higher rates of sexual assault and harassment

- Women and residents who are LGBTIQ+ or living with a disability experienced disproportionately higher rates of sexual assault or harassment.

About half of respondents who experienced sexual assault or harassment never disclosed the experience to an MRS or Monash representative.

- Underreporting is known to be a systemic issue for sexual assault and harassment. It means that any formal numbers reported by MRS or Monash are likely to be underreported and that residents who do not report may not be accessing or receiving the care and support that is available to them.
- Common reasons that victim-survivors at MRS cited for not reported including feeling embarrassed or ashamed, not thinking help was needed, not thinking others would find it serious enough, and/or thinking the incident would be too hard to prove.

⁴Social Research Centre, National Student Safety Survey, 2021, (accessed 15 August 2024). <https://www.nsss.edu.au/>

Culture at MRS

MRS is supportive of its diverse community of 3,000 residents and has a culture that enables conversations about sexual health.

- Stakeholders reported that there are clear behavioural expectations and that resident advisors and residents alike feel comfortable calling out inappropriate behaviour when it occurs.
- It is the resident advisors and Residential Support Team Officers (RSTOs) who drive MRS' healthy culture from year to year.
- There were no differences in perspectives about MRS' culture between halls, nor between the residential halls versus MRS' studio accommodation.

Attitudes about sexual harm and gender-based violence are mostly good at MRS

- Residents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with a set of attitudinal questions about sexual harm and gender-based violence that were derived from the NSSS.
- In general, MRS residents had attitudes that contribute to effective prevention of sexual harm. For example, 85 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that people who wait weeks or months to report sexual harassment are probably lying.
- International student residents, men and heterosexual students held slightly less favourable attitudes than domestic student residents, women, and LGBTIQ+ residents respectively.

Among survey respondents...

93% feel they are treated with respect by other residents and staff.

92% feel there is a clear sense of socially acceptable behaviour among MRS residents.



I think the culture set and developed by the RSTOs and continued by the RAs is the primary preventative measure for incidents [of sexual harm].

Survey free text response



The sense of community and closeness between residents and the other staff [is good]. People feel open to share feelings and people respect others' wishes.

Survey free text response

Culture at MRS

Though the review does not assess these systemic issues as pronounced or common at MRS, there is work to do to continue monitoring toxic masculinity, conservative cultural values and gossip.

- A minority of residents used qualitative free-text responses or consultations to reference toxic masculinity, conservative cultural values and gossip as contributors to sexual harm and gender-based violence at MRS.
- These respondents commented on their belief that:
 - some male residents at MRS hold negative attitudes towards women, sexually diverse men and other subjugated groups that gets largely overlooked or dismissed as 'boys being boys'.
 - some residents may come from more conservative countries in which there are different norms and biases around gender and gender roles, creating a lack of awareness around sexual harm and gender-based violence.
 - Gossip has the potential to isolate and shame victim-survivors who might have experienced or disclosed an incident, as well as discourage disclosure where residents are not confident that their confidentiality is certain.
- Survey data indicates that these issues are not systemic at MRS - for example, 81 per cent of residents believe women are treated equally to men - but should continue to be monitored nonetheless.

Among survey respondents...

89% feel that MRS' culture around sex is safe and healthy.



[Men] can sometimes participate in conversations that objectify women, and no one stops these conversations or there's no consequences for such behaviour.

Survey free text response



Prevention initiatives at MRS

MRS' prevention initiatives are effective overall

- Training is mostly comprehensive for MRS residents, resident advisers and staff alike. MRS and Monash collectively offer a range of online and in-person training programs, one of which currently mandatory. These are focused on educating residents about consent, sexual health and respectful relationships, as well as sexual harm and gender-based violence.
- Resident advisers and staff reported feeling well equipped to respond to incidents of sexual harm, supported by the additional training they receive to be first responders.
- MRS senior leadership are astute to the fact that resident advisors are mainly young and are themselves residents and students, and they carry emotional load and responsibility to be a first point of contact in this context. The review found that there are many measures in place to ensure resident advisors feel supported.

There are opportunities to fine-tune MRS' prevention initiatives

- While mandatory online training is critical, it does not receive deep engagement from residents and could be made more engaging. Stakeholders interviewed by the review emphasised that some residents can treat mandatory online training as a tick-box exercise. Twelve per cent of survey respondents did not recall completing mandatory online training. Enhanced online training and incentivisation of in-person training to build stronger knowledge and awareness among residents.
- There is currently no continuous program of training for residents, including refresher training for returning residents. The review notes that finding the right amount of training (i.e. not too much) is important to enable good engagement with it. There is an opportunity for Monash and MRS to develop a more coordinated training schedule that progressively builds on itself.
- LGBTIQ+ residents and international students can have unique experiences in prevention of and response to sexual harm that are not covered in the current mandatory training. Increasing the availability and promotion of tailored training opportunities to all residents can increase understanding of these varied experiences and strengthen prevention for cohorts at higher risk.
- There is a lack visual promotion of prevention initiatives and response processes in residential halls. This is critical to visually reinforce MRS' culture and provide residents information they might need at any time.

Among survey respondents...

70% reported felt Sexpectations increased their confidence and competence in preventing or responding to incidents of sexual harm or gender-based violence.

74% reported being very or mostly confident in their knowledge of where to seek immediate support about an experience of sexual harm or gender-based violence.



The mandatory training that all residents have to undergo helps us be aware of the severity of [sexual harm and gender-based violence] and pay attention to the way we behave around and interact with others.

Survey free text response



I know first-hand that residents will just click through some of training to get it done. I mean I'm and RA and even I have found myself doing it sometimes.

MRS stakeholder consulted

Response processes at MRS

MRS' response processes are effective overall

- Stakeholders reported that staff and resident advisors respond in an appropriate and trauma-informed manner, provide helpful information and regularly follow up with victim-survivors.
- Response processes are logical, centred on the victim-survivor's health and wellbeing and designed to ensure the victim-survivor feels safe and validated.
- Stakeholders were very supportive of the counselling and out-of-hours mental health service available to students. However, resident advisors informed the review that victim-survivors sometimes wait several weeks before getting a counselling appointment.

There are some opportunities for MRS to fine-tune response processes

- MRS' escalation process requires that if a resident advisor receives a disclosure of harm, they escalate the incident to a staff member immediately. This approach is designed to shift the burden from resident advisors to professional staff who have received additional training in trauma-informed responses. While the immediate escalation process is appropriate, resident advisors do not always use it in practice, often to respect the wishes of victim-survivors who want to remain anonymous. There are case-by-case instances in which escalation may not be the most trauma-informed response, but escalation nonetheless remains important for safety and for accurate monitoring of incidents.
- To address this, the safe, confidential, supportive and potentially anonymous or de-identified nature of disclosure could be emphasised to residents and the benefits of the escalation process to resident advisors.
- There is moderate awareness of the Safer Community Unit (SCU) among MRS residents and low use of it among residents who had experienced sexual assault or harassment. Efforts to raise awareness and willingness to use the SCU could also be enhanced.

Among survey respondents...

67% reported that MRS responds to and supports residents affected by incidents of sexual harm and gender-based violence mostly or very well.

A sub-sample of 19 residents described one incident of sexual assault or harassment that they had disclosed to someone.

Of these 19 residents...

- **Almost all** who had disclosed to MRS felt listened to, believed and supported once they disclosed
- **Only 40%** decided to visit the Safer Community Unit, Monash's formal unit that responds to reports and disclosures of sexual harm and supports Monash students.



The community at my hall is quite close with each other, and it seems that [people] would most likely report to a residential adviser, if [an incident of sexual harm or gender-based violence] does indeed happen.

Survey free text response



[The SCU] immediately spoke to the College Head of the other students who were involved and followed up to ensure that actions had been taken to talk to these students about their actions.

Survey free text responses

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the review found that prevention initiatives and response processes at MRS are appropriate and effective, and that MRS and Monash staff are conscientious in this space. These recommendations are opportunities to fine-tune MRS' approach to preventing and responding to sexual harm and gender-based violence.

- 1 Monash University should establish a rolling review of MRS every five years and extend an invitation to Mannix, with lessons from previous reviews incorporated into new reviews
- 2 The SCU should include a field in CORE that records specific location of on-campus incidents of sexual harm to improve monitoring and reporting at MRS.
- 3 MRS should consider options to incentivise residents to attend optional in-person training programs.
- 4 In collaboration with the EDI team, MRS should ensure resident advisors, RLS and MRS leadership are trained and equipped to support priority populations at higher risk of sexual harm and gender-based violence.
- 5 In collaboration with the EDI team and learning designers, MRS should consider opportunities to enhance mandatory online training to make it more engaging for residents.
- 6 In collaboration with the EDI team, MRS should ensure that mandatory training delivered to residents provides information on:
 - Toxic masculinity as a driver of sexual harm and gender-based violence.
 - The negative consequence of gossip.
 - Cultural norms around sex and dating in Australia.
 - The consequences of the negative attitudes held among men, heterosexual and international student residents.
- 7 In collaboration with the EDI team, MRS should explore opportunities to introduce more training continuity for residents and resident advisors to enable retention of knowledge and awareness.
- 8 MRS should reinforce the safe, confidential, supportive and potentially anonymous nature of disclosure to residents, including its benefits to reporting and individual and collective safety.
- 9 MRS should reinforce to resident advisors the importance of escalation and the possibility of anonymous reporting.
- 10 MRS should more actively promote training programs offered by Monash University, especially programs aimed at international student residents.
- 11 MRS should co-design with residents a full suite of visual collateral about its prevention initiatives and response processes and place the collateral in common areas of all residences.
- 12 MRS should build greater awareness of and willingness to use the SCU among all residents.



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A bigger idea
of success

750

PEOPLE

75

PRINCIPALS

5

COUNTRIES

+80.7

2020-22 NET PROMOTER SCORE
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