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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): I'd like to call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 126 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

I would like to remind all members of the following points.

Please wait until I recognize you by name prior to speaking. I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by the committee on Monday, November 27, 2023, and Monday, October 7, 2024, the committee is continuing with its study of coercive behaviour.

[Translation]

Thank you for your co-operation.

[English]

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide a trigger warning. We will be discussing experiences related to violence and coercive control. This may be triggering to viewers who have had similar experiences. If anyone present feels distressed or needs help, please advise the clerk.

For all witnesses and all members of Parliament, it is important that we recognize that these are very difficult discussions. Let's try to be as compassionate as we can be in our conversations.

I would like to note that we have one witness appearing anonymously. They will be referred to as Witness 1. I kindly ask that all members refer to the witness as such.

For today's panel, appearing first as an individual by video conference, we have Jean Mercer, professor emerita of psychology at Stockton University. Second, we have Witness 1. Third, from One Mom's Battle, we have Tina Swithin, advocate for family court reform, who is joining us by video conference. From Western University, also joining us by video conference, we have Lisa Heslop, associate of the centre for research and education on violence against women and children.

At this point, we will begin our opening statements. You'll have up to five minutes.

Professor Mercer, you have the floor for up to five minutes. Thank you.

Dr. Jean Mercer (Professor Emerita of Psychology, Stockton University, As an Individual): I'm here to talk about the connection between the parental alienation concept and coercive behaviour as part of the discussion on the criminalization of coercive behaviour.

Parental alienation is a hypothetical phenomenon whose proponents believe that children who want to avoid a parent have often been persuaded by the preferred parent to take that attitude. They propose that children alleged to have been alienated must be separated by a court order from their preferred parent, subjected to reunification therapies and put in the custody of the avoided parent.

Proponents of the parental alienation system have, over the last several years—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting you, Professor Mercer. Could you kindly move your boom just above your mouth?

Prof. Jean Mercer: It slipped. I'm sorry.

The Chair: That's okay. Move that boom and we'll try the audio for a minute to see if the translator can.... Try speaking now. You can even just say your name and where you're from.

• (1635)

Prof. Jean Mercer: My name is Jean Mercer.

The Chair: Where are you calling in from today?

Prof. Jean Mercer: I'm calling from Concord, Massachusetts.

The Chair: Can you move it up just a snap? Between your mouth and your nose is ideal.

Prof. Jean Mercer: How is this? Is it any better? Should I put it further up?

The Chair: I think we're good. Thank you.

Don't worry about your time. We're good. You can continue.

Prof. Jean Mercer: I'll start from where I was.

Proponents of the parental alienation system have, over the last several years, put forward the argument that parental alienation is a form of family violence and, therefore, can be classified as coercive behaviour. Although that argument is based entirely on analogy and has not been supported by empirical work, it's possible that courts could accept the argument and treat as criminals those parents alleged to have alienated children. To prevent this unwanted outcome, the use of parental alienation arguments in family courts must be prohibited before criminalization of coercive control takes place.

A cottage industry of lawyers, mental health professionals and court officials has grown to use the parental alienation concept as leverage in divorce and custody cases. They resist the idea of prohibiting use of parental alienation arguments, and want preferred parents to be seen as criminals practising coercive behaviours. I am here to counter that viewpoint.

To briefly state my qualifications to comment on this topic, I have a Ph.D. in psychology from Brandeis University. I have been working for a couple of decades on the subject of potentially harmful psychosocial treatments for children, and for about 10 years on parental alienation issues. I have published critiques of parental alienation ideas in peer-reviewed professional journals. I'm co-editor of the book *Challenging Parental Alienation*, and I have another book, *Someone Said Parental Alienation*, currently in production.

I interviewed seven young adults who were alleged to be alienated from a parent, most of whom had been ordered into some form of reunification therapy. All of them regarded the treatment situation and the treatment itself as insulting, frightening and ineffective. None of them had the good relationships with both parents that the parental alienation proponents claim as treatment outcomes. One had no contact with either parent. None had a good relationship with the formerly avoided parent. All had left the avoided parent's home at the first legal opportunity. In addition, several of the interviewees had not refused contact with one parent to begin with, but had asked for schedule changes or other modifications that would not avoid contact: Their attitudes later toward one parent were actually worse than they had been before the treatment.

Young adults who experienced parental alienation allegations reported ongoing anger toward one parent, and depression and anxiety. One of the interviewees was treated for PTSD after her reunification therapy experience, which had included the use of youth transport service workers. All expressed concern about threats that they would be sent to residential treatment or wilderness camps if they did not co-operate. Tragically, we are now seeing a number of cases in which children who were coerced into contact with a parent were murdered by that parent. Their stated fears of that person were all too justified, but the courts and court professionals interpreted them as evidence of parental alienation.

Certain U.S. states are beginning to pass laws outlawing aspects of reunification therapy, and these laws are being named in honour of the murdered children who experienced coercive behaviour by the courts as well as by the parent they wanted to avoid. These murders are, of course, far from typical of parental alienation cases, but they demonstrate the most serious end of the outcomes possible when the parental alienation concept becomes a part of judicial thinking.

I also interviewed over a dozen parents who were alleged to have caused parental alienation, although there exists no established method for ascertaining whether this has happened. The impact of this experience on the preferred parents was enormous. They experienced no-contact orders that originally were for 90 days' complete separation, but which could be and were extended for months or even years without so much as a phone call with the child. The preferred parents, usually the mothers, were ordered by the reunification therapist to write letters to their children, in which they were to falsely confess that they had caused the children to avoid the other parents and that they regretted this deeply. The letters had to be approved by the therapist, who often demanded multiple rewrites or did not accept the letter at all.

● (1640)

The preferred parents were ordered to pay exorbitant fees for the children's and their own treatment. In some cases, they had to sell their houses and other assets to manage this.

In my opinion, use of the parental alienation concept in family courts is potentially harmful to children and families and should be prohibited. I would recommend that the courts be prevented from giving orders for reunification therapy by that or any other name, custody reversals based on parental alienation beliefs, no-contact orders in response to allegations of parental alienation, and the use of youth transport service workers in cases where parental alienation is alleged.

These recommendations, similar to those suggested by the United Nations special rapporteur, are intended to prevent undesirable outcomes of the proposed criminalization of coercive behaviour. Such outcomes could occur if the claim were to be accepted by courts that alleged parental alienation is equal to family violence and if the recommended steps are not taken.

Thank you for your attention.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Point of order, Madam Chair.

We can hear the witness on the floor channel and in the earpiece, and we can hear the interpretation on top of that. It's really annoying.

Are you experiencing the same problem?

[English]

The Chair: She will be contacted after this statement to fix the echo before we have an opportunity to ask her questions, okay?

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Madam Chair, it's not only happening with the witness, I am hearing you and the interpreter speaking simultaneously through the earpiece. That's not normal.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: When I speak, I hear myself too. There's an echo.

[English]

The Chair: Pam.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thanks.

When you were speaking, I could hear it here and in the room. There's something wrong with the echo.

The Chair: Okay.

Prior to proceeding to the additional witnesses for testimony, I'll suspend for a few minutes to see if we can sort out the echo, and then we'll circle back to the witnesses.

I'll just suspend for a few minutes.

• (1640) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1650)

The Chair: At this point, I would like to offer my apologies to the witnesses, who are generous with their time this afternoon.

I do thank Professor Mercer. You were at the helm of this, and I appreciate your working through it with us.

At this point, I would like to open the floor to Witness 1 for up to five minutes.

Witness 1 (As an Individual): Good afternoon.

I come before you today to address the weaponization of parental alienation accusations against protective mothers by sharing my personal experience.

“Don't mention abuse. I know it sounds wrong, but don't bring it up. Mothers who are victims of domestic violence don't fare well in family court.”

This jarring warning was the first legal advice I received. It proved prophetic.

Abusers are masters at deflecting blame. Their primary tool is accusations of parental alienation. The family court is pro-contact at any cost. Alienation accusations are taken more seriously than abuse when raised by fathers in family court.

These accusations are designed to allow abusers to masquerade as victims. In my case, I was shocked that my abuser presented the abuse he inflicted as being perpetrated by me, his victim. He pro-

jected his actions onto me to reduce the case to a he-said-she-said situation for the court.

Despite his saying he didn't want the child to live and the fact that I had suffered severe physical violence, such as strangulation—a precursor to homicide—I was told he'd still be getting parenting time.

Despite proof of his having missed or rescheduled nearly half of his supervised visits, all he had to do was file again to get unsupervised visits and overnights, based on the assumption that a child should have more time with their father. Abusers just file again until they find a judge to give them the result they want.

When unsupervised contact started, my daughter began disclosing abuse. This disclosure began at two years old. Naively, I filed a motion before the family court, seeking protection to reinstate supervised parenting time. I provided third party proof from our child's family doctor, an emergency room doctor and her day care staff. His proof was letters from his mom and girlfriend, and alienation allegations.

Guess who won. He did.

I was punished through court costs, meaning that I had to pay money to my abuser. Child abuse disclosures give leverage or benefit to abusive fathers, because they are allowed to use the junk science of parental alienation to their benefit. In fact, the father filed for custody reversal, citing parental alienation. The legal advice was to settle to avoid her being given to him full time. She had never lived with him at any time.

Unverified sexual abuse allegations from the child implicating the father increase the likelihood of a custody reversal. Court and social services professionals are taught to be suspicious of mothers when children disclose abuse. That is the power of parental alienation claims. They effectively silence women and children who are victims of abuse.

We have undergone two separate police investigations, and they failed to find any wrongdoing. However, I faced skepticism when I met with the police, who often lack training in domestic abuse dynamics and abuser tactics. Instead of providing protection, they sometimes interpreted my efforts to protect my child as evidence supporting the false claims of alienation.

Criminalizing coercive control without banning accusations of parental alienation will simply reproduce this outcome on more women. The consequences of these institutional failures have been profound and far-reaching.

My daughter is still forced to maintain unsafe contact with her abuser, causing ongoing trauma and emotional distress. I've endured ongoing abuse through our legal system and face financial strain, job loss and health issues due to constant legal battles. The emotional toll of watching my child's distress, fearing repercussions for reporting abuse and the constant threat of losing custody of my child, is overwhelming and unbearable. I long for the day we will finally be free.

I'm not alone in this situation. Countless women are experiencing this violence.

In conclusion, I urge this committee to recognize the detrimental part that parental alienation plays in the cycle of coercive control. When you consider legislation on coercive control, I implore you not to pass any law that fails to include a ban on allegations of parental alienation by abusive fathers.

● (1655)

Please don't leave us behind. These accusations have become one of the most powerful tools for abusers to use to maintain coercive control and weaponize our legal and social systems against women and children seeking safety.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Witness 1, for sharing so vulnerably.

Next, I would like to welcome Ms. Swithin.

You have up to five minutes.

Ms. Tina Swithin (Advocate for Family Court Reform, One Mom's Battle): Thank you.

I am here about an issue that jeopardizes the well-being of children and undermines the integrity of the Canadian family courts. That is the pseudo-theory or concept of parental alienation in family court and in the context of coercive control. My organization has a Canadian chapter, so I have a front-row seat to this crisis.

"Parental alienation" is a term that was coined by disgraced psychiatrist Richard Gardner. He crafted it as a legal strategy for men accused of sexually abusing children. Gardner's views were controversial and deeply troubling. He advised that children suffering from alienation should be separated from their preferred parent and subjected to threat therapy. When asked what a good mother would do if her child disclosed sexual abuse, Gardner instructed that she should say that she doesn't believe them, that she's going to beat them for saying that, and that they don't ever talk that way again about their father.

Parental alienation is a theory that has been overwhelmingly dismissed by the medical community and governing bodies, including the World Health Organization, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association. Proponents have unsuccessfully attempted to have it included in the DSM for over a decade. The United Nations special rapporteur called for this dangerous theory to be eradicated from family courts worldwide. I agree with this recommendation.

The alienation industry, as I call it, is very lucrative, with a predictable pipeline. I know that you have been given a copy of this

diagram. You will see at the end of the pipeline the big-ticket items: the reunification camps and the intensive programs.

I have personally witnessed the toll that these programs take on parents and children, and the cost of youth services is shocking. Parents face significant loss of income because of the time-consuming and costly litigation. Many lose their jobs, homes and cars and face insurmountable debt and bankruptcy. However, equally devastating is the trauma that these families endure, which will ripple through into future generations.

For the past 15 years, I have observed a troubling pattern. Each time there is exposure on the tactics of those who work in the alienation industry, they just rebrand. What started as "parental alienation syndrome" has been called many things over the years. The latest is "resist and refuse dynamics". The constant rebranding allows them to escape scrutiny and accountability, and now they have begun to co-opt the language of coercive control. This is very dangerous.

Dr. Emma Katz is a leading expert on coercive control, and she offers vital clarification. She emphasizes that the work on coercive control prioritizes children's rights and respects their autonomy. Parental alienation proponents emphasize adult dominance over children. We must be vigilant and not swayed by those who try to conflate these concepts.

The framework of coercive control makes it clear that overriding a child's wishes is harmful and traumatizing. When asked about the reunification modalities utilized in family court proceedings, Dr. Christine Cocchiola, a coercive control expert, explained to me that children forced into these treatments are coerced to acquiesce to the clinical goal: repair of a relationship with an alleged abuser, someone they fear. Research affirms that rupturing the attachment and creating an environment of unsafety is traumatic to the developing brain and compromises healthy brain development.

Here in the U.S., we are successfully passing legislation that prevents judges from ordering children into these programs labelled as barbaric by our lawmakers. We passed one such law in Canada last year, and now, as a result, one of the most notorious reunification camp owners has relocated and is operating in British Columbia. Canada is becoming a hotbed for reunification profiteers.

It is imperative that we disentangle the pseudo-concept of parental alienation from family court altogether and from legislation surrounding coercive control. We have to take swift action and stop unscrupulous professionals from using children as revenue streams.

● (1700)

Thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Swithin.

At this point, I would like to welcome our last witness, Dr. Heslop.

You have five minutes.

Dr. Lisa Heslop (Associate, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, Western University): Thank you for inviting me to attend on behalf of the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, CREVAWC. I have experience in the matters being debated. I worked for 30 years as the head of a clinical crisis intervention team at a large urban police service and within the family court system for over 13 years. I was a member of the national framework committee on proactive community policing responses to intimate partner violence and have done extensive longitudinal research on police contact with persons with mental illness.

Over the past few years, I've co-led projects related to family violence within the family court context here at CREVAWC. One of these projects, funded by the Department of Justice Canada, responds to the 2021 changes to the Divorce Act that name family violence, including coercive control, as factors for consideration to the best interests of children involved in family litigation. We have built an online guide that will aid family court professionals in developing parenting plans that account for the nature, severity and impact of family violence, including coercive control, on survivor parents and their children.

Coercive control is significant and devastating, and at times has lifelong consequences for survivors. It often extends, as you've heard, long past separation, and can include litigation abuse in family court and other tactics that are intended to overwhelm and deplete the survivor's financial and emotional resources.

At the centre, we work across sectors, including justice systems, with allied professionals, survivors and police, and we can confidently say that there are significant gaps in knowledge related to coercive control that place survivors and their children at risk and contribute to low rates of reporting and to inadequate responses from professionals across sectors.

We add our voices to others who've cautioned against the criminalization of coercive control without a multipronged survivor-led approach that includes significant investments in services and resources for survivors, interventions for perpetrators that address violence initiation and escalation, and education on coercive control for all social service, justice and health professionals. We strongly support the conclusion of the Nova Scotia Mass Casualty Commission that criminal solutions to gender-based violence are effective only to the extent that they are part of a broader, community-based response.

Since other submissions have focused on these topics, I'll spend the remaining time talking about a key concern with the bill as crafted, and particularly about the inclusion of threats of suicidality as a form of coercive control. We have two major concerns.

The first is we have spent a long time trying to disentangle the mental health and criminal justice systems. Police are not mental health professionals. These are complex situations that are not likely to be easily sorted out on scene. When the police get it wrong, a

person in a mental health crisis is charged criminally instead of getting the treatment they require.

Second, labelling suicidality as a form of coercive control holds a strong risk of oversimplifying this complexity. For example, I was involved in a situation in which a man made a number of threats to kill himself during the process of separating from his partner. These were experienced by his partner as attempts to get her to stay in the relationship, a view that was supported by the police and may well have been his intent. However, weeks later, this man took a knife from the kitchen, slit his throat in front of his partner and died.

We recommend great caution here. These things can coexist. A person can use suicidal threats to keep his partner from leaving, and he can also be suicidal. It's important to remember that one-third of femicides are femicide-suicides. Try also to imagine a scenario where a survivor expresses suicidal thoughts to her partner during the process of separation. He calls the police, alleging her suicidal ideation is coercively controlling. Will she be charged? This is how we go backwards.

For the legislation on coercive control to have the positive impact intended, safeguards are needed. We recommend that, at the very least, Canada follow in Australia's footsteps, delaying the time at which it comes into force. The delay will, among other things, allow time for considerable education, training and consultation with police, criminal justice professionals and stakeholders and with the frontline sector. An implementation task force should be set up to manage the introduction of changes in the Criminal Code. This task force should consider necessary education and training, and also provisions that can be put in place to protect against the misuse of these new provisions.

• (1705)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, and thank you to all of the witnesses for your opening remarks.

At this point, we will move to our first round of questions. I'd like to begin with Michelle Ferreri.

You have six minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you so much to our witnesses here today.

Obviously, this is some very deeply upsetting testimony that we've heard as we study coercive control. It has been a kind of sidebar for me personally, about parental alienation and reunification camps, which I'm learning more about and which I think a lot of people don't know about.

It's also pretty timely for a lot of people who are pop culture folks watching Netflix, if they're watching *The Menendez Brothers*, as a lot of young people are. I see you guys shaking your heads.

Tina, your testimony that nobody believed you were abused is pretty shocking. That's a very shocking story and shows how far we've come in that time frame to now believing young men are capable of being sexually abused.

I think it's timely to reflect on the notion that you don't know what you don't know. There are a lot of people who truly do not understand coercive control, as was the case in a lot of that.

I want to start with Ms. Mercer. You have done some incredible research, and thank you for the work you do.

These psychologists and therapists are mandated by the courts and receiving funds for these therapy programs, these reunifications. Who's mandating the qualifications of these therapists? Who's overseeing that?

• (1710)

Prof. Jean Mercer: As far as I understand it, people can call themselves reunification therapists without any particular training. However, people who call themselves that are very often involved with essentially corporate structures, organizations that specialize especially in a couple of the reunification therapies that are well known and present themselves to the world as having this capacity for dealing with children who are avoiding one parent—

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I'm sorry. I don't mean to cut you off. I have only five minutes,

I just wanted to get more of that from you. There seems to be a serious profiteering that is happening. To me, it's a follow-the-money situation in terms of who these therapists are. There seem to be a select few—many of them aren't even Canadian—and there seems to be some sort of insider trading, for lack of a better term.

To get back to my earlier point about understanding coercive control, these judges, who obviously aren't educated, are mandating these therapists that you say have no necessary qualifications under a board. Are they not overseen by anyone?

Prof. Jean Mercer: Therapists who are licensed are overseen to a certain extent in that they have to continue their professional education. To be a reunification therapist means nothing in particular. Now, you can have a person who is, in the United States and, I think, in Canada too, a board certified specialist in a particular kind of psychological work. For example, you could have a board certified forensic psychologist.

There is no such thing as board certification in reunification therapy. The people who are doing reunification therapy on the whole are people who, as you say, will receive a good deal of money for their work. If we keep in mind that when we're looking at the intensive treatments, the so-called camps, we may be looking at \$20,000 or more for a four-day session...so you're right: Follow the money.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: It is wild that we are putting people in charge of children who are probably already traumatized and putting them into a further trauma environment.

I'm going to go to you, Tina. The biggest thing I find when I'm delving into this is family law, number one, with these judges who are appointed. We have this massive shortage. They don't have to have a lot of knowledge in family law. They don't know much. It's mostly criminal.

Where is the line between provincial and federal, and what do you see as the federal government's role in family law in protecting children from this clearly toxic approach?

Ms. Tina Swithin: I can speak only to the U.S. I'm not familiar with Canada, but I know that our systems are very similar.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Does anybody on the panel know about that?

I'm finding a massive overlap with the Divorce Act and family law between provincial.... They overlap, and it causes a lot of confusion, and then nobody seems to want to take responsibility for correcting it.

If you can speak on the American side to what we could do, that's fine, but I wonder if there are any other witnesses who could speak to that.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we have only about 15 seconds. If it could be a tight answer, we could go ahead.

Ms. Tina Swithin: I can speak to the U.S.

We passed federal legislation, but each state governs its own state courts. I describe family court as the Wild West. There is no oversight, and that is a huge part of the problem. There is no transparency and no recourse if they get it wrong.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Swithin.

At this point I would like to invite Emmanuella.

You have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here to answer some of our questions today.

My first question is for Dr. Mercer.

Can you tell us what some of the harms are that can come from a parent constantly speaking negatively about another parent, just in general, in situations where that may occur?

• (1715)

Prof. Jean Mercer: Children are very responsive to and are made very anxious and sad by parents who are speaking negatively on any topic. To talk about the other parent negatively, we would have to think about the level to which this is typical in intact families. Every spouse occasionally says something negative about the other spouse, such as, "Your dad left his dirty socks in the living room again."

Before we could actually say what the long-term impact was, particularly of talking negatively about the other partner, we would have to have some sort of baseline measure of how often people do this in any case. That would allow us to say what is really constant negative talk. Until we have that, we can't answer your question, except in a general way. Hearing a lot of negative talk is disturbing to anyone, to children as well as to adults.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: You've said that reunification therapy has been found to be largely ineffective, and if anything, in some cases, has made relationships between children and their parents worse.

We are not experts in psychology, so when we hear this.... All we've heard from witnesses is about reunification camps, reunification therapy.

Can you specify what exactly is meant here? What are the conditions required for this to be harmful for a kid? I'm sure that in many instances, therapy is helpful for a child. In what instances is it harmful?

Prof. Jean Mercer: I'll try to answer your question by describing reunification therapy.

If we're talking about an intensive form of therapy, not in a psychologist's office but in what people are calling camps, even though they're not really camps, a typical scenario would be that the child is not told that they're going to go anywhere for treatment, but they are picked up by youth transport service workers, perhaps as they come out of school or perhaps at one of the parents' houses.

When they ask what's going on, they're told they'll find out when they get there. They're told that if they don't co-operate, the workers have handcuffs. The workers can chase them down and take them down. Their phones, IDs and money are taken away, and they are taken by plane or some other way to an unfamiliar city, where they will go to a hotel or an Airbnb, not a regular clinic or hospital setting.

Once there, the parent they're avoiding also shows up, and they will spend four days being told that they cannot talk about anything that ever happened before. They can't explain why they don't want to be in contact with the parent. Instead, they have to watch videos that will tell them that they have been totally confused and over-persuaded by the other parent and that they can't trust their own feelings about this.

After several days of this, they are told they are going home with the parent they don't want to be with and they may have no contact with the parent they prefer. If they have any contact with that person, he or she, but mainly she, can go to prison for being in contempt of court. That's the treatment.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: How do we ensure, when we're wording a recommendation, that we don't get it wrong, and that people who are analyzing this and putting it into action are not getting it wrong and are actually including your definition?

Prof. Jean Mercer: What we would have to do is not call it reunification therapy and not call it reintegration or reunion or any of the other terms, but instead describe what happens: The child cannot be taken by youth transport service workers; the child cannot be prevented from any contact with the preferred parent; and the child

cannot be placed in the custody of someone with whom there is some kind of record that abuse has occurred.

• (1720)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you so much.

I appreciate your answers. For me, and I think possibly for my colleagues as well, it has clarified so much.

Thank you all for being here to answer our questions today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Andréanne, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being with us today for this additional meeting as part of our study on coercive control.

Ms. Heslop, in your opening remarks, you spoke about a bill. Were you referring to Bill C-332, on the criminalization of coercive control?

[*English*]

Dr. Lisa Heslop: I'm sorry, but I only heard the French question, and I'm not bilingual.

The Chair: Is there a function on your computer or tablet where you can select the English interpretation?

Let's try that again, Andréanne; I'm aware of the time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I thanked the witnesses for taking part in this important additional meeting as part of our study on coercive control.

I would reiterate that the idea for the study came from a request by Quebec government MNAs who tabled the rebuilding trust report and who met with experts in various social and legal spheres. That report led to the adoption of major recommendations in Quebec, such as special courts and electronic bracelets. However, one element does not fall under Quebec jurisdiction and that's the criminalization of coercive control.

Ms. Heslop, here is my question.

In your opening remarks, you mentioned a bill. Were you referring to Bill C-332, which is currently being studied by the Senate and which seeks to criminalize coercive control?

[*English*]

Dr. Lisa Heslop: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Could you tell us more about what you know about the bill and what might be interesting, what's good about it and maybe even what's not so good about it?

[*English*]

Dr. Lisa Heslop: One thing we are very concerned about, and I don't think it's been discussed, is the language around suicidality as being indicative of coercive control. We're very concerned about that. We see the possibility of how that could be used to harm survivors.

The other thing with respect to criminalization is that it places the responsibility of laying those charges on police officers. As I think I mentioned at the beginning, we've been trying to work with them in the family court system, which is much better equipped to assess, to take time, to gather information from multiple sources, to be able to understand, to build rapport and to build trust with survivors so that they'll be able to disclose the information that's required. That doesn't lend itself well to a police officer arriving on scene in an incident-driven system. That concerns us and, I think, leaves survivors vulnerable to being charged in the reverse.

We still continue to see, despite it being three years since the Divorce Act was enacted, a lot of stereotypes about family violence playing out in family court in ways that harm survivors, particularly survivors facing multiple inequities. Those include indigenous survivors and survivors facing poverty and experiencing housing insecurity and trauma-related issues. Survivors continue to be questioned as to why they did not report the violence to authorities, or why they didn't leave, or why they just can't move on. A lot of education has happened in the family court sector, yet here we are, three years later, with so much that still needs to be done to ensure that survivors' experience of family violence—all forms, not just coercive control—are taken seriously and that their disclosures don't lead victims to being unfairly and unjustly accused of fabricating allegations in order to gain advantage, or to being accused, as you've heard, of parental alienation in family court proceedings.

Those are our primary concerns.

• (1725)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: That's interesting. Right now, there's a lot of talk about training police forces. In fact, I'm meeting with an officer from the Granby city police force soon to talk about this; he wants to let me know that an annual conference I went to last year was also attended by police forces, as well as representatives of community groups and the Quebec legal system. They're all interested in Bill C-332. They were talking about how important it is for the bill to pass and the importance of criminalizing coercive control. These stakeholders represented a cross-section of society.

You mentioned something interesting.

I'm now going to turn to Ms. Mercer or Witness 1. Both—

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, I'm sorry.

[*English*]

We will have to leave it there.

Leah, I will pass the floor to you for six minutes, please.

I'm sorry, Andr anne. I provided you with an extra 30 seconds for the translation.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Madam Speaker, I lost over a minute of speaking time because of interpretation. When I resumed speaking, I had to repeat more than a minute. I saw that I had one minute left and I was going to ask my question.

I was at 5 minutes and 16 seconds when I reset the clock, as you suggested I do before I started speaking the last time around.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. I had understood that you had lost about 30 seconds, but was it the entire time that you were posing that question? Is that the concern, that she wasn't understanding the question?

I'm completely open to that, Andr anne.

Leah, can you press pause for a moment?

Andr anne, if you could ask your last remaining question within a minute, that would be terrific.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll ask my question quickly. In any case, it's simple.

Ms. Mercer or Witness 1, I invite you to give me a 15-second answer. You both spoke about family court. In Quebec, it falls under the Quebec government. Would it be important for family courts in Quebec and the provinces to be educated about parental alienation?

[*English*]

Prof. Jean Mercer: Is the question whether it is important?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: We're federal MPs. You were talking to us about family court, but they fall under the jurisdiction of Quebec and the provinces.

Did you also make your case before the provinces?

[*English*]

Dr. Lisa Heslop: Can I take a shot at answering that question?

As you probably know, most of the provincial legislation related to family law is consistent with the Divorce Act, with some exceptions in some of the provinces and territories. Quebec is maybe one of those exceptions, but it's equally important, no matter which piece of legislation you're using, that the same considerations be given.

The Chair: Thank you.

Leah, you have six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

My first question is for Madame Mercer.

We've spoken a lot on other legislation about the importance of educating judges and police officers in terms of the issue around coercive control. I'm certainly not against education, but I was wondering if you could explain how judicial education may not solve the problem with accusations of parental alienation and why legislative reform is needed.

• (1730)

Prof. Jean Mercer: The issue here is that judges are at least supposed to apply the laws as they exist. To educate them in laws as we think they should be rather than as they are would not be very helpful. The legislation would have to create the laws before we could educate judges on the current laws.

Ms. Leah Gazan: What you're saying is that we can't talk about education until we have legislation in place.

Prof. Jean Mercer: That's right.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Another quick question is this: Do you think that the committee should recommend banning reunification therapy, banning accusations of parental alienation, or both?

Prof. Jean Mercer: I don't see how you can ban accusations, but you can ban consideration of those accusations as part of judicial thinking in child custody, and I would say, yes, this should not be permitted as part of the evidence in court or part of the judge's rationale for making a decision.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My next question is for Witness 1.

You said that you were told by your lawyer, "Don't mention abuse." Why did your lawyer ask you not to mention abuse? What was the fear?

Could you respond quickly? Thanks.

Witness 1: Many survivors, when they enter the family court system, will receive advice from lawyers. They say that, if you don't mention the abuse, then you won't have the backlash of that parental alienation accusation, because parental alienation basically re-victimizes the domestic violence that the survivor has gone through by stating that they are unknowingly, not intentionally, sometimes without saying anything, transferring their fears onto the child. They don't understand that an abusive man who is an abuser to women is likely to also be abusive to a more vulnerable child.

This is a common recommendation. It really just speaks to, if you're a victim entering the family court system, a victim of family

violence, the thin line that you walk on every day either trying to receive protection by saying, "Hey, there's abuse present for either myself or my child," or trying to appease and not be seen as an alienator.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My last question is for Lisa Heslop.

I can't remember who you were responding to, but you said something about how accusations of coercive control can sometimes have the opposite impact, penalizing victims instead of perpetrators, particularly for indigenous folks and BIPOC folks. Can you expand on that a little?

Dr. Lisa Heslop: Sure.

I think that in the absence of a much broader understanding, when you're relying on a system that is incident-driven, there's a lot of room for.... For example, when we look at the criminal justice system as the response to intimate partner violence or gender-based violence, there's been a lot of unintended consequences from doing that. When officers aren't able or aren't trained to identify a primary perpetrator, our mandatory charging laws result too often in women being charged with defensive use of force.

One of the really interesting studies that has just come out is around women who have been charged with what they describe as defensive use of force saying they would never call the police again. These are women who are living in very precarious and dangerous situations. Loss of trust in the police service, for those women, puts them at a far greater risk.

This is the same and probably even much more complicated than primary perpetration for police to assess on scene. As I was saying, we're training people in the family courts to be able to assess in an environment where they have a lot more access to information from multiple sources over a long period of time. We're struggling to move the dial on their understanding of coercive control.

• (1735)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Heslop.

Anna, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you Madam Chair.

I'm going to give my last two minutes to Michelle.

My question here is.... Maybe it's not a question; it's a statement.

According to the United Nations, children have the right to protection from abuse, exploitation and harmful substances, and to have their views listened to and their evolving capacities respected.

Parents also have the right to protect their children and to ensure that they receive the nurturing they require, so I don't understand this whole bit about taking them away from the parents or one of the parents. Whatever happened to the foster care system?

I'm bringing this up because I was part of that system, and I didn't have this situation. They did listen to the child, and then the parents were assessed.

Why are we not doing that today instead of punishing the child?

I don't know if Lisa wants to answer that.

Dr. Lisa Heslop: I'm not sure I totally understand your question.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: If there is a situation with children and they're in danger, are the parents not assessed by professionals?

I was placed in the foster care system. Are they not assessed to ensure that the child is better with one of the parents? Are they not reviewing the circumstances?

Dr. Lisa Heslop: I can think of situations that I've been involved with where children were removed from their preferred parent and placed with the parent that they were not comfortable with or wanted to reduce their contact with, without findings of parental alienation and where there was no assessment.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: In reality, are we listening to the child?

Prof. Jean Mercer: May I comment on that?

No, we are not listening to the child. In fact, what you will find is that there are members of the parental alienation community, if you want to call it that, who state specifically that to listen to the child is harmful to the child. They say that the child must comply with the family hierarchy and with the authority of, especially, the father, and that to allow them to do otherwise by asking questions, filing their complaints or whatever it may be is in fact directly harmful to their personality development.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you very much for that.

I think Witness 1 wants to say something before I pass the mic over to my colleague, Michelle.

Witness 1: In my experience, whether it be CAS or police, these attitudes that stem from parental alienation have really infiltrated all of those institutions. I have had police officers say to me dismissively, we don't think anything happened. Did you want something to have happened to her? I've had them try to get me to agree with them that without saying anything, somehow energetically, maybe I was the reason for her fear.

We've been through multiple CAS investigations, but the threshold to verify those concerns is so high that they understand that there is something going on and they'll acknowledge that, and she is able to articulate, at eight years old, even the spit that hits her face when he's screaming in her face. She has repeatedly disclosed and named it as abuse. They do not listen to the child.

There is such a high threshold. They say that we don't have any physical.... Where is the bruising? I need a time. I need a date. She talks about it like it's happened, but we don't know when exactly, and we need the exact time and date to verify.

• (1740)

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you very much for that, Witness 1.

I'm going to pass it to my colleague, Michelle.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I have only 30 seconds, and I'm going to go to Ms. Mercer. I'd really like, on the record, to ask, do you think that this study needs to be opened up further and passed on to a committee like justice, where we can really delve into where the law is and see this looked at further? I feel like this has really been an eye-opening experience for a lot of people who don't know about this.

Prof. Jean Mercer: In my opinion, the first step has to be the legislation. After that, follow up with a study, yes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: That's legislation to do what? Sorry, can you confirm what you mean by that?

Prof. Jean Mercer: I mean legislation to make sure that the coercive control act cannot be used against people who are accused of parental alienation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next, I'd like to welcome Sonia, for five minutes.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being with us.

My first question is for Professor Mercer.

Professor Mercer, you wrote a book, *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*.

What kind of direction are you talking about in the book, especially regarding orders relying on principles and practices based on parental alienation?

Prof. Jean Mercer: It's an edited book. I just want to make sure everybody understands that there are a number of authors here, and I'm not the only one.

Basically, the idea was that we have to examine what has been claimed by advocates of the parental alienation system and to clarify and critique the statements and claims they have made, on which many judicial decisions have been based. Judicial decisions should not be based on those claims if the claims can be shown to be unsupported, which they can readily be shown to be.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: From that, what do judges or court officials need to know in order to properly address the parental alienation disputes or claims, and what kind of support system should be there when people are going through that type of dispute?

Prof. Jean Mercer: I would say, first of all, that child custody evaluations need to be done by experienced evaluators who do not have any particular commitment to one set of ideas rather than another. To have someone who is part of the parental alienation community evaluate a child for parental alienation is simply asking for trouble, because they always find it when they look for it.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say, this is the most severe case I've ever seen. All the cases, though, are apparently the most severe case that they've ever seen. Nobody ever asks them, how many cases have you seen, or how do you know this?

I think the point there is that attorneys, particularly, who are acting in defence of alleged alienators, have to know how to ask the right questions of the alienation experts, the ones who are claiming that they see parental alienation there. They need to understand, and judges also need to understand, the nature of the research that has been promulgated on this. The fact is that there has never been any independent study of any of these phenomena, and that, therefore, we have only statements by people who are proving what they want to prove.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

Dr. Heslop, what support systems have been proven...for the children who are experiencing parental alienation, particularly when they are in a high-conflict custody situation? We heard one of the witnesses talking about it being a very complex issue when a survivor has suicidal ideation. What better support system should be in place?

• (1745)

Dr. Lisa Heslop: I think that one of the most important things children need in the case they're embroiled in, when there's a back-and-forth, is legal counsel. It would be a really important step to have legal counsel available for children who are in the midst of this.

With respect to the suicidality piece, it's listed in the coercive control legislation, third reading, as an indicator of coercive control. I think that's a dangerous thing to put there, because it puts the onus on the police to assess the mental health status of an individual, to differentiate between coercively controlling behaviour and mental illness or distress, like depression. We know that, as a result of their experience, survivors have high rates of depression, anxiety disorders or other things that could easily be used against them.

The Chair: Thank you, Sonia.

Andréanne, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My questions in this last round are for Ms. Swithin.

You gave examples of people who moved to British Columbia from California. You were talking about reunification therapies, correct?

[*English*]

Ms. Tina Swithin: We had a lot of reunification camps here in California. Last year we passed Piqui's Law, which is modelled after Kayden's Law. It prohibits judges from ordering children into these intensive programs and ordering custody switches where kids are going to their abuser. As a result, we are seeing them leave our state and go...a lot of them already testify in other states. It is very common to traffic children over state lines or from Canada to the U.S., but now one of our main, most notorious reunification camp owners, Lynn Steinberg, is in British Columbia.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: You talked about camps in the U.S. moving to provinces such as British Columbia and the transfer of children. Ms. Heslop also mentioned cases in Nova Scotia. You even talked about Canada being a hotbed. What exactly did you mean by "hotbed"?

[*English*]

Ms. Tina Swithin: This is an umbrella business with a very strong network of alienation proponents. Dr. Mercer referred to it as a "cottage industry". They work together in unison, like a very well-oiled machine. When judges are making orders for reunification treatments, they are sending them to anyone...where it is a known intensive program, or the people who run these intensive programs come to the area where the children are located and do the intensive programs there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Leah, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

Ms. Swithin, I know you're a lawyer, but I also know that you ended up representing yourself in court. I'm glad you have a law background and understand the legal system, but I can't imagine how traumatizing it would be to have to fight for your parental rights and at the same time maintain a legal distance to analyze it.

That brings me to the question about inequalities in the justice system for folks who can't afford proper legal help, who might only qualify for limited legal aid programs. I'm wondering whether you could speak a bit to that.

• (1750)

Ms. Tina Swithin: Actually, I will make a clarification. I'm not an attorney. I have no legal background at all. I was one of those parents you are describing.

I left a very abusive marriage with less than \$200 to my name. I ended up in a women's shelter, afraid for my life and afraid for the lives of my daughters. I had to walk into the court system for the first time in my life and learn how to represent myself. I am not an anomaly. These stories are all over.

I am a very strong, resilient person, but for so many survivors, when they are so beaten down by domestic abuse and coercive control, they crumble. They don't have the ability to do what I did. A huge problem in our system is that there are very few resources for survivors.

Ms. Leah Gazan: This brings me to another question. I think there's...

Actually, Witness 1 wanted to comment, and I don't want to take up that time, in case you wanted to add something.

I see your hand's up.

Witness 1: I wanted to add something addressing the bias within the family court system from my own personal experience.

I've been at family court here in Canada for six years. At no point since I entered this system has my abuser, the father of my child, ever been sanctioned or called out, or had any sort of accountability, really, in the family court system.

There have been incidents of failing to return her on days like Mother's Day in order to inflict emotional harm on me. That was brushed aside completely. It was not even addressed. However, my daughter refusing to go and leave with him, despite my following the court order to a T and bringing her for an exchange, and the documented history of abuse that she's alleging about her father... If she doesn't leave with him, the family court judges label me as interfering with his parenting time and ask me to pay him. He's never once faced any repercussions, and each time, I'm ordered to pay him costs.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Witness 1.

Dominique, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Yet again, I'm extremely concerned by what I'm hearing today, particularly with regard to reunification camps. Personally, I'd call them reform camps. Everyone knows that reform camps are places where they try to re-educate young people and train them the hard way. It's very worrying. It's quite simply the tangent our study has taken up to now, and that's what we're very concerned about, as parliamentarians.

Ms. Heslop, what can you tell us about these camps? Are the professional associations not a little concerned about what's happening there? Has anyone raised a red flag about what's going on? Should we send in the police or youth services? I'm very concerned by what we're hearing today and by what we've heard throughout our study.

We're talking about corporal punishment. I wouldn't say we're talking about sexual punishment but when you force a child to hug and kiss their father, when there's currently a movement towards consent, there's a problem.

What should we do? It takes time to amend legislation or change attitudes and practices. Training judges and lawyers takes time. I get the feeling that it's ingrained in the way things are done.

Starting now, how can we create positive change?

• (1755)

[*English*]

Dr. Lisa Heslop: This is a topic that needs a fulsome discussion and in-depth work. We agree that there are legislative solutions that should be considered. One of the things that can perhaps be done more easily is to ensure that children who are subject to these orders have independent legal counsel. There are provisions in Ontario, through the Office of the Children's Lawyer—other provinces have the same sort of service—whereby children can be granted independent legal counsel to assure them of their rights and ensure that their voices are heard in the courts.

I would really encourage you, going back to an earlier comment made by somebody, that this is a topic that is definitely worthy of far more intensive and in-depth work.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you very much.

I understand that once you go to court, the lawyer is there to listen to the child. The problem occurs when the court authorizes the child's transfer.

How is it that our children are leaving Canada to go to the United States? That's the other question we need to be asking. When parents are separated, you need the other parent's permission to cross the border with your child to go to the beach in the summer. However, children are being taken out of Canada and sent to reform schools in the United States. I don't understand that at all. That's the problem. As long as the case is before the courts, things are okay, since there are actions that can be taken, but once the judge decides to send the child outside the country to the United States, there is no further recourse.

Ms. Mercer, what do you think about all that? Did you know that young people were going to camps in the United States?

[*English*]

Prof. Jean Mercer: Yes, I am aware of that fact. I'm also aware that, certainly just a few years ago, therapists from the United States were travelling to Canada to do their routine there.

When you're asking how they can take the child, say, if they're going from Canada to the U.S., the question is this: Who is going to complain? If the other parent complains, that parent is going to be found in contempt of court. They're attempting to counter the orders of the judge. They have been told not to talk about this, but they are talking about it, and, therefore, they're going to be in contempt, and money fines or even imprisonment may follow that.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you, Ms. Mercer. My time is up.

Madam Chair, I think that we'll need to discuss this at a future in camera meeting, but our report needs to be sent to provincial authorities and police forces. People and groups need to know that we are looking at this issue and that we are extremely concerned.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Vien.

[*English*]

Lisa, you have five minutes.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

My sincere thanks to all the witnesses who are here with us today. I've invited most, if not all, of the witnesses on parental alienation, because I was horrified to find out what was going on. I absolutely agree that it's a big part of coercive control, and we can't legislate against coercive control unless we address parental alienation.

There's another issue that was raised to me recently, Chair, by Survivor Safety Matters. I didn't have time to invite them to committee, but I'd like to ask the clerk if maybe she's received the brief, because it's important that we have this information in front of us when we come forward with our recommendations. They're saying that perpetrators who have a history of coercive control also have the right to get personal information about their opponents in court—personal and confidential records—which puts the victims in danger. People who are in court are not able to receive therapy at the same time, even though it's probably the worst time in their lives, because that therapy session could become part of the court's evidence. It includes medical records, psychiatric records, therapeutic records and records of counselling, education, employment, child welfare and adoption. Even personal journals and diaries can be taken by the court and used against victims of coercive control.

I'm clearly not the person who's giving evidence here, but I wanted to go over the brief that they've given me and maybe clarify with the clerk that we have this information in front of us and that we all have access to it.

• (1800)

The Chair: Can you clarify who it was from?

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: It was a collaboration between SAVIS, or Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Services of Halton region, and Survivor Safety Matters.

The Chair: Yes. It has been received. We'll ensure that it's distributed and considered.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you very much, Chair and Clerk.

Getting back to parental alienation, I'd like to again thank our witnesses for being here.

Tina Swithin, I think you coined the phrase that there is an “alienation industry pipeline”. I have your schematic in front of me, of the six-stage process. Can you explain to us, for anybody who's watching and doesn't have this in front of them, what you have described in this six-step process and how you came up with this data and information?

Ms. Tina Swithin: I've been studying this for the past 13 years. I have an online community of survivors, of 250,000 people around the world, so I have a big overview of this issue. Reunification camps and the pseudo-concept of alienation are of special interest to me. It's a continuation of power and control. When a relationship ends, we encourage domestic abuse survivors to leave the relationship. When they do, the abuser's need for power and control doesn't just dissipate. The children become the pawns in that. It is the abuser's way to maintain power and control.

Research shows that when a mother alleges abuse, they are more likely to lose custody, as we've talked about here. The father—typically, a lot of times it's the father—doesn't have a relationship with the kids. The kids are afraid of him because of abuse, or there was

no bond to begin with. As soon as that happens, going back to the “follow the money” we touched on, you then have all these pseudo-professionals. You can be a life coach and run a reunification program. You don't need a degree. They are lying in wait for these families. They specifically target families with more money, because those are the families who can pay for these services, but everybody is—

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I'm sorry. Just to add to that, we've also heard lots of stories of women who became impoverished because they had to pay these fees. It's not exclusively people with money, right?

Ms. Tina Swithin: I know of a woman who was forced to cash out her daughter's college fund to pay for a reunification camp. The further down the pipeline you go, you get to reunification therapy. We know that it will not be successful, because you cannot force two people to have a relationship when one is resistant or afraid of the other person. They will stamp it as severely alienated—as Dr. Mercer said, all of these cases are apparently severely alienated—which pushes them further through the pipeline and makes them candidates for these intensive programs, which can cost, for four days, between \$15,000 and \$40,000 U.S.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I have another minute, so I'll go to Lisa Heslop.

I believe you have written about engaging fathers who commit family violence. I'm wondering if you can talk about that. What we've heard at this committee is that there are some men who can be reformed and who can learn, and there are others who are narcissists. What do we do in that situation?

• (1805)

Dr. Lisa Heslop: I think the paper you're talking about was a piece of work we did in a community as a result of a tragic event in our city. The idea was that we would reach out to men who were at moderate to high risk of reoffending. The lower-end perpetrators were being shuffled into the PAR program. Those higher-risk guys, the ones you're talking about, were hopefully going to be kept in custody, or the police would manage their release.

The idea was that instead of taking women, putting them in shelters, and making children leave their schools and their communities and so on, if you start working with the people who cause harm and really focus intervention on those guys, then maybe you'll have some success in being able to reduce the chances that they'll harm someone else, including their children or their partner.

We found that by using the crisis of being arrested and charged, with access for them to one-on-one counselling or really just basic social work that targets the things that created risk in that man's life, we had fantastic results. Compared with another group of men who were charged and were matched in terms of their risk markers, the chances of violent recidivism against their partner were reduced by 50%.

The Chair: Thank you.

Folks, that concludes our panel for today.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all of the witnesses for your testimony. This also concludes our study on coercive behaviour. Thank you to everyone, including past and present witnesses, who has contributed to this report.

What we'll do now is suspend for about eight to 10 minutes while we go in camera for the last part of the session.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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