Domestic violence in Australia: a quick guide to the issues

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Overview and definitions
This paper summarises a recent Parliamentary Library publication on domestic violence. It provides an overview of the prevalence, risk factors and cost of domestic violence in Australia.

This paper uses the term domestic violence to refer to ‘acts of violence that occur between people who have, or have had, an intimate relationship’ which is the definition used in the Australian Government’s National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022. It may include physical, sexual, financial, emotional or psychological abuse. The ‘central element of domestic violence is an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner through fear’. Family violence is a broader term which may involve a variety of kinship and marital arrangements. It is often used in the context of, though not restricted to, violence experienced in Indigenous communities.

Prevalence
In 2013 the World Health Organization found that violence against women is a violation of human rights that affects more than one third of all women, and ‘a global public health problem of epidemic proportions’.

Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) notes that, in Australia, domestic violence is the most prevalent form of violence experienced by women, and a woman is more likely to be assaulted in her home by a male partner than anywhere or anyone else.

Information on the prevalence of domestic violence in Australia is derived from surveys including the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey (PSS) 2012 and 2005, the Australian elements of the 2004 International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS), and the 1996 Women’s Safety Australia.

Although a stronger evidence base is required as the full extent of domestic violence remains unknown, it is known that the majority of those who experience domestic violence are women, and such violence affects members of all cultures, ages and socio-economic groups. ANROWS has summarised the results of the 2012 PSS, highlighting that, since the age of 15:

• 1 in 6 Australian women had experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner
• 1 in 19 Australian men had experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner
• 1 in 4 Australian women had experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner
• 1 in 7 Australian men had experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner.

There are a range of challenges involved in collecting and analysing data on domestic violence. The 2012 PSS defined violence as at least one incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault, so these figures fail to reflect different patterns and experiences of violence, including duration, scale and severity. Women are over-represented in intimate partner homicides, and much more likely to experience
sexual assault than men. Of all Australian women, 15 per cent had been sexually assaulted by a person they knew. One in 22 Australian men had experienced sexual violence, by a person known or unknown to them.

Perpetration of violence is also gendered, and ANROWS states that it is more likely for a person to experience violence from a male rather than a female perpetrator. More than three times as many people over the age of 15 were found to have experienced violence from a male than a female.

**Risk factors and at-risk groups**

Key research findings demonstrate that:

- **Gender inequality** is a key determinant of violence against women.
- **Alcohol and drug use** can lead to higher levels of aggression by perpetrators. A study found that between 2000 and 2006 44 per cent of all intimate partner homicides, and 87 per cent of Indigenous intimate partner homicides, were alcohol related.
- **Past experience** of violent victimisation can predict future victimisation. IVAWS found that women who experienced abuse during childhood are one and a half times more likely to experience violence in adulthood than those who did not. People who experienced childhood sexual abuse were found to be three times more likely to experience partner violence than those who had not.
- **Pregnancy** may intensify the risk of domestic violence. A quarter of women who experienced partner violence since the age of 15 reported experiencing domestic violence for the first time from a previous partner while pregnant.
- **Separated women** are more likely to experience violence than married women, and it is most common for women to experience violence from a male ex-partner. It may be that violence follows separation, or the decision to separate is due to violence. International studies indicate that leaving a violent partner may increase the risk of more severe, or even fatal, violence.
- **Young women** are more likely to have recently experienced violence than older women. Researchers suggest that inexperience, age differences in relationships, and lack of access to services exacerbate younger women’s vulnerability to violence. Young men are more likely to hold pro-violence attitudes, and research indicates that pro-violence attitudes decrease with age.
- **Indigenous women** and their children are more likely to experience violence than any other section of society. When compared to non-Indigenous women, Indigenous women are five times more likely to be homicide victims. Rates of domestic assault reported to police are also more than six times higher for Indigenous women.
- **Rural and remote areas** have a higher reported incidence of domestic violence than metropolitan settings. Those who have experienced domestic violence may lack access to services, transport and telecommunications, and suffer a lack of anonymity.
- **Women with disabilities** are vulnerable to violence due to social and cultural disadvantage, and a greater dependence on other people for care, including, in some situations, the perpetrator of violence. Women and girls with disabilities may be twice as likely to experience violence as those without disabilities. Adults with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities are particularly at risk of sexual assault.
- **Women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds** may lack access to culturally appropriate services, leading to lower rates of reporting. Drawing conclusions regarding domestic violence in selected CALD communities is difficult as research has produced mixed findings. Cultural values can increase the complexities normally involved in domestic violence, and immigration may cause social and cultural dislocation, intensifying domestic violence.
- **Financial stress** may cause, or be exacerbated by, domestic violence. While domestic violence cuts across social and economic boundaries, further research is needed to adequately analyse the relationship between domestic violence, education, employment status and income. While IVAWS found that experiences of current intimate partner violence during the previous 12 months varied little according to education, status or household income, ABS data suggests that women whose main income is from government support are at increased risk of violence from a previous partner.
• **Same-sex intimate relationships** may also involve domestic violence, and approximately 2 per cent of intimate partner homicides in Australia involved partners from same-sex relationships since 1989–90. Males were also overrepresented as perpetrators in same-sex intimate partner homicides.

### Attitudes, reporting and policing

**Attitudes** towards domestic violence can influence perpetration and reporting behaviours. People with low support for gender equality are more likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes.

Most women **do not report** experiences of violence to police, and are less likely to report when the perpetrator is their current partner. Of women who contacted police about their most recently violent previous partner, half had a restraining order issued, but 58 per cent of those experienced further violence.

The Australian police and criminal justice systems are commonly criticised for not treating domestic violence seriously enough. Concerns have been commonly expressed about a lack of survivor support, failures to fully investigate incidents, and a lack of consistent policing (both within and across jurisdictions). The *Australasian Policing Strategy for Preventing and Reducing Family Violence* was launched in 2008 to coordinate police policies, practices and information-sharing. There has also been a shift towards broader **collaboration with partner agencies** to provide referrals and support.

### Social and economic costs

- **Homicide**: 61 per cent of Australian homicides between July 2008 and July 2010 occurred in a residential location, and domestic homicides accounted for just over half of these incidents.

- **Health**: domestic violence can have severe and enduring effects on physical and mental health. Using burden of disease methodology, domestic violence was found to be **the leading risk factor** contributing to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15 to 44 years.

- **Children and adolescents** living with domestic and family violence are at increased risk of experiencing emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Their social, behavioural, cognitive and emotional development may also be affected, as well as education and employment **outcomes**. Of people aged 12 to 20 years, 23 per cent had **witnessed violence** against their mother or step-mother, while 42 per cent of Indigenous young people had witnessed violence against their mother or step-mother.

- **Economic**: in 2009 it was estimated that violence against women and their children, including both domestic and non-domestic violence, **cost the Australian economy $13.6 billion**. Domestic violence also creates complex economic issues for women and their children, and many experience financial risk or poverty as a result. Domestic violence affects women’s **financial security** in key areas of life: debts, bills and banking, accommodation, legal issues, health, transport, migration, employment, social security and child support. Women nominated finding safe, affordable and appropriate accommodation post-separation as their biggest concern in a study of **economic wellbeing and domestic violence**.

- **Homelessness**: domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness, accounting for 32 per cent of all clients receiving assistance from specialist homelessness services in 2011–12. Women affected by domestic violence are more likely to **cycle in and out of homelessness** compared to the broader homeless population. The 2012 **PSS** found 37 per cent of women who experienced current partner violence had temporarily separated during the relationship and of these, 52 per cent had moved away from home. Violence also contributes to **youth homelessness**—a study found one third of young homeless people in Melbourne left home due to family violence.

- **Employment**: some researchers argue that approaches to domestic violence should **consider factors including employment**, as paid work can be pivotal in creating financial security. Women experiencing domestic violence are often disadvantaged in the labour market, and are more likely to have a **disrupted work** history. Some private sector organisations now offer **domestic violence leave**, though these provisions have not been evaluated.

### Government responses

The Commonwealth Government is responsible for over-arching government programs designed to reduce domestic violence nationally, though most programs and services aimed at preventing domestic violence and supporting survivors are administered through state and territory community services, health and law enforcement agencies.
Coalition and Labor governments have nominated reducing violence against women and domestic violence as a priority for many years. The *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (National Plan) was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in 2009. The National Plan set a framework for social change, coordination across levels of government and integrated responses. The National Plan is to be implemented through a series of four three-year Action Plans over 12 years.

The first of these Action Plans is viewed as making significant progress, and most community feedback has been *very positive*. During a consultative process in early 2014, many argued that there had not been enough *involvement of community groups*, particularly those from Indigenous and culturally diverse backgrounds, and that progress had been too slow. The *Second Action Plan*, released in June 2014, acknowledges these concerns.

The National Plan is administered under the ‘National Initiatives’ component of Program 2.1 Family and Communities, which was allocated $28.7 million in the 2014–15 Budget. However, the Abbott Government did not produce a 2014–15 women’s Budget statement, and therefore *violence against women funding breakdowns* are not available.

*If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault or family violence, visit ANROWS Get Support website or call 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732), the 24 hour, National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line. In an emergency, call 000.*