

**FAST FACTS:**

# The impact of financial stress, time at home and social isolation on the likelihood of women experiencing physical and sexual forms of domestic violence during COVID-19

In May 2020, the Australian Institute of Criminology surveyed 15,000 women aged 18 and over about their experiences of domestic violence since February 2020, when Australia first began to feel the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey aimed to estimate the prevalence, characteristics and drivers of violence, both reported and unreported.

## COVID-19 and violence against women

The Australian Institute of Criminology used the data gathered from its May 2020 survey to test whether the following factors impacted the likelihood of women experiencing violence during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: increased time at home, social isolation and financial stress.

These factors were explored in relation to two cohorts of women in current cohabiting relationships: those who had experienced violence by their partner before February 2020 (n=6,925), and those who had not (n=521).

**2.9%**

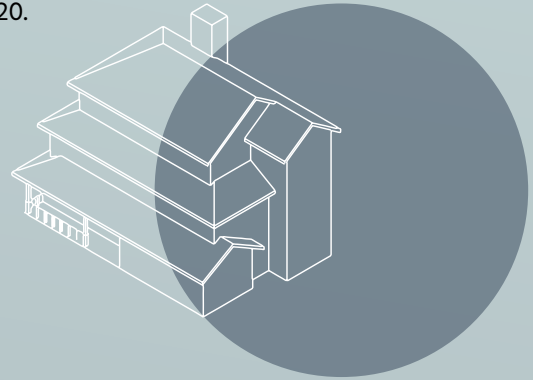
2.9% of women in a current cohabiting relationship reported having experienced physical or sexual violence by their partner for the first time in the three months prior to May 2020.

**67%**

Of women who had experienced violence before February 2020, 67% reported experiencing a repeat act of violence.

## Increased time at home

Unexpectedly, the likelihood of violence among women who had experienced partner violence prior to February 2020 and among those who had not did not rise with an increase in the amount of time spent at home.



## Social isolation

Women were more likely to experience physical or sexual violence by a cohabiting partner if their contact with family or friends outside the home occurred **weekly** or **less than weekly**.



**Among women who had experienced violence before February 2020:**

Women with **less than weekly contact** with friends and family outside the home were

**1.3 times**  
**more likely to experience violence**

compared to those who had more than weekly contact.

**Among women who had not experienced violence before February 2020:**

Women with **both weekly and less than weekly** contact were

**1.4 times**  
**more likely to experience first-time violence**

than women who had more than weekly contact with friends and family.

These results suggest that access to social support outside of the family home, rather than the amount of time spent with their partner, influenced women's experiences of violence during the pandemic.

# Financial stress

Higher levels of financial stress prior to COVID-19 were associated with a higher prevalence of violence.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data show that one in three Australian households reported being financially worse off by March 2020.<sup>1</sup> In the month of April alone, the number of people employed in Australia fell by 600,000.<sup>2</sup>

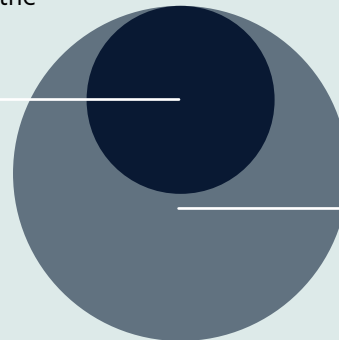
<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Household impacts of COVID-19 survey, 1–6 Apr 2020* (ABS cat. no. 4940.0). <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4940.0>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Household impacts of COVID-19 survey, 29 Apr–4 May 2020* (ABS cat. no. 4940.0). <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4940.0>

## Among women who were experiencing a high level of stress before the pandemic:

For those whose financial stress **did not increase** during the pandemic there was a

**4.6%**  
probability of  
first-time violence



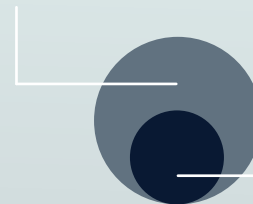
For those whose financial stress levels **increased** during the pandemic, there was an

**8.2%**  
probability of  
first-time violence

## For women who reported an increase in financial stress during the pandemic,

the predicted probability of first-time violence was 4.1%, a figure

**1.8 times higher**



than for women who did not report an increase in financial stress (2.3%).

**Overall**, the results from this study suggest that the early stages of the pandemic were associated with an increased risk of violence against women in current cohabiting relationships, most likely from a combination of economic stress and social isolation, particularly for first-time victims of violence.

## Definitions:

### Coercive control

For the purpose of this study, women were considered to have experienced coercive control if they had experienced three or more forms of non-physical forms of emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours in the three months prior to the survey. See note in “Limitations” on the operationalisation of “coercive control” in this study and the need to exercise caution when interpreting results associated with this term.

### Domestic violence

Physical violence, sexual violence or emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviour that occurs between current or former intimate partners.

### Partner

A person with whom the respondent lives, or lived with at some point in a married or de facto relationship during the last 12 months. This includes current and former partners, and may also be described as a cohabiting partner.

### Partner violence

Physical or sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour that occurs within current and former cohabiting relationships.

## Limitations:

The AIC report’s authors draw attention to the limitations of the study in a [technical appendix](#), including, notably, the operationalisation of “coercive control”. As noted in the ANROWS policy brief [Defining and responding to coercive control](#), coercive control is an attack on autonomy, liberty and equality (Stark, 2007). It is accomplished through a wide range of abusive tactics (which may or may not involve actual physical or sexual abuse) aimed at domination and control over the victim’s personhood.

Further limitations of the study follow:

- Because it is a cross-sectional survey, cause–effect relationships cannot be established (only suggested).
- Women who could not safely complete the survey were discouraged from participating (due to safety concerns), and some women who completed the survey may have chosen not to disclose the violence or abuse they had experienced given the sensitive nature of the questions, both of which mean that it is possible that the true level of violence has been under-reported.

## ANROWS

AUSTRALIA’S NATIONAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN’S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

### Source

Morgan, A., & Boxall, H. (2020). *Social isolation, time spent at home, financial stress and domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice no. 609). [https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/ti609\\_social\\_isolation\\_DV\\_during\\_covid-19\\_pandemic.pdf](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/ti609_social_isolation_DV_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf)

### Suggested citation

Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety. (2021). *The impact of financial stress, time at home and social isolation on the likelihood of women experiencing physical and sexual forms of domestic violence during COVID-19* [Fact sheet]. ANROWS.