**Factsheet #1: FAST FACTS: Prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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.

*KEY FINDINGS*

Of the 15,000 women surveyed, in the three months prior to the survey:

* 4.6 percent experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner
  + this figure rises to 8.2 percent for women in cohabiting relationships
* 5.8 percent experienced coercive control
  + this figure rises to 11.1 percent for women in cohabiting relationships
* 11.6 percent reported experiencing at least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour
  + this figure rises to 22.4 percent for women in cohabiting relationships

Women commonly reported experiencing **both** coercive control **and** physical or sexual violence.

* Half (51.6%) of the women who reported experiencing **either** coercive control **or** physical or sexual violence reported experiencing both forms of abuse.
* It was less common to experience either of these forms of abuse in isolation:
  + Less than one sixth (15.5%) of women experienced physical or sexual violence in isolation.
  + Less than one third (32.9%) of women experienced coercive control in isolation

*Onset and escalation of violence*

Violence started for the first time or escalated in the three months prior to the survey for:

* 65.4 percent of women who experienced physical or sexual violence
* 54.8 percent of those who experienced coercive control

Among women who had experienced physical or sexual violence from their current or former cohabiting partner prior to February 2020, more than half (53.1%) said the violence had increased in frequency or severity in the last three months.

*BARRIERS TO HELP-SEEKING*

Available evidence in Australia about the number of domestic violence incidents reported to police in March and April of 2020 is mixed. Some state and territory police agencies have seen an increase in the number of reports of domestic violence, while others have seen no change. These changes have also sometimes varied month by month within single jurisdictions. This could be partly explained by many women reporting that safety concerns were a barrier to help-seeking (consistent with concerns raised by many in the support services sector that they found it difficult to engage with women during this period of social distancing). National and international research consistently demonstrates that many factors and barriers influence reporting rates, and that domestic and family violence is often under-reported.

On at least one occasion, 36.9% of women who experienced **either** coercive control **or** physical or sexual violence reported that they wanted to seek advice or support in the three months prior to the survey but could not. This figure rises to 58.1% among those who experienced both forms of abuse.

**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](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-08/sb28_technical_appendix-revised-prevalence_of_domestic_violence_among_women_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf), including, notably, the operationalisation of “coercive control”. As noted in the ANROWS policy brief [*Defining and responding to coercive control*](https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/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.

Source: Boxall, H., Morgan, A., & Brown, B. *The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Statistical Bulletin no. 28). <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/sb/sb28>

**Factsheet #2: 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.

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 cohabitating relationships: those who had experienced violence by their partner before February 2020 (n=6,925), and those who had not (n=521).

* 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.
* 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 violence 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 with 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 was 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 the COVID-19 pandemic 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.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the month of April alone, the number of people employed in Australia fell by 600,000.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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.

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**LIMITATIONS**

The AIC report’s authors draw attention to the limitations of the study in a [technical appendix](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-08/sb28_technical_appendix-revised-prevalence_of_domestic_violence_among_women_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf), including, notably, the operationalisation of “coercive control”. As noted in the ANROWS policy brief [*Defining and responding to coercive control*](https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/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.

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>

**Factsheet #3: FAST FACTS: Domestic violence among women from priority populations during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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.

*WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND COERCIVE CONTROL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?*

Australian and international research consistently demonstrates that domestic violence disproportionately affects particular communities, rather than being evenly distributed across the general population. This held true in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following specific populations were more likely to experience domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey:

* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women\*
* women with a long-term health condition
* pregnant women
* those experiencing high levels of financial stress
* younger women—in particular, those between 18 and 24 years of age.

\* Exact figures capturing risk for this population are not included. This is to avoid direct comparisons between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and non-Indigenous women, in line with the [Warawarni-gu Guma statement](https://www.anrows.org.au/news/warawarni-gu-guma-statement/).

The sample for this study was 9,284 respondents. Women who had not been involved in an intimate relationship in the 12 months before the survey were removed from the sample. Unweighted data (see [technical appendix](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-08/sb28_technical_appendix-revised-prevalence_of_domestic_violence_among_women_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf)) was used to explore the relationship between variables.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Population* | *Odds of experiencing physical/sexual violence* | *Odds of experiencing coercive control* | *Odds of experiencing both physical/sexual violence and coercive control when women had reported experiencing any form of domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey* |
| *Women with a restrictive long-term health condition, compared to those without a restrictive long-term health condition* | 3x higher | 3x higher | 2.2x higher |
| *Pregnant women, compared to those who are not pregnant* | 3x higher | 2.5x higher | 4x higher |
| *Women experiencing extreme financial stress, compared to those experiencing no financial stress* | 10x higher | 9x higher | 3.5x higher |
| *Younger women (particularly 18–24 years), compared to those 55 years and over* | 8x higher | 6x higher | 4x higher |

**DEFINITIONS**

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**LIMITATIONS**

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Source: Boxall, H., & Morgan, A. (2021). Who is most at risk of physical and sexual partner violence and coercive control during the COVID-19 pandemic? *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, no. 618. Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi618>

1. 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> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 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> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)