**Domestic Violence in Australia—an Overview of the Issues**

Domestic violence occurs when a family member, partner or ex-partner attempts to physically or psychologically dominate or harm the other. According to the Commonwealth’s Office for Women, domestic violence can be exhibited in many forms, including physical violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, intimidation, economic deprivation or threats of violence. Domestic violence occurs in all geographic areas of Australia and in all socioeconomic and cultural groups, although domestic violence is a more significant problem for certain groups, such as regional and rural Australia and Indigenous communities.

**What Do We Know About Domestic Violence?**

As most incidences of domestic violence often go unreported, it is difficult to measure the true extent of the problem.

* 5.8 % of women had experienced violence in the 12 month period preceding the survey in 2005 compared with 7.1% in 1996
* 4.7% of these women had experienced physical violence (this includes threat of physical assault) in 2005 compared with 5.9% in 1996, and 1.6% had experienced sexual violence (this includes threat of sexual assault) compared to 1.5% in 1996
* Of the women who experienced sexual violence during the 12 months prior to the 2005 survey 21% had experienced sexual assault by a previous partner in the most recent incident, and 39% by a family member or friend

There have also been studies of the relationship between domestic violence and homicides. In [Homicide between Intimate Partners in Australia](http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi90.html), 1998, Carach and James from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) found that domestic violence plays a significant role in the lead up to lethal violence, accounting for 27% of all homicides in Australia between 1989 and 1996.

* on average there were 129 family homicides each year, 77 related to domestic disputes
* that killings between partners/spouses accounted for 60% of all family homicides in Australia, with women accounting for 75% of the victims, and men comprising the majority of the killers
* that a quarter of the intimate homicides occurred after the partners had separated or divorced.

**At Risk Groups**

**Children and Young People**

The 1996 ABS [Women's Safety Survey](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/F16680629C465E03CA256980007C4A81/%24File/41280_1996.pdf) found that of the women who experienced violence by a current partner, 61% (211 600) reported that they had children in their care at some time during the relationship, and 38% (132 400) said that these children had witnessed the violence.

Child abuse is more likely to occur in families experiencing domestic violence. Children of victims are also at risk of continuing the violence with their own children and partners and at heightened risk of alcohol and drug abuse and delinquency in later life. Impacts can also extend to people not directly experiencing victimisation. Effects can flow on to other children not from families experiencing domestic violence, for example, the effects of bullying or aggression by children of victims. Domestic violence, as with any other form of crime or violence, can also extend to the wider community, for example, by contributing to increased fear of crime.

**Indigenous Communities**

Indigenous Australians are over-represented as both victims and perpetrators of all forms of violent crime in Australia. Statistics cited in the [Australian component of the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS)](http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/56/RPP56.pdf) published in 2004, show that the rate of family violence victimisation for Indigenous women may be 40 times the rate for non-Indigenous women and that despite representing just over two per cent of the total Australian population, Indigenous women accounted for 15 per cent of homicide victims in Australia in 2002–03. However, the survey goes on to state that the current literature on the incidence and prevalence of family violence for indigenous women is limited, making it difficult to draw accurate conclusions.

**Pregnant Women**

The 1996 ABS [Women's Safety Survey](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/F16680629C465E03CA256980007C4A81/%24File/41280_1996.pdf) and the 2005 [Personal Safety Survey](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs%40.nsf/DetailsPage/4906.02005%20%28Reissue%29?OpenDocument) found that pregnancy is a time when women may be vulnerable to abuse. Of those women who experienced violence by a previous partner, 701 200 had been pregnant at some time during their relationship. While 42 per cent of these women experienced violence during the pregnancy (292 100), 20 per cent experienced domestic violence for the first time while they were pregnant.

**Costs of Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence directly affects the victims, their children, their families and friends, employers, co-workers, and has repercussions for the quality of life in a local community. There can be far-reaching financial, social, health and psychological consequences. The impact of violence can also have indirect costs, including the costs to the community of bringing perpetrators to justice or the costs of medical treatment for injured victims.

**The Way Forward**

**Prevention or Intervention**

A literature review undertaken for the PADV program, [Current Perspectives on Domestic Violence](http://ofw.facs.gov.au/downloads/pdfs/d_v/curr_persp_dv.pdf), identified three ways forward to prevent violence against women:

* working with young people to break the intergenerational cycle of violence
* working with victims and perpetrators to break the cycle of violence
* working with communities to educate against violence

**Conclusion**

A common theme throughout the research is that there is a need for a more long-term integrated response to domestic violence in Australia, which aims to prevent domestic violence in the first place with a view to reducing existing levels of violence.

* improve domestic violence data collection
* improve evaluations of intervention, public awareness and education programs
* improve cost estimates, including incidental economic consequences such as loss of income, child care costs, housing costs and legal or court costs
* include indirect and non-economic costs of domestic violence to the community, such as educational disruption, restriction of occupational attainment, the impact on individual self-esteem and the long-term social, educational and psychological impacts on women and children
* include intergenerational effects of domestic violence such as the development of life cycles of abuse from one generation to another