



National Rural Women's Coalition Discussion Paper Rural Women and Family Violence (August 2021)

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Introduction

This discussion paper provides a brief overview on domestic violence statistics and issues rural women face in Australia. Domestic violence and sexual violence are significant social and health issues in Australia. It occurs across all ages, and all socioeconomic and demographic groups, but predominantly affects women and children¹. In addition, the impacts of domestic violence affect extended families, friends, work colleagues and ultimately the broader community². Domestic violence also causes impacts on general health, including mental and physical health and body pain, and these health impacts³. As a result, women who experience domestic violence use more health services and have higher rates of hospitalisations, particularly the 34-39 age group⁴. Domestic violence also has an economic cost, an estimated \$21.7 billion a year (\$7.8 billion a year, comprising health, administration and social welfare costs), much of which falls on to the victim to cover⁵.

There is evidence that the rates in rural and remote Australia are higher compared to those in major cities, however, to say the information is “patchy”⁶ is an understatement. Violence against women can be described in many ways, and laws in each state and territory have their own definitions, which makes it difficult to make comparisons and get a clear picture of what is actually happening in Australia⁷. Gaps in the data can also be attributed to inconsistent identification, capturing and counting procedures between different data sets and jurisdictions; limited information about

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018). Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia 2018. Cat. no. FDV 2. Canberra: AIHW.

² National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022

³ Loxton D, Dolja-Gore X, Anderson AE, Townsend N (2017) Intimate partner violence adversely impacts health over 16 years and across generations: A longitudinal cohort study. PLoS ONE 12(6): e0178138. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0178138>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ PwC 2015 A high price to pay: The economic case for preventing violence against women.

⁶ Neame, A & Heenan, M (2004) Responding to sexual assault in rural communities, *Australian Institute of Family Studies*, <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/responding-sexual-assault-rural-communities>

⁷ Ibid.

vulnerable populations who come into contact with justice, health, welfare and other support services (for example, primary health care; emergency department care; drug and alcohol services; mental health services; corrections, or income support) and the lack of data about pathways, impacts and outcomes for victims, perpetrators and their children^{8 9}. Another problem with assessing how much of a problem domestic violence is, is the fact that it remains under reported, with an estimated 80-95% of self-reported victims of violence from a current partner not reporting the violence to police¹⁰.

Many reports draw on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey, the last report of which was published in 2016 and did not provide data specifically on rural and remote Australia. However, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) undertook a secondary analysis of the ABS data and reported on it in the *Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019*¹¹. The data reinforces the differences in the rates of domestic violence between rural and remote Australia and major cities. The ABS had planned to undertake the survey again in 2020, but to date there has been no new release of new data, meaning that many reports we see are based on data collected in 2015. A lot has happened over the last 6 years, not least of which is a string of extreme weather events, drought, floods, bushfires, financial crisis and recession, and now the Covid-19 pandemic.

Definition

The United Nations define violence against women as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life’¹²

Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse¹³.

Family violence is usually a broader term referring to violence between family members as well as intimate partners. It is often the preferred term used in the context of violence experienced in Indigenous communities, involving a variety of kinship and marital arrangements¹⁴.

What the statistics tell us

The ABS Recorded Crimes report (2020) shows that there has been a 13% increase in family and domestic violence since 2019. The states and territories with the largest increase in the number of sexual assault victims between 2019 and 2020 were: Western Australia (up 279 victims or 10%), New South Wales (up 267 victims or 2%) and Queensland (up 261 victims or 5%)¹⁵.

In contrast to the ABS Recorded Crimes report, the Personal Safety Survey 2016 reports that over the last decade the proportion of Australians (men and women) experiencing violence in the last 12 months declined from 8.3% in 2005 to 5.4% in 2016. Despite the decline, this still equates to

⁸ Hooker, L Theobald, J Anderson, K et al (2017) Violence Against Young Women in Non-urban Areas of Australia: A Scoping Review

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018). Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia 2018. Cat. no. FDV 2. Canberra: AIHW
¹⁰ <https://theconversation.com/factcheck-qanda-is-domestic-violence-in-australia-on-the-decline-54043>

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat. no. FDV3. Canberra: AIHW

¹² United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women 1993

https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf

¹³ National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ ABS Recorded Crime <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/recorded-crime-victims/latest-release>

significant numbers of people, 3.7 million men (41%) and 2.9 million women (31% or) that experienced physical violence; and 1.7 million women (18%) and 428,800 men (4,7%) experienced sexual violence.

In addition, the proportion of women who experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months remained stable over the last decade (i.e., things have not changed) and the proportion of women experiencing sexual harassment in the 12 months increased from 15% in 2012 to 17% in 2016 (i.e., things are a little worse). On average, one woman a week in Australia is killed by an intimate partner¹⁶.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience violence at higher rates than the rest of the population¹⁷. One in 7 (14%) Indigenous women had experienced physical violence in the previous year and are less likely to report incidents to police or other authorities, Indigenous women were 32 times, and Indigenous men 23 times, as likely to be hospitalised due to family violence¹⁸.

The AIHW also list several groups who are at higher risk than others of being victims of violence and abuse. They include:

- Children
- Young women
- Older people
- People with disability
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer people (LGBTIQ+ people)
- Socioeconomically disadvantaged people
- People in rural and remote Australia

[Data at the State/ Territory level](#) shows that in the Northern Territory on average there are 61 domestic and family violence incidents on a typical day and four domestic and family violence related homicides per 100,000 people per year¹⁹ and over the last year domestic violence and assault in the NT has increased by 35.68%²⁰.

Queensland police data shows that from July 1 last year to March 31 this year, officers responded to 113,779 domestic and family violence (DFV) occurrences, higher than the 107,000 cases reported across the 2020 calendar year²¹.

In Western Australia family related offences (assault and threatening behaviour) has increased by 19.3%²². In NSW the number of sexual assault incidents recorded by NSW Police increased by up 46% from February 2021 and 65% from March 2020 attributed to the heightened public attention on

¹⁶ Cussen, T and Bryant, W (2015) Domestic/family homicide in Australia. Research in practice no. 38. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rip/rip38>

¹⁷ Family violence in Indigenous communities needs to be understood in the context of colonisation, dispossession, child removal, racism and discrimination and the resulting intergenerational trauma. (Campo & Tayton 2015 Domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote communities An overview of key issues, Australian Institute of Family Studies)

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018). Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia 2018. Cat. no. FDV 2. Canberra: AIHW

¹⁹ <https://ntcoss.org.au/social-policy/domestic-and-family-violence/>

²⁰ <https://pfes.nt.gov.au/police/community-safety/nt-crime-statistics>

²¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-17/qld-domestic-violence-cases-rise-sharply-coercive-control-law/100133958>

²² <https://www.police.wa.gov.au/Crime/CrimeStatistics#/>

sexual assault and consent (rather than an increase in prevalence)²³. Victorian Police report an increase of 6.7% family violence incidents in 2018-2019, 29.8% of incidents had children recorded as a witness²⁴.

With regards to Tasmania, domestic violence is not recorded as a separate indicator. In the Crime Statistics Supplement 2019-2020 data the number of sexual assaults has declined 14% (34 offences) from 240 in 2018-19 to 206 in 2019-20²⁵. Data for the ACT was difficult to locate. Data reported in the ABS Recorded Crime - Victims, Australia report in 2016 showed the rate of domestic violence in Canberra had increased by 33 per cent from 2015 to 2016²⁶.

In the Personal Safety Survey 2016 the ABS reported a decline in the proportion of people experiencing violence. Given the snapshot of statistics highlighted above, it is hard to believe that this would still be the case.

Rural and Remote Statistics

Data on the situation in rural and remote Australia is not only patchy, it is very limited and a lot of it is outdated, and the search for data revealed few data sets that had direct comparison between rural areas and major cities. However, the data that is available (i.e. in the public domain) shows that there are significant issues, some of which were reported on 25 years ago and unfortunately despite the increased awareness and changes in attitudes towards domestic violence²⁷ these issues still need to be addressed.

- The ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016 data (reported in the AIHW Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019 report) shows that 23% of women living outside Major cities were more likely to have experienced violence from a current or previous partner since the age of 15, compared with 15% of women living in Major cities²⁸.
- Research undertaken in 2015 shows that the overall lifetime Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) prevalence rate was 21.6%, with significant differences in rates from major cities (19.6%), inner regional areas (24.4%) and other rural areas (26.1%). In addition, a history of IPV was significantly associated with women being separated/divorced/widowed, having lower levels of education, income hardship and limited available social support.²⁹
- Domestic and family violence is the main reason women and children leave their home. In 2000 the Women's Services Network (WESNET) published a literature review. In this review they cite unpublished data from the AIHW showing that from 1997-1998 women in remote areas were five times more likely to be requiring Supported Accommodation Assistance see Table 1.³⁰

²³ Fitzgerald, J 2021 NSW BOCSAR Why did sexual assault reports spike in March 2021? Bureau Brief No. BB155.

https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_publication/Pub_Summary/BB/BB155-Summary-Why-did-sexual-assault-reports-spike-in-March-2021.aspx

²⁴ Crime Statistics Agency. <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/family-violence-data-portal/family-violence-infographics/victoria-police-family-violence-incidents>

²⁵ Tasmanian Government. The Department of Police, Fire and Emergency Management Crime Statistics Supplement 2019-20 <https://www.police.tas.gov.au/uploads/Crime-Statistics-Supplement-2019-20.pdf>

²⁶ ABS Recorded Crime - Victims, Australia, 2016 (cat. no. 4510.0)

²⁷ NCAS 2017 <https://ncas.anrows.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2017NCAS-Youth-SubReport.pdf>

²⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat.no.FDV3.Canberra: AIHW

²⁹ Dillon G, Hussain R & Loxton D 2015. Intimate partner violence in the young cohort of the Australian longitudinal study on women's health: urban/rural comparison and demographic associations. *Advances in Mental Health* 13(1):18-29

³⁰ WENET (2000) Domestic Violence in Regional Australia. <https://wesnet.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/WESNET-Domestic-Violence-in-Regional-Australia-A-Literature-Review.pdf>

Table 1 % of population requiring SAAP due to DV Australia 1997-1998 rates / 1000 population

	Capital city	Other metro centre	Large rural	Other rural	Remote	Total
Female	4.29	4.39	9.95	6.18	20.86	5.42
Males	0.26	0.47	2.04	0.30	0.59	0.39

(Adapted from WESNET 2000)

- Fast forward nearly twenty years and the AIHW are still reporting that in 2017/2018 the rate of homelessness is higher in remote areas and around 25% of clients from inner regional and outer regional areas and 38% of those from remote/very remote areas reported domestic and family violence as their main reason for seeking assistance, as compared with around one third (32%) of SHS clients from major cities. Of note, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented among SHS clients (27% of clients or almost 71,600) 42% in need of SHSs are escaping DV^{31 32 33}
- People in Remote and Very remote Australia are 24 times as likely to be hospitalised for domestic violence than people in Major cities. Women accounted for 80–87% of these hospitalisations³⁴.
- Despite the high numbers of rural inequalities reported, it is surprising to read that in terms of self-reported general health or mental health women living in regional and rural areas affected by Intimate Partner Violence self-reported health showed they were no more disadvantaged than women in major cities³⁵.

Natural disasters

Increases in domestic violence have been reported after a natural disaster and it continues months and years following natural disasters including physical and psychological violence by men on women and children, including sexual, financial and emotional abuse³⁶. Anger has also been found to be a significant issue for post disaster mental health and needs to be integrated routinely into post disaster assessments³⁷.

Some theories as to why domestic and family violence increases after a natural disaster are that a natural disaster unmasks existing domestic violence particularly when there is an expectation of rural masculinity and the need for men to be seen to be coping, stoic and heroic³⁸.

³¹ Flanagan, K., Blunden, H., valentine, k. and Henriette, J. (2019) Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence, AHURI Final Report No. 311, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/311>, doi:10.18408/ahuri-4116101.

³² Mission Australia (2019) . <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/domestic-and-family-violence>

³³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018), Specialist homelessness services annual report 2017-18, Canberra, AIHW

³⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat. no. FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW

³⁵ Dillon G Hussain, R Loxton, D Khan, A (2016) Rurality and Self-Reported Health in Women with a History of Intimate Partner Violence PLoS One. 2016; 11(9): e0162380

³⁶ Boddy, J and Harris, C (2021) The Conversation <https://theconversation.com/domestic-violence-soars-after-natural-disasters-preventing-it-needs-to-be-part-of-the-emergency-response-151838>; and Parkinson, D and Zara, C The hidden disaster: domestic violence in the aftermath of natural disaster Australian Journal of Emergency Medicine vol 28 no2pp28-32 <http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AUJEmMgmt/2013/24.pdf>

³⁷ Cowlshaw, S et al (2021) Anger Dimensions and Mental Health Following a Disaster: Distribution and Implications After a Major Bushfire. Journal of Traumatic Stress, Volume34, Issue1 Pages 46-55

³⁸ Parkinson, D (2017) Investigating the Increase in Domestic Violence Post Disaster: An Australian Case Study, Journal of Interpersonal Violence, pp.1-30 <http://sfv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Investigating-the-increase-in-DV-post-disaster-2017.pdf>

The social norming that occurs in affected communities means that the violence is understood and even condoned in a culture of denial (e.g. a significant proportion of the domestic violence that became apparent after Black Saturday 2009 was both new and denied) and as a result reporting does not increase as women are silenced³⁹.

Women residing within high bushfire-affected communities experienced the highest levels of violence up to seven times that of women in areas that had been only moderately or minimally affected by the fires. These experiences are associated with post-disaster changes to income and with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression symptoms among women⁴⁰.

Covid-19

One of the greatest concerns in the Covid-19 pandemic is the escalated risk faced by women and children of family and domestic abuse who are geographically and socially isolated. Particularly as rates of family and domestic violence are already higher in rural and remote areas, and access to support services is limited, this risk is compounded further⁴¹.

Women's Safety NSW undertook a survey⁴² to find out what is happening with regards to domestic violence and the Covid-19 pandemic in NSW. Survey participants were in Inner Metropolitan (15%), Outer Metropolitan (30%), Regional (49%) and Rural/Remote (8%) locations. Key findings from the survey showed that there a number of concerning issues are being noticed by service providers for example:

- 45% stated that their client numbers have continued to rise since COVID restrictions began to lift and when compared to this time last year.
- 80% have noticed an increase in the percentage of higher risk cases since the lifting of COVID restrictions, identifying the worsening economic and financial impacts of COVID as a key factor.
- 86% have noticed an increase in the complexity of client needs since the lifting of COVID restrictions, also due to the economic and financial impacts of COVID.

Why violence against women remains more common in rural and regional Australia?

Table 2 provides a list of specific challenges found in the literature that explain why rural women are at higher risk and vulnerability to domestic violence⁴³. They include social and cultural issues, systemic and structural barriers.

³⁹ Parkinson, D (2017) Investigating the Increase in Domestic Violence Post Disaster: An Australian Case Study, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, pp.1-30 <http://sfv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Investigating-the-increase-in-DV-post-disaster-2017.pdf>

⁴⁰ Molyneux, R et al (2019) *Interpersonal violence and mental health outcomes following disaster*, *BJPsych Open*, Cambridge University Press, vol6 Issue 1 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2019.82>

⁴¹ <https://www.clcnsw.org.au/no-one-will-hear-me-scream-domestic-violence-regional-rural-and-remote-nsw>

⁴² Women's Safety NSW (2020) *Continued Impacts of COVID-19 on Domestic and Family Violence*.

<https://www.womenssafetyntsw.org.au/impact/publication/continued-impacts-of-covid-19-on-domestic-and-family-violence/>

⁴³ Campo, M. & Tayton, S. (2015) Domestic and family violence in regional, remote, and rural communities. *Child, Family and Community Australia*. Melbourne, Australia. Australian Institute of Family Studies; Hogg R & Carrington K (2003) Violence, spatiality and other rurals, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 36, Iss Robinson, H (2020) *Western NSW Community Legal Centre (2020) 'No one will hear me scream': Domestic violence in regional, rural and remote NSW*. <https://www.clcnsw.org.au/no-one-will-hear-me-scream-domestic-violence-regional-rural-and-remote-nswue3>. Publisher: Australian Academic Press Pty. Ltd; Lennon S. (2021) *Dancing Koalas, Burning Books, and "Fair Game": Using Butler's Concept of Performativity to Examine Rural Gender Performances*. In: Roberts P., Fuqua M. (eds) *Ruraling Education Research*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0131-6_14; Wendt, S. (2009). *Constructions of local culture and impacts on domestic violence in an Australian rural community*. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25(2), 175–184.; Wendt, S.,

Table 2 Rural women's challenges that contribute to higher risk and vulnerability

Social and Gender norms - silencing and minimising the problem	Conservative and patriarchal attitudes towards gender and family roles and rural masculinity	Privacy.	Fear of stigma, shame, community gossip, and a lack of perpetrator accountability deter women from seeking help.
Geographic isolation	Social isolation	Gun ownership	the 'digital divide' and technology assisted abuse
Lack of access to crisis accommodation quality alternative housing	Lack of services and timely/relevant crisis counseling	a lack of specialised or culturally appropriate services (disability, CALD, Indigenous	a lack of affordable legal services (e.g., Legal Aid), the higher cost of service provision in non-urban areas; longer waits for services (e.g., court sitting times), safety concerns in relation to court buildings.
Women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds face language barriers, cultural isolation, xenophobic attitudes	Women with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged and isolated in regional, rural and remote locations with limited access to transportation and specialist services	Indigenous factors	Significant workforce shortages and lack of training in the rural healthcare workforce
Lack of police presence or long response time due to geographical distance	Lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support services	Lack of access to transport or expensive to travel	Complex financial arrangements/ access to finance
Single services being responsible for large and remote geographical areas limiting access	Safety concerns for individuals delivering programs both in relation to living in a small community and potentially visiting isolated locations such as farms to support clients	Natural disasters	

Chung, D., Elder, A., Hendrick, A., & Hartwig, A. (2017). Seeking help for domestic and family violence: Exploring regional, rural, and remote women's coping experiences: Final report (ANROWS Horizons, 06/2017). Sydney: ANROWS; Neame & Heenan 2004 <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/responding-sexual-assault-rural-communities>; Wendt et al., 2015; Ragusa A (2017) Rurality's Influence on Women's Intimate Partner Violence Experiences and Support Needed for Escape and Healing in Australia, Journal of Social Service Research Volume 43, 2017 - Issue 2 Pages 270-295; Valpied, J et al.(2017) Are Future Doctors Taught to Respond to Intimate Partner Violence? A Study of Australian Medical Schools Journal of Interpersonal Violence vol32 Iss 6; Hooker, L et al (2021) Maternal and Child Health nurse's preparedness to respond to women and children experiencing intimate partner violence: A cross sectional study Nurse Education Today Volume 96, January 2021; Sawyer, S et al. (2014) Are Australian paramedics adequately trained and prepared for intimate partner violence? A pilot study, Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine Volume 28, November, Pp 32-35; George, A and Harris, B (2014) Landscapes of violence: Women surviving family violence in regional and rural Vitoria, Deakin University. https://www.deakin.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/287040/Landscapes-of-Violence-online-pdf-version.pdf; Western Alliance (2015) Violence against women in rural and regional Australia <https://www.westernalliance.org.au/2016/09/violence-against-women-in-rural-and-regional-australia>

Conclusion

Domestic violence remains a significant issue in Australia. Whilst evidence is hard to locate, there is data to demonstrate that women in rural and remote Australia have higher rates of domestic violence and face additional challenge to their female counterparts in major cities. And as Karen Baxter points out:

There seems little doubt that many of the difficulties faced by victim/survivors and services in rural contexts differ in degree, not kind, when compared to their urban counterparts⁴⁴.

Despite rural and remote women being identified as a high-risk group in many publications, the Fourth Action Plan 2019-2022 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 makes no mention of the rates or severity of family and domestic abuse against women and children in regional, rural and remote communities⁴⁵. A significant gap.

Given that the research is repeating (or reinforcing?) the issues and challenges that rural and remote women face that have been reported for over two decades, there is an urgent need for ongoing and significant investment in rural and remote communities specifically for⁴⁶:

1. An investment in prevention strategies
2. Accessible services
3. Crisis and transitional accommodation
4. Affordable housing
5. Affordable legal aid
6. Transport
7. Specialised case management
8. Perpetrator services and interventions
9. Health, police and first responder training

The tragic thing of all is that domestic violence is preventable⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ Baxter, K. (1992), "Starting from scratch: Sexual assault services in rural areas", in J. Breckenridge & M. Carmody (eds) Crimes of Violence: Australian Responses to Rape and Child Sexual Assault, Allen and Unwin, Sydney

⁴⁵ Robinson, H (2020) Western NSW Community Legal Centre (2020) 'No one will hear me scream': Domestic violence in regional, rural and remote NSW. <https://www.clcsw.org.au/no-one-will-hear-me-scream-domestic-violence-regional-rural-and-remote-nsw>

⁴⁶ <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/news-blog/media-and-updates/domestic-and-family-violence-and-affordable-home-shortage-pushes-thousands-into-homelessness>

⁴⁷ Webster, K. (2016). A preventable burden: Measuring and addressing the prevalence and health impacts of intimate partner violence in Australian women (ANROWS Compass, 07/2016). Sydney: ANROWS

