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Alcohol and Other Drug-Related Violence and Non-Reporting

Meredith Bryant and Paul Williams

When alcohol and other drug-related assaults are not reported to police, there is cause for community concern. Unreported crime has impacts on victims and on society at large. If citizens refrain from reporting crime, new policy initiatives may not be developed and the threat of repeat victimisation remains. There is, of course, a difficult balance to maintain, and that involves judgements about the seriousness of assaults. While all assaults cause concern, police should not be involved in trivial matters. Overall public satisfaction with police is high, with about 15 per cent of the Australian public expressing any degree of dissatisfaction with police services.

This paper, which reports data from the National Drug Strategy Household Surveys, shows that experience of verbal and physical abuse and being put in fear declines with age from the 20s onwards for both males and females. However, older people are more inclined than younger persons to report physical violence to police (older men much more so than older women).

During 1998, nearly 70 per cent of victims of an alcohol-related assault did not report the incident(s) to police. One in 6 of these victims stated they did not report the matter(s) because the police could not do anything and 1 in 9 stated the police would not do anything. A further 1 in 2 victims thought the violence was too trivial for the police to deal with.

Adam Graycar
Director

Confidence in the appropriateness of law enforcement behaviour is fundamental to a civil society. In particular, when crimes against a person are committed, the community expects police to intervene and to commence the process of bringing the perpetrator to justice. Appropriateness of response, however, can be a non-response in some instances and law enforcement agencies are sometimes faced with difficult choices. Nonetheless, when public confidence in police is lacking, or where the public fears police involvement, public safety itself is at risk. Between 1968 and 1988, for example, levels of public respect for police declined considerably in all states (Wilson 1988). Revelations in a number of commissions of enquiry in the 1990s may not have improved the situation, and 13–15 per cent of Australians still reported dissatisfaction or extreme dissatisfaction with police services in 1998 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1998a).

Violence continued to be a national concern in Australia in the 1990s. In 1998, nearly half (48%) of all sentenced prisoners were convicted for offences involving violence or the threat of violence (ABS 1999). It is estimated that alcohol is involved in approximately half of all violent crime (White and Humeniuk 1993). An apparent reluctance to report violent incidents to police is as concerning as the prevalence of violence itself. Often referred to as “dark figures” of crime (Carcach 1997, Mukherjee and Graycar 1997; Coleman and Moynihan 1996), unreported incidents prevent the true picture of

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violent crime in Australia being known and lessen the likelihood of developing effective initiatives to reduce violence.

Factors that influence a victim's decision to report physical abuse are complex and interrelated. They can range from the perceived seriousness of the crime to the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (Carcach 1997; Greenberg and Ruback 1992). One of the recurring reasons given by victims for not reporting physical abuse to the police is a lack of confidence in their capacity and/or their willingness to do anything.

The International Crime Victims Survey conducted in 11 industrialised countries in 1996 revealed that many victims of physical abuse did not report their experience to police because

of (among other factors) negative attitudes towards police (Mayhew and Van Dijk 1997). On average, only 38 per cent of assaults and threats from the previous year were reported. When victims of a range of contact crimes were asked about decisions not to report the incidents to police, 12 per cent stated the police *could not* have done anything, 7 per cent stated the police *would not* do anything, and a smaller percentage (4%) stated that they did not report because of a *fear or dislike* of police. Similarly, in 1998, almost 1 in 10 (9.2%) Australian victims of assault stated that the main reason for not reporting their most recent incident of assault was because they thought the police *could not* do anything and a further 8.1 per cent maintained that police would have been

unwilling to do anything (ABS 1998b). Among Indigenous victims in 1994, over 1 in 10 (11.9%) avoided reporting their last physical attack because they feared and/or disliked the police, or simply did not want them involved (ABS 1994).

As might be expected, when the perpetrator is affected by alcohol, police have a more difficult task (Leader-Elliott and White 1993). One study reported that 9 out of 10 police found it more difficult to deal with an intoxicated suspect than a sober one. They were said to be more aggressive (52%), more unpredictable or irrational (35%) than sober suspects, and more difficult to communicate with or understand (31%). When illicit drug use is suspected, police often face similar unpredictability.

Table 1: Experience of Alcohol-Related Violence, Australia, 1995 and 1998

	Verbal Abuse ¹		Physical Abuse ¹		Put in Fear ¹	
	1995	1998	1995	1998	1995	1998
(%)						
Males						
14-19	43.6	35.8	19.4	12.5	26.3	20.2
20-29	63.0	52.7 *	18.3	15.7	35.7	23.7 *
30-39	51.4	36.0 *	18.2	6.6 *	26.6	16.5 *
40-49	35.3	34.3	6.7	4.7	15.1	13.0
50-59	22.2	28.2	5.2	6.8	6.6	6.9
60+	12.0	4.9 *	2.0	0.6	5.6	2.7
Total	39.0	32.5 *	11.7	7.7 *	19.8	14.0 *
Females						
14-19	39.6	34.1	11.1	6.4	38.7	27.4 *
20-29	49.4	42.6	11.1	10.2	39.7	31.1
30-39	32.4	28.5	7.0	3.8	28.0	19.3 *
40-49	33.7	24.4 *	5.6	6.6	25.3	14.7 *
50-59	16.3	18.5	2.7	3.0	11.0	9.6
60+	6.4	9.2	0.4	0.4	4.9	5.2
Total	29.1	26.0	6.0	5.1	23.9	17.6 *
Persons						
14-19	41.8	34.9	15.6	9.5 *	32.0	23.8 *
20-29	56.3	47.7 *	14.7	12.9	37.7	27.4 *
30-39	41.4	32.3 *	12.3	5.2 *	27.4	17.9 *
40-49	34.5	29.3	6.1	5.7	20.0	13.8 *
50-59	19.1	23.4	3.9	4.9	8.9	8.2
60+	8.9	7.2	1.1	0.5	5.2	4.0
Total	34.0	29.2 *	8.8	6.4 *	21.9	15.8 *
Total (N) abuse/fear	1378	3262	344	735	887	1935

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey, Unit Record Files, Weighted Samples, 1995 and 1998 (N=3,850 in 1995, N=10,030 in 1998).

Notes: * p<=0.05. ¹Question wording in 1995 was "In the past 12 months, has there been any occasion when you were verbally abused by someone affected by alcohol?", and so on. Question wording in 1998 was "How many times in the past 12 months has a person or persons affected by alcohol verbally abused you?", and so on.

The purpose of this Paper

This paper presents results from a national survey of Australians which canvassed (among other items of interest) alcohol and other drug-related assaults, and the reporting behaviours of victims of the violence. It aims to determine the extent of alcohol and other drug-related assaults that are *not* reported to police and to identify factors that may underlie the non-reporting.

Data and Sample

The data used in this study are based on the two most recent National Drug Strategy Household Surveys, which were conducted in 1995 and 1998. The surveys included questions on alcohol and drug-related personal abuse (verbal, physical, and being

“put in fear”), and reporting behaviour (whether abuses were reported and if not, reasons why). Around 14,000 respondents aged 14 years or older participated in the surveys (N=3,850 in 1995, N=10,030 in 1998). Respondents were selected using a four-stage random process (quota strata, random Census Collectors District, random household, and random resident). In 1998, approximately 55 per cent of respondents were female and 42 per cent were aged between 14 and 29 years. For the purposes of this paper, the samples have been stratified by sex and age, and multi-stage-weighted to the “true” estimated resident population. Further details on the survey methodology can be found in Williams (1999) and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (1999a and 1999b).

Alcohol-Related Violence

Alcohol-related violence is common in Australia (Table 1). Between 1995 and 1998, however, rates of experiencing alcohol-related verbal abuse declined from 34 per cent to 29 per cent, experiences of physical abuse declined from 9 per cent to 6 per cent, and being put in fear declined from 22 per cent to 16 per cent. These results were statistically significant.

With a few exceptions, males of all ages in 1998 were more likely than females to experience alcohol-related verbal and physical abuse. For example, males aged 14–19 years (12.5%) were twice as likely as females aged 14–19 years (6.4%), and males aged 50–59 years (6.8%) were over twice as likely as females aged 50–59 years (3.0%), to be physically abused. Females,

Table 2: Experience of Other Drug-Related Abuse Australia, 1998ⁱ

	Verbal Abuse	Physical Abuse (%)	Put in Fear
Males			
14–19	12.9	3.5	7.7
20–29	20.2	4.8	8.7
30–39	12.5	3.1	8.7
40–49	13.3	3.1	5.3
50–59	9.3	0.7	4.2
60+	2.5	1.4	2.7
Total	12.0	2.9	6.3
Females			
14–19	11.9	2.4	11.1
20–29	16.2	4.5	14.6
30–39	8.4	2.0	9.0
40–49	6.2	1.6	6.4
50–59	6.3	1.3	5.8
60+	3.6	–	3.5
Total	8.7	2.0	8.4
Persons			
14–19	12.4	3.0	9.4
20–29	18.2	4.6	11.7
30–39	10.4	2.6	8.9
40–49	9.7	2.3	5.9
50–59	7.8	1.0	5.0
60+	3.1	0.7	3.2
Total	10.3	2.4	7.4
Total (N) abuse/ fear	1075	260	793

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey, Unit Record File, Weighted Sample, 1998 (N=10030).

Notes: ⁱQuestion not asked in 1995. 1998 Question was worded “How many times in the past 12 months has a person or persons affected by drugs other than alcohol verbally abused you?”, and so on.

however, were more likely to be put in fear. For example, females aged 60 years or over (5.2%) were twice as likely as males aged 60 years or over (2.7%) to be put in fear by an alcohol-affected person or persons.

Drug-Related Abuse

Patterns of alcohol-related personal violence were largely replicated for drug-related abuse, but on a smaller scale (Table 2).¹ Verbal abuse was the most common personal abuse reported (10.3%), followed by being “put in fear” (7.4%) and experiencing physical abuse (2.4%). Males were more likely than females to experience drug-related verbal (12.0% cf 8.7%) and physical abuse (2.9% cf 2.0%), and females were more likely (8.4%) to be put in fear by a drug-affected person or persons than were males (6.3%). For both sexes, younger persons were more likely than older persons to experience drug-related abuse.²

Reporting Behaviour

Of the 658 victims of alcohol or other drug-related physical abuse who were included in the 1998 sample (that is, approximately 7% of the total sample), less than 10 per cent reported *all* of the alcohol or other drug-related physical

abuse incidents experienced to police (Table 3). Indeed, nearly 500 victims did not report *any* of their physical abuse to police, which represents approximately 7 out of 10 victims (68.9%). One in 5 victims (22.0%) reported *some* of the abuse, but only 9.1 per cent reported *all* incidents to police. The 1995 figures demonstrated a similar pattern. In fact, an even smaller proportion of victims reported all of the abuse experienced to police (5.9%) in that year (data not shown).

The propensity to report offences differed by gender and age. In 1998, one-third of 14–19 year old female victims reported some (5.9%) or all (28.5%) of their physical abuse to police while only 7 per cent of their male counterparts did so (5.7%, 1.3%). Within the 50+ age group, however, females were less likely than their male counterparts to report incidents to police. Three out of 5 females (61.5%) aged 50 years or more did not report *any* of the assaults, compared with less than half (42.5%) of males in the same age group.

Compared with other age groups, older persons (especially males) were more likely to report physical abuse than younger victims. For example, around 58 per cent of male victims aged 50+ reported some or all incidents of physical abuse to police

compared with less than 7 per cent in the youngest age group (14–19 years) and only 20 per cent of 20–29 year olds.

Why Victims of Physical Abuse Do not Report to Police

The most frequently reported reason for not informing police of physical abuse was that the incident(s) were “too trivial or unimportant”, followed by perceptions that the incident(s) were a “private matter”, and that the incidents were “not uncommon” for the victim (Table 4).³ In 1998, more than half (56.0%) the victims of alcohol or other drug-related physical abuses thought the incidents were too trivial, compared to just 38.2 per cent in 1995. Males (63.7%) were more likely than females (44.1%) in 1998 to identify incidents as “too trivial or unimportant”.

In contrast, the proportion of victims believing that police *could not* do anything more than tripled from 5.9 per cent in 1995 to 17.3 per cent in 1998. The proportion of victims who believed that police *would not* do anything decreased from 19.8 per cent to 11.3 per cent in the same period. In 1998 males were more likely than females to believe police *would not* do anything (12.2% cf 10.0%), but less likely to believe police *could not* do

Table 3: Were Physical Abuse Incidents Reported to Police? Australia, 1998¹

1998	Age group					Total	Total N ^{2,3}
	14-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50+		
	(%)						
Males							
None	92.9	79.6	69.8	63.5	42.5	71.6	267
Some	5.7	11.3	14.3	36.5	54.5	21.4	45
All	1.3	9.1	15.9	—	3.0	7.0	33
Females							
None	65.6	63.3	51.0	85.9	61.5	65.0	222
Some	5.9	23.8	42.0	8.7	38.0	22.9	63
All	28.5	12.9	6.9	5.4	0.5	12.1	28
Persons							
None	81.1	72.7	61.9	75.1	47.5	68.9	489
Some	5.8	16.6	26.0	22.1	50.1	22.0	108
All	13.1	10.7	12.1	2.8	2.4	9.1	61

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey, Unit Record File, Weighted Sample, 1998.

Note: ¹Due to small sample size in 1995, equivalent age group results are statistically unreliable and therefore not reported.

²Total N is not comparable to Tables 1 and 2 due to missing values.

³Caution: Ns are small for older age groups.

anything (13.2% cf 23.7%). Females (28.8%) were more likely than males (18.7%) to want the incidents treated as “private matters”.

Summary

These results can be summarised into six key points.

- Between 1995 and 1998 the rates of experiencing alcohol-related abuse declined.
- In 1998, 6.4 per cent of persons were physically abused by an alcohol-affected person in the previous 12 months.
- In 1998, 2.4 per cent were physically abused by a person affected by drugs other than alcohol.
- Of those who were physically abused in the previous 12 months, around 70 per cent *did not* report the incident(s) to police.
- The main reason for not reporting incidents to police was that victims thought the matter was too trivial for police to deal with (56.0%).
- About 1 in 6 persons (17.3%) stated they did not report because the police *could not* do anything and 1 in 9 (11.3%) stated the police *would not* do anything.

Discussion and Policy Implications

The increase to almost 1 in 10 victims in 1998 *always* reporting incidents to police is encouraging, but this relatively low level is an

indictment of perceptions of the seriousness of abuse and the capacity of police to deal with it. The proportion of victims of alcohol or drug-related violence in this survey who reported that police could not or would not do anything about the abuse is greater than that reported in the ABS Victims of Crime Survey. The ABS Survey, however, did not measure the intoxication status of perpetrators and the National Drug Strategy Household Survey did not measure victimisation by all perpetrators, only those who were intoxicated. The results in this paper may indicate that people perceive police to be more helpless, or more unhelpful in dealing with intoxicated perpetrators, than with perpetrators in general (see also for example Leader-Elliott and White 1993).

Almost 3 in every 5 victims in 1998 characterised incidents as “too trivial/unimportant” for notifying police. There were, however, reductions in rates across all forms of abuse in the 12-month period prior to the 1998 survey compared to that in 1995. These two factors together (under-reporting and reduction in rates of assault) may suggest that there was also a reduction in the perceived or actual severity of the reported incidents. Almost half of the female victims, for example, indicated the incident was too trivial, 1 in 4 female victims indicated the incident was a private matter and 1 in 10

indicated that the incident was not uncommon. This may also suggest that more of the abuse was domestically situated in 1998 than in 1995, contributing to a reluctance to report. From the same data source, Williams (1999), for example, showed that among young female victims of alcohol-related abuse almost 1 in 2 rural and almost 1 in 3 metropolitan perpetrators were current or former spouses or boyfriends.

The policy implications of these findings are far reaching. As Carcach (1997) highlighted, “citizens, through the reporting of their crime experiences, start the criminal justice machinery which in turn enables investigation of crimes by police, the prosecution and trial of offenders, and their punishment.” It is imperative, therefore, that victims of physical (and other) abuses do not meet perceived or real barriers, which prevent them from taking the next step in this process if that is their decision.

Some victims of personal abuse, however, decide not to activate the criminal justice machinery. Taking the criminal justice path may not always be the most suitable nor beneficial course of action for victims and it may be neither effective nor efficient for police to intervene in such instances. Alternative resolution mechanisms may be more fruitful. Restorative justice programs, such as Reintegrative Shaming (Sherman and Strang 1997) provide models of how

Table 4: Reasons for Not Informing Police, Australia, 1995 and 1998

	Males		Females		Persons	
	1995	1998	(%) 1995	1998	1995	1998
Too trivial/unimportant	46.9	63.7 *	23.7	44.1 *	38.2	56.0 *
Private Matter	3.1	18.7 *	5.3	28.8 *	4.0	22.7 *
Police could not do anything	4.7	13.2	7.9	23.7 *	5.9	17.3 *
Police would not do anything	18.8	12.2	23.7	10.0	19.8	11.3
Did not want offender punished	3.1	6.7	5.3	15.3	4.9	10.7
Too confused/upset	1.6	4.4	0.0	16.7 *	1.0	9.3 *
Afraid of reprisal/revenge	0.0	8.8 *	15.8	28.3	5.9	16.1 *
Incident is not uncommon for me	7.8	23.1 *	7.9	11.7	7.8	18.1 *
Other reason	14.1	6.7	10.5	5.1	12.7	6.0

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey, Unit Record Files, Weighted Samples, 1995 and 1998.

Note: 1995 figures only take account of alcohol related assaults. Other drug-related assaults were not recorded in the 1995 survey. * indicates $p < 0.05$.

positive outcomes for victims in a community setting, with and without police involvement as appropriate, can be achieved outside of the conventional law enforcement/criminal justice approach. The data are unavailable from this survey, but it is likely that non-reporting victims were unaware of, or were unable to access, such programs, and instead decided to just keep silent. There is a need to implement programs that provide options other than silence.

Through more routine communication between the police and the community, using initiatives such as *community policing* and *Neighbourhood Watch*, victims of alcohol and drug-related abuse might be encouraged to speak out about their experiences and feel confident that their notifications will be acted on by an appropriate authority, if not the police themselves. Physical harm (of any magnitude) is not “too trivial” and it is not a “private matter”, even when the abuse occurs in one’s home or where the perpetrator is a former or current sexual intimate. The police may not always be the most appropriate agency to aid victims of personal abuse, but a lack of confidence in the ability or willingness of police to respond should not prevent accessing appropriate support according to the circumstances of the victimisation and the victims’ individual needs and personal wishes.

Notes

¹ For ease of reference, “drugs other than alcohol related abuse is simply referred to as “drug-related” abuse.

² For further details of identity of perpetrator and whether public or privately situated refer to Williams (1999, 2000a,b) and for when the offences occurred Teece and Williams (2000).

³ “Trivial/unimportant” categorisation self-reported. Exact nature of incidents is unknown.

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