



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Statistical Bulletin 28

ISSN 2206-7302 (Online)

ISBN 978 1 925304 71 8 (Online)

July 2020

Abstract | This paper presents the findings from an online survey of 15,000 Australian women about their experience of domestic violence during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the three months prior to the survey, conducted in May 2020, 4.6 percent of women who responded to the survey experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner. Almost six percent (5.8%) of women experienced coercive control and 11.6 percent reported experiencing at least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour.

For many women, the pandemic coincided with the onset or escalation of violence and abuse. Two-thirds of women who experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic said the violence had started or escalated in the three months prior to the survey.

Many women, particularly those experiencing more serious or complex forms of violence and abuse, reported safety concerns were a barrier to help-seeking.

The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic

Hayley Boxall, Anthony Morgan and Rick Brown

Since the first case of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was confirmed in Australia in January 2020, both the disease and the measures implemented to limit its spread have had significant impacts on the day-to-day lives of Australians. In the past few months there have been numerous media reports about the risks to the safety of victims of domestic violence (intimate partner violence), including concerns about an increase in violence, more complex forms of violence, and the impact of social distancing measures on the ability of victims to seek help (Morton 2020; Nancarrow 2020; Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020). Various factors have been identified as contributing to a potential increase in both the prevalence and severity of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- victims and offenders spending more time together;
- increased social isolation and decreased social movement, which may restrict avenues for women to seek help;
- increased situational stressors associated with domestic violence (eg financial stress and job insecurity);

- offenders feeling out of control due to situational factors and using violence and abuse as a means of creating a sense of control; and
- increased alcohol consumption among domestic violence perpetrators (Delaney 2020; Morton 2020; Nancarrow 2020; Payne, Morgan & Piquero 2020).

Contrary to international research (Ashby 2020; Jaramillo 2020; Mohler et al. 2020), recent Australian evidence from New South Wales and Queensland suggests that domestic violence reported to the police did not increase in March or April 2020 (Freeman 2020a, 2020b), nor did the number of protection order breaches (Payne, Morgan & Piquero 2020). Although some Australian domestic violence and men's behaviour change services have reported an increase in calls for support since February 2020, other service providers have reported a decrease or no change in their client numbers (Gleeson 2020; Morton 2020; Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020; Tuohy 2020; Women's Safety NSW & Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education 2020).

There is a lack of research into the prevalence of domestic violence among Australian women since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the majority of women experiencing violence and abuse within their relationships do not engage with police or government or non-government agencies—particularly while they remain in a relationship with their abuser—this is a significant gap in knowledge (ABS 2017). Relatedly, there are concerns that opportunities for women to contact and engage with domestic violence services or the police have been even more constrained during periods when social movement was restricted (Fitz-Gibbon & Meyer 2020). There are particular concerns about the safety of women experiencing coercive controlling behaviour (Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020).

To address these emerging issues, we set out to answer the following questions:

- What was the prevalence and nature of domestic violence experienced by Australian women during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What causal mechanisms may explain any observed relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic violence?

This paper focuses on the first of these questions.

Method

This paper presents the results of an online survey of 15,000 women aged 18 years and over. Respondents were asked about their experience of domestic violence in the last three months, as well as their experience of prior domestic violence. The aim was to measure the prevalence of violence since the beginning of February 2020, when COVID-19 first started impacting Australia. The focus of this study was on women's experience of violence, given the overwhelming evidence that women are over-represented as victims of domestic violence (ABS 2017) and domestic homicide (Bricknell 2020), experience significant harms associated with domestic violence (AIHW 2019), and were expected to be disproportionately affected by violence in the home during the pandemic (Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020).

Domestic violence is defined here as physical violence, sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour involving intimate partners. This includes attempted behaviours and face-to-face threats. The focus of this paper is on partner violence, which refers to physical and sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour that occurs within current and former cohabiting relationships. A cohabiting partner is a person the respondent lives with, or lived with at some point in the last 12 months, in a current or former married or de facto relationship.

Coercive controlling behaviours involve the micro-regulation of women's lives (Stark 2007). This can involve a range of behaviours perpetrators use as a means of controlling their partner, including frequent belittling and derogatory comments, monitoring of their whereabouts, interfering with their relationships and financial abuse. For further detail of the definitions used, see the *Technical appendix*.

The survey was conducted by i-Link Research Solutions between 6 May and 1 June 2020. It took respondents approximately 10 minutes to complete. There were several important measures in place to ensure the safety of respondents (see the *Technical appendix*). The survey was sent to female members of the research company's online panel aged 18 years or over. Proportional quota sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used. Data were subsequently weighted by age and jurisdiction to reflect the spread of the Australian population using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2019) on the estimated resident population as at June 2019. All data presented in this paper are weighted. Although the sample was not weighted by other sociodemographic factors, comparisons with population data and estimates from nationally representative surveys indicate there was a high level of concordance between the survey sample and the wider Australian female population (see *Technical appendix*). While a large sample of women were surveyed, the use of non-probability sampling from an online panel means that not everyone had an equal likelihood of being selected to participate in the research. Results are specific to the women who participated in the survey and cannot be generalised to the wider female population.

The survey included questions about sociodemographic and relationship characteristics and women's experiences of physical or sexual violence, and emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviour in the three months prior to the survey. The physical and sexual violence survey items were taken from the 2016 Personal Safety Survey (ABS 2017). Emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours were measured using items derived from the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory—Short Form (PMWI-SF) Dominance—Isolation subscale (Tolman 1999). Other items relating to emotional abuse and stalking were drawn from the Personal Safety Survey and modified, and a question about technology-facilitated abuse was added. This better reflects a contemporary understanding of the emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours that characterise non-physical forms of domestic violence (Dragiewicz et al. 2018; Monckton Smith 2019; Woodlock et al. 2019).

Previous studies have developed a cut-off score using the PMWI-SF to distinguish more serious levels of psychological violence (Começanha & Maia 2018). However, the current study relied on a modified set of questions and dichotomous response items instead of questions about the frequency of behaviour. This was necessary to capture as wide a range of abusive behaviours as possible within the strict time limit imposed for safety reasons. For the purpose of this study, the presence of coercive control was determined on the basis of a respondent reporting three or more of the 13 emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours described in the survey, indicating a pattern of controlling behaviour. Our estimate of coercive controlling behaviour is likely conservative. For this reason, the prevalence of fewer than three emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours is also reported.

Further information on the methodology, key definitions, sampling strategy, safety protocols and limitations of the survey is provided in the *Technical appendix*.

Sample characteristics

In the final weighted data, 32.0 percent of respondents lived in New South Wales, 26.2 percent in Victoria, 19.9 percent in Queensland and 10.1 percent in Western Australia. Smaller proportions resided in South Australia (7.1%), Tasmania (2.2%), the Australian Capital Territory (1.7%) and the Northern Territory (0.9%). This is consistent with the ABS (2019) estimated resident population as at June 2019.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The average age of respondents was 48 years, and approximately half of the sample was below the age of 45 years at the time of completing the survey (46.2%). Nearly four percent of respondents identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (3.8%), and one in five (18.7%) said that they spoke a language other than English most of the time at home (ie were from non-English-speaking backgrounds). One in eight respondents (11.9%) had a long-term health condition which they said restricted their ability to undertake day-to-day activities unassisted.

The majority of respondents had completed Year 12 or equivalent, with two in five (42.0%) reporting that they had a university qualification. One in four (24.6%) respondents reported their usual place of residence was in a regional or remote area, while 75.4 percent were living in a major city (as defined by the ABS).

	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
18–24	1,689	11.3
25–34	2,770	18.5
35–44	2,466	16.4
45–54	2,378	15.9
55–64	2,178	14.5
65+	3,519	23.5
Average age (years)	47.6	
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ^a	565	3.8
Non-English-speaking background ^b	2,799	18.7
Current long-term health condition restricting everyday activities ^c	1,778	11.9
Highest level of education completed^d		
Year 9 or below	406	2.7
Year 10/11 or equivalent	1,837	12.3
Year 12 or equivalent	2,265	15.1
Vocational certificate	4,195	28.0
University	6,296	42.0
Usual place of residence^e		
Major cities	11,315	75.4
Regional	3,330	22.2
Remote	355	2.4

a: Excludes 1 respondent who did not provide this information. Denominator includes 99 respondents who did not want to disclose this information

b: Excludes 1 respondent who did not provide this information

c: Defined as someone who said they had a health condition that had lasted or was expected to last six months or longer and, because of this condition, they were restricted in or needed help or supervision with day-to-day activities. Excludes 1 respondent who did not provide this information

d: Excludes 1 respondent who did not provide this information

e: Regional classification calculated using the respondent's postcode and concordance with the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ABS 2018)

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Overall, 51.8 percent ($n=7,763$) of women in the sample reported that they had been in a cohabiting relationship for at least some of the 12 months prior to the survey (95.7% in their current relationship). Further, of the women who were in a cohabiting relationship with a current or former partner in the past 12 months:

- 94.8 percent said their partner was male, and 4.4 percent said their partner was female;
- 54.7 percent had at least one child with their partner (average 2.1 children);
- 40.5 percent had at least one child living with them, either full time or part time (average 1.8 children); and
- 3.6 percent said they were pregnant at the time of completing the survey (Table 2).

Table 2: Relationship characteristics of respondents who had been in a cohabiting relationship in the past 12 months (weighted data) (n=7,763)

	<i>n</i>	%
Relationship status		
Current partner	7,432	95.7
Former partner	331	4.3
Gender of partner		
Male	7,360	94.8
Female	344	4.4
Intersex/indeterminate	8	<1
Do not want to disclose	51	<1
Children within the relationship		
At least one child with partner	4,247	54.7
Average number of children with partner (range) ^a	2.1 (1–8)	
Pregnant at time of survey ^b	278	3.6
Any children living in household	3,147	40.5
Average number of children living in household (range) ^c	1.8 (1–8)	

Note: Limited to women who said they had been in a cohabiting relationship with a current or former partner for at least some of the 12 months prior to completing the survey

a: Limited to women who said they had at least one child with their current or former partner

b: Denominator includes 68 women who said they were not sure if they were pregnant at time of survey

c: Limited to women who said they had at least one child living with them, either full time or part time

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Results

The prevalence of domestic violence among Australian women

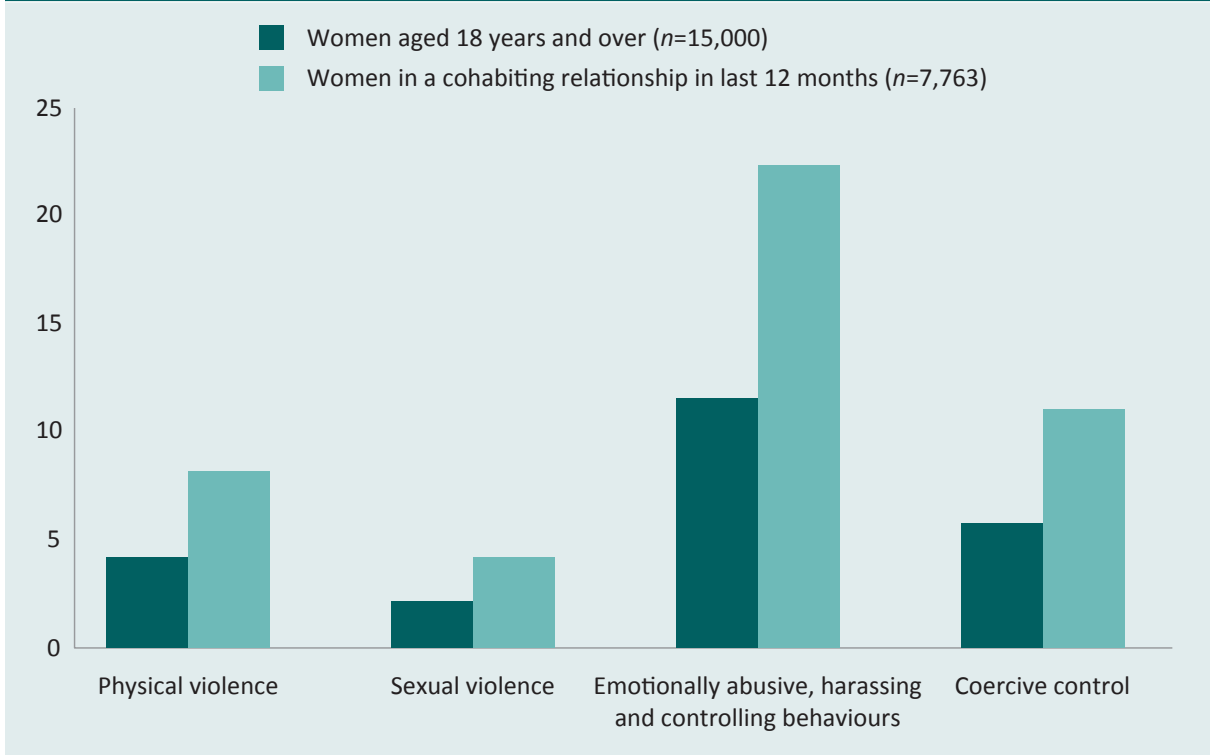
Overall, 4.6 percent of all women who responded to the survey reported experiencing physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to the survey. This increased to 8.8 percent when the sample was limited to women who had been in a cohabiting relationship in the previous 12 months.

As shown in Figure 1:

- 4.2 percent of all women and 8.2 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced physical violence;
- 2.2 percent of all women and 4.2 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced sexual violence; and
- 11.6 percent of all women and 22.4 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours.

Further, 5.8 percent of all women, and 11.1 percent of women in cohabiting relationships, experienced coercive control, meaning they experienced three or more forms of emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours in the three months prior to the survey. Overall, 6.8 percent of all women, and 13.2 percent of women in cohabiting relationships, experienced physical violence, sexual violence or coercive control in the three months prior to the survey.

Figure 1: Prevalence of domestic violence experienced by respondents in the last three months (weighted data) (%)



Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Nature of domestic violence experienced by Australian women

Information about the specific forms of violence and abuse experienced by women in the three months prior to the survey is presented in Tables 3 and 4. Among women who reported they experienced physical or sexual violence in the last three months, the most common forms of violence experienced were pushing, grabbing or shoving (71.7%); having things thrown at them, slapping, biting, kicking or hitting (52.7%); and sexual violence (47.1%; Table 3). The majority of these women reported multiple forms of violence during this period (68.3%; mean=2.5).

Table 3: Physical and sexual violence experienced by respondents in the last three months (weighted data) (%)

	Overall prevalence among respondents (n=15,000)	Prevalence among respondents who experienced physical or sexual violence (n=685) ^a
	%	%
Pushed, grabbed or shoved the respondent	3.3	71.7
Threw something at the respondent that could hurt them, or slapped, bit, kicked or hit them with a fist	2.4	52.7
Forced the respondent to take part in sexual activity against their will	2.2	47.1
Choked/strangled the respondent or grabbed them around the neck	1.9	41.6
Hit the respondent with something that could hurt them, beat them, stabbed them with a knife or shot them with a gun	1.6	35.1
Physically assaulted the respondent or hurt them in any other way	2.1	45.2
At least one form of physical or sexual violence	4.6	–
More than one form of physical or sexual violence	3.1	68.3
Average number of types of physical or sexual violence experienced	–	2.5

Note: Includes threatened behaviours and face-to-face threats of physical or sexual violence

a: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported experiencing physical or sexual violence in the three months prior to the survey

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Among women who experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour over the last three months, the most common forms of abuse reported were constant verbal abuse and insults (47.2%), jealousy or suspicion about the respondent's friends (46.2%) and monitoring their time and whereabouts (41.3%). Two-thirds of women (66.7%) reported that they had experienced more than one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour in the three months prior to the survey, with victims reporting an average of nearly four (3.9) different types of emotional abuse, harassing or controlling behaviours (Table 4).

Table 4: Emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours experienced by respondents in the last three months (weighted data) (%)

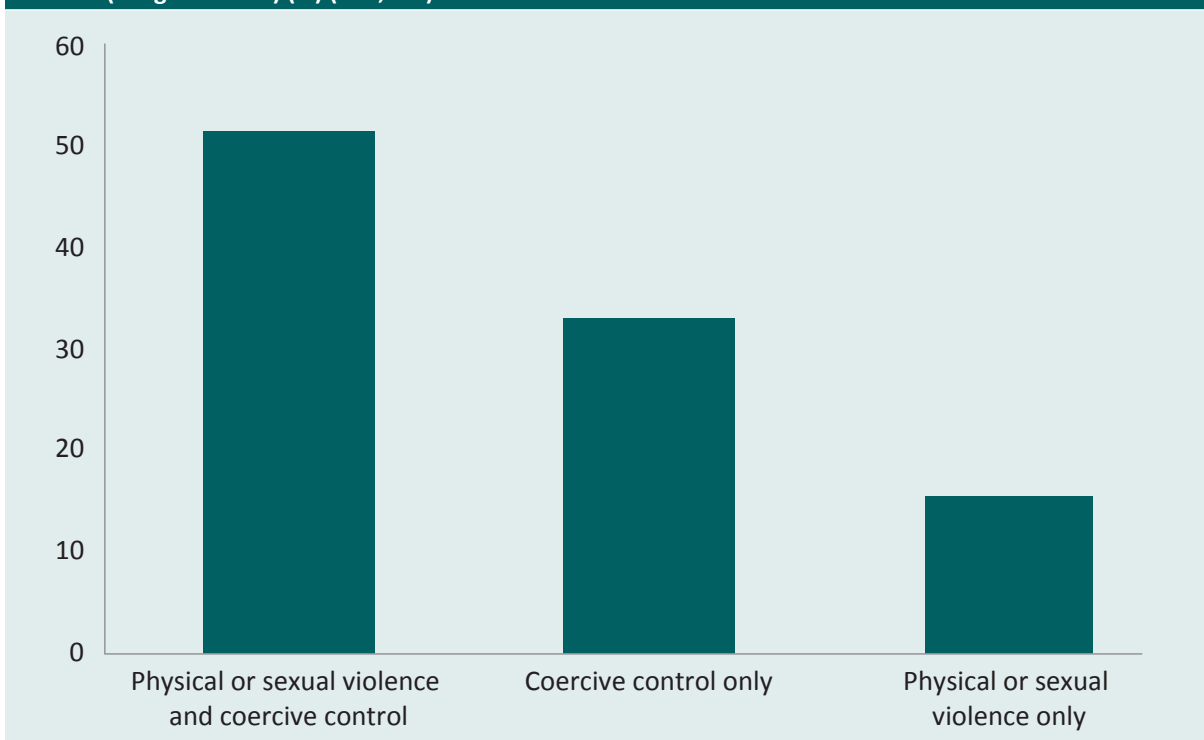
	Overall prevalence among respondents (n=15,000)	Prevalence among respondents who experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour (n=1,737) ^a
Constantly insulted the respondent to make them feel ashamed, belittled or humiliated; or shouted, yelled or verbally abused the respondent to intimidate them	5.5	47.2
Was jealous or suspicious of the respondent's friends	5.4	46.2
Monitored the respondent's time and made them account for their whereabouts	4.8	41.3
Used the respondent's/shared money or made important financial decisions without talking to them	4.7	40.2
Interfered with the respondent's relationships with other family members	3.9	33.8
Accused the respondent of having an affair	3.3	28.5
Tried to keep the respondent from doing things to help themselves	2.8	24.3
Threatened to hurt themselves	2.7	23.5
Damaged, destroyed or stole the respondent's property	2.7	23.4
Threatened or abused respondent online or through the use of technology (eg mobile phone)	2.7	22.9
Stalked the respondent online or in person	2.6	22.3
Restricted the respondent's use of their phone, the internet or the family car	2.6	22.2
Threatened to hurt the respondent's family, friends, children and/or pets	2.1	17.9
At least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour	11.6	–
More than one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour	7.7	66.7
Three or more forms of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour (coercive control)	5.8	49.7
Average number of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours	–	3.9

a: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported experiencing emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour in the three months prior to the survey

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Many women reported experiencing multiple forms of physical or sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour in the last three months. However, it was also common for women to report experiencing both coercive control and physical or sexual violence (Figure 2). Among women who experienced either physical or sexual violence or coercive control ($n=1,021$; 6.8% of respondents), half (51.6%) reported experiencing both forms of abuse. By comparison, experiencing physical or sexual violence (15.5%) or coercive control (32.9%) in isolation was less common. Further, of those women who experienced coercive control, 61.1 percent also reported physical or sexual violence. Relatedly, of women who reported physical or sexual violence, 76.9 percent also reported coercive control. This highlights the complex nature of the domestic violence that many respondents experienced.

Figure 2: Co-occurrence of physical or sexual violence and coercive control among women in the last three months (weighted data) (%) ($n=1,021$)



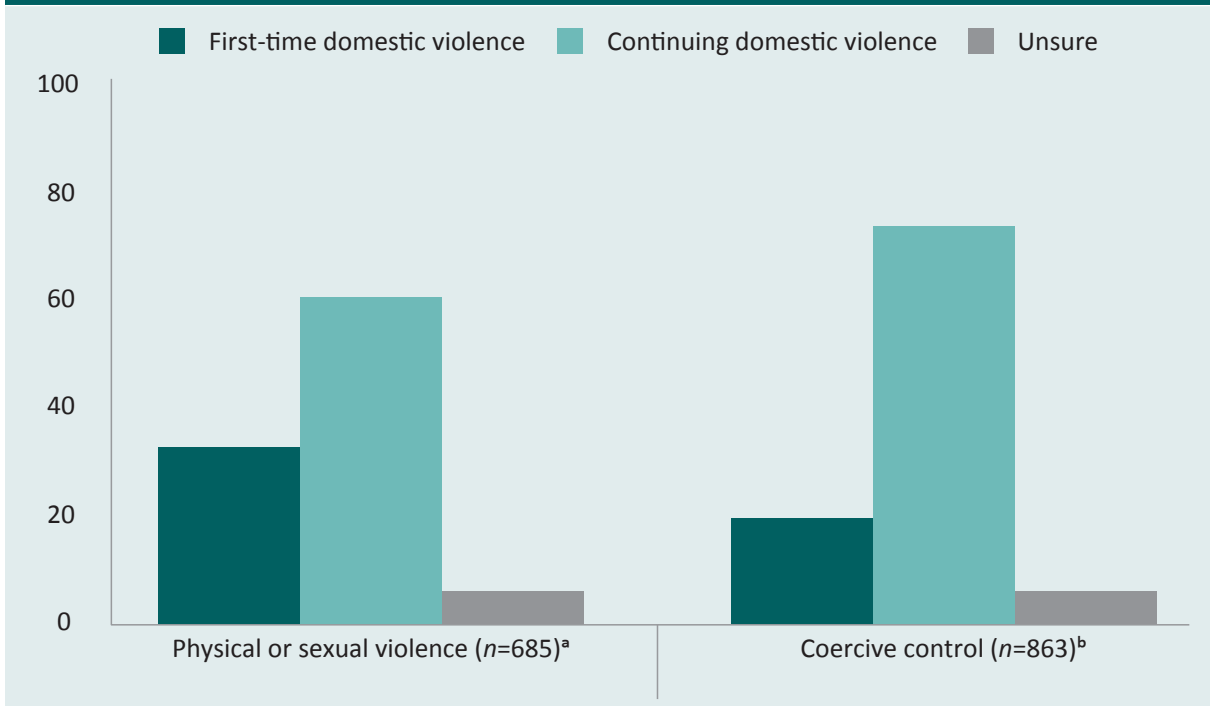
Note: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported experiencing physical or sexual violence or coercive control in the three months prior to the survey

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Among those women who reported they had experienced physical or sexual violence in the three months prior to the survey, one in three (33.1%) said that this was the first time their partner had been violent towards them. Similarly, 19.9 percent of women who had experienced coercive control said that this was the first time they had experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour within their relationship (Figure 3). Overall:

- 1.5 percent of all women and 2.9 percent of women in cohabiting relationships had been a victim of physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner *for the first time* in the last three months.
- 2.8 percent of all women and 5.4 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour by a current or former cohabiting partner *for the first time* in the last three months.
- 1.1 percent of all women and 2.2 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced coercive control by a current or former cohabiting partner for the first time in the last three months, meaning they had not experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour prior to February 2020.

Figure 3: Prior domestic violence, by type of violence experienced in the last three months (weighted data) (%)



Note: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported that they had experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding of weighted figures

a: Total includes 41 women who were unsure whether they had experienced physical or sexual violence prior to February 2020

b: Total includes 51 women who were unsure whether they had experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour prior to February 2020

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

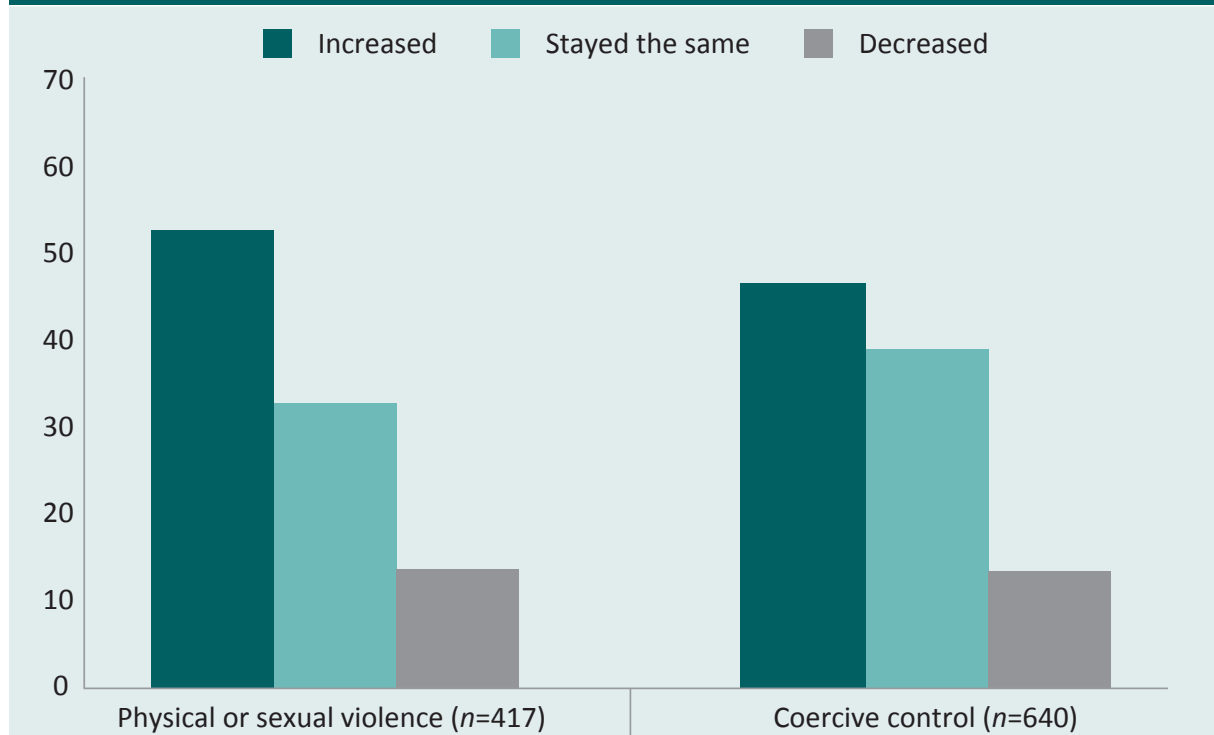
Changes in the frequency or severity of domestic violence

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the onset of domestic violence for many women. However, most women who experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey said they had also experienced physical or sexual violence or coercive control (or both) by their partner prior to February 2020. Women who reported violence as ongoing were also asked whether the frequency and severity of violence had increased, decreased or stayed the same, relative to the six-month period prior to February 2020.

Among women who had experienced physical or sexual violence from their current or former cohabiting partner prior to February 2020, half (53.1%) said the violence had increased in frequency or severity (Figure 4). One in three women (33.1%) reported that the violence had stayed the same, and a minority said that it had decreased (13.9%). Further, 47.0 percent of women who experienced coercive control before and after February 2020 said the abuse had increased in frequency or severity, 39.3 percent said it had remained the same and 13.7 percent said it had decreased.

Overall, this means that 65.4 percent of women who experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to the survey had experienced either violence for the first time by that partner or an escalation in the frequency and severity of prior violence. Similarly, 54.8 percent of women who experienced coercive control from a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to the survey said either that they had experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour by that partner for the first time, or that the abuse had escalated since February 2020.

Figure 4: Changes in the frequency or severity of physical or sexual violence or coercive control among women who had experienced prior domestic violence, by type of violence experienced in the last three months (weighted data) (%)



Note: Limited to women who reported they were in a cohabiting relationship in the past 12 months, had experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey and had experienced violence or abuse from their partner prior to February 2020. Respondents could report experiencing both physical or sexual violence and coercive control

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Help-seeking among women who experienced domestic violence

Women who experienced physical or sexual violence in the three months prior to the survey were asked whether police had been notified about the most recent incident, either by them or by someone else. Two in five (42.1%) women reported that the police had been notified after the most recent incident of physical or sexual violence. Specifically, one in three women (31.2%) said they had called the police, while another 10.9 percent said that someone else had notified the police. More than half (56.0%) said that the police had not been notified following the most recent incident (2.0% were unsure whether police had been notified).

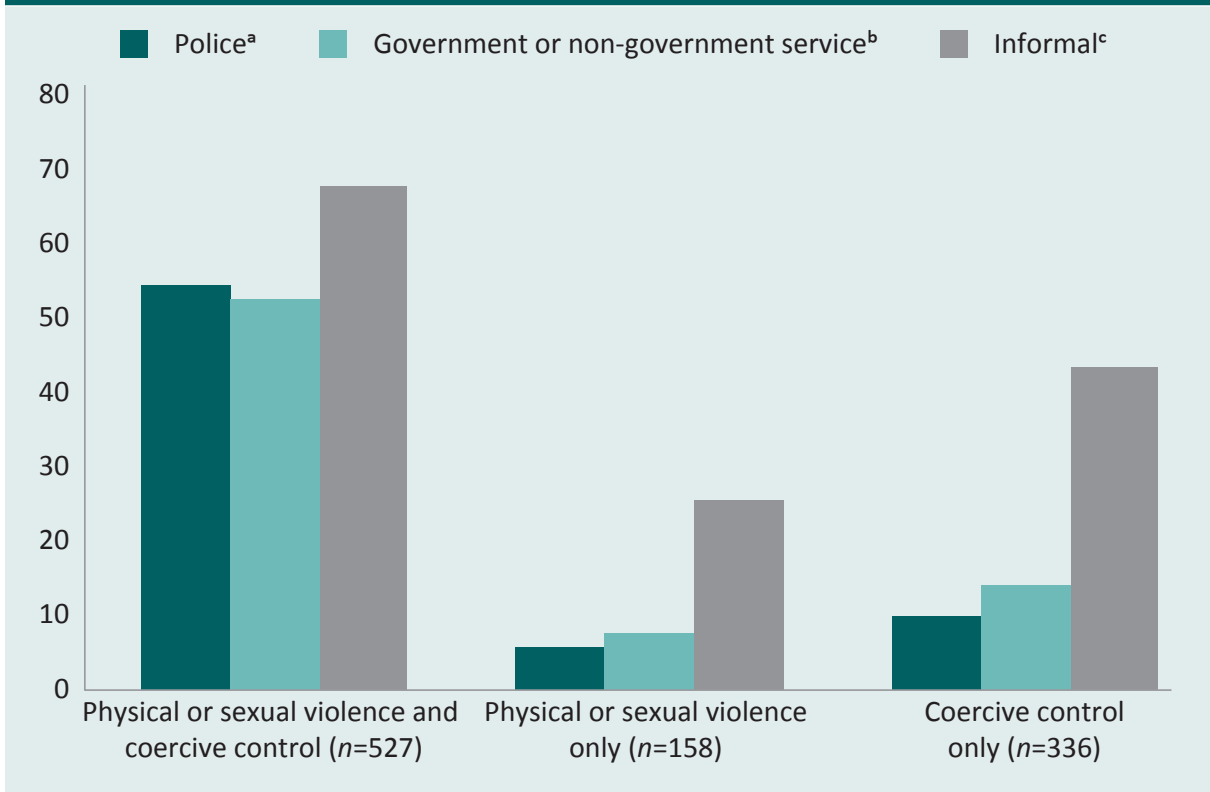
Women who experienced physical or sexual violence or coercive control in the three months prior to the survey were also asked whether they had sought support or advice in relation to their partner's behaviour at any time in the three months prior to the survey. Sources of support included the police, government and non-government support services, and informal sources (eg family members and spiritual leaders). They were not asked whether someone else had sought help or support on their behalf.

Among women who had experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control, 54.1 percent said they had contacted the police, 52.5 percent sought support from a government or non-government service and 67.7 percent said they reached out to informal sources of support (Figure 5). Around one in five women (22.3%) who experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control in the three months prior to the survey had not sought help from formal or informal sources of support.

Much smaller proportions of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence but not coercive control sought help from the police (5.8%), government or non-government services (7.8%) or informal sources of support (25.6%). Two-thirds (67.1%) of these women had not sought help from any source over the last three months. Similarly, only a small proportion of women who experienced coercive control but not physical or sexual violence had contacted police over the last three months (10.0%). Around one in seven (14.1%) sought help or support from government or non-government services, while two in five (43.2%) sought help or support from informal sources. Half (49.5%) of these women had not sought help from any source over the last three months.

The different patterns of help-seeking described in Figure 5 are explained in part by variations in the patterns and likely impact of violence and abuse experienced by women in the three groups. Closer analysis of the three groups revealed that women who experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control reported more frequent and severe forms of physical and non-physical abuse. For example, 50.7 percent of women who reported both physical or sexual violence and coercive control said that their partner had attempted to strangle or choke them in the three months prior to the survey, compared with 11.4 percent of women who reported physical or sexual violence but not coercive control. Further, one in three women (31.3%) who experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control reported 10 or more emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours in the last three months, compared with 3.9 percent of women who experienced coercive control but not physical or sexual violence.

Figure 5: Help-seeking among respondents who experienced domestic violence, by type of violence experienced in the last three months (weighted data) (%) (n=1,021)



Note: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported that they had experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey. Respondents could report experiencing both physical/sexual violence and coercive control

a: Total includes 8 women who experienced physical or sexual violence and coercive control, 3 women who experienced physical or sexual violence in isolation and 5 women who experienced coercive control in isolation who were unsure whether they had sought advice or support from police in the three months prior to the survey

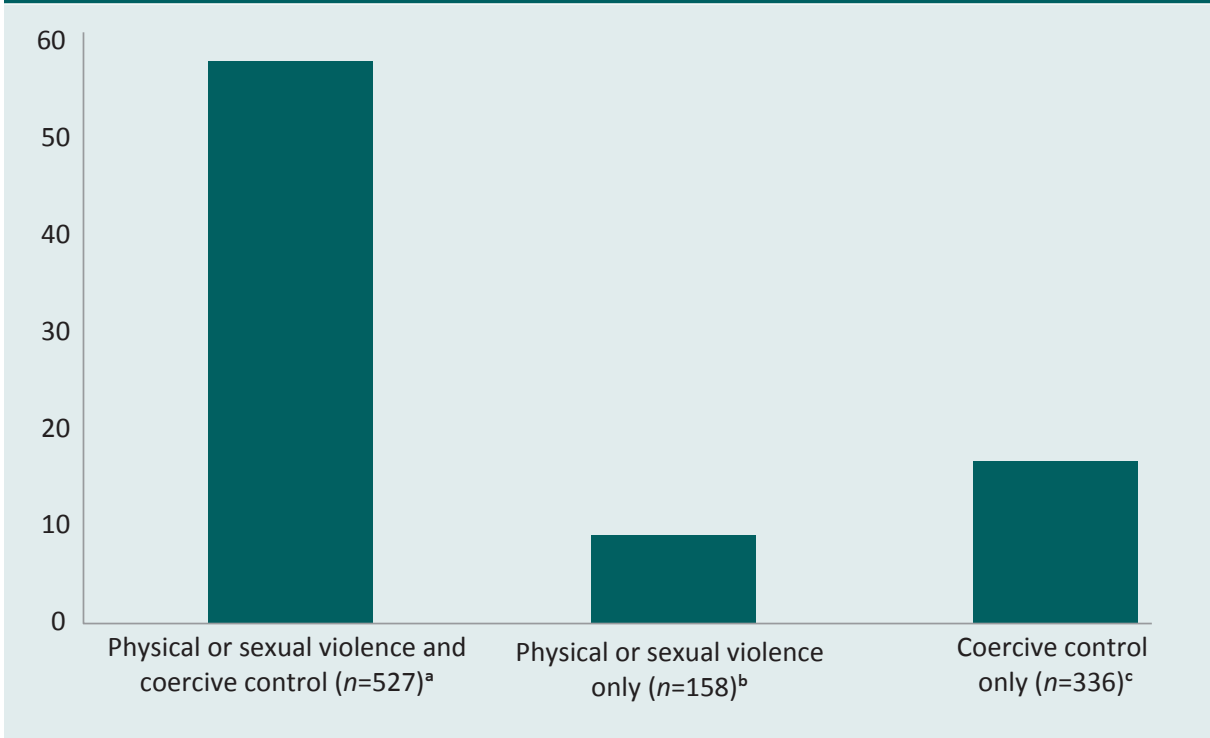
b: Total includes 12 women who experienced physical or sexual violence and coercive control, 3 women who experienced physical or sexual violence in isolation and 4 women who experienced coercive control in isolation who were unsure whether they had sought advice or support from government or non-government support services in the three months prior to the survey

c: Total includes 18 women who experienced physical or sexual violence and coercive control, 4 women who experienced physical or sexual violence in isolation and 8 women who experienced coercive control in isolation who were unsure whether they had sought advice or support from informal sources in the three months prior to the survey. Informal sources of support include friends, family members, spiritual leaders, work colleagues, employers etc

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Overall, more than a third of women (36.9%) who experienced either physical or sexual violence or coercive control said that, on at least one occasion, they wanted to seek advice or support but could not because of safety concerns. Importantly, over half (58.1%) of those women who experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control from a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to the survey said that on at least one occasion they did not seek help due to safety concerns. Smaller proportions of women who reported physical or sexual violence but not coercive control (9.0%), or coercive control but not physical violence (16.7%), reported they did not seek help due to safety concerns. This highlights the potential barriers to seeking help that many women experienced during the initial stages of the pandemic—particularly those who experienced more complex and serious violence and abuse (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Women who experienced domestic violence who were unable to seek support on at least occasion due to safety concerns, by type of violence experienced in the last three months (weighted data) (%) (*n*=1,021)



Note: Limited to women who reported they were in a cohabiting relationship in the past 12 months and had experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey

a: Total includes 37 women who said they were unsure about having experienced barriers to help-seeking in the three months prior to the survey

b: Total includes 6 women who said they were unsure about having experienced barriers to help-seeking in the three months prior to the survey

c: Total includes 21 women who said they were unsure about having experienced barriers to help-seeking in the three months prior to the survey

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Conclusion

This study provides the strongest evidence available about the prevalence of domestic violence experienced by Australian women during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. One in 20 women (4.6%) experienced physical or sexual violence over the last three months, 5.8 percent experienced coercive control, and one in 10 (11.6%) experienced at least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour perpetrated by a current or former cohabiting partner.

Critically, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have coincided with the onset of physical or sexual violence or coercive control for many women. For other women, it coincided with an increase in the frequency or severity of ongoing violence or abuse. Two-thirds of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic said the violence had started or escalated in the three months prior to the survey. Similarly, more than half the women who experienced coercive control reported the onset or escalation of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although a significant proportion of women did seek help from police, government or non-government agencies and informal sources, many were unable to because of safety concerns. This is consistent with the concerns raised by many in the support services sector that they found it difficult to engage with women during this period of social distancing. It also helps to explain why the number of domestic violence incidents reported to police has not increased (Freeman 2020b).

A cross-sectional survey does not allow cause–effect relationships to be established. Nevertheless, it appears likely that the conditions and consequences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an increase in domestic violence. These drivers of increased violence are complex, but likely involve some combination of the increased time spent at home, social isolation due to social distancing requirements and financial stressors associated with the economic impact of COVID-19.

References

URLS correct as at June 2020

Ashby MPJ 2020. Changes in police calls for service during the early months of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/h4mcu>

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019. *Australian demographic statistics, Jun 2019*. ABS cat. no. 3101.0. Canberra: ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0>

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018. *Australian Statistical Geographic Standard (ASGS): Volume 3 - non ABS structures, July 2018*. ABS cat. no. 1270.0.55.003. Canberra: ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1270.0.55.003>

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017. *Personal safety, Australia, 2016*. ABS cat. no. 4906.0. Canberra: ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. AIHW cat. no. FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW. DOI: 10.25816/5ebcc837fa7ea

Bricknell S 2020. *Homicide in Australia 2017–18*. Statistical Report no. 23. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://aic.gov.au/publications/sr/sr23>

Começanha R & Maia Â 2018. Screening tool for psychological intimate partner violence: Portuguese validation of the psychological maltreatment of women inventory. *Violence and Victims* 33(1): 75–90

Delaney B 2020. Drinking in coronavirus isolation: Experts warn Australians to monitor their intake. *The Guardian*, 6 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/apr/07/drinking-in-coronavirus-isolation-experts-warn-australians-to-monitor-their-intake>

Dragiewicz M et al. 2018. Technology facilitated coercive control: Domestic violence and the competing roles of digital media platforms. *Feminist Media Studies* 18(4): 609–625

Fitz-Gibbon K & Meyer S 2020. Coronavirus: Fear of family violence spike as COVID-19 impact hits households. Melbourne: Monash University. <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2020/03/18/1379841>

Freeman K 2020a. *Monitoring changes in domestic violence in the wake of COVID-19 social isolation measures*. Bureau Brief no. 145. Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_publication/bocsar_pub_brief.aspx

Freeman K 2020b. *Has domestic violence increased in NSW in the wake of COVID-19 social distancing and isolation? Update to April 2020*. Bureau Brief no. 146. Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_publication/bocsar_pub_brief.aspx

Gleeson H 2020. ‘This is the storm’: Inside the call centre dealing with Australia’s abusive men. *ABC News*, 3 May. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-03/mens-referral-service-family-violence-coronavirus/12207558>

Jaramillo C 2020. Family violence rose 12.5% during shelter-at-home orders, UT-Dallas study finds. *Dallas Morning News*, 19 May 2020. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/crime/2020/05/19/ut-dallas-study-finds-family-violence-increased-125-during-shelter-at-home-orders/>

Mohler G, Bertozzi A, Carter J, Short M, Sledge D, Tita G, Uchida C & Brantingham P 2020. Impact of social distancing during COVID-19 pandemic on crime in Los Angeles and Indianapolis. *Journal of Criminal Justice*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2020.101692>

Monckton Smith J 2019. Intimate partner femicide: Using Foucauldian analysis to track an eight stage progression to homicide. *Violence Against Women*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219863876>

Morton R 2020. Family violence increasing during Covid-19 lockdown. *The Saturday Paper*, 4 April. <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/law-crime/2020/04/04/family-violence-increasing-during-covid-19-lockdown/15859188009641>

Nancarrow H 2020. *Making sense of the Covid-19 commentary about domestic and family violence*. Sydney: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety

Payne J, Morgan A & Piquero A 2020. COVID-19 and social distancing measures in Queensland Australia are associated with short-term decreases in recorded violent crime. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/z4m8t>

Pfitzner N, Fitz-Gibbon K & True J 2020. *Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': Practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions*. Melbourne: Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University. <https://www.monash.edu/arts/gender-and-family-violence/research-projects/covid-19-and-gender-based-violence>

Stark E 2007. *Coercive control: The entrapment of women in personal life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Tolman RM 1999. The validation of the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory. *Violence and Victims* 14(1): 25–37

Tuohy W 2020. Helpline calls by family violence perpetrators 'skyrocket' amid isolation. *The Age*, 12 April. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/helpline-calls-by-family-violence-perpetrators-skyrocket-amid-isolation-20200410-p54iw7.html>

Women's Safety NSW & Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education 2020. Family violence and alcohol during COVID-19. Haymarket: Women's Safety NSW. <https://www.womenssafetyntsw.org.au/impact/publication/family-violence-and-alcohol-during-covid-19/>

Woodlock D, McKenzie M, Western D & Harris B 2019. Technology as a weapon in domestic violence: Responding to digital coercive control. *Australian Social Work*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2019.1607510>

Hayley Boxall is the Research Manager of the Australian Institute of Criminology's Violence against Women and Children Research Program.

Anthony Morgan is the Research Manager of the Australian Institute of Criminology's Serious and Organised Crime Research Laboratory.

Dr Rick Brown is the Deputy Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology and Visiting Fellow of Policing and Criminal Justice at the University of Derby.

General editor, *Statistical Bulletin series*: Dr Rick Brown, Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Criminology.
For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the *Statistical Bulletin series*, visit the AIC website at: aic.gov.au

ISSN 2206-7302 (Online)

ISBN 978 1 925304 71 8 (Online)

©Australian Institute of Criminology 2020

GPO Box 1936
Canberra ACT 2601, Australia
Tel: 02 6268 7166

Disclaimer: This research paper does not necessarily reflect the policy position of the Australian Government