

Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research

Statistics: Common Misconceptions and Misrepresentations

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Statistics are often the focal point for discussions about violence against women. However, much of the data gathered on the prevalence of violence against women, and women's experiences of violence, can be complex and easily misrepresented or taken out of context. Whether these statistics are reported in the media, utilised by governments to shape policy responses, used as a basis for research or disseminated by frontline staff or community advocates to raise awareness, it is important that they are used and interpreted accurately. We thought it timely to discuss one of the primary sources for statistical data in this field, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, common misconceptions about the data and some suggestions on how best to present key statistics.

Much of the data and statistics referred to when discussing violence against women is drawn from the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics *Personal Safety Survey*. The most recent survey was conducted from November 2016 to May 2017, with findings presented in *Personal Safety, Australia 2016*. The survey collected data from men and women over the age of 18 about their experiences of violence from the age of 15. This data included current and previous partner violence and emotional abuse; experiences of stalking; lifetime experience of sexual harassment; and general feelings of safety (ABS, 2018). The *Personal Safety Survey* is based upon the 1996 *Women's Safety Survey*, and has now been conducted three times: in 2005, 2012 and 2016. The similarity of design of the surveys allows some comparisons to be made between data collected at different times. As there are no generally accepted standards for defining 'violence', the ABS were guided by their Survey Advisory Group and where possible based their definitions upon actions which would constitute offences under State and Territory criminal legislation.

When it comes to defining key terms, it is important to note that while there are many common features, there are also some differences in definitions between State and Territory policies and legislation. The Australian Bureau of Statistics uses the following definitions:

Violence: Any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault experienced by a person since the age of 15.

Sexual Assault: An act of a sexual nature carried out against a person's will through the use of physical force, intimidation or coercion, including any attempts to do this. This includes rape, attempted rape, aggravated sexual assault (assault with a weapon), indecent assault, penetration by objects, forced sexual activity that did not end in penetration and attempts to force a person into sexual activity. Incidents so defined would be an offence under State and Territory criminal law.

Sexual harassment: Is considered to have occurred when a person has experienced or been subjected to behaviours which made them feel uncomfortable, and were offensive due to their sexual nature.

Intimate partner: Includes current partner (living with), previous partner (has lived with), boyfriend/girlfriend/date and ex-boyfriend/ex-girlfriend (never lived with).

Partner: The term partner in the PSS is used to describe a person the respondent lives with, or lived with at some point in a married or de facto relationship. This may also be described as a co-habiting partner.

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017)

The *Personal Safety Survey* contains detailed and useful information with regards to types of violence, changes in violence prevalence rates over times, gender of victims and perpetrators, relationship to perpetrator and most recent incidents. The fact that the survey covers all forms of violence, and not just domestic and family violence makes the data useful in many ways, but also leads to two of the more common misrepresentations of key statistics:

One in three women experience domestic violence

One in three Australian women have experienced at least one incident of violence, but the perpetrator may not necessarily be a partner or ex-partner. Approximately one quarter of Australian women have experienced at least one incident of violence by a partner or ex-partner (ie domestic violence).

Women are more likely to experience violence than men

Women are more likely to experience domestic violence, however men are more likely to be victims of violence. One in two men, compared to one in three women, experience violence perpetrated by anyone, irrespective of the relationship. Most of the violence against men is perpetrated by other men.

Precise use of the data from the *Personal Safety Survey* is important in advocating for social change, as addressing different forms of violence requires different strategies and responses. It is also important to note that while the *Personal Safety Survey* provides the best source for nationwide data on the types and prevalence of violence, there is much evidence to suggest that different groups of women have different experiences and rates of violence. Data from a range of sources, including the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are vastly over represented as victims of violence in Australia; and there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that women with disabilities experience incidents of violence at much higher rates than the national average (Mitra-Kahn, Newbigen & Hardefeldt, 2016). Although some data about these group are available through existing studies, a State of Knowledge paper completed by Australia's National Research Organisation on Women's Safety (ANROWS) in 2016 identified a number of gaps in the data gathered concerning violence against women, including in the statistics concerning experiences of violence for culturally and linguistically diverse women (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016). ANROWS has collated a range of studies to build a more comprehensive picture of violence against women in Australia, acknowledging and mapping the current deficiencies in the data, and providing a number of options to enhance the data landscape. Violence against women in different communities requires different policy responses, better data collection and analysis is therefore vital to formulating and delivering targeted responses. Ideally, policy makers, journalists, researchers and advocates

should take the time to gather and present accurate data in a clear and relevant manner to ensure consistency in messaging and appropriate responses.

Further resources

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2018). *Violence against women: Accurate use of key statistics*. Retrieved from https://d2rn9gno7zhxqg.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/19030556/ANROWS_VAW-Accurate-Use-of-Key-Statistics.1.pdf

Mitra-Kahn, T., Newbiggin, C., & Hardefeldt, S. (2016). *Invisible women, invisible violence: Understanding and improving data on the experiences of domestic and family violence and sexual assault for diverse groups of women: State of knowledge paper*. Retrieved from https://d2rn9gno7zhxqg.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/19024718/DiversityData_UPDATED191216.pdf

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). *Person safety survey 2016*. Retrieved 18 February, 2019 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4906.oGlossary12016>

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2016). *Invisible women, invisible violence: Understanding and improving data on the experiences of domestic and family violence and sexual assault for diverse groups of women: State of knowledge paper*. Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2018). *Violence against women: Accurate use of key statistics (ANROWS Insights 05/2018)*. Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

Mitra-Kahn, T., Newbiggin, C., & Hardefeldt, S. (2016). *Invisible women, invisible violence: Understanding and improving data on the experiences of domestic and family violence and sexual assault for diverse groups of women: State of knowledge paper (ANROWS Landscapes, DD01/2016)*. Sydney, NSW: ANROWS