

# Violence Against Women and Men in Australia

## What the *Personal Safety Survey* can and can't tell us

Michael Flood

A survey of physical and sexual violence against women and men (*Personal Safety Survey Australia 2005*) has recently been released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It has already generated controversy, with some men's rights groups claiming that it shows that women are almost as violent as men in relationships. In this article, Michael Flood responds to these claims and provides a detailed analysis of the findings and their limitations.

The *Personal Safety Survey* (PSS) reveals that there are still unacceptably high levels of violence experienced by women and men in Australia. In the last 12 months, one in 20 women and one in 10 men were the victims of violence.<sup>1</sup>

Women are most at risk in the home, and from men they know. Men are most at risk in public spaces, and from men they do not know.

Drawing on data from the survey, I address four points. First, PSS data suggest that rates of violence against women in Australia have declined. Second, the PSS shows that there are high rates of violence against males, and there is a striking contrast in women's and men's experiences of violence. Third, PSS data may be (mis)used to claim that one-quarter of the victims of domestic violence are men. Finally, I examine the limits of the PSS's definitions and measurements of violence, and the constraints they impose on our claims about the extent of domestic violence against women and women's versus men's subjection to domestic violence.

### Declining Rates of Violence against Women?

The release of a national survey measuring the extent of violence against women typically is an occasion for bad news, and the *Personal Safety Survey* is no

exception. It documents that over 440,000 women experienced physical or sexual violence in the last year. Violence against women in Australia continues to be a significant social problem.

However, there is also good news. The survey data do suggest that rates of violence against women have declined in Australia. Comparing this and the last national survey by the ABS in 1996 (*Women's Safety Australia 1996*), smaller proportions of women experienced physical or sexual violence in the last 12 months than in the survey nine years ago. In other words, the numbers of women who experienced violence each year has declined over time. Of course, we should keep in mind that we are still talking about hundreds of thousands of women.

Some may respond that this apparent decline is because of a decline in rates of reporting, but the ABS data do not support this. In fact, the PSS finds that women are more likely to report domestic violence to the police than they were ten years ago - and if they are willing to report it to the police, presumably they are also willing to report it anonymously in a survey conducted by the ABS. In 1996, 18.5 per cent of women who experienced physical assault reported the most recent incident to the police, but this rose to 36 per cent in 2005. Focusing on physical assaults by a previous partner, 34.6 per cent of women reported the most recent incident to the police in 1996, but this rose to 61.1 per cent in 2005 (ABS 2006a: 21).

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1. 'Violence' here can be physical, involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of physical assault, or sexual, involving the occurrence or attempt (but not threat) of sexual assault (ABS 2006b: 3-4, 57-9).

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There are further signs of positive shifts in women's risks of violence. Women's feelings of safety have increased: women now feel safer travelling on public transport alone at night or walking after dark than they did ten years ago. But it is still the case that most women do not feel safe: 85 per cent do not feel safe using public transport alone after dark.

Why might Australia's rates of violence have declined? Rates of violence against women are shaped by a wide variety of factors, at macro- and micro-social levels, and we can only guess as to the influences at work. One factor may be growing community intolerance for violence against women. A national survey of community attitudes in 1995 documented broad improvements in both men's and women's attitudes to and understandings of violence against women since the last national survey in 1987 (ANOP Research Services 1995). Data from the just-released survey of Victorians' attitudes towards violence against women suggest that these generally positive trends have continued, although there is still a significant minority who hold violence-supportive attitudes and some attitudes have even worsened (VicHealth 2006).

Another factor may be the presence and influence of domestic violence services themselves, and their role in allowing women to escape relationships in which otherwise they would continue to be abused. In other words, it may be that growing numbers of women now are able to leave violent relationships or leave them earlier, producing an overall decline in the numbers of women subject to violence each year.

Another factor may be growing gender equality in heterosexual relationships and families. We know that one of the most significant predictors of violence against women is male economic and decision-

making dominance in the family (Heise 1998: 270-271, Michalski 2004: 667).

Women's increasing entry into paid work and growing financial independence may have shifted intimate power relations and lessened men's willingness or ability to enforce their dominance through violence and abuse.

On the other hand, there are other social trends which are likely to be associated with increased rates of violence against women. These include shifts in family law which are exposing women, and children to ongoing contact with violent ex-husbands and fathers, increases in poverty, unemployment, and economic marginalisation, and increased exposure to sexist and violence-supportive discourses in some internet pornography and elsewhere.

## Gender Contrasts

One of the most striking findings in the PSS is the high rate of violence against men. In the last 12 months, twice as many men as women experienced violence. About one in 20 women (5.8 per cent) and one in 10 men (10.8 per cent) experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence. Data on lifetime experiences of violence further demonstrate this pattern. Since the age of 15, 39.9 per cent of women and 50.1 per cent of men have experienced at least one incident of violence (ABS 2006a: 5-7). Thus the victims of violence often are male, as evidence from crime victimisation surveys, police records, and hospital statistics corroborates.

There are both similarities and differences between women's and men's experiences of violence. The most obvious similarity concerns the sex of the typical perpetrator: both women and men are most at risk of violence from (other) men. The most obvious difference concerns the perpetrator's *relationship* to the victim - in

other words, *which* men assault other men or assault women. Among the large numbers of men physically assaulted each year, in the most recent incident almost 70 per cent were assaulted by a stranger and less than five per cent were assaulted by a female partner or ex-partner. In contrast, among the female victims of physical assault, 24 per cent were assaulted by a stranger and 30 per cent were assaulted by a male partner or ex-partner (ABS 2006a: 30).<sup>2</sup> For both male and female victims of physical assault, perpetrators unknown to them were more likely to be male than female, as Table 1 shows below.

While I have focused on physical assaults by partners or ex-partners, a substantial proportion of assaults on women - nearly as many as those by partners or ex-partners - are perpetrated by other male family members and friends. Of all females physically assaulted in the last 12 months, in 27.7 per cent of cases the most recent incident involved a male family member or friend. Among men on the other hand, only 10 per cent involved a male family member or friend.

Another gender contrast concerns the *location* of or *context* for violent incidents. Most violence to men is public violence, taking place in streets, outside licensed

premises, and in other public spaces. The most common location for violence to women is domestic: their homes, their partners' homes, or other familiar locations. This is no surprise, given that men are more likely to be assaulted by (male) strangers and women are more likely to be assaulted by (male) partners or ex-partners. Men's vulnerability to male-male violence in public places has been graphically illustrated in recent years by such incidents as the fatal assault on cricketer David Hookes (Flood 2004) and the riots in Cronulla, Sydney.

A further gender contrast concerns the *type* of violence to which women and men are subjected. Over their lifetimes, men are more likely than women to be subjected to physical assault and less likely than women to be subjected to sexual assault. Since the age of 15, 41 per cent of men experienced physical assault, compared to 29 per cent of women. On the other hand, 16.8 per cent of women experienced sexual assault, compared to 4.8 per cent of men (ABS 2006a: 7). This gender contrast holds for other forms of sexual coercion and violence. Greater proportions of women than men have experienced obscene phone calls, indecent exposure, and unwanted sexual touching (ABS 2006a: 24).

**Table 1: Perpetrators of physical assault against male and female victims**

Perpetrator of physical assault in previous 12 months	Male stranger	Male current or previous partner	Male family member / friend	Male other known person	Female stranger	Female current or previous partner	Female family member / friend	Female other known person
Male Victims	65%	-	10%	19%	*3%	*4%	*7%	*2%
Female Victims	15%	31%	28%	12%	9%	-	9%	10%

Source: ABS (2006a), Table 16, p. 30. Figures have been rounded to whole numbers. They add to more than 100 as some males and females have experienced physical assault by more than one category of perpetrator.

\* Estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

2. To calculate these figures, use Table 16 on page 30 of the Personal Safety Survey. Divide the total number of males or females physically assaulted in the previous 12 months by the particular type of perpetrator in question. For example, a total of 485,400 males were physically assaulted in the last 12 months. Of these, 316,700 were assaulted by a male stranger and 21,200 by a female current or previous partner.

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## Violence against Women and Men

The data from the PSS show clearly that both men and women are most at risk of physical violence from men. Among male victims of physical assault in the last 12 months, five times as many were assaulted by males as by females, and 20 times as many were assaulted by non-partner males or females than by female partners and ex-partners (ABS 2006a: 30). Among the males who were physically assaulted in the last 12 months and suffered physical injury (about half of them), 86 per cent were injured by *male* perpetrators.<sup>3</sup> Such facts should put an end to the myth, propounded by some men's and fathers' rights advocates, that men face a risk of violence by women which is equal to the risk of violence women face from men. If such advocates have a genuine concern for male victims of violence, they should be focused on ending violence to men *by other men*.

The ABS's initial release of the PSS erroneously perpetuated the myth of gender symmetry in domestic violence, through the inclusion of inaccurate text in the report's summary. This was corrected in a re-release several days later. The revised version is available online, although some people may have obtained only the initial, incorrect version.

The summary text in the initial report stated at one point that '38 per cent of women were physically assaulted by their male current or previous partner compared to 27 per cent of men who were physically assaulted by their female current or previous partner'. This sentence reads as if similar proportions of women and men were assaulted by opposite-sex partners. It was intended to be a comment on what

proportion of perpetration *by a perpetrator of the other sex* involves perpetration by a current or previous partner. In other words, the percentage figures concerned physical assaults reported by women which were perpetrated by *men*, and physical assaults reported by men which were perpetrated by *women*, and commented on what proportion of these were perpetrated by current or previous *partners*. While the summary text has been corrected, the Table 16 may still be misinterpreted by some readers, if they do not realise that the percentage figures in each column refer to perpetration by a specific sex of perpetrator rather than all perpetrators.

What percentage of all victimisation is represented by perpetration by current or former partners, for women and men? Using the raw numbers in the PSS, we find that 4.4 per cent of all males physically assaulted in the last 12 months were assaulted by a current or previous female partner in the most recent incident, while 30 per cent of females were physically assaulted by a current or previous male partner (ABS 2006a: 30). Thus, while substantial proportions of adult men in Australia are subject to physical assault, only a tiny proportion of this is perpetrated by female partners or ex-partners, and most is perpetrated by other men. For women on the other hand, close to one-third of the physical assaults they experience are perpetrated by male partners or ex-partners.

However, there is another aspect to the PSS's data on domestic violence which will be more problematic for feminist work on domestic violence. I have noted that if we compare women's and men's entire experience of violence, then domestic violence is a much more significant problem for women than it is for men. But there is another way to divide up the data. If we focus on the population of 'victims of

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3. Calculated from Table 15, p. 30. This does not provide detail regarding whether perpetrators were strangers, family members, partners, etc.

domestic violence' - any woman or man subjected to violence by a current or former partner - we may arrive at much more problematic conclusions about domestic violence.

To assess people's experience of physical violence, the survey asks if they have ever experienced one or more of a series of physical acts. Have they been pushed, grabbed or shoved; slapped; kicked, bitten or hit with a fist; hit with something else that could hurt them; beaten; choked; stabbed; shot; or subject to any other kind of physical assault (being burnt, hit by a vehicle, etc.) (ABS 2006b: 57)? We *could* assume that any person who has experienced any physically violent act by a partner or ex-partner has experienced 'domestic violence'. This would exclude assaults by other family members, and sexual assaults by a current or previous partner. And it would define domestic violence only in terms of violent 'acts', rather than the presence of fear or injury or other forms of power and control. But let us leave these for the moment.

From the PSS data, a total of 73,800 females and 21,200 males experienced at least one incident of physical assault by a current or previous other-sex partner in the last 12 months (ABS 2006a: 30). (There are no figures on physical assaults by same-sex partners, suggesting that the numbers are too low to be recorded.) These figures would be weighted more heavily towards women as victims of domestic violence if we included *sexual* assault. Domestic violence often is accompanied by sexual assault and coercion, and indeed, some definitions of domestic violence include sexual coercion and sexual violence. A total of 29,300 females were sexually assaulted in the last 12 months by a current or previous partner (ABS 2006a:



33).<sup>4</sup> However, we cannot simply add the numbers of women who were physically assaulted by a current or previous partner and the numbers of women who were sexually assaulted, to arrive at a total number of women assaulted by a partner or ex-partner, because some will be the *same* women. In other words, we would be double-counting those women who were physically and sexually assaulted in separate incidents.<sup>5</sup>

PSS data do tell us that females comprise 78 per cent and males comprise 22 per cent of victims of physical assault by a current or former partner in the last year. Perhaps it is not surprising that one can already see press releases on fathers' rights websites asserting that 'one-quarter of domestic violence is against men'. This claim will be used for example to call for allocating one-quarter of domestic violence resources to male victims. The problem is that the definitions and measures of violence used in the PSS are limited in important ways, as the next section discusses.

### **Defining Domestic Violence**

The PSS tells us that 95,000 people experienced at least one incident of physical assault by a current or former partner in the last year. Because of the narrow way in which the PSS measures violence, these figures do not tell us whether this violence was part of a systematic pattern of physical abuse or an isolated incident, whether it was initiated or in self-defence, whether it was instrumental or reactive, whether it was accompanied by (other) strategies of power and control, or whether it involved fear. (In addition, we only know the relationship to the perpetrator for the most recent

4. There are no figures on sexual assaults on males by a partner or ex-partner, suggesting that the numbers are too low to be recorded.

5. The PSS's definition of 'physical assault' excludes incidents of sexual assault or threatened sexual assault which also involved physical assault.

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incident.) In this regard, the PSS is similar to many other quantitative studies using measurement instruments that focus on violent *acts*. Instruments such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) focus on 'counting the blows', although most CTS-based studies provide more information than the PSS on the severity of the physical acts involved.

The narrow assessment of violence used in the PSS has real implications, first, for the ways in which we discuss the extent and impact of 'domestic violence' or 'violence against women' in Australia. Violence prevention advocates typically use the term 'domestic violence' to refer to a systematic pattern of power and control exerted by one person (usually a man) against another (often a woman), involving a variety of physical and non-physical tactics of abuse and coercion, in the context of a current or former intimate relationship. It is simply not the case that every one of the 73,800 women noted above is necessarily living with this. All experienced at least one violent act by a partner in the last year: for some this was part of a regular pattern of violent physical abuse, but for others it was a rare or even reciprocated event. The PSS itself gives us some sense of this. Among women who had experienced violence by a current or previous partner since the age of 15, for a little over half (54.2 per cent) there had been more than one incident (ABS 2006a: 37).

Related to this issue, noting how many women or men were subject to at least one physical assault by a partner does not necessarily tell us much about the *impact* of violence on the victim. Women may see the emotional impact of physical aggression as more significant than the physical impact, and the emotional impact is influenced as much by judgements of threat and intent to harm and their own self-blame as by the degree of force used or injury caused (Gordon 2000: 759). In

addition, women may experience the impact of non-physical tactics of control and abuse - controlling their movements, destroying property, verbal abuse, mind games, and so on - as more damaging than physical aggression. The PSS does allow some slight assessment of the emotional impact of partner violence. For example, among women who had experienced violence by a current partner or a previous partner *since the age of 15*, close to 20 per cent (19.7 and 18.3 per cent respectively) had experienced anxiety or fear in the last 12 months (ABS 2006a: 37). This does not tell us about fear or anxiety among women who experienced partner violence *in the last year*, but it does suggest that large proportions of women who have ever experienced a physically violent act by a partner or its threat are not 'living in fear'.

We can certainly say that every one of the 73,800 women above is a victim of violence, using the definition of violence adopted by the PSS. But to the extent that we use the term 'domestic violence' to refer to women's experience of chronic abuse and subjection by a partner or ex-partner to strategies of power and control, we cannot claim that every woman here is a 'victim of domestic violence'. Domestic violence advocates offer sympathetic images of battered women as victims living in fear of violent, controlling male perpetrators. These images are accurate for much violence between heterosexual partners or ex-partners. But we cannot assume, and should not imply, that they hold for all the women and men identified in the PSS as involved in physical aggression (Gordon 2000: 773).

## Gender Symmetry and Acts-based Approaches

For these same reasons, there are also real limits on the extent to which we can use PSS data to adjudicate the debate regarding women's and men's experiences

of domestic violence. As Dobash and Dobash (2004: 331-2) note for acts-based approaches such as that used in the PSS, acts 'are stripped of theoretical and social meanings and, as such, provide an inadequate basis for describing or explaining the violent acts of men and women'. In particular, these approaches are unable to distinguish between distinct patterns of violence in heterosexual couples. Some heterosexual relationships suffer from occasional outbursts of violence by either husbands or wives during conflicts, what Johnson (2000) calls 'situational couple violence'. Here, the violence is relatively minor, both partners practise it, it is expressive in meaning, it tends not to escalate over time, and injuries are rare. In situations of 'intimate terrorism' on the other hand, one partner (usually the man) uses violence and other controlling tactics to assert or restore power and authority. The violence is more severe, it is asymmetrical, it is instrumental in meaning, it tends to escalate, and injuries are more likely. Acts-based studies are only a weak measure of levels of minor 'expressive' violence in conflicts among heterosexual couples. They are poorer again as a measure of 'instrumental' violence, in which one partner uses violence and other tactics to assert power and authority. Because the PSS tells us so little of the extent, dynamics, impact, or context of violence, it is inadequate as a single source of information, whether on female or male victims of domestic violence.

Acts-based approaches, because of the narrow ways in which they define and measure violence, tend to *produce* claims of gender 'symmetry' and 'equivalence' (Dobash and Dobash 2004: 332). In other words, they predetermine the questions they set out to assess. However, data from other approaches shows clear asymmetries in men's and women's uses of and subjection to intimate partner violence. When it comes to violence by partners or ex-partners, women are far more likely



than men to be subjected to frequent, prolonged, and extreme violence, to sustain injuries, to be subjected to a range of controlling strategies, to fear for their lives, to be sexually assaulted, to experience post-separation violence, and to use violence only in self-defence (Flood 2003, Belknap and Melton 2005, Gordon 2000). Dobash and Dobash (2004) provide a clear example of apparent symmetries and actual asymmetries in domestic violence. Using an acts-based approach found that both men and women were physically aggressive to their partners. But interviews with the same men and women documented that men's violence differed systematically from women's in terms of its nature, frequency, intention, intensity, physical injury, and emotional impact.

The *Personal Safety Survey* does allow comparisons between overall rates of violence against women in Australia in 1996 and 2005. Acts-based instruments like the PSS do have value as surveillance instruments in the general population (Gordon 2000: 776). But they are inadequate for capturing the substance, impact, or dynamics of intimate partner violence, and particularly the more serious forms of this violence. Heterosexual partner violence is *not* a single, homogenous phenomenon (Johnson 2006: 1004). The PSS does allow some insight into the contrasts between men's and women's patterns of victimisation, but for more substantive comparisons we must turn to other measurement tools and data sources (Schwartz 2000: 822). Finally, in making public claims about the extent of violence against women or men, we must be careful and clear about exactly what we are claiming they have been subject to.

# The Personal Safety Survey

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## Two Steps Forward, One Step Back VicHealth Community Attitudes Survey Released

This survey was based on a random telephone sample of 2,800 Victorians aged 18 years and over. The findings from the survey can be compared to the 1995 national survey by the (then) Federal Office of the Status of Women.

### Positive findings:

Most Victorian women and men did not hold 'violence-supportive' attitudes. Since 1995, attitudes had improved on most measures.

### Challenges

A significant minority held attitudes which may serve to either condone or trivialise violence against women or undermine efforts to address it. Findings include:

- 20 per cent believed that domestic violence is perpetrated equally by both men and women (compared with only 9 per cent who believed this in 1995).
- Nearly one in four believed that domestic violence can be excused if the perpetrator genuinely regrets it or if the violence results from a loss of control.
- There was a lack of understanding of other forms of emotional abuse.
- Those most likely to hold attitudes that may serve to support violence were men and people who were born overseas.

The survey can be downloaded from  
VicHealth's website

[www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)

A comprehensive review of the findings  
will be provided in the Autumn 2007  
edition of *DVIRC Quarterly*





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