

# Intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic

## Report summary

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns about women's safety due to an amalgamation of risk factors for intimate partner violence (IPV) that were heightened during lockdowns across the country. Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) surveyed women across Australia to better understand women's experiences of IPV during the pandemic. Findings from this study have recently been released in the report [\*Intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic: A survey of women in Australia.\*](#)

## Methodology

ANROWS surveyed 10,107 adult women in Australia who had been in a relationship in the 12 months prior. The survey was conducted between February and April 2021. IPV was categorised as three distinct types of violence – physical, sexual, and emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours. Different forms of violence were then identified within these three categories. Women were the focus of this study because of their overrepresentation as victims of IPV. Women have also been disproportionately affected by the pandemic compared to their male counterparts.

The survey asked respondents about: experiences of IPV during the pandemic, experiences of IPV prior to the pandemic, changes in circumstances of both the respondent and the respondent's partner that may have contributed to violence and/or changed the patterns of violence that they were experiencing, and the respondents' help-seeking behaviour, economic security, and social support networks. Through this survey, ANROWS sought to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of women's experiences of IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Key findings

The research found that respondents were experiencing either first-time incidents or patterns of ongoing violence (physical, sexual, and/or emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours) which escalated in frequency and severity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study highlighted that it was difficult to pinpoint that the pandemic was a single driver of IPV. Instead it identified that factors such as mental and physical well-being, financial stress, drug and alcohol abuse, family stress, relationship conflict, and time spent at home were contributing to the escalation of violence. It was also found that a significant proportion of respondents who needed help were unable to access support services due to safety concerns. This left many women at risk of further victimisation and without assistance.

## Breakdown of the data:

### Women's experiences of different kinds of violence

- Of the women surveyed, 1 in 10 experienced physical violence, 1 in 12 experienced sexual violence, and 1 in 3 experienced emotional abuse, harassment and controlling behaviours.
- The most common forms of physical violence were pushing, grabbing, or shoving, while the most common forms of sexual violence involved the respondent's partners attempting to force them or forcing them to take part in sexual activity against their will.
- For women experiencing emotional abuse, harassment, and controlling behaviours, financial abuse was the most common form, followed by verbal abuse, threatening and socially restrictive behaviours.
- Over half of the women surveyed who experienced non-physical types of abuse had experienced concurrent forms of abuse.
- In the 12 months prior to the survey, 1 in 10 women had experienced a form of technology facilitated IPV.<sup>1</sup>

### COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated intimate partner violence for women in new and existing relationships

- 1 in 2 women reported that they had experienced violence from their partner for the first time in the 12 months prior to the survey – this was true for all forms of violence.
- During the pandemic, first-time violence was experienced by women who had entered a new relationship, as well as women who had been in a long-term relationship prior to COVID-19.
- 2 in 5 women who had experienced historical physical violence reported that the violence had escalated in frequency and/severity since the beginning of the pandemic.
- A similar proportion of women reported escalations in both sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours.
- Women who experienced first-time violence or an escalation of violence reported that they also experienced family stress, relationship conflict, and an increase in time spent with their partner.

### Help-seeking during the pandemic was challenging

- Only 1 in 5 women who had experienced IPV in the 12 months prior to the survey had sought support from the police, and 1 in 4 sought supports from government or non-government services.
- 1 in 4 women were unable to seek support on at least one occasion due to safety concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Technology-facilitated IPV refers to non-physical forms of abuse perpetrated using digital technology. This includes verbally abusive and threatening behaviours, stalking and monitoring behaviours, restrictive behaviours which are perpetrated either online or using digital devices.

- 2 in 3 respondents who had experienced safety-related barriers to seeking support had sought advice from either the police, government, or non-government services. This indicates that 1 in 3 women who were unable to seek support on at least one occasion due to safety concerns had not sought support from these sources.

### **Key takeaways**

The findings from the survey depict a complex pattern of violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic. A culmination of different factors came together during what was an extremely stressful period which contributed to the onset or escalation of IPV. It is important to recognise the implications of the pandemic for long-term patterns of violence and abuse as it is unclear whether the end of the pandemic will signal the end of the violence within relationships.

As such, the research highlights the importance of taking proactive measures to support victim-survivors, as well as a plan for long-term recovery. Moreover, there needs to be recognition of the impact that these forms of violence are having on children. Children do not exist in isolation; they witness and experience violence too. Therefore, there is a need for greater visibility of children during IPV incidences to identify age-appropriate support mechanisms that prevent long-term issues.

Additionally, the violence experienced by women outlined in the report is not indicative of a singular experience shared by all women. Rather, there needs to be increased attention on the women experiencing vulnerability and most at risk who could not safely participate in the survey. It is vital to consider the impacts for women in vulnerable communities to ensure appropriate supports are provided and accessible.

This report covers Stage 1 of a national study. Stage 2 will examine the economic insecurity of women experiencing IPV during the pandemic and is set to be released later.

You can read the full report [here](#).