

Understanding the links between women, violence and poverty

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (the Life Course Centre) investigates the factors underlying deep and persistent disadvantage to provide life-changing solutions for policy and service delivery. The Centre is administered by The University of Queensland and is a collaboration with the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne and The University of Western Australia and national and international academic, government and non-government partners.

These analyses on Women, Violence and Poverty were **undertaken for Anti-Poverty Week in August 2021 by Dr Alice Campbell, Life Course Centre Research Fellow, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland**, based on research conducted as part of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH) by The University of Queensland and the University of Newcastle.

The following analyses are all based on ALSWH data unless otherwise stated. These analyses use data from Wave 5 (2017) of the 1989-1995 birth cohort of women from ALSWH. We are grateful to the Australian Government Department of Health for funding and to the women who provided the survey data.

For more information on the Life Course Centre visit: lifecoursecentre.org.au

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Project ID CE200100025)

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1. Violence against Australian women is a growing problem...

In 2017, amongst young Australian women aged 21-28 years:

14.4% had experienced *some form of abuse* at the hands of a current or former partner in the previous 12 months. This includes physical, emotional and sexual abuse, coercive control, harassment and stalking.

4.6% said they had been the victim of *unwanted sexual activity* in the previous 12 months.

3.7% had experienced at least one form of *severe abuse* at the hands of a current or former partner in the previous 12 months. This includes being threatened or assaulted with a gun, knife or other weapon, being locked in a room, and being choked.

and COVID-19 has made it worse...

Early research points to the COVID-19 pandemic creating *unprecedented increases* in domestic violence incidents throughout the world. Since start of the pandemic, there have been reports of increased incidences of *physical* and *sexual abuse, coercive control* and *emotional abuse* against Australian womenⁱ.

Research published by the Australian Institute of Criminology in 2020, based on an online survey of 15,000 Australian women aged 18 years and over, shows that amongst women who reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse since the start of COVID-19:

65.4% experienced an increase in the severity or frequency of domestic violence or experienced it for the first timeⁱⁱ.

2. There is a strong association between violence and financial hardship for Australian women

- a) Young women who are abused are much more likely to be in financial hardship... by 2 to 3 times the rate of women who do not suffer violenceⁱⁱⁱ

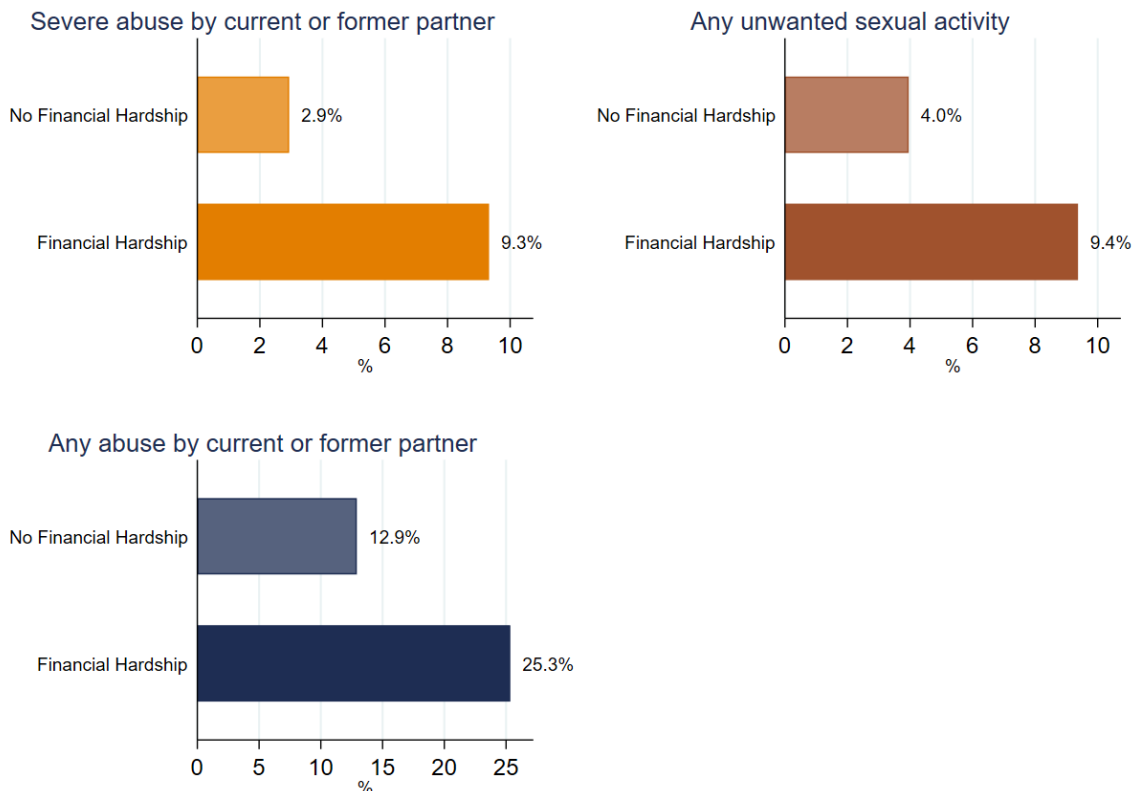
In 2017, amongst young Australian women aged 21-28 years in financial hardship, there were:

More than double the rates of past-year severe partner abuse (9.4% vs 4.0%)

Almost double the rates of past-year partner abuse (25.3% vs 12.9%)

More than triple the rates of past-year unwanted sexual activity (9.3% vs 2.9%)

Rates of past-year abuse among young Australian women by financial status



b) Young women who are abused are much more likely to start experiencing financial hardship following the abuse...by 2 to 3 times the rate of women who did not suffer violence^{iv}

The following analyses show **the rates of young Australian women aged 21-28 moving into financial hardship** following an experience of violence or abuse.

They clearly demonstrate the direct association between an experience of violence or abuse and a subsequent experience of financial hardship.

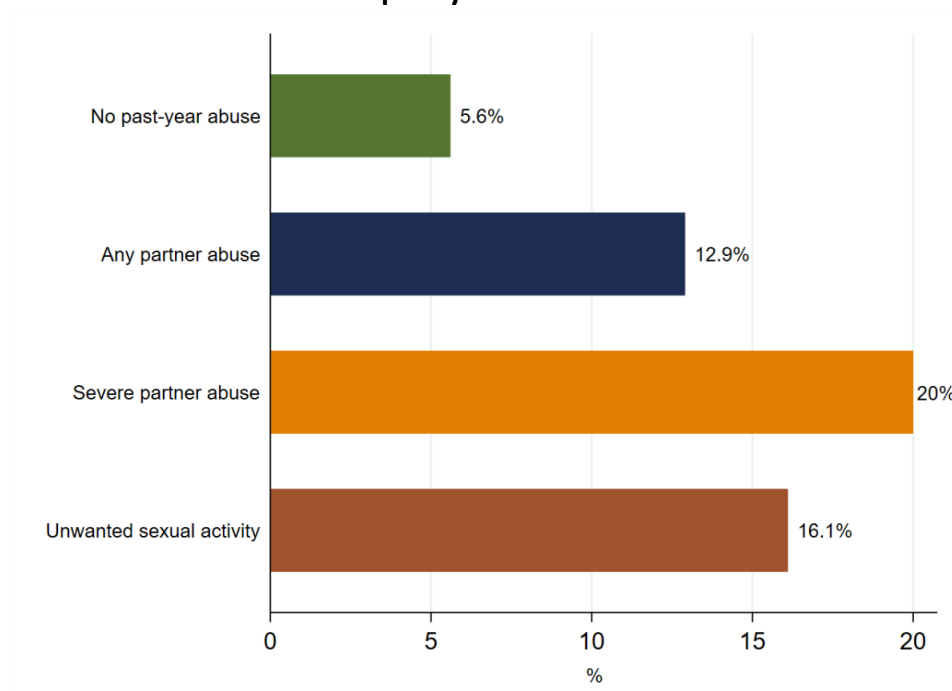
Among women who were not experiencing financial hardship in 2016, rates of financial hardship in 2017 were:

More than triple amongst women who had been the victim of severe partner abuse in past year (20% vs 5.6%)

More than double amongst women who been the victim of any partner abuse in past year (12.9% vs 5.6%)

Almost triple amongst women who been the victim of unwanted sexual activity in past year (16.1% vs 5.6%)

Rates of moving into financial hardship amongst young Australian women by past-year abuse



c) Women are more likely than men to experience both violence and financial hardship

Analysis of the 2019 Wave of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey^v also reveals gendered outcomes:

- 61,314 Australian women aged 15-24 have experienced moderate-to-very-high levels of financial hardship AND physical violence in the past year.
- Among those aged 15-24 years, women are 3 times more likely than men to have experienced both financial hardship AND physical violence in the past year.
- Australian women are more dissatisfied with their perceived levels of safety than men.

3. What can be done?

The Australian Government continues to invest in programs to address violence against women, including major new investments since the onset of COVID-19 in more helplines, counselling, and support services to respond to and lessen the effects of domestic violence.

The pandemic has also created opportunities for government and criminal justice agencies to respond to issues such as domestic and family violence in partnership, rather than going it alone. For example, police and health departments have been working closely together throughout COVID-19 in ways that had not been imagined prior to the pandemic.

This provides foundations and momentum for the development of innovative, fast-moving multi-agency interventions to address complex issues such as violence against women. In this respect, COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to hasten reforms and co-ordinated service responses^{vi}. We must not waste this opportunity.

To enact real change, it is critical to look beyond treating the symptoms of violence against women in Australia and turn attention to the causes.

Researchers at the Life Course Centre are focussed on investigating the underlying causes, rather than just the symptoms, of enduring social and economic disadvantage in Australia. Their research observes people, risks and opportunities over the life course – not just a single point in time.

In examining the issue of violence against women, Life Course Centre researchers highlight the need for:

- ***systemic, institutional change to address lingering gender inequalities (causes)***
- ***rather than only focussing on perpetrators and victims after an incident (symptoms).***

Violence against women is a complex issue, with many interacting and cumulative factors such as financial hardship, family and intergenerational influences, and workplace inequality and gender attitudes. Outdated institutional settings and constraints also play an influential role in perpetuating gendered disadvantage and heightening the risks of violence against women.

In Australia, institutionalised gender divisions of labour in the home and at work continue to disadvantage women. Government policies often focus on women rather than gender.

This includes defining some jobs as ‘women’s work’, uneven caring and family responsibilities, paying women differently, and ignoring unpaid care work and labour, which manifests in many poorer outcomes for women over the life course.

By challenging the outdated gender narratives that persist in these settings, we can **reimagine and transform institutional frameworks** and rules to help **reduce and prevent incidences of family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia**^{vii}.

Endnotes

ⁱ Baxter, J., Cobb-Clark, D., Cornish, A., Ho, T., Kalb, G., Mazerolle, L., Parsell, C., Pawson, H., Thorpe, K., De Silva, L., and Zubrick, S.R. (2020). ‘Never Let a Crisis Go to Waste: Opportunities to Reduce Social Disadvantage from COVID-19’. *Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2020-30*.

ⁱⁱ Boxall, H., Morgan, A. and Brown, R. (2020). *The Prevalence of Domestic Violence Among Women During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. *Australian Institute of Criminology, Statistical Bulletin, 28, July 2020*.

ⁱⁱⁱ The analyses on young Australian women aged 21-28 years of age use data from Wave 5 (2017) of the 1989-1995 birth cohort of women from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH). Women were categorised as experiencing financial hardship if they reported they had been “very” or “extremely” stressed about money in the past 12 months AND they said that it was “difficult all the time” or “impossible” to manage on their current income.

^{iv} The analyses on young Australian women aged 21-28 years of age use data from Wave 5 (2017) of the 1989-1995 birth cohort of women from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH). Women were categorised as experiencing financial hardship if they reported they had been "very" or "extremely" stressed about money in the past 12 months AND they said that it was "difficult all the time" or "impossible" to manage on their current income.

^v *Analysis of unit record data from the 2019 wave of the **Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey**. The HILDA Project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported in this article, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either DSS or the Melbourne Institute.*

Perceived safety: participants were asked how satisfied they were with how safe they felt, with possible responses ranging from 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). We created an indicator variable for being dissatisfied with perceived safety collapsing responses 0-4.

Financial hardship: participants were asked 7 items, asking if they had experienced the following over the previous 12 months: unable to pay utility bill on time, unable to pay rent/mortgage on time, pawned/sold something, went without meals, unable to heat home, asked friends/family for financial help, asked welfare/community organisation for financial help. We categorised levels of financial hardship as follows: none = no to all 7 items; low = yes to 1-2 items; moderate-high = yes to 3-4 items; and very high = yes to 5-7 items.

^{vi} *Baxter, J., Cobb-Clark, D., Cornish, A., Ho, T., Kalb, G., Mazerolle, L., Parsell, C., Pawson, H., Thorpe, K., De Silva, L., and Zubrick, S.R. (2020). 'Never Let a Crisis Go to Waste: Opportunities to Reduce Social Disadvantage from COVID-19'. Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2020-30.*

^{vii} *Life Course Centre submission (2020). Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence, Australian Government, House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, July 2020.*