



**Australian Social Trends  
2007**

**Article: Women's  
experience of partner  
violence**



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# Article: Women's experience of partner violence

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## SYMBOLS AND USAGES

billion	1,000 million
kg	kilogram
m	metre
n.a.	not available
n.e.c	not elsewhere classified
n.p.	not published
n.y.a.	not yet available
no.	number
'000	thousand
'000m	thousand million
\$	dollar
\$m	million dollars
\$b	billion dollars
\$US	American dollar
%	per cent
*	estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution
**	estimate has a relative standard error of greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use
. .	not applicable
—	nil or rounded to zero (including null cells)

Where figures have been rounded, discrepancies may occur between the sums of the component items and totals.

# Women's experience of partner violence

**In 2005, 1% of women aged 18 years and over reported experiencing partner violence during the 12 months prior to interview.**

One of the most common forms of violence against women is that perpetrated by a husband or an intimate male partner.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, for women who experienced violence during the last 12 months, over three-quarters (76%) of the violence was perpetrated by someone they knew, with over one-quarter (26%) of women reporting that the violence was perpetrated by a partner.

Partner violence can affect the physical, mental and reproductive health of those who experience it.<sup>1</sup> This impact can go beyond the wellbeing of individuals, affecting families, particular communities or society as a whole.

Increased use of services and lost productivity can have an economic impact on society. In 2002–03, Access Economics estimated the total cost of partner violence in Australia (using a broad definition that included emotional and social abuse, and financial deprivation) to be \$8.1 billion, including a \$3.5 billion estimate of pain, suffering and premature death.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, partner violence refers to a range of behaviours, such as physical assault, that are recognised as criminal offences. The article discusses the prevalence of partner violence in Australia, as well as the characteristics of the violence and the women who experienced it.

## Data sources and definitions

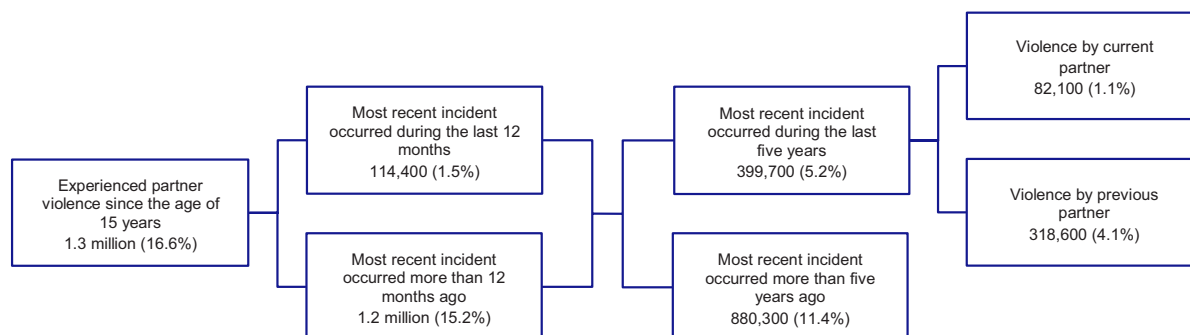
Data in this article are from the 1996 Women's Safety Survey (WSS) and the 2005 Personal Safety Survey (PSS), which collected information from women aged 18 years and over. Both urban and rural areas in all states and territories were included, but very remote areas of Australia were excluded. Survey respondents were asked questions about their experience of violence since the age of 15 years, including the type of violence and their relationship to the perpetrator. More detailed information was collected about the most recent incident of each type of violence, such as where it occurred and whether the police were told. This article focuses on violence that occurred during the five years prior to interview, unless otherwise specified.

*Partner violence* is any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault which was perpetrated by a current and/or previous partner, and which occurred since the age of 15 years. Sources other than the WSS and PSS may use a broader definition of partner violence, including for example, emotional or economic violence.

*Current partner* includes both married and de facto relationships. If the incident occurred while the person was dating a person they later partnered, the perpetrator was classified as boyfriend/girlfriend or date.

*Previous partner* includes both married and de facto relationships. Includes partners at the time of the incident from whom a person is now separated and partners a person was no longer living with at the time of the incident.

## Women's(a) experience of partner violence(b) — 2005



(a) Aged 18 years and over.

(b) Components do not add to total as some respondents experienced violence from both a current and a previous partner.

Source: ABS 2005 Personal Safety Survey.

## Prevalence of partner violence

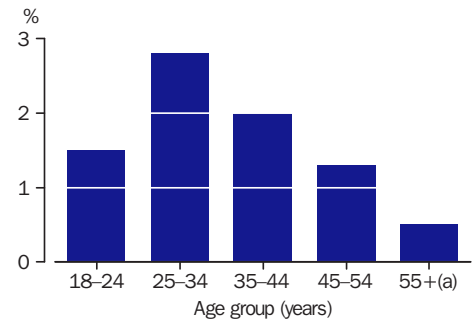
In 2005, an estimated 1.3 million women aged 18 years and over had ever experienced partner violence since the age of 15 years. This was 17% of all women aged 18 years and over in 2005.

More recently, 114,000 women (1%) had experienced partner violence during the 12 months prior to interview in 2005. This compares with 3% of women in 1996. During the five years prior to interview in 2005, 400,000 women (5%) had experienced partner violence. This compares with 8% of women in 1996. Most of these women in 2005 (80% or 319,000) had experienced violence from a previous partner during the last five years, with 21% reporting that they had experienced violence from their current partner.

## Characteristics of women who experienced partner violence during the last 12 months

Women with particular characteristics may be at a higher risk of experiencing violence. In the 12 months prior to interview in 2005, women aged 25–34 years had the highest rate of partner violence (2.8%) compared with women aged 55 years and over (0.5%).

## Proportion of women who experienced partner violence during the last 12 months by age — 2005



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

Source: ABS 2005 Personal Safety Survey.

A higher proportion of women born in Australia had experienced partner violence (1.7%) than those born overseas (1.0%).

The rate of partner violence differed among women with different levels of education. Women with no non-school qualification were more at risk of partner violence (1.8%) than those with a degree, diploma or higher as their highest non-school qualification (1.0%).

## Experience of partner violence during the last 12 months: levels among women with selected characteristics — 2005

	Number of women who experienced partner violence	Partner violence rate among all women with selected characteristic
	'000	%
Aged 25–34 years	39.4	2.8
Born in Australia	93.7	1.7
Born overseas	20.8	1.0
Degree, diploma or higher qualification	21.8	1.0
No non-school qualification	73.0	1.8
Employed	60.3	1.4
Unemployed	*10.3	*5.1
Living in area of greatest socio-economic disadvantage(a)	28.1	2.0
Living in area of least socio-economic disadvantage(b)	*14.4	*0.9
Experienced child abuse	48.9	3.5
Experienced violence from an other known person(c)	20.0	8.2
Experienced violence from a stranger	*11.3	*7.9
<b>Total women aged 18 years and over</b>	<b>114.4</b>	<b>1.5</b>

(a) Women in the lowest Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) quintile, using the Index of Advantage/Disadvantage.

(b) Women in the highest Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) quintile using the Index of Advantage/Disadvantage.

(c) Includes boyfriend, girlfriend or date and other known person.

Source: ABS 2005 Personal Safety Survey.

Although partner violence occurs throughout society, women from lower socioeconomic groups are at a greater risk of experiencing it.<sup>1</sup> Those women living in areas with the greatest socioeconomic disadvantage had the highest rate of partner violence (2.0%) while those living in areas with the lowest socioeconomic disadvantage had the lowest rate (0.9%).

Women were also at a higher risk of partner violence if they had a past history of child abuse. The partner violence rate for women who had experienced abuse as a child (before the age of 15 years) was 3.5%.

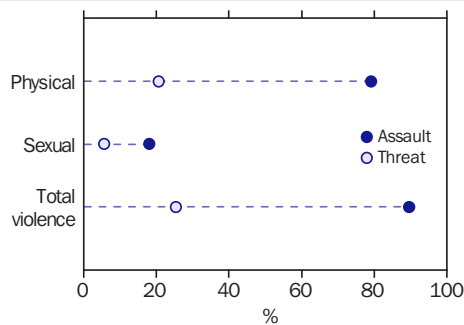
Women who had experienced partner violence were also more likely to have experienced violence from an other known person during the 12 months prior to the survey (8.2% compared with 1.5% of women overall).

### Characteristics of partner violence

Partner violence can take the form of physical or sexual violence, or both. Physical violence is defined as physical assault, and threatened or attempted physical assault. In 2005, the vast majority (90% or 359,000) of women who had experienced violence from a partner in the last five years had experienced physical violence. Most (79%) had been physically assaulted, and 21% had been physically threatened.

Sexual violence refers to sexual assault (including attempted sexual assault) and threatened sexual assault. Just over one-fifth (22% or 88,600) of women who had experienced partner violence during the last five years had experienced sexual violence, with 18% having been sexually assaulted and

### Women who experienced partner violence during the last five years: type of violence(a) — 2005



(a) Some women experienced more than one type of violence.

Source: ABS 2005 Personal Safety Survey.

### Partner violence during pregnancy during the last five years(a)(b) — 2005

	'000	%
Violence did not occur during pregnancy	140.3	62.7
Violence occurred during pregnancy	83.5	37.3
Did not occur for the first time	46.6	20.8
Did occur for the first time	36.9	16.5

**Total women who were pregnant during relationship with violent partner**      **223.8    100.0**

(a) Of women who were pregnant during relationship with violent partner during the last five years.

(b) Excludes women who were not living with their most recent violent previous partner when the incident occurred.

Source: ABS 2005 Personal Safety Survey.

6% experiencing threatened sexual assault. Of women who had experienced partner violence during the five years prior to interview, a small proportion (12% or 48,100) had experienced both physical and sexual violence, although this was not necessarily from the same partner.

The most common form of physical assault in 2005 described by women whose most recent experience of physical assault was by a partner, was being pushed or grabbed by the partner (79% or 239,000). A considerable proportion (43%) had been kicked, bitten, or hit with a fist or object, and 37% were beaten or choked.

In 2005, just over three-quarters (77% or 306,000) of women who had experienced violence from a partner during the last five years said that there had been more than one incident of partner violence. This was higher than in 1996, when 66% (360,000) had experienced more than one incident of partner violence.

Partner violence most often occurs in the home. In 2005, the majority (87% or 263,000) of women whose most recent experience of physical assault during the last five years was by a partner said that it took place in their home, with a further 8% reporting that it occurred in someone else's home. A vast majority (93% or 61,100) of women reporting incidents of sexual assault by a partner also said they took place in their home or another person's home.

Violent behaviour is often associated with consumption of alcohol or certain drugs. In 2005, of women whose most recent experience of physical or sexual assault was by a partner, a considerable proportion (50% and 46% respectively) said that their partner's consumption of alcohol or drugs had contributed to the incident.

Some women experience partner violence while they are pregnant. In 2005, 37% (83,500) of women who were pregnant during the relationship with a violent partner had experienced violence while pregnant. A small proportion (16%) said that the violence occurred for the first time while they were pregnant.

### Consequences of partner violence

Partner violence can have serious consequences for the individual who experiences it, ranging from death or injury to fear and depression.<sup>1</sup> In 2004–05, there were 87 female homicides, with 57% of these having been perpetrated by intimate partners (including boyfriends, girlfriends and extra-marital partners).<sup>3</sup>

In 2005, 66% of women, whose most recent experience of physical assault was by a partner, reported being injured in the assault. The most common type of injury was bruises (59%). Almost one-fifth (19%) had cuts, and 9% had fractured or broken bones.

#### Type of injury received in most recent incident of physical assault — 2005

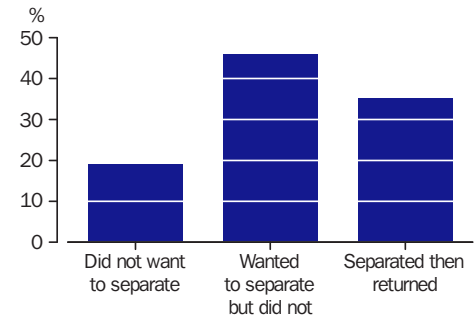
	'000	%
Total injured(a)	198.8	65.8
Bruises	179.0	59.3
Cuts	57.7	19.1
Scratches	47.8	15.8
Fractured or broken bones	26.7	8.9
Penetrative, gun shot or stab injury	*6.8	*2.3
Broken teeth	*6.3	*2.1
Other injury(b)	*18.6	*6.2
Not injured	103.1	34.2
<b>Total women whose most recent incident of physical assault during the last five years was by a partner</b>	<b>301.8</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(a) Components do not add to total as women may have experienced more than one type of injury, or been physically assaulted by both a male and a female partner.

(b) Other injury includes miscarriage; burns; bites; loss of digits, limbs, eyes or hearing; internal injuries; sexually transmitted diseases and loss of consciousness.

Source: ABS 2005 Personal Safety Survey.

#### Separation during relationship(a) — 2005



(a) Of women who experienced current partner violence during the last five years.

Source: ABS 2005 Personal Safety Survey.

In addition to, or because of, such acts of violence an element of fear may exist during violent relationships, or may continue after they have ended. Almost a third (30% or 24,400) of women in 2005 who had experienced current partner violence during the last five years said that they had experienced anxiety or fear for their safety at least once during the last 12 months as a result of the violence, with 13% reporting that they had felt this way every day. Of women who had experienced violence from a previous partner during the last five years, 10% (31,400) said that they had experienced anxiety or fear for their safety every day during the last 12 months.

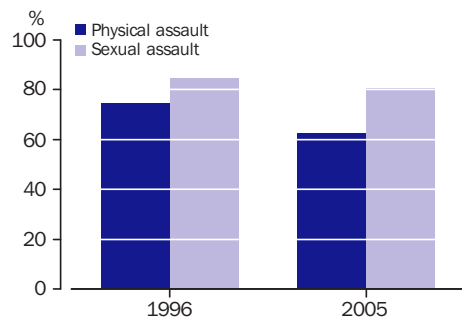
Violence that occurs between partners may also affect children living with them.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, 60% (214,000) of women who had experienced partner violence in the last five years had children in their care. Just over two-thirds of these women (68% or 145,000) said that the children had witnessed the violence.

### Women's responses to partner violence

Women who experience violence from their partner may respond in different ways. They may feel shame or self-blame, and cope by denying or understating the seriousness of their situation.<sup>1</sup> They may also report the violence to the police, and/or leave their partner. Some women may leave and return to their partner several times.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, 35% (or 28,800) of women who had experienced violence in the previous five years from their current partner had separated from, then returned to their partner at least once. Almost half (46% or 13,300) of these women said that the main reason they initially left was because of the violence.



### Police not told about assault(a)



(a) Of women whose most recent experience of physical assault or sexual assault during the last five years was by a partner.

Source: ABS 1996 Women's Safety Survey and ABS 2005 Personal Safety Survey.

Over half (57% or 159,000) the women who had experienced previous partner violence said that they had separated from, then returned to their partner at least once. A similar proportion (59%) of women who had experienced violence from a previous partner said that the main reason the relationship had ended was because of the violence. A further 12% said it ended because they wanted a better life for their children or they had found someone else.

A woman may experience violence from a partner while separated from them. In 2005, one in four (25% or 46,700) women, who had experienced partner violence and temporarily separated from their partner, reported that they had experienced violence from their partner during the temporary separation.

Of women who had experienced violence from a previous partner during the last five years, 25% (79,700) reported violence from a previous partner they were not living with at the time, including 19% who said that they had never experienced violence from their previous partner while living with them.

After ending a violent relationship, some women are stalked by their previous partner. Stalking refers to a range of activities, such as repeatedly waiting outside a person's workplace and/or home. In 2005, one-fifth (20% or 65,300) of women who had experienced previous partner violence during the last five years had also been stalked by a previous partner during this time, although this was not necessarily the same previous partner.

In response to violence, women may seek help from the police and/or turn to family or friends, or professionals like doctors or counsellors. In 2005, the majority (81% or 245,000) of women, whose most recent

experience of physical assault during the last five years was by a partner, said that they had told other people, such as family, friends, neighbours or colleagues. Just over a third (36%) said they had sought professional help, that is, from a doctor, counsellor, minister or priest. Just over three-quarters (77% or 50,700) of women sexually assaulted said that they had told other people, and 31% had sought professional help.

In 2005, 63% (189,000) of women, whose most recent experience of physical assault during the last five years was by a partner, said that the police were not informed about the incident (by them or by anyone else). This was significantly lower than in 1996, when 74% (327,000) said the physical assault was not reported. The majority of women who experienced sexual assault said that the police were not told (81% or 52,900 in 2005, and 85% or 76,900 in 1996).

The two most common main reasons given by women who said in 2005 that the police were not told of the physical assault was that they felt they could deal with it themselves (40% or 75,600) and fear of their partner (14%). That they felt they could deal with it themselves was also the most common main reason given by women who said that the sexual assault was not reported to the police (39% or 20,800).

Almost two-thirds (63% or 71,300) of women who reported the physical assault to the police said that the partner was not charged.

In some cases women need to seek a violence order against their partner. In 2005, 34% (108,000) of women who experienced violence from a previous partner during the last five years said that a violence order had been issued against their partner.

### Endnotes

- 1 Krug, EG et al. (eds) 2002, *World report on violence and health*, World Health Organization, Geneva.
- 2 Access Economics 2004, *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy: Part 1*, Office of the Status of Women, Canberra, viewed 25 September 2006, <<http://www.accesseconomics.com.au/publicationsreports/showreport.php?id=23&searchfor=2004&searchby=year>>.
- 3 Mouzos, J and Houliaras, T 2006, *Homicide in Australia: 2004–2005 National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) annual report*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, viewed 23 February 2007, <<http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/72/>>.

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