

Understanding the Statistics about Male Violence Against Women

**White Ribbon Research Series – Paper No. 5
Professor Donna Chung
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White Ribbon



The White Ribbon Campaign is the largest global male-led movement to stop men's violence against women. It engages and enables men and boys to lead this social change. White Ribbon Australia is an organisation that works to prevent violence by changing attitudes and behaviours. The prevention work is driven through social marketing, Ambassadors and initiatives with communities, schools, universities, sporting codes and workplaces.

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- Present contemporary evidence on violence against women and its prevention;
- Investigate and report on new developments in prevention locally, nationally and internationally;
- Identify policy and programming issues; and
- Provide options for improved prevention strategies and services.

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Title: Understanding the Statistics about Male Violence Against Women.

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Biography

Professor Donna Chung is a Winthrop Professor of Social Work and Social Policy in the School of Population Health at the University of Western Australia. Prior to this Donna was the Director of the Centre for the Study of Safety and Wellbeing at the University of Warwick. Her work in the area of gendered violence has spanned over 20 years. This has involved research, program evaluation and providing policy advice to governments. Recent areas of interest include domestic violence and employment, women's homelessness following domestic violence, sexual violence and young people from diverse communities, and evaluation programs for men using violence against partners. Donna is a member of a number of organisations and committees working to eliminate violence against women.

This paper provides a close examination of three key questions about the statistics concerning male violence against women:

- Why are there are so many varying statistics about the problem of male violence against women?
- What is critical to know about the different types of statistics?
- What do the statistics really tell us about male violence against women?

Why are the Statistics about Male Violence against Women (MVAW) Confusing?

There are a number of statistics used or quoted to show the extent of MVAW in Australia. At the outset, it is important to note that all statistics about MVAW, regardless of their source, will be a conservative or under-estimate of the actual extent of the problem. This is because there will always be women who are understandably distressed or embarrassed about having been subjected to such violence, and as such, do not disclose or report it.

Statistics are drawn from a range of sources, but fall into two main categories:

Agency Statistics

These statistics are generated from the records of government and non-government agencies (for example police, courts, hospitals, women's refuges), and provide information about the numbers of women who seek help as victims of violence, as well as various factors about individuals (such as age, gender, etc.).

Population Surveys

These statistics are generated from the findings of research studies, where a sample of participants from the general population is asked whether they have experienced various forms of violence.

What should we know about the Different Types of Statistics?

Agency Statistics

Police and crime statistics are a common means by which to demonstrate the extent of MVAW. One of the shortcomings of this information is that the majority of MVAW is **not** reported to police, health or support services. Therefore, agency statistics show *how many people report violence or seek help*, rather than providing information about the *total* number of women who have experienced male violence.

For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey (ABS PSS) (2006) indicates that, in Australia, only 36% of female victims of physical assault and 19% of female victims of sexual assault reported the incident to police. A review of the ABS Crime Victimization Survey (2008-2009) suggests that, of those surveyed, fewer than 50% who had experienced domestic violence reported the assault to the police (Grech & Burgess 2011).

Police, crime, health and support services statistics are valuable as they provide a picture of how frequently MVAW is addressed by these organisations, and their responses. These statistics represent the numbers of women who have required assistance or sought help, where the reason has been identified as some form of violence (e.g. domestic violence, sexual assault).

Crime and agency statistics offer us an understanding of how many women use services as a consequence of being current or past victims of male violence. They highlight the wide range of agencies that become involved in responding to the effects of MVAW.

Agency statistics will generally report lower numbers than those derived from population studies, as they only include women who have reported being a victim of violence and sought help. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Population Surveys

Population surveys show the estimated rates of MVAW in a given community, including women who have reported incidences and sought help, as well as those who have not. In short, a sample population group is surveyed and asked about whether they have experienced various forms of violence and/or abuse, as well as individual factors such as their age, relationship to the perpetrator, postcode, etc. An important factor to remember about population studies is that they do require a willingness by the participant to disclose their experience of violence—because this is a sensitive topic some people may understandably be unwilling to discuss it. Consequently, population surveys tend to be a more accurate representation than agency statistics, but still only offer a conservative estimate.

Statistics vary across different research studies for numerous reasons, but this is mainly due to the way the research is conducted.

The main ways in which studies differ—and produce different statistics—are:

- The **definition** of MVAW used in a research study
- The **period of time** being included in the survey
- The extent to which the population surveyed is an **accurate cross section or representative sample of the general population.**

Research Study Definitions of MVAW

Some researchers have used a broad definition of MVAW that includes a range of behaviours such as physical, sexual, emotional, verbal and financial abuse by a partner; being sexually harassed at work or in public; dating violence; and sexual coercion. Other studies may use a narrower definition and only include **some** of these behaviours and experiences. Mouzos & Makkai (2004, p.143) highlight these differences when comparing three Australian Population Surveys.¹

MVAW encompasses various acts and contexts such as intimate partner or domestic violence, sexual assault and violence, sexual harassment at work or in public, dating violence and subjecting women to harmful cultural practices. Studies may not always include all of these elements in their MVAW definition and related survey questions.

¹ Mouzos & Makkai (2004) identify that the broader *Crime and Safety Survey* (April 2002) only includes sexual assault, whereas the other specific population surveys (*Women's Safety Australia* and *IVAWS*) include a wider range of measures such as physical and sexual assault, attempted assaults, forced sexual intercourse, stalking and harassment.

As a result, the wider the definition of violence in a research study, the higher the rates of violence are likely to be, as more is included in the definition.

In Australia, the main study used to determine the extent of MVAW is the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) *Personal Safety Survey* (PSS). The PSS includes both women and men: as such, it encompasses various forms of interpersonal violence of which MVAW is a subset of the statistics generated. The PSS uses the following definition of violence:

Violence is any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault. Physical assault involves the use of physical force with the intent to harm or frighten. An attempt or threat to inflict physical harm is included only if a person believes it is likely to be carried out. Sexual assault includes acts of a sexual nature carried out against a person's will through the use of physical force, intimidation or coercion, or any attempts to do this. Unwanted sexual touching is excluded from sexual assault. Sexual threat involves the threat of an act of a sexual nature which the person believes is likely to be carried out (ABS 2006, p.5).

This definition is quite narrow, with a focus on specific behaviours that are generally consistent with legal definitions. This specificity is often important in surveys to ensure consistency of measurement and quality of data. However, the obvious drawback is that such specificity tends to provide a conservative estimate, as it does not encompass less visible signs of violence, such as constant putdowns and demeaning behaviours.

Time Periods covered by Surveys

Statistics can vary depending on whether women are asked about their experiences of violence in the past 12 months, or at any time during their life. A smaller number of women will have experienced violence in the past 12 months, when compared to women reporting incidents at any time during their life.

This difference is evident in *ABS PSS*:

- **40%** of women reported at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 15,
- **5.8%** of women reported such incidents in the past 12 months.

Surveying a Representative Sample of the General Population

The concern that research studies survey an accurate cross section of the general population is central to all forms of survey research, and is not specific to research into MVAW. In essence, the more representative a sample is of the general population, the more reliable the statistics are considered to be. Such a sample must cover a representative range of the population in terms of age, income levels, household types, ethnic, cultural and language groups, and so on. For example, many studies are only conducted in English: as such, people who do not read or write English, have a low level of literacy, or who are not able to speak English may not be included in the survey. While we could hypothesise such groups are at greater risk due to their vulnerability, they still may not be included in population surveys. As such, any surveys which do not include segments of the population are likely to be less accurate in their statistics.

As is evident, these various differences in the design of research studies will significantly influence the final statistics about MVAW. Therefore, it is critical to be aware of these differences in research studies, and how and why they lead to varying numbers being quoted and used by policy makers, media, activists, etc.

What are the Australian Statistics telling us about MVAW?

In Australia, the main population surveys used to estimate MVAW are conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics: these include the *Personal Safety Survey* (PSS) and the *Crime Victimization Survey*. These surveys do not exclusively examine MVAW; rather, this issue forms one component of the scope of these studies.

Population Surveys: The extent and types of MVAW in Australia

The ABS PSS (2006) shows that in the 12 months prior to the survey:

- 5.8% of all women had experienced at least one incident of violence (physical and/or sexual)
- 12% of young women aged 18-24 years experienced at least one incident of violence (physical and/or sexual)
- 4.7% of women reported at least one incident of physical violence
- 1.6% of women reported at least one incident of sexual violence²

The proportion of younger women (aged 18-24 years) reporting incidents of violence in the previous 12 months was just over twice as high as that for the general population of women (12% compared with 5.8 %).

Since the age of 15,

- 40% of women reported at least one incident of physical or sexual violence
- 33% of women experienced inappropriate comments about their body or sex life
- 25% of women experienced unwanted sexual touching
- 19% of women had been subjected to stalking.

In Australia, women are most likely to be subjected to violence by a male who is known to them (ABS, 2006).

- Amongst women experiencing physical violence, the perpetrator was a current or previous partner for 46% of women.
- Women who were sexually assaulted knew the perpetrators in 78% of cases
 - 21% were previous partners
 - 39% family members or friends
 - 32% other known men

² 4.7% + 1.6% is greater than 5.8% as women may report both physical and sexual violence incidents.

It is highly likely that in your workplace there will be a woman employee who has been, or is being subjected to male violence. The ABS PSS (2006) shows that:

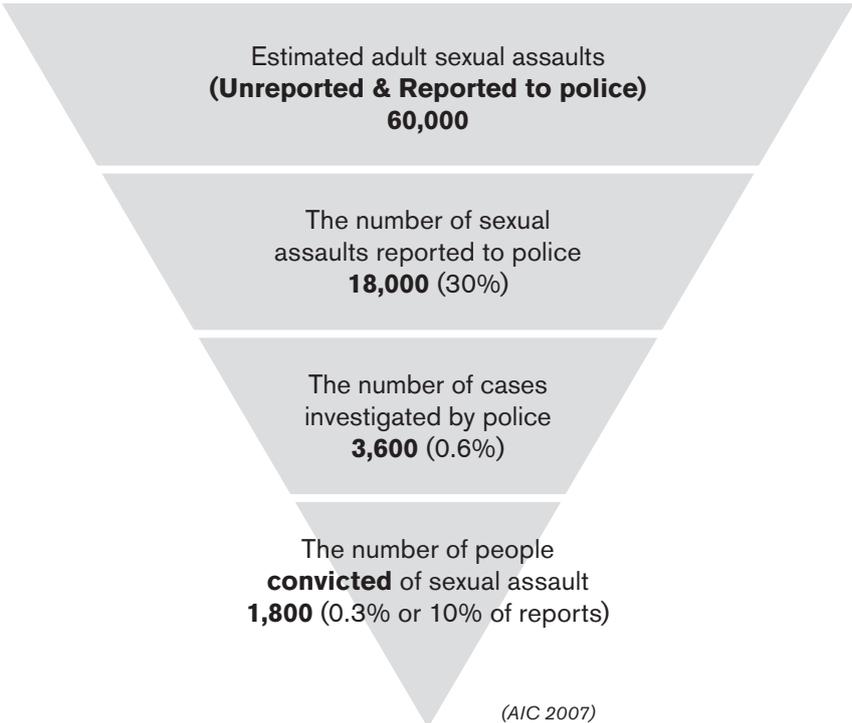
- 44% of women reported experiencing at least one incident of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15, and
- 55-70% of women who are or have been a victim of male violence are in paid employment.

In relation to sexual harassment in the workplace, there is a specific survey that only measures this form of MVAW. It is the *Australian Human Rights Commission National Telephone Survey (2012)*, and, is the largest population survey used.

In 2012, the statistics show that:

- 25% of women aged 15 years and older have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in the past five years
- Consistent with the PSS, the highest rate of sexual harassment in the workplace occurs when women are younger
- One-third of women (33%) have been sexually harassed since the age of 15
- The most common types of behaviours reported were sexually suggestive comments or offensive jokes (61%), intrusive questions (50%) and inappropriate staring or leering (40%)
- The main groups perpetrating sexual harassment towards women in the workplace are co-workers (45%), boss/employer (17%), supervisor (13%), and client/customer (11%).
- Only 22% of women made complaints about the workplace sexual harassment: out of these, 46% said the harassment ceased after the complaint and 12% reported no consequences/change as a result of reporting.

Agency Statistics: Responses to MVAW in Australia



Agency statistics demonstrate the serious, and often long lasting, impacts of MVAW. Sadly, it is crime statistics—specifically homicide data—that demonstrate the most serious consequences of MVAW.

- 112 women were homicide victims in 2007-08
- Of these women, 87 (78%) were killed by someone known to them
- 62 (55%) were killed by a partner or ex-partner (Virueda & Payne 2010).

Other statistics show the extent of the work of specific agencies in dealing with MVAW.

- 9% of NSW police call-outs are due to domestic and family violence: this is estimated to translate to 625,000 police investigation hours (*NSW Auditor General's Report on Responding to Domestic and Family Violence 2012*).
- Currently in Australia, domestic and family violence is the most commonly reported reason for accessing homelessness services in Australia across the population (26%), most especially amongst female clients (36%). As a direct result of current and past experiences of violence and abuse, the majority of people seeking homeless services are female (59%) (AIHW 2012).
- Domestic and family violence is a major problem amongst children and families reported to Child Protection (AIHW 2011).

Thousands of women (and their children) access homelessness services in Australia because their homes are unsafe due to violence and abuse. This demonstrates the continuing significant impact of MVAW, and its ongoing impact on women's safe housing, income and employment.

Moreover, MVAW can have a significant impact on women's mental health and wellbeing in the short and longer term. A study of mental health service users in an outpatient program found 59% of women had a history of being victims of sexual assault (Hutchings & Dutton 1993).

It has also been established that sexual assault:

- experienced during childhood and adulthood can have lasting mental health effects such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (VicHealth 2004)
- is understood as a precursor to suicide and self-harm rates among women (Taylor & Norma, 2012)
- can reduce women's capacity to work and impact on friendship and family networks (VicHealth, 2007).

Sexual Assault: The Importance of Building a Picture with Both Types of Statistics

Some of the most confusing statistics often concern sexual assault. In the diagram presented below, both population and agency survey statistics/estimates are used. In this instance, both types of statistics are used to demonstrate the vast difference between estimated rates of sexual assault in the community, compared with the number of people found guilty of such offences by courts.

As is evident in the diagram below, there is a significant disjunction between the estimated numbers of adult sexual assaults (60,000) in Australia to the number of people convicted of sexual assault.

The adult sexual assault statistic of 60,000 is based on population survey estimates in surveys such as the *Personal Safety* and *Crime Victimisation* Surveys. The middle and bottom parts of the diagram show the known percentages of sexual assault cases as they progress through law enforcement processes (based on agency statistics).

As the pyramid diagram indicates, the numbers decrease, depending on which statistic is used. As such, it is important to consider whether the statistic being used represents the extent of the problem (eg 60,000 per year from population surveys), or the number of convictions for sexual assault (1800 derived from agency statistics). Clearly, these two sets of statistics differ greatly, and can result in a serious underestimation of the extent of the problem.

Importantly, these statistics also demonstrate that victims of violence who are seeking justice and safety (for themselves and others) stand a very small chance that their efforts will result in the criminal conviction of an offender.

The varied forms of MVAW have a series of common effects that have been identified in both agency and population studies: these include (but are not limited to) anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and higher than average rates of substance misuse. While these effects may not be experienced by all women, the significance of the ongoing implications for women's well-being further underlines the necessity to prevent MVAW in the future.

Summary

While the statistics can be confusing, it is important to remember that they always represent a conservative or under-estimate of the actual extent of MVAW. This is due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

Statistics will be highest and more accurate when:

- a population survey is employed;
- a broad definition is used;
- reporting is based on people's lifetime experiences; and
- the population survey sample is representative of the general population.

Population study statistics give us an understanding of the likely prevalence of MVAW in a community, whereas agency statistics show us how many people present at an agency and disclose the experience of such violence.

It is important that we collect both types of statistics because they provide information about *how many women are affected*, as well as *how many women are disclosing and seeking help*. This can assist with service planning and prevention, and can also provide some measurement of whether MVAW is increasing or decreasing over time and which groups are most often subjected to MVAW.

Statistics will never be a completely accurate representation of the reality. However, they remain an influential tool, and are widely used by the media and governments to inform public opinion and public policy. As such, it is critical that the different types of statistics, and their different sources, are clearly distinguished so that debates about the future prevention of MVAW are soundly informed.

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