

# Domestic Violence: A Research Agenda

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## Abstract

This paper presents a brief overview of emerging issues in domestic violence research. Specifically, it sets out a research agenda in the context of rural and remote communities; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) communities; domestic violence amongst the elderly, those with disabilities and in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities; domestic violence and homelessness; the impact on children; and perpetrator programs.

This agenda does not purport to be exhaustive; in particular, it focuses on male perpetrators. In addition, the need for more research in relation to family violence in Indigenous communities should not be overlooked (see Bartels 2010). Nonetheless, this paper aims to serve as a point of focus for the criminological community for future research in this context.

## Background

In March 2009, the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (NCRVWC) released *Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009–2021*, which identified six key outcome areas:

- Communities are safe and free from violence;
- Relationships are respectful;
- Services meet the needs of women and their children;
- Responses are just;
- Perpetrators stop their violence; and
- Systems work together effectively (NCRVWC 2009).

The strategies for each of these outcome areas include 'build[ing] the evidence base' (NCRVWC 2009:17–20). This paper is accordingly geared towards informing some of the ways in which the evidence base should be built.

## Key Issues in Domestic Violence Research

In this section, a brief overview is presented of some of the principal emerging issues in domestic violence research, which have been selected for their topicality and their relevance to the NCRVWC priorities.

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## Rural and Remote Communities

There is conflicting evidence on the prevalence of domestic violence in rural and remote areas, with some research indicating higher rates than in urban areas, while other research suggests the contrary (see Bartels 2010). Generally speaking, the prevalence and incidence of domestic violence in rural communities has been given limited attention in Australia (see Wendt 2008). Accordingly, Tually et al (2008) have suggested that research is required into the extent and impact of domestic violence in remote communities.

The available research on this issue has focused predominantly on factors that keep rural women trapped in violent relationships, such as financial insecurity, isolation and lack of transport, as well as a perceived lack of confidentiality; and stigma attached to the public disclosure of violence. What is needed, however, is more research to better understand the capacity of regional domestic violence services to meet women's needs (Tually et al 2008).

The research about rural men and domestic violence is yet more limited (NCRVWC 2009). Wendt and Campbell (2009) have noted that isolation, beliefs about rural masculinity which encourage stoicism and repressed emotions, and limited access to, and use of, medical and health facilities all indicate that rural men require different assistance to men from urban areas to understand and address their use of violence against their partners and families. They argued that further empirical research is needed to explore the connections between domestic violence and rural ideologies and masculinities.

## GLBTI Communities

Jeffries and Ball (2008) have argued that the Australian criminological and social science research community has largely been silent on the issue of same-sex domestic violence. Women's Health Victoria (WHV) (2009) has noted that one form of violence which is specific to GLBTI relationships is the abusive partner 'outing' or threatening to 'out' their partner to family, friends, colleagues or the general community; similar issues may arise in terms of disclosing HIV positive status (Chan 2005). In addition, same-sex domestic violence victims may be particularly vulnerable due to isolation from their support networks and may feel that acknowledging the existence of the violence may further feed homophobia (WHV 2009).

Zhou (2009) has suggested that although the NCRVWC Plan of Action explicitly acknowledges domestic violence in lesbian relationships, it excludes such violence in gay male relationships and does not recognise the unique aspects of same-sex domestic violence.

Future research in this context should include:

- Research on the frequency and prevalence of GLBTI domestic violence and the contexts in which it occurs, as well as furthering awareness of the incidence and perceptions of and responses to such violence;
- Consideration of the impact of such violence on the individual and community generally;
- Information on help seeking and the provision of safe and relevant services; and
- The development of inclusive policy responses (Irwin 2008; Jeffries and Ball 2008).

## Domestic Violence and Older Women

In 2005, the *Personal Safety Survey Australia* (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006) found that 26 percent of women aged 55 and over had experienced violence from their current partner. Morgan and Chadwick (2009) noted that older women are much more likely to experience violence and abuse than their male counterparts and the majority of victims are long-term victims.

According to WHV (2009), there may be a change in perpetrators, with women reporting children, grandchildren, other relatives and carers, as abusers. Kurrle (2004) suggested that up to 90

percent of abusers of older people in Australia are close family. In addition, the nature of the abuse may change, for example, from physical and sexual abuse to more emotional and financial abuse (Bagshaw et al 2009a). Bagshaw et al (2009b) have therefore called for research to explore older people's experiences of abuse to recognise the social and cultural context and diversity of experiences; and develop appropriate responses. Such research is particularly important in the context of an ageing population.

### *Domestic Violence and Disability*

Women with physical and/or intellectual disabilities are more likely than those without disabilities to experience domestic violence and such violence is also likely to be more severe and continue for longer (Morgan and Chadwick 2009; Tually et al 2008; Women with Disabilities Australia 2008). In addition, such women experiencing violence generally have fewer support options for leaving the relationship (Morgan and Chadwick 2009).

The key finding in Healey et al (2008:10) was that there 'are major gaps in knowledge, policy and processes that will require significant resourcing in order to improve services to women with disabilities'. In addition, most services do not routinely collect data on disability and domestic violence. Little is therefore known about the help-seeking experiences of women with disabilities experiencing violence. Accordingly, Healey et al (2008) have called for nationwide research to ascertain the prevalence and extent of violence against women and children with disabilities in the full range of residential settings; and understand the help-seeking experiences of women with disabilities living with violence and the experiences of family violence workers in supporting women with disabilities.

### *Domestic Violence in CALD Communities*

The research on the prevalence of domestic violence against women from CALD backgrounds is unclear, and drawing conclusions on the nature and extent of domestic violence in such communities is therefore difficult (Morgan and Chadwick 2009). The research does indicate, however, that cultural values and immigration status enhance the complexities normally involved in domestic violence cases (Pease and Rees 2008) and women from CALD backgrounds are generally less likely than other groups of women to report cases of domestic violence (Morgan and Chadwick 2009; Tually et al 2008).

The factors which may influence this include the limited availability of appropriate translator/interpreter services and access to support services; limited support networks and reluctance to confide in others; isolation; lack of awareness about the law; continued abuse from the immediate family; cultural and/or religious shame; and religious beliefs about divorce (Benevolent Society 2009; Morgan and Chadwick 2009; Pease and Rees 2007). Some women may be geographically isolated from extended family and women who do not have permanent residency in Australia may fear deportation if they report the abuse (Office of Women's Policy Victoria 2002).

In order to better understand the impacts of the foregoing factors, future research should:

- Examine the incidence of, and factors associated with, domestic violence in CALD communities;
- Explore the role of religion and cultural mores more widely;
- Examine means of coping with and managing cultural change; and
- Develop effective strategies to enhance victim safety and prevention approaches.

### *Domestic Violence and Homelessness*

Domestic violence is the most common factor contributing to homelessness among women and their children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2008; Morgan and Chadwick

2009). Furthermore, the research suggests that homelessness caused by domestic violence differs from other forms of homelessness (Marcus and Braaf 2007). Accommodation is often a critical factor in women's decisions about whether to leave a violent relationship (Macdonald 2007). The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is the major government response to homelessness; in 2003-4, a third of people accessing such services were women escaping from domestic violence (AIHW 2005). Research is therefore required to examine housing needs and services in urban, rural and remote settings and for particularly vulnerable domestic violence victims, for example, Indigenous people, the elderly, people from CALD backgrounds and those with disabilities (see Tually et al 2008).

### *The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children*

Data analysed by the Australian Institute of Criminology (2006) has indicated that for 2003-4, children were recorded as being present at 44 per cent of domestic violence incidents. Notwithstanding the prevalence of children's exposure to such violence, there is currently little research that:

improves our understanding of the long-term impacts of continued exposure to trauma on the psychological, physical and brain development of children, or how this exposure impacts their personality, impulse control and, ultimately, their propensity to perpetrate violence in the future (NCRVWC 2009:83).

What the available evidence indicates is that witnessing violence in the home poses a threat to children's physical, emotional, psychological, social, educational and behavioural wellbeing.

Zerk et al (2009) have suggested that more research is required to determine the effects of stress on the developing nervous system, how these effects are manifested through observable symptoms and what factors in the child's environment may either enhance or modify these effects. They also suggested that future research should examine trauma symptoms in young children and develop more appropriate and standardised means of assessing trauma symptoms. In addition, research should focus on the extent to which the primary carer's distress and possibly diminished coping abilities as a result of family violence may influence their perceptions of their children. Finally, McGee considered it appropriate for future research to examine the impact of family violence on 'young people's socialisation and relationships' (2000:94).

Bedi and Goddard (2007) noted that future research also needs to focus on the effects of situational characteristics and called for greater precision in identifying the types and nature of the violence experienced, which may clarify whether certain attributes of the violent home environment are particularly damaging. In particular, they suggested that the examination should include the different violent and neglectful circumstances experienced by children, as well as the impact of time in out-of-home care and contact with social and protective services.

### *Perpetrator Programs*

Day et al (2009) have observed that there is a broad range of responses to domestic violence, ranging from community-based and voluntarily-attended programs through to court mandated programs (some of which are administered in prison). They also contend that not enough is known about such programs and the evidence of their efficacy is unconvincing and incomplete. The NCRVWC (2009:133) has likewise stated that:

We know little about the ways that the many different sectors and professions involved with perpetrators can complement and enhance each other's work, and what sort of social policy will facilitate this endeavour ... the best means to undertake specific interventions requires future research.

The NCRVWC proposed a number of specific avenues for future research on perpetrator programs, including research into the characteristics of programs that are proven to be effective in

changing men's behaviour and developing and evaluating best practice prison-based perpetrator programs.

In particular, the NCRVWC suggested that evaluations should include:

- Examination of the principles and theory underpinning the program content and the approach it takes to working with women partners and managing issues of safety;
- A focus on the capacity of the program to respond appropriately to perpetrators from a range of backgrounds and from different geographical locations (e.g. urban, rural and remote areas); and
- An assessment of the impact the program is having on reducing violence against women and their children.

A recent Campbell Collaboration review recommended that research be undertaken in relation to larger representative samples, instead of small samples; that victims be retained longer to determine positive and negative outcomes and that the validity and reliability of official and victim reports be measured (Feder et al 2008). The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse (ADFVC) has also raised a number of good practice issues for evaluations of perpetrator programs, for example, ensuring evaluators have an in-depth understanding of violence within families, its dynamics and impacts (Braaf 2007).

Finally, bearing in mind the foregoing discussion on the impacts of domestic violence on children's development, the very long-term impacts of perpetrator programs and prevention programs generally should be examined. As Schwartz and DeKeseredy (2008:182) have noted, 'one important area for study in the future is the extent to which ending interpersonal violence against women can be seen as a strategy for reducing adolescent and adult criminal behaviour in later years'.

## Conclusion

This paper has raised a number of research areas in the context of domestic violence. It is acknowledged, however, that there are a broad range of other vital research issues, including in Indigenous communities and in relation to the legal system (e.g. McClelland 2010). In addition, it follows from the foregoing discussion that the research, policy and practical issues which may arise are compounded where multiple circumstances coincide, for example, in the context of violence committed against elderly migrants in a rural setting. Accordingly, further research is required to better understand not only the prevalence of the issues discussed here and the best responses to them, but the intersection of these issues and contexts.

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