

Section 3

Family violence facts, myths, fears and safety

*What do you see as family violence?
What kind of family violence happens in Aboriginal families in your community?*

This Section begins with a discussion of definitions of family violence, a fundamental aspect of building an effective system through which harmful behaviour can be identified, reported and sanctioned. It then summarises the issues raised by focus group participants about the kinds of harmful behaviour they know to be occurring in their communities, its impacts and the contributing factors.

3.1 Definitions

Fundamental to any discussion of interpersonal violence is a shared understanding of the kinds of relationships, behaviours and experiences involved. Such violence typically constitutes an abuse of power, and its elimination must be informed by socio-political and social structural considerations.

Laing (2000) provides a brief background of the politicisation by feminists of male violence against women and the resulting emergence in Australia, in the 1970s, of women's refuges, other support services and legal responses to domestic violence. The initial focus on violence in intimate relationships between men and women has been extended to recognise violence in same gender relationships. The following definition, agreed by Australian Heads of Government at a 1997 National Domestic Violence Summit, reflects this:

Domestic violence is an abuse of power perpetrated mainly (but not only) by men against women, both in relationship and after separation. It occurs when one partner attempts physically or psychologically to dominate and control the other. Domestic violence takes a number of forms. The most commonly acknowledged forms are physical and sexual violence, threats and intimidation, emotional and social abuse and economic deprivation.

(Laing 2000:4)

The preference of Indigenous people for the term 'family violence' rather than 'domestic violence' reflects the extended nature of the family structure in modern Indigenous communities, and the fact that the violence might be perpetrated by or against a family member other than an intimate partner. The following Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) definition is adopted here:

'... the beating of a wife or family members, homicide, suicide and other self-inflicted injury, rape, child abuse, child sexual abuse, incest... (more than) serious physical injury but also verbal harassment, psychological and emotional abuse and economic deprivation, which although as devastating are even more difficult to quantify than physical abuse.'

(Atkinson 1996:5)

The following expanded version of this definition was used in focus group discussions for clarification purposes.

Figure 3: Definition of family violence

Family violence is when someone in your family abuses you, or another member of your family in any of the following ways:

Physical

- When you are beaten, bashed, punched, kicked, burnt, bitten, have bones broken or are seriously injured in some other way

Sexual

- When you are raped, that is, forced into having sex against your will.
- Incest, when a member of the immediate or extended family has sex with you.

Verbal

- When you are called names like 'idiot' or 'stupid', 'fat' or 'ugly'
- When someone puts you down or makes you feel bad about yourself by something they say.

Mental

- When what someone in your family does or says makes you feel bad, scared, degraded, guilty or ashamed.
- They may play mind games, causing you stress or other emotional problems.

Social

- When you are compared to others, like 'Why can't you be like that?'
- When you are put down in front of others in your community.
- When you are stopped from seeing your family and friends.
- Sometimes you may not be allowed to look at or speak to certain people.

Financial

- When the money you earn is taken from you and kept.
- When any money coming into the family to feed and clothe the kids or pay the bills is taken and spent, probably on grog or gambling, etc.
- Financial blackmail, where women who have no income become financially reliant on their partner, often having to beg for money and account for it later.

(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Undated)

3.2 Family violence – nature and impacts

Participants expressed concern about the comparatively higher levels of violent crime generally within Wagga Wagga, Bourke and Dubbo, and within the Aboriginal communities and families of the towns. While community violence includes inter group feuding that can result in multiple applications for personal APVOs, the main focus of discussions was family violence and ADVOs.

Consistent with domestic violence affecting the non-Aboriginal population, participants reported that a majority of incidents of family violence are perpetrated by adult men directly toward their female partners. Less frequently adolescent males and women also perpetrate family violence against men, children and elders. Participants expressed concern about the occurrence of all forms of family violence in their communities, and discussed instances of physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, social and financial abuse (see Appendix 3). Their concerns were about the impact of the violence on people who were direct targets and on other family and community members who were indirectly harmed. They regarded the harmful impacts of the violence on victims, families and communities as both immediate and long-term.

In their discussions about male violence toward women, participants gave examples of extreme and repeated physical violence, sometimes causing serious physical injury and, in extreme cases, death.

...growing up an Aboriginal person in the community where I come from, I hardly ever saw violence. But when I came to (this town) I got a really big shock at the amount of violence. It was like every second house the woman was being belted up at least twice a week. I mean, a case recently where a young girl over in (one suburb) was belted to death – Yes. That affected a lot of people. She was 23.
People are trying to avoid even talking about it - - for the fear. (Dubbo P87-103)

...there is family violence here, and it takes all forms of partner domestic violence, verbal abuse – really severe violence, a lot of stabbings. I don't know what the statistics are, but every week we're hearing of a stabbing.

It is extreme physical violence. With weapons - bottles, a lot of ... people are slashed with bottles or hit on the head with bottles. Between partners, but also within families, like just alcohol-induced - - (Bourke participant P29-45)

It was said that children are sometimes intentionally targeted. Some perceived children of a previous relationship of either a male or female partner to be particularly vulnerable to physical and verbal abuse.

...we call (those children) outsiders... That's why he's treating them like that. Kooris can see what happens when this other man comes into a relationship and there's children from the first relationship... it's good; it's beautiful until their little trophy comes along, and that's when the trouble starts. (Wagga Wagga participant I 134)

Children are considered more likely to be harmed through neglect or physical injury that occurs inadvertently in the crossfire of a violent incident. They can be emotionally harmed by bearing witness to it, or experience neglect as a result of a violent incident.

The kids know what goes on. The kids know that the father's bashing the mother. The kids know ... (the adults are) drinking and get into fights and brawl, ... the next morning - it's the kids who get up and clean up the bloody mess, pick up all the stubbies and the beer bottles and wipe up the blood on the floor and the spew in the backyard, and go into the kitchen and try and find something to eat where the night before all the drunks ate and drank all the food. . (Wagga Wagga P150-159)

Violence against elders is said to be most often verbal or financial in nature, and there was particular concern about their social isolation and lack of access to outside support.

Considerable time was spent discussing the indirect and long-term impacts of family violence on the communities. There was a strong desire for initiatives that might interrupt what participants view as an intergenerational cycle of violence, and prevent the negative attitudes and behaviour experienced in childhood being repeated in adult relationships.

I believe that the people who are committing the violence against each other really have no idea what effect it's having on their children. - I don't think anybody has got through to them that, "If you could stop the violence then your children don't have to become violent when they grow up." (Bourke participant P1171-1181)

If (children exposed to violence) are not cowed down to a point where they just want to cringe every time someone comes in, they'll fight back, and the way they'll fight back is violence with violence, that's why it's got to be stopped. (Wagga Wagga participant I 150-155)

Adolescent males known to have used violence in their relations with members of their family and community are seen as an immediate threat to individual safety and community harmony. Adolescent violence against elders is also considered a serious threat to a non-violent future, as it reflects a breakdown in the cultural values of respect accorded to elders.

...I think there are some elders in the community that the younger ones do respect, but they're usually the really old ones, and I don't think they would be game enough to swear at some of them, they're the ones in the seventies, and there's only a few of them, but I haven't heard kids swearing at them, but I don't know about the others. (Bourke participant P196-208)

3.3 Contributing factors

High rates of Indigenous personal violence, the research suggests, stem from multiple causes, including: marginalisation and dispossession; loss of land and traditional culture; the breakdown of community kinship systems and Indigenous law; entrenched poverty; and the 'redundancy' of the Indigenous male role and status, compensated for by an aggressive assertion of male rights over women and children.

(Holder 2001:5)

A review of the literature on violence in Indigenous communities (Memmott et. al. 2001) recognises the complex interplay of factors that contribute to violence in Indigenous communities and proposes a multi-dimensional perspective that distinguishes between precipitating causes, situational factors and underlying factors. This distinction provides a useful framework within which to report participant comments.

Precipitating factors are described as "...one or more particular events that trigger a violent episode by a perpetrator" (op. cit. 2001:11). Precipitating causes were described as conflict over money or jealousy based in beliefs or accusations that women were sexually interested or involved with other men. However there were also descriptions of incidents in which there was no apparent explanation for the behaviour, other than a demonstration of male power:

Yes, that was when I asked him for a smoke, he just jumped on the bed and put the smoke out on my face. (Bourke participant I166-167)

Situational factors are said to include "aspects such as alcohol abuse, other people encouraging one or both of the antagonists to act, conflicting social differences between the antagonists etc. and thereby constitute secondary exacerbating circumstances in the social environment of the antagonists" (op. cit. 2001:11).

Abuse of alcohol and other substances

Consistent with the findings of the 1994 NATSI survey, alcohol was identified as a major health problem in these Aboriginal communities.

(He'll be) real good and happy and, yeah, it's just that change when he's drinking. He's just a totally different person. (Bourke participant I270-274)

No, it's mostly the same, if they are a younger family like say a couple that's in their twenties, with small kids, it's mainly drugs.

And gambling - but also with the older parents it's associated with alcohol and gambling but with the younger ones it's drugs and gambling.

Very heavy drugs. Any kind of drug I think they'd have. Needles — heroin, speed, yes.

Yes, locally available. They've even got the kids on it now, most of them, I think.

Yes, there are a lot of young fellas using needles. (Bourke participant I76-97)

Focus group participants at the three towns expressed concern about the extent of substance abuse, the wide range of substances being used and the young age at which

some children are abusing substances. At Bourke, staff of the Department of Community Services (DOCS) confirmed that Aboriginal children as young as five years of age have been reported as 'at risk' due to their sniffing petrol. While economic disadvantage means that inexpensive legal drugs are the most accessible, rural people are increasingly aware of the introduction into their communities of illegal drugs. The author has heard unverified reports that 'heroin starter kits' are being introduced into some rural communities for as little as \$10.00, an extremely disturbing possibility. Alcohol abuse and sniffing of petrol and other inhalants are the most visible forms of substance abuse in these towns.

Since the mid 1990s the New South Wales government has decriminalised many forms of gambling, thus opening the way for increased competition for commercial operators. New South Wales citizens now have access to increasingly diverse forms of legal gambling in a wider range of venues. In rural towns gaming machines have become more numerous in clubs and hotels, and the social problems associated with gambling more evident. Participants in this study linked family violence to financial problems, which in many cases are exacerbated by gambling.

Gambling and 'pressing' the gaming machines

And gambling's a big problem, very big problem. (Dubbo participant P208)

Poker machines, bingo, any form of gambling - the TAB. It's just chock-a-block full every payday. You know, if they lose that money and then they go home and they're so (down) because they lost the money and didn't win - didn't get that big high off the winning - that's when they'll go for the bottle and belt the wife around because of it.

But many women are turning to gambling now too.

Yes, I've seen that more and more. It used to be only the man but now the women are getting right in on it. (Dubbo participant P221-231)

...the mother goes pressing and - - -

Yeah, that's what I'm saying... That's why the kids are hanging around at the pubs, coming from school, looking for a feed, because the parents - the mother hasn't (provided) food or bought their lunches...(Bourke participant I491-502)

The New South Wales government strikes a levy on the financial takings of gambling operators that increases State revenue. A small percentage of the levy collected is committed to funding research into the social impacts of gambling and services that aim to combat 'problem gambling'. These funds are allocated through competitive tendering processes rather than a consistent statewide collection of information that aims to channel funds for research and services to areas objectively demonstrated as having the greatest need.

The vicious cycle of economic disadvantage, gambling, alcohol abuse and family violence is clearly visible in rural and remote New South Wales:

And (she) gets away from (the abuse) by going to meetings, going out of town on meetings, going to the club to press (use electronic gambling machines), to stop - stop it - but it's not stopped, because she's still got to go home to it. It's a two-way situation. While she's doing that, that's why he drinks. While he drinks, she goes away. (Bourke participant I429-436)

That's the worse thing that they ever did, was put poker machines in the pubs! (Bourke participant I545-546)

Underlying factors are considered to be “the deep historical circumstances of Indigenous people, which make them vulnerable, leading to their enacting, or becoming victim, of violent behaviour” (Memmott et. al. 2001). Focus group participants discussed European colonisation, including dispossession from the land, assimilation and child removals as factors that contribute to current levels of social breakdown in Aboriginal communities.

The role of a woman, from an Indigenous point of view, has not changed much in the last 200 years. The role of the man has changed dramatically in the last 200 years. Traditionally men have gone from being the hunter to supplying the food to having a status within the community group. They've also had an element of self-worth within that group. Then up rocked terra nullius and those men have had their whole image, their whole 20,000 years of breeding and hunting and gathering and supplying the family and building huts taken away from them. What have they got now? Women still have the role in communities. We go out and work. We come home; we fill our domestic obligations by cleaning our house, raising our children, sending them to school. What do the men do? What's the man's role in today's Aboriginal community? If they're lucky enough to get a job they go to work and they come home. Then what about the ones that are unemployed and the ones that don't work? What have they got? They don't have anything. All they've got is the TAB and the local pub. This is where I believe a lot of domestic violence comes from with our Aboriginal men, because they have no sense of worth in the community. (Wagga Wagga participant P1767-1790)

... If you look at the way that alcohol was introduced to Aboriginal people, it was introduced as a means of payment for work. So the dependency that Aboriginal people developed came from white people giving them grog for work that they'd done, to pay them. So 100 years later you have a society of Aboriginal people who think that it's normal to drink alcohol ... it's normal to come home from the pub at night violent and abuse your spouse and your kids, and go out and fight and brawl on the streets, because they don't know any different. (Wagga Wagga participant P35-52)

He was taken as a kid himself. He wasn't taught how to be a parent so he thinks the only way to parent the kids is to flog them and all that sort of stuff. He's so angry and just so eaten up, and yet he's a really good person. So you just absolutely have to feel for him and it has to be about healing for men as well. Even though they might be the perpetrators, they're also victims. The majority of our males are also victims. (Wagga Wagga participant P1180-1207)

This in turn contributes to situational factors, including marginal participation in the economy and communities.

Economic marginalization

Previously in this report it was noted that Wagga Wagga, Dubbo and Bourke all have higher rates of unemployment and of proportions of Centrelink clients within their working age populations. Given the over representation of Indigenous people within these categories, it was not surprising that focus group participants considered lack of employment and economic disadvantage as significant contributors to the high incidence of crime and violence within their communities.

- it's different when he's working, now that he's got a good job for – oh, just goes on for about a month or six weeks or something.
Because it keeps him occupied. (Bourke participant I1556-1562)

... financially, like if they haven't got the money.
There's very little employment around here for Aboriginal people. There may be employment but it's having the self-esteem to go and apply for that job,
Having that education. (Dubbo participant P197-204)

In Bourke, the Aboriginal population is a rich source of casual labour for agricultural producers, a form of employment which does not provide the amount of work or certainty needed to secure everyday needs, let alone purchase a family home. Those who are not competitive for these jobs may gain employment in the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), a program that provides work and training for local Aboriginal people in exchange for payment that exceeds unemployment benefits, but is less than a working salary. Participation by Indigenous people in these government-funded programs can hide statistically the truth of their marginal labour force participation.

Indigenous leader, Noel Pearson recently described the current social position of Indigenous Australians as a 'social disaster', which is based in:

....the breakdown of responsibility in Aboriginal society occasioned by passive welfare dependency, substance abuse and our resulting criminal justice predicaments.

(Pearson 2001:2)

3.4 Summary

Focus group participants in the three towns expressed grave concern about the high incidence of all types of violence, physical, sexual, verbal, mental, social and financial. Aboriginal men were identified as the most frequent perpetrators of family violence and in all three towns there were known instances of Aboriginal women having died as a result of violence by a male partner. Concerns included the extreme and immediate harm violence causes to individuals, including women, children and elders, to families and to the wider community and culture. There was also concern about the high level of fear within the communities, and the negative impacts of violence and fear on the future well being and functioning of individuals, families and communities. In deciding to openly discuss the nature and extent of violence within their communities, many participants saw themselves as taking a stand against the violence, and also about the silence that has too often allowed it to go unchallenged. Participants recognised that the pursuit of a safer and more secure future for present and future generations necessitates addressing the complex interplay of underlying, situational and precipitating contributing factors. Based on these insights, discussions about the response to family violence emphasised the importance of community leadership in confronting perpetrators of violence, providing crisis support to victims and ensuring community access to resources that can contribute to the long term safety of individuals, families and the community.

