

Monitoring changes in domestic violence in the wake of COVID-19 social isolation measures

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AIM

To monitor changes in the incidence of domestic violence in NSW in light of the unprecedented societal changes in response to the global pandemic COVID-19.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Police recorded crime data for March 2020 shows no evidence of an increase in domestic violence since social distancing was implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing measures commenced in NSW in mid-March 2020. Recorded incidents of DV-related assault for the month of March 2020 are equivalent with those for March 2019 (2,678 recorded DV-related assaults in March 2020 versus 2,632 in March 2019).

It is possible the figures are stable because isolation strategies have affected the willingness or ability of people experiencing domestic violence to seek assistance from police. Were this to be the case, we would still expect the most serious forms of physical domestic violence (ie. murder and assault resulting in grievous bodily harm) to come to police attention as these offences are not sensitive to discretionary reporting. Trends for the most serious DV offences mirror those for DV-related assault generally in that the incidence in March 2020 is comparable to that of the previous year.

Domestic violence may yet increase in response to social isolation measures but we have not seen an impact in the first month of operation. We will continue to monitor this data over time.

KEYWORDS

domestic violence

family violence

intimate partner violence

social isolation

social distancing

Covid-19

Coronavirus

INTRODUCTION

The Australian and NSW Governments' health response to the COVID-19 outbreak has included minimising the number of people infected with COVID-19 through the use of social distancing measures and enforced isolation. The initiatives to achieve these goals have ratcheted up from March 2020 through to April 2020. On 15 March 2020 NSW Health advised NSW residents to adopt social distancing measures including working from home where possible, avoiding indoor gatherings and crowds and reducing public transport use.¹ On 23 March NSW parents were encouraged to keep children home from school² and non-essential activities and businesses were closed including gyms, cinemas, pubs, cafes and churches. On 31 March 2020 an order was made under the NSW *Public Health Act 2010* requiring that people not leave their place of residence without a reasonable excuse.³ Breach of orders made under the *Public Health Act 2010* is a criminal offence and attracts penalties.

There has been concern that the restrictions imposed to combat the spread of COVID-19 may inadvertently increase the incidence of domestic violence, and may limit the ability of people experiencing domestic violence to seek assistance. These concerns have some theoretical basis in past research. There is strong evidence that while risk of intimate partner violence in Australia varies widely across communities, several factors, including financial stress and social isolation are associated with higher risk of victimisation among women (Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn, 2016).⁴ Given that restrictions on business and socialisation imposed in response to COVID-19 will have a direct impact on these risk factors it is important to recognise the potential for an adverse effect on domestic violence victimisation.

METHOD

This report presents data on incidents of domestic violence offences reported to, or detected by, the NSW Police Force between January 2019 and March 2020. Of key interest is whether March 2020 figures are higher than expected as this could indicate a change in domestic violence due to social isolation strategies.

The data shown were extracted from the NSW Police Force's (NSWPF) Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) on 11 April 2020. To expedite reporting, we have truncated some of the usual BOCSAR data processes.⁵ For this reason the latest data is considered to be preliminary and will likely be revised slightly upwards in future. Domestic violence incidents in the recorded crime data are those flagged as 'Domestic Violence related' on COPS. The NSWPF flag domestic violence incidents in accordance with the *Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007*.

1 <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Factsheets/social-distancing.pdf>

2 <https://education.nsw.gov.au/news/latest-news/restrictions-begin-as-schools-move-towards-online-learning>

3 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/what-you-can-and-cant-do-under-rules>

https://gazette.legislation.nsw.gov.au/so/download.w3p?id=Gazette_2020_2020-72.pdf

[https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/_emergency/Public%20Health%20\(COVID-19%20Restrictions%20on%20Gathering%20and%20Movement\)%20Order%202020.pdf](https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/_emergency/Public%20Health%20(COVID-19%20Restrictions%20on%20Gathering%20and%20Movement)%20Order%202020.pdf)

4 Stavrou, E., Poynton, S., & Weatherburn, D. (2016). *Intimate partner violence against women in Australia: related factors and help-seeking behaviours*. (Crime and Justice Bulletin No. 200). Retrieved from NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 18 April 2020 <https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/CJB/Report-2016-Intimate-partner-violence-against-women-in-Australia-CJB200.pdf>

5 BOCSAR's usual practice is to report on crime data extracted from COPS 5-6 weeks after the close of the period. BOCSAR's statistics are restricted to incidents with status of accepted and verified and so this buffer gives time for the data to 'settle' so the figures are relatively stable. In this report we have brought our processing a month forward to report on data extracted nine days after the close of the period. This means that the preliminary March 2020 figures are likely to be revised upwards in future by roughly 2%.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents a series of charts examining incidents of domestic violence for selected offence types, comparing data from 2019 with the corresponding month in 2020. None of the Figure 1 charts show a noticeable increase in domestic violence in March 2020. The number of DV-related assaults recorded in March 2020 was almost exactly the same as in March 2019 (Chart 1(a)).

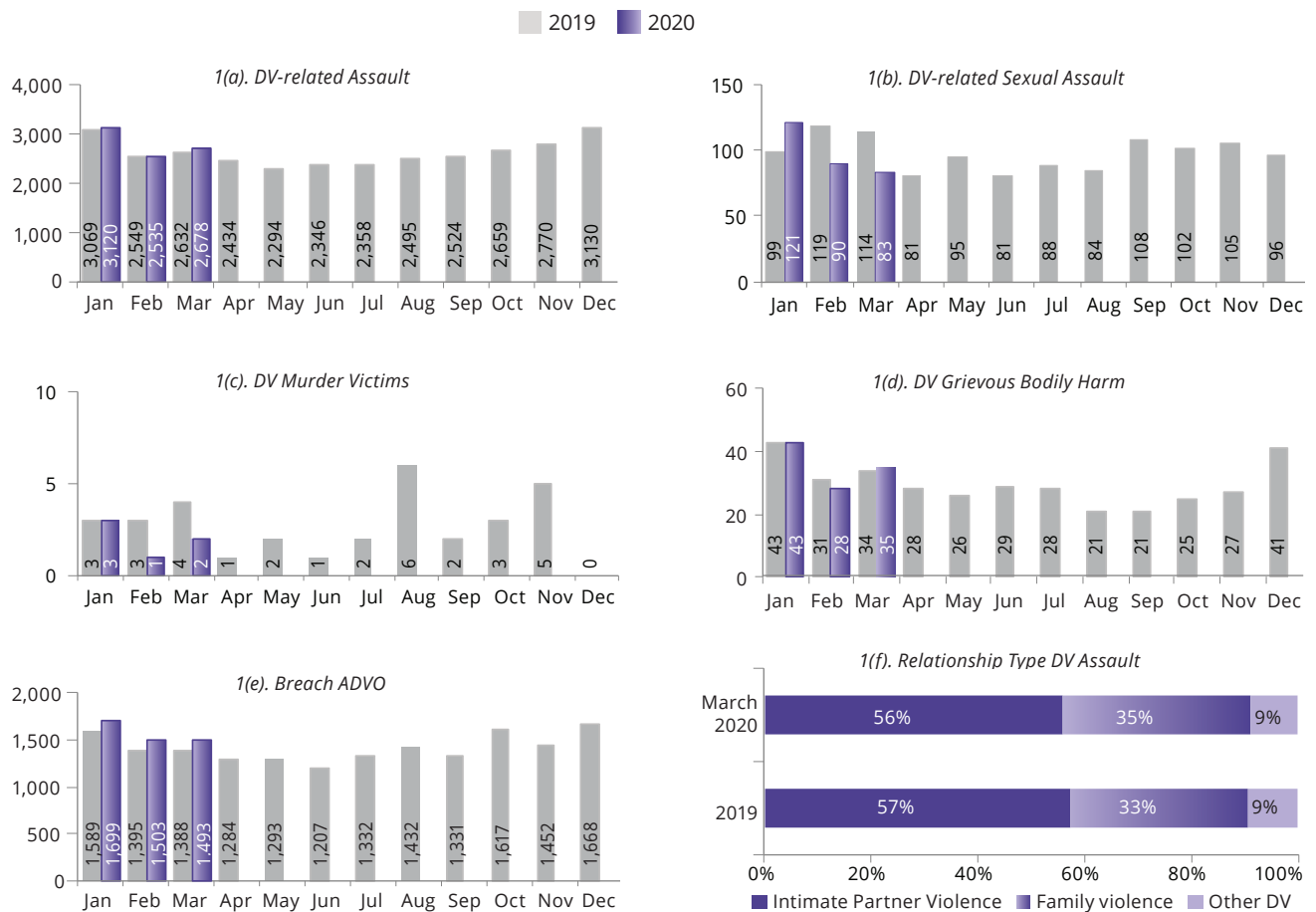
It is possible that domestic violence increased in March 2020 but victims were unable to report due to home confinement with their perpetrator. While murder and grievous bodily harm are infrequent they are serious enough that we expect they will come to police attention regardless of victim willingness to report. Neither of these offences rose markedly in March 2020.

Of all the offences shown, Breach Apprehended Violence Order was the only offence where the March 2020 count was noticeably higher than the equivalent 2019 figure. However, this pattern was already apparent in January and February 2020, prior to social isolation.

Figure 1(f), showing domestic violence –related assault by relationship between perpetrator and victims shows that just over half of these assaults in March 2020 were by intimate partners, while approximately one third were by family members; proportions consistent with reports for 2019.

Domestic Violence Incidents

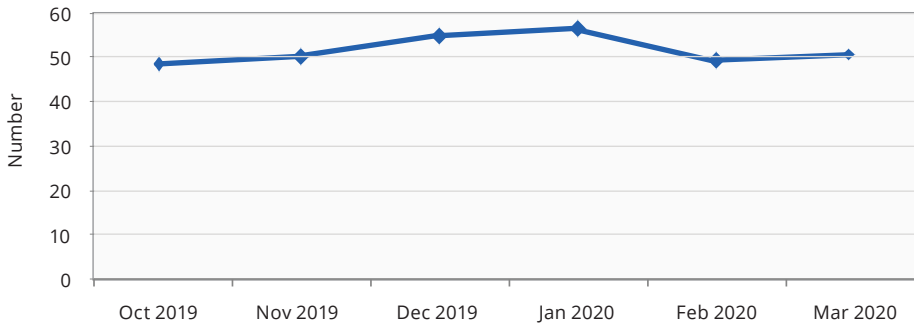
Figure 1. Domestic violence incidents recorded by NSW Police, selected offences, preliminary data, NSW, January 2019 - March 2020



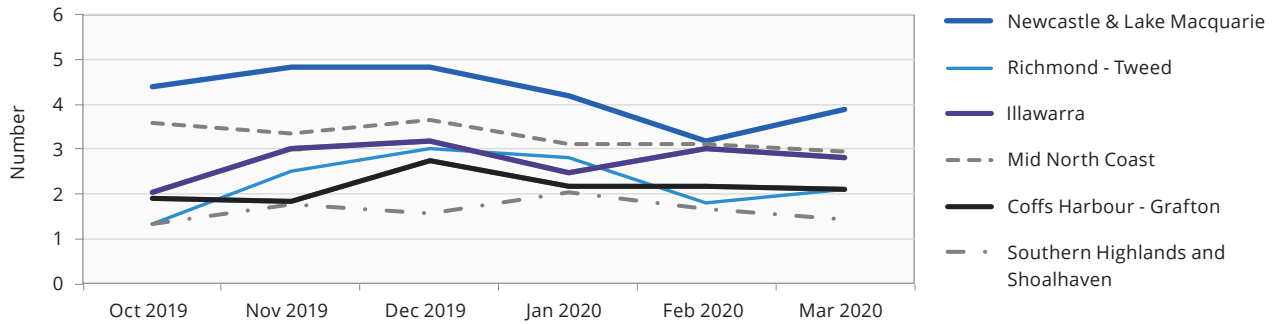
Domestic Violence Assault Incidents - Regional

Figure 2. Domestic violence related assault incidents in NSW by region, preliminary data, October 2019 to March 2020

2(a). Daily average number DV assaults, Greater Sydney



2(b). Daily average number DV Assaults, Coastal NSW



2(c). Daily average number of DV assaults, Western and Central NSW

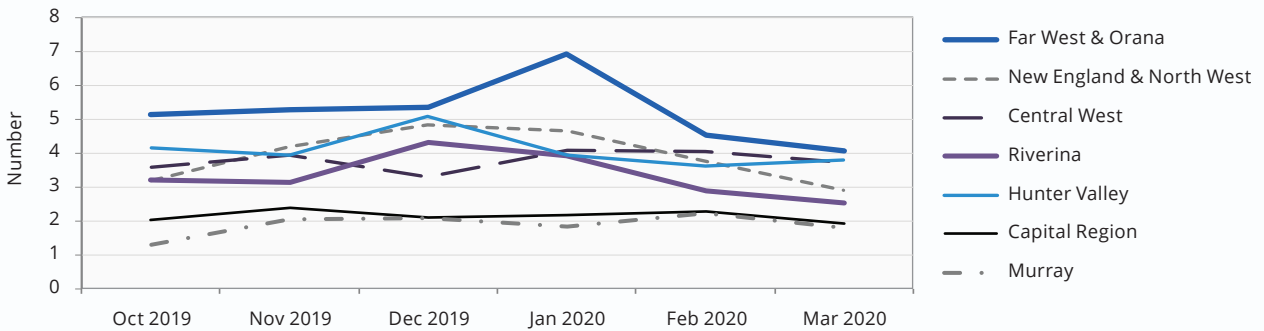


Figure 2 presents a regional perspective of the incidents of domestic violence-related assaults in NSW. Daily average numbers of domestic violence-related assaults are provided for the six-month period October 2019 to March 2020 for the Greater Sydney region and the 13 other Statistical Areas in NSW.

The regional charts confirm that, as at the end of March, no NSW regions had seen a noticeable increase in recorded DV-related assault.

CONCLUSION

Police recorded incidents of domestic violence did not increase in March 2020 despite social distancing and social isolation measures commencing mid-way through that month. This is also true of the most serious forms of domestic violence which we expect would come to police attention regardless of willingness to report. This pattern may change over time and we will continue to monitor these data.