



Is the assault rate in NSW higher now than it was during the 1990s?

An examination of police, crime victim survey and hospital separation data

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The rate of police-recorded assault more than doubled in NSW between 1990 and 2007. This bulletin investigates whether the increase was due to a genuine increase in violence or an increase in the amount and/or type of violent behaviour coming to police attention. Trends and patterns in police-recorded assault from 1995 to 2007 are supplemented with crime victim survey data, hospitalisations data and a selection of narratives for assault incidents. Over the period, rates of assault increased for both males and females and for all age groups. Increases occurred in both aggravated and common assault, assault with a weapon and without, in all statistical divisions and premise types. These trends in police-recorded assault, supported by increases in hospitalisation and victim survey data, suggest a real increase in violence. However, less serious police-recorded assaults (e.g. common assault and assault without a weapon) have increased at a greater rate than more serious assaults, and more recent assault narratives included a greater proportion of assaults with less serious actions. In addition, the increase in hospitalisations for assault was small in comparison to increases in police-recorded assault and crime survey victimisation rates. Thus, it is likely that the increase in assault was due not only to an increase in violence, but also to an increase in public awareness of assault and the increased willingness of victims and third parties to report, and/or police willingness to record, incidents as assault.

Keywords: assault, violence, trends, police, reporting

INTRODUCTION

In a recent publication on long-term trends in crime, Moffatt and Goh (2008) observed that the rate of assault recorded by New South Wales (NSW) Police more than doubled between 1990 and 2007. This increase largely occurred between 1990 and 2001, with the recorded assault rate stable since 2001. Nationally, and in many state jurisdictions, rates of recorded assault have also increased steadily over the past ten years or more (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008a; Bricknell 2008). Increases in the rate of police-

recorded assault¹ can sometimes reflect greater willingness on the part of assault victims to report the offence to police. In an earlier publication, Moffatt and Poynton (2006) noted, however, that the upward trend in police-recorded assaults was mirrored by victimisation rates shown in crime victim surveys regularly carried out in NSW by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (ABS, 1995-2007). Since these surveys also showed no evidence of any systematic increase in the willingness of assault victims to report the offence to police, Moffatt and Poynton concluded that the increase in police-recorded assaults

'appears to reflect a genuine increase in assault' (Moffatt & Poynton 2006, p. 3).

This conclusion may well be correct, but alternative explanations for an increase in the number of assaults coming to police attention are worthy of consideration. An increase in recorded crime can occur because of increased reporting by people other than the victim; for instance, by witnesses or people in positions of responsibility. For example, as a result of the growth in public and political concern about domestic violence (Office of the Status of Women 1988;

Office of the Status of Women 1995; Office for Women 2008), witnesses to domestic violence (e.g. neighbours, children, relatives) may be more willing to call for police intervention. Similarly, the number of cases of suspected or actual abuse reported to police by teachers and others involved in the care or protection of children is likely to have increased in response to the extension of mandatory reporting requirements for child maltreatment (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2008). Furthermore, over the last decade, police have adopted more proactive policing practices in relation to assault, domestic violence and child abuse. There has been a move to high visibility policing, local initiatives to target domestic violence have been introduced in Local Area Commands where domestic violence is particularly problematic, and the arrest policy is more proactive (NSW Police 2003; NSW Police Force 2008; Rodwell & Smith 2008). Such changes may have contributed to an increased number of assaults coming to police attention and an increase in recording of assaults by police.

It is also possible that the observed increase in police-recorded assault reflects a broadening of public perceptions as to what constitutes an assault. Some scholars have argued that the last decade has seen a heightening of public and political concern about domestic violence and child abuse (as previously mentioned), as well as sexual and racial harassment, homophobic violence, bullying and violence in schools and violence in sport (see, for example, Hogg & Brown 1998; Indermaur 1995; Office of the Status of Women 1995; Taylor & Mouzos 2006; Urbis Keys Young 2003). As a consequence of this heightened sensitivity, the range of behaviours that people view as assault may have broadened, thereby increasing both the number of assaults reported to police and the percentage of respondents in crime victim surveys who say they have been assaulted. If this interpretation is

accepted, the growth in assaults recorded by police may be more an indication of growing public intolerance toward violence than of rising levels of violent behaviour.

The purpose of this bulletin is to examine a range of evidence to investigate whether the increase in police-recorded rates of assault was due to a real increase in violence or an increase in the amount of violent behaviour coming to police attention. It should be stated at the outset that the results presented here are not definitive, although they do permit some qualified conclusions to be reached about the upward trend in assault from the mid 1990s through to 2001. They also suggest some potentially fruitful lines of enquiry for further research in this area. The bulletin includes trends and patterns in assaults primarily using police data; these data are supplemented with crime victim survey and hospital admissions data, where available. Results from a more detailed analysis of a selection of police narratives for assault incidents are also provided. Data sources are described in Appendix 1. The bulletin concludes by briefly discussing some policy implications that flow from the findings.

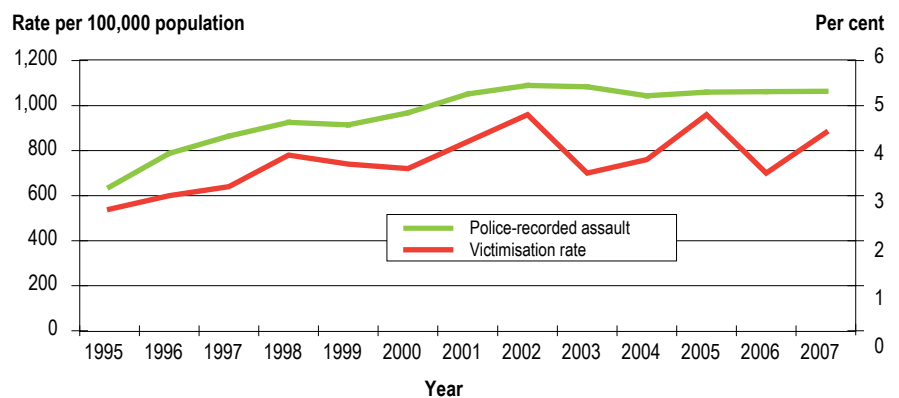
TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Figure 1 shows police-recorded assault rates per 100,000 population and self-reported victimisation rates from the ABS Crime and Safety Surveys for the period 1995 to 2007.

In 1995, NSW police recorded 39,132 assault incidents. As shown in Figure 1, this represents a rate of 638.7 incidents per 100,000 population. In 2007, the number of recorded incidents was 73,243, a rate of 1,063.3 incidents per 100,000 population, representing a 66 per cent increase from 1995. ABS Crime and Safety Survey estimates of the NSW population aged 15 years or over assaulted in the previous 12 months increased by 63 per cent over the same period, rising from 2.7 per cent in 1995 to 4.4 per cent in 2007 (ABS 1995; ABS 2007).

Findings from the ABS Crime and Safety Surveys suggest there has been little change in the willingness of victims to report incidents of assault, with 30.4 per cent of victims in 1995 and 32.4 per cent in 2007 reporting that they told the police about their last incident of assault (this estimate ranged from 29.8% in 2001 to 43.1% in 1997).

Figure 1: Police-recorded assault and assault victimisation rates (ABS Crime and Safety Surveys), NSW 1995-2007



Note: Data included for 1998, 2002 and 2005 are NSW estimates from ABS National Crime and Safety Surveys, whereas NSW Crime and Safety Surveys were conducted in other years. Differences in methodology may limit the comparability of these estimates.

In order to determine if the increase in recorded assaults varied by the specific characteristics of the victim or the offences, data were disaggregated in a number of ways, including gender and age of victim and the seriousness and location of the offence.

Was the upward trend in assault mainly concentrated among women?

It has been suggested that the upward trend in assault recorded by police was

due to an increase in the willingness of women and others to report domestic violence. If this were true, one might expect most of the increase in assaults to be associated with female victims. Figure 2 shows the trend in assault rate according to the gender of the victim recorded by police.

As Figure 2 shows, between 1995 and 2007, rates of assault increased similarly for males and females, from 792.5 to 1,393.5 per 100,000 population for

males (an increase of 76%), and from 556.6 to 1,022.1 per 100,000 population for females (an increase of 84%). The proportion of recorded victims of assault who were female changed little between 1995 and 2007 (41.6% in 1995 versus 43.4% in 2007). It is clear that the growth in recorded rates of assault was not confined to assaults involving female victims.

Data on victims of assault from the NSW Crime and Safety Surveys for the period 1995 to 2007 present a similar picture to that of police data on victims of assault. Victimization rates were higher for males than females and increased similarly over the period, from 3.5 to 5.6 per cent for males and 2.0 to 3.2 per cent for females.

As Figure 3 shows, rates of interpersonal violence-related hospitalisations for males are triple that of females. Over the period 1994/95 to 2006/07,² there were increases in rates for both males and females, with rates up 22 per cent for males and 27 per cent for females.

Was the increase in recorded rates of assault mainly due to an increase in domestic violence?

Despite increases in recorded rates of assault involving both male and female victims, it is possible that the increase in assault could nevertheless be attributed to an increase in domestic violence.

Figure 4 shows trends in police-recorded assault rates by gender of victim, according to whether the incident was flagged by police as being domestic violence related.³

Between 1995 and 2007, female victims of domestic related assault increased from 236.8 to 607.3 per 100,000 population (an increase of 156%), and male victims from 46.1 to 266.1 per 100,000 population (an increase of 478%). In comparison, relative changes in the rate of non-domestic related assault were small, up 30 and 51 per cent for females and males, respectively.

Figure 2: Victims of assault by gender, NSW 1995-2007 (COPS data)

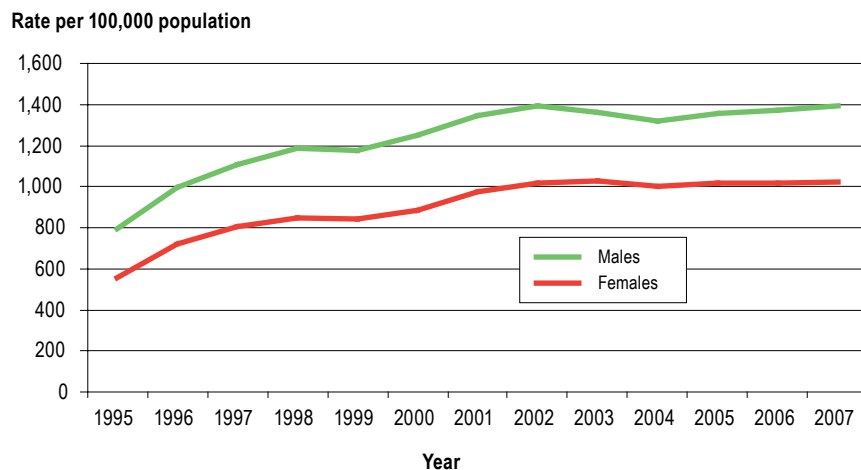
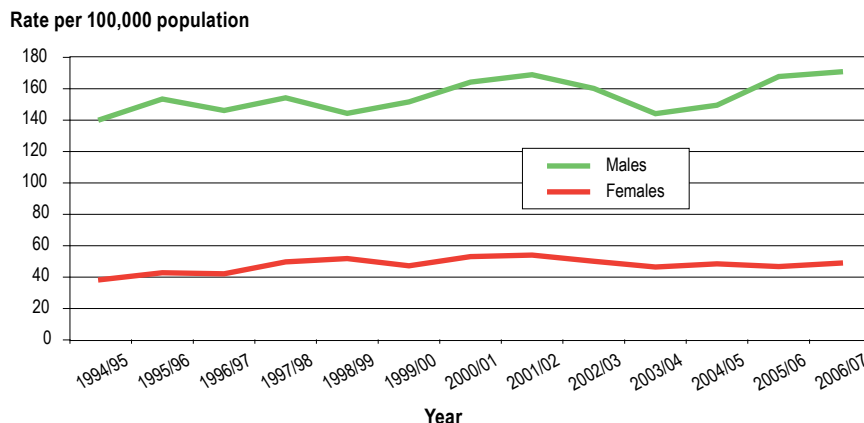


Figure 3: Interpersonal violence-related hospitalisations by gender, NSW 1994/95-2006/07



Source: NSW Department of Health 2008

Figure 4: Domestic assault by gender, NSW 1995-2007 (COPS data)

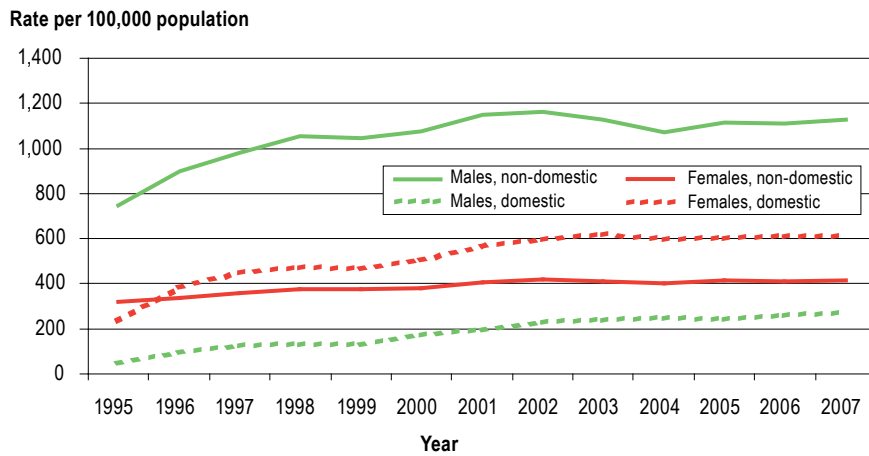


Figure 5: Victims of assault by age group, NSW 1995-2007 (COPS data)

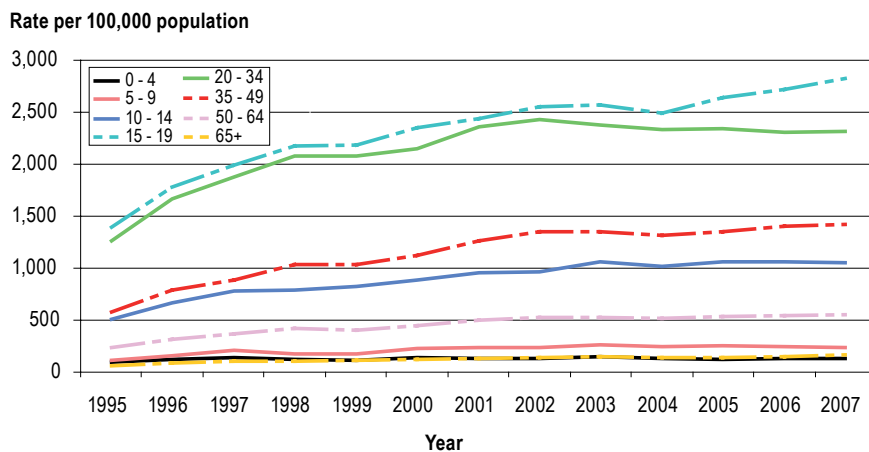
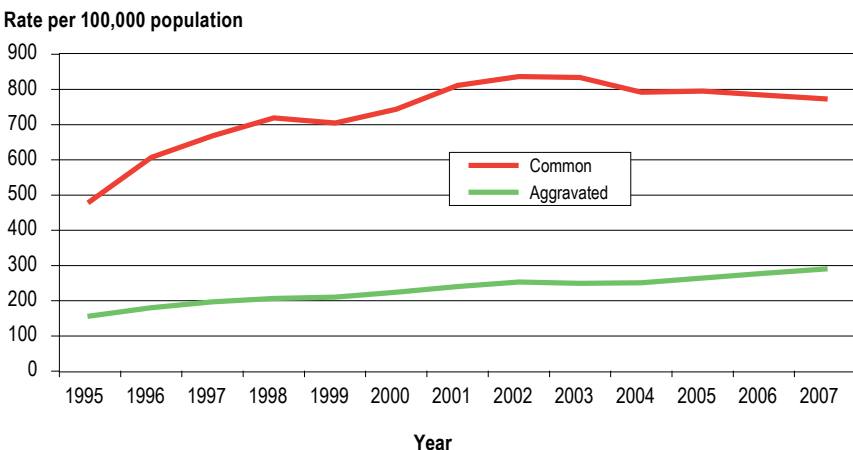


Figure 6: Aggravated and common assault, NSW 1995-2007 (COPS data)



However, the absolute increase in male victims of non-domestic assault from 746.5 to 1,127.4 per 100,000 population would have contributed considerably to increases in rates overall. While it appears there were increases in domestic related assault that would have contributed to the overall increase in assault, these trends should be interpreted with caution: it is unknown whether the domestic violence flag in COPS has been used consistently over time. Unfortunately, information on the prevalence of domestic violence over time from other sources is limited. For example, while the NSW Crime and Safety Survey includes questions on partner violence and whether the offender was known to the victim, assaults are not reported according to whether or not they were incidents of domestic violence.

Was the upward trend in assault mainly concentrated among children and young people?

In the last decade, considerable attention has been given to the problem of child abuse and to the need to report suspected incidents to relevant authorities. *The Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* significantly expanded the range of professionals required to report children at risk of harm and the range of behaviours or situations required to be reported. It is therefore of interest to determine how much of the upward trend in assault can be attributed to increased reporting of assaults involving younger victims. Figure 5 shows trends in age-specific police-recorded assault rates for eight age groups.

The percentage increases in age-specific recorded assault rates between 1995 and 2007 in each of the age categories were: 0-4 years, 39 per cent; 5-9 years, 119 per cent; 10-14 years, 109 per cent; 15-19 years, 102 per cent; 20-34 years, 84 per cent; 35-49 years, 144 per cent; 50-64 years, 137 per cent; and over 65 years, 179 per cent. It is obvious from

Figure 5 that there have been substantial increases in recorded rates of assault in all age groups. The large increase in recorded assault against school-aged children is consistent with the effect that would be expected from the mandatory reporting reforms. There is no equivalent explanation, however, for the greater increases in assault against persons aged 35 years and over. Another complicating factor is that the percentage of cases where the victim's age is unknown, has fallen from 15 per cent in 1995 to one per cent in 2007. It is impossible to say, therefore, exactly how much of the increase in any victim age category is attributable to a real increase in assault reports in that age category and how much is due to better recording of the victim's age. All that can be said with certainty is that the reduction in the number of cases where the victim's age is unknown cannot solely account for the large increases in assault in all age groups.

Was the increase in recorded rates of assault greater for less serious assaults?

If the increase in recorded assault were simply due to a greater tendency to report less serious assaults one would expect to see minor assaults increasing at a faster rate than more serious assaults. There are numerous ways that the seriousness of assaults can be examined with police-recorded data. Figure 6 shows the trend in recorded rates of aggravated and common assault over the period 1995 to 2007. Aggravated assault is the more serious type of assault and includes actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm and shoot with intent other than to murder. Common assault is the less serious level of assault and includes incidents that may not have resulted in any injury, classified as common assault and assault officer.

Over the period 1995 to 2007, rates of aggravated assault increased steadily (up 85%). Rates of common assault also increased (up 60% to 2007), peaking in 2002 and stabilising since then.

Figure 7: Assault by weapon use, NSW 1995-2007 (COPS data)

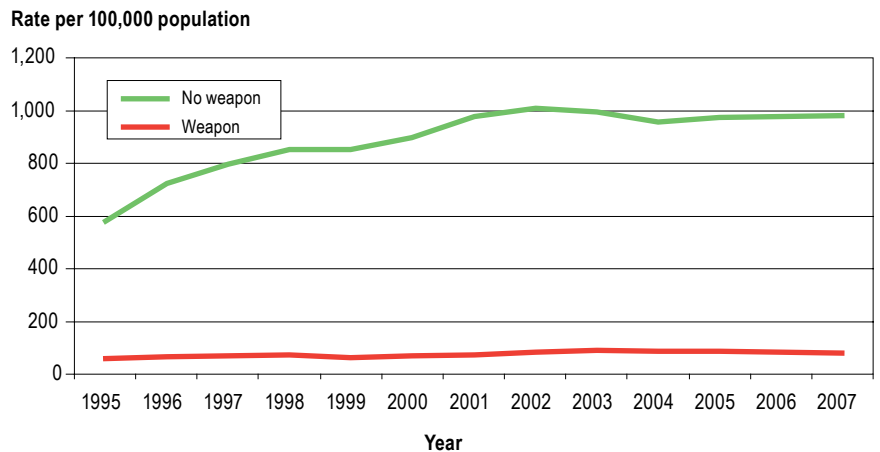
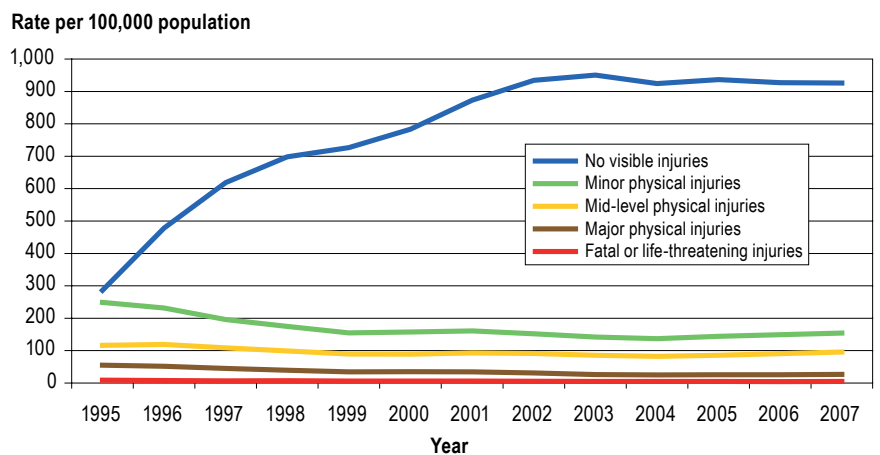


Figure 8: Assault by seriousness of victims' injuries, NSW 1995-2007 (COPS data)



Another indication of the level of seriousness of assaults is the involvement of a weapon. Figure 7 shows the trend in recorded rates of assault according to whether or not a weapon was involved.

Rates of assault with a weapon remained relatively stable throughout the period (ranging from 57.7 per 100,000 population in 1995 to 89.9 per 100,000 population in 2003), up by 40 per cent in 2007 compared with 1995. Rates of assault without a weapon increased by 69 per cent between 1995 and 2007, from 580.9 to 982.6 per 100,000 population. The

most commonly used weapons were 'knife/sword/scissors/screwdriver' and 'club/iron bar/pipe'.

Police-recorded assaults can also be examined according to the injuries sustained by the victim. Figure 8 shows trends in rates of assaults according to whether the victim had 'no visible injuries', 'minor physical injuries' (e.g. red marks, swelling, bruising), 'mid-level physical injuries' (e.g. bleeding, sprain, whiplash), 'major physical injuries' (e.g. fracture, severe lacerations) or 'fatal or life-threatening injuries' (e.g. spinal

injury, internal injury). This classification was based on that used by Hilliar (2008).

The rate of assault victims with no visible injuries increased substantially over the period 1995 to 2007, while rates of minor, mid-level, major and fatal injuries decreased. In 1995, 60 per cent of assault victims were recorded to have some degree of physical injury as a result of being assaulted, however, by 2007 less than 25 per cent of victims were recorded to have been injured.

However, trends should be interpreted with caution. Victims with no recorded injuries were assumed to be uninjured and it is possible that injuries are simply less likely to be recorded now than in earlier years. Indeed, the disparity between trends in aggravated assault and in the rate of assault victims with injuries provides some support for this claim. The reliability and completeness of injury data over time is unknown.

Was there a broadening of the definition of assault during the 1990s?

To explore whether the nature of assaults reported to police have broadened to include more 'trivial' assaults, a sample of 500 incidents recorded as 'assaults' was randomly selected from 1990 and 2000 and the associated police narratives were examined. Assaults were classified as less serious or more serious according to the types of actions taken by the offender against the victim. Actions were coded following the same general approach as that used in the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus 1979). Each assault was classified according to the involvement of actions such as, threaten without weapon, pull hair, drag, push/shove, grab, slap, hit with fist, choke, kick, bite, threaten with weapon and use weapon.⁴ Each incident could be classified by several different types of action taken by the offender against the victim. An assault was classified as 'more serious' if it involved any of the following actions: hit with fist, kick, choke, threaten with weapon and/or

use weapon. Incidents were classified as 'less serious' if they involved any of the lesser actions of threaten without weapon, pull hair, drag, push/shove, grab and/or slap.⁵ Those incidents classified as less serious should not be considered trivial, but can be considered less serious relative to the incidents involving actions such as punching, kicking and use of a weapon. In the vast majority of the actions classified as less serious, the victim was not injured.

The analysis of police narratives indicated that there was a significant increase in the proportion of assaults classified as less serious between 1990 and 2000. The proportion of less serious assaults increased from 15 per cent in 1990, to 22 per cent in 2000.⁶ Increases were evident in threats without a weapon, hair pulling, grabbing, pushing and shoving that did not result in any injury. Moreover, it was evident from the narratives that certain types of assaults, such as those involving spitting and scratching, were present in 2000 but not present in 1990. This finding suggests that there has been some broadening of the definition of assault over that time period, although this does not account for the entire increase in assault.

The finding that there has been an increase in the proportion of less serious assaults should not be taken as evidence that there has not been an increase in serious assaults over time. Between 1990 and 2000, the recorded rate of assault in NSW increased by 90 per cent, reflecting greater numbers of both serious and less serious offences. The finding reported above shows that the reporting of less serious offences has increased at a greater rate than the reporting of serious offences.

Was the upward trend in assault reflected in hospital records?

If the increase in recorded rates of assault were due solely to a greater proclivity to report less serious kinds of assault one would not expect to see an increase in the

rate at which people are being treated for assault in hospitals. As shown in Figure 3, it is evident that there was an increase in hospital separations for assault between 1994/95 and 2006/07, particularly between 1994/95 and 2001/02. However, it should be noted that the scale of that increase between 1994/95 and 2006/07 (22%) is considerably lower than the increases in assault revealed in both the police data (up 66% from 1995 to 2007) and victim survey data (up 63% from 1995 to 2007).

Was the upward trend in assault concentrated in certain locations?

Changes in the locations at which crime occurs can sometimes provide important clues to the factors that might lie behind an increase in recorded crime. Spatial change can be analysed from a broad regional perspective or from the perspective of specific individual premises.

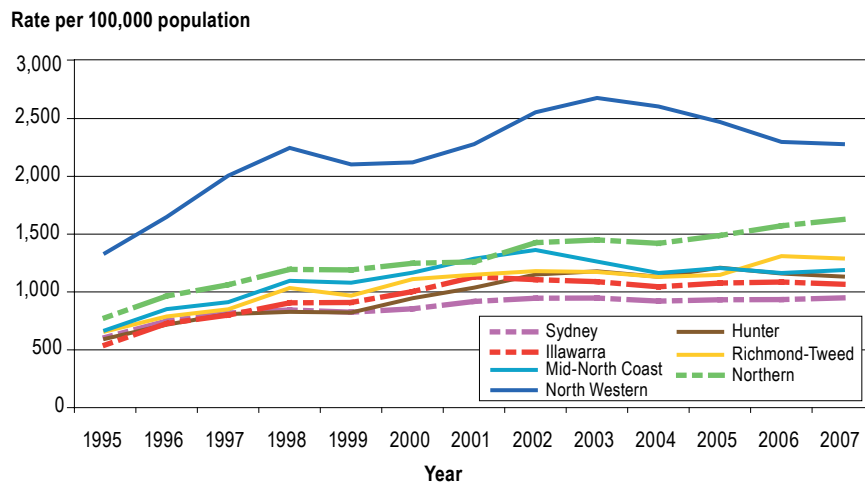
Figure 9 shows trends in the rate of assault for selected NSW statistical divisions with the greatest numbers of assaults (i.e. not necessarily those with the highest rates of assault per 100,000 population). Appendix 2 provides rates of assault for all statistical divisions.

As shown in Figure 9, although the size of the change in recorded rates of assault and the pattern of increase vary across NSW statistical divisions, all regions have experienced significant increases since 1995. In the majority of statistical divisions, rates have stabilised or decreased since 2003. There does not appear to be any particular pattern to the size of the increase in assault by statistical division.

Was the growth in assault concentrated on certain premise types?

Figure 10 shows the trends in the rate of assault according to the type of premises where the assault occurred over the period 1995 to 2007. The four largest

Figure 9: Assault by statistical division, NSW 1995-2007 (COPS data)



(up 102% from 2,277 incidents in 1995 to 5,171 in 2007). Within the ‘other’ category, there were large increases in the number of police-recorded assaults on health premises (up 132% from 274 incidents in 1995 to 716 in 2007), education premises (up 135% from 668 incidents in 1995 to 1,761 in 2007) and transport premises (up 74% from 808 incidents in 1995 to 1,581 in 2007) premises. The increases in assaults recorded on health premises occurred mainly in hospitals, those recorded on education premises primarily concerned schools (both public and private, both primary and secondary levels), and the increases on transport premises mainly involved railway stations.

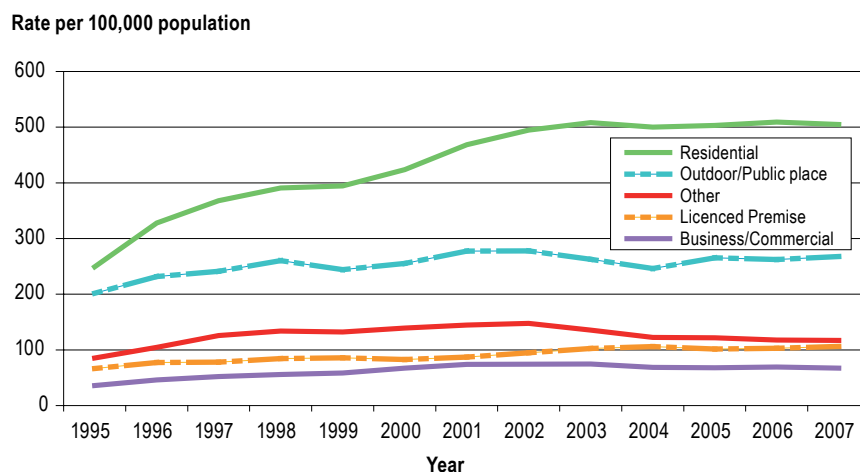
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this bulletin was to shed some light on whether the increase in assaults recorded by NSW Police during the 1990s reflects a real increase in the prevalence of violence, an increase in the rate at which violent acts are being reported to, or recorded by, the police, or both. It is impossible to answer this question definitively, but the available evidence suggests that the most likely answer is ‘both’. The hypothesis of a real increase in violence is supported by three facts:

- Three independent sources of information (police data, hospitalisation data and victim survey data) all suggest that the rate of assault has increased.
- There has been no significant increase in the percentage of assaults reported to police, according to the ABS Crime and Safety Surveys.
- The increase in assault has not been limited to the less serious end of the assault offence spectrum (see the increase in aggravated assaults).

The hypothesis of an increase in public willingness to report, or police willingness to record, incidents as assault, on the

Figure 10: Assault by premise type, NSW 1995-2007 (COPS data)



categories (in terms of assault rates in 2007) are shown in Figure 10, along with an ‘other’ category that includes the remaining categories combined.

As shown in Figure 10, the rate of assault increased in all premise types. Large increases in rates of assault occurred on residential (up 103%) and business/commercial (up 87%) premises. The rate of assault on licenced premises increased by 59 per cent, assault occurring at an outdoor/public place by 33 per cent, and assault at ‘other’ premises (e.g. health, education, transport premises) by 37 per cent.

Within the general category of business/commercial premises, the most noteworthy changes⁷ were increases in the number⁸ of assaults in shopping complexes (up 187% from 276 incidents in 1995 to 890 in 2007), supermarkets (up 161% from 113 incidents in 1995 to 332 in 2007), restaurants (up 137% from 159 incidents in 1995 to 423 in 2007), service stations (up 98% from 200 incidents in 1995 to 445 in 2007), and takeaway outlets (up 285% from 76 incidents in 1995 to 329 in 2007). Most of the increase in assaults recorded on licenced premises occurred in pubs

other hand, is supported by the following facts:

- There have been large increases in the recorded incidence of assaults against school-aged children, consistent with the expansion of mandatory reporting of child abuse.
- Less serious assaults, such as those not involving weapons, have increased at a greater rate than more serious assaults.
- More recent police assault records include a greater proportion of less serious matters.
- Assaults recorded by police and victimisation rates shown in the crime survey have increased at a greater rate than hospitalisations for assault.
- There have been large increases in assaults on particular premises that may have either improved their level of surveillance (e.g. the introduction of security officers on the rail network) or changed their reporting protocols (e.g. for violence on school grounds or in hospitals).

The fact that some of the increase in recorded rates of assault probably reflects increased reporting or recording rather than increased violence should not provide a reason to discount the serious problem presented by assaults. Violence in any form is a matter of widespread and legitimate public concern. Assault in NSW increased quite dramatically during the 1990s but unlike most forms of property crime (and robbery), assault has not declined since 2001. Even if the real increase in assault is smaller than police figures suggest, there is ample justification for giving the problem of assault in NSW a high priority. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the ways in which rates of assault may be reduced but, given the contribution that alcohol makes to assault (Briscoe & Donnelly 2001), it is hard to imagine any effective response to assault (particularly where it involves young males in public

places) that does not involve limiting the availability of alcohol and encouraging more responsible alcohol service and consumption (Chikritzhs & Stockwell 2002; Donnelly & Briscoe 2002).

This said, the difficulties involved in understanding the significance of an increase in the recorded rate of assault highlight an important problem facing police and others involved in protecting public safety. Whenever the level of violence in the community appears to have increased there are calls for the appointment of more police, intensified policing or the introduction of new policing tactics and strategies. Responses like these can be very expensive and/or divert scarce resources away from other important policing priorities. If changes in recorded rates of assault were a reliable guide to trends in assault, such additional expenditure or reallocation of resources might be entirely warranted. However, if increases in recorded rates of assault are sometimes attributable, not to any change in the level of violence, but to factors such as increased surveillance or greater willingness on the part of some authority or organisation to seek police assistance, policing priorities can be distorted. Indeed, increasing the priority police assign to preventing assault or allocating additional police resources to deal with it, far from reducing the number of assaults, may actually increase assault through increased reporting and recording.

There are a number of ways in which police and other authorities could improve their ability to monitor and interpret trends in recorded assault. Firstly, wherever possible, police and others concerned about violence could rely on multiple sources of information about changes in the level of violence, rather than just one source of information. Secondly, in areas where there are special concerns about public safety (e.g. on public transport and in schools), regular surveys could be conducted that are designed specifically to monitor trends in the prevalence of

assault. Thirdly, authorities with significant public safety responsibilities could keep a detailed log of events and developments that are likely to change the number of violent incidents that come to official attention. Indeed, where initiatives are being undertaken deliberately to increase the reporting of violence, focused and detailed surveys could be undertaken to document and highlight the changes that have occurred. Finally, the NSW Government could approach the Australian Bureau of Statistics with a view to improving the capacity of the ABS Crime and Safety Survey to report on domestic violence and assaults against people under 15 years of age, and to detect changes in public willingness to report violent incidents to police.

NOTES

1. Police-recorded assault was defined as any incident that involved the threat or actual infliction of bodily harm. An incident was coded as an 'assault' if the attending police recorded it as involving 'actual bodily harm', 'common assault', 'assault officer', 'grievous bodily harm, including malicious wounding', or 'shoot with intent other than to murder'.
2. At the time this research was conducted, the most recent hospitalisation data available was for 2006/07.
3. According to the *Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007*, "domestic violence offence means a personal violence offence committed by a person against another person with whom the person who commits the offence has or has had a domestic relationship".
4. Note that these types of actions are not all part of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). Some new actions, such as pull hair, drag and threaten without weapon were added, and other actions were modified. For example, to better suit the actions recorded in the narratives in this study, rather than using the

CTS categories of 'used knife or gun', 'threatened with knife or gun', and 'hit or tried to hit with something', new categories of 'use weapon' and 'threaten with weapon' were created.

5. Note that the less serious assaults did not involve any of the actions classified as serious.
6. $\chi^2_1=6.1$, $p=0.014$. Note that the type of blow was ascertained from the narratives in 434 (88.6%) of the 490 assaults from 1990 and in 458 (92.7%) cases of the 494 assaults from 2000.
7. They are noteworthy because they involved both large percentage changes and large numbers of incidents.
8. The percentage changes here are calculated on the raw numbers because it is impossible to calculate a meaningful rate of assault at specific locations.

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APPENDIX 1

DATA SOURCES

NSW Police data

The police data on trends in assault from 1995 to 2007 were obtained from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research's extract of the NSW Police's Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) database.

Victim survey

Victim survey data were drawn from the ABS's Crime and Safety Survey series and supplementary tables over the period 1995 to 2007. Additional data on the number of assault incidents were also supplied by the ABS, NSW.

There are a number of limitations associated with victim survey data. The survey excludes certain sections of the population, namely persons who are under 15 years of age, people who do not speak English and people who do not live in private residences. According to the ABS, there have been no major changes to the methodology and wording of the survey since the inception of the

survey in 1990. There have, however, been some subtle changes, at least one of which is known to have increased the reporting of assaults. In 1996, the robbery question was changed to exclude incidents where nothing was stolen and there was no attempt to steal anything, as many respondents had misinterpreted this question in the past. This change resulted in a subsequent increase in the number of assaults as previously respondents had reported some of these incidents as robberies (see ABS 1996). Other changes have also been made to the survey over time. Additional prompts have been included in the assault question. The wording of the assault question was changed in the 1998 survey, when it was conducted as a national survey, rather than in NSW alone. The survey methodology was changed in 1997 to a mail-out questionnaire where previously it had been hand-delivered to households for self-completion. In addition, since 2006, the survey weighting procedure has been refined. These modifications, while seemingly minor, may have impacted on the reporting of assaults, and the ability to compare estimates over time.

Hospital data

Data on trends in hospital separations were drawn from *The health of the people of New South Wales - Report of the Chief Health Officer 2008*. The main limitations of hospital separation data are that they include only those assault victims who are injured seriously enough to present to, and be admitted into, hospital. Assault victims who do not seek medical treatment, who present to emergency departments but are not admitted or who present to other health providers, such as general practitioners, are not included. Hospital separation data are also dependent on the willingness of victims to disclose the cause of their injuries or the ability of hospital staff to identify the cause. Other factors, such as changes in hospital admission and

recording procedures, accessibility of hospitals (particularly in regional areas), the availability of hospital beds and improvements in trauma care will also affect hospital separation data. In addition, the coding of injuries in hospital separation data changed in 1998-1999. This may have had an impact on the data. However, the NSW Department of Health (2002) suggests that the 'change has not had a major effect in the injury statistics from hospitals' (p. 219). There are unfortunately no reliable data uniformly kept on the number of assault victims presenting to emergency departments or general practitioners across NSW.

The narrative study

NSW Police extracted a list of all assaults that took place in 1990 from the Crime Information and Intelligence System (CIIS) database. The Bureau selected a random sample of 500 assaults from this list. To obtain the narratives, corresponding microfilms were located and printed out. The Bureau selected a random sample of 500 assaults that took place in 2000 from its own databases. As the Bureau's databases do not contain narratives, the narratives were downloaded directly from the NSW Police COPS database. All narratives were then coded using a standard

coding form. Information was extracted on the characteristics of the assaults and the victims and offenders involved. Where there was more than one assault described in the narrative, only details for the first assault were coded.

Narratives were located for 492 (98.4%) of the 1990 sample and 494 (98.8%) of the 2000 sample, with two of the 1990 narratives subsequently excluded as they did not involve assaults that took place in 1990. The effective response rates for the 1990 and 2000 samples were therefore, 98 per cent and 99 per cent, respectively. However, complete details of all assaults were not always available from the narratives.

APPENDIX 2

Rates of police-recorded assault per 100,000 population by statistical division, NSW 1995-2007

<i>Statistical Division</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2007</i>
Sydney	607.3	748.7	817.7	844.9	824.6	855.0	918.4	946.8	947.6	921.5	932.6	933.8	949.2
Hunter	594.9	717.0	808.5	827.9	822.2	946.8	1038.0	1151.0	1179.3	1131.7	1210.1	1160.3	1133.7
Illawarra	542.3	727.4	799.8	906.3	910.0	1004.0	1131.0	1106.2	1088.4	1045.6	1077.5	1085.4	1066.8
Richmond-Tweed	658.9	788.9	850.6	1034.5	968.8	1111.0	1149.7	1180.0	1173.1	1130.2	1147.3	1309.4	1289.7
Mid-North Coast	669.1	851.2	912.7	1096.8	1079.8	1166.5	1288.4	1362.6	1262.5	1164.2	1207.6	1163.7	1188.9
Northern	778.8	965.9	1062.0	1195.6	1191.5	1248.5	1260.7	1426.8	1449.9	1420.5	1488.9	1572.3	1626.6
North Western	1336.7	1648.5	2005.4	2246.1	2102.4	2120.6	2278.0	2553.6	2678.4	2603.9	2470.2	2298.0	2278.1
Central West	665.2	802.9	886.9	1012.9	1196.2	1167.6	1296.9	1374.3	1361.0	1356.0	1334.9	1367.3	1328.2
South Eastern	706.0	814.2	894.1	1036.4	1043.7	1113.3	1260.7	1139.4	1103.0	1132.2	1095.9	1082.2	1011.0
Murrumbidgee	678.8	849.5	893.6	1141.7	1229.3	1396.8	1784.7	1688.0	1475.5	1282.4	1295.4	1253.9	1308.3
Murray	784.6	930.7	965.4	966.9	979.3	1100.2	1199.3	1186.4	1150.3	1087.6	1143.2	1273.2	1185.8
Far West	1467.5	1980.7	2413.5	2402.5	2604.5	2734.5	2819.3	3349.2	3781.7	2642.8	2358.6	2686.7	2286.0

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