CRIME AND JUSTICE STATISTICS

BUREAU BRIEF

The nature and extent of cross-intimate partner violence

Sindy Wang and Ilya Klauzner

AIM

This study investigates: (1) long-term trends in cross-intimate partner violence and cross-apprehended domestic violence orders in the NSW justice system; and (2) the context in which cross-intimate partner violence occurs.

METHOD

This study relies on NSW Police administrative records sourced from the NSW Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) to examine trends in heterosexual intimate partner violence (IPV) events where both partners were subject to a legal action for a domestic violence (DV) offence by NSW Police (i.e. cross-IPV). To understand court outcomes and offending and victimisation histories, we linked the data to BOCSAR's Reoffending database (ROD) and Revictimisation database (RVD). We also used data from BOCSAR's Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) database to explore trends in Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders (ADVOs) where men and women in intimate partner relationships were both granted an ADVO against the other person (i.e. cross-ADVOs). Finally, we thematically analysed a sample of NSW Police narratives extracted from COPS relating to 194 cross-IPV events. We investigate the nature of cross-IPV and the prevalence of self-defensive and retaliatory violence between men and women.

RESULTS

Cross-IPV represents a small but growing proportion of police recorded IPV in NSW. NSW Police commenced legal action against both a male and female partner in 0.7% (74) of all IPV events with a legal proceeding in the 12 months to June 2011. This rose to 2.1% (320) in the 12 months to February 2023. Cross-ADVOs have also increased in NSW in recent years. The proportion of ADVOs where men and women in intimate partner relationships were both granted an ADVO increased from 5.7% (933) in the 12 months to December 2016 to 13.7% (3,204) in the 12 months to February 2023. In nearly half the cross-IPV events between 2016 and February 2023, both parties were charged with DV assault (42.6% or 599); other common charges were breach ADVO and malicious damage to property. Women in cross-IPV incidents were slightly more likely to be charged with DV assault than men (64.8% versus 61.4%). Conviction rates were also similar for male and female partners. Prior domestic violence among cross-IPV couples differed by gender with men more often having a greater history of DV convictions than their female partners (18.2% vs. 11.6%), while women more often had a greater number of prior DV victimisation episodes than their male partners (35.2% vs. 11.8%). Despite this, among the 194 cross-IPV police narratives examined, male and female violence presented similarly at the reference incident across a range of measures. In over three-quarters of cross-IPV events both the male and the female partner engaged in aggressive/violent behaviours such as assault or property damage. The experience of physical injury was also similar between men and women. In 22% both parties were injured, in 20% just the male partner was injured and in 21% just the female partner was injured. Violence by both parties was often described as occurring in self-defence or retaliation, although this was slightly more common for women (47% for women compared to 42% for men).

Suggested citation: Wang, S., & Klauzner, I. (2025). *The nature and extent of cross-intimate partner violence* (Bureau Brief No. 178). Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

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CONCLUSION

While IPV overwhelmingly involves male offenders and female victims, cross-IPV is a small but rising subset of all reported IPV in NSW. This study did not find clear evidence of gender differences in incident severity or resistant violence in cross-IPV events. However, misidentification is difficult to detect and may still occur in individual cases, warranting further attention and careful response.

KEYWORDS

Domestic violence | Intimate partner violence | Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders (ADVO)

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INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant and ongoing concern. Estimates suggest that one in five Australian adults have experienced partner violence or abuse since the age of 15 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023). Reducing partner violence is a priority for the community and government; and DV prevention and intervention has been the subject of significant investment over the last decade (Department of Communities and Justice [DCJ], 2021, 2022, 2024 & 2025).

While IPV is experienced by both women and men, the gendered nature of this offence means that victimisation is much more common among women and offending is more common among men. The ABS Personal Safety Survey (PSS) estimates that in Australia 17% of women and 5.5% of men have experienced partner violence or abuse since the age of 15 (ABS, 2023). This gender differential is also apparent in IPV assaults recorded by NSW Police; in 2024/25, 76% of police recorded IPV assaults involved a female victim (BOCSAR, 2025a). Looking at police charge numbers, men account for more than four out of five people proceeded against for IPV in NSW (BOCSAR, 2025a).

Over the past decade in NSW, we have seen a steady rise in DV offences recorded by NSW Police. This is true for all forms of DV including DV assault (up 30%), breach ADVO (up 82%) but also IPV assault (up 22%) (BOCSAR, 2025b). These increases are thought to be due to a combination of increased willingness to report DV, increased police enforcement and proactivity and a broader understanding of what constitutes DV[1] (e.g. Ramsey, Kim, & Fitzgerald, 2022). There is clear evidence that NSW Police have heightened the level of enforcement of DV offences. For instance, in 2018 NSW Police commenced a program of ADVO compliance checks and now conduct 100,000 of these per year (BOCSAR, 2025d). Between 2009 and 2023, the 90-day legal action rate for DV assault increased by 6.5 percentage points, from 60.0% in 2009 to 66.5% in 2023 (Donnelly, 2025). Some advocates have welcomed this tough-on-DV approach (ABC News, 2025; Full Stop Australia, 2024). However, others have raised concerns about the potential for net-widening (Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2018; Jillard & Mansour, 2014).

In recent years concerns have grown about misidentification in IPV and women being erroneously charged with DV offences or named as defendants on protection orders (ABC News, 2024; Jillard & Mansour, 2014; Nancarrow, Thomas, Ringland, & Modini, 2020; Reeves, 2019). Misidentification refers to cases where the person perpetrating DV is identified as the victim, and the victim is wrongly identified as the perpetrator. Misidentification is a potential unintended consequence of the stronger police response for DV offences. Factors contributing to misidentification are complex and nuanced. It can occur in situations where there are conflicting testimonies and allegations of mutual violence, or where victims with an extensive history of abuse commit violent acts in self-defence or retaliation (Nancarrow et al., 2020). The risk of misidentification is thought to be elevated in the context of policing practices that prioritise identifying the perpetrator based on the behaviour of the parties at the time of the incident. Research indicates that misidentification can be a concern when victim behaviour is not congruent with the submissive or powerless "ideal victim" stereotype (Iliadis et al., 2024; Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2019). Additionally, a focus on injury as proof of abuse, disregarding the history of abuse in a relationship, and mistaking victim distress as a sign of culpability, may all play a role in misidentification (Nancarrow et al., 2020).

While misidentification is not gender-specific it is thought to disproportionately affect women (Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2021). In this context it is notable that the increase in NSW police legal actions for DV assault has coincided with a larger rise in the number of women charged with DV and issued ADVOs as the defendant. BOCSAR data shows that the number of female persons of interest (POIs) charged with IPV related assault increased by 103% between 2014 and 2023, while the number of male POIs charged increased by 19% (BOCSAR, 2025a). While the overall number of final ADVOs has increased for both men and women in all DV relationships (not only intimate partners), the proportion of final ADVOs issued to

1 While it is possible that there has also been an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence in the community – that is not supported by hospitalisation and victim survey data (BOCSAR, 2025c).

female defendants increased from 17% in 2014 to 24% in 2023 (BOCSAR, 2025a). It is likely that these trends are the result of police policy rather than an increase in female perpetration of IPV.

The consequences of misidentification can be severe and wide-reaching. Female victim-survivors charged with IPV related offences or named as defendants on protection orders report various negative consequences arising from their misidentification, including job loss, separation from children, shame and social isolation, and a loss of faith in the justice system (Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2021; Ulbrick & Jago, 2020). Women defending protection orders also highlight that ADVOs can be used as a form of "legal systems abuse" (Jillard & Mansour, 2014; Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2019). In these cases, women report applying for a protection order against their partner for their own safety, but their partner initiates a cross-order application in retaliation or as a mechanism to control their behaviour (Jillard & Mansour, 2014). Recognising the harmful impacts of misidentification, the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-32 (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2022) references the need for law enforcement and justice agencies to be better equipped to identify the person most in need of protection.

The current study

The complex nature of misidentification and the absence of objective information about its occurrence, makes it difficult to measure and monitor. As a result, there is limited Australian research investigating the extent to which it occurs. Two indicators of misidentification that have been proposed in the literature are cross-IPV events and cross-applications for protection orders (Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2018). Cross-IPV events are where both individuals in an intimate partner relationship are charged with offences against the other person in the same criminal event[2]. Cross-applications are where both individuals in the intimate partner relationship are granted protection orders (or ADVOs in NSW) against the other party.[3] This study is the first in NSW to report on both these measures together. It examines trends in IPV where both parties received a police legal action from 2010 to 2023 and trends in cross-ADVOs from 2016 to 2023. For cross-IPV, we also examine the history of offending and victimisation between pairs of individuals, their demographics, and their court outcomes. Additionally, we thematically analyse police narratives to better understand the unique and complex contexts in which cross-IPV occurs.

METHOD

Data

The quantitative component of this study sourced data from the following databases:

1. **NSW Police Force's Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS):** an extract of all criminal events recorded between 1 July 2010 and 28 February 2023, with the following restrictions:

    a. At least one DV flagged incident on the event;

    b. Only two individuals identified in the event, recorded as a person of interest (POI) and/or victim;

    c. One person was male and the other was female; and

    d. On any incident within the event, police flagged the relationship type as intimate partner.[4]

2 A criminal event comprises one or more criminal incidents involving the same people and reported to police at the same time (BOCSAR, 2025e).
3 Nancarrow et al. (2020) found that police may apply for cross-ADVOs when not strictly required, leaving the final decision to the courts, which in conjunction with the lower threshold of proof required for ADVOs, may increase the risk of misidentification (Reeves, 2018).
4 An intimate partner relationship is defined where police have indicated that the incident involved a spouse/partner, ex-spouse/ex-partner, or boy/girlfriend (including ex-boy/girlfriend).

2. **BOCSAR's Reoffending Database (ROD):** an extract from BOCSAR's ROD containing information on proven court appearances in the previous five years linked to persons identified in the sample of COPS IPV events.
3. **BOCSAR's Revictimisation Database (RVD):** an extract from BOCSAR's RVD containing information on prior COPS events as a victim in the previous five years linked to persons identified in the sample of COPS IPV events.
4. **BOCSAR's Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) database:** an extract of ADVOs[5] commencing between 1 January 2016 and 28 February 2023, with the following restrictions:
    a. Only two people on the ADVO (one as the defendant and one as the protected person);
    b. One person was male and the other was female;
    c. Both the defendant and protected person linked to records in COPS; and
    d. Police flagged an intimate partner relationship between the two people on any event in COPS recorded during the study period.

To identify the subset of cross-IPV events that had a legal proceeding, we restricted the base sample of 228,255 heterosexual IPV events between 1 July 2010 and 28 February 2023 to IPV events where both partners were legally proceeded against by police. This resulted in a sample of 1,817 cross-IPV events involving heterosexual couples. Similarly, the subset of cross-ADVOs was identified from the base sample of 140,612 ADVOs between heterosexual intimate partners with a start date between 1 January 2016 and 28 February 2023. By restricting these episodes to those where the couple had overlapping ADVOs against one another, we were left with 15,342 cross-ADVOs.

The qualitative component of this study sourced data from:

1. **NSW Police Force's Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS):** a sample of 200 police narratives[6] were randomly selected from the larger sample of IPV events recorded between 1 January 2019 and 28 February 2023 where both parties were proceeded against by police. After excluding six cases which were incorrectly flagged as cross-IPV or did not contain enough detail to allow coding, 194 narratives were retained for analysis.

Statistical analysis

We begin by examining trends in IPV events from 2010 to 2023 and trends in ADVOs from 2016 to 2023, including the proportion of cross-IPV events and cross-ADVOs that were recorded during these periods. We also examine the characteristics of individuals involved in cross-IPV events, as well as the types of offences and court outcomes between 2016 and 2023. The quantitative section presents a broad picture of cross-IPV events in NSW using fixed fields from COPS and court records. To supplement this analysis, we undertook a thematic analysis of a sample of police narratives from the larger sample of cross-IPV events to better understand the nature of cross-IPV and the contexts in which these incidents occur. For each cross-IPV event, the following characteristics were coded: age of offender and victim, history of DV between the partners, whether either party engaged in violent behaviour and/or verbal arguments, whether there was evidence of self-defensive or retaliatory violence, and whether there was physical injury of either party. Some case studies are described to provide additional context.

5 ADVOs are civil orders made by the NSW Local Court with the purpose of protecting a person in need of protection (PINOP) from a defendant. A provisional or interim ADVO is usually first made by police or the courts as a temporary measure to protect a person. The ADVO is then either made final by the court, or it can be revoked or withdrawn. An ADVO sets out conditions that explain what a defendant can and cannot do with respect to the PINOP. An ADVO can list multiple PINOPs. In this paper, ADVOs are restricted to those where there is one defendant and one PINOP, and where one party is male and the other is female. These records were linked to COPS to identify if police had ever recorded an intimate partner relationship between the two partners.

6 Police record details of a criminal event attended by or reported to police in the COPS system. This includes a free text field for an officer to record details of what occurred during an incident in narrative form, including but not limited to, details about alleged offences committed, injuries sustained by the parties, history of DV or ADVOs between the parties, and the rationale behind charging decisions.

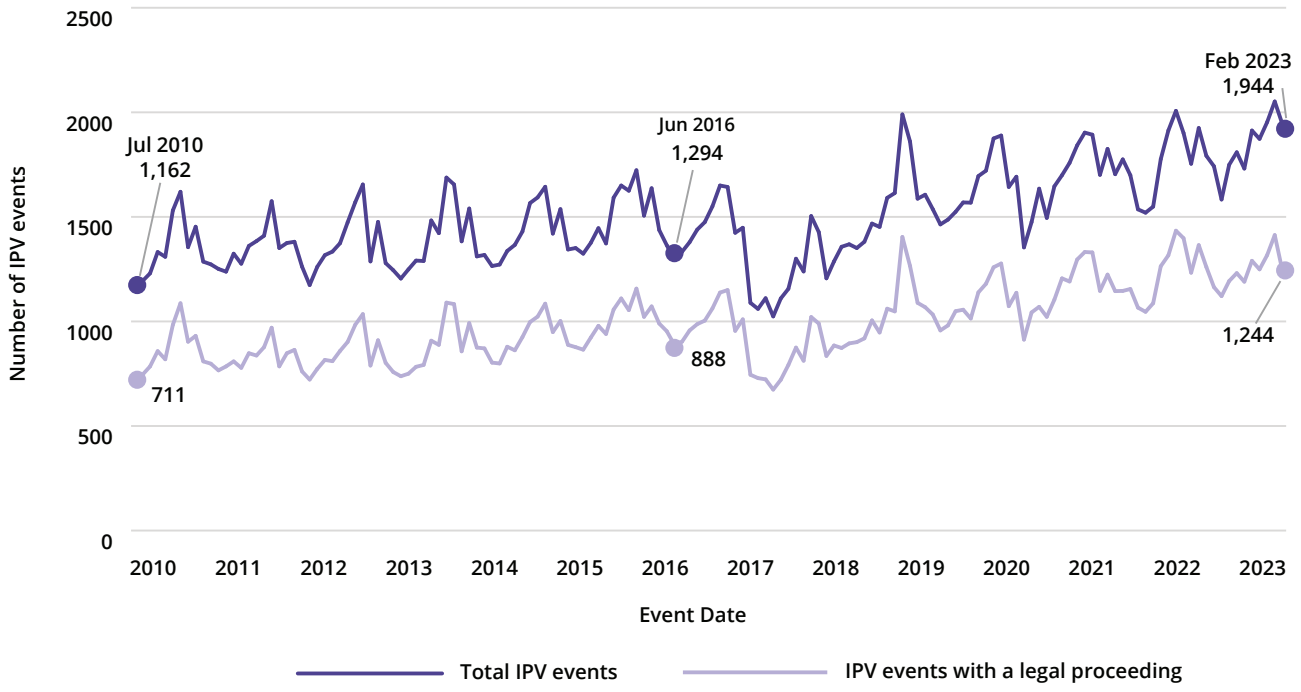
RESULTS

TRENDS IN CROSS-IPV EVENTS AND CROSS-ADVOS

In how many domestic violence events involving heterosexual partners are both parties charged? Have cross-IPV events increased with the legal action rate for all IPV related events involving heterosexual partners?

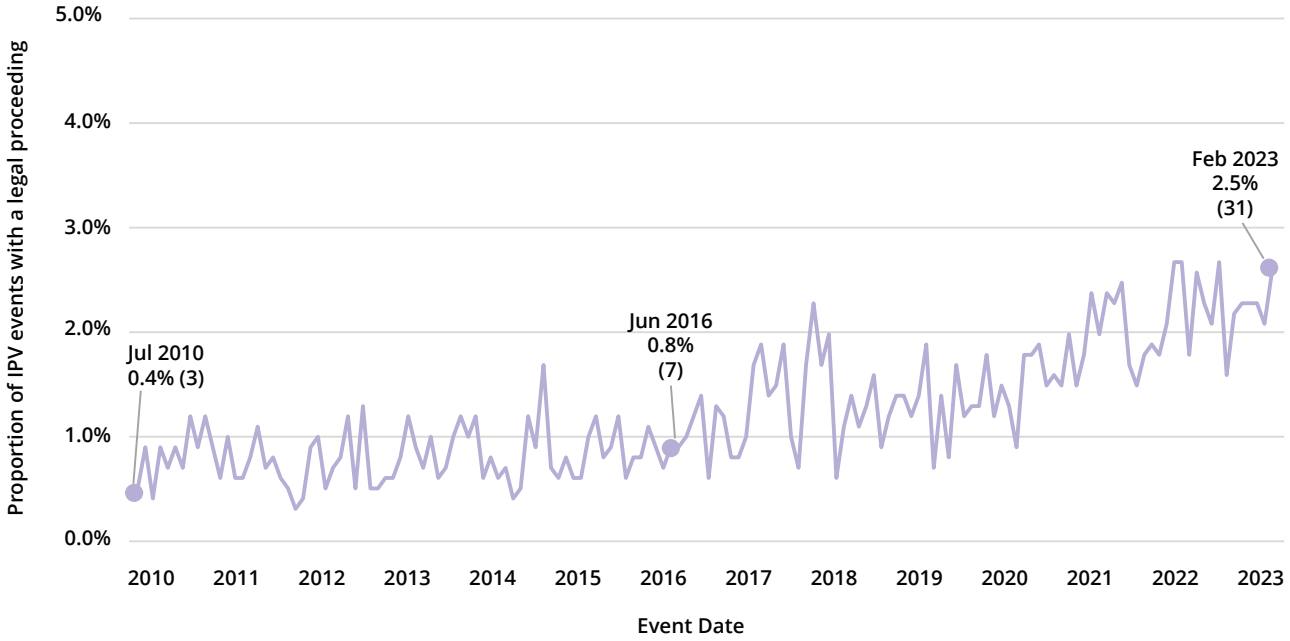
Police recorded IPV has risen considerably over the last decade. Figure 1 shows trends in the number of DV flagged events that involved one man and one woman, who were current or past intimate partners, by whether police legally proceeded against at least one party. The number of total IPV events increased by 38.0% from 15,995 in the 12 months to June 2011 to 22,066 in the 12 months to February 2023. Police commenced legal proceedings against at least one party in the majority of events. The annual legal action rate for all IPV related events increased by 4.4 percentage points (p.p.) between the 12 months to June 2011 and the 12 months to February 2023, rising from 63.7% to 68.1%.

Figure 1. Total number of IPV events involving heterosexual partners and number where legal proceedings were commenced



In the same period, the number of IPV events where both partners were legally proceeded against also increased from 74 in the 12 months to June 2011 to 320 in the 12 months to February 2023. While this is a 330% increase, cross-IPV events account for a minute share of total IPV events with a legal proceeding. This is seen from Figure 2 which plots the proportion of IPV events with at least one legal proceeding where both partners were legally proceeded against. As seen here, IPV events with cross-proceedings rose from only 0.7% of all IPV events with a legal proceeding in the 12 months to June 2011 to 2.1% in the 12 months to February 2023.

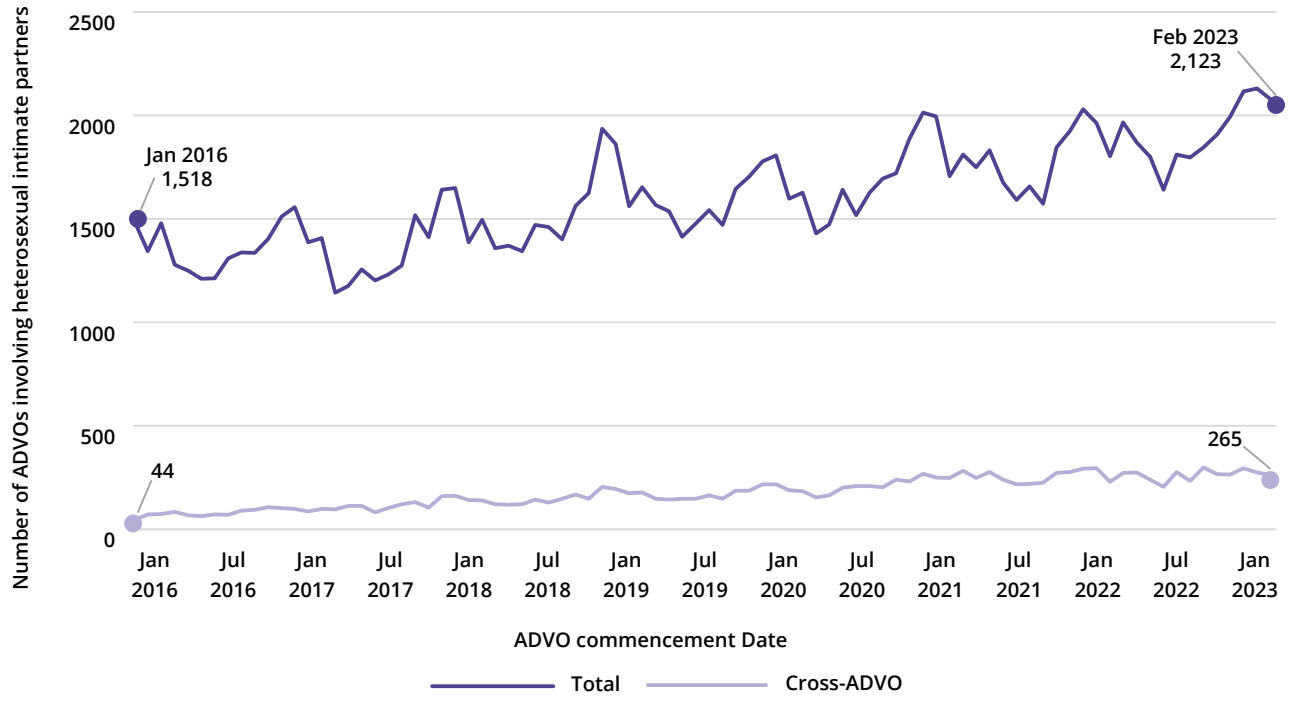
Figure 2. Proportion of heterosexual IPV events with a legal proceeding where legal proceedings were commenced against both partners



How many intimate partner ADVOs are cross-applications and in what proportion of these matters is a final ADVO granted?

In parallel to the increase in IPV events, the number of ADVOs involving intimate partners has also grown. Figure 3 shows the number of ADVOs involving one male defendant/protected person and one female defendant/protected person who were current or former intimate partners. The annual number of ADVOs between heterosexual intimate partners grew by 42.2% between 2016 and 2023, rising from 16,485 in the 12 months to December 2016 to 23,434 in the 12 months to February 2023. This is on par with the 43.2% increase between 2016 and 2023 in the total number of ADVOs (covering all domestic relationships, not only intimate partners) (BOCSAR, 2025f). Figure 3 also shows that the number of cross-ADVOs involving intimate partners (i.e. overlapping orders involving the same heterosexual couple) have grown 240%, from 933 in 12 months to December 2016 to 3,204 in the 12 months to February 2023.

Figure 3. Monthly number of ADVOs involving heterosexual intimate partners



Like cross-IPV events, cross-ADVOs represent a small, but growing, percentage of the total number of ADVOs between intimate partners. Figure 4 shows that in the 12 months to December 2016 only 5.7% of IPV related ADVOs were cross-ADVOs. However, in the 12 months to February 2023, the proportion of ADVOs that were cross-ADVOs had increased to 13.7%. This graph also shows that while cross-ADVOs represent a minority of all ADVOs involving intimate partners, they are a more common occurrence than cross-IPV events.

Figure 4. Proportion of ADVOs involving heterosexual intimate partners that were cross-ADVOs

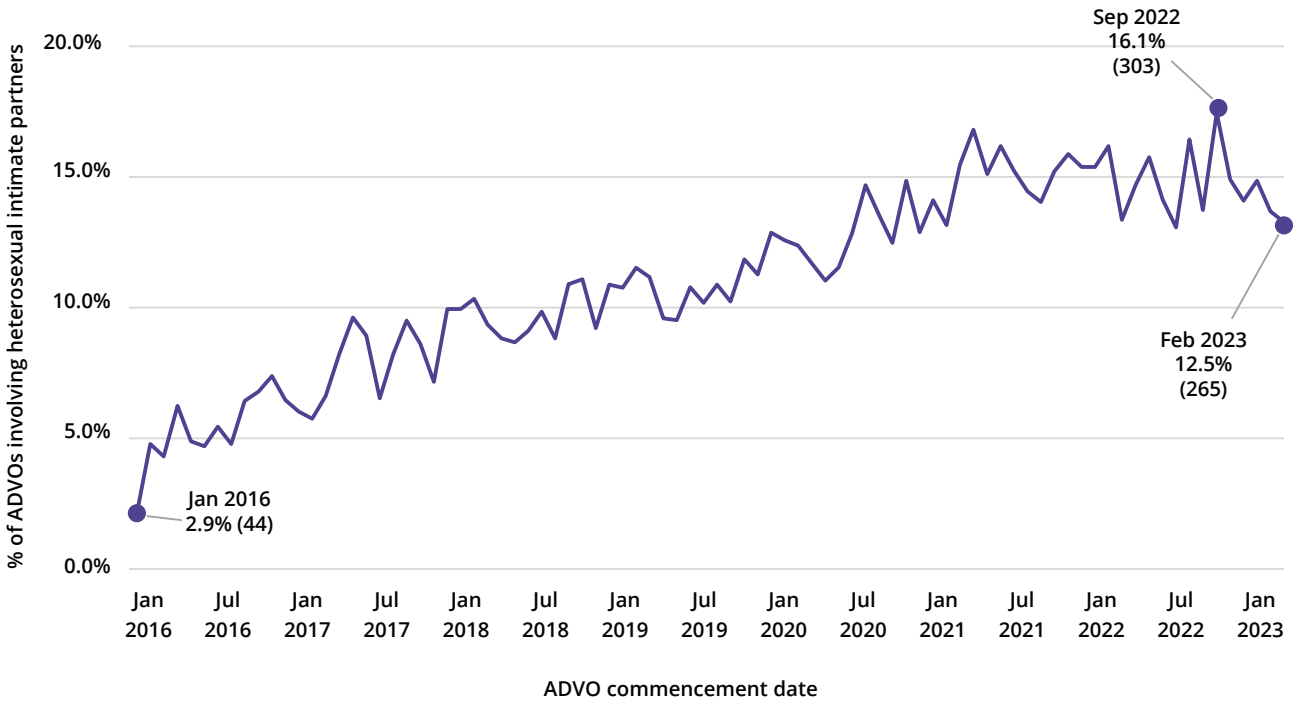
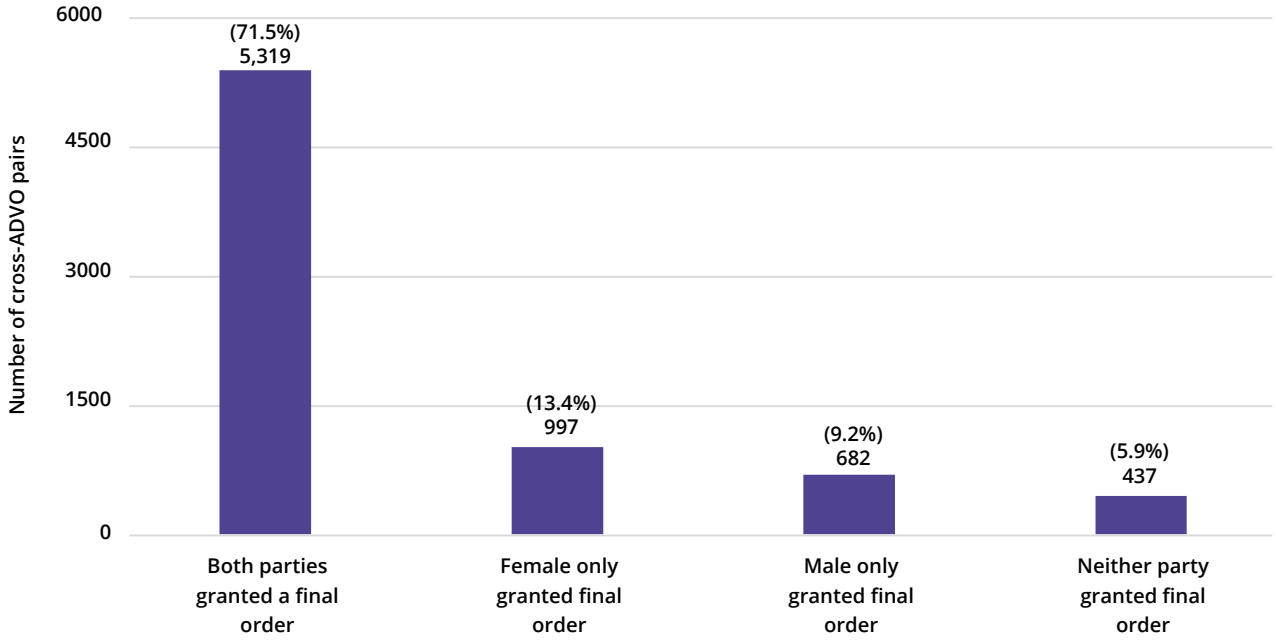


Figure 4 includes all subsets of ADVOs: provisional, interim and final. Provisional and interim ADVOs are temporary protection orders made before the ADVO application is heard in court. A final ADVO can then be granted by the court after a hearing, or if the defendant consents to the order or doesn't appear at court. Given final ADVOs are typically longer in duration (i.e. two years unless the court specifies an alternative) it is also of interest to know how many cross-ADVOs were final orders granted by the court.

Figure 5 shows the proportion of pairs of cross-ADVOs with a start date between January 2016 and February 2023 by whether the two ADVOs in the pair were granted a final ADVO, by the gender of the protected person. Overall, 94.1% of all cross-ADVOs pairs involved at least one final order. When we consider the breakdown by gender, we see that in the majority of these cases (71.5%) both partners had their provisional or interim ADVO converted to a final ADVO. Where only one partner was granted a final ADVO, female protected persons were 4.2 p.p. more likely than male protected persons to be granted a final ADVO.

Figure 5. Number of cross-ADVO pairs by gender of the protected person who was granted a final ADVO (January 2016 to February 2023)



CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTEXT OF CROSS-IPV EVENTS

What are the demographic and offending characteristics of individuals involved in cross-IPV?

In this next section we describe the demographic and offending characteristics of individuals in the sample of 1,405 cross-IPV events recorded between January 2016 and February 2023. Table 1 shows the age distribution of these partners by gender. The vast majority of individuals involved in cross-IPV were adults (98.0%). However, where a partner was aged under 18, they were more likely to be female than male (2.9% for females and 1.1% for males). A higher proportion of female partners involved in cross-IPV events were aged between 18 and 34 compared with male partners (57.8% vs. 50.2%). Table 1 also shows the Aboriginality[7] of partners involved in cross-IPV events by gender. Over two-thirds of male and female partners involved in cross-IPV events were non-Aboriginal. Female partners were slightly more likely than male partners to identify as Aboriginal (13.1% of women and 11.8% of men).

Table 1. Age distribution and Aboriginality of heterosexual intimate partners cross-proceeded against for an IPV event, by gender (January 2016 to February 2023)

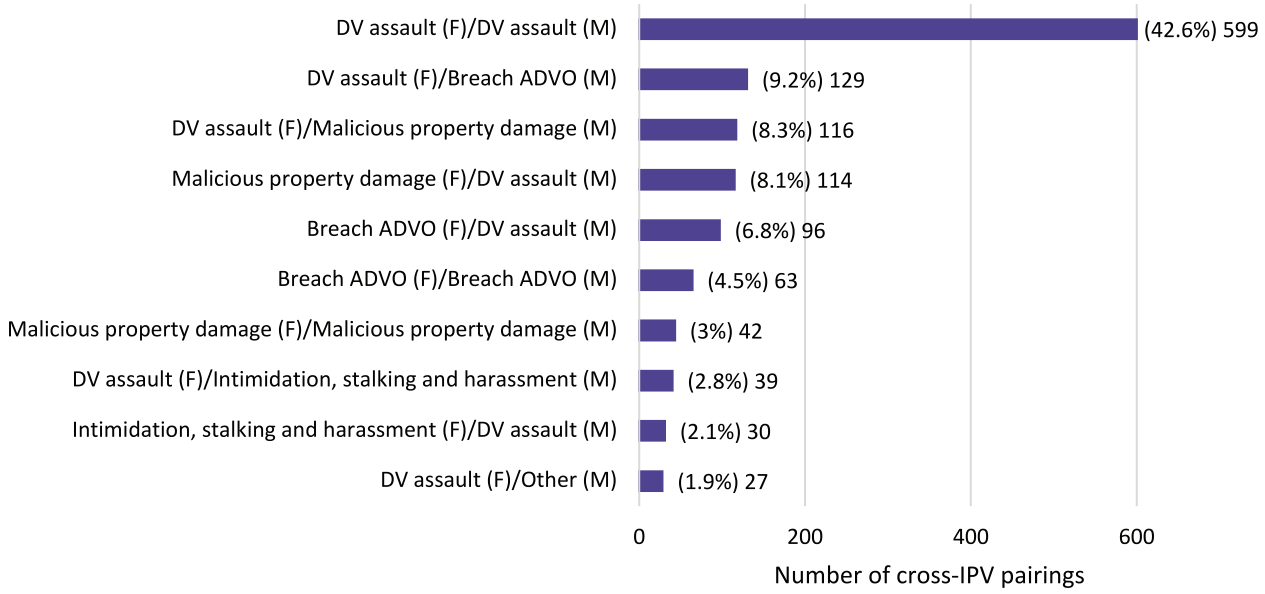
	Female (N=1,405)		Male (N=1,405)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Age Group				
Under 18	41	2.9%	15	1.1%
18-24	298	21.2%	246	17.5%
25-34	514	36.6%	460	32.7%
35-44	370	26.4%	420	29.9%
45+	181	12.9%	264	18.8%
Aboriginality				
Aboriginal	184	13.1%	166	11.8%
Non-Aboriginal	979	69.7%	982	69.9%
Unknown	242	17.2%	257	18.3%

Note. Female total includes one individual with unknown age.

7 A person was considered to be Aboriginal if they identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander to police at the time of contact.

Figure 6 shows the most common offence pairings for cross-IPV proceedings by gender. Here the most serious offence is presented for each party proceeded against within the event. More than two-fifths of the cross-IPV events involved both the male and female partner being charged with DV assault (42.6% or 599). Charges for breaching an ADVO were also common in cross-IPV events. In 9.2% of events a female partner was charged with DV assault and their male partner was charged with breach ADVO, in 6.8% of events a female partner was charged with breaching their ADVO and the male partner was charged with DV assault, and in 4.5% events both partners were charged with breaching their ADVO conditions. Overall, women were slightly more likely than men to be charged with DV assault (64.8% vs. 61.4%, respectively) in a cross-IPV event, while men were slightly more likely than women to be charged with breach ADVO (15.7% vs. 13.1%, respectively) and intimidation, stalking and harassment offences (6.5% vs. 5.0%, respectively).

Figure 6. Top 10 most serious offence pairings in cross-IPV events (January 2016 to February 2023)



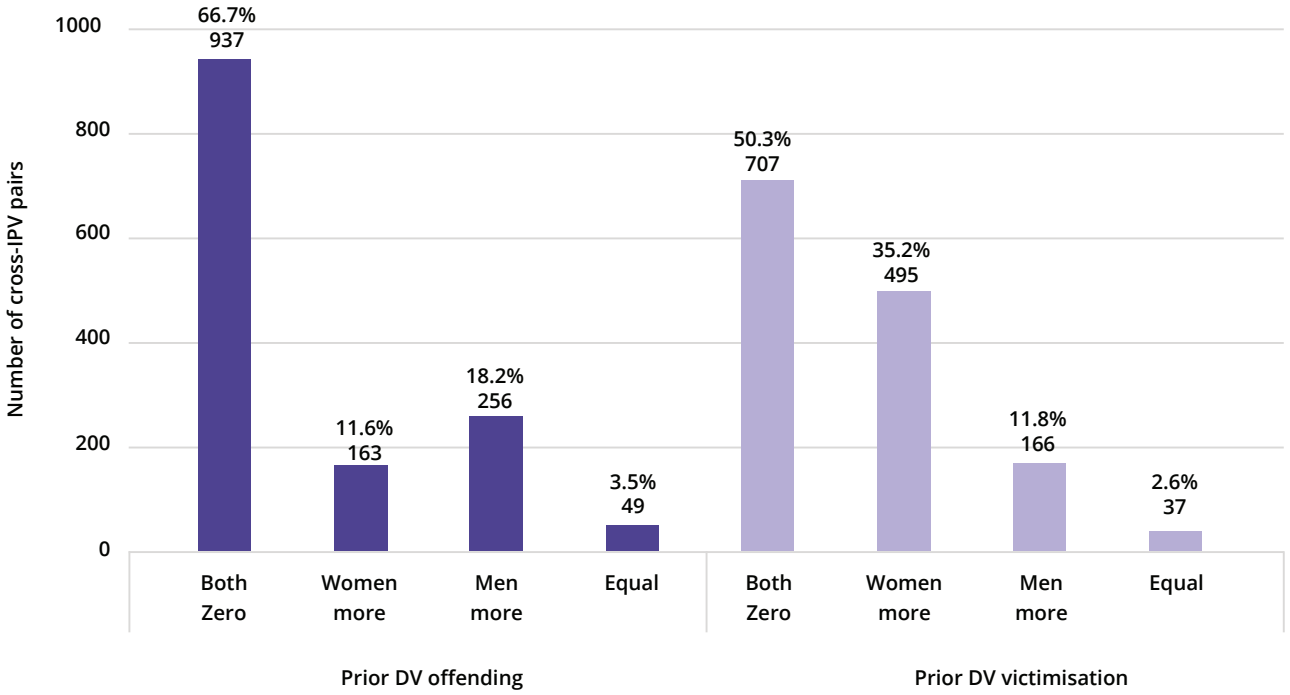
What are the historical patterns of offending and victimisation among individuals involved in cross-IPV events?

Figure 7 shows the differences within pairs of men and women in DV related[8] offending and victimisation in the five years preceding the index cross-IPV event. The first point worth noting is that in two-thirds of cross-IPV events neither party had any prior proven DV related offences in the previous five years and in one-half of events neither party had any prior police contact for DV related victimisation. When comparing to all IPV offenders (not limited to cross-IPV), 75.0% of people who were charged with an IPV related offence did not have any prior proven DV court appearances in the last five years (BOCSAR, 2025a).

In the cross-IPV cohort, where there was a prior (recorded) history of victimisation, a higher proportion of female partners had more DV related victimisation episodes[9] in the previous five years than their male partner (35.2% vs. 11.8%). In contrast, a higher proportion of male partners had more proven DV related offences in the five years prior to the index event compared with their female partner (18.2% vs. 11.6%, respectively).

8 This is broader than IPV and includes family and other relationship types, such as carers, housemates, or ex-partners of current partners.
9 This measure of victimisation includes DV related incidents where the alleged perpetrator was not the same person as the partner in the index event.

Figure 7. Prior proven DV court appearances and prior police-recorded DV victimisation in the 5 years preceding the index event for heterosexual pairs in cross-IPV events (January 2016 to February 2023)

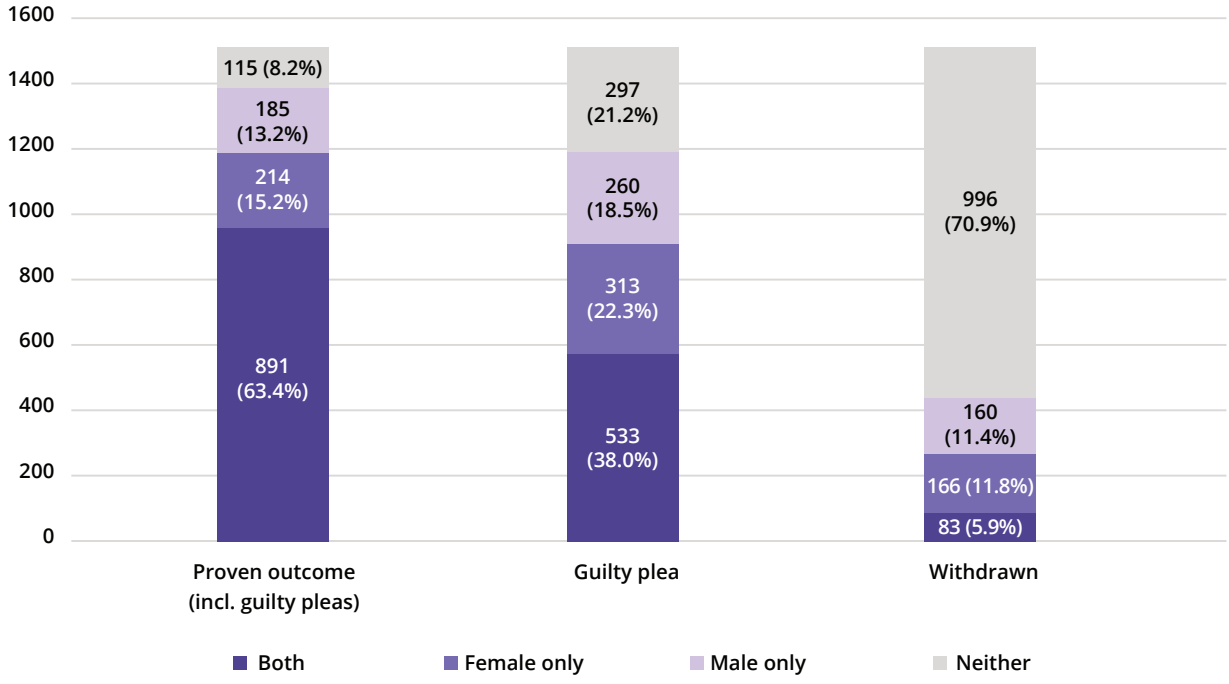


What are the withdrawal and conviction rates in cross-IPV events?

Figure 8 shows court outcomes for pairs of men and women cross-proceeded against for an IPV event. It shows that in the majority of pairs, both partners had a proven outcome (63.4%), either by pleading guilty or being found guilty at a defended hearing. Women were slightly more likely than men to have a proven outcome overall (78.6% of women compared to 76.6% of men). This is partly due to a higher proportion of women pleading guilty in cases where only one party entered a guilty plea (22.3% of women compared to 18.5% of men).

When examining only those that proceeded to a defended hearing, men were slightly more likely to be found guilty. In 20.1% of pairings, the male partner was found guilty at a defended hearing, compared with 18.3% where the female partner was found guilty. In 5.9% of cases all charges were withdrawn against both parties.

Figure 8. Court outcomes for heterosexual pairs appearing in court for cross-IPV (January 2016 to February 2023)



Note. Two cross-IPV pairs had unknown outcome for the guilty plea category.

What are the circumstances surrounding cross-IPV incidents?

We now turn to the findings from the thematic analysis of police-recorded narratives for the subsample of 194 cross-IPV events that were recorded between January 2019 and February 2023. The demographics of individuals included in this narrative sample were broadly consistent with the entire sample of cross-IPV events. Nearly all female (96%) and male (97%) partners were adults (96% and 97%, respectively) but a higher proportion of female partners were aged between 18 and 34 compared with males (63% and 50%, respectively). Fifteen per cent of female partners were Aboriginal and 16% of male partners were Aboriginal.

We first consider the history of DV between couples in the cross-IPV events. A history of DV was recorded as present if the police narrative mentioned any of the following: a past police recorded DV related event involving the two partners (either criminal (e.g. assault or malicious damage to property) or non-criminal (e.g. verbal arguments); a current or past ADVO between the parties; or if any unreported past violence was disclosed to police at the current event. Earlier, we observed that only one-third of cross-IPV events involved a person of interest (POI) with a proven history of DV in the past five years. However, using a broader definition, we now find that a prior history of DV between the two partners was present in 67% of cases. This figure is significantly higher than the estimates derived solely from BOCSAR's reoffending database and highlights the limitations of relying on criminal justice outcomes alone. It underscores the extent to which intimate partner violence is underreported within this cohort.

Table 2. History of DV between heterosexual partners in the subsample of cross-IPV events

History of DV	No.	%
Recorded history of DV	130	67%
No recorded history of DV	64	33%
Total	**194**	**100%**

While a history of violence between partners was often mentioned in the narratives to add context to an incident, it was not always clear how this was factored into the police decision to charge an individual. For example, in one case police attended an incident where a husband reported that his wife had assaulted him. During the course of the investigation, the woman disclosed to police that she had been the victim of ongoing (but unreported) abuse from her husband. The husband subsequently admitted to assaulting his wife earlier in the day. Police accepted her explanation and recorded that they believed she had "cracked" from the history of abuse. Both partners were charged in relation to the index event. In another case, police attended an incident where a female partner had thrown alcohol from a glass at her male partner during a verbal argument. The male partner responded by punching her. The male partner was, at that time, a defendant on an ADVO where the female party was the protected person. The male partner expressed to police that he believed that the relationship was "toxic" and that the female partner was the primary aggressor in the relationship. Both parties were subsequently charged in relation to the incident, and an ADVO naming the male partner as the protected person was issued. In both these cases, the evidence of mutual physical violence at the reference incident drove the decision to proceed against both parties.

Table 3 shows the number and proportion of events where police recorded in the narrative that aggressive/violent behaviour had occurred, as well as the party who was responsible. Here aggressive behaviours include a broad definition of violence including physical assault, threats of assault or property damage. Examples of aggressive/violent behaviour recorded in the narratives included: punching, kicking, slapping, biting, smashing or throwing objects (commonly phones), punching walls, scratching, choking, spitting, or threatening the other party with a weapon (commonly a knife). Table 3 shows that one of these behaviours were recorded in almost all cross-IPV events (98%). In 154 (79%) events, both parties engaged in at least one of these behaviours. In a further 36 (18%) events the behaviour was committed by only one partner; in these cases responsibility for the violence was evenly split by gender (10% of events involved violence from only the female partner and 8% from only the male partner). In 86% of narratives, verbal arguments or verbal abuse was recorded. Arguments commonly concerned allegations of infidelity, disagreements about childcare arrangements, financial disagreements or one party feeling neglected by or not taken seriously by their partner.

Table 3. Cross-IPV events by whether personal, property or threats of violence occurred and the party responsible for the violence

Violent/aggressive behaviour	No.	%
Yes - Both parties	154	79%
Yes - Male only	16	*8%*
Yes - Female only	20	*10%*
No violence recorded	4	*2%*
Total	**194**	**100%**

Note. Where no violence was recorded, both parties were proceeded against for either breach ADVO or intimidation, stalking and harassment.

Where no violence was recorded for either party, the most common reason for the person receiving a legal action was for breaching an ADVO. The nature of the ADVO breaches typically related to breaches of conditions, such as couples continuing cohabitation or contact despite having a no-contact condition on the ADVO. It was also common for ADVO breaches to occur when the party that was the defendant on an ADVO with a no-alcohol condition, consumed alcohol in the presence of the protected person.

Table 4 shows the proportion of cross-IPV events where police recorded that someone was physically injured and the party who was injured. In the majority (62%) of events a physical injury was recorded for at least one party. Both parties were injured in 22% of cross-IPV events, only the female partner was injured in 21% of events and only the male partner was injured in 20% of events. The information reviewed did not reveal systemic differences between males and female injuries. Injuries commonly included lacerations, bleeding, bruising, swelling, bite marks, and general pain or soreness. Injuries were often inflicted by the other party, but could also be self-inflicted, or acquired during self-defence (such as bruising to the person's hands when trying to defend themselves). In some cases, the origins of the injury were unclear due to conflicting accounts provided by both parties.

Table 4. Cross-IPV events by whether physical injury was recorded and the party who was physically injured

Physical injury recorded	No.	%
Yes - Both parties	43	22%
Yes - Male only	38	20%
Yes - Female only	40	21%
No physical injury recorded	73	38%
Total	**194**	**100%**

Evidence of physical injury emerged as an important consideration in the charging process. In one case, a woman alleged that her partner had assaulted her during an argument; an allegation which he denied. Police did not proceed against him until the woman attended hospital a few days later and provided photographs showing bruising to police. In another incident, a woman attended a police station to report that her male partner had punched her multiple times the evening before. According to the male partner's account, she had hit him. Both partners were seen by paramedics at the time the incident occurred. The paramedics advised police that the injuries to the female partner were consistent with her being the aggressor (as she had marks on her hands and a dislocated finger) and that the male partner did not have any such injuries to his hands. Police also noted that the female partner did not act in a way that was consistent with someone who was afraid for their safety. Based on this evidence police believed that the male partner's account was more credible. However, given the conflicting accounts from both parties, they were both initially charged with breach ADVO. Police also obtained witness statements asserting that both partners had engaged in a physical altercation earlier in the evening (although it was unclear who was the primary aggressor), as well as CCTV footage which showed the male partner assaulting the female partner. At this point, police also proceeded to charge the male partner with common assault. In situations such as this where there were conflicting allegations of violence from both parties, tangible evidence (such as injury, witness statements or CCTV) was often a key factor in the charging decision.

Finally, Table 5 shows the proportion of events where police noted in the narrative that the violence was motivated by self-defence and/or retaliation. Self-defence has a broad and at times nebulous definition in the literature. In a legal-centric context, self-defence is understood as violence a person uses to protect themselves from immediate physical harm (Leisring & Grigorian, 2016). To capture a wider array of behaviours, we followed the definition of "violent resistance" used by Boxall et al. (2020), which is broader than the legal category of self-defence. Violent resistance involves a "fear-based response to a perceived threat", which can be overlaid with other motives such as retaliation (Boxall et al., 2020, p. 5). So, in our narrative analysis, if a person characterised their use of violence as a way to protect themselves, or because they wanted to get back at their partner for verbally or physically abusing them, both were coded as a form of resistant violence.[10] Using this wider definition of violent resistance allows us to capture a more complete picture of the motivations underlying violence in cross-IPV events.

10 Additionally, violent resistance was coded if the narrative recorded that the violence occurred in response to physical violence (including verbal threats of violence) initiated by the other party,

Table 5. Cross-IPV events by whether characteristics of self-defence or retaliation were recorded by police

Self-defence or retaliation	No.	%
Male	82	42%
Female	91	47%
No self-defence or retaliatory behaviours recorded	49	25%
Total	**194**	**100%**

Note. Totals do not add up to 100% as both partners may have had self-defence or retaliatory behaviours recorded on the same event.

Table 5 shows that women were more likely to engage in violent resistance (47% of women in the sample compared with 42% of men) but reported acts of retaliatory or self-defensive violence were also reasonably common among male partners in our sample. The motivations underlying the use of violence in cross-IPV events were multifaceted. Victims and alleged offenders often characterised their behaviours as self-defensive, resistant or retaliatory, or a combination of these, although the motivations were not always verifiable by police. In one case, a woman scratched her husband after he slapped her during an argument. She described her actions to police as both self-defensive and because she was "angry" at her partner. Similarly, in another case, a woman told police that her partner was abusive and his actions had been recently escalating. She told police that she assaulted her partner in response to being "assaulted and belittled" by him and that if she did not respond with violence then it "would all be over for her".

In some cases where police accepted the victim's explanation of self-defence, they decided to proceed against the partner(s) on lesser charges. In one case, a woman attended her partner's residence to take custody of their child and an argument regarding custody arrangements ensued. As the she picked the child up and walked to her vehicle, the male partner tried to stop her by pulling at her arms. In response, the female partner struck the male partner, causing injury. Police sought advice from prosecutors and determined that both parties should be charged with offensive behaviour offences and that no further action would be taken in relation to the assaults. In this case, police accepted both parties acted in defence of their child. A further complicating factor is that in some cases where police accepted that one party was acting in self-defence, they still initiated charges for breaching the conditions of an ADVO which may have resulted in harsher penalties. Overall, identifying self-defence or retaliatory violence was a significant challenge in the narrative review, particularly given the often ambiguous or conflicting accounts of mutual violence.

DISCUSSION

This study examined long-term trends in cross-IPV events and cross-ADVOs, and thematically analysed police narratives to explore the context in which cross-IPV occurs. We found that cross-IPV represents a small but growing proportion of police recorded IPV in NSW. NSW Police legally proceeded against both a male and female partner in 0.7% (74) of IPV events with a legal proceeding in the 12 months to June 2011. This rose to 2.1% (320) in the 12 months to February 2023. Cross-ADVOs have also increased in NSW in recent years. The proportion of ADVOs where men and women in intimate partner relationships were both granted an ADVO increased from 5.7% (933) in the 12 months to December 2016 to 13.7% (3,204) in the 12 months to February 2023. Intimate partners involved in cross-IPV events were most often charged with assault offences and/or breach ADVOs. Men more often had a greater number of prior proven DV court appearances than their female partners (18.2% vs. 11.6%), while women more often had a greater number of prior victimisation episodes than their male partners (35.2% vs. 11.8%). Past violence is useful context for cross-IPV, but the presence of past victimisation or offending alone does not indicate that misidentification has occurred in relation to the current event or that either party has necessarily been mischarged. When the court outcomes for people charged in cross-IPV are considered we can see that conviction rates are high for both men and women (76.6% for men and 78.6% for women).

Examination of the police narratives for cross-IPV events revealed that most cross-IPV events (98%) involved physical or property violence, and most commonly both parties engaged in at least one of these behaviours (79%). Even in events where an aggressive/violent behaviour was committed by only one partner, responsibility for the violence was evenly split across genders. Physical injury was recorded by at least one party in 62% of cross-IPV events. In over one-fifth of these events both parties were injured, in 20% only the male was injured and in 21% only the female was injured. These figures don't indicate substantial differences between men and women in the conduct or experience of violence in cross-IPV events.

In the majority of cross-IPV events (67%) police were aware of a history of violence between the partners, even where violence had not previously been reported to police. Identifying self-defence or retaliatory violence was a significant challenge in the narrative review. While we found some slight evidence that women were more likely to act in self-defence or retaliation than men (47% compared to 42% for men), resistant violence appeared to also be relatively common among male partners. This accords with Boxall et al.'s (2020) narrative study of female perpetrators of IPV, which found that around half of the women engaged in violent resistance against their male partners, and around two-fifths of men retaliated violently against the female perpetrator. Identifying the underlying motivations of parties involved in the cross-IPV events was complicated by the fact that often there were significant discrepancies in the accounts provided to police, or an unwillingness to speak with police at all. In such circumstances, police tended to focus the investigation on the current incident, relying on tangible evidence such as injuries, witness statements or CCTV to inform their charging decisions. These findings reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of cross-IPV and highlight the significant challenges facing frontline police officers responding to these incidents.

Very little prior research has examined cross-IPV, however our estimate of the prevalence of cross-ADVOs is broadly consistent with those reported in other Australian studies. In our sample of ADVOs commencing between 2016 to 2023, between 5.7% and 13.7% were cross-ADVOs. In comparison, Wangmann (2009, & 2012) identified that between 5% and 11% of ADVOs in their NSW sample were cross-applications. In Queensland, Douglas and Fitzgerald (2013) found that 16.5% of applications for protection orders in 2010-11 had a mutual application submitted at some point in the same financial year. Qualitative research has also revealed that some individuals apply for ADVOs against their partners in retaliation for being named as a defendant in an ADVO, or as a tactic to control the behaviour of the partner (Jillard & Mansour, 2014). One way of exploring whether ADVOs are vexatious is to examine the rate at which provisional and interim ADVOs are converted to final orders by the court. Mansour (2014) found that of the 95 clients of the Women's Legal Service in 2010, only 39% of the women who were defending ADVO proceedings had final orders made. However, we found that across our entire sample, the majority (71.5%) of cross-ADVOs became final ADVOs for both partners, but in the small number of cases where only one ADVO was made final, female protected persons were more likely to be granted a final ADVO than men (13.4% compared with 9.2%).[11]

Our finding that, within couples involved in cross-IPV, men had a greater history of DV offending and women had a greater history of DV victimisation accords with Wangmann et al.'s (2020) longitudinal study of IPV. Using a base sample from 2010 where legal action was taken against a person for IPV and following both the POI and victim from 2006 through to 2012, Wangmann et al. (2020) found that men were more likely to be the predominant aggressor over time, and women were more often victims or had a mixed presentation. The history of DV between partners is a key consideration in misidentification, given that the primary victim in a relationship may physically react to a history of abuse in self-defence (including pre-emptively) or engage in retaliatory violence (Boxall et al., 2020; Swan, Gambone, Caldwell, Sullivan, & Snow, 2008). In the narrative samples, police did note the presence of self-defence or retaliation, as well as a history of abuse in the relationship, but these factors appeared to play an ancillary role in their charging decisions. In some cases, police accepted that the violence had begun as genuine self-defence, but that it was excessive or had escalated beyond that threshold, and they decided to proceed to criminal

11 Our estimates are closer to Wangmann et al.'s (2020) study which found that 72.7% of ADVOs against male defendants became final ADVOs in their sample, compared with 65.5% of female defendants.

charges. Additionally, in cases where it was difficult to determine the circumstances and sequence of events or where there were mutual claims of violence, police often relied on evidence of physical injury to determine the veracity of either party's account. These results align with Nancarrow et al.'s (2020) and Wangmann et al.'s (2020) observations that police frequently take an incident-based approach to determine the aggressor in a situation. Where one party has identified the other as the primary aggressor in the relationship, police may decide to proceed against both partners if there is an admission to, or evidence of, an assault, regardless of the history of abuse. In interviews with Queensland Police, Nancarrow et al. (2020) identified further challenges for police in cases where neither party are willing to cooperate with the investigation, resulting in a reliance on external sources of evidence, such as witness statements. Police interviewees also reported that time constraints often limit their ability to acquire a holistic understanding of the history of abuse over the entire relationship.

It is important to recognise the limitations of the data used in this research. Police narratives, while richer in detail than fixed field datasets, are written from the policing perspective and with the purpose of serving a brief of evidence (Boxall et al., 2018) and therefore prioritise information that pertains to the investigative process. This means that details that are important for misidentification research, such as the motivations of the victims and alleged perpetrators, may be omitted or not clearly articulated (Boxall et al., 2018). Research also shows that women do not always characterise their behaviour as self-defence to police at the time of the incident or may be unwilling to disclose their motives (Iliadis et al., 2024). Furthermore, police narratives often focus on the visible forms of physical violence and might exclude other abusive behaviours, such as coercive control, even if reported by the victim (Nancarrow et al., 2020). A further limitation of our analysis is that the IPV sample consisted only of events where police commenced legal actions against both partners. Cases where police accepted the claims of self-defence of one party and decided not to charge them, or cases where they correctly identified the primary victim, would not appear in our analysis.

While IPV in NSW overwhelmingly involves male offenders and female victims—with four out of five people charged being male (BOCSAR, 2025a)—it is important to acknowledge that IPV can affect people of all genders. A small proportion of men experience IPV, and some relationships involve mutual violence. NSW Police have recorded a rise in cross-IPV charges between heterosexual couples. Although the overall number remains low, this trend has prompted concern about potential misidentification, where women may be erroneously charged as perpetrators despite being victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. Here we have found evidence that women involved in cross-IPV events do tend to have longer histories of victimisation, while men more often have histories of DV perpetration. However, this alone does not indicate that misidentification has occurred or that cross-IPV charges are inappropriate. Police are required to respond to incidents as they occur and enforce the law based on available evidence. This study found that in cross-IPV cases, the violent behaviours and injuries attributed to male and female parties at the time of the incident were generally comparable. These findings highlight the complexity of IPV dynamics and the need for nuanced, trauma-informed responses that consider both incident-level evidence and broader patterns of abuse.

Since July 2024 coercive control has been an offence in NSW. Coercive control criminalises a broad suite of abusive behaviours between intimate partners when they occur over time as a pattern of behaviour. Penalties are more serious than for many other DV offences and it is intended to elevate focus beyond a single incident. Future research should extend the current analysis to include IPV events that occurred after the introduction of NSW's coercive control legislation and the new legislative definition of "domestic abuse" in July 2024 (DCJ, 2025), to examine whether these legislative reforms, and the substantial police training that accompanied them, has impacted trends in cross-IPV and cross-ADVOs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Adam Teperski and Bonnie Ross for their guidance and knowledge, Suzanne Poynton and Jackie Fitzgerald for their insights and feedback, Caitlin Bennett and Stewart Boiteux for reviewing the report, and Florence Sin for desktop publishing.

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