



Interpersonal Violence Position Paper

Background

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines interpersonal violence broadly as "The intentional use of physical force, or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in, or has a likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation"¹. This definition includes violence perpetrated against intimate partners, parents, siblings, children, other relatives, friends, acquaintances, colleagues and strangers¹. Interpersonal violence is the most common and widespread breach of an individual's human rights and amounts to an infringement of an individual's dignity. However, violence is an area that is often unreported as it is difficult to capture the full extent of the issue.

Interpersonal violence is a cause of suffering and trauma which has devastating consequences for the mental, physical and sexual health of the victim. It affects us as individuals, parents, spouses, educators, researchers and citizens. The breadth of the problem is staggering with public health officials identifying interpersonal violence as a public health issue of epidemic proportions. However, obtaining a clear picture of the extent of the problem is troublesome. There is no single research study that describes the entire spectrum of interpersonal violence and often research studies examine only one aspect of this diverse problem. It is important to note that prevalence data regarding violence should be interpreted with caution due to the complex nature of violence. This data reflects numerically the pervasiveness of violence in our society, yet it falls short in describing the effects of violence from a human perspective.

Interpersonal violence occurs in a wide range of contexts and includes for example, intimate partner violence, violent crime, rape and other sexual violence, child abuse/ neglect, workplace violence and elder abuse. Sexual assault and domestic family violence are among the most pervasive forms of violence in Australia; with women and children being identified as most vulnerable victims of these crimes². Recently, issues of child abuse and neglect, family violence, community violence and sexual assault have received increased prominence and attention from the Australian Government. In April 2009, 'Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020' and 'Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children 2009–2021', were released. The recommendations from these reports have driven the recent changes to the Family Law Act 2012, which has attracted some media attention of late. However, the focus of these actions has been on child protection and there exists little coordinated action to prevent the escalation in other forms of interpersonal violence in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports in that 50% of adult males and 40% of adult females have experienced violence or the threat of violence since the age of 15³. This paper analyses the issues and activities surrounding interpersonal violence and puts forward some further recommendations for action.

The Australian Injury Prevention Network recognises that:

- Interpersonal violence occurs in a wide range of contexts making it difficult to consolidate research regarding the issue as a whole and, therefore, to take coordinated action on all areas of interpersonal violence.
- The focus of the Australian Government's efforts to reduce interpersonal violence is on the protection of women and children as the more common victims of interpersonal violence.
- COAG's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 (the National Plan) brings together the efforts of governments across the nation to make a real and sustained reduction in the levels of violence against women.
- As a part of the COAG 'Close the Gap' initiative, 'Safe Community' programs attempt to address issues of interpersonal violence in the community for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Child protection is a focus of Community programs which exist in each state, such as the successful 'Safe at Home' program in Tasmania and 'Brighter Futures' in NSW.
- Recently, the need for action on technology facilitated crimes against children has been identified and taken on by the Australian Federal Police who have joined the VGT (Virtual Global Taskforce)⁴.

The Australian Injury Prevention Network acknowledges that:

- There were an estimated 1.8 million incidents of physical assault in Australia, experienced by 527,400 individuals aged 15 years or over in 2008 to 2009⁵.
- Interpersonal violence can result in medical problems, including physical injury, as well as emotional and psychological harm such as substance abuse, depression, suicide, anxiety, somatising disorders, eating disorders and chronic pain^{6, 7}.
- Interpersonal violence is extremely costly to society, in terms of legal system and health care costs. A recent report estimated the total cost of domestic violence in Australia at over \$13 billion per year and is expected to rise to \$15 billion by 2021⁸.
- Death, poor physical and mental health, poor educational or employment achievement, poor maternal and foetal outcomes for pregnant women, increased risk of alcohol or substance abuse, increased risk of perpetrating violence and decreased confidence in public safety within the community have all been identified as outcomes of violence⁶.
- Alcohol and drug use are known to be deeply entwined with violence in Australian society⁹.
- One in three Australian women will report being a victim of physical violence and almost one in five will report being a victim of sexual violence in their lifetime¹⁰.
- The substantiated child abuse rate has more than doubled over the past 10 years and the number of children subject to child abuse and neglect remains unacceptably high.
- Indigenous children are significantly over-represented amongst the number of children subject to child abuse (six times more likely to be the subject of a substantiation than other children)¹¹.
- Indigenous people, younger adults, males and those with a mental illness have been identified as being at particular risk of violence victimisation; immigrant and refugee women have been found to be more likely to be murdered as a result of domestic violence².
- People exposed to violence may also accept it as a legitimate form of communication, leading to victims of violence becoming perpetrators.

The Australian Injury Prevention Network recommends:

A multi-sectorial approach to violence prevention that includes:

- Development of public policy initiatives and legislative reform to protect victims and rehabilitate perpetrators and partnering with other organizations committed to decreasing interpersonal violence.
- Continued research into violence to understand the causes, consequences and successful prevention strategies. Information obtained through research will lead to better understanding and develop promising best practices which will lead to the opportunity to advocate for increased investment.
- Exchange of information on successful and unsuccessful violence prevention initiatives at the national, state and local level. All forms of violence need to be statistically described and targeted with appropriate prevention and intervention.
- Expanding or raising more awareness of the provision of services to victims of interpersonal violence to reduce negative health and social outcomes and cost to society.
- Injury researchers and partners to continue providing leadership and advocacy efforts to prevent violence.
- An emphasis on primary prevention - there are a range of strategies that will act at different stages of development for effective intervention for prevention of violence. Investing in early intervention from a young age is more effective than waiting for adulthood.
- Targeted and appropriate violence prevention activities for high risk groups such as Indigenous people, refugees, females, children, and young men.
- Tackling of alcohol related violence through penalties, restrictions on alcohol outlets etc.

References

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11. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) Personal Safety Survey, ABS Cat. No. 4906.0, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Other useful references and resources:

- Australian Institute of Family Studies: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/>
 - Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/>
- Family Relationship Services Australia: <http://www.frsa.org.au/site/>
- Brighter Futures Initiative: <http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/community-services/1623-brighter-futures-nsw>
- Safe at Home Initiative Tasmania: <http://www.safeathome.tas.gov.au/>
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- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009). Child Protection Australia 2007-08. Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
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