

Interpersonal Violence Position Paper

The Australasian Injury Prevention Network (AIPN) accepts the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition of interpersonal violence: "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 can be under-reported and population based estimates may underestimate the magnitude of the problem.

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, few studies examine the cumulative effects of violence for either victims or perpetrators. Beyond physical injury and premature death, people who have experienced violence have increased rates of mental health disorders including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, drug and alcohol misuse.

Violence is complex and pervasive. The nature of violence has resulted in research taking a fragmented perspective based on populations affected, risk factors associated with the event or the societal roles of victims or perpetrators. Examples of this include intimate partner violence, alcohol related assault, rape and other sexual violence, child abuse/neglect, workplace violence and elder abuse. While this has been necessary to implement setting based prevention and policy, it also means that the total human cost/perspective of violence is difficult to capture in prevalence studies. Many people are both victims and perpetrators of violence and experience multiple forms of violence and abuse during their lifetime. Interpersonal violence is a cause of suffering and trauma with potential short and long-term consequences for the health and well-being of victims and perpetrators alike.

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 resulted in changes to the Family Law Act 2012. State-based responses to 'coward punch' and alcohol related assault have brought about changes to liquor licensing laws and policies.

There is increasing recognition at all levels of Government of the need for a public health approach to preventing interpersonal violence, including the identification of underlying determinants, risk and protective factors. However, there exists little coordinated action to prevent the escalation of interpersonal violence in Australia. The AIPN endorses the WHO eco-environmental framework to understanding the individual, family, community and systems level factors that contribute to violence¹. This paper puts forward some further recommendations for action, provides information on some of the research that underpins the need for action and acknowledges work already being done.

The AIPN recommends:

A multi-sectorial, public health approach to violence prevention that includes:

1. An emphasis on primary prevention and universal program implementation, including strategies that will act at different developmental stages and those that will facilitate a cultural shift in those most at risk of perpetrating violence, based on partnering with communities and cultural groups to develop public policy initiatives and legislative reform
2. Addressing the underlying cultural and social norms that support violence, including gender inequality drinking culture, exposure to violence and barriers to reporting and accessing services
3. Support services for both victims and perpetrators, because protecting victims is not sufficient to address the issue, perpetrators must also be provided services to enable cultural and behavioural change;
4. Need to recognise and respond experiences of violence, which contribute to barriers to reporting and accessing support services and the risk of exposure. Responses to violence within community groups should be community led in order to both prevent and address the complex issues of trauma, prejudice, racism, relationships with police and other government organisations and disadvantage and should include (but not be limited to) people with a disability, people identifying as LGBTQI, people with English as an additional language and older people.
5. Identify and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community led solutions to these complex issues including trauma, racism, shame, relationship with police and removal of children and to work in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their representative bodies to develop, implement and evaluate culturally safe and effective violence prevention programs
6. Increased investment in research into violence to understand the causes, consequences, and identification of gaps in practice and knowledge and the application of these learnings to inform and improve existing policy and practice and to develop new strategies for prevention;
7. Evaluation of existing initiatives and exchange of information on successful and unsuccessful violence prevention initiatives at the national, state and local level. All forms of violence and their risk factors need to be quantitatively and qualitatively described and targeted with appropriate prevention and intervention.
8. Injury researchers and partners to continue providing leadership and advocacy efforts to prevent violence.

The AIPN acknowledges that:

- Interpersonal violence is pervasive and takes on many forms; therefore, responses to and prevention of violence will vary according to settings, agents, perpetrators and victims and require intersectoral collaboration;
- 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. This plan recognises the far reaching physical, psychological, social and economic consequences of violence, and calls for community action rather than placing the burden of responsibility on women;
- COAG's National Framework for Reducing Child Abuse and Neglect and the recognition that child

- safety cannot be seen in isolation but as part of a community wide, whole of government response;
- 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;
- the need for action on technology facilitated crimes against children as identified and taken on by the Australian Federal Police who have joined the VGT (Virtual Global Taskforce)³; and
- the importance of research being undertaken in various state jurisdictions relating to responding to and reducing alcohol related community violence.

The AIPN recognises that:

- In the twelve months prior to interview in 2015-16, approximately 462,200 (2.4%) Australians over the age of 15yrs experienced at least one physical assault and 48% of those experienced multiple incidents⁴;
- 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 lifetime⁵;
- Both men and women experience fatal interpersonal violence, however women are more likely to experience this in the context of intimate relationships⁶;
- The substantiated child abuse rate has increased from 37,781 children in 2011-12 to 45,714 children in 2015-16, an increase of 21%. The number of children subject to child abuse and neglect remains unacceptably high⁶;
- Interpersonal violence is extremely costly to society, in terms of legal system and health care costs. Violence against women is estimated to cost Australian society \$21.7 billion per year and, if not addressed will increase to \$323.4 billion by 2044^{7 13};
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 family violence²
- In 2014-15 225 of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults reported being a victim of physical or threatened violence, this is 2.5x the rate of non-Indigenous Australians⁸;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly over-represented amongst the number of children subject to child abuse seven times more likely to be the subject of a substantiation than other children^{9 7};
- Elder maltreatment is a neglected public health issue and is considered to be vastly underreported - the consequences of abuse including minor injuries can be serious or life threatening for older people¹⁰;
- Victims of interpersonal violence can experience medical problems, including physical injury, as well as emotional and psychological harm such as depression, suicide, anxiety, somatising disorders, eating disorders and, substance misuse disorders, and chronic pain^{11, 12} and that this can have intergenerational impacts;
- Perpetrators of interpersonal violence experience depression, substance misuse and low self-esteem¹³
- Alcohol and drug use are known to be deeply entwined with violence in Australian society¹⁴;

References

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Other useful references and resources:

- Our Watch <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/>
- No to Violence <http://www.ntvmrs.org.au/>
- ANROWS <https://anrows.org.au/>
- National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/protecting-children-is-everyones-business>
- National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children <https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/the-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children-2010-2022>
- National Framework for action to prevent alcohol-related family violence <http://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/research/FARE-National-framework-to-prevent-alcohol-related-family-violence-web.pdf> 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/>
- Department of Injuries and Violence Prevention, World Health Organisation. http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/en/
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