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MEDIA RELEASE

Predicting violence against women: The 1996 Women's Safety Survey

If you are an unmarried woman aged 18-24 years who:

- suffered physical abuse as a child
- experienced violence as an adult
- whose highest qualification is a diploma and
- who is on a government benefit (other than family payment)

you face an 85 per cent chance of being physically assaulted or threatened with physical assault in the next 12 months. By contrast, if you are a married woman aged 45 to 54 years who:

- has never experienced violence as an adult or child
- whose highest qualification is a degree and
- who earns a wage or salary

then your chance of being physically assaulted or threatened with physical assault in the next twelve months is eight per cent.

These figures, contained in a new analysis of national survey data by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, illustrate the extreme variation in the risk of physical violence faced by different groups of Australian women.

There is similarly wide variation in the risk of sexual violence. Unmarried women aged 18-24 who have been sexually abused as a child and have experienced violence as an adult face a 44 per cent chance of being sexually assaulted or threatened with sexual assault in the next 12 months.

On the other hand, married women aged 45-55 years who have no prior adult violence and no child sexual abuse face a one per cent chance of being sexually assaulted or threatened with sexual assault in the next twelve months.

Childhood physical and sexual abuse emerged from the Bureau's analysis as key predictors of adult physical violence, sexual violence and emotional abuse.

Women who have experienced childhood physical abuse are more than twice as likely to suffer physical violence and emotional abuse in the next twelve months than women who have not suffered physical abuse as a child. They are also nearly twice as likely to have suffered multiple incidents of violence since the age of 15.

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Similar findings apply to sexual abuse. Women who experienced sexual abuse as a child are twice as likely as women who did not experience such abuse to experience sexual violence in the next twelve months.

Commenting on the findings, the Director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn, said that they highlighted a new dimension to the so-called 'cycle of violence'.

'It has long been known that people who experience physical or sexual abuse as children are at increased risk, as adults, of abusing their own children. These data show that women who suffer physical or sexual abuse as a child are at increased risk of physical or sexual violence as an adult.'

'This finding once again highlights the importance of early intervention programs (such as the Government's 'Families First' initiative) designed to reduce the risk of child maltreatment.'

'Past research by the Bureau has shown that a reduction in child maltreatment would reduce the number of offenders. This research suggests that it would also reduce the number of victims of violence.'

According to Dr Weatherburn, the research findings create opportunities for better targeting of services to women who become victims of violence.

'It is true that violence against women occurs across the social and demographic spectrum. It is also true, however, that violence is much more prevalent among young unmarried women than among other groups of women.'

'Where physical violence is concerned, it is also significantly more prevalent among women dependent on a government benefit (other than family payment) than among other groups of women.'

'Women who have already experienced violence as an adult are also more likely than other women to experience violence again.'

'These findings have important practical implications. Young, unmarried women, those on a government benefit other than family payment, those who have experienced abuse as a child and those who have already experienced violence as an adult ought to be the prime focus of service and prevention programs.'

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