

# Domestic violence in NSW in the wake of COVID-19: Update to December 2020

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## AIM

To examine trends and patterns of reported domestic violence in New South Wales, Australia, between April and December 2020 following the implementation of social restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19.

## METHOD

We examine trends in incidents recorded by the NSW Police Force for domestic violence related incidents and domestic episodes with no criminal offence, from April 2020 to December 2020. Observed volumes are compared with a seasonally adjusted forecast model estimated from the previous five years of data. A descriptive analysis of number of calls to the NSW Domestic Violence Line is also provided to compare with pre-pandemic trends.

## RESULTS

The analysis of domestic violence related assaults shows the weekly observed number of incidents is consistent with predictions from the forecast model from April to December 2020, with few exceptions. There was no evidence of a spike in domestic assaults during the period when the most socially restrictive orders were in place.

The examination of domestic episodes attended by police where no criminal incident was detected (predominantly verbal arguments), shows significantly higher incident counts in the three months from April to June 2020 (even once pre-existing trends and seasonality are considered). Patterns returned to pre-pandemic levels in the second half of 2020.

The number of calls received by the NSW Domestic Violence Line was higher throughout 2020 compared to the same month the previous year, however the increase predates the implementation of COVID-19 related restrictions.

Further analysis of domestic assaults reported to the NSW Police Force found no evidence of delay in the reporting of incidents associated with the period of most severe social restrictions. Approximately 90 percent of incidents reported each month from April to June 2020 occurred within six days of the report date, with no notable increase in delayed reporting as restrictions lifted in May and June 2020.

## CONCLUSION

There is no evidence of an increase in domestic violence-related assault coinciding with the introduction of strict social isolation requirements coming into effect in the last week of March 2020 and throughout April; or even beyond this as restrictions eased up to December 2020. Similarly, there was no clear evidence of an increase in calls for crisis counselling or assistance to the DV Help Line. There may, however, have been unobserved increases in domestic violence among some communities and cohorts of people that cannot be detected with the administrative data that is available. Conversely, there is evidence of an increase in non-criminal domestic conflict from the commencement of COVID-19 restrictions continuing into the middle of 2020. These findings do not support the suggestion of a 'spike' in domestic violence during the period that stay-at-home orders were in force in NSW, but there is evidence of increased demand for assistance from NSW Police in relation to domestic disturbances coinciding with the imposition of social.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19

Coronavirus

domestic violence

family violence

forecasting

intimate partner violence

social isolation

social distancing

crime trends

## INTRODUCTION

There is a general concern that societal changes arising from the COVID-19 pandemic response may have increased the prevalence of domestic violence (DV) during 2020. Changes introduced in New South Wales (NSW) following the escalation of the pandemic in early 2020 included social distancing, enforced isolation, limits on social gatherings and restrictions on mobility in the community: any of which could potentially impact the safety of women and families. It is plausible to consider that a pandemic-related increase in DV could be triggered by several mechanisms: increasing the time in which victims and perpetrators are in close contact; increasing financial stress, increasing emotional stress, and loss of access to safe places and support.

This paper draws on DV data available from administrative sources to look for evidence of an acceleration in DV in NSW between April and December 2020. While robust evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on DV in NSW is still emerging, reporting in the media suggested a surge in DV related to COVID containment measures (see Cormack, 2020; Fielding, 2020; Kelly, 2020; Kennedy, 2020).

Previous examination of administrative DV data sources found no evidence of an increase in reported DV in NSW during April 2020, when restrictions on social mobility in NSW were greatest (Freeman, 2020; and Kim & Leung, 2020). Freeman (2020) considered recorded criminal incidents of DV-related assaults, calls for assistance to the NSW Domestic Violence Line and urgent police callouts: none showed evidence of an increase during the period of most stringent social isolation restrictions, commonly referred to as 'lockdown', in place throughout April 2020.<sup>1</sup> Kim and Leung (2020) examined seasonally adjusted crime data to compare forecast crime rates with actual crime rates over a six week period from mid-March 2020 to the end of April 2020. For many offences they found the recorded rate of crime was well below expectations (including for non-DV-related assault). The observed frequency of DV-related assault, however, remained within the confidence interval of the model estimates indicating that recorded DV assault was not significantly different to the pre-pandemic trend.

The aforementioned studies were based on administrative records so were necessarily restricted to reported offences. A key limitation of this, however, is that the pandemic might have limited the opportunity or willingness of victims to report DV to police, which would in turn impact the volume of incidents reflected in administrative data. Other research has suggested an increase in domestic and family violence in some areas of NSW, based on findings from self-reported survey data. A NSW women's advocacy organisation, Women's Safety NSW, conducted a series of surveys with between 40 and 80 frontline DV service providers to gauge the impact of the pandemic on women and children experiencing domestic and family violence. In each of the reports, published in March, April, June and September 2020, over 40 percent of the respondents reported an increase in client numbers since the start of the pandemic, and compared with the same time the previous year. This increase was reported even as the COVID 19 restrictions began to lift (Women's Safety NSW, 2020a; 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). Approximately 40 percent of frontline workers who responded to the survey also believed their clients had experienced an escalation in violence and abuse during the 'lock down' (Women's Safety NSW, 2020c). While the majority of survey respondents did not report an increase in client numbers, the findings suggest that there may have been an increase in the number of women seeking assistance in response to DV in at least some NSW communities during the early stages of the pandemic. Similarly, surveys conducted in Queensland during April and May 2020 with 56 and 117 DV practitioners respectively, reported similar findings. Nearly 32 percent of respondents to the April survey and 43 percent of respondents to the May survey reported a perceived increase in client numbers in the early stages of the pandemic (Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon, Meyer, & True, 2020).

In May 2020, Boxall, Morgan and Brown (2020) surveyed 15,000 women across Australia about their experience of violence between February and April 2020. This study found that 4.6 percent of women

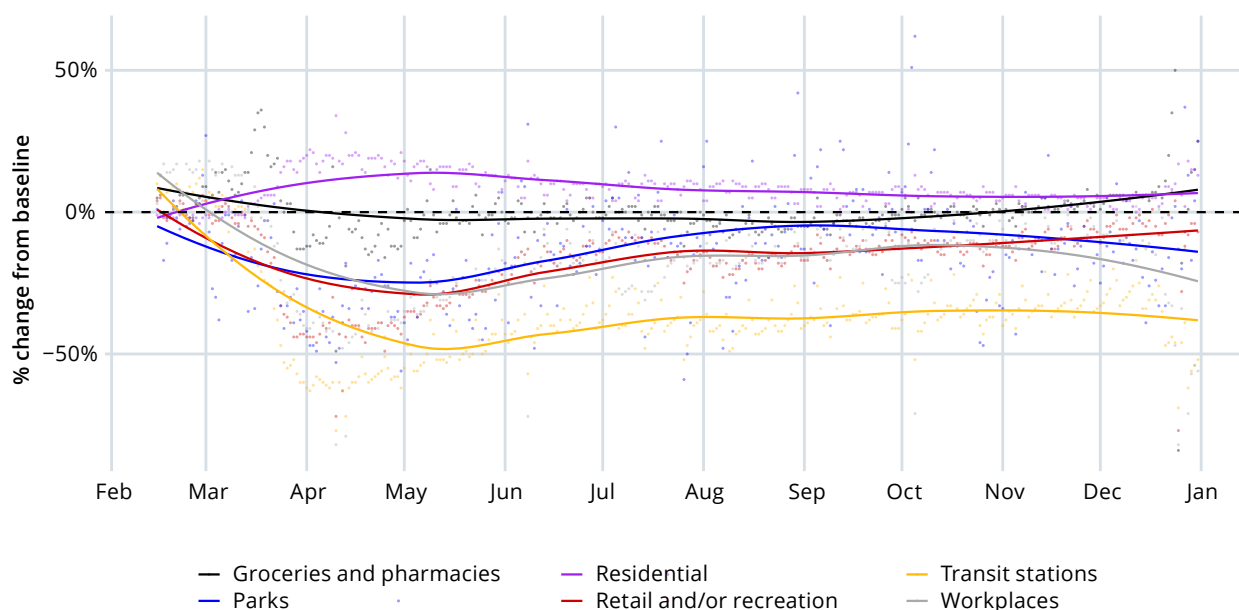
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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar\\_news/bb146-DV-update-Apr-2020.aspx](https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_news/bb146-DV-update-Apr-2020.aspx)

who responded to the survey had experienced physical or sexual violence in the three months prior to the survey, and 11.6 percent experienced emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours. Among the women who reported experiencing physical or sexual violence, one in three said it was the first time their partner had been violent towards them. While these results indicate that a substantial proportion of women reporting intimate partner violence between February and April 2020 had not previously experienced violence by their partner, the study is unable to shed light on whether the proportion of first-time victims differs from pre-pandemic levels due to the cross-sectional nature of the survey.

Self-report surveys focusing on personal experience of domestic and family violence or those seeking assistance from specialist services, address some of the limitations presented by administrative data, however the conclusions drawn from this research need to be considered in context. Often these reports fail to account for the seasonality of the data and pre-existing trends, which can explain why findings may differ to those drawn from administrative data sources. Domestic violence-related assault is typically seasonal with a higher number of assaults reported during the warmer months and fewer reported during winter (Lauritsen, 2014). As such, looking at changes in DV using only month-to-month or year-on-year comparisons does not provide a complete picture. Furthermore, surveys are often limited to selected cohorts of the population, such as women or persons experiencing intimate partner violence so the findings may not relate to family violence or may not generalise to other cohorts of the population.

**Figure 1. NSW mobility trend data, Google**



The baseline is the median value for the corresponding day of the week between 3 Jan to 6 Feb 2020

While social restrictions in NSW began to ease from mid May 2020, the routine activities of residents and social engagement in NSW remained disrupted over the following months. This led to the continuation of concerns around the impact the pandemic was having on the levels of DV. Google mobility data (Figure 1) shows the relative time NSW residents spent in various locations between March and December 2020 compared with a pre-pandemic baseline period.<sup>2</sup> It is apparent that over the entire period, but particularly in April and May, people spent more time in residential locations and considerably less time on transport, retail/recreation premises, workplaces and parks.<sup>3</sup> This pattern aligns with government social distancing

<sup>2</sup> Data are based on Google users who have opted-in to Location History for their Google Account. Data accessed from [google.com/covid19/mobility/](https://google.com/covid19/mobility/)

<sup>3</sup> On 19 December 2020 rules and restrictions were introduced in NSW to protect the community from COVID-19. Movement in and out of the Northern Beaches Local Government Area (LGA) was restricted and residence of this LGA were asked to restrict their movements to essential travel.

advice which took effect in NSW from mid-March 2020, with the most stringent restrictions introduced on 31 March, prohibiting people leaving their place of residence without a reasonable excuse and limiting outdoor gatherings to two people.<sup>4,5</sup> While restrictions on gatherings and movement were formally eased from 15 May 2020, Figure 1 shows that routine patterns of behaviour were still experiencing disruption in December 2020.

In this paper we examine trends in various DV indicators once again, looking for evidence that the incidence of DV changed in NSW after the Australian and NSW Governments introduced restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19. Using a longer time period than previous reports and a more robust methodology where sufficient data is available, this report specifically sets out to answer three research questions:

1. Was there an increase in DV between April and December 2020, above what would have been expected in the absence of the pandemic?
2. Is there evidence to indicate delayed reporting of DV resulting from changes in the opportunity to report?
3. Have trends in DV varied across types of domestic relationships?

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## METHOD

### Data sources

This report includes data on the following measures of DV:

- DV-related criminal incidents recorded by the NSW Police Force;
- Non-criminal domestic episodes recorded by the NSW Police Force; and
- NSW Domestic Violence Line call volumes.

### NSW Police Force data

Reports of (a) DV-related criminal offences and (b) domestic episodes with no associated criminal offence were extracted from the NSW Police Force's Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS). Incidents are recorded as being 'DV-related' when police decide that DV was a factor in the incident in accordance with the *Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007*.<sup>6</sup> This includes intimate partner violence, family violence and other forms of DV such as those between household members and love triangles (ex-partner of current partner). All incidents recorded in COPS have all been either reported to or detected by NSW Police.<sup>7</sup>

### *Domestic violence-related criminal incidents recorded by the NSW Police Force*

The recorded crime data used in this report include DV-related incidents of these offences: assault, assault resulting in grievous bodily harm (GBH) (the most serious subset of assault) and murder. The latter two offences have been included because they are more reliably reported due to their severity, meaning they are generally unaffected by changes in reporting.

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4 [https://gazette.legislation.nsw.gov.au/so/download.w3p?id=Gazette\\_2020\\_2020-65.pdf](https://gazette.legislation.nsw.gov.au/so/download.w3p?id=Gazette_2020_2020-65.pdf)

5 On 23 March 2020 limits on visitors in homes were introduced, non-essential businesses were closed and work and school from home messaging was issued. [https://gazette.legislation.nsw.gov.au/so/download.w3p?id=Gazette\\_2020\\_2020-54.pdf](https://gazette.legislation.nsw.gov.au/so/download.w3p?id=Gazette_2020_2020-54.pdf)

6 BOCSAR considers an incident to be domestic violence related if police have recorded domestic violence as an associated factor attached to the incident.

7 BOCSAR's usual practice is to process crime data six weeks after the close of the period. In the forecasting analysis used in this report we brought our processing a month forward when extracting the weekly data for December. This means that the weekly data used in for December 2020 are likely to be revised upwards in future by around 3% to 4%. For reference, the preliminary April 2020 data published in our previous paper have now been revised up by 85 incidents from 2,145 to 2,230 (up 3.9%).

### ***'Domestic episodes' recorded by the NSW Police Force***

This paper also considers data on *domestic episodes-no offence* which are domestic disturbances attended by police where no criminal incident is recorded. About 75 percent of these non-criminal domestic episodes are noted by police to be related to a verbal argument. Police records of these *domestic episodes-no offence* are included in this report to examine potential changes in a broader range of domestic matters than presented previously.

### **Calls to the NSW Domestic Violence Line**

The NSW Domestic Violence Line is a 24 hour, NSW state-wide telephone crisis counselling and referral service for women which is operated by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. The number of calls for assistance to this line is recorded by Department of Communities and Justice and has been provided to BOCSAR for analysis.

## **Analysis**

Forecasting techniques were used to model the level of DV assault and *domestic episodes-no offence* expected from 16 Mar 2020 to the last week of December 2020. Forecast incident volumes were compared with observed incidents to determine whether DV reported in 2020 was significantly different from what would have been expected in the absence of the pandemic.

Our forecasts include adjustment for seasonal fluctuations (as necessary), which accounts for pre-existing upward or downward trends. We then consider whether the volume of observed incidents differ from what was expected. The process used to evaluate and select the optimal forecasting method for each time series follows the method outlined in Kim and Leung (2020).

Forecast charts show the number of incidents observed per week compared with the number of incidents that we would expect to observe, based on trends prior to the COVID-19 period. Weekly recorded incident counts in 2019 are also shown for reference. Confidence intervals from the forecast model are used to judge whether the changes observed are consistent (or inconsistent) with what could have been expected based on existing trends, with 80 percent and 95 percent prediction intervals. Tabular data are also provided comparing the observed and expected weekly incident average and proportional difference for each month from April to December 2020.

Descriptive methods have been used where forecasting techniques were not appropriate or weekly data was not available. Trend testing on monthly data was undertaken using Kendall's rank-order correlation test (Conover, 1980). A two-tailed test was used to determine whether there had been an increasing or decreasing trend in the recorded numbers of incidents over the relevant period.

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## **RESULTS**

### **Has there been an increase in domestic violence above what would have been expected in the absence of the pandemic?**

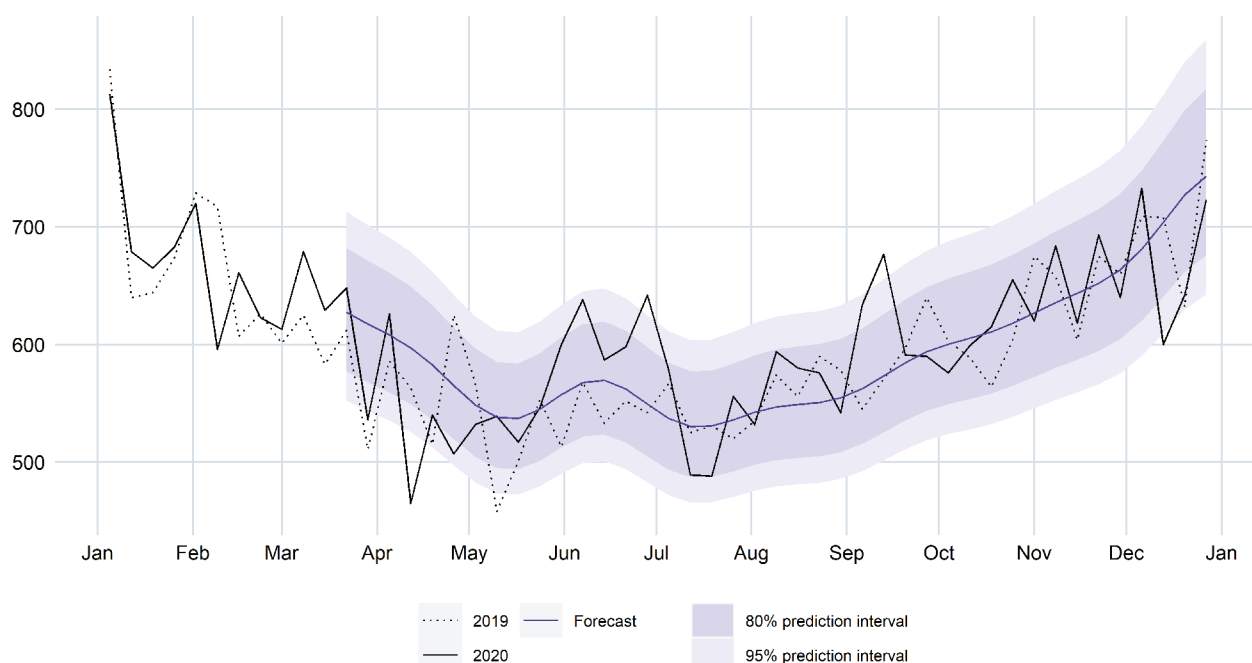
Firstly, we examine trends in selected DV criminal offences recorded by the NSW Police Force to identify if there is evidence of an increase in DV above what would have been expected in the absence of the pandemic. This is followed by an examination of *domestic episodes – no offence* recorded by police, and thirdly we examine the number of calls for assistance made to the NSW Domestic Violence Line.

### **Domestic violence-related assault**

Assault is a broad incident category that includes acts ranging from threatening to hurt someone, to acts of violence that cause significant injuries that require hospitalisation. Combining all categories of

DV-related assault provides sufficient data to forecast weekly incident data. Figure 2 shows the observed number of DV-related assault incidents from 2019 and 2020, and the volume that was predicted in 2020 had the pandemic not occurred. The seasonal nature of DV-related assault can be seen with higher volumes of assault in the earlier months of the year for both 2019 and 2020. Further analysis also shows that there had been an increasing trend in DV-related assaults in the 24 months to March 2020 (significantly up by 5.1% over the two-year period).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2. DV-related assaults incidents per week, NSW, forecast and observed**



The chart suggests the observed number of DV related-related assaults is consistent with predictions from the forecast model for most weeks of 2020, meaning that the actual number of incidents recorded in 2020 was not statistically different from expected variation with few exceptions: one week in mid-April and one in December had observed incident numbers below the forecast, while higher than forecast numbers were observed in a week in late June and again in mid-September. It is also interesting to observe that the expected seasonal dip in numbers in the middle of the year was absent in 2020.

Table 1 shows the difference in the average observed weekly incident count compared with the forecast for the months April through to December 2020. During April 2020, the observed weekly incident count was 10.1 percent lower than forecast, 8.8 percent higher than the forecast in June and 7.1 percent higher in September.

**Table 1. DV-related assault incidents, NSW, April - December 2020**

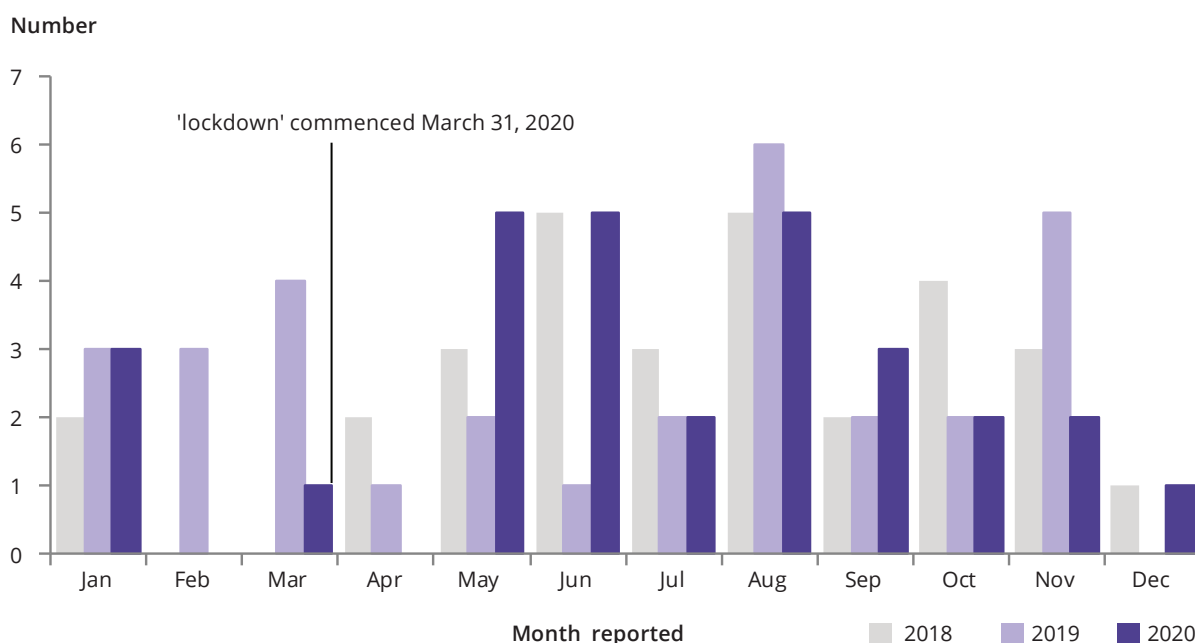
	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20
Observed (weekly average)	535	547	616	528	565	623	611	651	675
Forecast (weekly average)	588	545	562	534	549	579	609	644	714
# difference	-54	2	54	-6	16	44	3	7	-39
% difference	-10.1	0.3	8.8	-1.1	2.9	7.1	0.4	1.0	-5.8

<sup>8</sup> The trend test used was Kendall's rank-order correlation test.  $\tau = 0.507, p < 0.000$ .

## Domestic violence-related murder

Domestic violence-related murders are unlikely to evade police detection or go unreported, however the relatively infrequent nature of the offences makes it subject to substantial monthly fluctuations and not suitable for forecasting. Figure 3 shows the number of DV-related murder victims per month from January 2018 to December 2020. Table 2 shows the victims counts per month from January 2018 to December 2020. The number varies between zero and six victims per month throughout the period examined. While there was no DV-related murder victim recorded for February or April 2020, there were between one and five victims from May to December 2020. The variation in number of victims seen in 2020 is comparable to what is observed in previous years.

**Figure 3. DV-related murder victims, NSW, January 2018 – December 2020**



**Table 2. DV-related murder victims, NSW, January 2018 - December 2020**

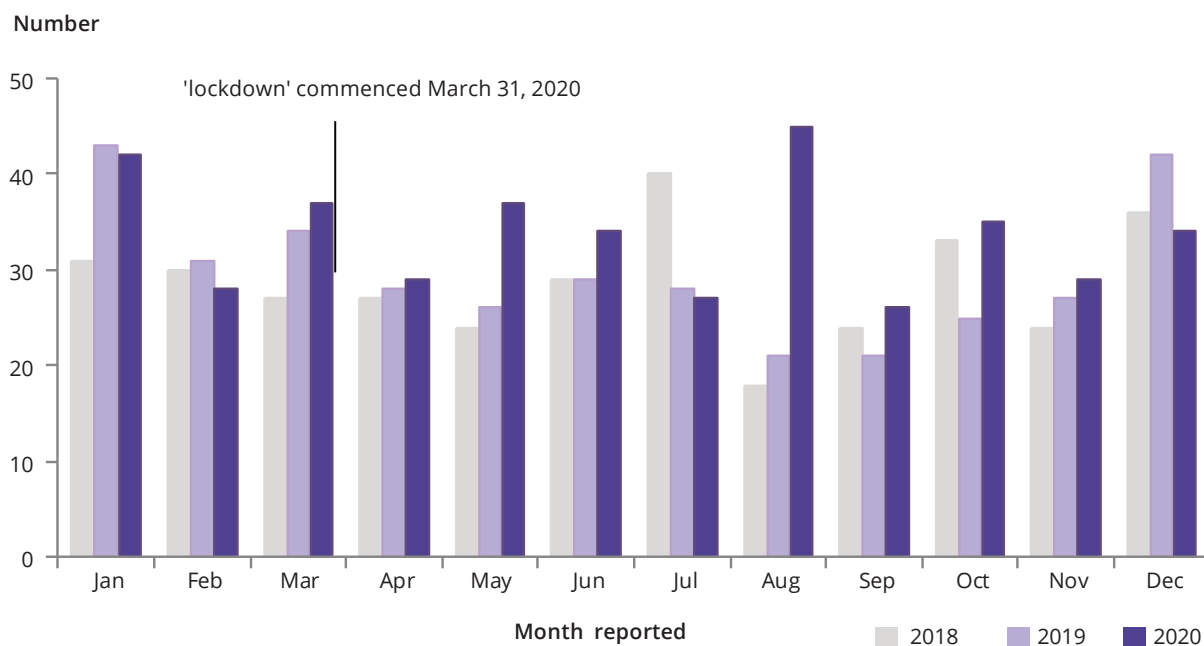
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2018	2	0	0	2	3	5	3	5	2	4	3	1
2019	3	3	4	1	2	1	2	6	2	2	5	0
2020	3	0	1	0	5	5	2	5	3	2	2	1
# difference 2019 to 2020	0	-3	-3	-1	3	4	0	-1	1	0	-3	1

## Domestic violence-related assault grievous bodily harm (GBH)

Assaults resulting in GBH are the most serious category of assault, accounting for approximately one percent of the total DV-related assaults recorded by the NSW Police Force. As with DV-related murder, the serious nature of these incidents means that we expect GBH assaults to come to the attention of police regardless of changes in willingness to report to police, so trends in reported GBH assault are a more reliable indicator of change in incidence than for other types of assaults. However, the volume of DV-related GBH assaults in NSW is relatively low, resulting in week-to-week fluctuations that make it unsuitable for the forecasting analysis. Trend test for the 24 months to March 2020 show that DV-related GBH assaults recorded by the NSW Police Force were stable over this period.<sup>9</sup>

Monthly counts of DV-related GBH assaults are shown in Figure 4 with the data from January 2018 to December 2020 presented in Table 3. There are fluctuations from month to month, and when making comparison to the same month over years. However, there does not appear to be any consistent pattern to these changes over time associated with periods of social mobility restrictions. As can be seen in Figure 4, there were small year-on-year fluctuations in the number of DV-related GBH assaults in 2020 compared with 2019, with a notable increase in August 2020. However, this chart does not suggest any substantial change in DV-related GBH assault during the period when the most stringent restrictions were in place.

**Figure 4. DV-related GBH assaults, NSW, January 2018 – December 2020**



**Table 3. DV-related GBH assaults, NSW, January 2018 - December 2020**

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2018	31	30	27	27	24	29	40	18	24	33	24	36
2019	43	31	34	28	26	29	28	21	21	25	27	42
2020	42	28	37	29	37	34	27	45	26	35	29	34
# difference 2019 to 2020	-1	-3	3	1	11	5	-1	24	5	10	2	-8

### Non-criminal domestic episodes recorded by NSW Police

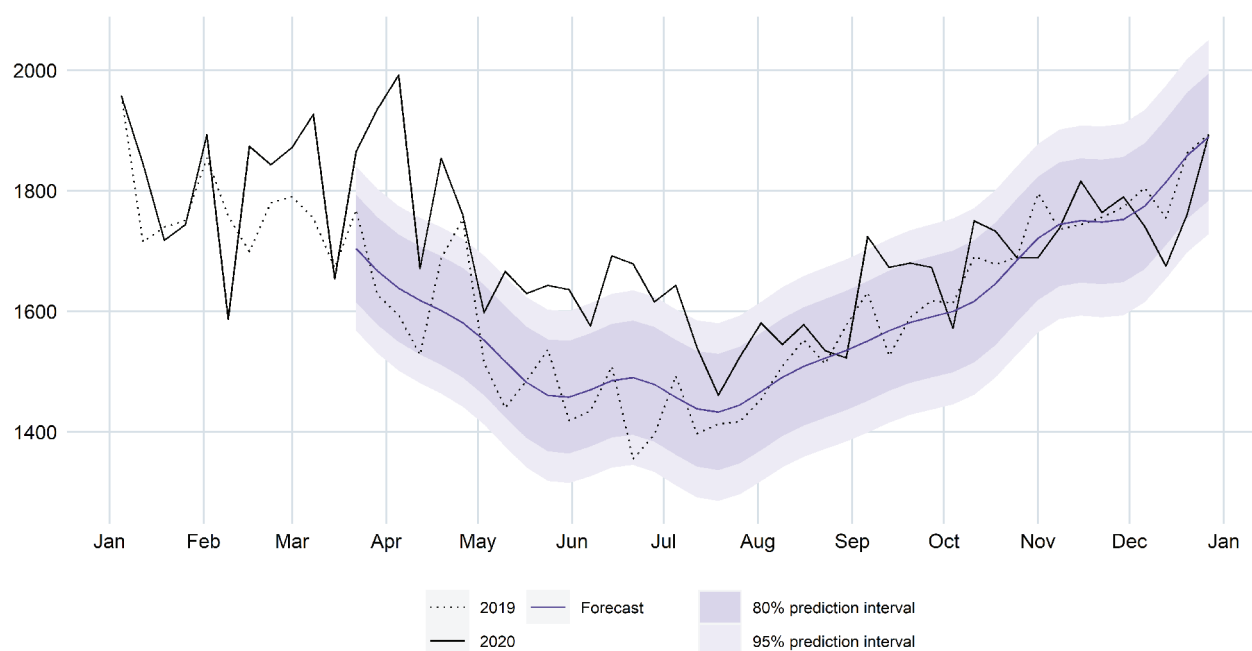
To broaden the scope of the analysis we now examine reports of domestic episodes that do not constitute a criminal offence. Domestic violence can take many forms, including physical abuse, threats, intimidation, social coercion, emotional and economic abuse. While these behaviours cause harm they do not all necessarily constitute a criminal offence. The NSW Police Force record all reported domestic related events that come to their attention, including those where no criminal incident is detected. The volume of *domestic episodes – no offence* recorded by police far exceeds that of DV-related assaults, with on average 7,102 records of *domestic episodes – no offence* each month in 2019 compared with 2,610 for DV-related assault incidents. Approximately three-quarters of the *domestic episodes-no offence* relate to verbal arguments between people considered to be in a domestic relationship. A trend test for the 24 months to March 2020 shows a significant pre-existing upward trend in *domestic episodes-no offence* recorded by NSW Police prior to April 2020.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Kendall trend test: tau = 0.478,  $p = 0.001$ , up 6.2% from previous 12 months.



The weekly observed volume of *domestic episodes-no offence* in 2019 and 2020 are shown in Figure 5, along with the 2020 forecast. The seasonal nature of the *domestic episodes-no offence* is similar to that of DV-related assaults, with numbers higher in the warmer months and generally falling toward the winter months in the middle of the year. This seasonal pattern is present in 2020 with a decline in the number of domestic episodes–no offence recorded in the winter months of 2020 compared with earlier in the 2020. However, Figure 5 also shows that counts in April 2020 were significantly higher than forecast, outside the 95 percent prediction interval, and remained significantly higher than expected until mid-July 2020. Table 4 shows that the average weekly count of *domestic episodes-no offence* was higher than forecast from April 2020 to June 2020, with April 2020 having the highest weekly average of episodes and the greatest variation from the forecast (up 11.5% from forecast). From mid-July to December 2020 observed incidents were within the expectations forecast for this period. These results provide evidence of an increase in domestic discord from the time COVID-19 restrictions were introduced until well after the most stringent travel and social restrictions had been eased.

**Figure 5. Domestic episodes - no offence per week, NSW, forecast and observed**



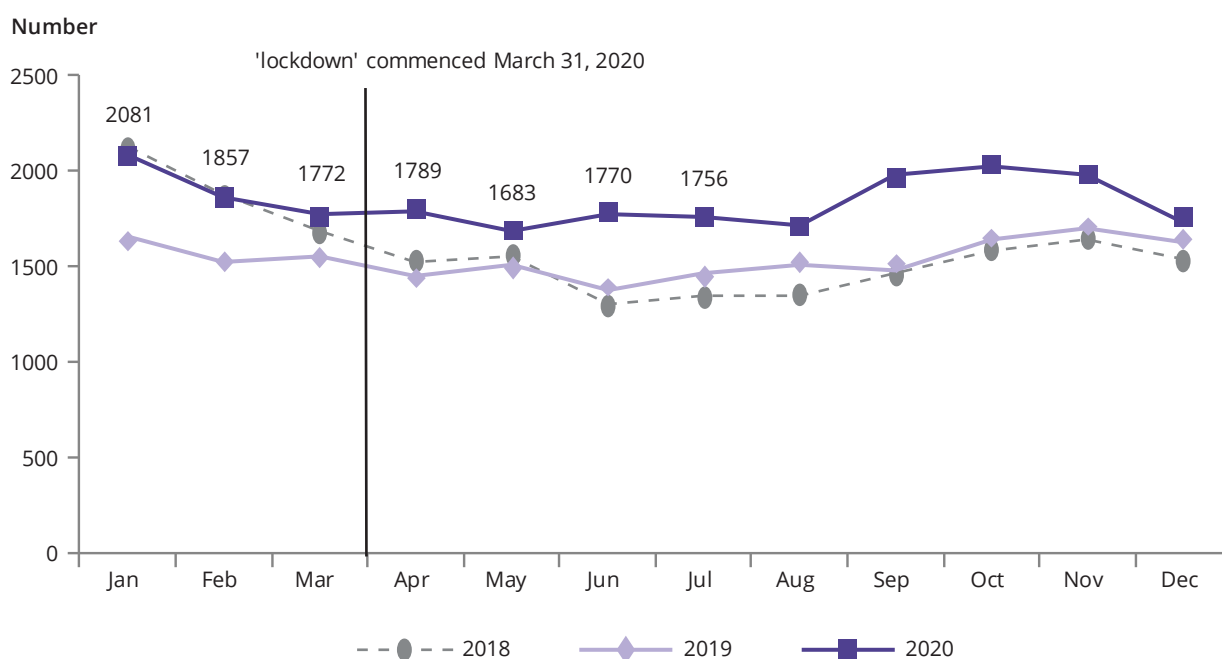
**Table 4. Domestic episodes - no offence, NSW, April - December 2020**

	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20
Observed (weekly average)	1,820	1,635	1,641	1,542	1,552	1,688	1,686	1,759	1,768
Forecast (weekly average)	1,610	1,494	1,481	1,443	1,505	1,573	1,637	1,743	1,834
# difference	210	141	160	99	47	115	49	16	-66
% difference	11.5	8.6	9.7	6.4	3.1	6.8	2.9	0.9	-3.8

## Calls to NSW Domestic Violence Line

Next, we come to the examination of calls for assistance from the public to a DV specialist service, the NSW Domestic Violence Line. Figure 6 presents descriptive year-on-year comparisons of monthly data from January 2019 to December 2020. Figure 6 shows calls to the NSW Domestic Violence Line in each month were consistently higher in 2020 than in 2019, with an upward trend in the 24 months to March 2020.<sup>11</sup> The number of calls received each month is shown in Table 5. While the volume of calls received during April 2020 was 23.8 percent higher than calls in April 2019, this increase was consistent with the increase experienced prior to the rollout of COVID-19 restrictions (up 26.1% in January 2020 and up 22.0% in February compared with the same months in 2019). Furthermore, the monthly difference between corresponding months from 2019 to 2020 has varied substantially since restrictions were eased from an increase of 13.3 percent in August to 33.4 percent in September back to 16.0 percent by November. These variations seem to bare no obvious association with COVID-19 related restrictions.

**Figure 6. NSW Domestic Violence Line calls, NSW, January 2018 - December 2020**



**Table 5. NSW Domestic Violence Line calls, NSW, January 2018 - December 2020**

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2018	2127	1877	1684	1531	1555	1303	1345	1349	1460	1586	1648	1534
2019	1650	1522	1557	1445	1509	1379	1458	1508	1480	1637	1702	1624
2020	2081	1857	1772	1789	1683	1770	1756	1709	1974	2021	1974	1731
# difference 2019 to 2020	431	335	215	344	174	391	298	201	494	384	272	107
% difference 2019 to 2020	26.1%	22.0%	13.8%	23.8%	11.5%	28.4%	20.4%	13.3%	33.4%	23.5%	16.0%	6.6%

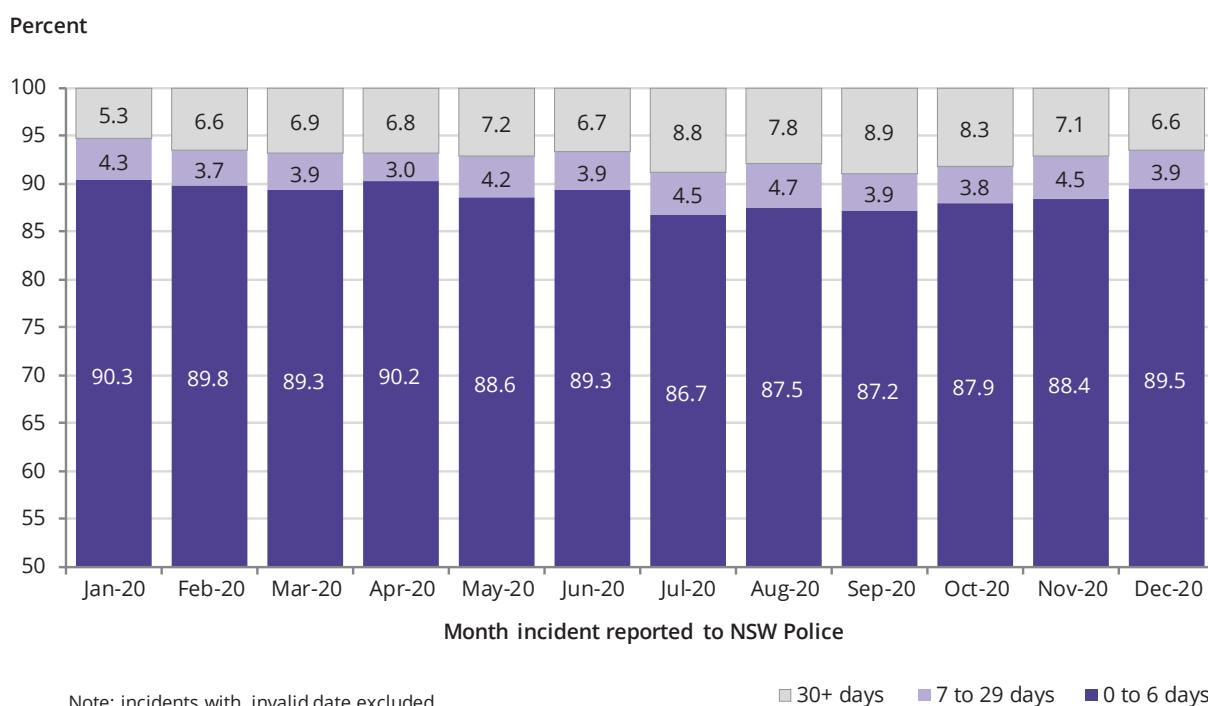
<sup>11</sup> Kendall trend test: tau = 0.377,  $p < 0.010$ , up 7.8% from previous 12 months.

## Is there evidence to indicate delayed reporting of domestic violence resulting from changes in the opportunity to report?

In this section we address the concern that there was a delay in reporting incidents of DV to police due to social isolation restrictions. This concern is particularly relevant to the month of June 2020 (after the restrictions had eased), when there was a relatively high volume of domestic violence incidents reported to police, following relatively low numbers of reports in April 2020 (when restrictions were tightest).

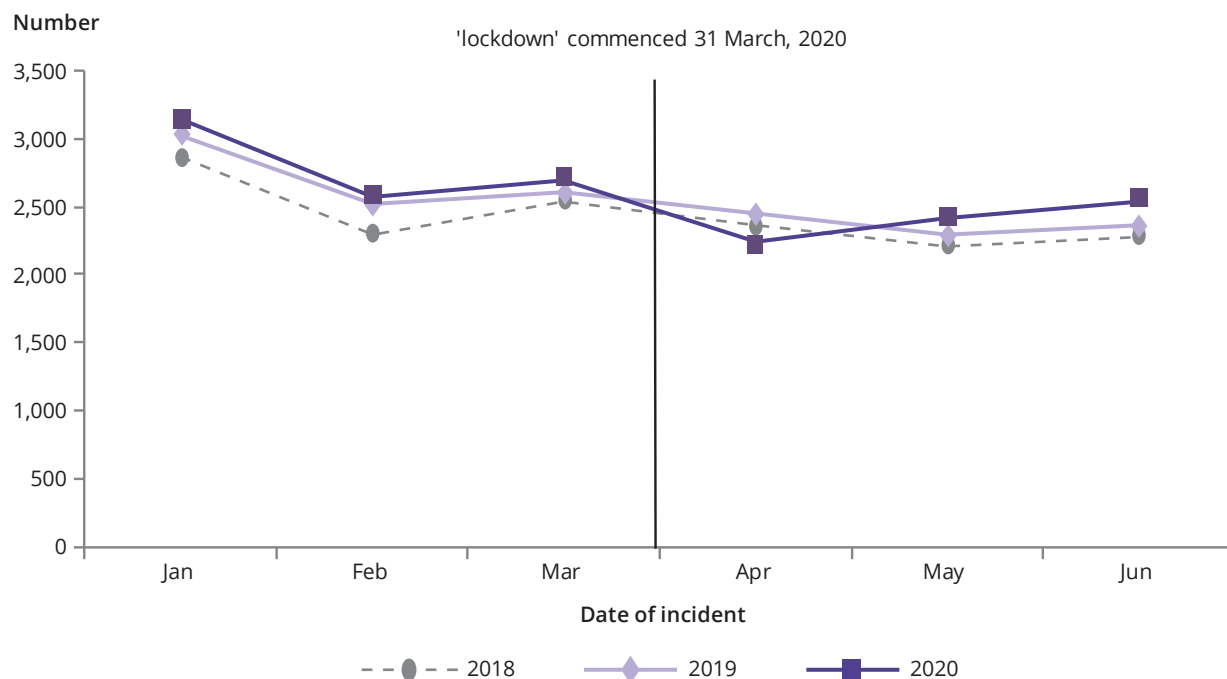
Figure 7 shows the proportion of DV-related assault incidents reported each month by the number of days between incident date and reporting date. If social restrictions impeded the reporting of DV-related assaults, we would expect to see an increase in the proportion of historical incidents (over 30 days from incident date) reported once restrictions eased. As can be seen in Figure 7, 89.3 percent of incidents reported in June occurred within six days of the incident, indicating that the higher number of reported incidents in June 2020 compared with the preceding months is being driven by incidents occurring in June 2020. The months of July and September had the highest proportions of historical reporting of incidents that had taken place more than 30 days prior to the report date (8.8% and 8.9% of reports respectively). While the vast majority (over 85%) of DV-related assaults reported in July and September related to recent incidents, a slightly higher proportion related to historical assaults compared with other months in 2020.

**Figure 7. Days between date of DV-related assault incident and date of report to police, January to December 2020**



We can also approach the matter of a potential delay in reporting in April 2020 by examining incident counts based on the date the incident occurred rather than the date the incident was reported to police. Figure 8 shows the number of incidents of DV assault per month for January to June for the years 2018 to 2020, based on reports received by the NSW Police Force to 31 December 2020, thereby allowing at least six months of historical reports to be included in the monthly incident counts. We see in Figure 8 that there was no notable spike in number of reported DV-related incidents occurring in April and May 2020 compared with these months in the previous two years.

**Figure 8. Number of DV-related assault incidents, NSW, by date of incident**



### Have trends in domestic violence varied across types of domestic relationships?

While we have seen thus far that the overall number of DV assaults reported to police was not affected by the pandemic, it is possible that changes occurred to the characteristics of DV assaults recorded by police. Here, we examine victim data relating to incidents of DV-related assault to identify if changes have occurred within specific subtypes of domestic relationships: intimate partner violence (IPV including current and ex-spouse/partner, and current and ex-boyfriend/girlfriend) and family violence (parent, child, sibling and other family members).<sup>12</sup> Over half of all victims of DV-related assaults reported in NSW are assaulted by an intimate partner (57.1% in 2019), with an additional 33.3 percent assaulted by a family member, and 9.3 percent by a perpetrator with another type of domestic relationship to the victim (household member, ex-partner of current partner, carer or other known person).

Figure 9 (a) and (b) show the observed and forecast number of victims of DV-related IPV assaults and family violence assaults. The number of victims observed for both types of DV was generally within the 95 percent prediction interval for the forecast during the period when stay-at-home orders were in place and throughout 2020, with few exceptions. The number of IPV victims was higher than forecast for a week in June and again for a week in September and lower for a week in December, while family violence was lower than forecast for a week in April and higher for a single week in the months of September, October and November.

Table 6 shows the difference in the average observed weekly victims of IPV and family violence assaults compared with the forecast for the months April through to December 2020. From this table we observe that there are variations between year-on-year changes in reports of IPV and family violence victimisation in both the proportion of difference observed, and the direction of change. For example, in April 2020 there was a 11.1 percent fall in average weekly reported victims of IPV compared with a 1.4 percent fall for family violence, and in May 2020 there was a 1.1 percent fall for IPV victims and a 3.8 percent increase for victims of family violence.

<sup>12</sup> The NSW legislation, Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007 definition of a domestic relationship includes persons who are or have been married or in a defacto relationship, including boyfriend/ girlfriends, household members, carers, family members, kinship relationships, and persons previously in a relationship with a current domestic partner.

Figure 9. DV-related assaults victims per week, NSW, by relationship type, forecast and observed

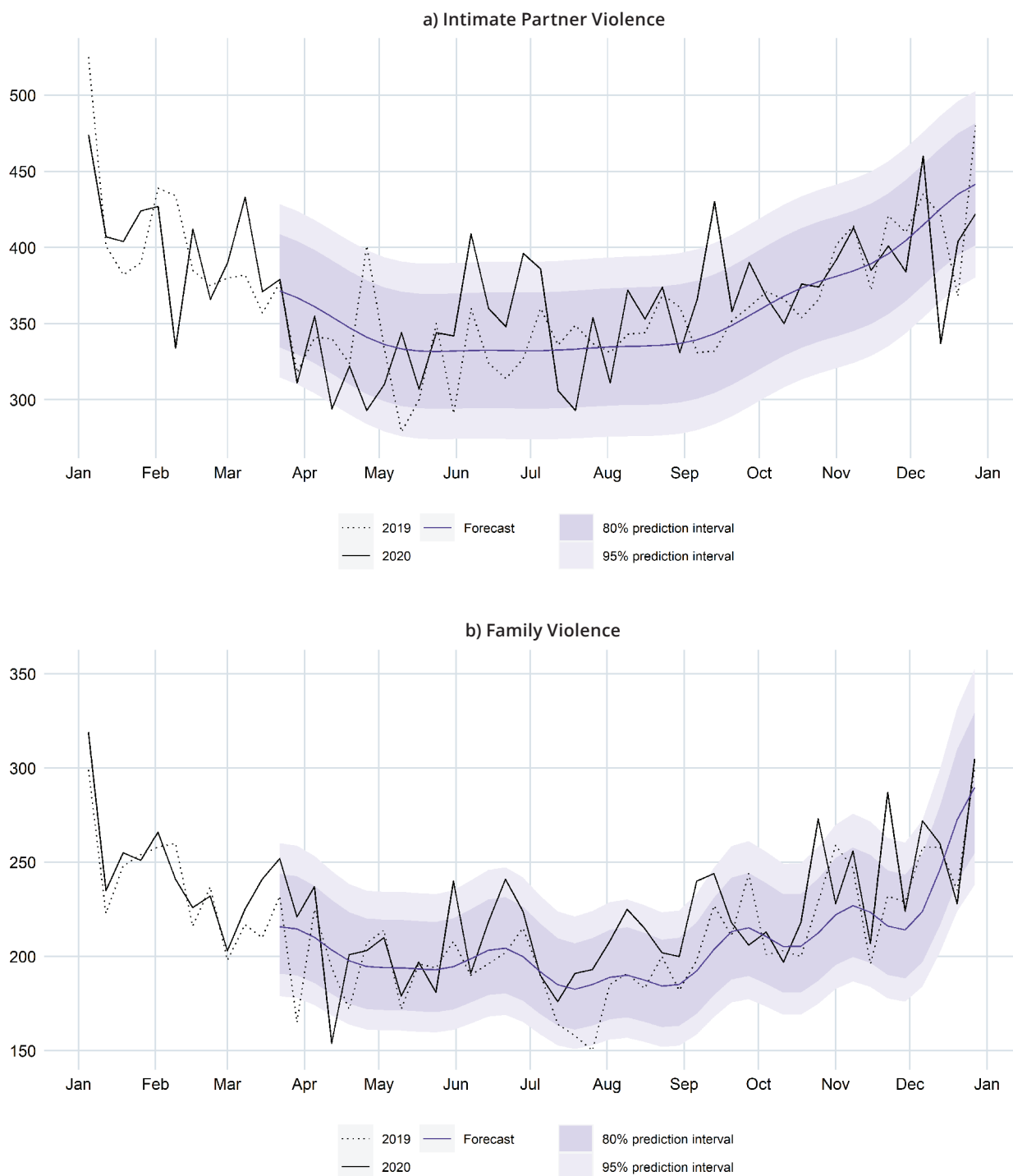


Table 6. Victims of DV-related assault, NSW, by relationship type, April - December 2020

		Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20
Intimate partner violence	Observed (weekly average)	316	329	378	335	348	386	367	395	406
	Forecast (weekly average)	351	333	332	333	336	347	370	391	429
	# difference	-35	-4	46	2	13	39	-4	4	-24
	% difference	-11.1	-1.1	12.1	0.5	3.6	10.2	-1.0	1.0	-5.8
Family Violence	Observed (weekly average)	199	201	219	188	210	227	225	240	266
	Forecast (weekly average)	201	194	202	186	187	206	208	221	258
	# difference	-3	8	17	1	23	21	17	20	8
	% difference	-1.4	3.8	7.7	0.7	10.9	9.2	7.5	8.2	3.1

IPV can be further disaggregated into different categories of intimate partner: spouse/partner, ex-spouse/ex-partner and boyfriend/girlfriend (including exes). Within the IPV subcategories, victim counts are too low to create reliable forecasts, however, Table 7 provides a descriptive analysis of monthly counts of victims for the IPV sub-categories and the percentage change in victim numbers from 2019 to 2020 for each month.

**Table 7. Victims of IPV assault, NSW, by relationship type, January 2019 - December 2020**

		Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total Apr-Dec
Boy/ Girlfriend (Incl Ex-Boy/ Girlfriend)	2019	780	656	657	640	554	554	676	702	651	725	778	814	6094
	2020	808	630	710	562	629	695	609	677	725	745	755	795	6192
	# diff 2019 to 2020	28	-26	53	-78	75	141	-67	-25	74	20	-23	-19	98
	% diff 2019 to 2020	3.6	-4.0	8.1	-12.2	13.5	25.5	-9.9	-3.6	11.4	2.8	-3.0	-2.3	1.6%
Spouse/ Partner	2019	680	550	578	530	498	523	502	523	499	569	590	641	4875
	2020	661	539	603	491	577	588	499	581	521	554	636	656	5103
	# diff 2019 to 2020	-19	-11	25	-39	79	65	-3	58	22	-15	46	15	228
	% diff 2019 to 2020	-2.8	-2.0	4.3	-7.4	15.9	12.4	-0.6	11.1	4.4	-2.6	7.8	2.3	4.7%
Ex- Spouse/ Ex- Partner	2019	419	340	401	314	329	343	323	331	344	329	362	437	3112
	2020	442	363	380	267	273	333	329	335	368	370	351	426	3052
	# diff 2019 to 2020	23	23	-21	-47	-56	-10	6	4	24	41	-11	-11	-60
	% diff 2019 to 2020	5.5	6.8	-5.2	-15.0	-17.0	-2.9	1.9	1.2	7.0	12.5	-3.0	-2.5	-1.9%
Total IPV	2019	1879	1546	1636	1484	1381	1420	1501	1556	1494	1623	1730	1892	14081
	2020	1911	1532	1693	1320	1479	1616	1437	1593	1614	1669	1742	1877	14347
	# diff 2019 to 2020	32	-14	57	-164	98	196	-64	37	120	46	12	-15	266
	% diff 2019 to 2020	1.7	-0.9	3.5	-11.1	7.1	13.8	-4.3	2.4	8.0	2.8	0.7	-0.8	1.9%

From Table 7 we see that assaults between boy/girlfriend (including exes) are the most frequent category of IPV assault reported to the NSW Police Force (43% in 2020), followed by spouse/partner (36% in 2020) and then ex-spouse/ex-partner (21% in 2020).

We can see that in April 2020 compared with 2019, IPV assaults involving boyfriends/girlfriends fell 12 percent, spouse/partner incidents fell 7.4 percent and ex-spouse/ex-partner incidents fell 15 percent. Over the course of 2020 there were some small shifts in DV assaults by different intimate partner offender types. From April to December 2020, DV assaults by ex-spouse/ex-partner were 2 percent lower than in 2019 while assaults by boy/girlfriend (including exes) were up 2 percent and current spouse/partner increased 5 percent. While these changes are all modest, it is interesting to note the different results among people in IPV relationships within the same household versus IPV relationships where people are not co-habiting (ie current spouse/partners versus ex-spouse/partners and boy/girlfriend including exes).

## CONCLUSION

This report examines a range of indicators of DV to identify evidence of a change in the incidence of DV in NSW related to COVID-19. We examined a range of DV-related incidents reported to police, from serious domestic assaults to *domestic episodes-no offence* and calls to the NSW Domestic Violence Line. The results of the analysis are two-fold. First, there is no evidence of an increase in DV-related assault coinciding with the introduction of strict social isolation requirements coming into effect in the last week of March 2020 and throughout April; or even beyond this as restrictions eased up to December 2020. Second, there is evidence for an increase in non-criminal domestic conflict from the commencement of COVID-19 restrictions continuing into the middle of 2020. These analyses do not support the suggestion of a 'spike' in domestic violence during the period that stay-at-home orders were in force in NSW. However, the rise in police attendance of DV-related verbal arguments suggest that the increased time spent at home and other societal changes and stressors associated with the pandemic may have played a role in the ongoing higher level of demand for assistance from NSW Police. We have seen that NSW Domestic Violence Line calls were higher in 2020 than 2019, however because this increase commenced pre-pandemic, any subsequent impact of the pandemic is hard to disentangle.

While there have been fluctuations in the number of DV-related assaults recorded in 2020, there was no spike in criminal incidents of physical DV observed during the period where stay-at-home orders were in place (April 2020). The absence of a sharp increase in DV with the advent of social isolation regulations contrasts with some international reports of increases in DV assaults reported to police in the first weeks of social restriction measures (Leslie & Wilson, 2020; Piquero et al., 2020). The findings do, however, concord with the results of Ashby (2020 ), who examined the frequency of serious assault in residences in 16 large cities across the United States of America in the early months of 2020. The study found that observed residential assaults remained within modelled estimates once data was seasonally adjusted. Given the evidence of a pre-existing upward trend in DV in NSW in the 24 months to March 2020, some continuation of year-on-year increase throughout 2020 would be within expectations but does not necessarily denote an association with the COVID-19 related restrictions.

The NSW recorded crime data showed some isolated weeks where the number of DV-related assaults were higher than forecast; these occurred after the stay-at-home orders had been lifted and restrictions had eased. Further analysis of the data did not support the proposition of a delay in reporting DV assaults that occurred during the lockdown. In the months following the easing of social restrictions, reports of DV-related assault to NSW Police were overwhelmingly for recent incidents, with between 87 percent and 90 percent of reports for incidents that had occurred within the past seven days.

When we broadened the scope of the analysis to consider domestic episodes attended by police where no criminal incident was detected (predominantly verbal arguments), we found significantly higher incident counts in the three months from April to June 2020 (even once pre-existing trends and seasonality were considered). Patterns returned to pre-pandemic levels in the second half of 2020. The increase in *domestic episodes – no offence* recorded by police could be due to an increase in the prevalence or frequency of non-criminal domestic disputes during this time, an increase in reporting or an increase in detection due to changes in police practices. Given the period when we observed higher than forecast episodes coincides with the period of stay-at-home orders, it is plausible that the increase is associated with the increased opportunity for domestic arguments.

Our examination of the difference in DV-related assault trends for IPV and family violence showed that, while there was no spike in the number of victims in either of these sub-groups during April 2020, there were differences between subtypes worth noting. The observed number of victims of IPV assault for April was 11.1 percent lower than the forecast, while only 1.4 percent lower for family violence. There are several factors that could potentially contribute to this difference: greater barriers to reporting IPV; households with more family members than intimate partners leading to more opportunity for assaults with family members; and greater surveillance of known IPV offenders. Many IPV assaults are committed by ex-partners and boyfriends/girlfriends who the victim does not co-habit with. Delving further into the

data for assaults by intimate partners, we find almost two thirds of IPV assaults were by a person not co-habiting with the victim (boy/girlfriend including ex-boy/girlfriend and ex-spouse/ex-partner). The reduction in community mobility associated with the restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19 would increase the exposure time for victims who live with their perpetrator, while for others not co-habiting with the potential offender, the stay-at-home orders may have actually reduced opportunities for physical assaults.

Having examined a range of measures of DV, and domestic assaults for different offender/victim relationship categories, we observe some different patterns in the data based on cohorts of victims and indicators of DV. This may explain some of the differences in the literature on the effect of COVID-19 restrictions and trends in DV.

While we found no evidence of an increase in DV-related assault associated with the measures introduced to contain COVID-19, there may have been unobserved increases among some communities and cohorts of people that cannot be detected with the administrative data that is available. Any fall in the reporting of incidents to police due to the restrictions imposed would mask the actual level of offending. However, the finding of a significant increase in recorded *domestic episodes-no offence* in police data provides some confidence that people experiencing domestic incidents continued to seek assistance from police despite the restrictions imposed. Conversely, this observed increase in *domestic episodes-no offence* is cause for concern as research has shown that non-criminal behaviour, namely emotional abuse in the form of a partner who attempts to control social contact, is one of the strongest predictors of a victim of DV related assault being revictimised (Rahman, 2018). These findings underpin the need for ongoing monitoring of a range of indicators of DV.

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