

Has the rate of domestic and family violence changed in NSW?: Victim survey results from July 2008 to June 2020

Karen Freeman

AIM

To examine prevalence and trends in domestic and family violence (DFV) in New South Wales (NSW) as indicated by crime victim survey results.

METHOD

This is a descriptive study drawing upon pooled data from 12 consecutive *Crime Victimization, Australia* surveys from financial years 2008/09 to 2019/20. Self-reported rates of physical assault, threatened assault and police reporting rates of domestic and family violence are considered for NSW and Australia across four three-year time periods.

RESULTS

Using victimisation surveys from 2008/09 to 2019/20, and comparing victimisation rates across three-year pooled estimates, no significant changes were found in the NSW victimisation rate for physical DFV between consecutive time periods. This finding remained generally consistent when threats of physical DFV were included.

The victimisation rates for physical DFV in NSW were generally consistent with the national victimisation rates with the exception of the period July 2014 to June 2017, where the NSW victimisation rate was significantly lower than the national rate.

Approximately 60 percent of NSW victims of physical DFV reported the most recent incident to police. The proportion of victims reporting physical DFV to police did not change significantly over the time periods examined.

CONCLUSION

It is estimated that in NSW over 41,000 persons aged 15 and over experienced at least one episode of physical violence by an intimate partner or family member within a 12 month period. This equates to approximately 650 per 100,000 persons or approximately one in every 155 persons. The survey data suggest that the prevalence of physical DFV in NSW did not change significantly over the time periods examined. This finding supports trends in the rate of domestic violence related assault recorded by the NSW Police Force which also remained stable in the 15 years to December 2021.

KEYWORDS

domestic and family violence

victim

reporting rates

intimate partner violence

INTRODUCTION

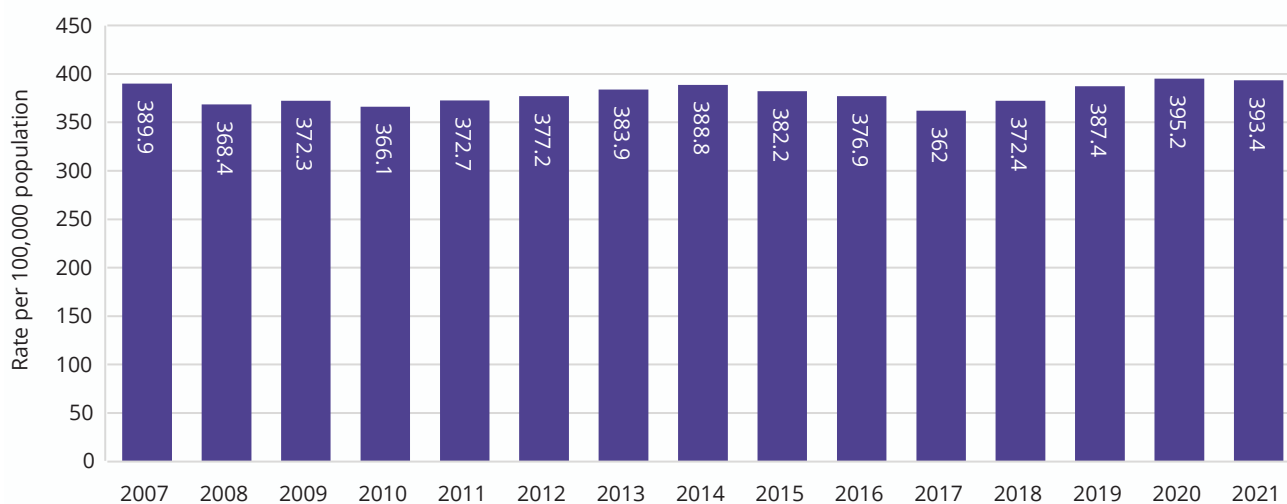
Domestic and family violence (DFV) is a major health, welfare and criminal justice issue. A key consideration in our understanding of DFV is how prevalent it is, and whether that prevalence has changed over time. Unfortunately, reliably assessing trends in DFV is not a straight-forward exercise.

Domestic and family violence incidents reported to and/or detected by police are routinely published (BOCSAR, 2021) and can be easily monitored for change. However, a significant limitation with police records is that a large proportion of DFV incidents are not reported to police. Victim surveys tell us that in Australia 82 percent of women and 97 percent of men who experience violence by a current partner never reported violence by that partner to police (ABS, 2017). Consequently, trends in police reports can reflect changes in the willingness of victims to report the offence to police rather than the occurrence of the offence itself. It is impossible to know, for instance, whether an increase in police reports represents more victims coming forward or more offending.

Over the past decade, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) has reported a significant upward trend in the number of DFV assaults recorded by police either over a 24 month or five-year period in multiple reports (for example see BOCSAR, 2016, BOCSAR, 2019, BOCSAR, 2020, BOCSAR, 2021).¹ It is unclear from the police data alone, however, whether these increases were due to increased prevalence or increased reporting (or just regular variation).

Figure 1 shows the annual rate of police recorded DFV assaults in the 15 years to December 2021. This chart suggests that the recorded rate of DFV has been stable over this period.² Given the limitations with police statistics mentioned above, it is possible that underlying changes in reporting rates could influence these results. For instance, a decrease in the prevalence of DFV in the community could be offset by an increase in reporting thus suggesting that domestic violence is stable.

Figure 1. Domestic and family violence related assault incidents, NSW, rate per 100,000 population



¹ The category 'domestic violence related assault' in these reports includes incidents of assault flagged by the NSW Police Force with domestic violence as an associated factor based on the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. The definition of domestic relationship for this purpose is consistent with the *Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007*: a spouse/partner, ex-spouse/ ex-partner, parent/guardian (including step/foster), child (including step/foster), sibling or other members of family (including kin), household member, and two persons who have both been in a domestic relationship with the same person.

² Kendall's rank-order trend test ($\tau = 0.08$, $p = 0.14$).

The limitations of police recorded DFV statistics can be reduced by supplementing them with a view of crime victim survey results. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducts an annual survey of approximately 30,000 people aged over 15 years (over 6,500 in NSW) asking respondents about their experience of various crimes in the previous 12 months.³

The *Crime Victimization, Australia* survey offers the potential for an annual estimate of DFV in the community based on the results of the sample surveyed. The imprecise nature of the survey estimates, however, means that the *Crime Victimization, Australia* survey is not well placed to reliably detect year-on-year changes in the prevalence of DFV. Due to both the survey sample size and the relatively low proportion of the sample who report experiencing DFV, the victimisation rate for NSW would have to increase or decrease by approximately 70 percent to be able to detect change from one year to the next (ABS, 2020). Clearly a change of this magnitude would be extremely unusual.

An accepted method to increase the power of sample surveys to detect changes over time is to pool survey results across a few years. This paper adopts this approach (see also past paper Freeman, 2018).

This Bureau Brief uses pooled crime victimisation survey results for NSW and Australia up to June 2020 to:

1. estimate the prevalence of DFV;
2. examine trends in DFV; and
3. consider whether there have been changes in willingness to report DFV.

We consider trends over the 12-year period from *July 2008 to June 2020*. We do not address the issue of short-term changes related to COVID-19.

METHOD

Data Sources

The study is based on a customised data extract from the ABS' *Crime Victimization, Australia* survey (ABS, 2021).⁴ The study replicates the methodology used in an earlier BOCSAR examination of changes in DFV (Freeman, 2018).

Crime Victimization, Australia (ABS, 2021) is a national survey conducted each financial year, which asks respondents about their experiences of personal and household victimisation in the past 12 months.⁵ The survey is conducted throughout the year, with the reference period determined by the date of interview. Interviews are conducted by telephone in the respondent's home. It should be noted that the *Crime Victimization Australia* survey does not require a private interview setting (unlike the ABS's Personal Safety Survey). Consequently, respondents to this survey may be less likely to disclose experiences of violence by their partner or family member if the perpetrator is present in the home at the time of interview.

³ In the 2019/20 survey, the Australian sample size was 29,793 respondents. Further details of the sampling used in each of the surveys can be found in the explanatory notes of each issue of *Crime Victimization, Australia* (ABS, 2021). In 2019-20 the NSW sample size was 6,949 (ABS, 2022).

⁴ This report is based on data collected in surveys conducted between the financial years 2008/09 and 2019/20. Changes to the methodology used for the administration of the survey means that survey data pre-2008 are not comparable with data post-2008. The data used in this report are derived from a customised data request (ABS Customised report, 2021).

⁵ The *Crime Victimization Australia* survey is conducted as part of the *Multipurpose Household Survey* (MPHS) and is undertaken throughout Australia each financial year as part of a supplement to the ABS's monthly *Labour Force Survey* (LFS). The survey is restricted to persons aged 15 years and over, and people living in non-private dwellings are excluded (e.g. Hotels, hospitals, inmates of prisons, residents of other institutions). Households selected to complete in the LFS are initially contacted by mail. Respondents to the *Crime Victimization, Australia* survey must be members of a household completing the LFS and are selected at random. Respondents are asked about their experience of selected personal and household crimes in the last 12 months, selected details of the incident including their relationship to the perpetrator, and whether they reported the incident to the police. The interviews are conducted either by telephone or face-to-face, with the majority of interviews conducted over the phone.

In this paper we focus on respondents' self-reported experience of physical and threatened violence perpetrated by either intimate partners or family members in the 12 months prior to the survey. Survey respondents who indicate that they experienced physical assault or a face-to-face threatened assault in the past 12 months are asked about their relationship to the offender involved in the most recent incident of assault.⁶ 'Intimate partner' includes current spouse/partner, ex-spouse/ex-partner, current boy/girlfriend, ex-boy/girlfriend of the respondent.

Data from 12 consecutive surveys were 'pooled' into four time periods spanning three consecutive financial years each. This resulted in four time periods: *July 2008 to June 2011*, *July 2011 to June 2014*, *July 2014 to June 2017* and *July 2017 to June 2020*.⁷ This technique effectively triples the sample size of an individual estimate and correspondingly each estimate is more reliable. Data pooling does however compromise time specificity as each data point represents three years' worth of data. As such, the estimates represent the average across the years of the pooled data, rather than an estimate for the total period or a single year. This means the paper considers sustained changes over time rather than yearly fluctuations.

The relative standard errors for each estimate were used to calculate 95 percent confidence intervals (CI) for each estimate. This means we can be 95 percent confident that the actual population mean falls within the range shown. When comparing victimisation estimate, either over time or between populations, the standard errors of the differences between estimates were calculated, and the 95 percent CIs of these differences were used to determine whether the differences are statistically significant.

RESULTS

Survey Data

Estimated physical DFV victimisation rate within 12 months

Based on the most recent pooled data point (*July 2017 to June 2020*), it is estimated over 41,000 people in NSW experienced at least one incident of physical DFV in 12 months and over 57,000 experienced a physical DFV assault or were threatened with DFV assault. This equates to approximately 650 victims per 100,000 population who experienced a physical assault from an intimate partner or family member, and 900 per 100,000 who were either physically assaulted or threatened with DFV assault.

Figure 2 shows the estimated 12-month physical assault DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 for both NSW and Australia in the four three-year time windows. NSW victimisation estimates fluctuate modestly over the period examined; the highest estimate was from *June 2008 to July 2011* at 699 per 100,000 and the lowest rate was during *June 2014 to July 2017* at 558 per 100,000. However, the 95 percent CIs (shown as vertical lines through each column in Figure 2), show that even the pooled NSW estimates have a large margin of error and appear to be overlapping. Further analysis of the CIs is required to determine with confidence whether the difference between the estimates at different time points is significant.

Table 1a shows the difference in DFV estimates between consecutive data periods (and associated CIs) for NSW and Australia. To determine if adjacent estimates are significantly different from each other, we consider the CIs of the differences of these estimates. Table 1a shows there were no statistically significant changes to NSW estimates between any consecutive time periods. This suggests DFV rates have been stable over the periods considered.

⁶ It should be noted that when asked about the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, only the relationship for the last incident of violence is included.

⁷ The pooled time periods refer to three financial years. As such July 2008 – June 2011 refers to data from surveys conducted in the financial years 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11.

Table 1a also shows that there were no consecutive time periods where DFV victimisation for physical assault changed for the estimate for Australia.

Figure 2 also shows the rate of DFV physical assault in NSW versus Australia. The NSW rate is generally equivalent to the Australian rate with the possible exception of the period between *July 2014 to June 2017*, when the DFV rate in NSW appears lower.

Table 1b quantifies whether this difference is significant by showing the difference between NSW and Australian victimisation rates at each of the four time periods considered (plus the CI for these differences). The results confirm that the victimisation rate for NSW was significantly lower than the Australian victimisation rate in the period between *July 2014 to June 2017* (-180.8; 95% CIs (-283.0, -78.6)) but equivalent at other times.

Figure 2. Estimated physical DFV assault victimisation rate per 100,000 population, with 95% confidence interval, NSW and Australia

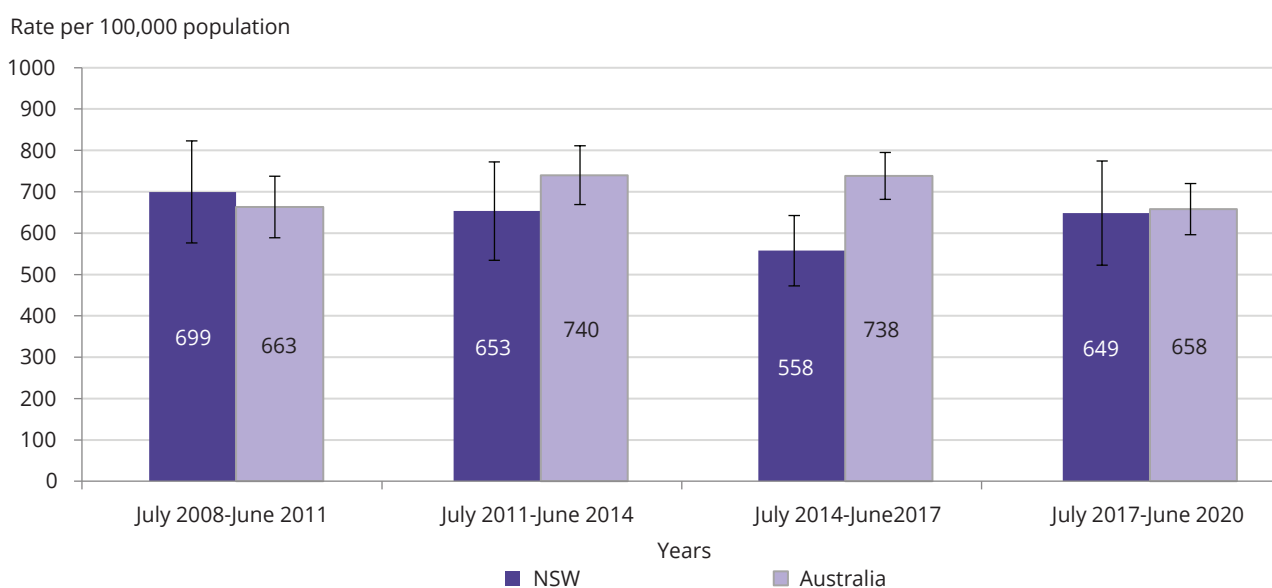


Table 1a. Difference from previous data period for 12-month physical DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 population, NSW and Australia

Year	NSW			Australia		
	Difference	(95% confidence interval)	Standard error of difference	Difference	(95% confidence interval)	Standard error of difference
July 2011-June 2014 vs July 2008-June 2011	-46.0	(-217.5, 125.5)	87.5	76.6	(-26.1, 179.3)	52.5
July 2014-June 2017 vs July 2011-June 2014	-95.8	(-242.3, 50.6)	74.7	-24.2	(-123.0, 74.7)	50.4
July 2017-June 2020 vs July 2014-June 2017	91.0	(-61.0, 243.0)	77.5	-57.8	(-150.3, 34.7)	47.2

Table 1b. Difference in 12-month physical DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 population between NSW and Australia

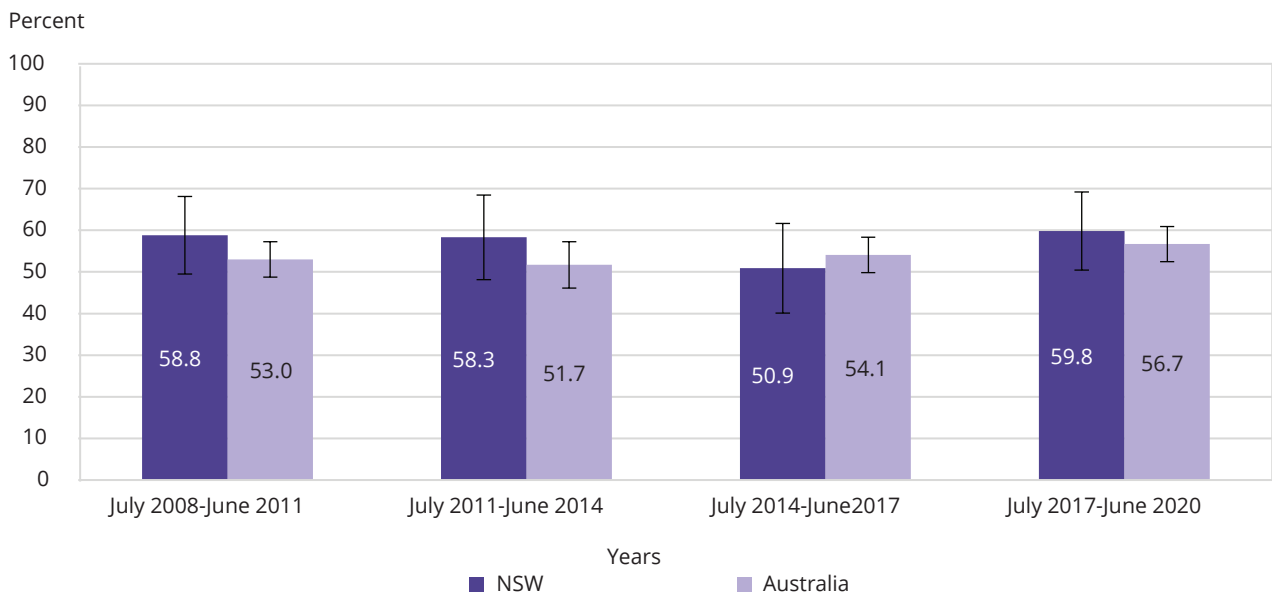
Year	Difference in DFV victimisation rate	(95% confidence interval)	Standard error of difference
July 2008-June 2011	36.2	(-107.7, 180.1)	73.4
July 2011-June 2014	-86.4	(-225.1, 52.3)	70.8
July 2014-June 2017	-180.8	(-283.0, -78.6)	52.2
July 2017-June 2020	-9.3	(-149.6, 130.9)	71.6

Rate of reporting physical DFV assaults to police

Respondents to the *Crime Victimization, Australia* survey who experienced an incident of physical assault in the previous 12 months were asked whether that incident was reported to the police. This allows us to measure the proportion of victims reporting criminal incidents to police and whether this has changed over time (which gives context to police reported crime rates).

Figure 3 plots the proportion of physical DFV victims who reported the last incident to police, for each of the four time periods examined.

Figure 3. Proportion of victims of physical DFV, reporting last incident to police, with 95% confidence intervals, NSW and Australia



In NSW and nationally, a little over half of people who experienced an incident of DFV assault reported the last incident to police. While the NSW estimate varies slightly between time periods, the estimates are not statistically different from each other. The finding is also true of the national reporting rates. Table 2 presents the difference in estimated reporting rates between consecutive data periods and the associated CIs, confirming that there were no statistically significant changes in the reporting rate over the time periods examined. The CIs for the estimates are available in the Appendix.

Table 2. Difference from previous data period of estimated reporting rate for most recent physical DFV incident, NSW and Australia

Year	NSW			Australia		
	Difference	(95% confidence interval)	Standard error of difference	Difference	(95% confidence interval)	Standard error of difference
July 2011-June 2014 vs July 2008-June 2011	-0.5	(-14.3, 13.3)	7.0	-1.3	(-8.3, 5.7)	3.6
July 2014-June 2017 vs July 2011-June 2014	-7.4	(-22.2, 7.4)	7.6	2.4	(-4.6, 9.4)	3.6
July 2017-June 2020 vs July 2014-June 2017	8.9	(-5.4, 23.2)	7.3	2.6	(-3.4, 8.6)	3.1

Estimated DFV physical assault and/or face-to-face threat victimisation rate within 12 months

Respondents to the victim survey are also asked if they have experienced a face-to-face threat of assault. This section expands on the previous section by including people who experienced a face-to-face threat by an intimate partner or family member along with physical assault victims. Figure 4 shows estimates for victims of DFV who experience physical or threatened DFV.

Once again, there were variations in the NSW estimated victimisation rate across the four time periods. However, Table 3a, which presents the confidence intervals for the difference between the data points, shows that these differences were statistically significant between a pair of consecutive time periods, with a decrease in victimisation between July 2011 to June 2014 to July 2014 to June 2017 (-209.3; 95% CI (-374.2, -44.4)).

A slightly different pattern of victimisation is observed for Australia. From Table 3a we can conclude that nationally there was an increase in the victimisation rate between the first two time periods, July 2008 to June 2011 and July 2011 to June 2014 (144.2; 95% CI (34.0, 254.4)), and a significant decrease between the last time periods, July 2014 to June 2017 and July 2017 to June 2020 (-150.1; 95% CI (-264.7, -35.5)).

Table 3b presents the difference between the estimated rate of DFV victims of physical assault and or face-to-face threats for NSW and Australia. While the estimate for NSW is consistently lower than the estimate for Australia, the confidence intervals reveal that the differences are only statistically significant in July 2014 to June 2017 (-272.5; 95% CIs (-401.2, -143.9)).

Figure 4. Estimated DFV physical assault and/or face to face threatened victimisation rate per 100,000 population, with 95% confidence intervals, NSW and Australia

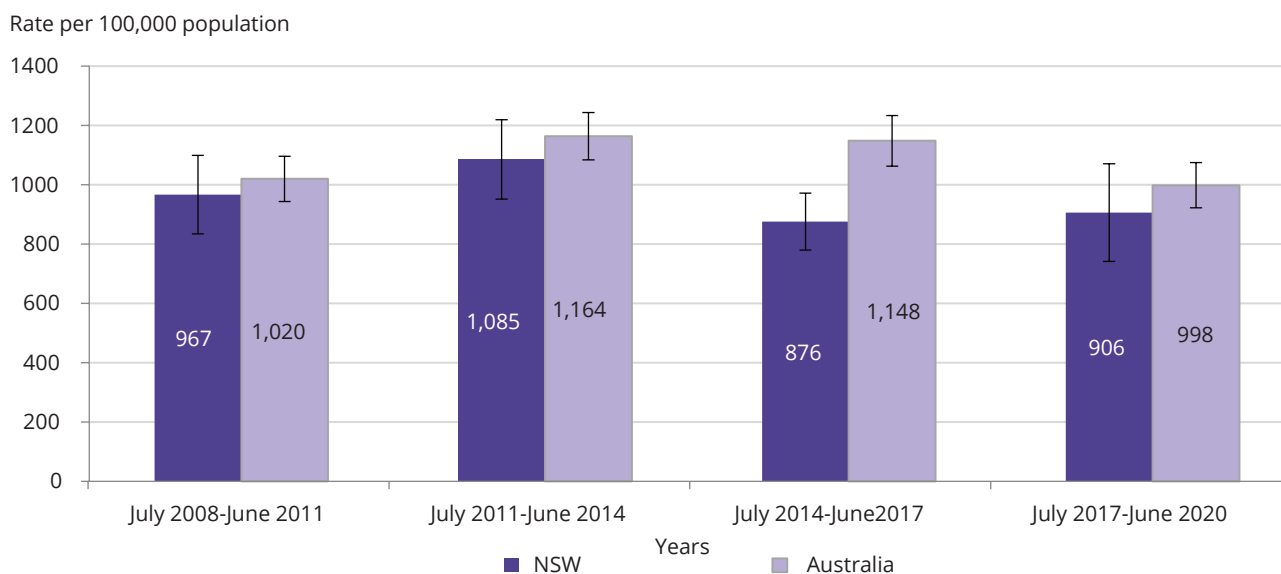


Table 3a. Difference from previous data period for DFV physical assault and/or threatened victimisation rate per 100,000 population, NSW and Australia

Year	NSW			Australia		
	Difference	(95% confidence interval)	Standard error of difference	Difference	(95% confidence interval)	Standard error of difference
July 2011-June 2014 vs July 2008-June 2011	118.6	(-70.0, 307.1)	96.2	144.2	(34.0, 254.4)	56.2
July 2014-June 2017 vs July 2011-June 2014	-209.3	(-374.2, -44.4)	84.1	-15.8	(-132.8, 101.2)	59.7
July 2017-June 2020 vs July 2014-June 2017	30.3	(-160.8, 221.4)	97.5	-150.1	(-264.7, -35.5)	58.5

Table 3b. Difference in DFV physical assault and/or threatened victimisation rate per 100,000 population between NSW and Australia

Year	Difference in DFV victimisation rate	(95% confidence interval)	Standard error of difference
July 2008-June 2011	-53.4	(-206.2, 99.5)	78.0
July 2011-June 2014	-79.0	(-235.0, 77.0)	79.6
July 2014-June 2017	-272.5	(-401.2, -143.9)	65.6
July 2017-June 2020	-92.1	(-274.0, 89.9)	92.8

DISCUSSION

This Bureau Brief examines evidence of changes in domestic and family violence in NSW from July 2008 to June 2020 using self-reports of experiences of physical violence and threats of physical violence from survey data. Based on the *July 2017 to June 2020* survey data, it is estimated in NSW there were approximately 650 victims of physical DFV per 100,000 population in 12 months, and approximately 900 per 100,000 victims of either physical or threatened DFV. That equates to approximately 41,000 victims of physical DFV and 57,000 victims of physical or threatened DFV in NSW the past 12 months. These are likely to be underestimates of actual victimisation given limitations of the data collection process.

While the survey estimates fluctuate over time, there were no statistically significant difference in victimisation rates in NSW between any consecutive time periods, for physical DFV. The rate of police reporting for physical DFV also remained stable in NSW over the period considered.

While there were no statistically significant *increases* between the estimates for the rate of victimisation for physical or threatened DFV in NSW, there was a statistically significant decrease between estimates for *July 2011 to June 2014* and *July 2014 and June 2017*. There was no subsequent significant increase or decrease when comparing the two most recent time periods presented.

The survey results indicate that the rate of DFV in NSW has generally been equivalent to the national rate over the period considered. The only exception to this found in the study was in the period *July 2014 to June 2017* when the rate of DFV in NSW was significantly lower than the rate for Australia.

These findings align closely to trends in police domestic violence reports. The stable rate of DFV in NSW shown in the pooled *Crime Victimisation, Australia* survey results is consistent with the stable rate of domestic violence assault recorded by the NSW Police Force (see Figure 1). Furthermore, there was no evidence of a significant change in the rate of reporting of domestic violence assault over time, providing greater confidence that the long-term trends in police recorded crime data reflects the trends in incidence of reported DFV rather than willingness to report the offence.

It must also be acknowledged that DFV takes many forms, including emotional abuse, financial abuse, and social isolation. As such, the number of people in NSW who experienced some form of DFV is likely to be

substantially larger than the estimate of victims of physical violence derived from the victim survey. Similarly, criminal incidents recorded by police provide only a narrow window of behaviors in relation to DFV.

The current analysis shows how complex it is, even at a broad level, to determine the prevalence of domestic and family violence and monitor trends. It is even more difficult to do so within specific contexts, for example violence by an intimate partner, among members of the same household, among persons living in remote areas with limited access to services, and persons from linguistically culturally diverse backgrounds; all of whom may be particularly vulnerable in relation to domestic and family violence. As such, it is particularly challenging to assess progress and success of policy and programs that have been implemented to tackle this pervasive harm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Alana Cook and Jackie Fitzgerald for reviewing the report and Florence Sin for desktop publishing.

REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2017). *Personal Safety Survey, Australia 2016*. Retrieved 16 February 2022 from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release#experience-of-partner-violence>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2019). *Crime Victimization, Australia, 2017-18*. (ABS Cat. No. 4530). Retrieved 8 October 2021 from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf-4530.0>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2020). *Crime Victimization Survey, Overview of survey methodology and options to improve estimate reliability*. Unpublished report.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2021). *Customised Report*.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2022). *Crime Victimization Survey (unpublished)*
- Freeman, K. (2018). *Is domestic violence in NSW decreasing?* Bureau Brief (no. 134). NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. Retrieved 1 February 2022 <https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Publications-BB-2018-Report-Is-domestic-violence-in-NSW-decreasing-BB134.pdf>
- NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) (2016). *NSW Recorded Crime Statistics, quarterly update, June Quarter 2016*. Retrieved 1 February 2022 from https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_crime_stats/bocsar_crime_stats_archived.aspx
- NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) (2020). *NSW Recorded Crime Statistics, quarterly update, December Quarter 2019*. Retrieved 1 February 2022 from https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_crime_stats/bocsar_crime_stats_archived.aspx
- NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) (2020). *NSW Recorded Crime Statistics, quarterly update, June Quarter 2020*. Retrieved 1 February 2022 from https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_crime_stats/bocsar_crime_stats_archived.aspx
- NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) (2021). *NSW Recorded Crime Statistics, quarterly update, September Quarter 2021*. Retrieved 1 February 2022 from https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_crime_stats/bocsar_crime_stats_archived.aspx

APPENDIX

Table A1. Estimated physical DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 population, NSW and Australia

Year	NSW		Australia	
	Physical DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 population (95% CI)	Standard error	Physical DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 population (95% CI)	Standard error
July 2008-June 2011	699.4 (576.2 - 822.8)	62.9	663.2 (589.1 - 737.3)	37.8
July 2011-June 2014	653.4 (534.3 - 772.5)	60.8	739.8 (668.8 - 810.9)	36.3
July 2014-June 2017	557.6 (472.3 - 642.8)	43.5	738.4 (682.0 - 794.8)	28.8
July 2017-June 2020	648.5 (522.7 - 774.4)	64.2	657.9 (596.0 - 719.8)	31.6

Table A2. Reporting rate for physical DFV incident, NSW and Australia

Year	NSW		Australia	
	Estimated reporting rate (95% CI)	Standard error	Estimated reporting rate (95% CI)	Standard error
July 2008-June 2011	58.8 (49.5 - 68.1)	4.8	53.0 (48.7 - 57.3)	2.2
July 2011-June 2014	58.3 (48.1 - 68.5)	5.2	51.7 (46.1 - 57.3)	2.8
July 2014-June 2017	50.9 (40.1 - 61.7)	5.5	54.1 (49.9 - 58.3)	2.2
July 2017-June 2020	59.8 (50.4 - 69.2)	4.8	56.7 (52.5 - 60.9)	2.2

Table A3. Estimated physical and/or threatened DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 population, NSW and Australia

Year	NSW		Australia	
	Physical DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 population (95% CI)	Standard error	Physical DFV victimisation rate per 100,000 population (95% CI)	Standard error
July 2008-June 2011	966.5 (833.9 - 1099.1)	67.7	1019.9 (943.9 - 1095.8)	38.8
July 2011-June 2014	1085.1 (951.1 - 1219.1)	68.4	1164.1 (1084.2 - 1243.9)	40.1
July 2014-June 2017	875.7 (779.6 - 971.9)	49.0	1148.3 (1262.7 - 1233.8)	43.6
July 2017-June 2020	906.1 (740.9 - 1071.2)	84.3	998.2 (921.9 - 1074.5)	38.9