

Has domestic violence increased in NSW in the wake of COVID-19 social distancing and isolation? Update to April 2020

Karen Freeman

AIM

To monitor changes in the incidents and patterns of domestic violence in NSW related to the unprecedented societal changes in response to the global pandemic COVID-19.

METHOD

Consider changes in the volume of domestic violence records from January 2019 to April 2020 from the following data sources:

- Domestic violence-related assaults and sexual assaults recorded the NSW Police Force;
- NSW Police callouts to domestic violence incidents;
- NSW Domestic Violence Line call volumes; and
- Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO) compliance checks made by NSW Police.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Police recorded crime data for March and April 2020 show no evidence of an increase in domestic violence since social distancing was implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing measures commenced in NSW in mid-March 2020. Recorded incidents of domestic violence-related assault for the month of April 2020 were lower than April 2019 (2,145 recorded domestic violence-related assaults in April 2020 versus 2,434 in April 2019).

It is possible that an increase has been masked by isolation strategies affecting victim willingness or ability to seek assistance from police. Were this to be the case, we would still expect the most serious forms of physical domestic violence (i.e. murder and assault resulting in grievous bodily harm) to come to police attention as these offences are not as sensitive to discretionary reporting. The volume of extremely serious domestic violence offences recorded by police in April 2020, however, are comparable with 2019 counts.

Trends in the volume of calls to the NSW Domestic Violence Line, a 24 hour victim assistance service, show no evidence of COVID related increase; while call volumes have been higher in 2020 compared with 2019, the increase preceded social isolation initiatives. Police urgent domestic violence callouts have not increased either.

None of the evidence considered here suggests social isolation measures have increased domestic violence in the first six weeks of operation. This study however is not sensitive to changes in forms of domestic violence that do not result in serious physical injury AND which are not reported to police or victim services.

KEYWORDS

domestic violence

family violence

intimate partner violence

social isolation

social distancing

COVID-19

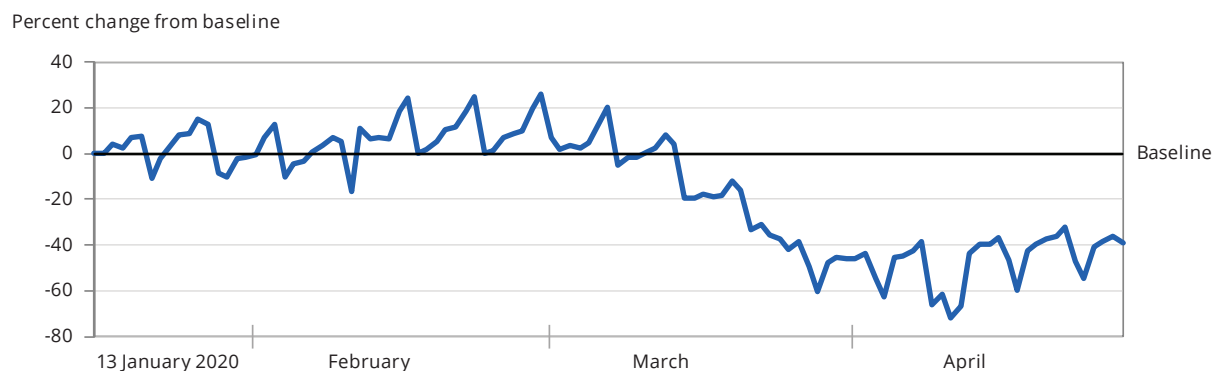
Coronavirus

INTRODUCTION

The Australian and NSW Governments' health response to the COVID-19 outbreak has included minimising infection through the use of social distancing measures and enforced isolation. The initiatives to achieve these goals ratcheted up from March 2020 through April 2020. On 15 March 2020 NSW Health advised NSW residents to adopt social distancing measures including working from home where possible, avoiding indoor gatherings and crowds and reducing public transport use.¹ On 23 March 2020 NSW non-essential businesses were closed, work from home messaging was reinforced² and parents were encouraged to keep children home from school.³ On 31 March 2020 criminal offences were enacted under the NSW Public Health Act 2010 requiring that people not leave their place of residence without a reasonable excuse.⁴ The most stringent restrictions were in place throughout April, with some restrictions relating to isolation being relaxed from 15 May 2020.

The social mobility of people within NSW changed dramatically following the announcement of these government directions. To illustrate, Figure 1 shows the relative volume of driving direction requests by Apple Map users compared with a baseline volume as at January 13. It reveals a sharp downward trend from mid-March, consistent with the timing of the restrictions.

Figure 1. Mobility trends. Change in driving direction requests January 13 - April 30, 2020, NSW



Source: apple.com/covid19/mobility

There has been concern that the restrictions imposed to combat the spread of COVID-19 may inadvertently increase the incidence of domestic violence (DV), and may limit the ability of people experiencing domestic violence to seek assistance.

This report is an update of a previous Bureau Brief which presented preliminary domestic violence data for March 2020. That report found no evidence of an increase in recorded domestic violence at that time. However, as mentioned in the paper and confirmed in Figure 1, social isolation strategies were only initiated in the second half of March 2020 and didn't reach full impact until April 2020.⁵

This paper considers whether there is evidence of an increase in domestic violence in April 2020 related to social isolation based on a variety of sources. As with the previous study we are relying on administrative data such as police recorded criminal incidents plus some new measures to assess possible changes to levels of domestic violence following the introduction of restrictions in response to COVID-19.

1 <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Factsheets/social-distancing.pdf>

2 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/news/new-covid-19-restrictions-begin-as-schools-move-towards-online-learning>

3 <https://education.nsw.gov.au/news/latest-news/restrictions-begin-as-schools-move-towards-online-learning>

4 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/what-you-can-and-cant-do-under-rules>

https://gazette.legislation.nsw.gov.au/so/download.w3p?id=Gazette_2020_2020-72.pdf

[https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/_emergency/Public%20Health%20\(COVID-19%20Restrictions%20on%20Gathering%20and%20Movement\)%20Order%202020.pdf](https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/_emergency/Public%20Health%20(COVID-19%20Restrictions%20on%20Gathering%20and%20Movement)%20Order%202020.pdf)

5 www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/BB/2020-Report-Domestic-Violence-in-the-wake-of-COVID-19-BB145.pdf released 23 April 2020

METHOD

This report presents data on these key measures of domestic violence between January 2019 and April 2020:

- Domestic violence-related assaults and sexual assaults recorded the NSW Police Force;
- NSW Police callouts to domestic violence incidents;
- NSW Domestic Violence Line call volumes; and
- Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO) compliance checks made by NSW Police.

Criminal incident, NSW Police callout and ADVO compliance check data were extracted from the NSW Police Force's (NSWPF) Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS). Incidents of domestic violence in recorded crime data are identified by the 'related' flag in COPS. The NSWPF flag domestic incidents in accordance with the Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007. To expedite reporting, we have truncated some of the usual BOCSAR data processes.⁶ For this reason the latest data is considered to be preliminary and will likely be revised slightly upwards in future.⁷

NSW Police callout data reflect occasions where a police car is directed to a location through the computer aided dispatch system. These callouts are categorised by priority level with Priority 1 and 2 relating to incidents that require an urgent response. This report shows Priority 1 and 2 callout data only.

An ADVO compliance check is a proactive contact made by police with victims and offenders subject to ADVOs. These checks are intended to ensure that apprehended violence orders are being complied with. This is a proactive police activity aimed at increasing victim safety. ADVO compliance checks do not indicate the level of domestic violence occurring in the community but they do indicate the amount of police enforcement occurring.

The 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 volume of calls for assistance to this line is recorded and has been provided by Helpline, Department of Communities and Justice.

Of key interest is whether April 2020 figures for these measures are higher than expected as this could indicate a change in domestic violence due to social isolation strategies.

RESULTS

Figure 2 presents a series of charts examining incidents of domestic violence for selected offence types, comparing data from 2019 with the corresponding month in 2020. Figure 2 (a), (b), (c) and (d) show various domestic violence-related criminal incidents recorded by police; none show a noticeable increase in domestic violence incidents in April 2020.

The number of domestic violence-related assaults recorded in April 2020 was 12% lower than in April 2019, a fall of 289 incidents (Figure 2(a)). For domestic violence related sexual assault, the number of recorded incidents in April 2020 was broadly similar to April 2019 (Figure 2(b)).

⁶ BOCSAR's usual practice is to process crime data six weeks after the close of the period. This 6 week buffer gives time for the data to 'settle' so the figures are relatively stable. In this report we have brought our processing a month forward extracting the data just two weeks after the close of the period. This means that the preliminary April 2020 figures are likely to be revised upwards in future by roughly 2 to 3%.

⁷ For reference, the March 2020 data published in our previous paper a month ago have now been revised up by 79 incidents from 2,678 to 2,757 (up 2.9%).

It is possible that domestic violence increased in April 2020 but victims were unable to report due to home confinement with their perpetrator. While murder and grievous bodily harm are infrequent they are serious enough that we would expect them to come to police attention regardless of victim willingness to report. Neither of these offences changed markedly in April 2020 (Figure 2(c) and 2(d)).

Of all the offences shown, Breach Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO) was the only offence where the April 2020 count was noticeably higher than the equivalent 2019 count. However, this pattern was already apparent in January and February 2020, prior to social isolation. Breach ADVO incidents are also considered to be influenced by police enforcement activity which we will see later has increased since social-isolation strategies were implemented.

Figure 2(f), shows domestic violence-related assaults recorded by police by relationship between perpetrator and victims. Just over half these assaults in April 2020 were by intimate partners, while approximately one third were by family members; proportions consistent with reports for 2019.

Domestic Violence Incidents

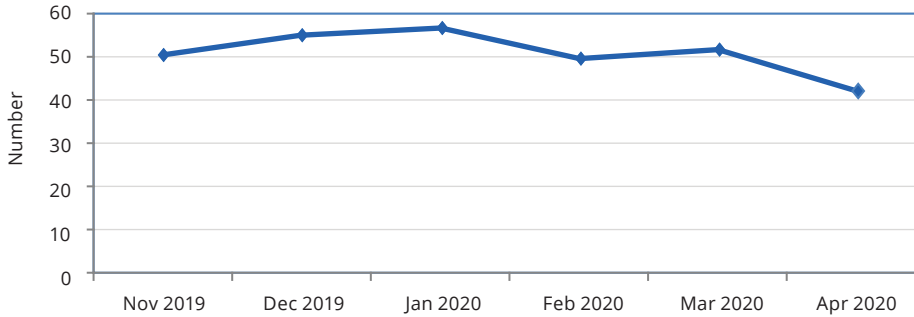
Figure 2. Domestic violence incidents recorded by NSW Police, selected offences, (preliminary data), NSW, January 2019 - April 2020



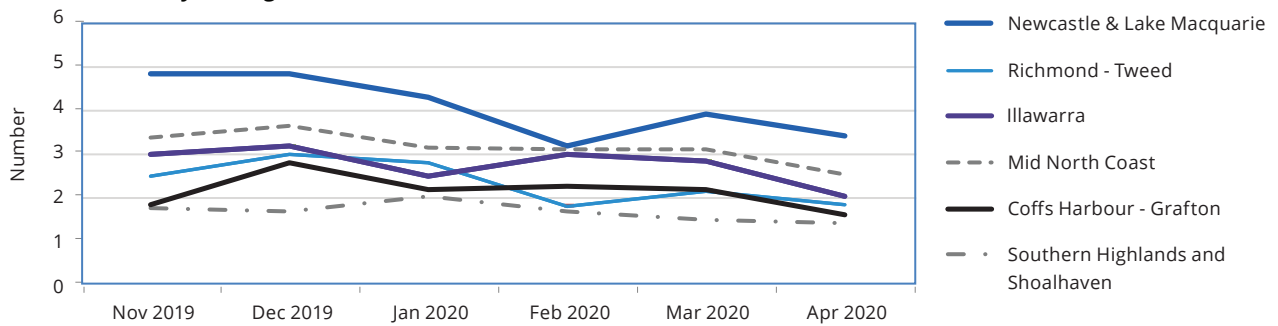
Domestic Violence Assault Incidents - Regional

Figure 3. Domestic violence related assault incidents in NSW by region, (preliminary data), November 2019 to April 2020

3(a). Daily average number DV assaults, Greater Sydney



3(b). Daily average number DV Assaults, Coastal NSW



3(c). Daily average number of DV assaults, Western and Central NSW

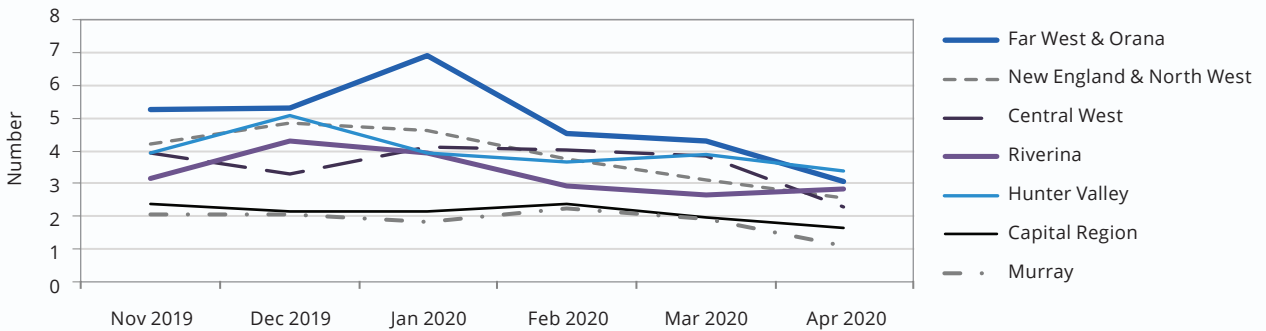


Figure 3 presents a regional perspective of incidents of domestic violence-related assaults recorded by police in NSW. Again we are looking for evidence of an increase in recorded assaults in April which could indicate more violence due to social isolation. Daily average numbers of domestic violence-related assaults are provided for the six-month period November 2019 to April 2020 for the Greater Sydney region and the 13 other Statistical Area 4 locations in NSW.

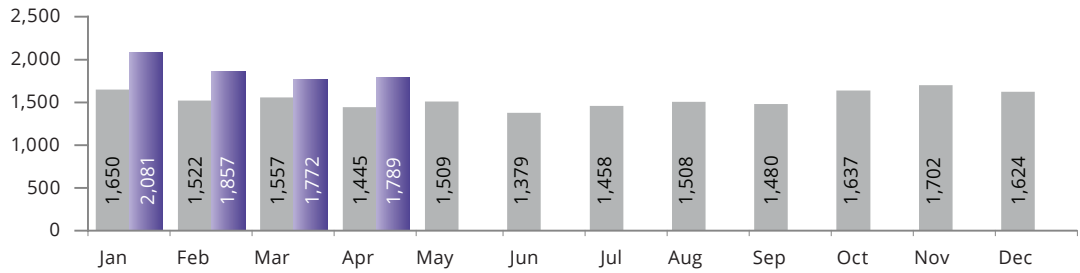
The regional charts do not suggest any noticeable change in recorded domestic violence in April anywhere in NSW. All but one region (Riverina) showed fewer average incidents a day in April 2020 relative to March 2020, which is in-line with usual seasonal patterns.

Domestic violence calls for assistance

The data reported above reflect criminal incidents recorded by NSW Police. Now we consider two measures which approach the question from a different angle; reflecting domestic violence requests for assistance rather than the incident response.

The volume of calls to the NSW Domestic Violence Line is shown in Figure 4. The seasonal nature of calls to the Domestic Violence Line is apparent in the 2019 data, with higher volumes recorded over the summer months, and lower volumes in June and July. The volume of calls received in April 2020 was 24% higher than calls in April 2019. However, the hotline was already receiving more calls prior to COVID-19 social isolation measures being implemented. In January 2020 call volumes were up 26% over the previous January and in February 2020 they were up 22%. Thus, while Domestic Violence Line calls have increased, the increase pre-dates social isolation measures.

Figure 4. NSW DV Line call volume, NSW, January 2019 - April 2020

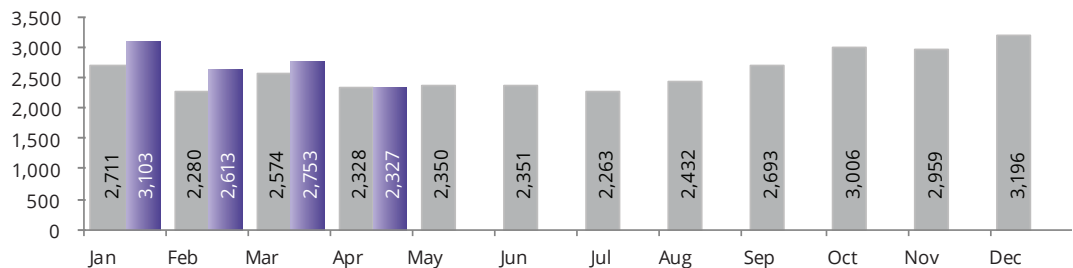


Source: NSW Domestic Violence Line, NSW Department of Communities & Justice, unpublished data.

Figure 5 shows domestic violence callouts received by police that are categorised as urgent (Priority 1 or 2). Callouts can arise from a 000 call, a call to the police station or a call for assistance from other police.

There is no evidence from Figure 5 of a COVID-related increase in urgent police callouts to respond to Priority 1 & 2 domestic violence incidents. Police callouts to domestic violence incidents were higher in 2020 than in 2019 for the months of January through to March, but were equivalent in April.

Figure 5. NSW Police DV Police callouts (Priority 1 & 2), NSW, January 2019 - April 2020



ADVO compliance checks

The last series considered does not inform us about the incidence of domestic violence in the community. Instead it is an indicator of police activity and proactive enforcement in the area of domestic violence.

Figure 6 shows the number of ADVO compliance checks conducted by NSW Police.

Figure 6. NSW Police ADVO compliance checks, NSW, January 2019 - April 2020

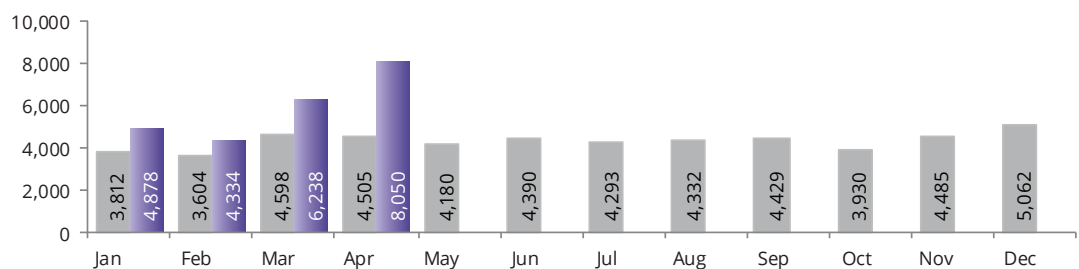


Figure 6 shows evidence of a substantial rise in proactive policing in the area of domestic violence from the time COVID-19 restrictions were introduced. The number of monthly ADVO compliance checks throughout 2019 showed a gradual increase over time, however the number of checks undertaken in the most recent year increased by 44% from February 2020 to March 2020 (from 4,334 to 6,238) and a further 29% from March 2020 to April 2020 (from 6,238 to 8,050). In April 2020 the number of compliance check conducted was 79% higher than for the same month in 2019.

The high level of police compliance checks could increase detection of additional domestic violence offences should it occur among families already known to police.

CONCLUSION

Among the various measures presented, none show evidence for an increase in domestic violence since the introduction of social distancing and social isolation measures commenced in mid-March 2020. Recorded incidents of domestic violence-related assault and domestic violence-related sexual assault were lower in April 2020 than in April 2019. There were no substantial changes to the most serious forms of domestic violence which we expect would come to police attention regardless of victims' willingness to report. There was also no evidence of a COVID-19 related increase in the number of urgent callouts for police to respond to domestic related incidents or in the number of calls for assistance to the NSW Domestic Violence Line.

At the same time there is evidence of an increase in proactive police activity in relation to domestic violence with a large increase in the number of ADVO compliance checks conducted by NSW Police evident in March and April 2020 compared with the preceding months. The increase in police activity could increase the likelihood of unreported domestic violence assaults being detected and recorded; but there is no evidence that this has eventuated.

A limitation of this study is the reliance on reported domestic violence incidents. A concern raised in relation to COVID-19 restrictions is that victims in social isolation may be unwilling or unable to report offences to authorities due to confinement with their perpetrator. We have attempted to address this by also considering trends in the most serious forms of domestic assault which are not subject to discretionary reporting (namely murder and assault occasioning grievous bodily harm). It remains possible however that, while extremely serious domestic violence events remain stable, forms of domestic violence that result in less-serious or non-physical harm may have increased but are not being reported. Such a situation would not be revealed from the data sources considered in this paper.