

PROPENSITY TO REPORT INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA: COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

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ABSTRACT: Intimate partner violence (IPV) has devastating consequences both for the individuals involved and the community more widely. The role of the community in the prevention of IPV has been noted both in the literature and in recent initiatives within Australia. Contingency-specifying stimuli like community attitudes towards both IPV and women have been suggested to contribute to the prevalence of IPV. Logically the success of any community-based initiative to reduce IPV rests upon individuals of that community being willing to report such violence. As such, there is a need to determine which variables may influence an individual's willingness to report IPV. The aim of the current study was to examine demographic and attitudinal variables to ascertain their relationship with propensity to report. A telephone questionnaire resulted in 1208 valid responses from members of the general community. Results showed a number of variables which were related with report propensity including gender, age, income level and awareness of whom to report such incidents to. These variables and their implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS: family violence, reporting, propensity to report

It is generally acknowledged within the social sciences that official reports of crime prevalence significantly underestimate the reality (Mukherjee & Dagger, 1990; Mukherjee, Carcach, & Higgins, 1997). This is particularly the case with violent crime such as intimate partner violence (IPV). In part this is due to the fact that much IPV occurs "both metaphorically and literally ... 'behind closed doors'" (Felson, Messner, & Hoskin, 1999, p. 931) and is therefore less likely to be reported by others (Fineman & Mykitiuk, 1994). It has also been suggested that IPV may go unreported by the abused due to a fear of retaliation, privacy concerns and/or a desire to protect the family unit (e.g., Felson, Messner, Hoskin, & Deane, 2002). This situation is further complicated by the fact that among the public, and to a lesser extent the legal system, IPV may be seen as less 'important' or less 'reportable' than violence between strangers (Felson & Paré, 2005; Gartner & Macmillan, 1995).

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For example, Douglas and Godden (2002) report that, in the Australian state of Queensland, IPV is treated as a private and/or social issue by the legal system. They argue that this perspective essentially results in minimal ‘criminal’ consequences for those who engage in IPV and that the current focus on providing protection orders for those experiencing (or at risk of) IPV rather than prosecution of such violence reinforces this. Interestingly, while nearly 30% of female homicides in Queensland (in the period 1994-1997, cited in Douglas & Godden, 2002) were perpetrated by the individual whom the victim took a protection order out against, less than 1% of applications for protection orders were investigated by police in 2001 and only 0.4% resulted in prosecution. This extremely low rate of ‘criminal consequence’ is not limited to Queensland or Australia per se (e.g., Myers, 1995; Partnerships Against Domestic Violence [PADV], 2004) and serves to highlight the cultural (and social) milieu that surrounds the issue of IPV.

General reluctance to report IPV (and the related lowered probability of detection and prosecution), results in what has been described as a ‘contingency-specifying stimulus’ (Myers, 1995; Schlenger & Blakely, 1994). Contingency-specifying stimuli are temporally remote, often culturally embedded, practices and mores that act similarly to Establishing Operations. That is, they alter the reinforcing property, and hence, in this case, the likelihood of IPV. Societal attitudes towards and media portrayal of women, traditional gender roles and relative power within relationships have all been identified within the behavioural literature as potentially contributing to the prevalence of IPV (e.g., Bell & Naugle, 2005; Myers, 1995). For example, research suggests that women who choose to remain within abusive relationships also tend to endorse more traditional gender roles (Frisch & Mackenzie, 1991). Thus, within communities in which the probability of legal consequences for IPV is low, “...battering is less likely to be suppressed in situations in which it provides reinforcement” (Myers, 1995, p.497). Douglas and Godden’s (2002) coverage of the implications of the current Australian focus on protection orders rather than prosecution of incidences of IPV would suggest that this is very much the case within an Australian context.

Beyond the direct effect that IPV has on family members it also needs to be acknowledged that there are wider community consequences which encompass both monetary and social factors. Financially, it was estimated that the total annual cost of family violence to Australia in 2002-3 was \$8.1 billion (PADV, 2004). The largest cost within this, estimated to be \$3.5 billion, which results from pain, suffering and early mortality, is borne largely by the abused. Other costs include ‘production related costs’ such as loss of production at work, retraining costs; consumption related costs (e.g., property replacement; bad debts); second generation costs (e.g., childcare; counselling); administrative costs (e.g., perpetrator programmes, funerals) and transfer costs (e.g., victim compensation; income support). Whilst the abused bears the largest proportion of these financial costs (approximately \$4 billion); the group which bears the next largest financial ‘burden’ is the community at large (approximately \$1.1 billion).

While such costs are financial, there are also wider social consequences for the general well being of the community. Normalizing violence, and the stereotypical gender and cultural roles which underpin it, exacts a very real toll on the general community,

moreover these effects are often generational and thereby maintain the ‘cycle’ of violence wherein children who grow up in an environment where IPV is common often go on to be victims or perpetrators themselves (e.g., Chermack & Walton, 1999). Additionally family violence contributes to other significant social problems such as elder abuse, homelessness, and animal abuse, and has been shown to result in many psychological and health problems (e.g., Chung, Kennedy, O’Brien, & Wendt, 2000; Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Fergusson, 2004; Laing & Bobic, 2002).

Logically, since family violence affects both the individual and the community, the response to it needs to be at both the individual and community levels. Various authors have suggested that one way to reduce the prevalence of IPV is to increase community awareness and the related probability of IPV being reported to the authorities (e.g., Myers, 1995). Potentially this has a two-fold benefit, firstly by increasing the chance of legal consequences for the abuser (assuming that these are indeed present and punitive), and secondly signaling community intolerance of IPV, again with the assumption that this reflects an underlying change in community attitudes towards IPV and women.

Crimes which are either reported by a third party, or have a third party witness, are taken more seriously and have a stronger chance of resulting in a positive outcome than crimes reported solely by the victim (Robinson & Chandek, 2000; Shernock, 2005). Some victims may also be unable, or choose not to, report IPV; and/or may choose, for a range of reasons, to return to an abusive situation (see Bell & Naugle, 2005, for a review of stay/leave decisions) all of which underscores the need for a community response. While Bell and Naugle (2005) note the role of social support and community attitudes in the eventual decision to leave an abusive relationship, Myers (1995) more specifically states that “The three-term contingencies for abuse can not be addressed effectively without also changing the broader societal context ...” (p. 503). Behavioural psychology would seem uniquely placed to implement and encourage such a community response given a track record of successful community level change (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Farrimond & Leland, 2006; Jackson & Mathews, 1995).

A report from Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, a joint initiative across all levels of government in Australia (PADV), highlighted the need to increase community awareness of IPV within Australia. In particular, the role of the community in preventing IPV was stressed, with the need to target specific groups for awareness raising campaigns. It was noted that such campaigns needed to provide information about the multifaceted nature of IPV and about services available to help those who are victims of, or concerned about, such violence (PADV, 2003). The findings of PADV, however, suggested that the expense of generalised media campaigns may not be justified in an area where limited funds and resources exist, as they often do not lead to meaningful behavioural change (O’Keefe & Reed, 1990). In fact it is suggested that more complex behavioural change on behalf of the general community in terms of their attitudes requires targeted, rather than general, campaigns.

Furthermore, the report points out that without provision of a precise “call to action” (PADV, 2003, p.40) there is little chance of any behavioural change. Specifically the report highlights the fact that even if a community is aware of the ramifications of IPV,

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unless they are informed of the appropriate action to take then community level behavioural change is unlikely to occur. As indicated earlier, one potentially valuable behavioural change would be an increase in community propensity to report IPV. Thus the current, exploratory, study sought to assess the existence and significance of particular demographic variables within the general community which correlate with propensity to report IPV. Theoretically this may help determine community groups with a tendency to under-report and the largest potential for meaningful behavioural change, assuming that raising awareness of these issues will result in increased reporting of IPV.

From previous research regarding the reporting of crimes generally, there is an *a priori* expectation that women in the current study will have a higher propensity to report than men. Older respondents and those from lower socio-economic groups are also expected to be more willing to report compared to younger and those from higher income brackets respectively (Felson & Paré, 2005; Johnson, 2005).

METHOD

Participants

A telephone survey was administered by the Centre for Social Science Research at Central Queensland University to a random sample of 3090 adults over the age of 18 who were residing in central Queensland at the time. The survey resulted in a sample of 1208 valid responses from 602 males and 606 females with ages ranging from 18 to 85 with an average age of 47. This represents a 39% response rate.

Apparatus

As part of the annual Central Queensland Social Survey (CQSS) researchers were invited to contribute up to 10 questions which reflected their research interests. The survey instrument therefore consisted of three components: a standardized introduction, demographics, and researcher-contributed questions. The demographic questions included: gender, age, marital status, strength of religious belief, length of time living in the current community, income, and political beliefs. Further demographic information regarding the following were also collected; education level (Primary, Secondary, Tertiary - technical, Tertiary – university), current occupation (coded using major categories listed within an online job search engine (www.seek.com.au) resulting in six categories; Primary Industries, Education, Healthcare, White Collar, Blue Collar and Other) and employment status (Unemployed; Pension, i.e., in receipt of other state benefit; Student; At Home; Employed). In this case, the researcher-directed questions required respondents to indicate on a 5 point scale (1=Not at all likely, 2=Not likely, 3=Neutral, 4=Fairly likely, to 5=Definitely would) their propensity to report an incident of violence involving an adult (e.g., “If you became aware of an incident/incidences of family violence with an ADULT victim how likely would you be to report it?”). This question deliberately lacked specificity in terms of the respondents’ relationship to the abused as research has suggested that this relationship can affect propensity to report

(e.g., Griffith, Negy, & Chadee, 2006) and the aim of the current study was to ascertain *general* willingness to report IPV. However it has to be acknowledged that this lack of specificity is a potential limitation. Respondents were also asked whom they would report IPV to, with no pre-coded options offered. Again, this was a deliberate part of the research design, as one of the key issues deemed of interest was both the range of responses and the number of respondents who would reply 'Don't Know' if unprompted.

Procedure

The 2005 Central Queensland Survey sample was drawn from a telephone database using a computer program to select, with replacement, a simple random sample of phone numbers within the region. All duplicate, mobile and business numbers were removed from the computer-generated list. Nursing homes and other collective dwellings (e.g., youth hostels) were also deleted from the sample. Within the household, one person was selected as the respondent for the twenty-minute interview based on gender and age in order to ensure a representative sample of the Central Queensland population.

RESULTS

The data were entered into *SPSS* for Windows (v13), data cleaning and consistency checks were performed resulting in 1208 cases.

Overall, 50.3% ($n=614$) of respondents indicated that they definitely would report an incident of IPV involving an adult victim; in contrast approximately 8% ($n=94$) stated that they would not be likely to report such an incident. Table 1 outlines the significant and non-significant relations found following statistical analyses of the relations between the demographic variables examined and overall willingness to report IPV.

Of those demographic variables found to have a significant effect on expressed willingness to report IPV; older respondents, those in the lowest income bracket (<AUS\$500 per week), those in receipt of a state benefit, and women, were found to have significantly higher propensities to report. However it must be noted here that due to the nature of the methodology employed causality cannot be determined. Given the potential confound between Household Income and Employment Status further analyses were conducted however no interaction between these variables was found suggesting that the effect of employment status was independent of household income levels. Similarly, while both genders indicated an overall willingness to report incidents of IPV (mean female = 4.34; mean male = 4.16) no significant interactions between gender and any of the above listed variables were found.

Participants were also asked whom they would report an incident of IPV to. Categories were collated from the original responses gathered without pre-coding, resulting in the following five categories; Don't Know ($n=102$, 8.4%), Police ($n=969$, 79.4%), Government Agency ($n=50$, 4.1%); Telephone Hotline ($n=12$, 1.0%) and 'Other' ($n=76$, 6.2%). The category 'Other' included responses such as talking to other family members or friends and personal intervention (with the latter option being endorsed al-

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TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AND THEIR ASSOCIATION
WITH WILLINGNESS TO REPORT IPV (ADULT VICTIM)

No significant difference in willingness to report:†	Significant difference in willingness to report:†	
Education ¹	Age ¹	$F(5,1181)=2.830, p=0.015$
Occupation ¹	Household Income ¹	$F(3,845)=2.738, p=0.042$
Political Affiliation ¹	Employment Status ¹	$F(4,1187)=5.179, p=0.000$
Time spent in current community ¹	Gender ²	$t(1164)=-3.266, p=0.001$
Marital status ¹		
Presence of child in dwelling ²		
Home ownership ²		
Strength of religious belief ²		

¹ANOVA

² *t* test

† refers to demographic characteristic of the individual reporting

most exclusively by males), however none of these had a frequency of more than 10 hence they were collapsed into one category.

A statistically significant interaction was observed between self-rated propensity to report and to whom that report would be made (ANOVA: $F(4,1204)=36.030, p=0.000$) in that, those who responded ‘Don’t Know’ had demonstrably lower propensities to report than any other cohort. Further analyses determined that there was a significant interaction between gender and to whom to report on propensity to report IPV (ANOVA: $F(4, 1198)=2.478, p=0.043$). Presented in Figure 1 is the interaction between the choice of who to report to, gender and an individual’s self-rated propensity to report.

As can be seen in the graph the pattern of interaction was mixed although the overall trend for those responding ‘Don’t Know’ to have the lowest expressed propensity to report remains clear followed by males who would take ‘Other’ actions. Interestingly it would seem that, although women were found to have significantly higher overall propensities to report IPV than men, this is very dependent upon the method available for reporting.

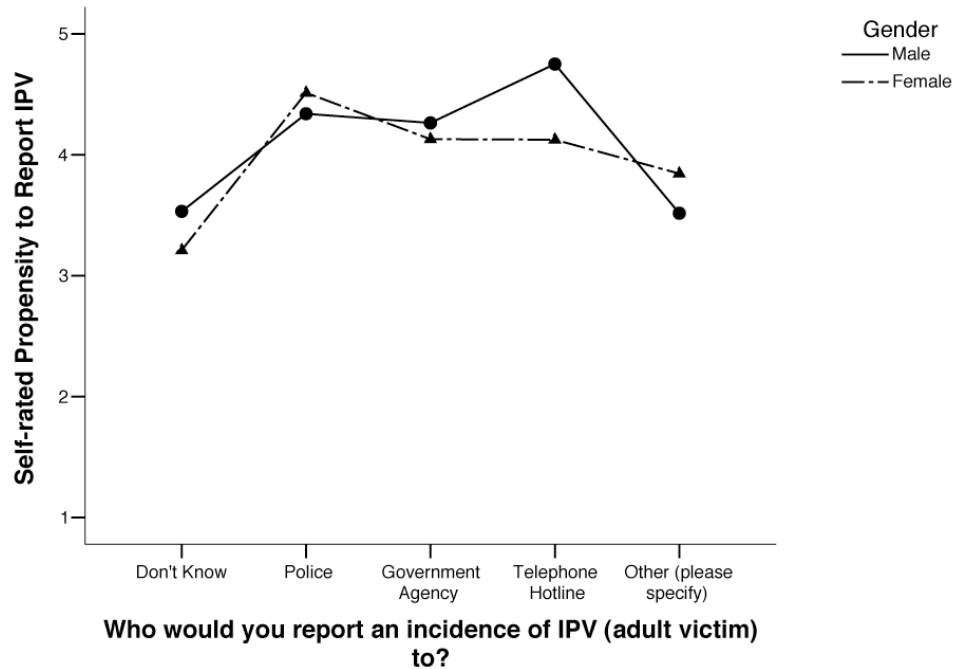


Figure 1. Self-rated propensity to report IPV (with an adult victim) as a function of gender and to whom the report would be made.

DISCUSSION

The first aim of the current paper was to measure general community willingness to report IPV within Queensland, Australia. Approximately 20% of those surveyed indicated that they would be unlikely to report an incident of IPV, within this 8% stated that they definitely would not report such an incident (i.e., 12% may report dependent on unknown variables). In itself this is noteworthy and suggests that the current educational/awareness campaigns running in Australia (e.g., 'Violence Against Women, Australia Says No' a campaign launched in 2004) are either not working as intended or are missing a significant subsection of the community. This further underscores the need for campaigns which take into account the vagaries of specific communities and can thereby target those groups which indicate they are less likely to report (PADV, 2003).

Hence, the second aim of this paper, which was to determine the demographic characteristics that may be associated with propensity to report incidences of IPV. The

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majority of demographic variables investigated, e.g. occupation type, education level, strength of religious belief, were found to have no significant relation with propensity to report. As found in previous studies (e.g., Johnson, 2005), gender proved to be a significant predictor of propensity to report with women being more likely to report IPV than men. This result has a two-fold implication. Firstly there needs to be further research specifically addressing male attitudes towards both women generally, and IPV specifically (both of which fall firmly under the remit of contingency specifying stimuli in that they alter both the likelihood of IPV and the reporting thereof). Secondly it also suggests that education campaigns aimed at men specifically may be needed. Given recent arguments and awareness concerning the rise in male victims of IPV, and the underreporting thereof (e.g., Felson & Paré, 2005), such campaigns may also be able to raise awareness concerning this issue. However, it is the authors' contention that any such attempts to do so must be sensitive to the needs of the majority of victims who are female.

Age was found to be a significant variable in that the older the participant the more likely they were to report. Those between the ages of 18-24 were significantly less likely than any other age group to report. This finding replicates research around propensity to report crimes generally (e.g., Johnson, 2005). The facts that some of the highest rates of IPV in Australia occur within younger age groups (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996), and that many young people experience broader effects from violence (e.g. homelessness), indicates that future educational campaigns should specifically target this age bracket. Such campaigns also need to be mindful of the fact that the kind of intimate violence likely to be experienced by those within younger age groups is non-cohabitating or 'dating' violence (Laing & Bobic, 2002). Younger individuals may not therefore semantically identify with campaigns which discuss 'domestic' and/or 'family' violence. Additionally, research (e.g., Chermack & Walton, 1999) which suggests that the impact of IPV goes beyond immediate emotional and physical harm to encompass inter-generational effects further underlines the need for educational campaigns aimed at the young who may be victims of, or witnesses to, IPV.

Household income also proved to vary with propensity to report. In particular, those earning less than \$AUD500 per week or in receipt of state benefit(s), were the most likely to report. Therefore it would seem that educational campaigns may need to be aimed at those within higher socio-economic brackets given the associated lower propensity to report. Cultural stereotypes often depict IPV as more prevalent within lower socio-economic communities. Whilst the current study indicates that this group was the most likely to report IPV, similar to that found for reporting crime generally (e.g., Johnson, 2005), this finding deserves more attention. It is unclear from the current study whether this increased propensity to report is due to a genuinely higher prevalence of IPV within this population, a better awareness of issues pertaining to IPV (which may not be dependent upon an underlying prevalence), or other factors. In contrast, the lower propensity to report within the higher income bracket may go some way to suggest that there is either poor awareness of IPV, a general acceptance of IPV, or some other

confounding variable at work within this segment of the population. Further research aimed at unpacking these issues is therefore needed.

Perhaps the most significant finding of the current study however relates to the issue of who to report IPV to. When participants were asked who they would report an incident of IPV to, the majority responded with 'Police.' However, nearly 10% (n=102) did not know who to report to. Moreover, further analyses showed that those who responded 'Don't Know' were significantly less likely to report overall. This mirrors the results from a similar study which assessed community willingness to report incidences of animal cruelty (Taylor & Signal, 2006). In addition, women who indicated that they did not know who to report to were the least likely of all groups to report. Given that overall, women were more willing than men to report IPV this suggests an area in need of further research and potentially targeted educational campaigns. Interestingly graphical analyses suggested that contacting the Police was the most likely way a woman would report IPV and that a telephone hotline was the least preferred option. In contrast, telephone hotlines were the preferred method for men who indicated that they would be likely to report. However it needs to be noted that not a single respondent within the 18-24 age bracket indicated a willingness to use a telephone hotline to report incidences of IPV. The major IPV campaign in Australia at the current time, 'Violence Against Women, Australia Says No', advertises a confidential telephone hotline number as the paramount way of reporting, or getting help for, IPV (see www.australiasaysno.gov.au for more details). Thus, given these results it would seem that, at the very least, educational material aimed at informing members of the community of the options for reporting IPV, and alternative methods to telephone hotlines, need to be promoted. As an aside, why anonymous telephone hotlines are a less preferred method than calling the Police is unclear and an area in need of further investigation.

Given the gender effect noted earlier (i.e., that women are more likely to report IPV) the subsection of women who do not know to whom to report, and are less likely to report, are potentially a valuable cohort to target. Thus an educational campaign clearly aimed at disseminating information to women, regarding to whom report, seems a likely way to engender meaningful behavioural change by capitalizing on a group which a priori should have an elevated likelihood to report. Additionally such a campaign may have the additional benefit of providing much needed information to the group who are most likely to be the victims of IPV (i.e., women) and thereby go some way to removing social barriers to reporting IPV.

One important consideration with all of the above is that some victims in violent situations choose not to report that violence and/or choose to remain in a violent relationship. This may be due to any number of factors including, but not limited to, financial constraints, availability of existing services, societal and/or cultural expectations. Coverage of these factors is beyond the scope of the current paper (see Bell & Naugle (2005) for a recent behavioural discussion thereof). However, it should be noted here that many women choose not to report/stay in such a relationship due to fear of retaliation. We therefore have to question whether, in increasing community likelihood to report incidences of IPV, we are disempowering these individuals and/or opening them

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up to more harm via retaliatory violence. However, given that child abuse is often co-existent with IPV (Becker & French, 2004) there may be an impetus to report even at the 'expense' of the adult victim however the implications of this is also an area in need of further research.

In order to mediate against such potential detrimental effects it is therefore imperative that any initiative aimed at increasing community propensity to report only proceeds with concomitant initiatives aimed at increasing the availability and scope of existing services. It needs to be recognised that this will not simply be a matter of increasing the number of refuges and related social services, which often result in a range of punishing consequences themselves (e.g., Myers, 1995), but requires governmental support for the added stress this will place on an already overburdened criminal justice system. In particular, given that IPV is often second only to traffic accidents in taking up police time in Australia (PADV, 2003); the added burden on police resources must be acknowledged. The current emphasis on providing protection orders rather than prosecuting IPV within Queensland, Australia (Douglas & Godden, 2002) also needs addressing as this reduces the chances for legal consequences being delivered to perpetrators of IPV which, in a very real sense, provides the very kind of contingency specifying stimuli that Myers (1995) argues supports the prevalence of IPV.

Increased community propensity to report IPV (with the concomitant services mentioned above) will theoretically result in more convictions of perpetrators. As Holder (2001) suggests "... criminal law is a powerful agency of public disapproval and reprobation" (p. 2). This combined with the clear message resulting from general community intolerance can only help break the cycle of violence. In order to achieve this we need to know which groups of the community are more, and less, likely to report IPV so we can begin to formulate effective behavioural change programmes aimed at increasing both awareness and willingness to report. The current paper begins to address some of these issues; however it has also highlighted the paucity of current research in this area and the urgent need for more information.

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