

THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN AND INFANTS

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There is a growing body of research highlighting the impact of domestic violence on children and infants. Key statistics on the prevalence of children's exposure to domestic violence and its impacts on their wellbeing are cited below. In addition, links to issues of homelessness and homicide are discussed.

VIOLENCE DURING PREGNANCY

- The nationally distributed *Personal Safety Survey, Australia* found that approximately 1.1 million Australian women had experienced violence by a previous partner since the age of fifteen. The majority of women in this group (59%) were pregnant at some time during the violent relationship (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, p. 11).
- Of the 59% of women who were pregnant at some time during the violent relationship, 36% reported that violence occurred during a pregnancy and 17% experienced violence for the first time when they were pregnant (p. 11).

CHILDREN AFFECTED BY VIOLENCE

- The *Personal Safety Survey, Australia* found that 57% of the women who experienced violence by a previous partner had children in their care at some time during the relationship (p. 40).
- Over a third of women who experienced violence by a previous partner (34%) said that their children had witnessed the violence (p. 40).
- A national survey of 5000 Australian young people (aged twelve to twenty) found that 23% of participants had witnessed physical domestic violence against their mothers (Indermaur 2001, p. 2).

IMPACTS OF EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

- Children's exposure to domestic violence may seriously affect their wellbeing. Holt, Buckley and Whelan's (2008) comprehensive review of the literature showed that exposure to domestic violence:
 - places children at greater risk of directly experiencing physical and sexual abuse by the violent partner (p. 800)
 - impacts negatively on the relationship between children and both their parents (p. 801)
 - may jeopardise children's abilities and key developmental processes, such as toilet training and healthy sleep patterns in infants and a healthy sense of self in older children (p. 802)
 - may be an indicator of later adolescent male abusive behaviour, as well as female and male adolescent victimisation in intimate relationships (p. 803).
- In a recent Clearinghouse paper on adolescent violence against their parents, a mother and child's experience of family violence was reported as being the most significant determinant of adolescent violence in the home and towards mothers particularly (Howard 2011, p. 6).
- An earlier Clearinghouse paper on the attachment between mothers and their infants emphasised that domestic violence often leads to insecurity in this key relationship (Buchanan 2008). A baby may show signs of insecure attachment to her primary caregiver through displaying withdrawal or little emotion. Alternatively, an infant may seek comfort but not be easily consoled by her mother or she may be erratic in her attachments.

- The Clearinghouse's recent literature review on children affected by domestic violence highlighted growing evidence that impacts are most significant for infants and young children (Sety 2011, p. 6).

CHILDREN AND HOMELESSNESS

- Domestic and family violence is closely linked to homelessness for children. In 2009-10, women with children were one of the largest groups to use specialist homelessness services in Australia, comprising 23% of total clients (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, p. 15). Domestic and family violence was the most commonly cited reason for women with children accessing housing support.

CHILDREN AND HOMICIDE

- Australian research found that on average twenty-five children per year were killed by a parent between 1989 and 2002 (Mouzos & Rushforth 2003, p. 1). During this period, fathers were responsible for 63% of deaths of children by parents (p. 3).
- A more recent Australian study found that physical abuse of children was the most common cause of child homicides in Australia between 1991 and 2005. Deaths due to fatal child abuse accounted for 36% of child homicides (Nielsen, Large, Westmore & Lackersteen 2009, p.10).

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Publication information –

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The Clearinghouse is linked to the Centre for Gender-Related Violence Studies, based in the University of New South Wales, School of Social Sciences and International Studies. The Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.



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