



Researching the economic dimensions of domestic and family violence: Information gaps and data strategies

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Australia's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 recognises the importance of economic wellbeing to the capacity of women and children to rebuild their lives following violence. However, while Australian research about the economic dimensions of violence is growing, much more needs to be known about ways to prevent and reduce the economic harms of domestic violence, and how the economic wellbeing of those subject to violence can be protected and promoted.

This short paper identifies information gaps and data strategies which would help strengthen the evidence base in this area of domestic violence research. It is intended as a resource for researchers and policy makers concerned with developing evidence-based strategies to prevent and end all forms of domestic and family violence.

Prevalence and incidence of economic abuse

Economic abuse involves a very wide range of behaviours and tactics. Although it is defined in family violence legislation in four Australian jurisdictions, there is no standard definition. This makes it difficult to capture in administrative data sets, or in surveys.

In the last decade some researchers have started to develop and test standardised scales to help identify various kinds of economic abuse, and to estimate prevalence. The Scale of Economic Abuse, for example, captures the frequency of economic controlling or economically exploitative behaviours, and employment sabotage, and this scale has been tested among service user populations (eg Adams, 2011; Adams et. al., 2008; Postmus et. al., 2012). However, these scales have not been used in Australian practice or research. Further research could explore prospects of incorporating these instruments into national sample surveys as a way to estimate prevalence of economic abuse in Australia.

Community awareness and recognition of economic abuse

Economic abuse is a form of violence that is less recognised in the community. The 2013 National Community Attitudes Towards Violence against Women Survey found that only one third (36 per cent) of respondents viewed "controlling the partner by denying them money" as always domestic violence, while one quarter (26 per cent) did not regard this as domestic violence (Webster et al., 2014:69). Qualitative research could explore why these controlling tactics within intimate partner relationships are considered more socially acceptable than other forms of violence.

Women's long term economic trajectories

Researchers have acknowledged that there are many ways violence contributes to economic harm, and many trajectories of economic loss for different groups of women following violence. However, further research would help understand the long term economic harms of domestic violence. A large national longitudinal study specifically focused on women's trajectories following violence would help fill this gap. This could provide data to explore key questions for domestic violence research, such as whether economic impacts are different for women who stay in their home following violence or leave, and the impact on asset and superannuation accumulation. Longitudinal data would also capture experiences of post-separation financial abuse. A dedicated longitudinal survey would enable the complexities and the impact of the experience of economic abuse and economic harms of violence to be identified. The inclusion of modules identifying current and previous experiences of domestic violence in existing longitudinal surveys, such as the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey would also provide new data on women's long-term economic trajectories.

Engaging the private sector

The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence recommended the implementation of industry guidelines relating to domestic violence, including for the banking industry, and with respect to the energy retail codes. Evaluation research could document and monitor the process of implementing these guidelines, with a view to expanding positive developments.

Employment and violence

Research, perhaps through case studies or other qualitative methods, could establish ways to support women to remain in employment, and the impact of insecure employment on women's capacity to leave and recover from violence. As the role of business and employers in supporting employees subject to violence increases, further evaluation research could help show which employer strategies work best for supporting women in various circumstances following violence. This could involve documenting the experiences of women and employers where domestic violence leave and other industrial supports have been used. Further research could also explore how workplaces can reduce the stigma associated with violence, to create conditions for disclosure and support.

Housing and violence

A key component of economic security and wellbeing is women's access to safe, affordable housing options. Qualitative longitudinal research could explore the economic impact of different housing pathways for women leaving violence and the effectiveness of different forms of service support and brokerage for women to enable them to access safe rental properties.

Accessing financial support

A study about women's experiences of accessing services to assist with financial matters following violence would help develop Australia's evidence base, and could underpin the development of strategies to more effectively assist women affected by violence. As well as exploring experiences of using financial counselling, studies could also focus on women's interactions with Centrelink services following violence, and how these could be improved. This research could include ways the income support system could better meet women's immediate financial needs following violence, experiences of disclosure to Centrelink, and the impact of the shift to online services on women's receipt of support.

Men and the economic dimensions of violence

Future research could explore the economic dimensions of domestic and family violence among men who perpetrate violence, including its economic correlates and economic impacts, for a fuller understanding of the relationships between economic wellbeing and violence.

Developing datasets on all forms of domestic violence

The prevalence of physical and sexual violence in Australia have been estimated, based on survey data (Cox, 2015). However, a national dataset capturing economic, as well as other aspects of, violence would help understand prevalence and incidence of violence, and monitor the effectiveness of national efforts to prevent and address violence. Developing or augmenting administrative data sources, such as criminal justice and police data and Family Court, Federal Court and Federal Circuit Court data, to better monitor the economic aspects of domestic violence and understand the factors associated with it, would also help build capacity.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has developed the *Foundation for a National Data Collection and Reporting Framework for Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence* (2014), which aims to support a shared understanding of violence and the collection of consistent and comparable data in administrative data sets and provide a basis for identifying data gaps. The data collected is designed to inform research and policy questions in relation to:

- **Who** experiences family, domestic and sexual violence?
- **How** do people experience family, domestic and sexual violence?
- **What** services or initiatives are used by (or needed to respond to) those that have experienced violence?
- **Outputs** from engaging with organisations that respond to those affected by violence.

While some of this information is already collected (Cox, 2015), this framework could be applied to create consistent and comparable collection of data on economic abuse and forms of economic harms following domestic violence in administrative data sources and develop new, or augment existing, data collections. The framework also highlights the ways in which different types of data can address different research and policy questions.

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