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Abstract | The police play an important role in the management of immediate harm and risk associated with domestic violence. However, the hidden nature of domestic violence incidents means that the involvement of police is dependent on a report being made.

Set against the backdrop of increasing levels of reporting of domestic violence in Australia, the current study analysed 21 Australian and international quantitative studies of victim self-report data to identify factors associated with victim reporting of domestic violence to police.

The analysis found that victims who are female, non-white, experiencing frequent violence and who have been abused in the past are more likely to report. Incidents that involve serious violence, an intoxicated offender and/or child witnesses are also more likely to be reported to the police.

Who reports domestic violence to police? A review of the evidence

Isabella Voce and Hayley Boxall

The police have an important role to play in the prevention and de-escalation of domestic violence. Although the efficacy of specific police responses to domestic violence appears mixed, there is little doubt that police presence provides at least short-term protection to victims of domestic violence, particularly when the response involves the removal of the perpetrator (Felson, Ackerman & Gallagher 2005; Dowling et al. forthcoming; Maxwell, Garner & Fagan 2002).

Police may also have a role in preventing domestic violence in the longer term. In many jurisdictions, police have the power to implement emergency and interim protection orders and have a role in supporting victims' applications for protection orders through the court (eg through provision of statements). Police may also act as a gateway for victims to access other services that can provide them with longer-term support and access to resources to prevent future violence. Although there is an ongoing debate as to the appropriateness of the police fulfilling this role (State of Victoria 2016), it is consistent with an overall shift towards integrated responses to domestic violence. The importance of integrated responses was identified by the recent Royal Commission into Family Violence, as well as the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022 developed by the Council of Australian Governments.

Because domestic violence typically occurs on private premises and behind closed doors (Mouzos & Makkai 2004), police are unlikely to detect domestic violence through their routine patrolling activities. Instead, their awareness of domestic violence is dependent on a report being made by the victim or a third party (eg neighbours, family members). Unfortunately, the majority of domestic violence incidents are never reported to the police (ABS 2016a; Boxall, Rosevear & Payne 2015; McPhedran & Baker 2012). The 2016 Personal Safety Survey administered by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found that only one in five women (21%) who said they had experienced violence at the hands of their current partner had ever made a report to the police (ABS 2016a; figures for male victims not available). The numerous barriers to (predominantly female) victims reporting domestic violence to police are well documented in research, and include:

- fear of not being believed by the police;
- desire to protect the offender;
- fear of negatively impacting the family (eg removal of children, dissolution of the relationship);
- economic dependence on the perpetrator;
- privacy concerns;
- fear of exposing their own illegal activities; and
- fear of retribution and the escalation of violence (ABS 2016a; Barnett 2001; Birdsey & Snowball 2013; Felson et al. 2002).

However, recent Australian statistics suggest that reporting of domestic violence to police may have increased over the past five years. Recorded crime data indicate that the number of acts intended to cause injury reported to police (which includes domestic violence) has increased since the 2011–12 financial year from 68,334 nationally to 75,847 in 2015–16 (ABS 2016b). This represents a 10 percent increase.

There are three potential explanations for this increase. First, increased reporting may indicate that domestic violence is becoming more prevalent because there are simply more offenders or offenders are becoming more violent. Interestingly, results from the Personal Safety Survey indicate that rates of domestic violence reported by female respondents increased between 2012 and 2016 (1.5% vs 1.7%), although changes in the definition of ‘partner’ limit comparisons (ABS 2012, 2016a).

Second, reporting may be increasing as community attitudes towards and awareness of domestic violence improve. Increasing community awareness and condemnation of domestic violence could affect reporting rates by making victims feel less shame about reporting the violence to the police, and/or improving the ability of victims and third parties to identify domestic violence when it occurs (Gracia & Herrero 2007; VicHealth 2007). Finally, the increase in reporting could be caused by changes in police responses to domestic violence when it occurs, which in turn increase victim satisfaction with police and the likelihood that they will contact them again in relation to future violence, although this may in part depend on victims achieving their preferred outcome (Hickman & Simpson 2003).

Regardless of the reason, the increase in reporting raises the question of who typically contacts police about domestic violence, and who does not. The identification of groups in the community who are less likely to report is particularly important as police and other agencies can then focus additional efforts on identifying strategies to improve reporting among these cohorts.

Despite the numerous studies that have explored trends in domestic violence reporting to police, the factors that are positively and negatively associated with reporting are unclear. This is largely due to inconsistencies within the literature regarding research questions, variables, sampling strategies and analytical methods. As such, the findings are difficult to compare and there is no clear consensus on what predicts reporting behaviour among victims, and which groups (if any) are being 'left behind'.

To address this gap in knowledge, the current study aims to identify the sociodemographic, relationship, situation and community-level predictors of victim reporting of domestic violence to police. More specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What factors have been studied in relation to victim reporting of domestic violence to police?
- What is the nature of the relationship between identified factors and victim reporting of domestic violence to police?
- Which victims are most and least likely to report to police and in what situations do they do so?

The current study uses the definition of domestic violence provided in the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (COAG 2011: 2):

...acts of violence that occur between people who have, or have had, an intimate relationship...
Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse.

Methodology

The current study involved the secondary analysis of studies collated as part of a systematic review of police responses to domestic violence recently undertaken by Dowling and colleagues (forthcoming). As such, the literature analysed as part of the current study was selected from the initial pool of studies included in the larger review. The search protocols, processes and inclusion criteria developed for the systematic review are described in detail in the final report (Dowling et al. forthcoming). However, it is important to note studies were limited to those published in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom or Canada since 1980. Over 33,000 articles were identified through the systematic review search process, of which 346 articles were ultimately deemed eligible for inclusion. Eighty-three of these related to the reporting of domestic violence to police.

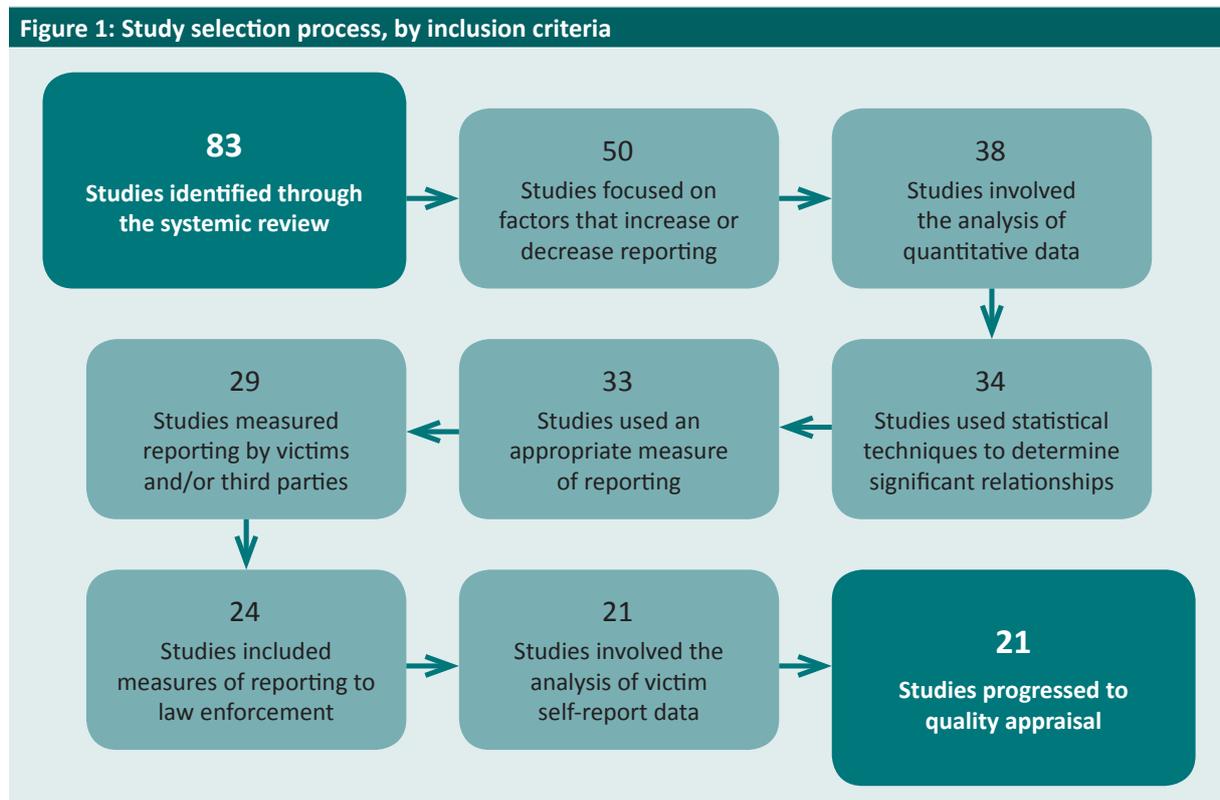
The 83 reporting articles identified in Dowling and colleagues' (forthcoming) systematic review were subject to further analysis to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria for the current study. Studies were included if they:

- focused on sociodemographic, situation and/or community-level factors (independent variables) that increase or decrease the likelihood of domestic violence reporting;
- involved the analysis of quantitative data (eg closed response surveys, questionnaires);
- involved the analysis of relationships between factors and reporting using statistical techniques (significance testing—bivariate and multivariate);
- included an appropriate measure of domestic violence reporting (incidence and/or frequency) by victims and/or victims and third parties;
- included measures of reporting to the police; and
- used victim self-reporting as the primary source of data (eg questionnaires, surveys or interviews).

The decision was made to focus on research involving quantitative data collection and analysis because of the relative ease with which the findings of multiple studies could be compared. Rather than examining which individuals experience higher rates of domestic violence, the current analysis focuses on which victims are more likely to report their victimisation when it does occur. As such, victim report data was prioritised over official government records because police reports can be an unreliable and ambiguous indication of victim reporting rates relative to actual victimisation rates (Boxall, Rosevear & Payne 2015; Davis, Weisburd & Taylor 2008; Holder 2007).

Finally, although the aim of the current study is to understand factors that increase the likelihood that victims will report domestic violence to police, occasionally it was not possible to differentiate between victim reporting and third-party reporting. Some victim surveys asked respondents whether they ‘or someone else’ had reported domestic violence to the police, rather than focusing exclusively on victim reporting. Studies that focused solely on third-party reporting were excluded from the analysis.

The final sample comprised 21 articles which were progressed to quality appraisal (see Figure 1). A description of these studies is included in Table 1.



Note: This figure illustrates the process by which studies were excluded from the final sample. If a study did not meet an inclusion criterion, it was excluded and was not judged against subsequent inclusion criteria
Source: AIC Predictors of reporting, 2016–17 [computer file]

Quality appraisal tool

The final sample of 21 studies was analysed using the Appraisal tool for Cross-Sectional Studies (AXIS) developed by Downes, Brennan, Williams and Dean (2016). The AXIS was developed to critically appraise cross-sectional studies across a range of disciplines and is one of the only appraisal tools that have been the subject of some form of validation study (Downes et al. 2016).

The AXIS comprises 20 questions which users are required to answer about the article's introduction, methods, results, discussion and other issues related to researcher independence and ethical conduct. The research team also included a question about whether the research involved statistical analyses beyond simple bivariate correlations (ie multivariate). This was deemed necessary due to research which has found that reporting of domestic violence to police is influenced by a variety of factors (Dowling et al. forthcoming). The final quality appraisal tool therefore comprised 21 items. Each study was allocated a score based on the proportion of relevant items for which the study met the necessary criteria. The scores ranged from 50 to 100, and the median was 82. This indicates that the overall quality of the studies was high.

Confidence in results

Cumulative evidence is needed to ensure confidence in the results of any systematic review. Therefore, factors associated with reporting (independent variables) were included in the current review only if they were investigated in three or more studies. Factors which are of interest but were not the focus of sufficient research attention to be included in the review include victims' English-speaking ability, disability, arrest record, past experiences with police, confidence in police and the criminal justice system, and support for mandatory arrest; offenders' gender, age and income; and the presence of protection orders at the time of the incident.

Limitations

The lack of Australian research on domestic violence reporting is an important limitation of the current review. Of the 21 studies identified through the systematic review and inclusion process, only three were Australian, with the vast majority coming from the United States. This lack of Australian research is consistent across the broader literature on policing domestic violence (Dowling et al. forthcoming).

Consistent with the findings from Dowling and colleagues' (forthcoming) systematic review, the majority of studies included in the current analysis focus on the characteristics of victims that are related to reporting. This is in part explained by the decision to focus on victim report data rather than official records, and means that several offender- and incident-specific variables potentially related to the reporting of domestic violence were unable to be examined in the current review due to lack of available research.

Dowling and colleagues' (forthcoming) systematic review focused on male-perpetrated domestic violence against female victims. This reflects the historical and current experience of females as comprising the majority of domestic violence victims, which has resulted in research predominantly using female victim samples only. While the systematic review did not exclude studies also examining female perpetrators and male victims, few studies compared the reporting behaviour of females and males. This limitation should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings regarding gender.

Findings

The analysis found that a small number of sociodemographic factors relating to the victim and offender, the relationship between the victim and offender and the characteristics of violent incidents had some impact on reporting of domestic violence to police. These findings are discussed in detail below, and summarised in Table 1. For the sake of brevity, only factors that were identified as being positively or negatively related to reporting (and those that produced mixed findings) are discussed in detail.

Victim characteristics

Demographic characteristics

Studies looked at a variety of victim demographic factors, including gender, age, race/ethnicity, whether they were pregnant at the time of the incident, geographic location (rural or urban) and access to social support networks. The majority of reviewed studies focused on female-only samples, meaning that the examination of any association between victim gender and reporting was limited. Two of the three studies that did include victim gender in their analysis found that female victims were significantly more likely than male victims to report violence to the police (Felson & Paré 2005; MacQueen & Norris 2016) with estimates provided by MacQueen and Norris (2016) indicating that female victims are more than three times more likely to report than male victims. The third study found that gender had no impact on reporting (Birdsey & Snowball 2013).

Twelve studies examined the relationship between reporting and victim race or ethnicity (Ackerman & Love 2014; Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Ammar et al. 2005; Bachman & Coker 1995; Birdsey & Snowball 2013; Bonomi et al. 2006; Hickman & Simpson 2003; Hutchison 2003; Johnson 1990; Lee, Park & Lightfoot 2010; Novisky & Peralta 2015; Pitts 2014). While there is significant variation among these studies in terms of the racial groups they include and compare, there is consistent evidence that when compared to ethnic minorities (eg black persons) white victims are less likely to report domestic violence to the police. Four of the seven studies that compared white victims with non-white ethnic groups found that white victims are less likely to report than victims who are black (Bachman & Coker 1995; Hutchison 2003), Latina (Ackerman & Love 2014), aboriginal (Canadian; Akers & Kaukinen 2009) and other non-white ethnic minorities (Ackerman & Love 2014). However, the majority of studies that found a relationship between reporting and victim ethnicity were conducted overseas, which may have limited applicability in Australian contexts. Notably, the only Australian study that explored ethnicity and reporting found no difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous victims (Birdsey & Snowball 2013).

A small number of other victim sociodemographic factors were explored in the included studies, particularly:

- victim age (Ackerman & Love 2014; Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Bachman & Coker 1995; Birdsey & Snowball 2013; Bonomi et al. 2006; Hickman & Simpson 2003; Hutchison 2003; Johnson 1990; Lee, Park & Lightfoot 2010; MacQueen & Norris 2016; Mirrlees-Black 1999; Novisky & Peralta 2015; Pitts 2014; Wiist & McFarlane 1998);
- pregnancy (Birdsey & Snowball 2013; Johnson 1990; Meyer 2010; Pitts 2014);
- geographic location (Bachman & Coker 1995; Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016); and
- access to social support (Ammar et al. 2005; Johnson 1990; Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016).

The analysis of these studies found largely non-significant results (see Table 1).

In summary, the current analysis identified very few victim demographic factors that consistently predict reporting to police. The only factors that appear to hold constant across multiple studies are victim ethnicity and gender—females and white victims are less likely than other victims to report to the police.

Socio-economic characteristics

Victim employment and education level appear to have no impact on reporting. Eight of the nine studies that looked at employment (Abel & Suh 1987; Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Berk et al. 1984; Birdsey & Snowball 2013; Johnson 1990; MacQueen & Norris 2016; Mirrlees-Black 1999; Pitts 2014), found no relationship between employment status and reporting. Similarly, nine of the 10 studies that included education measures (Abel & Suh 1987; Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Bonomi et al. 2006; Hutchison 2003; Johnson 1990; Lee, Park & Lightfoot 2010; Meyer 2010; Novisky & Peralta 2015; Pitts 2014; Wiist & McFarlane 1998) identified no relationship with reporting.

Twelve studies examined the association between victim socio-economic status (SES) and reporting, with the majority finding no relationship. However, findings appeared to be influenced by the measure of SES used. Studies that measured victims' personal or family/household income, or their perceived level of financial independence, identified no relationship with police notification (Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Bachman & Coker 1995; Hutchison 2003; Johnson 1990; Meyer 2010; Wiist & McFarlane 1998). In comparison, three studies found that lower SES was associated with reporting when the following measures were used:

- family-level SES (calculated using family member income, education and occupation; Ackerman & Love 2014);
- victim views of whether they were managing well financially (Mirrlees-Black 1999); or
- whether a victim could raise \$2,000 in an emergency (Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016).

The relationship between victim SES and reporting may be confounded by victim ethnicity. One study specifically examined the intersections between victim SES, race and reporting and found that white victims were 92 percent less likely to report than black victims, 83 percent less likely to report than Latina victims and 36 percent less likely to report than other non-white ethnic minority victims (Ackerman & Love 2014). When controlling for SES differences between these racial groups, the difference estimates decreased by up to 40 percent, such that reporting rates were comparable with those of white victims. What this means is that the differences in reporting observed previously for non-white and white victims may be driven by differences in SES level.

Overall, the majority of research shows that indicators of victim socio-economic advantage such as employment and education are not significantly related to reporting domestic violence to law enforcement. However, the role of SES and ethnicity and their relative impact on one another in domestic violence reporting requires further examination.

History of abuse and police contact

Relative to studies that included information on the sociodemographic and economic characteristics of victims, there are very few studies exploring the reporting of prior victimisation experiences outside the current abusive relationship and contact with police. Of the three studies that included victim abuse history in their modelling, two found that prior victims were more likely to contact police than those with no history of abuse (MacQueen & Norris 2016; Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016). The third study found no significant relationship (Johnson 1990).

The relationship between prior reporting and notifying police of the most recent domestic violence incident was investigated by three studies, two of which found that victims who had contacted police about historical domestic violence were more likely to report the most recent incident as well (Berk et al. 1984; Birdsey and Snowball 2013). Berk and colleagues (1984) estimated that victims who had made a report to police previously were approximately 41 percent more likely to have reported the most recent incident than those who had not contacted police previously. The third study again found no significant relationship (Hickman & Simpson 2003).

Although only a small number of studies included an examination of historical variables in models predicting future reporting, the balance of the evidence suggests that both prior experiences of abuse outside the current abusive relationship and prior reporting of violence to the police predict future reporting. This means that many victims who report to police have been the subject of ongoing abuse.

Offender characteristics

The offender characteristics that were most consistently explored in the included studies were ethnicity/race, employment and prior arrest histories. The association between offender race and reporting is unclear, largely because of inconsistencies between the three studies regarding how ethnicity was measured. One study which compared reporting of domestic violence in relationships where the offender and victim were the same race (black or white) found that violence perpetrated by black offenders was statistically more likely to be reported than offences by white offenders (Bachman & Coker 1995). Pitts (2014) compared reporting of domestic violence by Latina women when the offender was the same race or a different race to the victim and found that victims were

three times more likely to report if they were the same race as the offender, when compared with victims who were of a different race, regardless of the ethnicity of the offender. In comparison, Bonomi and colleagues (2006) analysed offender race by differentiating between black and non-black offenders, and found no difference between the two groups. What this suggests is that there could be a relationship between offender race and victim reporting, although it could be mediated by the race of the victim.

The analysis also found that offender employment (Abel & Suh 1987; Berk et al. 1984; Johnson 1990), and arrest history (Abel & Suh 1987; Bonomi et al. 2006; Hickman & Simpson 2003) had no impact on victim reporting of domestic violence.

Victim–offender relationship

Abuse within the relationship

The presence of abuse within the relationship between the victim and offender was measured across two dimensions. Three studies looked at the length of time that the abuse had been occurring at the time of the most recent incident (Abel & Suh 1987; Birdsey and Snowball 2013; Johnson 1990), only one of which identified a significant relationship. Abel and Suh (1987) found that victims who had experienced abuse for longer than one year were significantly more likely to report to police than those who had experienced abuse for less time.

The frequency of prior abuse within the relationship was examined by five studies, four of which identified a positive and linear relationship between frequency of abuse and reporting (Berk et al. 1984; Hutchison 2003; Johnson 1990; MacQueen & Norris 2016). The fifth study produced contradictory findings, with less frequent abuse being more likely to be reported (Ammar et al. 2005). However, the balance of the evidence suggests that as frequency of abusive behaviour increases, so too does the likelihood of reporting to police.

Relationship status

Ten studies looked at the role of victim–offender marital status in offending, nine of which found no relationship (Bachman & Coker 1995; Berk et al. 1984; Birdsey & Snowball 2013; Bonomi et al. 2006; Hutchison 2003; Johnson 1990; Meyer 2010; Mirrlees-Black 1999; Pitts 2014). This suggests that married victims are no more or less likely than unmarried ones to report domestic violence. Four similar studies that examined whether police notification is influenced by whether the victim and offender were in a relationship or separated at the time of the incident produced more mixed results. One study found that victims were more likely to report violence perpetrated by current partners than former partners (Coulter et al. 1999) while another conducted in Australia found the opposite—reporting was more common when the violence was perpetrated by a previous partner (Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016). The other two studies found no statistical relationship (Ammar et al. 2005; Birdsey & Snowball 2013). As such, it is not possible to determine whether current relationship status (other than marital) has a role in reporting.

Victim and offender cohabitation at the time of a domestic violence incident was investigated in five studies, two of which found that victims who were living with the offender at the time of the incident were less likely to call the police (Ackerman & Love 2014; MacQueen & Norris 2016). However, three studies found no difference in police notification between cohabiting partners and those living separately (Berk et al. 1984; Mirrlees-Black 1999; Wiist & McFarlane 1998). The studies examining the length of the relationship between the victim and offender also produced mixed results. Two studies found that victims are less likely to report when they have been in the relationship for a long period of time (Johnson 1990; Lee, Park & Lightfoot 2010) while the other two did not produce any significant findings (Bonomi et al. 2006; Hickman & Simpson 2003).

Children

The presence of children in the relationship appeared to have no impact on reporting. Four studies found that the victim having children—regardless of whether they were living with them at the time of the incident—had no impact on reporting (Abel & Suh 1987; Johnson 1990; Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Wiist & McFarlane 1998). Further, of the three studies that asked victims whether there were children living in the family home at the time of the incident (MacQueen & Norris 2016; Novisky & Peralta 2015; Bonomi et al. 2006), only one found a significant relationship with reporting (Bonomi et al. 2006).

Characteristics of the reported incident

Type of violence

The types of violence used against victims/survivors in reporting studies were measured in a number of different ways. Three studies differentiated between severe and minor domestic violence, all of which found victims/survivors were more likely to report severe abuse compared with more minor forms (Bonomi et al. 2006; Johnson 1990; Wiist & McFarlane 1998). Bonomi and colleagues (2006) found that severe physical and psychological abuse (as measured using the Conflict Tactics Scale) was associated not only with police reporting but also with the frequency of calls.

Four studies identified a relationship between the type of violence and reporting, with victims experiencing physical forms of violence statistically more likely to contact police (Birdsey & Snowball 2013; Coulter et al. 1999; Hickman & Simpson 2003; Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016).

Taken together, the study findings point towards a 'hierarchy' of abuse types. Physical violence appears to have the strongest association with reporting, followed by sexual assault and then other forms of domestic violence that may not involve physical contact between the victim and offender (eg emotional and verbal abuse, stalking and harassment).

Thirteen studies examined the role of physical injury in reporting (Ackerman & Love 2014; Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Ammar et al. 2005; Bachman & Coker 1995; Berk et al. 1984; Birdsey & Snowball 2013; Bonomi et al. 2006; Hickman & Simpson 2003; Lee, Park & Lightfoot 2010; MacQueen & Norris 2016; Mirrlees-Black 1999; Pitts 2014; Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016), with 10 showing that victim injury increases reporting. Study estimates of the impact of injury on reporting rates vary significantly, from 2.28 times higher (Stavrou, Poynton & Weatherburn 2016) to eight times higher (Pitts 2014).

Finally, property damage during the domestic violence incident has an unclear relationship to subsequent reporting, although the balance of evidence suggests that it has no impact. Five studies looked at the role of property damage, two of which found that victims were more likely to contact police when the offender damaged property (Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Birdsey & Snowball 2013). The other three studies found no relationship (Berk et al. 1984; Hickman & Simpson 2003; Hutchison 2003).

Other incident characteristics

A range of other incident characteristics were explored in the reviewed studies. First, five studies examined the use or presence of a weapon during a domestic violence incident, with three finding that offender weapon use increased the likelihood and frequency of reporting (Ackerman & Love 2014; Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Bonomi et al. 2006). The other two detected no correlation (Johnson 1990; Lee, Park & Lightfoot 2010).

Offender intoxication (drugs or alcohol) at the time of the incident was examined in six studies, of which half identified that incidents involving a perpetrator who was intoxicated were more likely to be reported to the police by the victim. However, the findings were in part influenced by the type of intoxication measured:

- three studies looked at offender alcohol use, of which two found a significant increase in the likelihood of reporting (Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Ackerman & Love 2014) and one detected no relationship (Johnson 1990);
- two studies looked at offender drug and/or alcohol use, with one demonstrating a positive relationship with reporting (Novisky & Peralta 2015) and the other identifying no impact (Hickman & Simpson 2003); and
- one study looked at offender drug intoxication and found no correlation with victim reporting (Ackerman & Love 2014).

This suggests that incidents involving an offender who is alcohol intoxicated are more likely to be reported to the police than those involving a drug-affected offender.

All seven studies that included information about whether a child was present at the time of an incident found that child witnesses increase the likelihood of victim reporting (Akers & Kaukinen 2009; Ammar et al. 2005; Berk et al. 1984; MacQueen & Norris 2016; Meyer 2010; Mirrlees-Black 1999; Pitts 2014). The studies indicate that incidents involving child witnesses were approximately three times more likely to be reported to the police than incidents that did not involve children (MacQueen & Norris 2016; Meyer 2010; Pitts 2014). This indicates that, while having children living in the family home may not increase reporting, children witnessing the violence may prompt victims to report to the police out of concern that the abuse has escalated to a point where their children's safety or wellbeing is threatened (MacQueen & Norris 2016; Meyer 2010).

Overall, there is strong empirical support for the influence of situational incident characteristics on victim reporting behaviour. The type and severity of abuse appear to play an important role in reporting, with severe physical abuse the most likely to be reported to police. Children witnessing the abuse and the victim suffering physical injury are also consistent predictors of victim reporting. Despite mixed findings, the balance of the evidence suggests that weapon use and offender alcohol intoxication also increase reporting, while property damage and offender drug intoxication have no relationship to reporting.

Table 1: Independent variables and their relationship with reporting domestic violence to police^a

Independent variables	Total number of studies	Study finding (n)		
		Increased reporting	Decreased reporting	Non-significant
Victim characteristics				
Female	3	2		1
Non-white	7	4		3
Older	14	2		12
Pregnant	4	1		3
Living in urban area	3			3
Access to social support	3			3
Low-level occupation	9	1		8
Low education level	10	1		9
Low SES	12	4		8
Suffered previous abuse ^b	3	2		1
Has reported to police previously	3	2		1
Offender characteristics				
Employed	3			3
Offender arrested previously ^c	3			3 ^b
Victim–offender relationship characteristics				
Long duration of abuse	3	1		2
Frequent abuse	5	4		1
Married	10		1	9
Current partner ^d	4	1	1	2
Living together	5		2	3
Long-term relationship	4		2	2
Victim has children	4			4
Children living in home	3	1		2
Characteristics of the reported incident				
Severe violence ^e	3	3		
Physical assault ^f	4	4		
Physical injury	13	10		3
Property damaged	5	2		3
Weapon used/present	5	3		2
Offender using alcohol	3	2		1
Offender using drugs/alcohol	3	1		2
Children witnessed violence	7	7		

a: Table only includes findings from the 21 studies included in the review. For each independent variable, the number of studies examining the variable is presented, along with the breakdown of studies by findings from significance testing

b: outside the current relationship

c: although prior arrest history did not predict future reporting, it was associated with frequency of reporting (Bonomi et al. 2006)

d: vs former partner

e: vs minor violence

f: vs all other forms of abuse

Source: AIC Predictors of reporting, 2016–17 [computer file]

Who reports and who doesn't?

The current study aimed to understand what factors increase or decrease the likelihood that victims will report domestic violence to police. It is somewhat encouraging that the findings suggest that the people who are contacting police are also the most vulnerable to either experiencing domestic violence in the first place (eg women), or being significantly affected by the violence because it is severe and/or ongoing. Considering their relative risk and the harms they experience, there is a clear rationale for continued efforts to improve reporting within these groups.

Overall, the study identified that victim and offender characteristics are less reliable predictors of reporting than characteristics of the relationship and the incident itself. This said, it is possible from the evidence to say that women who are not white, who are experiencing frequent abuse and who have had a violent partner in the past are more likely to report domestic violence to the police. Incidents involving an intoxicated offender, serious violence (eg violence that results in a physical injury, physical abuse) and child witnesses are also more likely to be reported to the police.

Conversely, men are less likely to contact police, as are victims who are white, experiencing violence for the first time or experiencing violence that is infrequent or minor in nature. Incidents that are typically not reported to police involve relatively minor violence (ie violence that does not involve physical abuse or result in an injury), a sober offender and no child witnesses.

Conclusion

Victims of domestic violence proactively make a number of decisions about how to manage abusive relationships and use law enforcement to promote their safety (Lewis et al. 2000). These decisions involve consideration of a number of factors which can facilitate or inhibit reporting to police. Factors encouraging victims to report include the perception that the abuse is serious enough to constitute a crime or represent an acute danger, or threats to the safety or wellbeing of the victim's children. Factors deterring victims from reporting to police include fear that they will not be believed, fear of reputational damage, uncertainty that the abuse is serious enough to report, and having financial and social resources that can be used as an alternative to police intervention.

The findings from this analysis highlight significant issues around victim under-reporting, and an opportunity to recognise those groups of victims who are not coming to the attention of law enforcement. It is also an opportunity to critically examine where police responses to domestic violence have been directed in the past, where police resources and partnerships may be targeted, and whether new pathways for reaching victims could be explored. Finally, the purpose of this paper was to identify *who* is more likely to report, not *why* some cohorts may be more likely than others to contact police. Understanding of this issue would benefit from additional research that focuses on the reasons encouraging and inhibiting victim cohorts from reporting.

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Isabella Voce is a Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Hayley Boxall is a Principal Research Analyst at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

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GPO Box 1936
Canberra ACT 2601, Australia
Tel: 02 6268 7166

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