

Results of the Personal Safety Survey 2005

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The 2005 Personal Safety Survey (PSS) was released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on 10 August this year. This survey updates Australian statistics on sexual assault and other forms of violence since the benchmark 1996 Women's Safety Survey (WSS). This time, the survey includes men's as well as women's experiences of violence. It provides information on the nature and extent of physical and sexual violence against women and men in Australia, information about experiences of abuse and harassment, and feelings of safety within the home and the community.

In this article, we concentrate on the survey's findings in relation to sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence. We look at the overall rates of sexual assault and other forms sexual violence, including the experience of sexual violence within partner violence. We also look at whether the incidence of sexual assault has increased or decreased since 1996. We examine the characteristics of those who have experienced sexual assault, including age and location of incident. We summarise who perpetrates sexual assaults, what proportion of assaults have been reported to police, and whether reporting to police has increased or decreased over the last 10 years. Finally, we look at the sexual abuse that occurred prior to age 15.

The summary provided in this article is drawn only from the data published in the ABS's public release of the PSS Summary Publication (ABS, 2006). This article provides a summary of that information. We do not provide explanations or analyses of the statistics here, but rather simply describe the data on sexual violence that has so far been made available. The Institute will be obtaining more data from the PSS when it becomes available, and will conduct an in-depth analysis of the findings.

Funding for the women's component of the PSS was provided through the *National initiative to combat sexual assault and partnerships against domestic violence* – Australian Government initiatives administered by the Office for Women. The men's component of the survey was funded by the ABS.

How was the survey carried out? The methodology

The PSS was completed by approximately 11,900 women and 4,600 men between August and December 2005. Face-to-face interviews were used to administer the survey. However, for those not wishing to proceed in person, the option of a telephone interview was offered. Respondents were also given the option at key stages in the survey of discontinuing, for example if they had disclosed an incident of violence.

All survey respondents were at least 18 years of age. They were asked about their experience of different types of violence since the age of 15, and also during the previous 12 months. If they had experienced a form (or forms) of violence, more detailed information was then collected about the most recent incident of each type of violence experienced, such as where the incident occurred and what actions were taken. Additional information was also collected about respondents' experiences of current and previous partner violence such as frequency of the violence, fear of violence, incidents of stalking and other forms of harassment. Respondents were also asked about their experiences of physical and sexual abuse prior to age 15.

The survey was restricted to residents of private dwellings. This means that the experiences of violence of certain groups in the community are likely to be under-represented. For example, people with disabilities not living in private households, Indigenous communities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds who fall outside a selected number of language groups, prison populations, and

women in emergency accommodation (*ACSSA Aware 6*, p. 22) are likely to be under-represented. Many of these groups of people experience higher rates of sexual violence than the rest of the community.

The survey is nationally representative. That is, the results presented in the PSS Summary Publication are estimates of the experience of violence regarding the whole population, estimates which have been inferred by the survey results (of a much smaller number of people). To do this, the survey is 'weighted', a process by which the results are adjusted according to estimated distribution of the total population by age and area, allowing results to be inferred for the total population.

Key findings

While our focus in this article is on sexual violence, we begin by presenting some of the statistics on personal violence overall, by way of a backdrop to the statistics on sexual violence that follow.

Where data are contained in a specific table in the PSS Summary Publication, the particular Table number is referenced in brackets. Also, as according to the Publication, one asterisk (*) above a figure means the estimate should be used with caution, because it has a 'relative standard error' of 25% to 50%. Two asterisks (**) above a figure means that the figure is considered too unreliable for general use, because it has a 'relative standard error' of greater than 50%.

Overall experiences of violence – physical and sexual violence combined

The survey found that overall in Australia, during the 12 months prior to when the survey took place, 8.3% of Australians experienced some sort of violence: 5.8% of females and 10.8% of males (ABS, 2006, see Table 5). Both women and men most often experience violence from male perpetrators. In most other ways, however, women's and men's experiences of violence in Australia fundamentally differ. For example, the survey confirms that women are more at risk of violence in the home, from men they know, while men are most at risk of violence in public spaces and licensed premises, from men they don't know.

The PSS shows a decrease in the proportion of women who experienced violence in the previous 12 months from 7.1% in 1996 to 5.8% in 2005 (although the 1995 figure may have included any incident of physical threat that resulted in assault) (ABS, 2006, see Table 5). However, when women were asked about their experiences of violence since the age of 15, the rate has slightly increased. In 1996, 38.4% of women had experienced violence since they were 15 (rather than just the past 12 months), while in 2005, 39.9% of women had experienced violence since they were 15 (ABS, 2006, see Table 5).

Sexual violence – sexual assaults and sexual threats

The 2005 survey found that women in Australia still experience high rates of sexual violence. Since the age of 15, 19.1% of women (or nearly 1 in 5) have experienced sexual violence, compared to 5.5% of men (or 1 in 20) (ABS, 2006, see Table 3). In the previous 12 months, nearly three times as many women (1.6%) as men (0.6%) experienced sexual violence (ABS, 2006, see Table 5).

Sexual violence is defined in the survey as including sexual assault and sexual threat. Sexual assault is defined as an act of a sexual nature carried out against a person's will. Sexual threat is defined as threat of sexual assault, which a person believed was likely to be carried out. The sexual threats included in the survey are only those made face-to-face, and include verbal threats, threats with a weapon and threats to harm children. In the 2005 date, it excludes the threat if threats were made and then a sexual assault was carried out (that is, if the threat became an assault).

Sexual harassment

Harassment is defined in the PSS as including obscene phone calls, indecent exposure, inappropriate comments about body or sex life and unwanted sexual touching. The PSS showed that since the age of 15, 32.5% of women (1 in 3) have experienced inappropriate comments about their body or sex life, compared to 11.7% of men. Since the age of 15, 25.1% of women experienced unwanted sexual touching, compared to 9.9% of men, and 23.6% experienced indecent exposure compared to 8.6% of men (ABS, 2006, see Table 10).

Sexual violence as part of domestic violence

Of females sexually assaulted in the last 12 months, 21.1% had been assaulted by a previous partner, and 7.7% had been assaulted by a current partner. Among males, the number of sexual assaults committed by a current partner was nil, and the number for previous partners was not available for publication (as the ABS states numbers are too low to provide reliable estimates) (ABS, 2006, see Table 19).

Of those women who have experienced any form of violence from their partner, in the most recent incident of this violence from their current partner, 19.2% experienced sexual violence, with 17.1% including sexual assault. In the most recent incident experienced by a previous partner, 28.1% of these included sexual violence, with 24.0% including sexual assault (ABS, 2006, see Table 22). That is, the survey found a higher incidence of sexual violence in the context of previous partners than current partners, and that a significant minority of all sexual assaults were committed by previous partners.

Has the incidence of sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence experienced by women increased or decreased since 1996?

Results of the 2005 survey show a small decrease in the overall incidence of sexual violence experienced by women in Australia over the last 12 months. In 1996, 1.9% of all women had experienced sexual violence in the past 12 months (1.5% assault, 0.7% threat), in 2005 this is reported as 1.6% (1.3% assault, 0.5% threat) (ABS, 2006, see Table 5).

However, when asked about their experience of sexual violence since the age of 15, or over the course of a lifetime, the rate calculated for 2006 has increased. In 1996, 17.9% of women had experienced sexual violence since they were 15 (15.5% assault, 4.9% threat). In 2005, 19.1% had experienced sexual violence since they were 15. This increase is limited to sexual assault: the percentage who had experienced sexual threat in the course of a life time was lower in 2005 (4.6%) compared to 1996 (4.9%), but the proportion who had experienced sexual assault over the course of a lifetime increased from 15.5% in 1996 to 16.8% in 2005 (ABS, 2006, see Table 5).

Characteristics of people who have experienced sexual violence

Age and the incidence of sexual assault and other forms of violence

Age is an important consideration in relation to the experience of sexual assault.

The survey confirmed that younger women still experience violence overall at higher rates than older women. In relation to sexual violence in particular, younger women also experience higher rates. For instance, of all the women who experienced sexual violence in the 12 months prior to the 2005 survey, 30.7% of these were women aged 18–24, 29.8% were women in the 25–34 age group, 24.6% in the 35–44 age group and 14.9% 45 and over (ABS, 2006, see Table 6).

The 2005 PSS found a decrease in the proportions of younger women experiencing sexual violence in the last 12 months, and an increase in the proportions of women in older age groups experiencing sexual violence. In 2005, young women still experienced sexual violence the most. In reports of their most recent experience of sexual assault they accounted for the highest proportion of women (30.7%) who experienced sexual violence in the last 12 months. However, the proportion and number of sexual assaults of this age group of women slightly decreased: this age group accounted for 32.8% of the most recent incident of all sexual violence against women in 1996, compared to 30.7% in 2005. This is the same for the 25–34 age group, which accounted for 31.6% of the most recent incident of sexual violence in 1996, compared to 29.8% in 2005 (ABS, 2006, see Table 6).

By contrast, the proportions of the most recent incident of sexual violence against women who are aged 35 and over has increased. In 1996, 23.6% of these incidents were women aged 35–44, compared to 24.6% in 2005; and 12.0% were 45 and over in 1996, compared to 14.9% in 2005. Taking data from the most recent incident of sexual assault in the 12 months prior to the survey, there has been an absolute increase in the number of experiences of sexual violence of women in this age group of 45 and over. In 1996, 15,900 women in the 45 and over age group experienced sexual violence, compared to 18,800 women in 2005.

These changes may be attributed to an ageing Australian population, with greater numbers and proportions of women in older age-groups. This can be seen when the incidence of sexual assault

is considered (see Table 1 below): while the numbers and proportion of older women experiencing sexual assault has increased, the incidence rate of sexual assault among this age group has remained the same.

Table 1. Women's experience of violence during 12 months prior to the survey by age, 1996 and 2005
(data based on most recent incident)

Age group	Experienced sexual violence 1996 ('000)	% of women 1996	Total women 1996 ('000)	Incidence 1996 (%)	Experienced sexual violence 2006 ('000)	% of women 2006	Total women 2006 ('000)	Incidence 2006 (%)
18-24	43.6	32.8	945.2	4.6	38.8	30.7	945.7	4.1
25-34	42.1	31.6	1440.2	2.9	37.6	29.8	1404.5	2.7
35-44	31.5	23.6	1376.3	2.3	31.0	24.6	1497.6	2.1
45+	15.9	12.0	3118.8	0.5	18.8	14.9	3845.4	0.5
Total	133.1	100.0	6880.5	1.9	126.1	100.0	7693.1	1.6

Source: ABS, 2006, see Table 6.

Country of birth

In the published ABS summary of the PSS, there is little information available about experiences of sexual violence of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. What does exist are statistics on country of birth – classified as either 'Australia' or 'Overseas'. If we compare the data on the country of birth of those who experienced sexual assault, with the country of birth of the overall population, we can get a sense of whether there is any change to the proportion of people born overseas in the population who were sexually assaulted.

Of all women aged over 18 in the total population, 73.5% were born in Australia (ABS, 2006, see Appendix 1, p. 46). Of all the women who experienced sexual assault in the past 12 months, 81.3% were born in Australia (ABS, 2006, see Table 18). That is, there is a larger proportion of Australian-born women in the population who experienced sexual assault, compared to the general population. The opposite is the case for men. In the total population, 73.4% of men were born in Australia (ABS, 2006, see Appendix 1). Of the men who experienced sexual assault in the past 12 months, 68.5% were born in Australia (ABS, 2006, see Table 18). However, the ABS advises that the statistics on the sexual assault of females and males born overseas be used with caution, because they have a relative standard error of 25% to 50%.

Indigenous status

There is no specific information given in the survey results on the experience of violence by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The ABS states that it was not feasible to expand this survey to include a representative sample of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that would allow estimates to be produced.

Education

Of those women who have been sexually assaulted, a greater proportion of these do not have a higher education compared to the rest of the population. While 29.4% of all females surveyed had received higher education (ABS, 2006, see Appendix 1), 22.3% of women who had experienced sexual assault in the last 12 months had received a higher education (ABS, 2006, see Table 18).

Of all the males in the total population, 28.5% (ABS, 2006, see Appendix 1) had a higher education. Of those men who were sexually assaulted, a substantially greater proportion (50.4%*) had a higher qualification (ABS, 2006, see Table 18). However, we are advised to treat this figure with caution, due to low number of males involved.

Labour force status

Of all the women surveyed, 42.6% were unemployed or not in the labour force (ABS, 2006, see Appendix 1). Of all the women sexually assaulted, a slightly greater percentage (44.8%) were unemployed or not in the labour force (ABS, 2006, see Table 18).

Of all the men surveyed, 27.8% were unemployed or not in the labour force (ABS, 2006, see Appendix 1). Of all the men sexually assaulted, a greater percentage of 34.5%* were unemployed or not in the labour force, although we are asked to use this figure (34.5%) with caution, due to the low numbers of men involved (ABS, 2006, see Table 18).

Residence

Are people who are sexually assaulted more or less likely to live in a capital city?

Of all the women surveyed, 64.7% lived in a capital city (ABS, 2006, see Appendix 1). Of all the women who experienced sexual assault, 69.2% lived in a capital city.

Of all the men surveyed, 64.2% lived in a capital city (ABS, 2006, see Appendix 1). Of all the men who had been sexually assaulted, a slightly smaller proportion of 62.8% lived in a capital city (ABS, 2006, see Table 18).

How do the Australian states and territories compare?

Women from Victoria were found by the survey to be most likely to have experienced sexual assault of threat in the past 12 months (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: The incidence rate of experience of sexual violence during the last 12 months – state or territory of residence of victim

State/Territory	Number of females who experienced sexual violence	Female sexual violence victims as a proportion of total population
New South Wales	25,700	1.0
Victoria	40,900	2.1
Queensland	28,200	1.9
South Australia	9,700	1.6
Western Australia	12,300	1.7
AUSTRALIA*	126,100	1.6

*This includes Tasmania, Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory as well as the rest of the states listed above. Figures are not provided separately for Tasmania, Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory.

Who are the perpetrators of sexual assault?

Incidence

Of the most recent incident of sexual assault experienced by women in the last 12 months, 78.2% of perpetrators were a person known to the woman: 39.0% were by a family member or friend (which includes acquaintance, neighbour, counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist, ex-boyfriend or girlfriend, doctor, teacher, minister, priest, clergy or prison officer), 32.0% by 'another known person', and 21.1% by a previous partner. A women's current partner was the perpetrator in 7.7%* of the sexual assaults in the last 12 months. The other 21.8% of sexual assaults were by a stranger (ABS, 2006, see Table 19).

Lifetime prevalence

In relation to sexual assaults that women have experienced since the age of 15, perpetrators were mostly similar to the figures above. What was different was a greater proportion perpetrated by family and friends. In the most recent incident of sexual assault of those experienced since the age of 15, 49.7% were perpetrated by family and friends (compared to 39% perpetrated by family and friends in the previous 12 months). A previous partner was the perpetrator in 21.2% of cases, 27.5% were perpetrated by another known person, 2.1% by a current partner, and 22.1% by a stranger (ABS, 2006, see Table 19).

Is sexual assault reported to the police?

The PSS confirms that the majority of sexual assaults are not reported to the police. However, there has been a slight increase in the proportion of the most recent sexual assaults reported the police in 2005 compared to 1996.

Of those women who experienced sexual assault in the 12 months prior to the 2005 survey, 81.1% of the most recent incidents of sexual assaults were not reported to the police. This is an improvement on the 1996 data, when 85.1% of sexual assaults were not reported to the police (ABS, 2006, see Table 7).

The reporting figures are also better for all for all sexual assaults by men experienced by women since the age of 15 (and this excludes people whose most recent incident of sexual assault occurred more than 20 years ago). Of these sexual assaults, the 2005 survey found that 84.1% were not reported to the police, compared to 91.0% in 1996 (ABS, 2006, see Table 7).

According to the PSS data, women are much more likely to report a physical assault to the police compared to a sexual assault. Also, compared to sexual assault, women's reporting of physical assault to police has markedly increased since 1996. In 1996, police were told about 18.5% of physical assaults of women that took place in the last 12 months. In 2005, police were told about 36.0% of physical assaults of women (ABS, 2006, see Table 7).

Whether a sexual assault of a woman is reported to the police differs according to who perpetrated the assault. If we take those sexual assaults perpetrated in the previous 12 months, and look at those perpetrated by a boyfriend or male date, police were told about 29.9%** of these assaults. In relation to those perpetrated by stranger over the previous 12 months, police were told about 27.9%** of them in 2005. In relation to sexual assaults perpetrated by a previous partner, police were told about 20.5% of these. However, in 100% of cases police were not told about sexual assaults perpetrated by a current partner. In relation to assaults perpetrated by an 'other known person' in the last 12 months, 15.6% were reported to police (ABS, 2006, see Table 7).

In all of these categories, reporting to police has increased, except in relation to sexual assaults of women committed by previous partners in the last 12 months (and possibly current partners): 25.3%** of previous partner rapes were reported in 1996 compared to 20.5% in 2006. However, the ABS advises caution in relation to the 1996 figure (ABS, 2006, see Table 7).

Sexual abuse of girls and boys

Child sexual abuse is defined in the survey as any act by an adult involving children under the age of 15 years in sexual activity. The survey found that women experienced sexual assault before the age of 15 at higher rates than men. The rate of sexual assault of girls is higher than the sexual assault of boys. Before the age of 15, 12.4% or more than 1 in 10 women (956,600) had been sexually assaulted. In relation to men, 4.5% (337,400) had been sexually assaulted before the age of 15 (ABS, 2006, see Table 29).

For sexual abuse experienced by women before the age of 15, the most common age bracket that the abuse first occurred for girls was 11–14 years old (32.3%). Therefore, more than two-thirds (67.7%) of sexual abuse of girls first occurred at age 10 years or below. The next most common age bracket for victim/survivors of childhood sexual abuse first experiencing the abuse was 7–8 years old (22.1%) (ABS, 2006, see Table 29).

Differences exist in who perpetrates sexual abuse of girls and the sexual abuse of boys. The survey found that the most common perpetrator of childhood sexual abuse of females was a male relative: their father or stepfather constituted 16.5% of perpetrators, and another male relative 35.1%. Other perpetrators were a family friend constituting 16.5%, or acquaintance/neighbour at 15.4%.

However, for males, fathers and step-fathers were 5%* of perpetrators of child sexual abuse, and another male relative constituted 16.4% of perpetrators. Strangers were 18.3% of perpetrators, acquaintances or neighbours accounted for 16.2% and a family friend accounted for 15.6%.

Conclusion

The Summary Publication of the 2005 Personal Safety Survey provides vital information on sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence experienced by Australian women and men. However, some of the statistics presented here raise as many questions as they answer. For instance, what accounts for the decrease in incidents of sexual assault over the 12 months immediately preceding the 1996 and 2005 surveys, but the increase over the course of women's life times? What accounts for the increase in sexual assaults experienced by older women? Why are the statistics on sexual assaults across the different states and territories so different? It is hoped that further analysis on the full data set once it is released will allow for these – and other – questions to be addressed.

References

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