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National sexual violence responses

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Sexual violence is a major health, welfare and social issue in Australia and worldwide that can result in a range of serious, potentially long-term consequences. These include physical, psychological, financial, legal and spiritual consequences for individuals and communities.

One way to understand sexual violence is as an abuse of power, most often perpetrated by men against women, children, young people and other men. Almost all sexual assault offenders recorded by police are male (AIHW 2020). Sexual violence is both a consequence and a reinforcement of power disparities between individuals and groups in society. Attitudes, beliefs, laws and social structures that allow or support either the power of one group over another or the violence to continue contribute to the ongoing problem of sexual violence in society (NASASV 2021).

Sexual violence can take many forms, including assault, abuse and harassment, and the experiences may vary across population groups and in different settings. The impact of sexual violence can be compounded by negative attitudes pertaining to sex, race, age, culture and religion, as well as by inequalities stemming from class, geographic location, language or ability (NASASV 2021). The responses, or actions taken, when sexual violence occurs can also be wide ranging and depend on the forms of violence experienced and the context in which it occurs.

Sexual violence responses are likely to comprise a mix of informal responses (such as contact with friends and family) and formal responses (such as assistance from police, legal services, specialist crisis services or health professionals). Responses can be initiated by victim survivors, by another person, or sometimes by the perpetrator.

Currently, no single data source can describe the range of formal responses to sexual violence across Australia. This report brings together data from a range of sources to build a better understanding of where people seek support and the service use patterns. It also discusses data gaps, highlights opportunities for data improvements and complements the ongoing Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) national reporting on family, domestic and sexual violence found in:

- [Family, domestic and sexual violence data in Australia](#)
- [Sexual assault in Australia, 2020](#)
- [‘Sexual violence dashboard’ \(in Family, domestic and sexual violence data in Australia\).](#)

9 in 10 women said police were not contacted about their most recent sexual assault incident.



The Office of the eSafety Commissioner managed **2,687** reports of image-based abuse in 2020–21.



93% of people admitted to hospital for injuries related to sexual assault in 2019–20 were female.



AIHW

Box 1: What is sexual violence?

There is no single definition of sexual violence; rather, it is a broad term, often used to encompass a wide range of behaviours. Definitions of sexual violence vary according to different legislation and practices. Operational definitions used in a service context may differ from those used for research or data collection. This report uses several terms, based on known definitions and available data.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey (PSS), **sexual violence** refers to any occurrence, attempt or threat of **sexual assault** experienced by a person since the age of 15 (ABS 2017). This definition applies where PSS data are used in this report.

Sexual assault refers to an act of a sexual nature carried out against a person's will through the use of physical force, intimidation or coercion, and including any attempts to do this. This includes rape, attempted rape, aggravated sexual assault (assault with a weapon), indecent assault, penetration by objects, forced sexual activity that did not end in penetration and attempts to force a person into sexual activity. Such incidents would be an offence under state and territory criminal law (ABS 2017).

Sexual threat refers to the threat of acts of a sexual nature that were made face to face, and where the person believed the threat could be – and was likely to be – carried out.

In the PSS, sexual assault excludes incidents of violence that occurred before the age of 15. These are defined as **sexual abuse**, which constitutes any act by an adult involving a child (under the age of 15) in sexual activity beyond their understanding or contrary to accepted community standards.

The PSS definition of assault also excludes unwanted sexual touching – defined as **sexual harassment**. Sexual harassment is considered to have occurred when a person has experienced or was subjected to behaviours that made them feel uncomfortable and/or were offensive due to their sexual nature (ABS 2017).

Note that the definitions adopted by the PSS provide a general understanding of how sexual violence is commonly discussed. These terms may be used differently elsewhere. For example, sexual abuse is also the term used in the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study for sexual violence that occurs in the context of elder abuse (Qu et al. 2021).

Sexual exploitation is a term used to describe a range of behaviours; it usually refers to sexual abuse where offenders use their power (physical, financial or emotional) or a false identity to sexually or emotionally abuse (Victorian Department of Education and Training 2019). Sexual exploitation can occur in the context of human trafficking, prostitution or child sexual exploitation (when sexual abuse of children and young people is carried out in person or online) (ACCCE 2021; Victorian Department of Education and Training 2019; UNHCR n.d.).

National Standards of Practice Manual for Services Against Sexual Violence

The definition of sexual violence adopted by the National Standards of Practice Manual for Services Against Sexual Violence extends the ABS definition, noting that many researchers and clinicians in the field conceptualise sexual violence more broadly to encompass child sexual assault, sexual harassment, street-based sexual harassment and image-based abuse. According to the practice standards, sexual violence is an abuse of power, most often perpetrated by men against women, children, young people and other men. It is both a consequence and a reinforcement of power disparities between individuals and groups in society (NASASV 2021).

(continued)

Box 1 (continued): What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence in family and intimate partner relationships

Sexual violence can occur in a family and domestic violence context, when it is perpetrated by a current or previous partner, a parent, sibling or other family member. Sexual violence can also occur in boyfriend, girlfriend or other dating relationships; this is sometimes referred to under the umbrella term intimate partner violence.

Note that sexual violence does not always occur in isolation; it may occur in intimate partner relationships as a form of coercive control, or as part of a broader pattern of abusive behaviour.

How common is sexual violence?

Prevalence data from national surveys can be used to show how widespread sexual violence is in Australia. These data can also highlight who is at risk, who perpetrates sexual violence, and the actions people take once sexual violence has occurred. Box 2 lists some examples of national survey data sources.

Box 2: Data sources for understanding the prevalence of sexual violence

- ABS Personal Safety Survey, Australia
- ABS *Recorded crime – victims* data, Australia
- AIFS Elder Abuse Prevalence Study
- Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) National Survey on Workplace Sexual Harassment
- National Student Safety Survey
- eSafety Commission's Image-based Abuse National Survey
- National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey
- Australian Child Maltreatment Study (forthcoming)

This report focuses on national data sources and provides an overview of sexual violence and service responses for the general population. Due to the limited data available, this report does not look at, or make comparisons between, specific population groups. These limitations are discussed further in **Data gaps and development opportunities**.

Interpreting survey results

Survey data sources such as those listed in Box 2 can provide valuable information about sexual violence; however, it is important to note that the quality of survey data depends on key features of survey design. There are a number of reasons why survey estimates may differ from the true population values.

Due to differences in individual survey designs, results included in this report vary in accuracy and representativeness, and this should be taken into account when interpreting results.

Note, too, that not all data sources listed in Box 2 are included in this report. Further detail about each data source used can be found in the **Data sources appendix**.

Many Australians have experienced some form of sexual violence

Data from the 2016 PSS show that many Australians have experienced some form of sexual violence or abuse:

- 12% (2.2 million) of Australians aged 15 and over have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15.
- 1 in 20 (5.0% or 913,000) experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15 (ABS 2017).

Sexual violence can occur anywhere, but most sexual assaults happen in a residential setting, often at home (AIHW 2019).

Data from the Elder Abuse Prevalence Study, which includes a survey of Australians aged 65 and over, show that in the 12 months before being surveyed, 1.0% of the sample reported experiencing sexual abuse. Women (1.2%) were more likely to report sexual abuse than men (0.7%) (Qu et al. 2021).

The proportion of women experiencing sexual violence has remained relatively stable

Data from the PSS show that the proportion of women experiencing sexual violence in the 12 months before the survey remained steady between 2005 and 2016 (1.6% in 2005 and 1.8% in 2016). However, during this period, the proportion did fluctuate, increasing from 1.2% in 2012 to 1.8% in 2016 (ABS 2017).

Many people have experienced sexual harassment

The 2016 PSS shows that around 1 in 2 (53% or 5.0 million) women and 1 in 3 (25% or 2.2 million) men have experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15. Of those who experienced sexual harassment:

- about 3 in 5 (62% or around 3 million) women and 1 in 2 (46% or around 1 million) men had been subjected to inappropriate comments about their body or sex life
- more than half of the women (57% or 2.8 million) and half of the men (51% or 1.1 million) experienced unwanted touching, grabbing, kissing or fondling (ABS 2017).

For both men and women, the proportion of people who experienced sexual harassment has increased over time. The women experiencing sexual harassment in the 12 months before the survey increased from:

- 15% in 2012 to 17% in 2016 for women
- 6.6% in 2012 to 9.3% in 2016 for men (ABS 2017).

The prevalence of violence may increase over time for several reasons, including due to an actual increase in prevalence, an increase in awareness and propensity to report, or a combination of these reasons.

Sexual harassment occurs in many settings

Sexual harassment can occur in several settings, including workplaces and universities. Data are available from 2 surveys to report on sexual harassment in these contexts:

- According to the Australian Human Rights Commission 2018 National Survey on Workplace Sexual Harassment, 1 in 3 (33%) people said they had experienced sexual harassment at work in the 5 years before the survey.
 - Of those who experienced sexual harassment, 7 in 10 (69%) women and 6 in 10 (58%) men experienced more than one form of sexual harassment in the previous 5 years (AHRC 2018).
- According to the 2021 National Student Safety Survey, 1 in 12 (8.1%) students who responded said they were sexually harassed in the previous 12 months.
 - Recent incidents most commonly occurred in general campus areas (55%), in a university library (24%) and in university lecture theatres and computer labs (22%) (Heywood et al. 2022). A total of 43,819 students participated in the survey, with a completion rate of 12%.

Sexual violence, abuse and harassment can also occur in schools; religious institutions; recreational, sporting or retail venues; and aged care and other residential care facilities, as well as in other public spaces, on the internet and on social media. Prevalence data from these specific contexts are limited.

Women and younger adults are more likely to experience image-based abuse

According to an Image-Based Abuse National Survey conducted in 2017, 1 in 10 (11%) respondents have had a nude or sexual photo or video of them posted online or sent on without their consent.

The study also found that:

- women and younger adults were more likely to have experienced image-based abuse. Of all adults aged over 18, 15% of women and 7% of men had experienced image-based abuse. The largest difference in prevalence between women and men was among young adults aged 18–24 (24% of women and 16% of men)
- perpetrators of image-based abuse are typically someone whom the victims knew – 29% said it was a friend they knew face to face and 13% said it was an ex-partner (Office of the eSafety Commissioner 2017).

The study found that certain population groups – younger adults, women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and those who identify as LGBTQI+ were more likely to be targets of image-based abuse. A total of 4,122 people participated in the survey – 2,417 women aged 15–45, 1,505 women aged 46 and over and men, together with a boost sample of 200 women aged 15–45 who had experienced image-based abuse (Office of the eSafety Commissioner 2017).

Sexual violence during the COVID-19 pandemic

Between February and April 2021, the Australian Institute of Criminology surveyed 10,000 women in Australia about their experiences of intimate partner violence since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the survey was to explore the experiences of intimate partner violence in the 12 months before the survey.

The survey found that, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 1 in 12 respondents (7.6%) experienced sexual violence from a partner. About 2 in 5 (43%) respondents who experienced sexual violence during the pandemic, and who had a history of sexual violence by their current or most recent partner, said the violence had increased in frequency or severity during the pandemic (Boxall and Morgan 2021).

The survey looks only at sexual violence in the context of partner violence. For more information, see [The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on experiences of intimate partner violence among Australian women](#).

What actions do people take when they experience sexual violence?

Actions taken after an incident of sexual violence vary, depending on the characteristics of the incident and the context in which the violence occurs. In general, incidents of sexual violence are likely to be under-reported to police and/or workplaces.

Friends and family are the most common sources of support

The 2016 PSS asked respondents about the actions taken after their most recent incident of sexual assault. Of the 639,000 women who experienced sexual assault by a male in the 10 years before the survey, half (50% or 317,000) sought advice or support after the incident. The most common sources of advice or support were:

- friend or family member (71%)
- counsellor, support worker or telephone helpline (27%)
- general practitioner (21%) (ABS 2017).

Police were not contacted for most incidents

In the 2016 PSS, around 9 in 10 (87% or 554,000) women who had experienced sexual assault by a male in the last 10 years said the police were not contacted about the most recent incident. The most common reasons for this were women feeling like they could deal with it themselves (34%) or not regarding the incident as a serious offence (34%). One in 4 (26% or 143,000) women who did not contact the police said that they felt ashamed or embarrassed about the incident.

Workplace sexual harassment often goes unreported

Data from the 2018 Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces show that fewer than 1 in 5 (17%) people who were sexually harassed lodged a formal report or complaint. Of those who did not report the incident, almost half (49%) said it was because they assumed people would think they were overreacting (AHRC 2018). This is consistent with findings from the National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (Webster et al. 2018), which show that 25% of Australians hold attitudes that minimise violence against women.

Sexual assault and harassment at university often goes unreported

Data from the 2021 National Student Safety Survey (Heywood et al. 2022) of universities show that a large proportion of sexual harassment and assault at universities goes unreported:

- 97% of respondents who were sexually harassed did not make a formal report or complaint to their university.
- 94% of respondents who were sexually assaulted did not make a report or complaint for the incident having most impact.

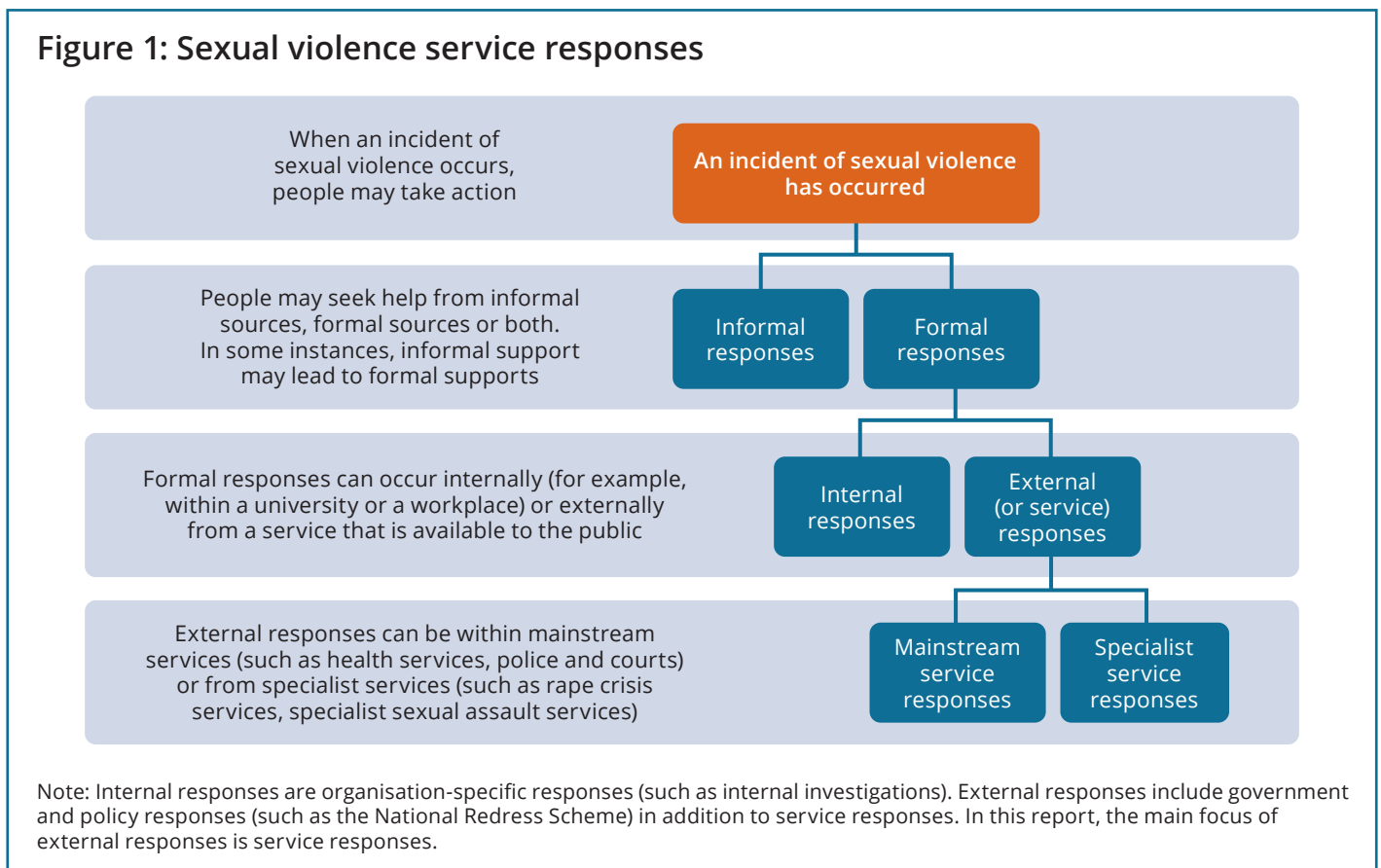
When asked about reasons for non-report, the 3 most common reasons given by both those who were sexually assaulted and those who were sexually harassed were the same: they did not think they needed help, they did not think others would think it was serious enough, or they thought the incident would be too hard to prove. However, many students also indicated systemic reasons for their non-report, such as thinking the issue would not be kept confidential, not knowing who to report or complain to, or being worried about the effect of reporting on their studies or career opportunities.

Students were also unlikely to seek support or assistance for sexual harassment or assault from the university, with only 1 in 6 (17%) seeking support from within their university for sexual harassment and 1 in 4 (26%) for sexual assault. Slightly less than two-thirds (62%) reported seeking support from outside the university for sexual harassment and 66% for sexual assault (Heywood et al. 2022).

What are sexual violence responses?

The data presented show that sexual violence responses are wide ranging and can include both informal and formal responses. Informal responses are those that involve reporting to friends, family or other community members. Formal responses are those that lead to further action – an investigation, referral or specialist support – or action with criminal and legal consequences. Informal responses can sometimes lead to more formal action; for example, if a friend or family member encourages the victim/survivor to report to the police, or reports to the police themselves.

Figure 1 provides an overview of sexual violence responses. These responses frequently overlap, and people who experience violence may be involved with a number of different formal and informal responses.



This report focuses on formal responses to sexual violence, in particular those offered by mainstream and specialist services.

- **Mainstream services:** These services offer health and welfare services to the public, but respond to victim-survivors and perpetrators of sexual violence as part of this work. These services include hospitals, general practitioners, mental health services, child protection services, and police and courts.
- **Specialist services:** These services offer support that is specific to sexual violence. This support includes rape crisis services, specialist sexual assault counselling, victim support groups, helplines, and specialist perpetrator intervention services.

The support that sexual violence services provide can differ, and services have varying levels of contact with both victim-survivors and perpetrators. People who experience sexual violence may also interact with multiple services after an incident of sexual violence.

The National Standards of Practice Manual for Services Against Sexual Violence outlines how services should respond to victim-survivors (Box 3).

Box 3: National Standards of Practice Manual for Services Against Sexual Violence

The NASASV is the key expert peak body in Australia on sexual violence. It is represented in each state and territory by service providers specialising in sexual violence. It works to implement the shared aims of sexual assault services for those affected by sexual violence, in all its forms, with the ultimate goal of eliminating sexual violence in the community.

In 2020–21, the Department of Social Services engaged the NASASV to develop a Third Edition of the National Standards of Practice Manual for Services Against Sexual Violence (the Standards).

Purpose and aim of the Standards

This third edition offers guidance on service provision to adults, children and young people who have experienced sexual assault, as well as to children and young people exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours. The purpose of these Standards is to ensure that these services are accessible, of a high quality and consistent.

The Standards aim to ensure that service provision is not only informed about trauma but also specialised in dealing with it – based on international best practice for working with trauma – and provided within a framework of quality assurance and continual improvement. Trauma-informed services seek to create safety for survivors by understanding the effect of trauma and its close links with health and behaviour.

The Standards set a guide for practice competence for the workforce and guide training providers in designing and developing different levels of training for responding to people affected by sexual violence. As well, they outline the specific skills and knowledge set required for different response modalities, such as telephone, online or face-to-face approaches.

For more information, see [National Standards of Practice Manual for Services](#).

What data are available on service responses?

Nationally, sexual violence responses are diverse. No single data source can be used to illustrate how systems and service providers respond when sexual violence occurs, and the available data are limited to a few key areas (Box 4). Further, data from services will capture only some of the picture. Not all people who experience sexual violence will seek help or come into contact with services. This means the data presented below will represent only a subset of the experiences of victims-survivors.

Box 4: Data sources for reporting on national sexual violence responses

- ABS *Criminal courts, Australia*
- ABS *Recorded crime – victims*
- ABS *Recorded crime – offenders*
- AIHW National Hospital Morbidity Database
- AIHW Child Protection National Minimum Data Set
- Kids Helpline
- Office of the eSafety Commissioner

Additional data may be available at the state and territory level, or from individual non-government organisations that provide services. These data are not included in this report but are discussed in **Data gaps and development opportunities**.

What do the data tell us?

When people experience sexual violence, they may seek formal advice and support in a number of ways. The types of services offered will vary according to the type of violence experienced and the context in which it occurs.

Helplines

Helplines are an important point of first contact for those experiencing sexual violence. They provide a range of services and supports, including information, referral and counselling. Some helplines are specifically designed to respond to sexual violence – for example, those connected to rape crisis centres, or specialist sexual assault referral services. Others may provide more general support in areas such as mental health, workplace health and safety, legal assistance and domestic violence, but will often respond to sexual violence as part of this work.

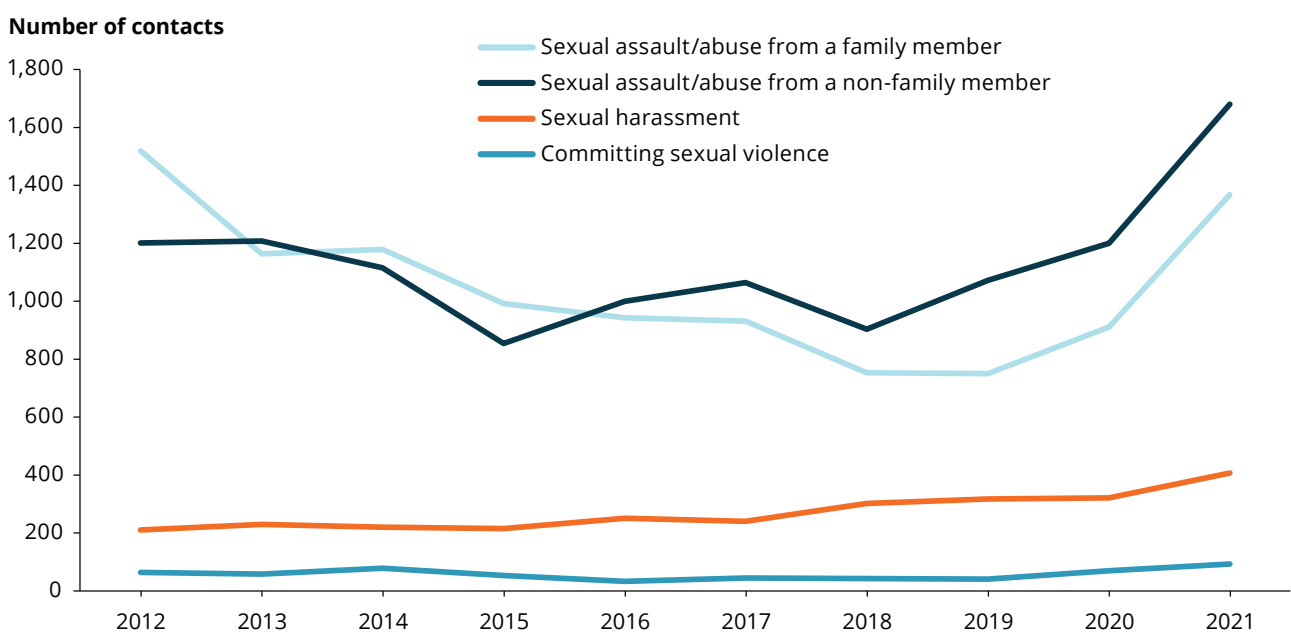
Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline is a free national helpline that provides support and counselling for children and young people aged 5 to 25. Children and young people contact Kids Helpline about diverse issues, including child abuse, family and relationship issues, sexual violence and harassment.

Data from Kids Helpline are available to report on the number of contacts provided with counselling for sexual violence, harassment and abuse, including those who committed sexual violence.

In 2021, 3,492 contacts were provided with counselling for sexual violence, harassment and abuse. This was an increase from 2020 (2,463) and 2019 (2,148). For these contacts, the major concerns raised related to counselling for sexual assault/abuse by a non-family member (1,680 or 48%) and/or sexual abuse by a family member (1,368 or 39%) (Figure 2). Counselling sessions for concerns related to sexual harassment (407 or 12%) and/or committing sexual violence (93 or 2.7%) were less common.

Figure 2: Number of concerns in contacts related to sexual violence, harassment and/or abuse, 2012–2021



Note: Contacts can include counselling for more than one type of sexual violence, harassment and abuse. Numbers do not reflect a unique count of individuals.

Chart: AIHW. Source: Kids Helpline unpublished. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/>

The number of counselling concerns for family and non-family assault/abuse have exceeded those for sexual harassment and committing sexual violence since 2012.

Image-based abuse

Image-based abuse is a form of sexual violence that involves the non-consensual sharing of intimate images online. The Office of the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) operates a complaints scheme to deal with image-based abuse complaints; this work includes providing advice and supporting the development of educational resources. eSafety also facilitates the rapid removal of intimate images posted online. In addition, it works to hold perpetrators to account through formal warnings, remedial directions (which require action to address the image-based activity), infringement notices, and through seeking an injunction or civil penalty order from a court.

In 2020–21, eSafety:

- managed 2,687 reports of image-based abuse. This was a slight drop from 2019–20 (2,702 reports)
- responded to 1,598 enquiries about image-based abuse. This was a large increase from 2019–20 (326 enquiries)
- gave 1 removal notice to a website based overseas
- issued 2 remedial directions and 2 warnings to people responsible for image-based abuse (ACMA 2020, 2021).

eSafety was successful in having 90% of image-based abuse material removed on request. Most (73%) reports received during this period were from adult victims, the majority of whom were aged between 18 and 24.

Sexual extortion is the most common type of harm associated with image-based abuse

The type of harm most often experienced by people reporting image-based abuse was sexual extortion (57%) (Figure 3). Sexual extortion is a form of blackmail that involves threats to post intimate images of the victim unless demands are met, typically for money. It includes the use of fake accounts to threaten distribution of intimate content recorded via video chat, scam email campaigns where victims are threatened with the release of ‘hacked’ intimate content, and dating/romance scams. Victims of sexual extortion are predominantly male (ACMA 2021).

Figure 3: Percentage of image-based abuse reports by type of harm, 2020–21

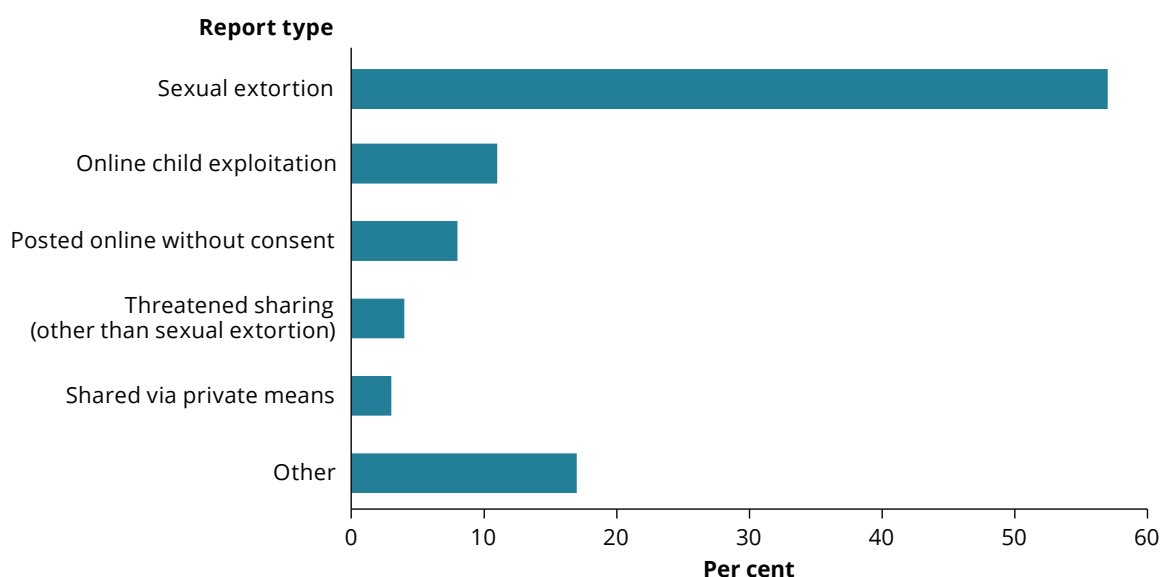


Chart: AIHW. Source: ACMA 2021.

Note: ‘Other’ includes harms such as peer group sharing among young people, coercive control, impersonation accounts, receipt of unsolicited intimate images and digitally altered images.

In 2020–21, eSafety investigators also managed over 23,500 items of potentially prohibited online content, which ranged from depictions of terrorism and other extreme or violent acts; of the investigations taken forward, 14,494 concerned child sexual abuse material (ACMA 2021).

Child protection

Child protection services aim to protect children from abuse and neglect in family settings. Data from the AIHW Child Protection National Minimum Data Set are available to report on cases of substantiated sexual abuse. Substantiated sexual abuse occurs when an investigation concludes there was reasonable cause to believe a child had been, was being, or was likely to be, sexually abused.

In 2020–21, sexual abuse was recorded as the primary type of abuse for 4,843 children (10%) of the 49,700 children who had substantiated cases of child abuse. A primary type of abuse is the type considered most likely to place the child at risk or be most severe in the short term. A higher proportion of girls (14%) had substantiations for sexual abuse than boys (5.8%) (AIHW 2022a).

Some children who receive child protection services may be placed in the care of the state or territory. Data are available on the safety and abuse of children in care. In 2020–21, 297 children were the subject of a substantiation of sexual abuse in care (AIHW 2022b).

Data from child protection services are used to illustrate sexual violence responses to children in family settings but do not include instances of child sexual abuse in institutions. See Box 5 for information on institutional abuse and associated government responses.

Box 5: National Redress Scheme

The National Redress Scheme was created in response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. A person can apply under the scheme if they experienced institutional child sexual abuse before 1 July 2018, are aged over 18 or will turn 18 before 30 June 2028 and are an Australian citizen or permanent resident.

Child sexual abuse is considered institutional abuse when it occurs in an institution (such as a school, a church, a club, an orphanage or a children's home), where activities of an institution take place (such as a camp or sporting facility), or when the abuse is perpetrated by an official of an institution (such as a teacher, a religious figure or a coach or camp leader).

How does the scheme work?

Under the scheme, an offer of redress consists of 3 components:

- counselling and psychological care
- a redress payment
- a direct personal response from participating institution/s responsible for the abuse.

How many people access the scheme?

In 2020–21, the third year of the scheme's operation:

- 3,773 people applied for redress through the scheme
- 3,240 determinations were made
- 3,174 people were determined as being eligible for redress
- 3,225 people accepted and 13 people declined an offer of redress (DSS 2021).

A total of 1,209 institutions were found to have been responsible across for abuse, and 3,251 redress payments were made ranging from less than \$10,000 to \$150,000, with an average payment of \$85,048. The total value of redress monetary payments was \$285,005,565. Further:

- 2,334 people accepted the offer of counselling and psychological care services as part of their redress outcome
- 1,922 people accepted the offer of a direct personal response from an institution.

As at 30 June 2021, all Australian and state and territory government institutions and 491 non-government institutions, or groups of institutions, were participating in the scheme.

Current work underway to establish better data and improve monitoring for child safety is discussed further in **Data gaps and development opportunities**.

For more information about the scheme, see [National Redress Scheme](#).

Hospitalisations

People who experience sexual assault may be admitted to hospitals with injuries; hospitals can thus be a critical entry point to the health system for victim-survivors of sexual violence. Data on assault hospitalisations are available from the AIHW National Hospital Morbidity Database.

In 2019–20, 235 people were admitted to hospital for injuries related to sexual assault. Of these people:

- 219 (93%) were female
- 167 (71%) specified a perpetrator.

The perpetrator most commonly specified was a spouse or domestic partner – accounting for 34% of specified perpetrators – followed by other known persons (24%) and strangers (22%).

These data include only patients who have been admitted to hospital, who may or may not have had a preceding presentation to an emergency department. Emergency department presentations that did not lead to a hospital admission are not included in these data.

Police responses

When incidents of sexual assault are reported to the police, they are recorded as crimes. Data on police responses are available from the ABS *Recorded crime – victims*, and *Recorded crime – offenders* collections.

The number of sexual assault victims recorded by police has risen

In 2021, police recorded 31,118 victims of sexual assault. This was an increase of 13% (3,580 victims) from 2020, and the highest number recorded across the 29-year time series. Accounting for population growth, the sexual assault victimisation rate increased from 69 victims per 100,000 people in 1993 to 121 victims per 100,000 in 2021.

Of the 31,118 victims of sexual assault:

- most were female (86% or 26,669 victims)
- around 3 in 5 (61% or 18,925) were aged under 18 at the date of incident.

Most sexual assaults (69% or 21,378) were reported to police within a year and occurred at a residential location (67% or 20,963 victims). Over a third (37% or 11,367) of sexual assault incidents were FDV-related (ABS 2022c).

The majority of sexual assault offenders proceeded against by police were male

Data about alleged offenders proceeded against by police for sexual assault are recorded in ABS *Recorded crime – offenders*. These data include all those who were proceeded against by police in 2020–21 in all states and territories.

In 2020–21, 8,982 offenders were proceeded against by police for sexual assault and related offences. These offenders comprised all those who had a principal offence of sexual assault, or nonassaultive sexual offences. Of these offenders:

- 94% (8,428) were male
- the median age was 33 years (ABS 2022b).

After accounting for population growth, the offender rate has risen slightly over time from 33.3 per 100,000 people in 2008–09 to 39.9 per 100,000 in 2020–21. Further information about the number of proceedings police initiated in the form of court and noncourt actions is available for all states and territories except Western Australia.

Data from the ABS *Recorded crime* collections include sexual assault offences committed against children. These do not include child sexual exploitation offences, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Australian Federal Police (Box 6).

Box 6: Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation

The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE), led by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), focuses on countering online child sexual exploitation, including organised child exploitation networks operating in an online environment.

In 2020–21:

- the ACCCE received 22,680 reports of child sexual exploitation
- the AFP charged 235 people with 2,772 offences related to child abuse (an increase from 161 people and 1,214 charges in 2019–20)
- the ACCCE's Australian and international law enforcement partners removed 232 victims from harm (88 in Australia and 144 internationally) (AFP 2021).

In addition, the AFP, through the ACCCE, records instances of children being rescued, as well as other interventions to remove them from ongoing online sexual exploitation. Children at risk can be in Australia or in another country. In 2020–21, 43 of these matters, which sometimes involve more than one child, were reported. In some, disruption occurred by removing abusive parents' access to their own or other children through arrest, refusal of bail or apprehended violence orders. The removal of children or removal of parental/abuser access aims to stop exploitative material being made and prevent the harm associated with its production, hindering ongoing exploitation.

For more information, see [Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation](#).

Criminal courts

Following police responses, court action may be initiated for offenders of sexual assault. Criminal proceedings punish offenders for criminal conduct related to family, domestic and sexual violence. Data about criminal proceedings in 2020–21 are reported by the ABS in *Criminal courts, Australia*.

The majority of defendants finalised for sexual assault were male

According to ABS *Criminal courts, Australia*, 6,760 defendants were finalised in the criminal courts for sexual assault and related offences in 2020–21. A finalised defendant is a person for whom all charges within a case were formally completed during the reference period. Of the defendants finalised for a sexual assault or related offence:

- 3,736 were finalised for aggravated sexual assault
- 373 were finalised for non-assaultive sexual offences against a child
- 780 were finalised for child pornography and child abuse material offences (ABS 2022a).

The majority (97% or 6,533) of defendants finalised for sexual assault and related offences were male; 9.2% (625) were aged 10–19 (ABS 2022a).

Two in 5 defendants finalised received a guilty outcome

In 2020–21, 39% (3,978) of defendants finalised for sexual assault and related offences received a guilty outcome while 9.0% (922) were acquitted. Defendants may be finalised in a number of ways; the total number of defendants finalised in 2020–21 includes instances where cases were withdrawn by the prosecution (17%) or transferred to other court levels (34%) (ABS 2022a).

Of the 3,978 defendants who received a guilty outcome:

- 63% (2,516) received custodial orders, with 50% (1,990) receiving custody in a correctional institution and 9.8% (390) receiving a fully suspended sentence
- 18% (702) received community supervision/work orders
- 5.3% (209) were issued with fines (ABS 2021).

The principal sentence differed according to the nature of the offence. For example, 69% of defendants who received a guilty outcome for aggravated sexual assault were sentenced to custody in a correctional institution compared with 22% of those who committed nonaggravated sexual assault.

The process from initiation to finalisation in criminal courts represents a part of the justice and legal response to sexual assault. However, during this process, additional services may be available, particularly for victim-survivors, to provide additional assistance and support (Box 7).

Box 7: Witness Assistance Service

The Witness Assistance Service (WAS) works with prosecutors to make sure vulnerable victims of crime, and vulnerable witnesses, have access to a range of information and support services during the case. The WAS works with the most vulnerable witnesses and victims of crime; its work includes matters involving identifiable child victims of crime, victims of slavery, sexual servitude and forced marriage offences. The WAS Referral Guidelines require all identifiable child victims and victims of slavery, sexual servitude and forced marriage offences to be referred to the WAS by prosecutors.

In 2020–21, the WAS received a total of 493 new referrals for victims or witnesses. Of these people (including parents/caregivers of child victims of crime):

- 400 were referred for online child exploitation
- 16 were referred for other child sex offences (CDPP 2021).

For more information see [Witness and Assistance Service](#).

Internal responses

The service responses discussed earlier represent a portion of the way systems can respond to people who have experienced sexual violence. Service responses tend to take place in the community and involve victim-survivors and perpetrators engaging with publicly available systems across a range of sectors.

In some instances, other actions may be taken; for example, through internal investigations and reporting requirements. Data are available from some key areas to show how different processes can be initiated by victim-survivors, service providers and institutions when sexual violence has occurred in specific settings. Some internal responses may also take the form of inquiries, conducted as a one-off, which aim to collect information about the extent and nature of sexual violence or harassment, and investigate the actions frequently taken (see boxes 8 and 9).

Aged care

The number of reportable assaults in residential aged care has been included in the annual Report on the Operation of the *Aged Care Act 1997* since 2008.

In 2019–20:

- 5,718 notifications in relation to assaults were reported under the Act. Of those, 4,867 were recorded as alleged or suspected unreasonable use of force, 816 as alleged or suspected unlawful sexual contact, and 35 as both (Department of Health 2020).

The data show a steady increase in reported incidents of unlawful sexual contact – from 272 in 2008–09 (Department of Health 2009) to 816 in 2019–20.

From 1 April 2021, the compulsory reporting requirements were replaced by a Serious Incident Response Scheme (SIRS). The SIRS requires providers to identify, record, manage, resolve and report a broader range of serious incidents.

From 1 July 2020 to 31 March 2021, the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission received 4,439 notifications in relation to reported assaults (Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission 2021). These comprised serious physical assault, sexual assault, and a combination of both. Data on sexual assaults alone are not publicly available. Under the *Aged Care Act 1997*, aged care providers are mandated to report alleged or suspected unlawful sexual contact to the commission within 24 hours. The intention is to report the allegation or suspicion whether or not the assault was ‘proven’ to have occurred.

National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguards Commission

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Quality and Safeguards Commission is an independent agency established to improve the quality and safety of NDIS supports and services. The NDIS Commission receives reports from NDIS providers on a range of issues.

In 2020–21, NDIS providers notified the NDIS Commission of 1,044,851 reportable incidents. These included:

- 418 incidents of alleged sexual misconduct
- 2,030 allegations of unlawful physical/sexual conduct
- 5,971 alleged incidents of abuse and neglect (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission 2021).

Actions taken following a reportable incident include referring the incident to another agency, requiring the provider to undertake remedial action, requiring a provider-led investigation, requiring the provider to undertake an expert-led investigation, or taking any other action the NDIS Commission deems appropriate in the circumstances.

Sexual harassment in Australian workplaces

Recognising the prevalence of – and immense harm caused by – sexual harassment in Australian workplaces, the National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces was announced in June 2018. It was conducted by the AHRC and builds on the data collected in the survey of Australian workplaces (Box 8).

Box 8: Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry

The purpose of the Respect@Work inquiry was to improve how Australian workplaces prevent and respond to sexual harassment. The AHRC received 460 submissions from government agencies, business groups, community bodies and victims. From September 2018 to February 2019, it conducted 60 consultations. These consultations informed the inquiry report, which outlines:

- the current context in which workplace sexual harassment occurs
- what is understood about workplace sexual harassment
- how primary prevention initiatives outside the workplace can be used to address workplace sexual harassment
- the current legal and regulatory systems for responding to workplace sexual harassment and how these can be improved
- the support, advice and advocacy services that are available, and how access to these services can be improved (AHRC 2020).

The inquiry made 55 recommendations across a range of areas. The Australian Government's response to these is outlined in the Roadmap to Respect report. Five reform priorities were identified:

1. establishing the Respect@Work Council
2. conducting data collection and research on workplace sexual harassment
3. initiating targeted education and training initiatives and the development of resources
4. adopting a joined-up approach across agencies, support services, legal assistance providers and other bodies to ensure better advice and support on workplace sexual harassment issues
5. supporting disclosure of historical workplace sexual harassment (Australian Government 2021).

For more information, see [Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report](#).

In March 2021, an Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces was established by the Australian Government to further examine the culture of Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces. The aim of the review was to ensure that the national Parliament reflects best practice in preventing and responding to bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault (Box 9).

Box 9: Parliamentary services

On 5 March 2021, the Australian Government established an Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces (CPWs), with support from the Opposition and crossbench. The review was conducted by the AHRC and included an anonymous online survey, which received 935 survey responses – 23% of all people currently working in CPWs.

The survey found that:

- 1 in 3 (33%) people currently working in CPWs have experienced some form of sexual harassment while working there
- around 1% of people have experienced some form of actual or attempted sexual assault in CPWs
- women in CPWs experienced sexual harassment at a higher rate (40%) than men (26%) (AHRC 2021).

Over half (53%) of people in CPWs who have experienced sexual harassment disclosed that their most recent experience of harassment by a single perpetrator was by someone more senior. Overall, only half (50%) of people in CPWs knew how to make a report or complaint about bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault.

The AHRC consistently heard from participants throughout the review that there was considerable hesitancy and fear about making a complaint or report. The Review Survey results indicated that only 11% of people who experienced sexual harassment in a CPW reported their experience. Most people who experienced sexual harassment did not report it because they did not think it was serious enough (55%) or believed that people would think they were over-reacting (43%) (AHRC 2021).

The review made 28 recommendations. For these and further information, see [Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces](#).

Sexual violence in the Australian Defence Force

The Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, within its Defence Force Ombudsman jurisdiction, receives reports of contemporary and historic serious abuse within the Australian Defence Force. Serious abuse means sexual abuse, serious physical abuse or serious bullying or harassment that occurred between 2 (or more) people who were members of Defence at the time. Data are available on reports of abuse from 1 December 2016 to 30 April 2022. During this period 3,231 total reports of abuse were received.

Data are also available from 1 December 2016 to 30 April 2022 on assessment decisions, which are reports received by the Ombudsman that are assessed to be a serious abuse in Defence. During this period, there were 2,216 assessment decisions made. Of the reports that contained incident data, 1,095 involved sexual abuse (Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman 2022).

Responses taken following a report include facilitation of counselling through Open Arms (Veterans and Families Counselling), participation in the Ombudsman's Restorative Engagement Program, or an assessment against the Australian Government's reparation payment framework.

Reported sexual assault incidents

Data are also available from the Australian Defence Force on the reported number of sexual assault incidents per year. These assaults include matters of a historical nature, such as those that occurred more than one year before reporting. Reporting sexual misconduct triggers a further inquiry or investigation by the Joint Military Police Unit (JMPU) or state/territory police.

In 2020–21, there were 187 incidents of sexual assault reported. Of these:

- 116 were aggravated sexual assaults (penetrative acts committed without consent, threat of penetrative acts committed with aggravating circumstances, or instances where consent is proscribed)
- 71 were non-aggravated sexual assaults (for example, touching of a sexual nature without consent where penetration does not occur)
- 83 investigations were not conducted or were ceased because no complaint was forthcoming (68) or the complaint was withdrawn (15)
- 20 cases had a determination of insufficient evidence to proceed (10 cases with civilian police and 10 cases with military police)
- 9 cases proceeded to military trial, with 5 guilty outcomes, 3 not guilty outcomes and one trial held in abeyance due to a technical issue
- 2 cases resulted in administrative and disciplinary action at unit level and one case ceased as the alleged offender was deceased (Department of Defence 2021b).

About 44% of allegations of sexual assault made to the JMPU were made by members who did not wish to make a statement of complaint, did not want the matter investigated by the JMPU or state/territory police or withdrew their complaint (Department of Defence 2021a).

The number of reported sexual assault incidents was higher in 2020–21 than in previous years –160 in 2019–20, 166 in 2018–19 and 170 in 2017–18. Due to differences in reporting frameworks, these numbers cannot be compared with those before 2017–18. Support for Defence personnel regarding matters of sexual violence is also provided through the Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office (Box 10).

Box 10: Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office

The Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office (SeMPRO) provides:

- confidential support services to Defence personnel directly affected by sexual misconduct
- debriefing services for personnel exposed to difficult material at work
- assistance with incident management to promote personnel wellbeing
- educational programs and resources.

In 2020–21, SeMPRO assisted 446 new clients – more than in any previous year. Of these clients:

- 159 were support clients who were directly affected by sexual misconduct
- 275 were advice clients (such as commanders, managers, supervisors, colleagues, family and friends) who received assistance to manage or respond to sexual misconduct reports and disclosures
- 12 were debriefing clients (who sought debriefing and mental health services but were not directly affected by a sexual misconduct incident).

Of the total number of support clients between 2013–14 and 2020–21 who were directly affected by sexual misconduct:

- more than three-quarters (76% or 715) were women
- around 3 in 4 (74% or 708) were current or ex-serving Australian Defence Force members) (Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office 2021).

For more information, see [Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office](#).

Data gaps and development opportunities

This report shows that sexual violence responses are diverse. Bringing together data highlights some of the different responses that victim-survivors and perpetrators are involved with after an incident of assault, abuse or harassment. It also highlights the importance of keeping victim-survivors and perpetrators in view, so that service needs are met. However, some key national data gaps remain. In many instances, the data available are fragmented, and cannot be compared across services or states and territories due to differences in reporting and methodology. Further data improvements in key areas can help to strengthen an understanding of sexual violence responses in Australia.

Where are the data gaps?

National data on responses to sexual violence are most readily available from administrative sources where regular reporting is underway, such as child protection services, police and courts, hospitals, and government agencies where data are regularly published to show service provision (such as those reported by eSafety).

Data gaps remain in a few key areas:

- **Specialist sexual violence services:** Currently, there is no single data source for specialist sexual violence services, which can include rape crisis centres, sexual violence counselling services and sexual violence referral services. These specialist services form a critical part of the sexual violence response and provide frontline services to victim-survivors. Specialist services may also respond to those who use violence. Data on these perpetrator-specific services is a critical gap. In some states and territories, data are available from selected organisations to show the volume of service use. However, the picture is incomplete. Specialist services can be diverse, and further work is required to determine which services are in scope – and to develop definitions and data standards – before these data can be reported (see the following section titled ‘What work is underway to improve data on sexual violence responses’).
- **Emergency departments, ambulance and primary care:** Ambulances, emergency departments and primary care are important entry points for many people who experience sexual violence. Some data are available in some states and territories, but there are substantial differences in data collation practices. Some of these data may also be resource intensive to code from health records, and this may limit whether and how quickly they can be obtained. Data from health services may also require additional review and approval processes before release.
- **Community services, including community mental health:** Many services in the community support people across a range of areas. These include services that may interact with people who have experienced sexual violence, such as mental health services and alcohol and other drug treatment services. However, data are not currently available about whether clients have experienced sexual violence or about how these services overlap with sexual violence responses.
- **Population groups:** Many existing data sets do not provide detailed information on the responses to sexual violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, migrant or refugee women, people living with a disability and LGBTQIA+ people. The forthcoming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Personal Safety Survey (conducted by the ABS) may help fill this gap for some Indigenous Australians, but there are some groups of Indigenous people, such as LGBTQIA+ and Sistergirl and Brotherboys, where data may be limited.

The limited data availability across services means that there is limited scope to measure the impacts and outcomes of services from the perspective of victim-survivors and perpetrators. Data improvement across other areas may lead to greater opportunities for data linkage, and these data linkages will enable a better understanding of the pathways and patterns of service use.

What work is underway to improve data on sexual violence responses?

Although there are still data gaps, data improvements are underway in several areas to build the evidence base and enhance our understanding of sexual violence responses. Data improvements can include a range of activities, such as improving definitions, standardising data already collected or adding new data items to existing data collections.

In some instances, data improvement involves building new data collections to cover data gaps (Box 11).

Box 11: Developing new data collections

National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse

One of the 5 themes of the First National Action Plan of the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030 is improving the evidence base. Several measures under this theme relate to data improvement; for example:

- **Measure 24: Complete a baseline analysis of specialist and community support services for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.** This analysis will agree on a threshold for service standards, identify Australian services that meet the agreed standards, find gaps in the service system and recommend on expanding or developing new support services. The analysis will also recommend on the feasibility of developing a nationally consistent minimum data collection for relevant support services.
- **Measure 29: Develop a scoping study for, and establish, an Australian Child Wellbeing Data Asset.** This measure – currently in its early stages of development – will deliver a scoping study for a national, child-focused linked data set to support the holistic analysis of children and young people’s pathways through government services.

Building the family, domestic and sexual violence evidence base

In the 2021–22 Budget for women’s safety, a commitment was made to help build the family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) evidence base. This initiative includes a prototype FDSV specialist services data collection and a FDSV integrated data system.

- Prototype specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services data collection.

Sexual violence can overlap with family and domestic violence. People who experience sexual violence may seek support from specialist family and domestic violence service providers as well as specialist sexual violence service providers. These services, collectively referred to as specialist FDSV services, work with victim-survivors, people who use violence (perpetrators) and their families.

This project aims to develop a prototype collection of data on specialist FDSV services. The lack of a national collection for these services is a longstanding data gap. These data are essential to understanding service use, demand (including unmet demand), outcomes, impacts of investment and reforms, and what works to help not only victim-survivors of FDSV but also perpetrators and their respective families.

- FDSV integrated data system

By joining de-identified data from different sources, data linkage provides an opportunity to explore broader and more detailed policy questions – for example, questions about service pathways of victims or perpetrators, longer term outcomes, and the potential impact of services. This project aims to scope and develop a FDSV integrated data system.

Improving data on sexual violence and sexual violence responses was identified as a priority in the National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces. Recommendation 3 of the Respect@Work inquiry report specifies that agencies that manage workplace sexual harassment matters work with the Workplace Sexual Harassment Council to:

- collect an agreed de-identified data set relating to workplace sexual harassment enquiries, complaints, claims and settlement outcomes to contribute to a coordinated system of annual reporting on workplace sexual harassment metrics
- establish formal arrangements for information sharing and data exchange on enquiries, complaints and claims relating to workplace sexual harassment matters (AHRC 2020).

More information

For more information, see:

- [Family, domestic and sexual violence data in Australia](#)
- [Sexual assault in Australia](#)
- [Family, domestic and sexual violence service responses in the time of COVID-19](#)
- [Examination of hospital stays due to family and domestic violence 2010–11 to 2018–19](#)
- [Monitoring perpetrator interventions in Australia](#)

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCCE	Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation
AFP	Australian Federal Police
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CPW	Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces
eSafety	Office of the eSafety Commissioner
FDSV	family, domestic and sexual violence
JMPU	Joint Military Police
NASASV	National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
PSS	Personal Safety Survey
SIRS	Serious Incident Response Scheme
WAS	Witness Assistance Scheme

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