

# Research Note

## *Assessing relative rates of Indigenous family violence: Using existing quantitative data and a triangulation methodology to identify rural areas in greatest need of additional legal services*

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### **Introduction**

The research team recently completed an exercise to estimate relative rates of Indigenous Family Violence (IFV). The research was conducted on a national scale and utilised only quantitative information. This time-constrained data collation exercise, which was conducted over a seven-week period at the end of 2004, was undertaken for the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department. It sought to 'quantify' the distribution of IFV at a small-area level, using a nationally standardised methodology. This reasonable aim proved to be extremely challenging given the current availability of Australian data on (domestic) violence and Indigenous victimisation. As a consequence, the result was the construction of 'best possible' estimates of IFV based on available data. In conjunction with some key-stakeholder qualitative data the findings of this exercise were used to construct a list of high-priority locations where additional Family Violence Prevention Legal Service (FVPLS) units could be optimally placed. This paper summarises the IFV issue, outlines the 'triangulation' methodology adopted, and discusses the issues raised by this exercise.

### ***Indigenous Family Violence — A Brief Overview***

Indigenous Australians tend to prefer the term 'family violence' to the alternative terminology, 'domestic violence', as the latter construct is viewed as too narrow to take sufficient account of the particular historical experiences of Indigenous people and their current life situations (see Memmott et al 2000 for an expanded discussion of this distinction). IFV often takes place within a context of communal dysfunction and endemic crisis. It is only rarely a private, domestic event unconstrained by communal, clan, and familial pressures, and it takes place in a diversity of settings beside the home, including drinking grounds, streets, and parks. Indigenous people tend to tell stories of IFV which go beyond spousal violence to encompass a diverse mix of aggressive and exploitive behaviours, including child and elder abuse, suicide and self-harm, negative behaviour associated with alcohol and drug use, excessive jealousy, withholding money so children go without food (often as a result of gambling), constant put downs and personal abuse. The commonality connecting these behaviours is that they all emanate from family and communal crisis and they may involve a range of participants (for a comprehensive review of IFV see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence 2000; Blagg 2000; Memmott et al 2000; Gordon 2004; Keel 2004).

While Indigenous people have tended to prefer community 'healing' and 'wellbeing' strategies in addressing IFV, there have also been increasing calls for more, and better coordinated, crisis intervention, policing, and legal services, particularly in remote and rural areas (see Dodson 2004; Gordon 2004). This is not to say that family violence is restricted to remote Indigenous communities; however, it is in these places that the 'visibility, concentration and engulfing nature (of IFV) seem to be most apparent' (Sutton 2001).

Unfortunately, these high-need remote areas are also the most difficult places to service in conventional terms, lacking the capacity to sustain initiatives.

### ***Indigenous Family Violence Prevention Legal Services — A Brief Overview***

In the mid-1990s 13 FVPLS units were established to address the dearth in service provision in remote-Australia. The aim and function of these units has been summarised as follows:

The Family Violence Prevention Legal Service (FVPLS) units are community controlled justice, advisory and referral centres for victims of family violence. The units provide practical assistance and emotional support to people seeking to deal with the effects of family violence (Attorney-General's Department 2004:4).

The original FVPLS units were placed after considering the results of the NATSISS1994 survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994a; Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994b) and qualitative information provided by legal and justice employees across the country.

### ***Motivation for Undertaking this Evaluation***

The demands placed on the FVPLS units increased so significantly over the decade following their conception that funding was allocated for 13 additional units to be placed in 'high need' rural areas by early-2005. As such, the analysis of current quantitative information formed an essential contribution to the simultaneous, broader analysis of IFV undertaken by the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department, which also included consultation with major stakeholders, a national workshop for existing FVPLS unit coordinators (held in Darwin, November 2004), and a analysis of current national infrastructure to address IFV (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission 2001).

## **Methodology**

In effort to quantify current rates of IFV the research team undertook a two-stage analysis of existing, available data. First, the relative rates of IFV between-States were calculated, in order to rank the States for need with respect to additional FVPLS units. Second, the within-State incidence of IFV was estimated through the use of State-specific data, to identify potential locations for the placement of additional resources. As there was no single source of data available to provide a standardised, uniform measure of IFV across the country, the relative rates both between- and within-States were assessed via a triangulation approach, which combined the 'best possible' data sources into a coherent, comparable form. An explanation of how relative-need was assessed under this approach is summarised below.

### ***Estimating Between-State Rates of Family Violence***

Unfortunately, nationally comparable data on family and domestic violence generally is limited, and data relating to family and domestic violence involving Indigenous Australians is even more so. This said, two appropriate, recent sources of information were located that could be compared at a national level; (a) NATSISS2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002), and (b) Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) data. Both of these data sources were provided to the research team on request, having already been collected and collated by the respective national organisations. The data incorporated into the between-State assessment of need is as follows:<sup>1</sup>

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1 The NATSISS 1994 data was excluded from this between-State assessment, with preference given to the NATSISS 2002 information. However, the NATSISS 1994 data did play a crucial role in assessing the within-State rate of IFV for Queensland, as is explained below.

## **NATSISS2002 Data**

Due to its national, standardised collection, the NATSISS2002 data was arguably the most representative, comprehensive and up-to-date source of information providing insight into the prevalence of IFV. For the purposes of this investigation, five items judged to be the most relevant to issues of IFV and the need for legal services were selected for analysis. These asked about, (a) experiences of physical/verbal attack/threat, (b) need for legal representation, (c) use of legal representation, (d) perceptions of family violence as a problem, and (e) perceptions of general violence as problem. Due to the small number of respondents from certain areas, this data disaggregated only to very broad geographic levels of remoteness.<sup>2</sup>

## **SAAP Data**

The SAAP national body provided information about why people sought assistance but emphasised the need for caution when interpreting findings. This is because SAAP service usage data arguably under-represents the incidence of clients seeking support because, (a) not all SAAP agencies participate in the provision of data for the national collection, (b) clients are given the option to exclude their information for national collections, and (c) not all SAAP admission forms gather information about the client's reasons for seeking assistance.

Notwithstanding these caveats, data for a number of family violence-specific SAAP service admission reasons were requested, including (a) time out from family/other situation, (b) relationship/family breakdown, (c) interpersonal conflict, (d) physical/emotional abuse, (e) domestic violence, and (f) sexual abuse. When considered in isolation, the SAAP service usage for these specific reasons showed a large degree of internal consistency, so these incidences were collapsed into a single SAAP score for the purposes of the between-State comparison.

## **Combining the National Data Sources to Assess Relative Rates of Family Violence**

In order to determine how many additional FVPLS units should be placed in each State/Territory it was first assumed that 26 units were to be allocated across Australia at the conclusion of this process (the 13 *existing* units combined with the 13 *additional* units). As such, the objective of the between-State assessment was to determine the ratio at which these 26 units should be distributed between the States.

Based on this assumption, the research team made judgments regarding the representativeness and utility of the information provided by the NATSISS2002 and SAAP data. This perceived utility was reflected by a 'weight' that was allocated to each of the data-types, designed to moderate their influence on the final distribution of the FVPLS units across the States. The weighted influence of all of this information was then combined to generate a composite estimate of the number of units the quantitative data suggested each State should be allocated (as a proportion of the assumed 26 units).

Experience of physical attacks or threats and perceiving family violence as a problem were given the highest weighting (both receiving a weight of 0.34) since these bore (separately) on the major components of the research. Need for legal services, use of legal

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2 This data was not provided in a more disaggregated manner for two reasons. First, from an ethical perspective, the ABS acted to remove any possibility of identifying respondents from low-response areas. Second, from a mathematical position, the sample size in the areas of low response act to make standard errors of measurement so large as to make any 'apparent' differences unreliable and uninterpretable. Previously, NATSISS 1994 data was reported at ATSI regional levels.

services, and SAAP incidents were given lower weights (weights of 0.07, 0.07, and 0.08 respectively) because the researchers believed these measures could be affected by the availability of services (such that more available services may inflate the relative perception of need). Perceptions of general violence were also given a relatively low weight (0.11) because information was already available on the actual experiences of violence. Nevertheless, the allocation of weights could not be regarded as a highly scientific exercise. This said, the final assessment of State units was not highly sensitive to moderate changes in the weights.

An advantage of this method was that it made transparent the number of units that would be assigned if each single data source (i.e., SAAP and each of the five NATSISS2002 questions) was considered in isolation. As such, the differential influence of each of these types of information became evident and the researchers were provided with a range of estimates for the number of units 'needed' within each State. For example, the eventual recommended allocation of units to NSW was 6.2 (of which 3 were already in place). However, across the individual items, the allocation for NSW varied from 4.9 units (based on the combined responses to the SAAP data) to 7.7 units (based on the 'demand for legal services' question in NATSISS2002).

### ***Estimating Within-State Rates of Family Violence***

This weighting process was then replicated within the second stage of this analysis, which was concerned with determining where FVPLS would be best placed within-States. To complete this task State-specific data was gathered from the respective State organisations. Within States/Territories it was necessary to think laterally in order to isolate IFV-specific information. Some of the major types of data identified as useful measures included police data (victims and/or offenders), court data (predominantly restraining order-related), health data (hospital separations for external cause injuries provided by Department of Health and Ageing 2002), SAAP use (for IFV-related reasons), and child protection data. Due to variation in the collection and classifications of these broad data types across the country it was not possible to compare between States/Territories on these indicators. However, where this data was available and could be disaggregated to isolate information about Indigenous people from geographic locations below the State/Territory level,<sup>3</sup> it was utilised as a proxy indicator for relative rates of IFV.

As with the between-State analysis, weights were applied to the available data within each State, resulting in geographic locations being allocated a composite score reflecting their individual 'need' for a FVPLS unit. The outcome of this process ostensibly supported prior decision-making with respect to 'need' identification, as this analysis identified the majority of current FVPLS unit locations as 'high need'. In addition, a list of potential sites for new units was generated for each State/Territory.

### ***Determining a List of Recommended Locations for FVPLS Units***

As suggested previously, the lack of small-area data available on a comparable national basis meant that it was not possible to rank areas across Australia on a uniform basis. Instead, within each State, local areas that were identified as experiencing a large incidence of IFV were either given a measure of 1 (*essential* placement of a FVPLS unit) or 2 (*desirable* placement of a unit). Although the quantitative data had identified the areas under consideration, the final rank was also influenced by qualitative judgments made by

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3 In most States, and for the majority of data types, the unit of analysis was the Local Government Area (LGA).

the research team, and took into consideration each location's relative within-State need, the State's relative level of needs nationally, and the currently available infrastructure within each location (as identified in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission 2001). The end result of this process was the generation of a list of national priority locations for the placement of additional FVPLS units based on the currently available quantitative data. This list is presented in Table 1. It is important to emphasise here that this list represented the outcome of the research team's investigation, but only constituted *part* of the information assessed by the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department in making a decision about the final placement of the additional units. As is discussed below, there are significant limitations to analysing IFV from a purely quantitative perspective, which is why these findings and recommendations were used in conjunction with other qualitative sources of information.

### ***Limitations of Quantitative Indicators and this Approach Generally***

Although this triangulation methodology did provide a structure that enabled the comparison and evaluation of extremely diverse datasets, two issues that warrant discussion were identified by the process.

#### **Quantitative Data Under-Represents the Problem**

Given the complete emphasis placed on reported data in this approach, it is very important to explain that these data-sources under-represent the extent of IFV because assaultive family violence is under-reported to police and other agencies. Considering police data for example, offences such as motor vehicle theft (over 90% reported) or completed burglary (up 80% reported) are generally brought to police notice in Australia. However, relatively few assaults (30%) are reported to police, and there is evidence that assaults involving family members are even less likely to be reported. For example, the 1998 Crime and Safety Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999) indicated that few assaults by current partners (17%) were reported to police. Other surveys, such as the Women's Safety Survey, indicate fewer than 10% of violent incidents experienced by women may be reported to police if the assailant is a current partner (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996:32).

This issue of underreporting is further compounded by the remoteness of the areas of interest in this study. In these locations, and with respect to Indigenous clients, services are rarely as accessible as they are in the major cities of Australia, or even in larger regional towns. This issue is particularly highlighted by extremely remote areas, such as 'The Lands', which are known to be in drastic need of additional resources, but which were not identified by this quantitative analysis at all. This provides a second reason why official measures of IFV almost certainly underestimate the extent of the problem relative to more populous areas with better service provision.

A third possible reason why the information included in this analysis may not present a complete picture of the real incidence of IFV concerns individual's perceptions of the acceptability or normality of actions that actually constitute family violence. Whether family violence is a problem in the community, the seriousness accorded to a specific incident (whether a victim would consider an incident to be 'family violence' or not), may fluctuate according to situation. The same questions may be decoded and responded to differently in urban, rural, and remote areas over time. In some remote areas, in particular, there may be a degree of de-sensitisation, or 'tragedy tolerance' (Sutton 2001) both to personal issues and those of others in the locality due to long term exposure to crisis conditions. Furthermore, remote areas tend to be places where pressures may be greatest to keep issues away from the prying eyes of outsiders.

Table 1: Areas Within Each State/Territory/Area Identified via the Quantitative Triangulation Method as Having the Greatest Need for Additional FVPLS Units, Presented by LGA and SD, and Summarising the Pre-existing Services at Each Location

State/		Existing services															
Territory/	Local government	Rank	Statistical	Courts						Legal services				Support			Prison
Area	authority (LGA)	need	division (SD)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)	(j)	(k)	(l)	(m)	(n)
NSW	Bourke	1	North Western				✓				✓			✓		✓	
	Broken Hill	1	Far West				✓				✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
	Dubbo	2	North Western			✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Vic	Mildura	1	Mallee		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		
	Shepparton	2	Goulburn		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	
Qu	Townsville	1	Northern	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓		✓	✓		✓
	Cooktown*	1	Far North		✓												✓
	Roma	1	South West	✓	✓	✓					✓				✓		
	Rockhampton	1	Fitzroy	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓			✓		
SA	Ceduna	1	Eyre		✓		✓		✓							✓	✓
	Cooper Pedy	2	Northern		✓		✓				✓					✓	✓
WA	Halls Creek	1	Kimberley							✓				✓		✓	
	Port Headland	1	Pilbara				✓				✓			✓	✓	✓	
	Broome	1	Kimberley				✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
NT	Tennant Creek	1	NT balance				✓		✓		✓					✓	✓
Other	The NPY Lands	1	Cross-border														

Notes: Existing services include: (a) supreme court, (b) magistrate's court, (c) district court, (d) local court, (e) family court, (f) children's court, (g) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal service (ATSILS), (h) ATSILS sub-office, (i) legal aid office, (j) community legal centre, (k) women's refuge group, (l) victim's support service/regional domestic violence service, (m) community development employment program, (n) prison/custodial correction centre/remand centre (existing service information extracted from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission 2001 Indigenous Population Data and Legal Services Demographic Maps). \* Cooktown here refers to the ATSIC region, which covers the Cape York Peninsula North of Cairns.

## Issues Surrounding the Operationalisation of Indigenous Family Violence

All measures of crime, health status, welfare need, and other indicators, whether based on surveys or official records, result from some institutional mechanism for defining, capturing, and processing events as the phenomenon of interest. This is argued convincingly in the case of 'crime' by Biderman and Reiss (1967). For example, police statistics rely on police to accurately assess, record, and report on those events that come to their notice and they judge to be crimes.

While this reporting issue exerts influence over the currently available information on IFV it is also important to outline two other issues that influenced the current research. First, within Australia there is no nationally comparable data on IFV available from police, courts, health, or welfare sources. (Remembering that time constraints and logistical issues prevented all data types being compiled for every State/Territory, e.g., Queensland was limited to health and SAAP accommodation data.<sup>4</sup>) Where these sources were available at small-area level within particular States, the range of data from such sources varied significantly from one State to the next. Second, it was not possible to impose a uniform definition of family violence across all of these data sources. Instead, the research team had to tailor specific definitions to the restrictions of each data source during the analysis. As such, even when data was available that did meet the simultaneous needs for a geographic location below the State/Territory level, an Indigenous indicator, and relative population rates (rather than just basic frequencies), the definitions of the data were not uniform (e.g., the two different offence-classification systems in operation across police jurisdictions).

## Conclusions

Overall, it can be concluded that this triangulation, weighting methodology enabled large, diverse sets of data to be analysed in parallel. The findings of this process supported the uneven distribution of FVPLS units across States/Territories, and also identified a number of priority areas within each State/Territory which would benefit from additional legal resources.

However, it is important to qualify that simply because an area was not identified as a priority location for additional FVPLS units according to this methodology this definitely did not exclude it from being classified as a 'real' priority area for resource placement. This outcome is simply an artifact of the arguable completeness of existing quantitative data. As such, until national, comparable, comprehensive data exists, it is crucial that future, similar exercises do not simply rely on what the numbers show. While the findings from the analysis of the existing quantitative data contributed to the decision-making process in this case, the qualitative stakeholder feedback also played a crucial part in determining the final location of the additional FVPLS units.

The National Information Development Plan for Crime and Justice Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics forthcoming) flags the need for improvement in three areas of data collection relevant to this project: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, family violence, and spatial data. The paucity of quality data at the intersection of these three areas highlights the priority that needs to be given to all of them to redress the poverty of current statistics. The massive effort required is highlighted by the fact that the Australian Bureau of Statistics *removed* statistics on assault and sexual assault from its 2004 national

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4 Given the absence of other information within the time constraints applicable here, the Queensland analysis also incorporated aspects of the NATSISS 1994 data, showing the relative rates of IFV across ATSI regions.

collection (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005). Raw numbers of these offences were reincluded in the 2005 data, but offence *rates* were not tabulated. In other words, Australia now lacks comparable recorded crime data on violence even at State-level, let alone data on *family* violence, involving *Indigenous* victims, at *small-area* level.

On a final note, the research team believes that the triangulation and weighting methodology used in this exercise is a useful one, with the potential for wider applicability beyond the boundaries of the exercise described here. While the approach does not have the statistical rigor of the techniques used in systematic reviews and meta-analyses (e.g., Farrington et al 2001), the approach does provide an opportunity to explore and interpret findings in situations where data is scant or where the comparability of data sources is questionable and where the requirement for statistical rigor cannot be satisfied by available data sources.

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