



# THE CHOICE

VIOLENCE or  
POVERTY

Anne Summers



Domestic violence  
and its consequences  
in Australia today

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Paul Ramsay Foundation Fellow 2021-22

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The report can also be found on the following website: [www.violenceorpoverty.com](http://www.violenceorpoverty.com)

The ABS tables can be found at <https://rebrand.ly/violenceorpoverty-tables>

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We all acknowledge the Traditional owners of country throughout Australia and pay our respects to Elders past and present.



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## Note on terminology

It is regrettable that there is no standard language in Australia to describe violence against women by the men who they live with. There are no standard definitions between, or even within, states and territories of what constitutes domestic and other forms of violence against intimate partners. This situation needs urgent redress, and it is to be hoped that the federal government, via its National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032, might lead the way. It is confusing, to say the least, when there are so many terms whose definitions overlap, and which often appear to be used interchangeably. Such terms include ‘domestic violence’, ‘domestic and family violence’, ‘domestic abuse’, ‘intimate partner violence’, ‘family violence’, ‘partner violence’, and ‘gender-based violence’, to name the most commonly used.

This report will use ‘domestic violence’ when referring to violence against women in the home or by their current or former partners. I prefer that we use language that is widely known and understood. This is the term that is used most in the media and people are coming to understand that its meaning has expanded to include forms of violence such as emotional abuse and coercive control, as well as physical and sexual assault. When reporting the Australian Bureau of Statistics findings in the customized data from its 2016 Personal Safety Survey prepared for this report, I will use the ABS term ‘partner violence’, which refers to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

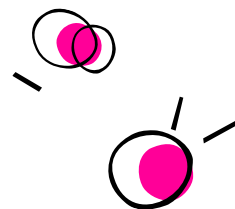
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ALSWH	Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health
ANROWS	Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
DFV	Domestic and Family Violence
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
LGBTQI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
PRF	Paul Ramsay Foundation
PSS	Personal Safety Survey
PV	Partner Violence

## Key government payments

Family Tax Benefit	Payments made to families according to the numbers and ages of their children
JobSeeker	Replaced Newstart as the unemployment benefit in 2020
Newstart	The benefit paid to unemployed people
ParentsNext	A compulsory federal government program for young parents receiving the Parenting Payment whose youngest child is under 6, whose stated objective is to 'help eligible parents to plan and prepare for employment by the time their youngest child reaches school age'
Parenting Payment Single	An income-support Payment for single parents whose youngest child is aged under 8

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***I didn't like the path I was going. There was domestic violence. My partner at the time, her dad, we broke up. It wasn't nice ... I didn't want that for my daughter ... I packed three suitcases, climbed out a window, pushed my car down the drive and went.***

Leah Purcell  
Actor and director

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***I don't know any single mothers who haven't experienced violence.***

Asher Wolf  
Human rights activist

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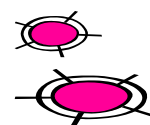
***In my consultations with children, young people and families on 'Keeping kids safe and well', I have been staggered at how many homeless young mothers I am meeting who are couch-surfing or cycling through caravan parks and short-term refuges with babies and toddlers in tow. Typically, they have left violent relationships and end up homeless.***

Anne Hollonds  
National Children's Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission

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Sources:

1. Leah Purcell, quoted in Garry Maddox, 'My grandmother was considered sub-human: The drive behind Leah Purcell's new film', Sydney Morning Herald, 23 July 2021 <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/movies/how-leah-purcell-coped-with-old-memories-hug-the-kids-walk-the-dog-20210713-p589dx.html>
2. Asher Wolf to author; quoted with permission.
3. Commissioner Anne Hollonds to author; quoted with permission.



# The Choice: violence or poverty



Women experiencing domestic violence in Australia today have two choices:

- to stay in the violent relationship, or
- to leave.

Each year several hundred thousand women are forced to make this choice. It is not easy, as the experiences of women in 2016 reveal.

## Those who stayed

### The numbers<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS), an estimated **275,000** Australian women suffered physical and/or sexual violence from their current partner. Of these women, **81,700** (30 per cent) had temporarily left the violent partner on at least one occasion but later returned. Mostly they returned because they still loved their current partner, wanted to work things out, or the partner had promised to stop the threats and the violence (**69,000** or 85 percent). But for around 15 per cent<sup>\*2</sup> of these women (**12,000\***),

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- 1 All figures cited in this section are from the ABS, from the Personal Safety Survey 2016 or from the customized data drawn from the 2016 PSS prepared by the ABS in 2021 for this report, which can be viewed from the link in the Appendix.
  - 2 Figures in this report that are flagged with an asterisk have a relative standard error of 25–50%. The ABS notes that while such figures are still suitable for analytical purposes, they should be used with caution.

the reason for returning was that they had no money or nowhere else to go.<sup>3</sup> Returning to their violent partner seemed a better choice than being homeless or trying to subsist in poverty.

The vast majority of these 275,000 women – **193,400** or 70 per cent of them – chose to remain. Not all of them did so happily. Almost **90,000** of them wanted to separate but were unable to do so, with **22,600\*** saying that lack of money and financial support was the main reason they were unable to leave their violent partner.

## The consequences

By staying in the violent relationship, the woman hoped to be able to have financial security for herself and her children. But she may pay a price:

- The violence will likely continue and could escalate.
- The social stigma attached to remaining: the 2017 National Community Attitudes Towards Violence against Women Survey, conducted by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), found that 32 per cent of respondents believe that a female victim who does not leave her abusive partner is partly responsible for the abuse continuing.
- Being at risk of loss of independence and agency: only 85,800 of these 275,000 women were employed full-time, with almost 110,000 of them either unemployed or not in the labour force, and therefore having no income of their own.<sup>4</sup>

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3 See ABS Customized data 2021, Table 18, *Women aged 18 years and over who experienced violence by a current partner since the age of 15 and who had temporarily separated, Reasons for returning to violent current partner.*

4 Of the 275,000 women who experienced violence by their current partner, at the time of the survey in 2016:

- 165,100 (60%) were employed
  - 85,800 (31.2%) full-time
  - 81,200 (29.5%) part-time
- 10,800\* (3.9%\*) were unemployed
- 98,400 (35.8%) were not in the labour force

\* Estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

See ABS Customized data 2021, Table 10, *Women aged 18 years and over, whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, by labour force status.*



## Those who left

### The numbers

In 2016, there were an estimated **185,700**<sup>5</sup> women who had experienced violence by a previous partner they lived with in a married or de facto relationship, and were now living as single mothers with all children under the age of 18. An estimated **168,000** of these women experienced violence while living with their most recently violent previous partner. Thirty-nine per cent said the main reason for leaving their most recently violent previous partner was the partner's assaults or threats to them or their children, and a further 36 per cent said the main reason for leaving was the partner's controlling or emotionally harmful behaviour towards them. Forty-two per cent of the **168,000** who experienced partner violence while living with the perpetrator said they experienced violence while they were pregnant, and for 35,000 of these women (about half of them) the violence occurred for the first time while they were pregnant. More than half the women said their children had seen or heard the violence. By leaving they hoped to escape the violence and to begin to remake their lives. For far too many of these women, this dream is unrealizable due to circumstances beyond their control.

### The consequences

- For 37 per cent of the 124,100 single mothers who had experienced violence more than once while living with their most recently violent previous partner, the violence increased after the final separation.
- 75 per cent of the 99,700 women who moved out of home after the relationship with their most recently violent previous partner ended left behind property or assets.
- Although 60 per cent of the 185,700 single mothers who had experienced partner violence were in employment, for many their earnings were insufficient to support themselves and their children and they experienced considerable financial stress.
- 50 per cent of the 185,700 women were reliant on government benefits as their main source of income.

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5 An explanation of all the numbers used in the ABS customized data can be found in Appendix 2

- Single mothers receive the Parenting Payment Single (PPS) of \$892.20<sup>6</sup> per fortnight until their youngest child turns eight, when they are forced to go onto JobSeeker, the unemployment benefit.
- JobSeeker, at \$691.00 per fortnight, is the second-lowest unemployment benefit in the OECD (after Greece), at just 27 per cent of the average wage, compared with the OECD average of 58 per cent. It was worth 89 per cent of the single pension (for age pensioners) in 2000; in 2021, despite being increased by \$25 per week, JobSeeker was worth just 66 per cent of the pension.<sup>7</sup>

The choices, and the consequences, are very stark for women wanting to escape domestic violence.

*The government may not be able to immediately stop domestic violence, but it could stop poverty. It chooses not to.*

Government policy, through the current National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010–2022,<sup>8</sup> is ostensibly to encourage and support women to leave violent relationships. **But government policy, through payments policy and other welfare measures, ensures that as many as half the women who choose to leave will end up in poverty.** These two arms of government policy are in direct conflict with each other when it comes to tackling domestic violence.

The government may not be able to immediately stop domestic violence, but it could stop poverty. It chooses not to.

The report that follows lays out in detail the consequences of this choice for women escaping domestic violence.

6 These rates are as of 20 March 2022: [formerministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/](https://forministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/)

7 Brendan Coates & Matt Cowgill. 'Now is an especially bad time to cut unemployment benefits'. *Grattan Institute News*, 25 February 2021, [grattan.edu.au/news/now-is-an-especially-bad-time-to-cut-unemployment-benefits/](https://grattan.edu.au/news/now-is-an-especially-bad-time-to-cut-unemployment-benefits/)

8 This Plan was due to end on 30 June 2022, and to be replaced by a new Plan, a draft of which had been circulated by the previous Coalition government, which lost office on 21 May. At the time of writing (12 June 2022), a final new Plan had yet to be released.



## Executive summary

The data that is published here for the first time reveals both the shocking extent of domestic violence suffered by women who are now single mothers, and outlines in grim detail the economic, health and other consequences of the choice these women made to leave the violence. The findings are both new and confronting and have major policy ramifications for how we address domestic violence, and to the policy-induced poverty that is its outcome for far too many women and children.

Although there is extensive, and growing, awareness about domestic violence in contemporary Australia, the true extent, and the consequences, of this violence remain largely hidden. Perhaps as a result, the conversations about domestic violence are mostly focused on how to deal with its victim-survivors, rather than how to stop the violence from happening. The same is true of much policy. Prevention policy is mostly long-term, based on the assumption that we need full gender equality in our society for domestic violence to end, yet there is no federal government plan for how to achieve gender equality in Australia. (Nor is there any evidence that countries with greater gender equality than Australia have lower rates of domestic violence. In fact, the opposite is often the case.<sup>9</sup>) Another major focus is teaching respectful relationships in schools – another long-term approach that will hopefully pay dividends in the future but cannot be expected to have much impact on violence being perpetrated today.

All this suggests that a policy reset is required, and for that to happen the conversation needs to change. And for the conversation to change, we need new information. This was the overall context and rationale for the report that

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9 For instance, Denmark ranks no. 2 in the Gender Inequality Index yet has a lifetime physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence rate of 32%; Sweden, which ranks no. 4 in the Gender Inequality Index has a lifetime violence rate of 28%. Australia ranks 24 in the Gender Inequality Index and has a violence rate of 22.8% – lower than both Denmark and Sweden: [evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en](http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en)

follows: the search for new information that might prompt us to take a fresh look at domestic violence in Australia. Rather than continuing to look through all the familiar lenses, rehashing all the known data, and continuing to reinforce our existing findings and convictions, I thought it was necessary to seek a fresh perspective. This might, I hoped, yield new knowledge which can, in turn, suggest new ways of tackling our twin objectives: reducing domestic violence, and providing better support for the women who escape it. I decided to do this by examining the circumstances of single mothers who had experienced domestic violence. My reason for this choice was that single mothers appeared to experience domestic violence at a much greater rate than women in any other household group.

*These now single mothers were not single at the time of the violence.*

My first discovery was that there was very little formal data about single mothers and violence. The Personal Safety Survey (PSS), Australia's main data collection on violence, including domestic violence, which is conducted every four years by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), does not identify single mothers as a discrete dataset. I had hoped to learn from the experiences of this group. I had been surprised at how underrepresented they were in current domestic violence research; perhaps the reason for this was the lack of data. To remedy this, I submitted a request to the ABS for a customized dataset. The ABS was able to extract from its PSS 2016 a dataset that comprised **women in single parent families with all children in the household aged under 18** (hereinafter referred to as 'single mothers'). They then produced a set of tables that presented information about the experience, and outcomes, of the 'partner violence' (the ABS term) these women had been subjected to since the age of 15.

*Of the estimated 311,000 single mothers living in Australia in 2016, 185,700 – 60 per cent – had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a previous partner.*

The first, and most confronting, finding is that of the estimated 311,000 single mothers living in Australia in 2016 who had lived with a previous partner, 185,700 – or 60 per cent of them – had experienced violence (physical and/or sexual) by a previous partner since age 15. And that 71 per cent, or 220,200 of these women, had experienced emotional abuse by a previous partner since age 15.

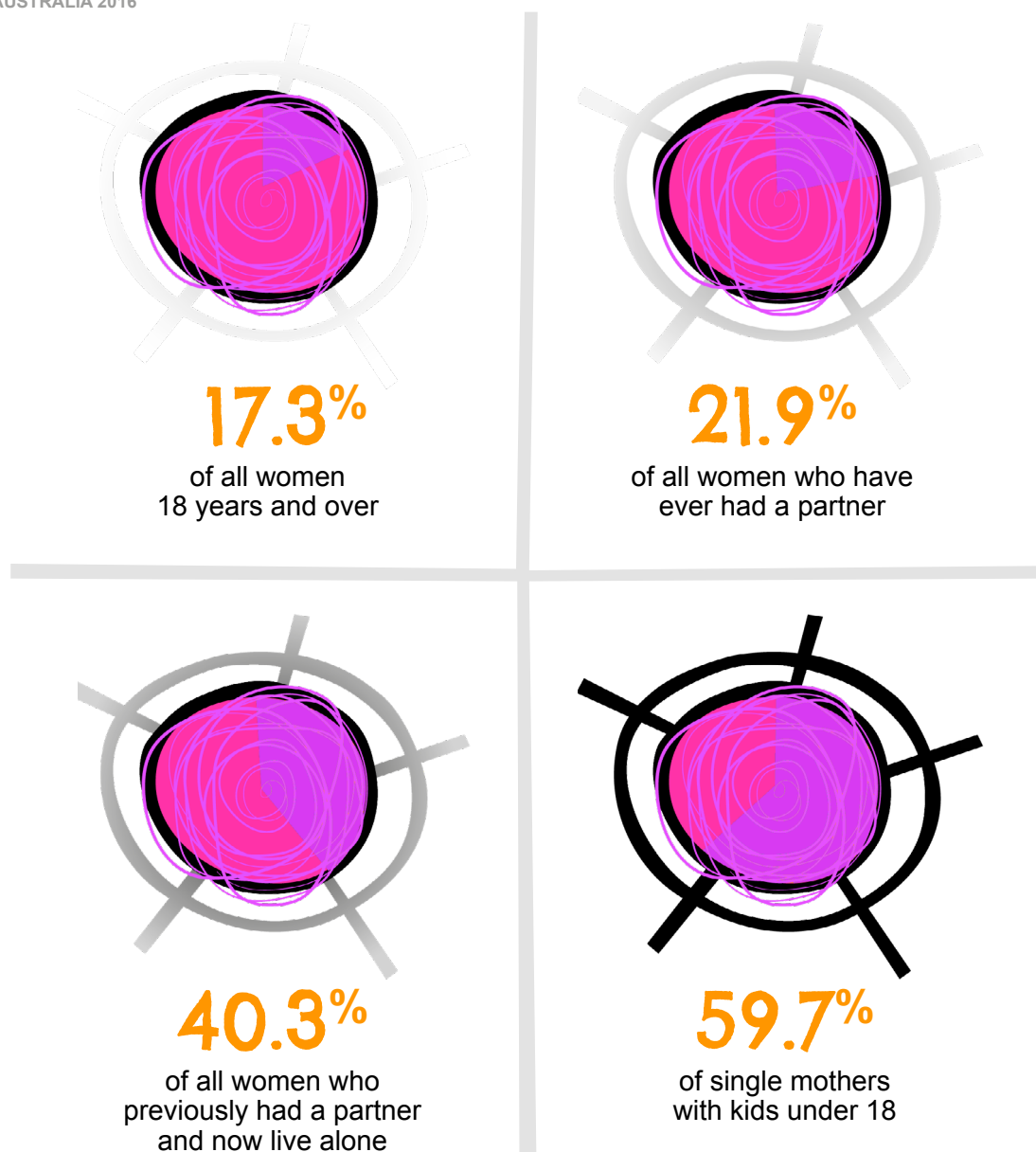
To put this finding in context, the PSS 2016 found that 1.6 million Australian women aged 18 or over had experienced partner violence since the age of 15. That equates to 17 per cent of all Australian women. However, if we only look at

women who have ever had a partner, that number rises to 22 per cent. For all women who previously had a partner, but currently live alone, the number is 40 per cent. But all these numbers are eclipsed by the startling 60 per cent of women who are now single mothers who experienced violence from a previous partner.

FIGURE 1

## rates of partner violence

AUSTRALIA 2016



Source: adapted from ABS Customized Data Table 1

The second thing to note is that these women were all single mothers in 2016 when the ABS collected the data, but they had been in a married or de facto relationship with a violent previous partner in the past. (The ABS defines ‘partner violence’ as any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either sexual or physical assault by a person the respondent lives with, or lived with at some point in a married or de facto relationship since age 15. This may also be described as a co-habiting partner.) In other words, these single mothers were not single at the time of the violence. Was the violence the cause of them becoming single? The customized data documents their multiple attempts at temporary, and then final, separation from their most recently violent previous partner – and this is laid out in exhaustive detail in this report. It also documents that for 75 per cent of these women, their former partner’s assaults, threats, or controlling or emotionally harmful behaviour were the main reason the relationship ended. In other words, these now single mothers left because of the violence.

*The experiences of women who are now single mothers should prompt us to rethink how we approach the issue of domestic violence against women in Australia.*

That finding alone should make us rethink our assumptions about single mothers. Too often single mothers are subjected to unfair and inaccurate stereotyping suggesting that they are amoral, unfit, or otherwise undeserving of sympathy and support. This research should prompt a rethinking of the most effective way to understand the causes and consequences of domestic violence. Much of the current literature highlights groups who, statistics show, are most at risk of experiencing violence: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women, LGBTQI women, women with disabilities, and women living in rural, regional or remote areas. But by focusing exclusively on risk, rather than examining outcomes, we overlook some extremely relevant factors.

We take note of deaths due to domestic violence. We count dead women, but we have overlooked other consequences of the violence. We do not count the physical and emotional injuries, the hospitalizations, the permanent disabilities resulting from domestic violence, the often lifelong injuries to mental health or psychological well-being. And we have not taken into the account the most frequent, and the most obvious, consequence of all: that if women who have children leave violent relationships they become single mothers – and all that results from that. We ignore the fact that these single mothers include Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQI, cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds and women from rural or remote areas. And that not only are there often tough economic consequences, health risks and other problematic outcomes for single mothers who have left violent relationships, but single mothers are themselves often at risk of continuing to endure violence – especially from previous partners.



This report documents in excruciating detail the violence (physical and sexual) and emotional abuse experienced by these women at the hands of their former partner. It makes for painful reading, but it is a necessary resource for understanding the lives of these women – and the health and other consequences, many of which last a lifetime, long after the relationship is over.

I also document the risks of intergenerational perpetuation of this violence. We know that being exposed to violence against one's parents, especially one's mother, as a child increases the likelihood of growing up to be either a victim or a perpetrator of violence. Sadly, our data shows that just over half of the single mothers said the violence was 'seen or heard' by their children. We are talking about 88,600 women here. We know that a third of single mothers in this study have one child and 40 per cent have two. That's a lot of kids who today are potentially setting out in life with this grim prognostication about their future hanging over them. In reality, the figure could be even higher, since children can be impacted by violence occurring between the adults in their household even if they do not actually witness it. They are likely to be aware of the tension, the anxiety, any physical signs of abuse. The customized PSS data shows that 67 per cent of the women who are now single mothers had children in their care at the time they were experiencing the violence; many, if not all, of these children were potentially impacted by this violence

***Almost one-third of the single mothers had witnessed violence against one of their parents when they were children.***

Equally grim is the finding that almost one-third of these single mothers had themselves witnessed violence against one or other of their parents when they were children.

The section of my report that sets out the consequences for these single mothers of having experienced partner violence is detailed and revelatory. The economic consequences are perhaps the most serious, but also the easiest to measure. We do not know enough about the health outcomes except in the most general terms, but work done by the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, and reported in Chapter 2, indicates that long-lasting physical and mental health consequences are common for women who have experienced domestic violence.

My report on the economic outcomes includes the findings of a path-breaking study conducted for this report by Professor Bruce Chapman and Mr Matt Taylor, both economists from the ANU, of Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data on the incomes of women who separated following partner violence. HILDA is a longitudinal study and therefore able to trace outcomes over time (unlike the PSS which is a cross-sectional snapshot of a situation). This is the first time HILDA data has been used to analyze

the financial outcome of domestic violence. The findings are that women who leave violent relationships suffer a drop in income of as much as 45 per cent. These findings are intrinsically important for what they reveal about the impact of partner violence on a woman's household income, but they also point to a whole new avenue of research that Professor Chapman intends to pursue, hopefully in conjunction with future work stemming from this report.

Finally, this report analyses the dire economic situation of the 50 per cent of the single mothers in my study who rely on government payments as their main source of income. I identify their situation as 'policy-induced poverty',<sup>10</sup> a description that might sound hyperbolic were it not for what successive Australian governments have done to payments policy for single mothers over the past two decades.

In summary, in 2006 the Howard government introduced Welfare to Work so-called reforms that took single mothers off the Parenting Payment Single (PPS) once their youngest child turned 8 and forced them onto the much lower-paying Newstart allowance, which was the name then for unemployment benefits. That benefit is now called JobSeeker and is even lower in value in 2022 in relation to the PPS and other government payments and pensions such as the age pension than was the case in 2006. This harsh treatment of welfare recipients, single mothers in particular, has been a bipartisan policy, with the Rudd and Gillard governments introducing measures that exacerbated the impact of the original Welfare to Work policies. These included compounding the disadvantage built into the JobSeeker allowance by changing the indexing to prices rather than – as for pensions and as had been for single parents – to male earnings. This means the gap between the two sets of government payments continues to widen, and single parents, along with the unemployed, are expected to subsist on an amount that is significantly below what social scientists and economists refer to as the poverty line. In addition, changes to the Child Support legislation between 2006 and 2008, which made various changes to the payment formula, including from parental income to a 'cost of children' model, have decreased child support payments for many single mothers.<sup>11</sup>

All this means that thousands of women and children who have escaped from violent families have been forced by the government to live in policy-induced poverty.

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10 I have taken this evocative phrase from S. Maury, S. Olney, K. Cook, E. Klein, & S. Bielefeld (2022). 'The social safety net as a complex system failure for women', [www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/the-social-safety-net-as-a-complex-system-failure-for-women/5/2/2022](http://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/the-social-safety-net-as-a-complex-system-failure-for-women/5/2/2022)

11 [www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/history-of-the-child-support-scheme](http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/history-of-the-child-support-scheme)



## Introduction

The purpose of this report is to shine a very bright light on an area of domestic violence that has not been previously reported or discussed in Australia. As a result, it has been overlooked or ignored by policymakers, with significant consequences for both the women and children affected. This report publishes, for the first time, disturbing data about the startling extent of violence against women who are now single mothers, almost three-quarters of whom because of fleeing their violent partners, and whose lives, and those of their children, are often severely disadvantaged as a consequence.

These findings are based on customized data that was prepared by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) specifically for this report and which has not previously been made public. Together with other data from the ABS's Personal Safety Survey 2016 that has received scant previous public attention, I am able to present – for the first time – the shocking figures on the extent of partner violence (the term used by the ABS to describe violence by a current or previous cohabiting partner) experienced by women who were single mothers at the time of the survey in 2016.<sup>12</sup> I am also able to present a detailed and, at times, disturbing account of the poverty in which so many of these women have been forced to live because of inadequate support by governments for women fleeing violence.

The ABS's Personal Safety Survey (PSS) is the main data source on violence experienced by Australians. It has a particular focus on violence against women, including on domestic violence, and it is from this survey that most of our knowledge of the extent and details of this violence are known. It is an extraordinarily rich resource, based on interviews with more than 20,000 Australians about their experiences of violence. Yet while its

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12 This report follows the practice of the ABS and uses the term 'single' mothers and parents, but we need to recognize that the term 'sole parents' is also in common use, reflecting the fact that not all sole parents are single.

headline findings are relatively well known, parts of this massive dataset remains unexplored (or at least unpublished) – important information that could, and should, be part of the nation’s evidence base for policies to prevent violence against women.<sup>13</sup> As a result, our current knowledge is limited and sometimes unreliable. This report seeks to address some important gaps in this knowledge.

It is well known, for instance, from the most recent PSS conducted in 2016 that 1.625 million, or 17 per cent of Australian women aged over 18, have experienced partner violence at some time in their life since the age of 15. That sounds like a grim statistic, and it is. That’s 17 per cent of the 9,373,500 women in Australia who were 18 or over in 2016. One million six hundred and twenty-five thousand women. That is more than the combined populations of Adelaide, Hobart, and Darwin in 2016.

***1,625,000 women have experienced partner violence – more than the combined populations of Adelaide, Hobart, and Darwin in 2016.***

But who are these women? What do we know about them?

We know this: if we break that number down into specific demographics, the reality is even worse. If, for instance, we simply exclude all women who have never had a partner, the figures are immediately higher: 22 per cent of women who have ever previously had a partner have experienced partner violence. For women who are currently living alone but who have previously had a partner, the figure is 40 per cent.

But it is women living as single parents with all children in the household under 18 years of age who deserve our attention, because a truly shocking 60 per cent of them experienced violence from a previous partner. It was to learn as much as possible about these women that I asked the ABS to produce a customized PSS 2016 dataset that focused entirely on these women, their experiences of violence, and the consequences for them and their children.

In 2016, this ABS customized data shows, there were 311,000 mothers with all children under 18 living in single-parent households, and who had lived

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13 Results from the 2016 Personal Safety Survey are published in the summary publication *Personal Safety, Australia*. Data from the survey is also explored in more detail in a series of thematic analytical articles ([www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/related-articles](http://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/related-articles)) available on the ABS website. Finally, the entire PSS dataset is available to researchers, academics, and other high-end users who wish to undertake complex analysis of detailed microdata, through [TableBuilder](#) or the [DataLab](#).

with a previous partner in the past. Almost 60 per cent, or 185,700, had experienced partner violence, and around 70 per cent, or 220,200, had experienced partner emotional abuse (as many as 152,500 women experienced both<sup>14</sup>). We need to understand that behind these raw statistics are actual real women, with children, trying to rebuild their lives after leaving a violent partner. This study will try to do justice to their situation by reporting, for the first time, the details of what they have suffered, and how they are currently faring.

The data reveals that 75 per cent of these women ended their relationship with their most recently violent previous partner because of their partner's assaults or threats towards her or her children, or because of their partner's controlling or emotionally harmful behaviour. 'Why doesn't she leave?' is society's default response when we learn of a woman suffering domestic violence. These women did exactly that. They left. They escaped. And now they are single mothers.

Yet while the Australian media is full of sympathy towards women who are victims of violence, our society does not look kindly on single mothers. We never have historically, and we continue to judge them harshly simply for being single mothers, making facile and often inaccurate assumptions about their being single. In the past, single mothers were condemned on moral grounds; today they are more likely to be criticized for being a drag on the state's coffers.

***Stereotypes have been used by successive federal governments to rationalize subjecting single mothers to punitive policies.***

These derogatory stereotypes and prejudices against single mothers have been powerful and persistent. The media contributes to them by frequently depicting single mothers as welfare cheats (having babies for cash) or morally lax (children by different fathers), falsely implying that these stereotypes accurately reflect the lives of all single mothers.

These stereotypes have also been used by successive federal governments to rationalize subjecting single mothers to punitive policies. The ABS customized data tells us that almost 50 per cent of single mothers with children under 18 who have experienced partner violence rely on government benefits as their main source of income. Over the

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14 See ABS Customized data 2021, Table 4, *Women aged 18 years and over, Whether experienced violence and emotional abuse by a partner since the age of 15.*

past 15 years these payments have declined in value relative to wages, and even to the poverty line, while at the same time the onerous 'mutual obligations' required of recipients to seek work or attend employment preparation programs have increased markedly.

As a result, too many single mothers and their children live on the margins of society, their lives defined by never-ending financial stress and its accompanying anxieties. While leaving an unhappy or violent relationship can be liberating for many women, and their children, sadly this is not the experience of all those who leave. For too many, there is a high likelihood of them becoming trapped in a whirlpool of disadvantage from which escape will be very difficult. Their children, too, will also struggle to escape from this vicious cycle. We know that children who witness violence against their parents, especially against their mothers, are at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators themselves. By failing to recognize, and respond appropriately to, the reasons so many women and children have ended up in one-parent families, Australia perpetuates poverty and disadvantage – and violence.

*It is domestic violence that breaks up families  
and leaves women to raise their children alone.  
But it is the state that forces them into poverty.*

Almost 58 per cent of those now-single mothers who experienced partner violence are divorced or separated, meaning they were once in registered marriages, and of the further 41 per cent who are currently described as 'never married', all had lived with a partner in a de facto relationship, but their relationships were not registered.<sup>15</sup> The reason that three-quarters of them left their most recently violent previous partner is because they fled the violence or their partner's controlling and emotionally harmful behaviour. As we urged them to do. We must understand, and acknowledge, that it is domestic violence that breaks up families and leaves women to raise their children alone. But it is the state that forces them into poverty. Hence the phrase 'policy-induced poverty'.

This report provides an extensive description of the violence and emotional abuse these women experienced. There is a very detailed account of the types of violence; the impact it had on women's lives, including their employment; the steps women took to escape the violence; and how they fared when they left. As we will see, many women separated from

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15 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7 *Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By family composition and selected socio-demographic and household characteristics.*



violent partners several times before they were able to make the final break. In many cases, the reasons they returned to their violent partners were financial; they simply did not have the money to stay away. Poverty destroys autonomy and undermines the capacity to escape violence. This is also a powerful commentary on the irresponsibility of a society that enjoins women to leave violent relationships but does not provide them with adequate and safe alternatives. There are insufficient shelters and refuges to accommodate the women who need emergency accommodation, and there is a lack of available and affordable housing, and necessary support services, especially to help with employment, for women who have escaped partner violence and who want to rebuild their lives.

*In many cases, the reasons for returning to their violent partners were financial; they simply did not have the money to stay away.*

The consequences of this lack of practical support for women who have left, and are now single mothers, are also spelt out in the report. We have, for the first time, extremely detailed data on the economic, employment, health and other consequences of being a single mother who has experienced partner violence. When we compare these data, and include the findings based on the Household Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey outlined in Chapter 2 of this report, we find that most now-single mothers are considerably worse off financially than they were when still partnered – worse off than women currently in couple relationships who currently have or had a violent partner, and worse off than those single mothers who did not experience partner violence. It is a devastating picture.

*Most now-single mothers are considerably worse off financially than they were when still partnered.*

Finally, the report describes how single mothers have been treated by state and federal governments in Australia. Single mothers have gone from being totally neglected and rejected for government payments on moral grounds in the early part of the 20th century, to the landmark reforms of the Whitlam government that created a special payment for them in the 1970s, to the 1988 creation by the Hawke government of the Child Support Agency, designed to facilitate the transfer of maintenance payments between separated parents, to the Howard government era that upended this relatively generous treatment with its Welfare to Work so-called reforms of 2006 that required single mothers to move into employment once

their youngest child turned 8. The latter policy, which was supported and extended by subsequent Labor governments, has had a disastrous impact on the ability of single mothers to improve their economic circumstances and become financially independent. It has also been catastrophic for the health, well-being, and morale of large numbers of now-single mothers.

The report that follows contains a lot of numbers, by necessity. It is not possible to tell the story of these women without quantifying the situation, to give a sense of how many women have experienced various kinds of partner violence, and to measure the impacts. It is also important to compare their experiences with those of women in other household formations who have also experienced partner violence. We need to understand as much as is possible from this data because this is an instance where the numbers tell the story. I have done my best to make that story more easily digestible by including graphics and charts that illustrate the numbers and complement the text. But we cannot get away from the basic fact that this is a report about numbers. They are big and frightening numbers, but we must not recoil from confronting them. (It should be noted that because the focus of my report is on women who have experienced partner violence and are currently living as single mothers, I am not addressing the issue of women *without children* who experience such violence. This is an equally valid and important topic to address, but it is not the focus of this report.) Nor should we overlook the fact that in addition to these 185,700 women who experienced partner violence and who left, a further 275,000 women, the Personal Safety Survey 2016 found, had experienced violence from their current partner.<sup>16</sup> These were the women who did not leave.

*The violence from which these women escaped has had a far more serious, and often long-lasting effect on their lives and those of their children than was perhaps previously understood.*

My report reveals that the violence from which these women escaped has had a far more serious, and often long-lasting, effect on their lives and those of their children than was perhaps previously understood. This ignorance stems from an approach to talking about domestic and family violence that focuses almost exclusively on risk factors, and rarely considers outcomes.

For instance, the Morrison government's draft National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032, released for public comment in mid-January 2022, described the prevalence of violence in very general

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16 ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016, Table 22.1.

terms of probability – for example, ‘1 in 2 women has experienced violence by a partner, other known person or a stranger since the age of 15’. Such a broad generalization is next to useless in describing the actual prevalence of domestic and family violence, and it is extraordinary that this summary of ‘family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia’ does not actually quantify the violence women have experienced from their partners.

Even the usual focus on the PSS headline number – the 17 per cent of women who have experienced partner violence – is inexplicably missing from this document,<sup>17</sup> and there is thus no chance that the much higher prevalence for women in various types of households outlined in this report is going to be addressed. If the National Plan were even to acknowledge the 60 per cent of single mothers who have experienced partner violence, it would be obliged to address a multitude of issues, including key threshold questions about the evidence base currently used for domestic violence prevention in this country. If governments were to consider the outcomes for women who have experienced violence, they might need to consider who these women are, and why they do not necessarily fit the neat categories that currently drive all policy discussions. The experiences of women who are now single mothers provide evidence that is so startling it might – and perhaps should – prompt us to rethink totally how we approach the issue of domestic violence against women in Australia.

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17 The draft National Plan cites the Personal Safety Survey 2016 as the source for these broad generalizations, but confusingly uses different terminology.



## CHAPTER 1

# Single mothers and their experience of past partner violent relationships

There is a staggering omission from the discussion of domestic and family violence in Australia: the unique experiences of women who are now single mothers and their children. Whether this is the result of oversight, ignorance or indifference, its implications are profound. There is extensive discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences of violence, of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women's, and LGBTQI women's, women with disabilities, and women from rural or remote geographical areas. Women in these groups, the statistics seem to show, are at greater risk of experiencing domestic and family violence. What is rarely noted is that many, if not most, of these women who have experienced domestic violence are also single mothers. And what is never stated is that they are single mothers because of the *violence*.

This report has been prompted by this omission. I first became aware of single mothers seemingly being at greater risk for partner violence from a table in the Personal Safety Survey (PSS) 2016,<sup>18</sup> entitled: 'Proportion of women who experienced partner violence in the past two years, by family composition of household'.<sup>19</sup> This table shows that women living in 'one parent family with children' households had experienced recent partner violence at more than three times the rate of women in couples with or

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18 The Personal Safety Survey was previously conducted in 2012 and 2005 and was based on the original [Women's Safety Survey](#) undertaken in 1996 but expanded, as directed by the Howard government, to include men's experience of violence. The Personal Safety Survey 2020 results will be released in late 2022.

19 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/focus-crime-and-justice-statistics/partner-violence-january-2020>

without children, or women living alone. That seemed to be a situation worthy of further exploration.

I had begun my research with the assumption that the women in ‘one parent family with children’ referred to by the PSS were single mothers. I soon learned, however, that this was not necessarily the case. The PSS obtains its data from interviews with ‘one randomly selected person aged 18 years or over who was a usual resident of the selected household.’<sup>20</sup> In 2016, 21,242 persons were interviewed: 5,653 men and 15,589 women.<sup>21</sup> Since interviewees are selected on the basis of their households rather than their marital status, it turns out that women living in one parent family households with children are not necessarily the mothers of those children; if aged over 18 they might be one of the children, or another adult who is sharing the accommodation. In fact, the PSS does not identify single mothers as a specific dataset.

I sought guidance from the ABS and as a result of these discussions, I requested the ABS to undertake a paid customized data consultancy for this study which would extract from the PSS previously unpublished data for the population of single mothers with children all under the age of 18 living in the household.

*For the first time we have a comprehensive dataset that identifies single mothers and describes their socioeconomic and demographic circumstances at the time of the survey.*

The initial set of customized data was prepared by the ABS for this study in August 2021,<sup>22</sup> together with a set of Explanatory Notes. Following further requests for specific information, two further sets of data were supplied, in October and December 2021. As a result, we now have, for the first time, a comprehensive dataset that identifies single mothers, describes their socioeconomic and demographic circumstances at the time of the survey, and charts in exhaustive detail their experiences of partner violence and partner emotional abuse. These data can be used to compare the experiences of women in other family formations, including other single mothers who did not experience partner violence.

Single mothers who experienced partner violence are the principal source for this study. What we learn from them is that single mothers’ experience of ‘partner violence’ – the term used by the PSS to indicate physical or sexual

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20 ABS (2016). Personal Safety Survey, Australia: User guide, [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4906.0.55.003main+features192016](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4906.0.55.003main+features192016)

21 ABS (2016). Personal Safety Survey, Australia: User guide.

22 The links to this data can be found in the Appendix to this report.

violence by a current or former co-habiting partner – is considerably higher than for any other household or socio-demographic group – and far greater than the figure that had initially caught my attention. When I began my investigations, I was startled to discover how little had been written about single mothers and their experience of domestic violence; now I had a very rich set of data with which to at least start to learn about these experiences.

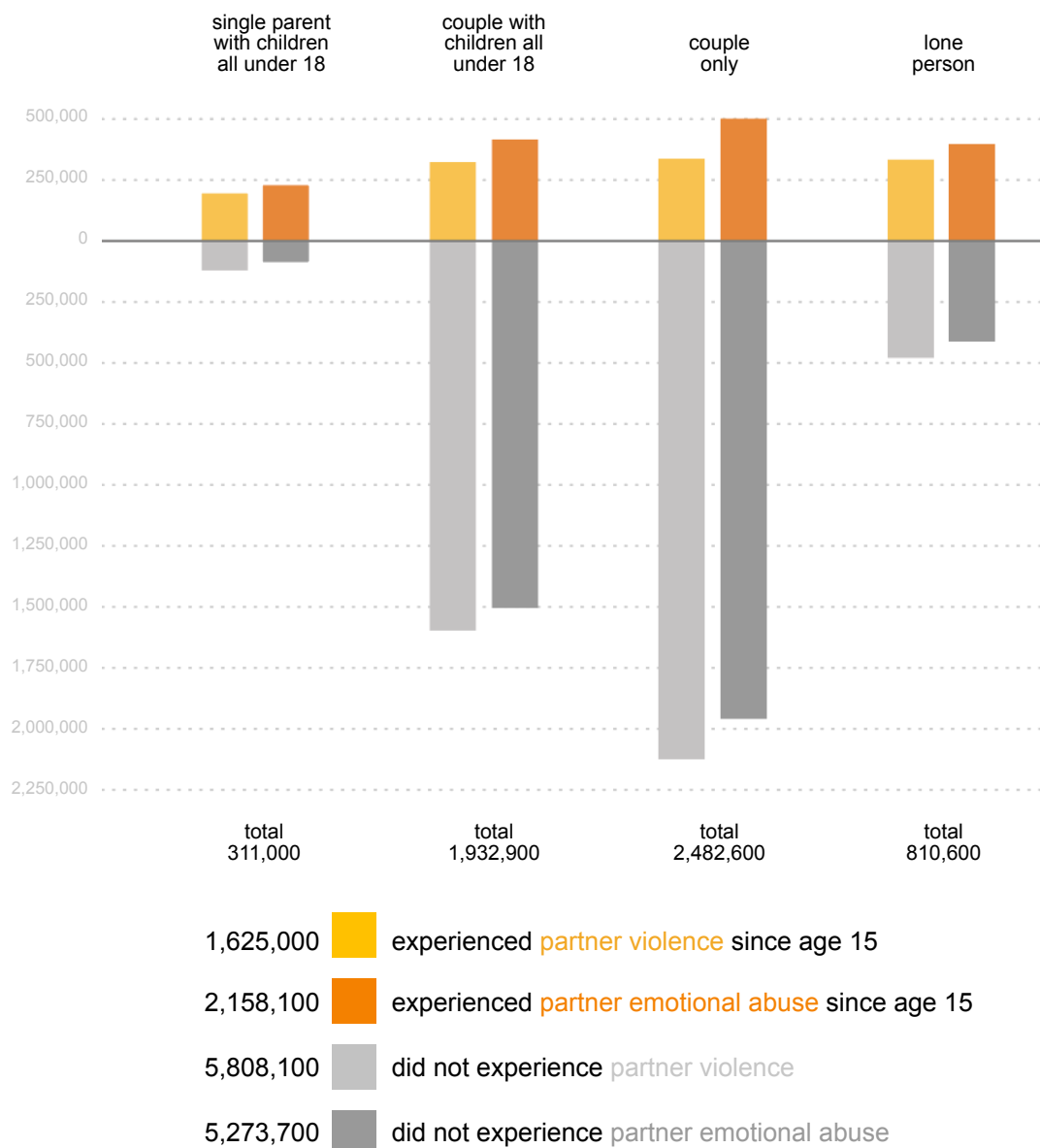
**FIGURE 2**

## partner violence & emotional abuse since age 15

AUSTRALIA 2016

7,433,600

women, 18 years and over, who have ever had a partner, whether experienced partner violence and partner emotional abuse since the age of 15, by family composition



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 1



Before looking at this data in detail, it is important to understand the definitions used by the PSS:

1. **Partner violence** refers to *any* incident of sexual assault, sexual threat, physical assault or physical threat by a current partner they were living with at the time of the survey and/or a previous partner they had lived with.<sup>23</sup>
2. The term **partner** in the PSS is used to describe a person the respondent lives with, or lived with at some point, in a married or de facto relationship. **Current partner** refers to a person the respondent currently lives with in a married or de facto relationship, at the time of the survey.<sup>24</sup>
3. A **previous partner** is a person who lived with the respondent at some point in a marriage or de facto relationship, but who was no longer living with the respondent at the time of the survey. This includes (but is not limited to, since not all previous partners were violent):
  - A partner who was violent during the relationship, but the relationship has now ended.
  - A partner who was not violent during the relationship but has been violent since the relationship ended.
  - A partner who was violent both during and after the relationship.<sup>25</sup>

According to the customized PSS dataset, in 2016 there were an estimated 311,000 single mothers with dependent children all aged 18 or under and living with them, and who had a previous partner (hereinafter referred to as just 'single mothers'). The key findings are:

- 185,700 of these women experienced violence from a previous partner (60 per cent)
- 220,000 (71 per cent) endured emotional abuse from a previous partner, and
- 152,500 (49 per cent) experienced both.<sup>26</sup>

This is a far higher rate than for all Australian women who have or had a partner:

- 1,625.0 million (22 per cent) of whom experienced current or previous partner physical violence

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23 [www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/personal-safety-australia-methodology/2016](http://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/personal-safety-australia-methodology/2016)  
See clause 58.

24 ABS (2016). Personal Safety Survey, Australia: User guide.

25 'Experience of partner violence' tab of Personal Safety, Australia, [www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release#experience-of-partner-violence](http://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release#experience-of-partner-violence)

26 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 4, *Women aged 18 years and over, Whether experienced violence and emotional abuse since the age of 15*

- 2,158.1 million (29 per cent) experienced emotional abuse by a former or current partner.<sup>27</sup>
- 1,258.8 million (17 per cent) experienced both physical violence and emotional abuse from a former or current partner.<sup>28</sup>

Single mothers' experience of partner violence – 60 per cent – is far greater than for women in any other household group. For women who currently live in a couple and who have children all aged under 18 residing in the household, the rate is 16 per cent, and for women who live in couples but have no children, it is 13 per cent (both figures include violence by a previous partner or by their current partner).<sup>29</sup> However, it is important to note that women living alone (but who have had a previous partner), described by ABS as women in 'lone person' households, have also experienced partner violence at very high rates. There are 810,600 of these women, so a considerable number – more than twice as many as the single mothers who are the focus of this study. They include widows, divorcees, the never married, the separated and a tiny number who are still legally married but living alone. The ABS customized data shows that 40 per cent of them had experienced partner violence, and 49 per cent partner emotional abuse.<sup>30</sup> These women tend to be older than the single mothers: 84 per cent of them are aged 45 or over (compared with 30 per cent of the single mothers<sup>31</sup>). There is no information about their maternal status, and none of these women currently have children living with them, but it is possible that some of them at least were single mothers due to the violence when they were younger. The experiences of these women deserve to be investigated in depth, as I am doing with the single mothers, if we want a more complete picture of the prevalence, and impacts, of domestic violence in Australia.

The customized data presents an almost forensic picture of the characteristics of the partner violence and emotional abuse that these single mothers ultimately chose to leave. It deserves to be reported in some detail.

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27 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release#experience-of-partner-emotional-abuse>

28 See ABS Customized data 2021, Table 4.

29 My calculations based on ABS Customized data 2021, Table 1, *Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence and partner emotional abuse since age 15, By family composition*.

30 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 1.

31 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7, *Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By family composition and selected socio-demographic and household characteristics*.

## Violence: frequency, first occurrence, during pregnancy

Of the 185,700 women who are now single mothers and who experienced previous partner violence:<sup>32</sup>

- 73 per cent reported that they experienced more than one incident of violence by their most recently violent previous partner.
- Around 20 per cent said they experienced violence 'all' or 'most' of the time by their most recently violent previous partner.<sup>33</sup> (SEE FIGURE 3)
- Ninety per cent, or 168,000 women, reported that the violence occurred while they were living with their previous partner, while 10 per cent of the 185,700 women did not experience violence while living with their partner (it began after they left).
- For 86 per cent of them, the violence occurred for the first time while living with their partner.<sup>34</sup>

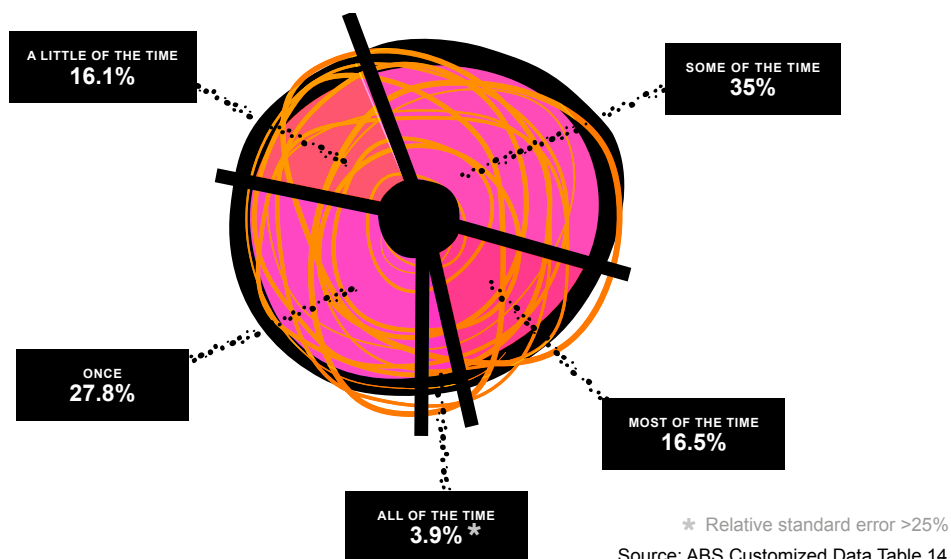
FIGURE 3

### frequency of experience of partner violence

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, how often they experienced violence by their most recently violent previous partner



32 All of the partner violence characteristics referred to in this section refers to the woman's most recently violent previous partner.

33 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 14, *Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Characteristics of previous partner violence over the course of the relationship.*

34 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 14.

It is well known that partner violence often begins when a woman is pregnant, and that was the case for many of these women. Of the 168,000 women who experienced violence while they were living with their previous partner, 128,200 – or 76 per cent – were pregnant during the relationship. Of these 128,200 women, 69,700 (54 per cent) experienced violence during the pregnancy, and for 51 per cent of them, the violence occurred for the first time during pregnancy.<sup>35</sup>

## Nature of physical violence; economic and other consequences

The 2016 PSS found an estimated 151,000 single mothers experienced physical assault by a male perpetrator within the last ten years.<sup>36</sup> Of these, 112,900 (75 per cent) experienced their most recent incident of physical assault at the hands of their previous partner. The data shows that, in the most recent incident of physical assault, these women were choked (22 per cent), beaten (29 per cent), slapped (24 per cent), kicked, bitten or hit with a fist (39 per cent), pushed, grabbed or shoved (73 per cent).<sup>37</sup> These assaults resulted in 81,200 women, or 72 per cent, experiencing physical injuries, and in 37 per cent of those physically injured consulting a doctor or other health professional.<sup>38</sup>

Whether any of the women required hospitalization is not reported, but a 2018 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare notes that 8 per cent (or 1 in 12) women who were hospitalized for domestic violence were pregnant at the time.<sup>39</sup> The ABS reports that for those women who were physically injured, in addition to scratches, bruises, cuts, fractures and broken bones, some received ‘other’ injuries. These include ‘broken teeth; stab, gunshot, or other deep wound; miscarriage; and other’, but their incidence was too low or infrequent to be measured with statistical accuracy.<sup>40</sup> (SEE FIGURE 4)

35 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 14.

36 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 11, *Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Relationship to perpetrator of the most recent incident of physical assault by a male in the last ten years.*

37 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 12, *Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Characteristics of the most recent incident of physical assault by a previous male partner in the last ten years.*

38 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 12,

39 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018). *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia 2018*. AIHW, Canberra, p. 57: ‘The most common site of injury among these women was the head or neck (affecting 44%, or 97 women) followed by the trunk (thorax, abdomen, lower back, lumbar, spine and pelvis) (affecting 35% or 77 women) (AIHW analysis of the National Hospital Morbidity Database).’ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d1a8d479-a39a-48c1-bbe2-4b27c7a321e0/aihw-fdv-2.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

40 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 12.

FIGURE 4

## most recent experience of physical assault

AUSTRALIA 2016

112,900

112,900 women, 18 years and over, who experienced partner violence since the age of 15, now living in a single parent family with all children under 18. Characteristics of the most recent incident of physical assault by a male previous partner in the last ten years



Multiple categories can be selected

\* Relative standard error >25%

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 12

The data also records some of the immediate consequences for these now-single mothers of having been assaulted. More than two-thirds (67 per cent) of these 112,900 women – that is 76,100 women – said they experienced anxiety or fear for their personal safety in the 12 months after the most recent incident of physical assault.<sup>41</sup> (SEE FIGURE 5)

FIGURE 5

## anxiety and fear due to partner violence

AUSTRALIA 2016



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 13

Of the 81,200 women who were physically injured, more than half of them made alterations to their usual routines, such as changing contact details, moving house, improving home security, as well as varying their household routines, eating and sleeping habits, or their social/leisure activities.<sup>42</sup>

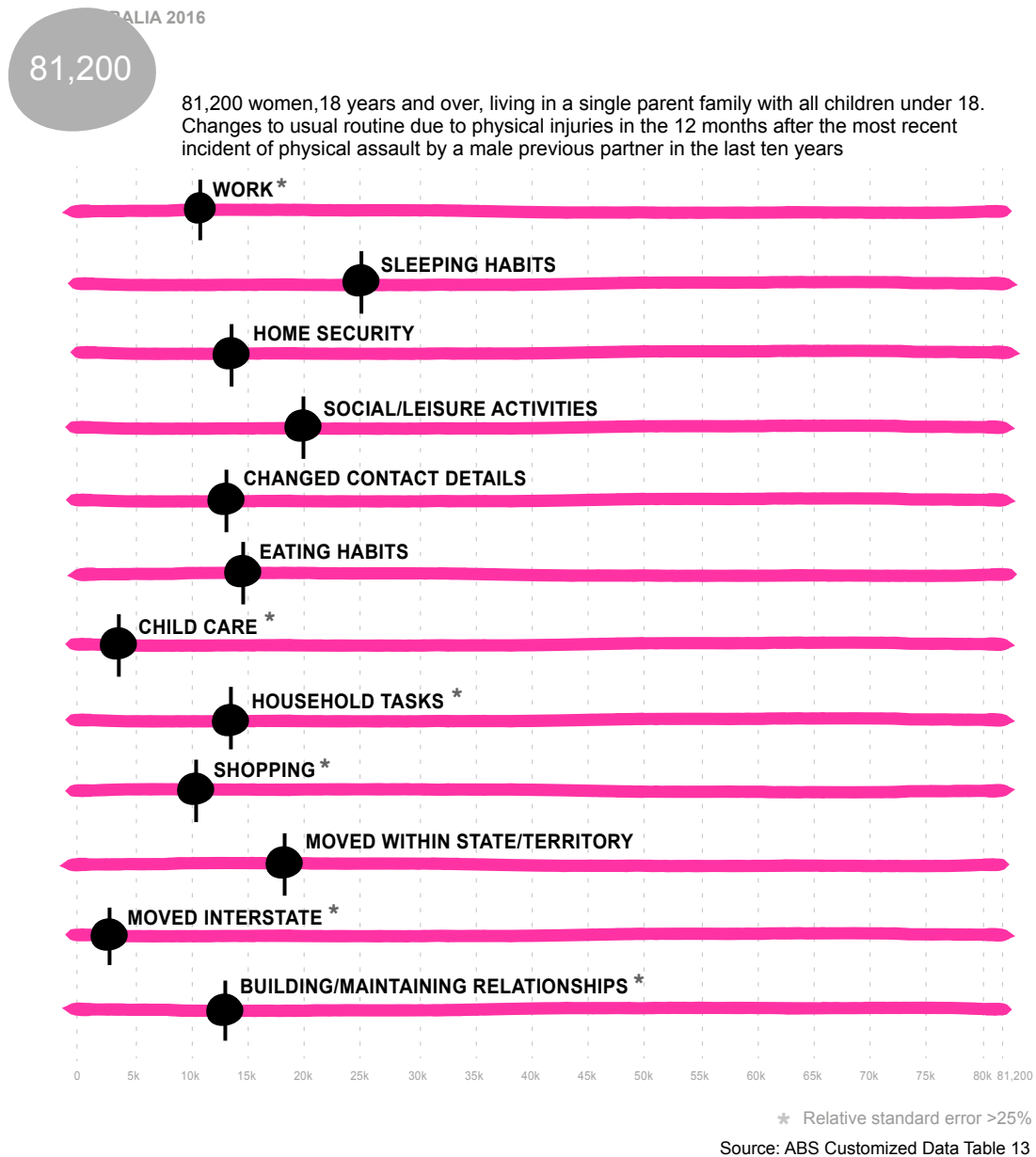
(SEE FIGURE 6)

41 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 13, *Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Actions taken and impacts following the most recent incident of physical assault by a male previous partner in the last ten years.*

42 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 13.

FIGURE 6

## changes to usual routine in the 12 months after physical assault by previous partner



We know that 15 per cent (or 17,200 women) took time off from their jobs in the 12 months after the incident.<sup>43</sup> (SEE FIGURE 7). We cannot say categorically that this was as a result of the violence, but the possibility that this was the case needs further investigation. For many women,

43 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 13.



these physical assaults by their previous partners have changed their lives, often in profound ways. The economic impact of the physical violence most likely meant for many women that their independence and autonomy became compromised. For many violent partners, having women financially dependent upon them is a further means of exercising domination and control.

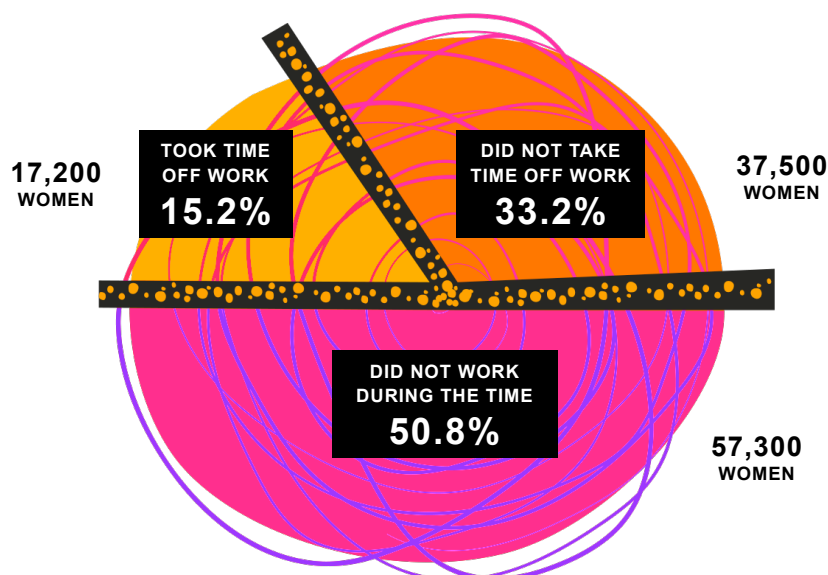
**FIGURE 7**

## took time off work in the 12 months after most recent physical assault

AUSTRALIA 2016

112,900

112,900 women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, whether took time off work in the 12 months after the most recent incident of physical assault by a male previous partner in the last ten years



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 13

## Emotional abuse and coercive control

There is currently widespread discussion about 'coercive control', a form of abuse in which the partner may not use physical force, but who nevertheless terrorizes a woman and – often – her children as well, with a range of other tactics. The existence of this form of domestic violence came to public attention in Australia in February 2020 with the shocking murder of Hannah Clarke and her three children when her former husband, and the children's

father, set them on fire in a quiet suburban street in Brisbane. Hannah had gathered up her kids and left her husband some months earlier because of his controlling behaviour towards her but, she told friends and family, she did not consider herself a victim of domestic violence because he ‘never hit her’. After her death, Hannah’s parents and brother appeared in a television interview where they described in detail the behaviour used by her husband to control Hannah and the children’s every move. This included dictating what she could and could not wear and if she could go out. He also punished the children if she refused his nightly demands for sex, and he prevented her from using contraceptives. Such behaviour would be very familiar to the 220,200 single mothers who suffered what the ABS labels ‘emotional abuse’ by a previous partner.

This term covers a large array of behaviours. These range from preventing women from having contact with their families, friends or community (for 55 per cent of these 220,200 single mothers), to using electronic surveillance to track their movements (33 per cent), to threatening to harm (9 per cent) – or actually harming (6 per cent) – the family pet.<sup>44</sup> The single mothers said their former partners had tried to prevent them from studying (20 per cent); from having access to, or being able to make decisions about, household money (49 per cent); or from working or earning money (30 per cent).<sup>45</sup> A very large 68 per cent of the women said their former partner had ‘constantly insulted them to make them feel ashamed, belittled or humiliated’, while 66 per cent said their partner had ‘shouted, yelled or verbally abused them to intimidate them’.<sup>46</sup> For 44 per cent of the women, the former partner had threatened to take the children away, and 12 per cent had threatened to harm the children.<sup>47</sup> (SEE FIGURE 8)

*The belittlement and feelings of inadequacy and insecurity that often result from abusive behaviour can have lasting effects. Often very long-lasting.*

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44 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 19, *Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children under the age of 18, Characteristics of previous partner emotional abuse.*

45 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 19.

46 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 19.

47 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 19.

FIGURE 8

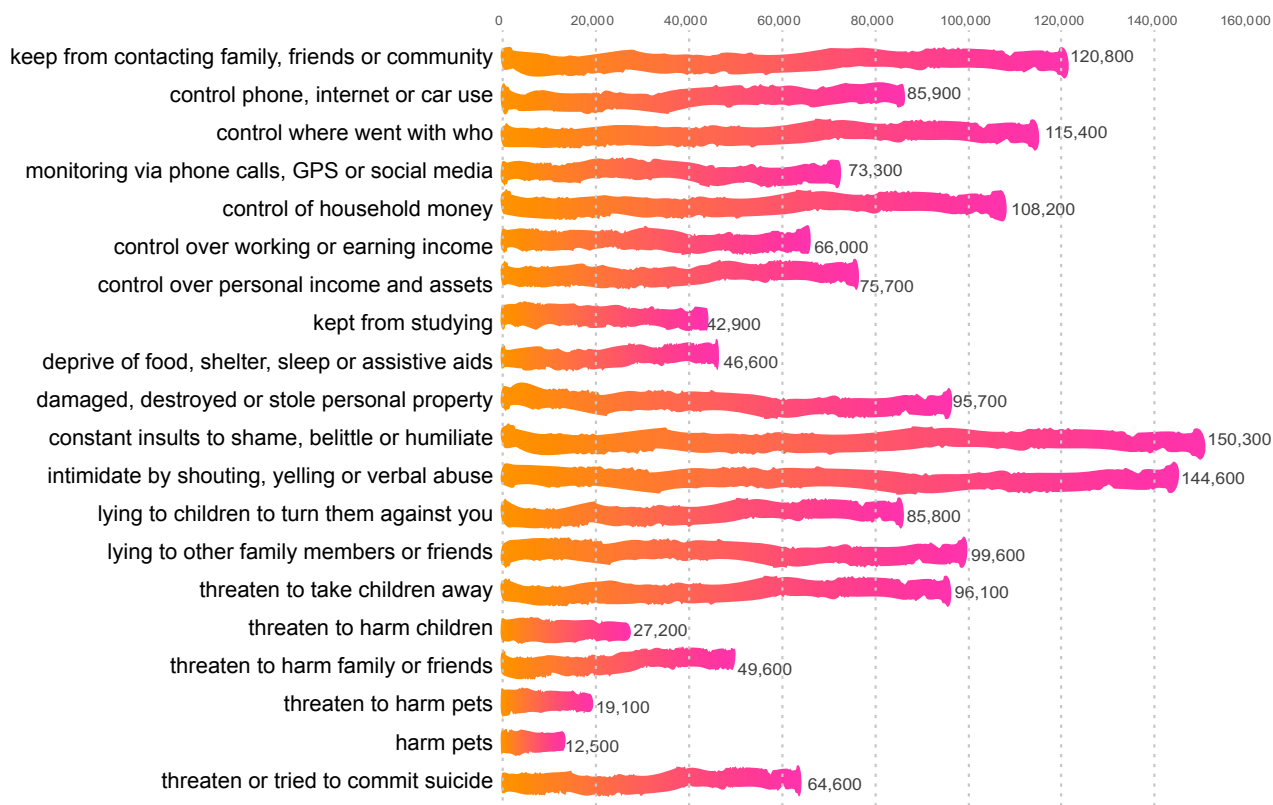
## experience of emotional abuse

AUSTRALIA 2016

220,200

women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who have experienced emotional abuse by a previous partner

### TYPES OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE BEHAVIOURS EXPERIENCED



Emotionally abusive partner assaulted or threatened to assault

YES  
134,900

NO  
85,300

Experienced anxiety or fear due to emotional abuse

YES  
178,600

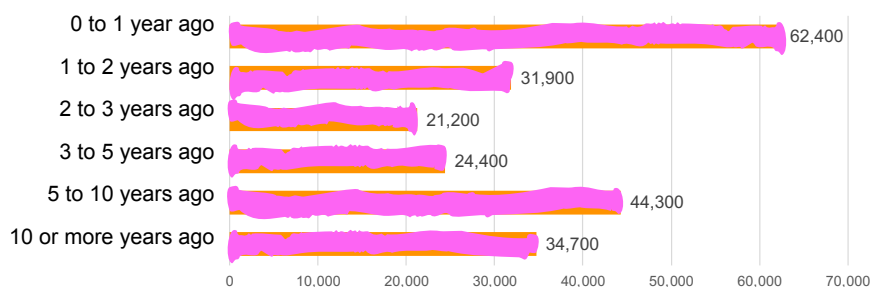
NO  
40,700

Experienced emotional abuse by more than one previous partner

ONE ONLY  
156,000

MORE  
62,900

### MOST RECENT OCCURENCE OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE BY PREVIOUS PARTNER



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 19

A glimpse of how miserable their lives must have been due to this behaviour can be gleaned from the fact that for 81 per cent of these women this 'emotional abuse' took place 'all' or 'most' or 'some' of the time. It happened 'all' or 'most' of the time for 43 per cent of them. In other words, for close to half of the women who were subjected to emotional abuse, it was a constant in their lives. (SEE FIGURE 8)

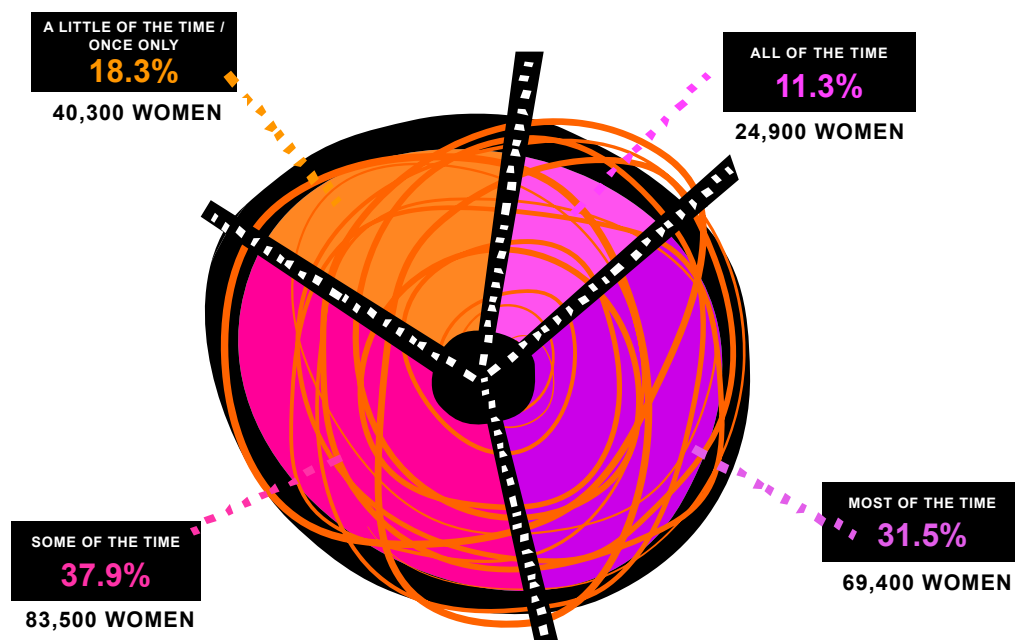
FIGURE 9

## how often emotional abuse experienced

AUSTRALIA 2016

220,200

women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who have experienced emotional abuse by a previous partner



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 19

Not surprising, then, that 81 per cent of them experienced fear and/or anxiety due to the emotional abuse. And 134,900 (or 61 per cent) of these women were also subjected to actual or threatened assault. It is not true, as some conventional wisdom has it, that the men who engage in coercive control do not also become physically violent. Around 40 per cent in this sample did not assault or threaten to assault their partner, leaving a huge majority who did.<sup>48</sup>

48 All numbers in this paragraph are from ABS Customized data 2021, Table 19.

Just over 28 per cent of these 220,200 now-single mothers reported that the emotional abuse had last occurred less than twelve months ago, and a further 15 per cent last experienced such abuse between one and two years ago. Altogether, 52 per cent had experienced emotional abuse from their previous partner within the past three years.<sup>49</sup>

The belittlement and feelings of inadequacy and insecurity that often result from abusive behaviour can have lasting effects. Often very long-lasting. Women will tell you that it took them a long time after separation before they could even begin to reclaim their self-esteem. For many, it seems to be almost impossible. For example, a 46-year-old Victorian woman who took part in a 2007 Monash University study of female domestic violence survivors told the interviewer:

*I still find myself dissolving into tears or thinking that killing myself would be a better alternative at times. I have come such a long way and am extremely proud of myself and my children but I wish I could forget the comments which I try so hard not to believe, the 'you're not good enough, you're a reject, no-one will ever want you' remarks. It's so much easier to dodge a fist than to erase your memory bank.*<sup>50</sup>

At the time, this woman had been separated for six years from the man who had abused her for ten years.

## Separating from a violent partner

Many factors influence a woman's decision to separate from a violent partner. It can be the violence itself (physical violence or coercive control, or both), violence during pregnancy, the impact on children, or the impact on a woman's ability to hold down a job. For the single mothers in my study, it was likely all of the above. Remember, a full 75 per cent said the main reason the relationship with the most recently violent previous partner ended was because of the partner's 'assaults or threats to respondent/children' or 'partner's controlling or emotionally harmful behaviour towards respondent'.<sup>51</sup>

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49 All numbers in this paragraph are from ABS Customized data 2021, Table 19.

50 Quoted in Ilsa Evans (2007). *Battle Scars: Long-term effects of prior domestic violence*. Centre for Gender studies and Women's Research and Gender Studies, Monash University, p. 14. [www.chillawebsites.com/sitefiles/553/File/Battlescars.pdf](http://www.chillawebsites.com/sitefiles/553/File/Battlescars.pdf)

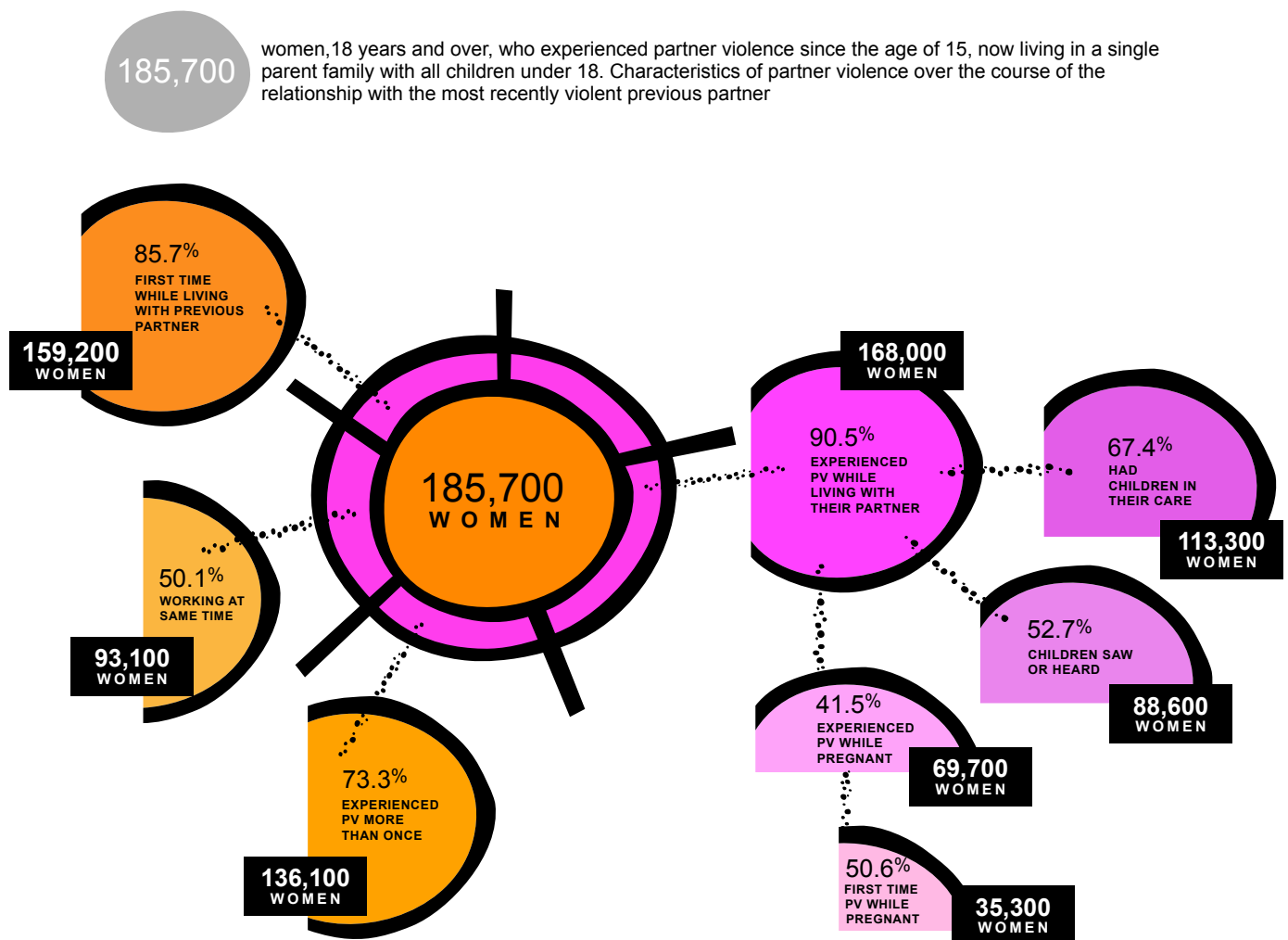
51 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 17.

The women in this study had also experienced partner violence at a far greater rate than any other group of women: 60 per cent of them who ever had a partner, compared with 22 per cent of all Australian women who ever had a partner. This includes 69,700, or 42 per cent of the 168,000 women,<sup>52</sup> who experienced partner violence during pregnancy. It also includes the 35,300 (51 per cent of the 69,700) who experienced violence for the first time during pregnancy (compared with 24 per cent of all women who had experienced violence for the first time from a previous partner during pregnancy).<sup>53</sup>

FIGURE 10

## experience of partner violence

AUSTRALIA 2016



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 14

52 These 168,000 women are those who experienced previous partner violence while living together with their most recently violent previous partner.

53 ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016, Table 18.3.

Almost 53 per cent of the now-single mothers said their children had seen or heard the violence they experienced while they were living with their most recently violent previous partner (compared with the lower – although still disturbingly high – 33 per cent of all women whose children saw or heard the violence by their most recently violent previous partner). Half (50 per cent) of the 185,700 single mothers who experienced previous partner violence were working at the time the violence was occurring (compared with 67 per cent of all women who had experienced previous partner violence who were working during the period the violence was occurring).<sup>54</sup>

For many women, leaving a violent relationship often takes several attempts. The ABS customized data shows that of the 168,000 single mothers who experienced violence while living with their most recently violent previous partner, 92,600 (55 per cent) had temporarily separated on one or more occasions.<sup>55</sup> Almost 30 per cent separated just once, but for many there were several temporary separations, including 33 per cent who left more than three times. What drove them back? Around 60 per cent said their partner had promised to stop the assaults and/or threats, and 63 per cent said that they wanted to try to work things out. Forty-five per cent said they still loved their partner. Others were afraid for their or their children's safety or well-being, or were embarrassed or ashamed of their situation, but for 37 per cent of the women, they returned to the violent partner because they had no money, or nowhere else to go.<sup>56</sup>

On the first night of their last temporary separation from their most recently violent previous partner, of those women who moved out of home 64 per cent of the now-single mothers were able to stay with family or friends, but 17 per cent\* stayed at a shelter or refuge, and around 5 per cent\* at a motel, serviced apartment or caravan park. Overall, taking into account all of the places stayed during the temporary separations, almost 12 per cent,\* or as many as 5,000\* women, reported they had slept rough (e.g. on the street, in a car, in a tent, or squatted in an abandoned building).<sup>57</sup> No wonder so many returned to their violent partner. (SEE FIGURE 10)

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54 All figures from ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016, Table 18.3.

55 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 16, *Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Temporary separations from violent previous partner.*

56 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 16.

57 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 16.



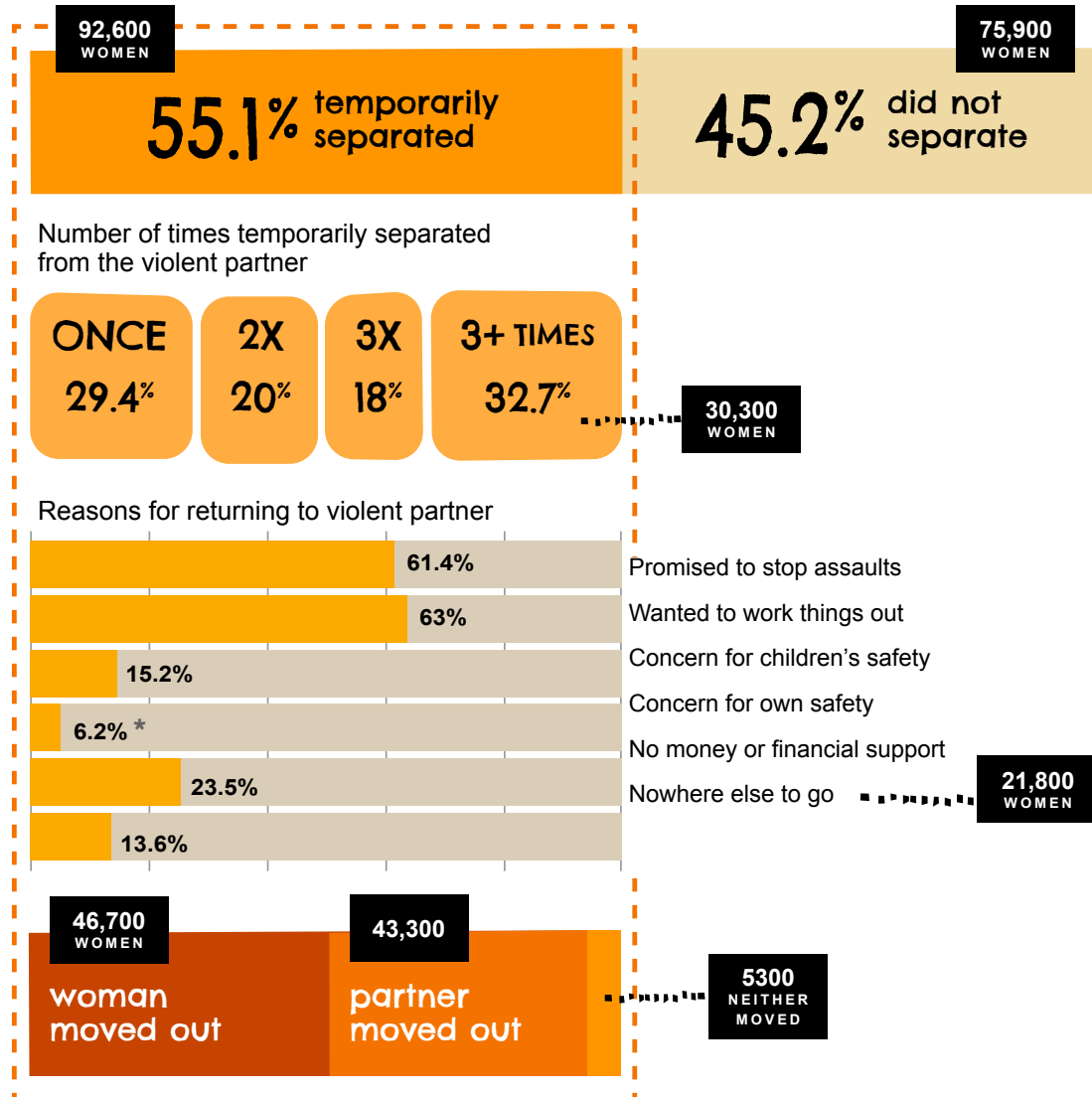
FIGURE 11

## temporary separation from a violent partner

AUSTRALIA 2016

168,000

168,000 women, 18 years and over, now living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who experienced partner violence while living together with their most recently violent previous partner



\* Relative standard error >25%

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 16

When comparing the experiences of temporary separation of now-single mothers with the general population of Australian women who temporarily separated from their most recently violent previous partner, there are some notable differences. Although the proportions of women who temporarily separated is slightly less (49 per cent of all women who experienced previous partner violence while living with their most recently violent previous partner, compared with 55 per cent of

now-single mothers), their patterns of separating more than once are similar.<sup>58</sup> It is when we examine the choices available to the wider population that we see some significant differences: 25 per cent returned because they had no money or nowhere else to go (compared with 37 per cent of the single mothers). Far fewer slept rough or in insecure temporary accommodation during one or more temporary separations (5 per cent compared with 12 per cent\* of the now-single mothers.<sup>59</sup> We do not know why this is, because very similar proportions had stayed with friends or relatives (81 per cent for all women, 79 per cent for now-single mothers) and/or were able to relocate to a new house or rental property (29 per cent for all women, 33 per cent for now-single mothers). This is an area worthy of further investigation.

FIGURE 12

## places stayed during temporary separations

AUSTRALIA 2016

46,700

46,700 women, 18 years and over, now living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who moved out of home during temporary separation after experiencing partner violence while living together

Place stayed on first night during last temporary separation from violent partner

64%	with friends or relatives	
17.3%*	in a refuge or shelter	8,100* WOMEN
4.7%*	in a motel, hotel, serviced apartment or caravan park	
19.7%	other	

All places stayed during temporary separations

79%	with friends / relatives	
22.3%	refuge / shelter	
21.8%*	motel / caravan park	
12%*	slept rough	5,500* WOMEN slept rough e.g. on the street, in a car, in a park or an abandoned building
32.5%	relocated to house/rental	

\* Relative standard error >25%

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 16

Leaving the violent partner does not always end the violence. In some cases – shockingly – it often precipitates it. The period immediately after leaving a violent relationship can be the most dangerous time for a woman and her children. This period – and it can last a year or longer – is when they may face increases in violence, sometimes experiencing physical violence for the first time, and –

58 ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016, Table 22.3, *Female temporary separations from violent partner, By partner type, Proportion of females*.

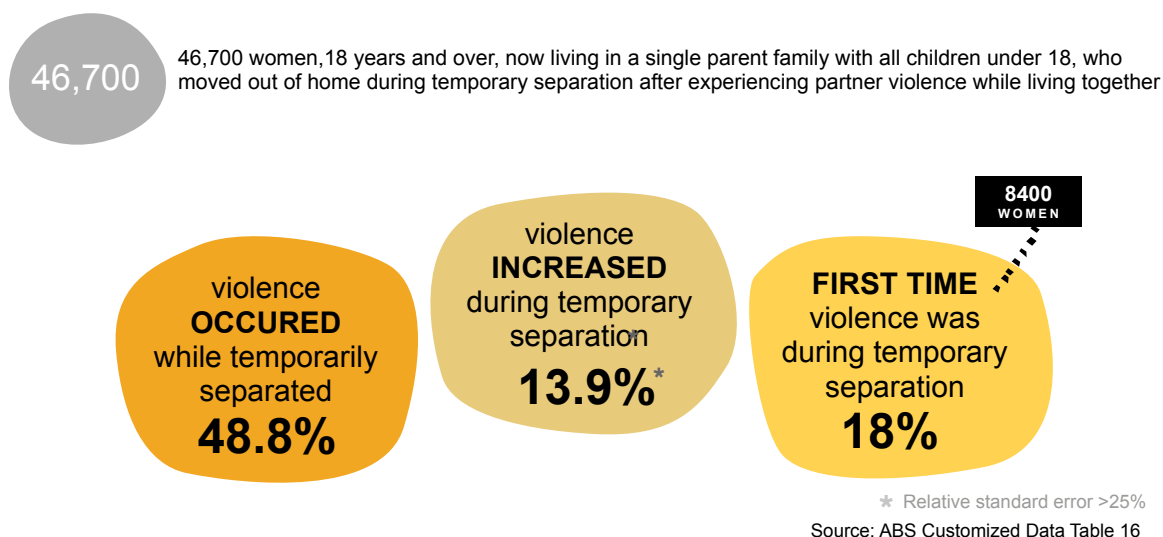
59 ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016, Table 22.3; ABS Customized data 2021, Table 16.

tragically – the risk of being murdered. Think of Hannah Clarke. She had left her controlling husband. She thought she was now safe. Dozens of other women have had similar experiences, of brutal violence if not actual murder, because they dared to leave. A 2022 ANROWS/Australian Institute of Criminology report on intimate partner homicide states that one-third of the victims of the homicide and their murderer were separated at the time of the lethal violence. In cases where the length of time between the separation and the lethal violence was known, one in two homicides occurred within three months, and 80 per cent occurred within a year.<sup>60</sup>

FIGURE 13

## violence during temporary separations

AUSTRALIA 2016



Sadly, my study bears out these risks: 49 per cent of the now-single mothers and 39 per cent of the wider population of Australian women experienced violence from their partner during the period(s) of temporary separation. The violence *increased during separation* for almost 14 per cent\* of both groups of women who moved out of home during one or more temporary separations, and for 18 per cent of the now-single mothers and 14 per cent of the wider population, the violence occurred for the first-time during separation.<sup>61</sup> We cannot assume that because women and children have left a violent relationship they are now

60 H. Boxall, L. Doherty, S. Lawler, C. Franks, & S. Bricknell (2022). *The 'Pathways to Intimate Partner Homicide' Project: Key stages and events in male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide in Australia* (Research report, 04/2022). ANROWS, [protect-au.mimecast.com/s/IXtaCk81oVH7Gop6sVXeMy?domain=anrows.org.au/](https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/IXtaCk81oVH7Gop6sVXeMy?domain=anrows.org.au/)

61 All numbers in this paragraph are from ABS Customized data 2021, Table 16, and Personal Safety Survey 2016, Table 22.3.

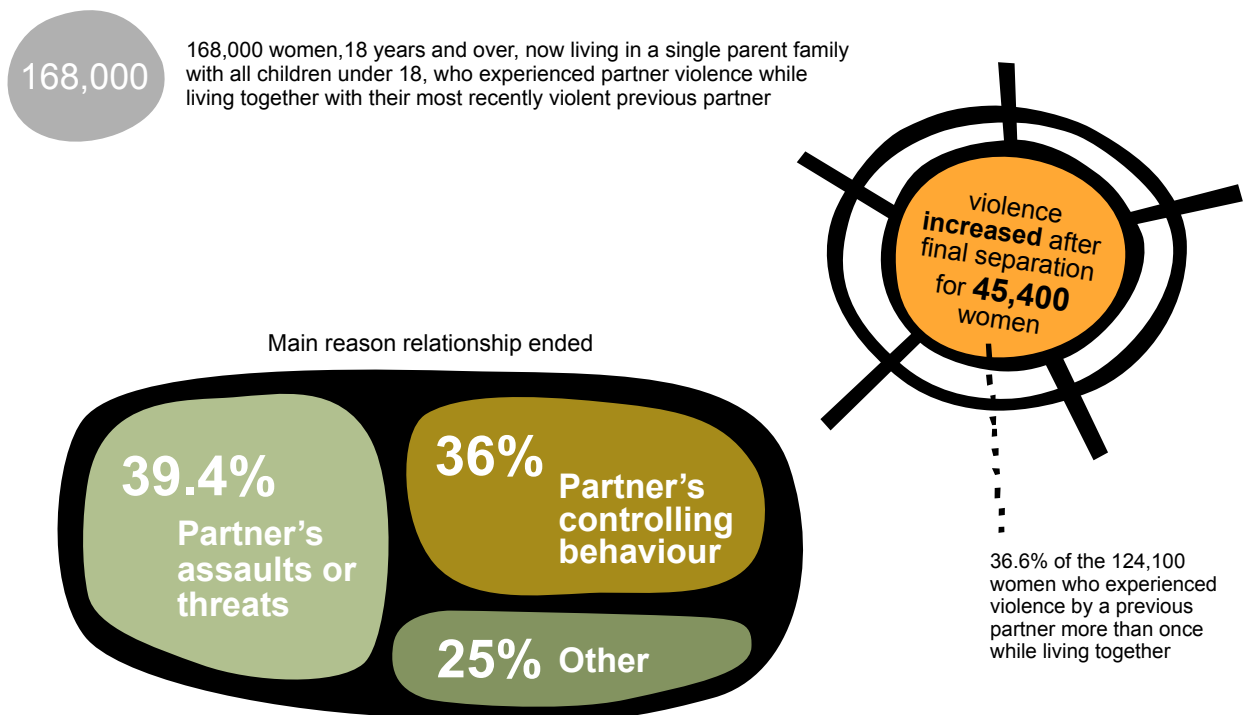
safe; this assumption all too often informs decisions by family courts and child protection agencies, often with tragic consequences.

Leaving a violent relationship can take many forms. For some women, it can be negotiated with their partner: assets can be divided; he might agree to leave the home, enabling the woman and her children to stay in familiar surroundings, continue to attend local schools, etc. Other women carefully plan their final departure, often with the secret assistance of a friend or family member or a worker from a women's shelter. Such planning requires guile and minute preparation to prevent the violent partner from suspecting what is afoot. For some women, it is a matter of picking up their kids, grabbing some clothes if they can, and running for their lives. Eventually, 168,000 now-single mothers who were living with their violent partner were able to leave for good. For 75 per cent of them, the partner's assaults, threats, controlling or emotionally abusive behaviour was the 'main reason relationship with violent previous partner ended'. But for 37 per cent of those who had experienced violence more than once while living together, the violence was not only not over, but it *increased after the separation*.<sup>62</sup>

FIGURE 14

## final separation from violent previous partner

AUSTRALIA 2016

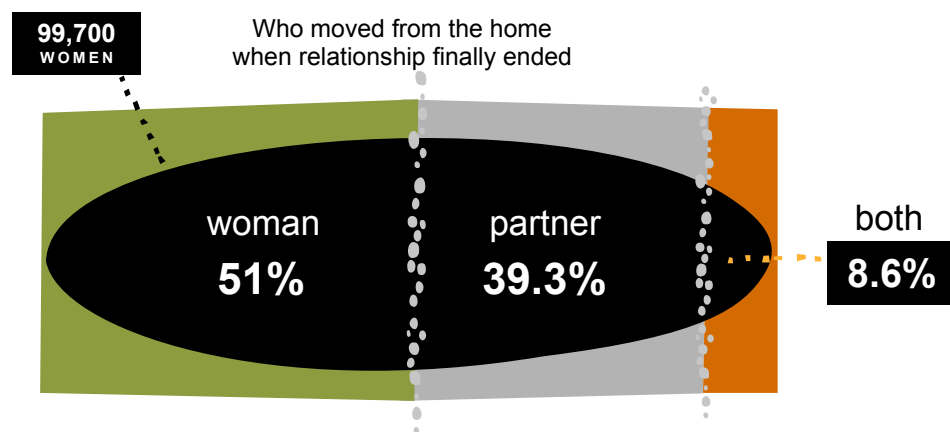


Source: ABS Customized Data Table 17

62 All numbers from ABS Customized data 2021, Table 17.

Perhaps surprisingly, not all women move out following the final separation from their violent partner. In some cases (almost 50 per cent of the violent partners of the women), the partner leaves. A total of 99,700, or 59 per cent, of the 168,000 women moved out when the relationship with their violent previous partner finally ended. Of these women, 27 per cent were able to take property or assets with them, and a similar number – 28 per cent – spent their first night after the relationship ended at a new house or rental property, suggesting the separation was either carefully planned and executed or mutually agreed to. But for the 75 per cent of the single mothers who left property or assets behind, it is likely that the break-up was not mutual, was hurried, perhaps even a desperate flight, with no opportunity to take any belongings at all.

FIGURE 14.2

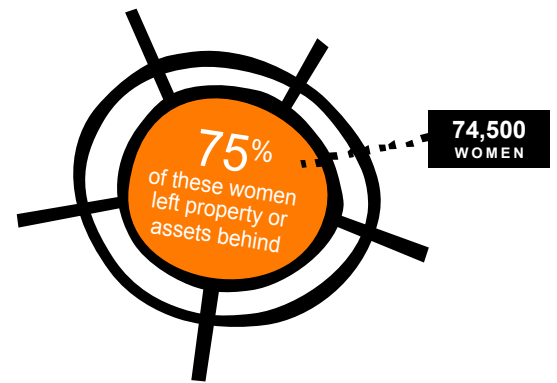


This is true for many women, and it can leave them in a pitiful situation. For instance, Terri, a 29-year-old Victorian woman who was interviewed for the 2007 Monash University study on domestic violence survivors, left her abusive relationship of four years with little more than the clothing she and her two children were wearing:

*'I asked my ex if we could have sex for the washing machine and stereo,' she told the interviewer. 'He agreed, and that's all I got ... no photos, clothes, old school reports, personal effects ... this had a huge impact on my life and still does. I had to establish an entire household on one wage, with a baby and a three-year old ... he now owns a business, has two new cars and owns his own home, he cleared out the savings the day I left.'*<sup>63</sup>

On that first night following their final separation, 28 per cent of the 99,700 now-single mothers who moved out of home had been able to relocate to a new house or rental property, and 57 per cent stayed with friends or relatives.

63 Ilsa Evans (2007). *Battle Scars*.

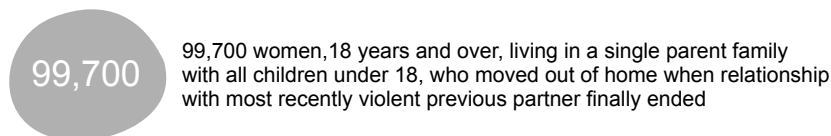


The rest of them went to a refuge or shelter (around 12 per cent\*) and 3 per cent\* to a hotel, motel, serviced apartment or caravan park. In time, many of these women were able to find more secure housing, with 54 per cent relocating to a new house or rental property. Where the remaining 46 per cent were able to finally land is not recorded and, given the continuing (and, in 2022, worsening) acute shortage of public and social housing for women leaving violence, is anybody's guess. (However, we do know that the women interviewed for the PSS lived in private dwellings, so obviously had been able to find some form of accommodation.)

FIGURE 15

## final separation - places stayed

AUSTRALIA 2016



### Place stayed first night

56,800	Friend or relative's house
11,900 *	Refuge or shelter
3,000 *	Motel, hotel, serviced apt, caravan park
28,200	Relocated to new house or rental

### All places stayed when relationship ended

Friend or relative's house	65,000
Refuge or shelter	17,900
Motel, hotel, serviced apt, caravan park	6,800 *
Relocated to new house or rental	54,100
Other	7,800

More than one place can be reported

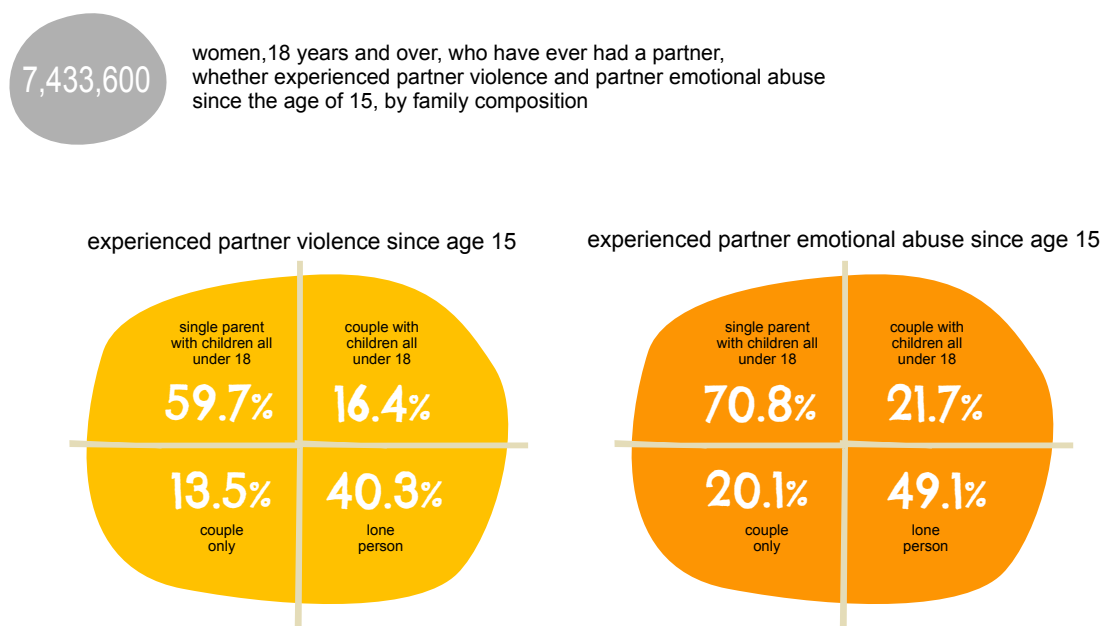
\* Relative standard error >25%

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 17

As we have already seen, 75 per cent of the 185,700 now-single mothers who experienced violence by a previous partner said that their previous partner's assaults, threats, controlling or emotionally abusive behaviour was the 'main reason relationship with violent previous partner ended'. I am comfortable taking these women at their word and stating that violence caused them to leave. Statistically, while we can take note of the disproportionately high number of

single mothers who experienced partner violence in the past relative to other women, we cannot establish causality. But there are other ways to look at this picture. And the ABS customized data has enabled me to undertake analysis of the association between current socio-demographic characteristics (at the time of the survey) and experiences of partner violence in the past, for single mothers and women in other family formations. Where single mothers *are* mentioned in policy and other discussions about domestic violence (and as I have already noted, this is, inexplicably, relatively unusual), they are merely part of a list of women who are seen as being at greater risk of experiencing partner violence, along with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, CALD women, LGBTQI women, women with disabilities, and women in rural or remote locations. It is assumed that single mothers are at a greater risk of being subjected to violence than women who are partnered. I have seen no explanation for why this might be the case. Nor, to my knowledge, has anyone made the causal link between the violence and a woman's single mother status.

FIGURE 16



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 1

The PSS findings here are very instructive. The data shows that women who were living as single mothers at the time of the survey in 2016 were significantly more likely to have experienced violence by a partner than women living in other family formations, including women in couple relationships (with and without children), and women living alone. However, it is important to note that not all the now-single mothers who experienced violence by



a previous partner were mothers who had children in their care at the time they experienced the violence. Rather, women who had experienced partner violence and partner emotional abuse since the age of 15 were more likely than women who had not had these experiences to be living as single mothers with children all under the age of 18 at the time of the survey.

The differences are significant: 11 per cent of women who experienced partner violence were living as single mothers, compared with 2 per cent of women who did not experience partner violence who were living as single mothers.<sup>64</sup>

The differences are even more stark for women who experienced partner emotional abuse: 10 per cent were living as single mothers, compared with just 2 per cent who did not experience such abuse. These are significant findings. Moreover, the very logic of the situation is compelling; we cannot overlook the facts these figures, and those in the other ABS customized data, reveal: the extremely high rate of partner violence experienced by women who are now single mothers with children under the age of 18. The higher rate of partner violence that is observed in the population of single mothers is to be expected, given that partner violence often precipitates separations. This means that women experiencing partner violence will be overrepresented in the single mother population, compared with women in couple relationships.

As we have seen, the numbers of single mothers who experienced partner violence are very high. Yet they could be substantially higher if an even larger number of women who were living in violent relationships had also left. A table in the Personal Safety Survey 2016 that has, to my knowledge, not been highlighted in previous writings about this subject displays data on the astounding number of 193,400 women who are described as ‘Total women who experienced current partner violence while living together who never separated’.<sup>65</sup> Just to be clear, this number refers to the estimated number of women who were living with a violent current partner at the time of the survey in 2016. They represent 70 per cent of the total 275,000 women who reported that they had experienced violence from their current partner. We know from other data that 88,700 of these women experienced violence from their current partner within the last 12 months.<sup>66</sup> Of these 275,000 women, 81,700 separated temporarily – but returned for reasons described above.

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64 ABS Customized Data 2021, Table 1.

65 ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016, Table 22.1, *Female temporary separations from violent partner, By partner type, Estimate*.

66 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 14, *Women aged 18 years and over, Experiences of current and previous partner violence in the last 12 months and last 5 years*.

A further group of 89,700 women – fully 46 per cent of the 193,400 who experienced partner violence but did not separate – ‘never separated but wanted to’. It is horrifying to think there were almost 90,000 women who wanted to leave violent relationships but were unable to do so. A quarter of these women said they were unable to leave because they had ‘no money/ financial support’. A further 24 per cent did not leave because of ‘nowhere to go, concerns for children’s or a pet’s safety or well-being, shame or embarrassment, fear of partner and cultural or religious reasons’.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps some of these women have observed what happens to women who do leave and have understood the grim calculus so often involved. For too many women the choice is between ongoing violence and emotional abuse or a life of poverty and social ignominy. As we shall see in the next chapter, too often our society makes women choose between violence and poverty. (SEE FIGURE 16)

Yet it is sobering to think about those 89,700 women who wanted to escape but did not. Who were not able to join the ranks of the nearly 1.4 million Australian women who were no longer living with a violent previous partner, including the 168,000 now-single mothers. Imagine if these 89,700 women – or even the entire 275,000 women who remained with their violent current partner – had been able to leave for good. Think how much larger the population of these newly-single mothers in Australia would be. Perhaps a large enough number to force the rest of society to recognize that so many of them are survivors of violence inflicted by their previous partners.

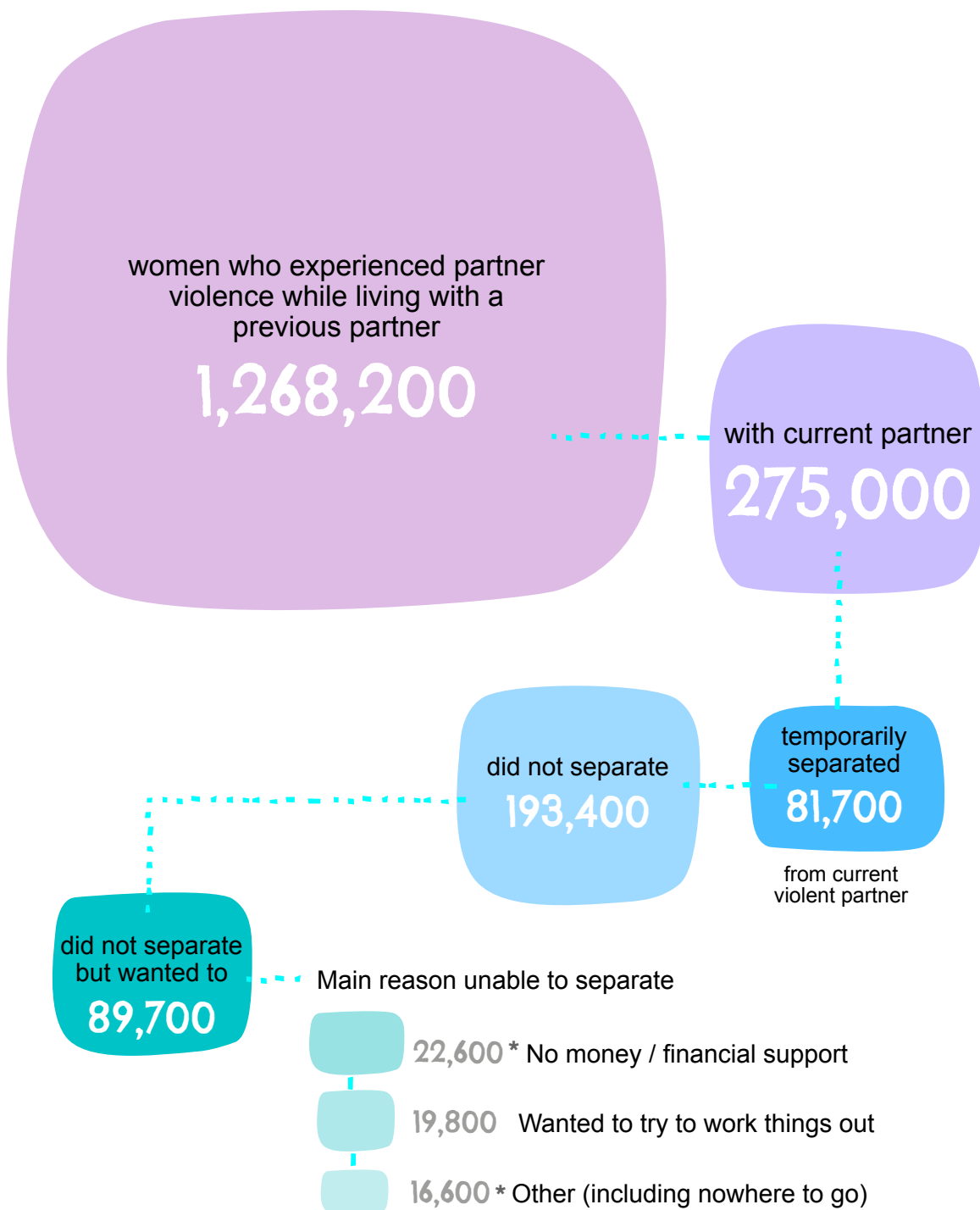
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67 ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016, Table 22.3, *Female temporary separations from violent partner, By partner type, Proportion of females*.

FIGURE 17

## a portrait of partner violence

AUSTRALIA 2016



\* Relative standard error >25%

Source: ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016 Table 22.1



## CHAPTER 2

### The consequences for mothers who fled partner violence

What is life now like for the 185,700 women who experienced violence by a previous partner, but who are now living as single mothers with children all under the age of 18? What has leaving violence done to their lives? Thanks to the ABS customized data prepared for this report, and other datasets referred to below, we know a great deal about some aspects of their lives, although some potentially relevant information is missing. We know that for a great many of these now-single mothers, life is tough. They rarely have enough money to be comfortable; some of them are only just getting by and only then with the help of family, or welfare organizations. For many of these women, the decline in income since separating from their violent partner has been catastrophic. Many also have ongoing health problems that can be attributed to their experiences of violence. We know these women's ages, and how many children they have. We know whether they, and their parents, were born in Australia, and what language they spoke at home as children. We know if they have a disability.

But other aspects of their lives are not so readily knowable: the ages of their children, for instance (except that they are all aged under 18). Nor do we know their status in terms of some of the variables that are commonly identified as being risk factors for experiencing partner violence. We do not know if they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander because the PSS has never collected this data, because they do not collect data from very remote areas of Australia and from some discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There is considerable criticism of this omission by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. In response, the federal

government has proposed a ‘dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan’ within the proposed National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032.<sup>68</sup> This proposed Action Plan is extremely vague and there is no mention of extending the data collection of the PSS to ensure greater representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. (It should be noted that, according to figures collected by the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014–15, 28 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females aged 15 years and over who had experienced physical violence said the perpetrator of the most recent incident was a current or previous partner.<sup>69</sup> The same survey finds that 27 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women said that family violence was a problem in the local community.

**27 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women said that family violence was a problem in the local community.**

Nor do we know the LGBTQI status of these women, as this information has not previously been collected by the PSS. The ABS began collecting statistics on people of different sexual identities, including non-binary, in the 2016 Census and has addressed how it intends to further develop collecting this data in future.<sup>70</sup> Future PSS surveys will also ask respondents about their sexuality. Of course, some of these women will be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, just as other categories of women deemed to be at risk are likely to identify with one of the LGBTQI categories. But, as I argued in the previous chapter, using the risk analysis approach is not especially illuminating and may even be counterproductive if it prevents us from being aware of the extent of partner violence against women who do not fit into any of these categories.

The ABS customized data provides extensive socio-demographic information about the 185,700 women, giving us information about their ages, the number of children they have, their levels of education and their employment status.

68 Draft (2022). *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*, p. 41.

69 [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4714.0~2014-15~Main%20Features~Safety,%20law%20and%20justice~8](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4714.0~2014-15~Main%20Features~Safety,%20law%20and%20justice~8)

70 ABS (2018). *Sex and Gender Diversity: Characteristics of the responding population*, [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Sex%20and%20Gender%20Diversity:%20Characteristics%20of%20the%20Responding%20Population~103](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Sex%20and%20Gender%20Diversity:%20Characteristics%20of%20the%20Responding%20Population~103)

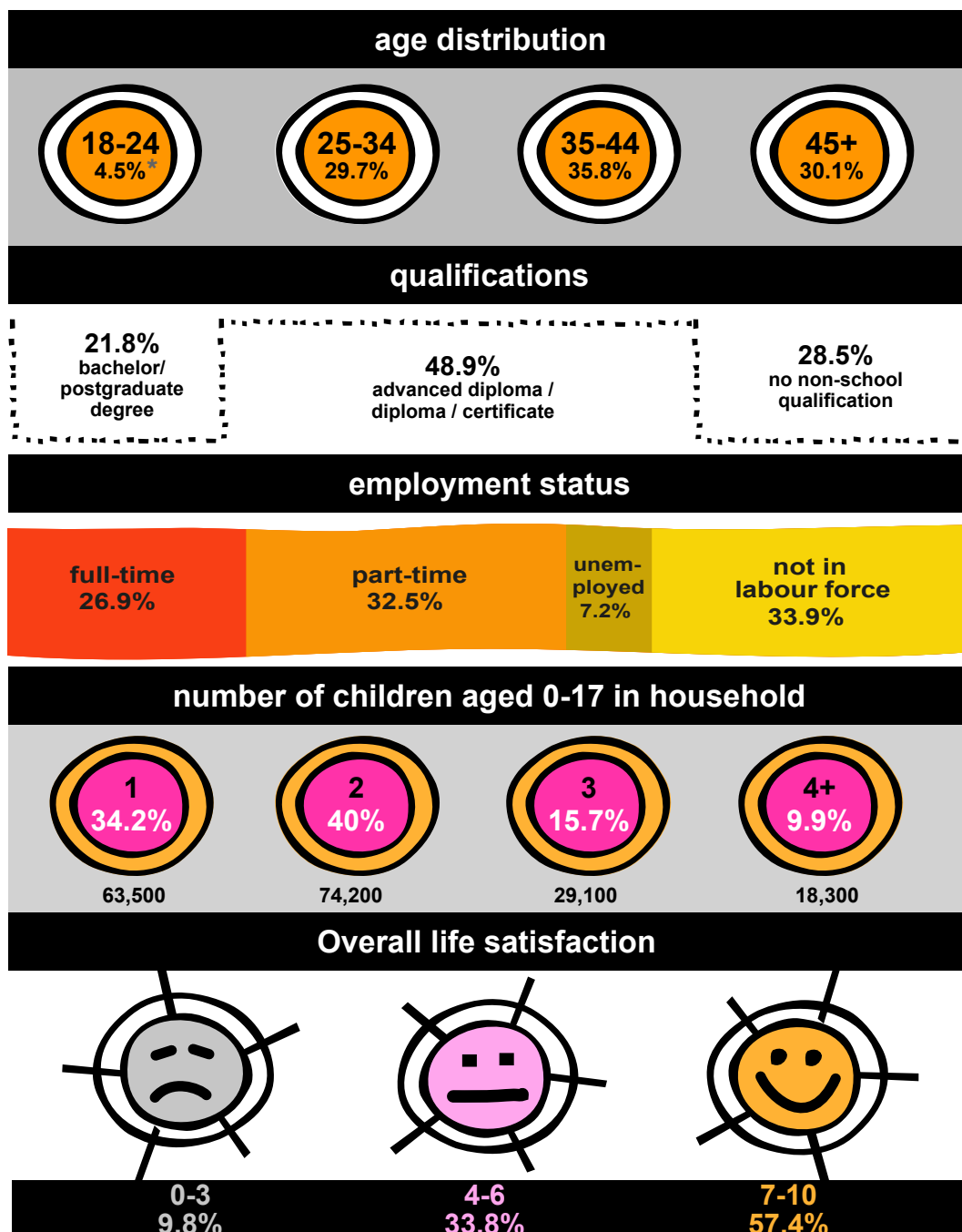
FIGURE 18

## socio-demographic characteristics

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

185,700 women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who ever had a partner, having experienced partner violence since age 15



\* Relative standard error >25%

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

We also learn that the vast majority (82 per cent) of these women were born in Australia, which is considerably higher than the 67 per cent of all Australians, women and men, who the 2016 Census reported were born in Australia.<sup>71</sup>

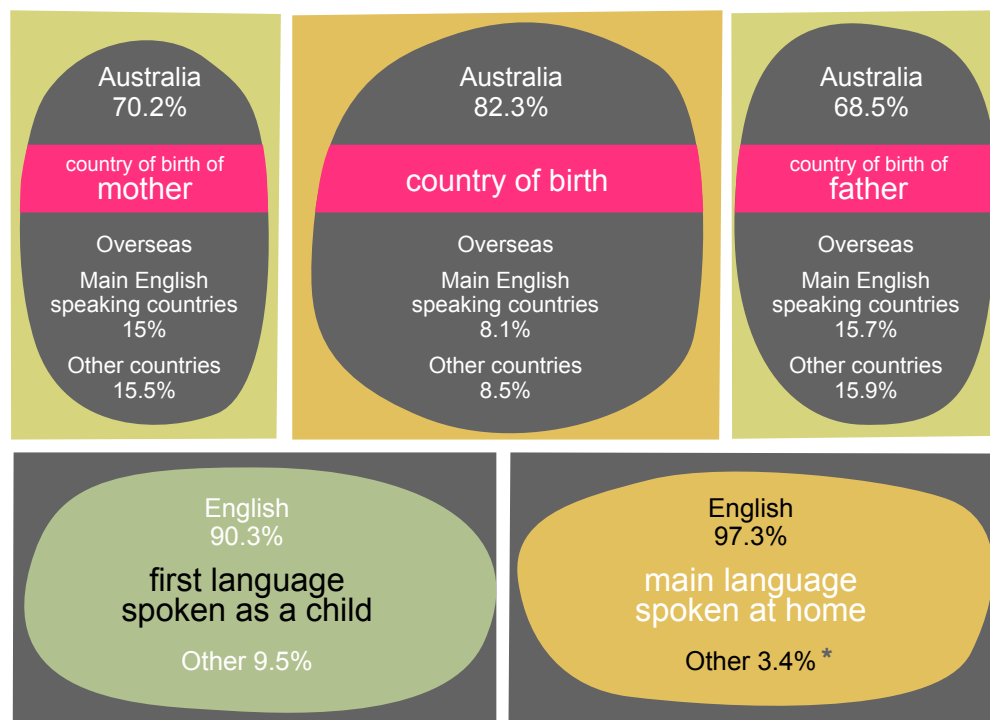
FIGURE 19

## experience of partner violence by cultural and linguistic diversity

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

185,700 women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, having experienced partner violence since age 15, by cultural and linguistic diversity



Main English speaking countries include Canada, Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, United Kingdom and United States of America.

\* Relative standard error >25%

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

The 18 per cent of mothers who fled violent relationships who were born overseas is split equally between 'main English-speaking countries' (as the ABS labels them) – including Canada, Republic of Ireland, New Zealand,

71 <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2016/0>

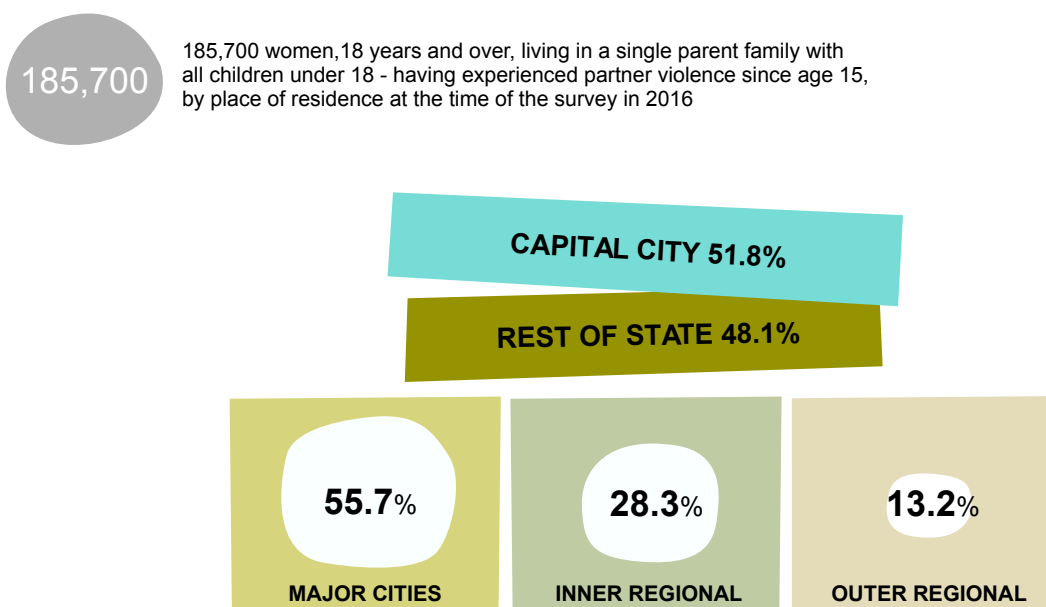
Note: The association between lifetime PV incidence and immigration status could be picking up an age effect, given that immigrants are younger on average than the domestic born. This is an issue for future research.

South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America – and ‘other countries’.<sup>72</sup> As children, English was the first language spoken at home for 90 per cent, and for 97 per cent English was the main language spoken at home. And while 31 per cent have a father, and 31 per cent a mother, born overseas, these numbers are considerably lower than those for women in other family formations who also experienced partner violence.

**FIGURE 20**

## experience of partner violence by place of residence

AUSTRALIA 2016



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

- 72 Some relevant information from the PSS User Guide: Respondents who are unable to speak English, and for whom an ABS translator was not able to be used, are offered a proxy interview where another member of the household could answer the compulsory questions on the respondent's behalf. There may be an under-representation of people with limited English in the survey. For more details, refer to the Proxy section of the [Survey Development and Data Collection](#) page of this User Guide.
- Details on the language first spoken or main language spoken by a current partner are collected via the selected respondent. Therefore the information is based on the knowledge the selected respondent has of their partner's language background. As the main language spoken is based on what they speak at home, it is unlikely the respondent would be unable to provide this information accurately. However, the option to identify that they didn't know the language first spoken by their current partner was available and is identified by an additional category of 'Not known' in the current partner output items.
- Proficiency in spoken English is a self-assessed measure based on the respondent's perception of how well they speak it.
- The collection of Ancestry in PSS is defined in terms of country of birth, which doesn't necessarily reflect cultural/ethnic background as perceived by the respondent. Also, some respondents may respond based on biological backgrounds associated with step-parents or guardians. As such, COB may not always be an accurate indicator of self declared ancestry: [4906.0.55.003 - Personal Safety Survey, Australia: User Guide, 2016 \(abs.gov.au\)](#)



The mothers who fled violence live in every state and territory in Australia and, more than any other household group, they are split almost equally between capital cities and the rest of the state.<sup>73</sup>

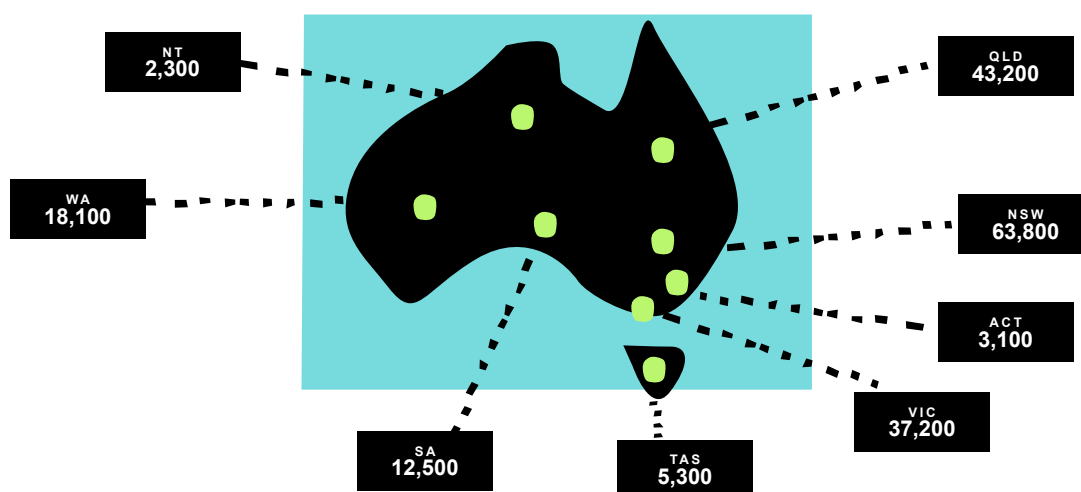
FIGURE 21

## experience of partner violence by state/territory of residence

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

185,700 women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18 - having experienced partner violence since age 15, by state/territory of residence at the time of the survey in 2016



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

## Income and general financial well-being post-separation

The mothers who fled violent relationships have relatively high levels of education, with 73 per cent having a post-school qualification (compared with 61 per cent of the overall population of women),<sup>74</sup> although fewer had a bachelor's degree or above: 22 per cent compared with 33 per cent of women overall. Although 60 per cent were employed, 50 per cent relied on government benefits as their main source of income. In other words, half these women were seemingly unable to earn enough from paid employment to support themselves and their children without a government payment.

73 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7, *Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By family composition, cultural and linguistic diversity, and geography.*

74 ABS (2018). Gender indicators, [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4125.0~Sep%202018~Main%20Features~Education~5](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4125.0~Sep%202018~Main%20Features~Education~5)

A large 82 per cent received government payments as at least part of their weekly income. Only 27 per cent of these mothers who had fled violence were employed full-time, with 33 per cent working part-time and 7 per cent unemployed. One-third of them were not in the labour force.<sup>75</sup> (SEE FIGURE 17) As a result of all these factors, 87 per cent of the mothers who fled violent relationships had an equivalized household gross weekly income that was within the three lowest quintiles, and a full 48 per cent were in the lowest quintile.<sup>76</sup>

FIGURE 22

## household income

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

185,700 women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who ever had a partner, having experienced partner violence since age 15

% OF SINGLE WOMEN WITH CHILDREN UNDER 18	QUINTILE	GROSS WEEKLY EQUIVALIZED HOUSEHOLD INCOME*
48.1%	1	\$0-460 pw
25.8%	2	\$461-767 pw
13.2%	3	\$768-1151 pw
2.7%**	4	\$1152-1688 pw
***	5	\$1689+ pw

\* Equivalized household income is household income adjusted by the application of an equivalence scale to facilitate comparison of income levels between households of differing size and composition, reflecting that a larger household would normally need more income than a smaller household to achieve the same standard of living.

\*\* Relative standard error >25%

\*\*\* Relative standard error is too large for figure to be reliable

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

Income figures: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/49a06.0.55.003Appendix12016>

75 All numbers in this paragraph are from ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7, *Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By family composition and selected socio-demographic and household characteristics*.

76 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7. Footnote in Table 7 states: 'Equivalized household income is household income adjusted by the application of an equivalence scale to facilitate comparison of income levels between households of differing size and composition, reflecting that a larger household would normally need more income than a smaller household to achieve the same standard of living.' The weekly income per quintile was as follows: 1. \$0 – \$460, 2. \$461 – \$767, 3. \$768 – \$1151, 4. \$1152 – \$1688, 5. \$1689+

The ABS has several ways of assessing a household's financial well-being. One quick question asks whether the household could raise \$2000 in emergency money within a week. Most households could manage this, some of them seemingly very easily. For instance, 89 per cent of women in a couple with no children who had experienced partner violence could do so, as could 84 per cent of women in couple relationships with kids who had not experienced partner violence. It was single mothers who would have the greatest difficulty: 41 per cent of those who did not experience previous partner violence would have trouble, as would 47 per cent, or just under half, of the mothers who had fled violent relationships.<sup>77</sup>

FIGURE 23

## ability to raise emergency money

AUSTRALIA 2016

Women, 18 years and over, who have experienced partner violence since the age of 15 and their ability to raise emergency money, by family composition



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

Another way to investigate financial well-being is to delve into a household's cashflow problems over the past 12 months. The ABS customized data on household cashflow problems prepared especially for this report is truly revelatory, showing the extent to which mothers who fled violence are so often living hand-to-mouth, or government payment to government payment, as they seek to survive and to support their children. Fully 60 per cent of them said they had one or more of the cashflow problems listed. This was far, far greater than any other household group.

77 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7.

For instance, in the households where the woman had *not* experienced partner violence, only 8 per cent of the couple-only families, and 17 per cent of the couples with kids, reported any such problems. It is the single mothers who struggled with their cashflow, with 60 per cent of those who had experienced previous partner violence reporting these problems. The details of their struggle and sacrifices are heartbreaking: could not pay electricity, gas or telephone bills on time (42 per cent), were unable to heat or cool home (11 per cent), pawned or sold something to raise cash (13 per cent), could not pay mortgage or rent on time (13 per cent), went without meals (9 per cent), could not pay credit card minimum balance (9 per cent), sought financial help from family or friends (37 per cent) or assistance from welfare or community organizations (15 per cent).

FIGURE 24

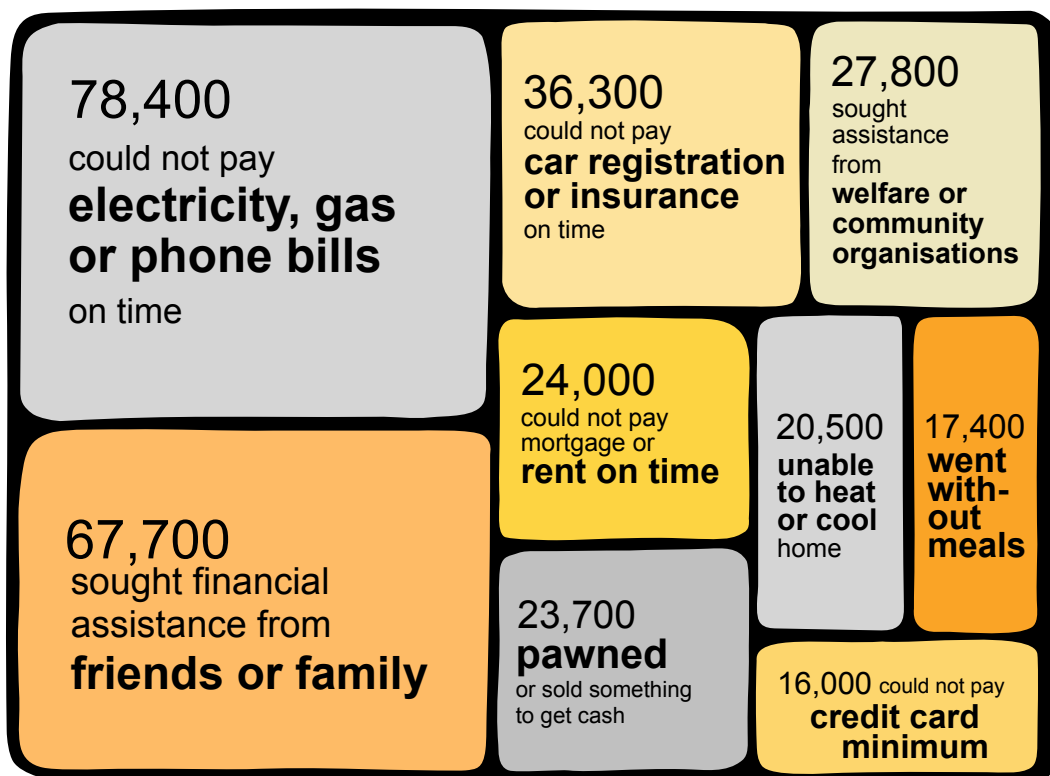
## cash flow problems in the last 12 months

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

185,700 women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who ever had a partner, having experienced partner violence since age 15

**59.5%** had one or more of the following cash flow problems



**38.2%** did not have cash flow problems

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

But the most telling and, to me, a most problematic issue was the 20 per cent who could not pay their car registration or insurance on time. Being able to afford to run a car is critical for most people to be able to get to their place of work. It can be even more so for single mothers, because they have no partner support and are on their own in terms of getting to work after first dropping off kids at childcare or school, especially when the two locations are geographically not close. It is even more essential for the 48 per cent of mothers who fled violence who live outside capital cities, where public transport may not be an option. Single mothers will tell you that when they lose their car, they lose their ability to interact with the world, especially the world of employment but also the social world. Most people in modern Australia need cars – for work or to visit friends and family, to go to the supermarket, to take children to recreation, and for many more essential or desirable day-to-day activities.<sup>78</sup> Without a car, unless you live in an inner urban or other area well served by public transport, you will struggle to engage fully with society.

*When they lose their car, they lose their ability to interact with the world, especially the world of employment but also the social world.*

Despite the large amount of data provided about the household finances of these mothers who have fled violence, there is still a great deal that we do not know. The PSS is a cross-sectional survey, giving us data only at a particular moment in time. It does not tell us anything about the women's finances before or after the time of the survey. To learn whether her financial situation has improved or, more likely, deteriorated, in the time since she left the violent relationship, we need longitudinal data. The same goes for these women's health. It is important to be able to track the financial and health consequences of having experienced partner violence and, especially, the consequences of leaving and starting life as a single mother.

The PSS cannot give us this data but fortunately there are other sources that can: the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH) and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA), the main Australian longitudinal study of employment and income.

The ALSWH, which follows the health and related aspects of the lives of 57,000 Australian women, is the longest-running such survey in Australia. It began in 1996, an initiative of the Keating government, as a project to map the physical and mental health of women at various stages of their lives. ALSWH gathers and publishes data from four cohorts of women of various ages who are tracked over time, giving us an incomparable picture of the health issues and concerns

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78 All numbers in this paragraph are from ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7.

affecting women of all ages in Australia. As we shall see below, this research has contributed some important findings that are relevant to this report.

My study has benefitted immeasurably from a collaboration with Professor Bruce Chapman of the Australian National University and his colleague Matt Taylor, a researcher at the National Centre for Social Research and Methods who, with input from Lorraine Dearden, Professor of Economics and Social Statistics at the Social Research Institute, University College London, have undertaken a path-breaking analysis of the HILDA data to measure the financial impact on women of experiencing partner violence.

*Professor Bruce Chapman has undertaken a path-breaking analysis of the HILDA data to measure the financial impact on women of experiencing partner violence.*

Professor Chapman was prompted to undertake this work by having been part of an informal advice and support group for my project<sup>79</sup> and having realized the limitations of the PSS in providing meaningful data on the financial impact on women of having left a violent relationship. He and Matt Taylor initially grappled with the problem that while HILDA asks respondents about their experience of violence, it does not ask whether the assault involved a domestic partner. Their technical solution to this problem is explained in their paper<sup>80</sup> and need not be canvassed here. It is their findings that matter for this report. And their findings are very significant, both intrinsically for their content, but also for the precedent they set for economists to recognize the personal and societal financial impacts of domestic violence.

Chapman and Taylor analyzed HILDA data from 2006 to 2019 and produced financial data in real 2015–16 terms to apply to four categories of women:

- (i) mothers unlikely to have experienced partner violence (non-PV mothers);
- (ii) mothers likely to have experienced partner violence (PV mothers);
- (iii) childless women unlikely to have experienced partner violence (non-PV childless women); and
- (iv) childless women likely to have experienced partner violence (PV childless women).

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79 The group consisted of Professor Chapman, holder of the Sir Roland Wilson Chair of Economics, Australian National University, Ms Mary Ann O'Loughlin, Senior Advisor at Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability and Senior Advisor, Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), and Dr Jananie William, Senior Lecturer at the Research School of Finance, Actuarial Studies and Statistics, Australian National University.

80 Bruce Chapman & Matt Taylor (2022). Partner Violence and the Financial Well-Being of Women: HILDA research results, [csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/partner-violence-and-financial-well-being-women-hilda-research-results-0](https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/partner-violence-and-financial-well-being-women-hilda-research-results-0)

They produced an analysis that ‘compared the financial state-of-affairs of women while partnered to their situation after separation’, using averages of the three income categories of:

- the partner’s contribution to household income;
- the woman’s wages and salaries; and
- total government financial support received by women.

As a result, for the first time we have data on the change to a woman’s income after she separates due to partner violence. The results are startling.

Chapman and Taylor use ‘equivalized household income’ (EHI) – the total annual income of all household members adjusted to take into account the number and age of people this income supports – to represent financial well-being. They find that before separation, PV mothers have about the same incomes as mothers who did not experience PV, but after separation the PV mothers experienced a ‘very significantly higher’ drop in income of 34 per cent, compared with the 20 per cent drop for non-PV mothers. In dollar terms, the drop for PV mothers was from \$54,648 to \$35,921 a year.

*After separation the PV mothers experienced a ‘very significantly higher’ drop in income of 34 per cent, compared with the 20 per cent drop for non-PV mothers.*

The authors also look at the changes to average equivalized gross wages and salaries of the women post-separation and, again, find that PV mothers fare worse than their non-PV counterparts. While both groups experienced an increase in salaries, the rise for PV mothers (from \$11,526 to \$13,747) was just 19 per cent. For non-PV mothers, whose salaries rose from \$14,414 to \$20,838, the rise was 45 per cent. In other words, single mothers who experienced PV are considerably worse off financially than single mothers who did not. This is in line with the PSS findings of greater financial disadvantage being suffered by those single mothers who had fled violence, but is of greater significance in being quantified and capable of showing the extent of that disadvantage over time. Chapman and Taylor plan further work to develop these findings – which is very welcome news indeed – and foreshadow that ‘much of this difference is attributable to disparities in the employment rates’. It will be extremely important to have data that suggests that the experience of partner violence impacts negatively on a woman’s ability to secure or maintain employment post-separation.

Chapman and Taylor also examine the pre- and post-separation incomes of PV and non-PV childless women.<sup>81</sup> The findings are similar to those for mothers, with PV women experiencing a 45 per cent drop in EHI, compared with 18 per cent for non-PV childless women. These findings might be relevant for understanding better the experiences of that very large number of women in the group the PSS calls ‘lone persons’ – that is, women who had experienced previous partner violence but who are now single. Like Chapman and Taylor’s PV childless women, these women appear to be financially disadvantaged but, as I noted in Chapter One, we need to know more about these women, especially whether or not they ever had children. Are they comparable, in other words? The PV childless women experience a drop of 19 per cent in their post-separation wages and salaries income, compared with a rise of 19 per cent for PV mothers, a difference that the authors say can be attributed to a drop in these women’s employment rate from 50 to 47 per cent.

**The inescapable conclusion is ‘that PV is a key contributor to significant material disadvantage for those affected’.**

In summarizing their work, Chapman and Taylor point to their ‘very clear findings’:

1. Separation is associated with considerable (equivalized) household income losses for all women, at least 17 per cent and up to 45 per cent on average irrespective of parental status; and
2. Both PV mothers and PV childless women experience very much larger average income losses compared to women (whether mothers or childless), of the order of an additional 14 to 28 percentage points.

They point out the financial adversity experienced post-separation by PV mothers and childless women is ‘in contrast to the major increases in wages and salaries of women who are unlikely to have experienced PV’, and the inescapable conclusion ‘that PV is a key contributor to significant material disadvantage for those affected’.<sup>82</sup>

The importance of these two papers, and of the ongoing work ‘designed to uncover and reveal the real and complex story of the consequences of PV for

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81 Bruce Chapman & Matt Taylor (2022). *Socio-economic Background and the Incidence of Partner Violence: Evidence from HILDA*, [csm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/socio-economic-background-and-incidence-partner-violence-evidence-hilda](https://csm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/socio-economic-background-and-incidence-partner-violence-evidence-hilda)

82 Chapman and Taylor point out that there are important caveats to the use of average incomes, and consequently subjected the data to much more sophisticated econometric methods. These approaches provided both strong statistical tests of significance and critical control for other variables likely to have impacted on the results. These analyses are reported in full in Chapman and Taylor, *Partner Violence and the Financial Well-Being of Women* (pp. 16–17), with the main findings constituting strong endorsement of the initial evidence.



the financial well-being of those affected', can hardly be overstated. It quantifies the negative financial impact on women's lives when they leave a violent partner. When read in conjunction with the key findings from the PSS customized data prepared for this report, we have incontrovertible evidence that partner violence against women is far worse, in terms of its prevalence and its impacts on women's lives (and those of their children), than we previously knew. It is evidence that cannot be forgotten. Or ignored.

## Ongoing health and disability issues

As mentioned previously, the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH) – also known as Women's Health Australia – has collected invaluable data on all aspects of women's health from four large nationally representative cohorts of women representing four generations. The original cohorts, recruited in 1996 when the survey began, were women born between 1921 and 1926; 1946 and 1951; and 1973 and 1978. A new cohort, bringing in women born between 1989 and 1995, was added to the survey in 2012, bringing the total to 57,000 women recruited. These women have been repeatedly surveyed over the past 24 years, resulting in the collection of a very large amount of data on their lifestyles, use of health services and health outcomes. This data can be linked to a large number of federal and state administrative datasets such as Medicare and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme records, cancer registries, hospital admissions and other health-related collections.<sup>83</sup> The study is, the ALSWH website notes, 'the largest project of its kind ever conducted in Australia and has an international reputation for its multidisciplinary methodology'.<sup>84</sup>

ALSWH is run for the federal Department of Health by the Universities of Queensland and Newcastle. Its deputy director, Professor Deb Loxton, who is also co-director of the Centre for Women's Health Research at the University of Newcastle, is a pre-eminent researcher in this field and has published extensively. She has documented the enduring health issues of many women who have experienced domestic violence. For instance, in a 2017 study that was based on the three original cohorts, she reported:

*For all cohorts, women who had lived with intimate partner violence were more likely to report poorer mental health, physical function and general health, and higher levels of bodily pain. Some generational differences existed. Younger women showed a reduction in health associated with the onset of intimate partner violence, which was not*

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83 [alswh.org.au/for-data-users/linked-data-overview/linked-data-sources/](https://alswh.org.au/for-data-users/linked-data-overview/linked-data-sources/)

84 [alswh.org.au/about/the-study/](https://alswh.org.au/about/the-study/)

*apparent for women in the two older groups. In addition, the physical health differences between women born 1921–26 who had and had not experienced intimate partner violence tapered off over time, whereas these differences remained constant for women born 1973–78 and 1946–51.*<sup>85</sup>

In 2019, Professor Loxton reported on the prevalence of domestic violence among the four cohorts of the ALSWH: 16 per cent of the 1989–95 cohort, 26 per cent of 1973–78 cohort, 16 per cent of the 1946–51 cohort and 5 per cent of the 1921–26 cohort.<sup>86</sup> She noted that when such violence was measured by asking respondents about specific abusive acts, such as being hit by their partner, the prevalence was higher.

*When violence was measured by asking respondents about specific abusive acts, such as being hit by their partner, the prevalence was higher.*

This paper, which summarizes ALSWH research conducted over the previous decade, finds the following health outcomes for women who have experienced domestic violence:

- More likely to have experienced cervical cancer, due to not having adequate access to screening for this disease.
- Consistently had poorer mental health, with 75 per cent of the 1989–95 cohort who had experienced domestic violence saying at some point in their lives that life was not worth living, compared with 53 per cent of women from that cohort who had not experienced domestic violence.
- Experienced a lifetime deficit in mental health, even after the abuse had ceased.
- More likely to experience menopause at a younger age, in part due to their being more likely to smoke.
- Women born in 1946–51 had poorer health when domestic violence was combined with another stressful activity such as caregiving.<sup>87</sup>

Professor Loxton has also reported on the health, including mental health, problems of single mothers. In one study, published in 2006 and which she is now updating and expanding, she and her colleagues found that single mothers

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85 Deborah Loxton, Xenia Dolja-Gore, Amy E. Anderson, & Natalie Townsend (2017). 'Intimate partner violence adversely impacts health over 16 years and across generations: A longitudinal study', *PLoS ONE*, vol. 12, no. 6.

86 Deborah Loxton and Natalie Townsend (2019). *Violence and Abuse Policy Brief*. Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health.

87 Ibid.

had ‘significantly poorer psychological health’ than other women, and this could be partly accounted for by their economic status.<sup>88</sup>

*In 2018, of the 1973–78 cohort, who were then aged 40 to 45, a huge 87 per cent of those ‘Living with children, no partner’ had ‘ever’ experienced IPV and 23 per cent of them had experienced violence in the previous twelve months*

Regrettably, ALSWH has not undertaken any analysis of the physical or mental health of single mothers who have experienced domestic violence. Professor Loxton has supplied me with raw tables from recent ALSWH surveys that show that the prevalence of domestic violence (or intimate partner violence, IPV, as they call it) among unpartnered women with or without children is considerably higher than for women who are in couple relationships. For instance, in 2018, of the 1973–78 cohort, who were then aged 40 to 45, a huge 87 per cent of those ‘Living with children, no partner’ had ‘ever’ experienced IPV and 23 per cent of them had experienced violence in the previous twelve months. For women the same age who had no children, the figures were 74 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. As was reported in Chapter One, the PSS in 2016 found that 60 per cent of single mothers with children aged under 18, and 40 per cent of women living alone, had experienced violence from a previous partner. The difference between the ALSWH and PSS figures is alarming and deserves further investigation.

Even for the partnered women, the rates who had ‘ever’ experienced violence were high: 52 per cent for those with children, and 59 per cent for those without. The numbers were similar for women in the 1989–95 cohort, who were aged 24 to 29 in 2019–20, when they were surveyed. One important difference was that for these younger women, 56 per cent – or more than half – of the single mothers said they had ‘ever’ been in a violent relationship with a partner, compared with 49 per cent of the older single mothers. These figures, too, are very disturbing and deserve closer analysis.

*For younger women, 56 per cent – or more than half – of the single mothers said they had ‘ever’ been in a violent relationship with a partner, compared with 49 per cent of the older single mothers.*

This report could have benefitted greatly from a customized analysis of the ALSWH data, but the lead times needed to undertake such a study unfortunately

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88 Deborah Loxton, Rosemary Mooney, & Anne F. Young (2006). ‘The psychological health of sole mothers in Australia’. *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 184, no. 6, pp. 265–68. Proposed update: Dr Tania Dey, Deborah Loxton, Ms Peta Forder, & Dr Andreas Cebulia (2021). ‘Mental health of single mothers in Australia’. ALSWH.

did not work with the timeframe of my Fellowship. But this is such a potentially rich source of data that could amplify the cross-sectional PSS findings – as the HILDA data has done – and greatly enhance our evidence base of the prevalence of partner violence.

The ABS has reported that women with a disability are more likely to experience physical violence and partner emotional abuse than women who do not have a disability, stating that 6 per cent of women with a disability or long-term health condition experienced violence in 2016.<sup>89</sup> Their report on disability and violence, released in April 2021, cited findings from the 2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) that:

- 18 per cent or 4.4 million people were living with disability and a further 22 per cent (5.5 million) had a long-term health condition but no disability.
- The prevalence of disability increased with age, with 12 per cent of people aged 64 years and under and 50 per cent of people aged 65 years and over living with disability.<sup>90</sup>

The single mothers were more likely to be living with a disability or long-term health condition, with 45 per cent of them having a disability or long-term health condition: 22 per cent an intellectual disability, and 34 per cent a physical disability.<sup>91</sup> (SEE FIGURE 24) Other evidence suggests that parental disability is considerably higher than average in single-parent families.<sup>92</sup>

For single mothers who had not experienced violence, 27 per cent had a disability or long-term health condition, 6 per cent\* intellectual and 22 per cent physical. These figures refer to the respondents' disability status in 2016, at the time the PSS data was collected, and gives us no insight into how long these women had had their disability nor – importantly, in my view – how it might have been acquired. The ABS definition of physical disability 'includes sight, hearing, speech disability; head injury, stroke or brain damage; and

89 ABS (13 April 2021). *Women with disability at increased risk of violence*, media release, [www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/women-disability-increased-risk-violence](http://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/women-disability-increased-risk-violence)

More than one type of disability may have been reported, given that 33.6% + 22% = 55.6%, which is greater than the overall proportion who had a disability or long-term health condition (45.3%).

90 ABS (2021). *Disability and Violence – In Focus: Crime and justice statistics*. [www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/focus-crime-and-justice-statistics/latest-release](http://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/focus-crime-and-justice-statistics/latest-release)

91 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7.

92 See, for instance, (1) 'In 2015, it was estimated that among children aged 0–14, 15% (669,000) lived with 1 or both parents with disability. There was a higher proportion of parental disability in 1-parent families compared with 2-parent families (19% and 14%, respectively) (ABS 2015)', [www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/social-support-snapshots/parental-health-disability](http://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/social-support-snapshots/parental-health-disability); and (2) Council of Single Mothers and their Children: 'our national survey of 1112 single mothers show 40% have a disability', [engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CSMC\\_DES\\_Dec2021.pdf](http://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CSMC_DES_Dec2021.pdf)

other physical disability'.<sup>93</sup> We will recall from Chapter One, Figure 4, that the injuries experienced by some of the mothers who fled violent relationships included being beaten, stabbed or choked, and that of the 81,200 who were physically injured as a result of this violence, for 37 per cent of them those injuries were severe enough for them to have consulted a doctor or other professional. It is entirely possible that some of the severe injuries suffered by these women caused them to have a permanent disability. This is especially the case with head injuries.

**Brain injuries can be both the result of, and a trigger for, partner violence.**

There is growing awareness that brain injuries can result from domestic violence, even if the damage is not always immediately detectable.<sup>94</sup> For instance, during an emergency admission, a woman's head injuries may be treated, but she may not be given an MRI to assess the extent of possible brain damage; or the brain damage may not manifest itself until some time later. The changed behaviour patterns of a brain-damaged woman may also trigger a violent reaction from her abusive partner. In other words, brain injuries can be both the result of, and a trigger for, partner violence. The PSS data does not include disability status at the time of experiencing the violence. It is therefore not possible to identify whether disability is a risk factor or an outcome of physical and/or sexual violence.<sup>95</sup> But given very high incidence of disability among women who have experienced partner violence, this is an area where further work is required.

Perhaps surprisingly, when asked to assess their own health status, 45 per cent of the single mothers who had fled violent relationships said it was 'Excellent/very good'. This was not so different from the single mothers who had not experienced partner violence, 50 per cent of whom also rated their health in the highest category. Women who had experienced partner violence reported lower self-assessed health status than women who had not experienced partner violence, across all of the different family formations. This is in line with the ALSWH

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93 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7, footnote o.

94 [www.braininjuryaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/acquired-brain-injury-and-family-violence.pdf](http://www.braininjuryaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/acquired-brain-injury-and-family-violence.pdf)

95 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019). *Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: Continuing the national story 2019* (Cat. no. FDV 3). AIHW, p. 91.

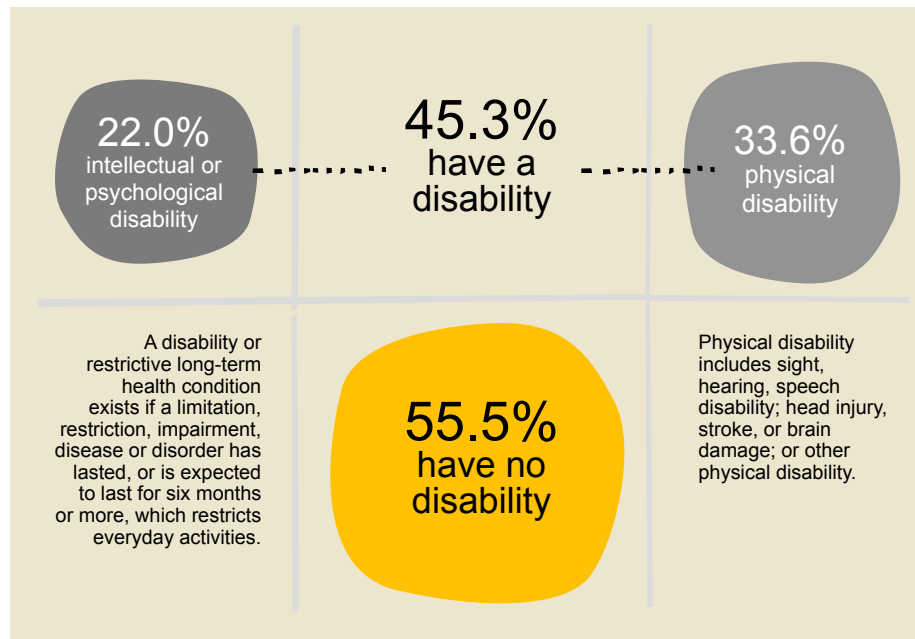
FIGURE 25

## disability status - single mothers 2016

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

185,700 women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who have experienced partner violence, whether they have a disability and its type

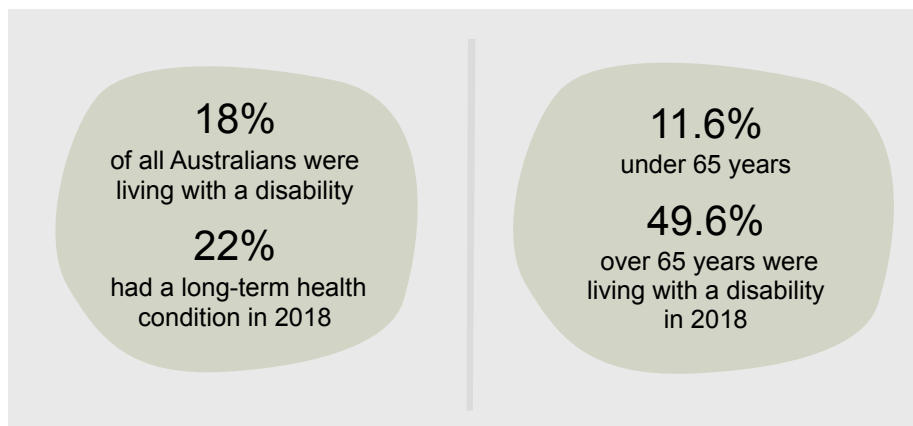


Disability status refers to the status at the time of survey in 2016

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

## disability status - all Australians 2018

AUSTRALIA 2018



Source: 2018 SDAC, Table 3.3 row 57

Source: ABS 2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers

findings. There was a similar discrepancy when these women were asked to rate their overall life satisfaction. The women who had not experienced partner violence reported higher life satisfaction than the women who had experienced partner violence. The single mothers who had experienced partner violence in the past were the least satisfied of all, almost 10 per cent giving themselves a 0 to 3 rating (out of 10), and only 57 per cent assessing themselves at 7 to 10 compared with 77 per cent of the women in couples with children, and 74 per cent of the women in couples with no children, who rated themselves at the top level of satisfaction.<sup>96</sup>

These findings are not surprising, given that women who have experienced violence in the past are likely to have ongoing health and other problems. 'Unfortunately, the reality for one in four Australian women is that the physical and mental health impacts of domestic violence could last a lifetime,' Professor Deb Loxton from the ALSWH has said. 'We need policies and interventions in place to provide support for the women who are still feeling the impact 10 to 20 years later.'<sup>97</sup>

**Unfortunately, the reality for one in four Australian women is that the physical and mental health impacts of domestic violence could last a lifetime.**

We have a greater understanding today of the traumatic impacts of violence, including domestic violence, on survivors, in part because of the pioneering work of psychiatrist and writer Judith Herman. Her remarkable 1992 book *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror* was one of the first, if not the very first, to make the case:

*Only after 1980, when the efforts of combat veterans had legitimated the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder, did it become clear that the psychological syndrome seen in survivors of rape, domestic battery and incest was essentially the same as the syndrome seen in survivors of war. The implications of this insight are as horrifying in the present as they were a century ago: the subordinate condition of women is maintained and enforced by the hidden violence of men.*<sup>98</sup>

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96 All numbers in this paragraph are from ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7.

97 Melissa Davey, 'Women abused by partners suffer lifelong health problems – study', *Guardian*, 13 June 2017, [www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jun/13/women-abused-by-partners-suffer-lifelong-health-problems-study](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jun/13/women-abused-by-partners-suffer-lifelong-health-problems-study)

98 Judith Herman MD (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books, New York, p. 32.



The ongoing trauma experienced by women survivors of partner violence, and by their children as well, is perhaps not given adequate recognition in Australia today. Frontline workers in domestic and family violence, especially those who provide emergency accommodation for women and children escaping violence, are aware of the phenomenon, but is it factored into the health and related services needed to support these women?

We also need to understand that ongoing trauma is just one of the potential consequences for women after escaping partner violence. There is also the threat, and the reality, of actual physical and emotional violence continuing. As we saw in the last chapter, for 37 per cent of the women who had experienced violence by a previous partner more than once while living together, the violence *actually increased* after their final separation.<sup>99</sup> Some women found themselves even more fearful after they had separated, and with a sense of having lost control because they could no longer gauge how their partner was going to respond to situations. One woman interviewed in a Victorian study on women leaving domestic violence expressed it this way:

*I guess when I was at home I could always judge exactly where his mind was at the time. I felt safer in a way because I could always judge how dangerous the situation was, whereas once I left I wasn't able to judge his mental state at the time. It made it perhaps more frightening.*<sup>100</sup>

We do not know from the ABS customized data how long ago these women left their most recently violent partner, but we do know that 20,000 (11 per cent) of the 185,700 women who in 2016 were single mothers living with children all under the age of 18 had experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months.<sup>101</sup> And that 28 per cent of the 220,200 women who had experienced previous partner emotional abuse had experienced such abuse within the past 12 months.<sup>102</sup>

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99 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 17.

100 Crystal Bruton and Danielle Tyson (2018). 'Leaving violent men: A study of women's experiences of separation in Victoria, Australia'. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, vol. 5, no. 3, p. 349.

101 ABS customized data 2021, Table 12, *Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months, By family composition*.

102 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 19.



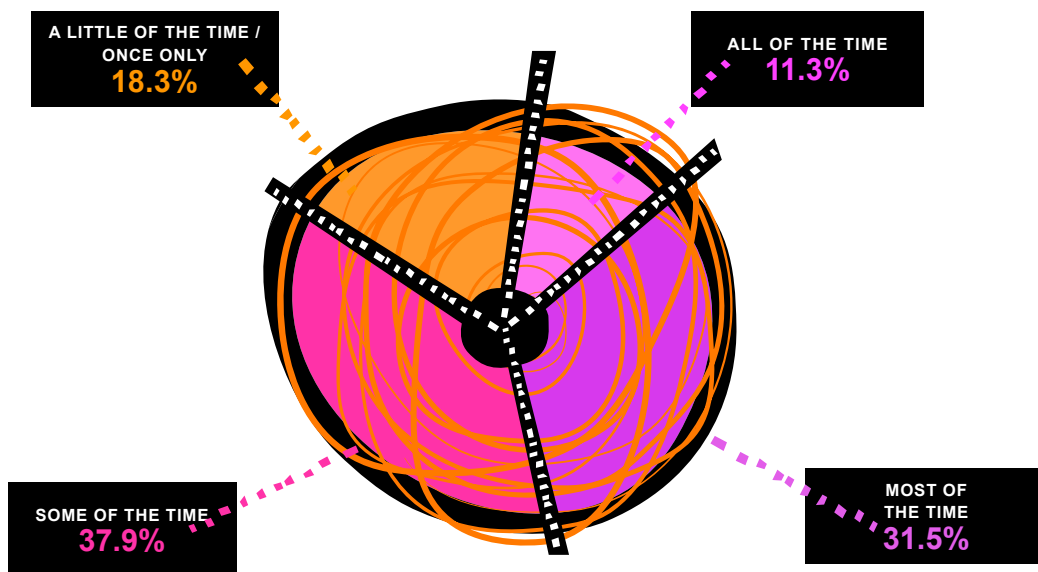
FIGURE 26

## frequency of experience of emotional abuse

AUSTRALIA 2016

220,200

women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who have experienced emotional abuse by a previous partner



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 6

A further grim consequence of domestic violence is the potential for intergenerational transmission of the notion that violence is either normal or acceptable. There is extensive research on the relationship between witnessing family violence as a child and the likelihood of becoming involved in a violent relationship as an adult. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, the psychiatrist and expert on trauma Bessel van der Kolk, a colleague of Judith Herman, has written that women who, as children, witnessed their mothers being assaulted have a 'vastly increased chance to fall victim to domestic violence'.<sup>103</sup> The ABS customized data reveals that 33 per cent of the mothers in this study who fled violent partners had witnessed violence towards their mother and/or father by a partner before they were aged 15.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Bessel van der Kolk (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score*. Penguin Books, New York, p. 87.

<sup>104</sup> ABS Customized data 2021, Table 6.

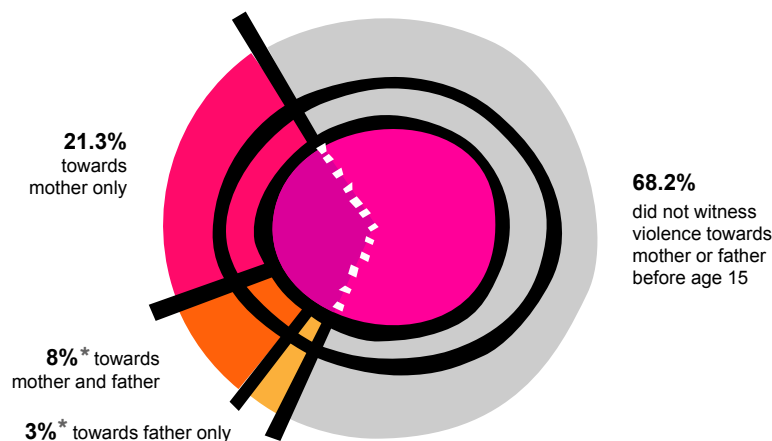
FIGURE 27

## witnessed partner violence before age 15

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18, who ever had a partner - whether witnessed partner violence towards a parent before the age of 15



\* Relative standard error >25%

Source: ABS Customized Data Table 6

Bessel van der Kolk has also suggested that witnessing family violence as a child 'often makes it difficult to establish stable, trusting relationships as an adult'.<sup>105</sup> It is disturbing, therefore, to see the numbers of children who witnessed violence against their now-single mothers. Just over half (53 per cent) of the 168,000 women who experienced violence while living together with their most recently violent previous partner said the violence was 'seen or heard' by their children.<sup>106</sup> We are talking about 88,600 women and their children. The bleak prospect for these children is that, if they follow the pattern of their mothers, a great many of them will either end up in violent relationships (as victims or perpetrators), or unable to form ongoing stable relationships as adults. This probability ought to be included in our calculations of the cost of violence in families.

105 Van der Kolk. *The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 1.

106 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 14.



## CHAPTER 3

### From partner violence to 'policy-induced poverty'

*The Targeted Compliance Framework comprises three zones. A participant will begin in the default 'green zone'. If they commit a mutual obligation [failure] without a reasonable excuse (and consequently accrue a demerit), they will move to the 'warning zone'. A demerit has a lifespan of six months. If a participant in this warning zone receives three demerits within a six-month period, they must (within two business days of incurring the most recent demerit) attend a capability interview with their ParentsNext provider. If the provider determines that their participation plan is suitable for them, they will remain in the warning zone. If the person accrues a total of five demerit points in six months, they will then be referred for a 'capability assessment' with the department. If this assessment determines that the requirements imposed on the parent are appropriate, the participant will be moved into the 'penalty zone'. Once in the penalty zone, a participant will receive financial penalties for each mutual obligation failure without a reasonable excuse. These are: the loss of one week's income support payment for a first failure (that is, a 50 per cent reduction); the loss of two week's payment for the second failure (that is, a 100 per cent reduction); and ultimately the cancellation of the payment and service of a four-week preclusion period before being able to re-apply for a payment in the case of a third failure. If a person has had their income support payment cancelled, and they return to payment within three active months of cancellation, they will return to the beginning of the penalty zone (meaning that a further mutual obligation failure within three active months after cancellation would result in another loss of one week's payment). If they commit no further mutual obligation failures within that three-month period, they would return to the green zone.*

The above paragraph above could have been written by George Orwell. In fact, it is an excerpt from the Targeted Compliance Framework for the ParentsNext program, a compulsory federal government program for young parents receiving the Parenting Payment whose youngest child is under 6, whose stated objective is to ‘help eligible parents to plan and prepare for employment by the time their youngest child reaches school age’. In reality, it is a chaotic and inconsistent program that involves punishment (see above) and surveillance and in the ten years since it was initially trialled has created very little meaningful employment. Most of the participants are single parents, 95 per cent are women,<sup>107</sup> and 18 per cent of them Indigenous.

In August 2021 the federal Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights delivered a scathing report on the operations and effectiveness of ParentsNext.<sup>108</sup> The committee heard evidence that of the more than 150,000 parents who have participated in ParentsNext between 1 July 2018 and 31 December 2021, a mere 4,500 – or just 3 per cent – had left the program because of finding stable employment. Yet the committee was advised by the department that administers the program that one-third of participants have had their payments suspended for an average of five days because of mutual obligation infractions, and 1072 have had their payments cancelled altogether.<sup>109</sup>

***The system creates, and then perpetuates, poverty and disadvantage, which in turn make women more vulnerable to domestic violence.***

The very existence of this program, and the way it punishes and impoverishes already disadvantaged recipients, encapsulates Australia’s current treatment of single mothers. Rather than providing security or even much of a safety net for single mothers, the system creates, and then perpetuates, poverty and disadvantage, which in turn make women more vulnerable to domestic violence. This is how, for almost two decades now, Australia has treated women who have fled domestic violence.

I will return to the ParentsNext program below, but first we need to examine the evolution of government payments policy for single mothers in Australia. It is important to know from our relatively recent history that Australia’s current welfare policy towards single mothers represents a drastic, and cruel, departure from one that, beginning in the early 1970s, respected its recipients and acknowledged their rights both to an adequate income and to be able to care for their children.

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107 Maury, et al. (2022). *The social safety net as a complex system failure for women*.

108 [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Human\\_Rights/ParentsNext/Report](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Human_Rights/ParentsNext/Report)

109 Ibid.

In 1973 the Whitlam government introduced the Supporting Mothers Benefit, which, for the first time, provided the same level of income support to deserted, so-called deserting and other unmarried mothers as was provided to widowed mothers. The significance of the introduction of this benefit, and those other supporting measures that followed, cannot be overemphasized. It was the beginning of the modern era of women demanding an end to discriminatory practices that had largely excluded them from public life and had singled out certain categories of women – single mothers being one such group – who were not merely stigmatized but had, shamefully and for decades, been excluded from virtually all forms of government assistance to families.

In 1927 New South Wales had introduced a *Family Endowment Act* that paid a means-tested allowance of five shillings a week per child to all families with dependent children aged under 14.<sup>110</sup> Excluded from the payment were ‘illegitimate’ children – that is, children whose mothers were unmarried – as well as the children of aliens, ‘Asiatics’, or ‘aboriginal natives’ of Africa, Pacific Islands or New Zealand, unless they were born in Australia.<sup>111</sup> Single mothers had been excluded from the 1926 NSW Widows Pension Act, and were not included in the federal Widows Pension introduced by the Curtin Labor government in 1942. This federal legislation also excluded other women not seen as ‘deserving of a pension’: wives whose husbands were in prison, women deserted by de facto husbands, and women who had left their husbands, no matter what the reason was for the separation.<sup>112</sup>

Some states paid allowances to single mothers or, in the case of Victoria, to the child, but the amounts were certainly not enough to live on. In 1968 Victoria paid just \$4 per week to a single mother with one child.<sup>113</sup> Later that year, the federal government enacted the *States Grants (Deserted Wives) Act*, which was designed to incentivize the states to provide uniform payments for ‘fatherless families’, and this time single mothers were included, but their rate of pay – just \$27 a week – was below \$34.58, which was the minimum weekly wage for adult females in Victoria in 1968, and well below the \$48.67 male wage,<sup>114</sup> which was supposed to be sufficient to provide for a family.

110 [www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/num\\_act/fea1927n39212.pdf](http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/num_act/fea1927n39212.pdf)

111 Anne Summers (2016). *Damned Whores and God's Police: The colonisation of women in Australia*. NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, p. 545.

112 Carol Ely (2012). *Social Security Payments for the Unemployed, the Sick and Those in Special Circumstances, 1942 to 2012: A chronology*. Australian Parliamentary Library, Canberra, [www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SSPaymentsUnemployment](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/SSPaymentsUnemployment)

113 Summers (2016). *Damned Whores and God's Police*, p. 613.

114 Rates of pay from V.H. Arnold (1970). *Victorian Year Book 1970* (no. 84), Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Victorian Office, Melbourne, [www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/17C5ABF692A283B6CA257FD2001D40A2/\\$File/50\\_13012%20-Vic%20YrBook-1970\\_Part\\_4\\_Industrial\\_Employ\\_Prices.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/17C5ABF692A283B6CA257FD2001D40A2/$File/50_13012%20-Vic%20YrBook-1970_Part_4_Industrial_Employ_Prices.pdf)

The term 'single mother' did not exist until the 1960s, when women began using it to replace the far more prejudicial 'unmarried mother'. That phrase had been used to describe a woman whose child, or children, were 'born out of wedlock', and were referred to, in official documents, as 'illegitimate'. In common parlance, they were known as 'bastards'. (There were, of course, also mothers in these so-called 'fatherless families' who were bringing up 'legitimate' children, who were the product of a marriage that had for one reason or another disintegrated, but unless the woman had been widowed, she was widely seen as somehow being at fault for her situation; and there was of course no remedy for her unless she was able, and willing, to marry again.)

*The term 'single mother' did not exist until the 1960s, when women began using it to replace the far more prejudicial 'unmarried mother'.*

The concept of 'moral danger' was in widespread use at the time, and teenaged girls, especially if they were under the age of consent, could be removed from their families if it was suspected by the state that they were 'exposed to moral danger' – that is, having sex. The girls – but not the boys they had sex with – were subsequently charged with what was known colloquially as 'EMD' ('Exposed to Moral Danger').<sup>115</sup> The usual punishment was to be sent to a girls' 'home'. In Sydney this was the notorious Parramatta Girls Home, which resembled a prison more than a home, but there was also Bidura, in Glebe in inner Sydney. Bidura was not far from the first Women's Liberation Movement shopfront further down Glebe Point Road, and in the early 1970s, the women's movement often held demonstrations outside Bidura to express solidarity with the girls imprisoned inside, as well as to agitate for the reform of these archaic laws and the release of the girls from custody.

This denigration of single mothers as morally delinquent, together with the failure of the state to offer them adequate financial assistance, led in the 1960s and 1970s to thousands of young pregnant girls being forced to choose between a 'shotgun marriage' to a boy they might scarcely know; trying to procure an abortion, which was illegal, expensive and often medically dangerous; or trying to have the baby and, often, being given no choice but to offer it up for adoption. Many angry and embarrassed families sent their delinquent daughters off to 'homes', usually run by nuns, where they were obliged to do housework or other manual tasks while they waited to give birth. Their babies were then taken from them, sometimes under coercion, and in many cases without the young mother being able to hold or even see her baby. The girls then returned to society, usually having concealed what had happened, and tried to resume a normal life.

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115 [www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/exposed-to-moral-danger/3069882](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/exposed-to-moral-danger/3069882)

In February 2012, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee released its report into what have since become known as ‘forced adoptions’.<sup>116</sup> The report acknowledged that these adoption practices had impacted a very large number of Australians and had caused ‘significant ongoing effects for many people’. The report estimated that in the years between 1951 and 1975 there were as many as 140,000 to 150,000 total adoptions, although it could not specify the exact number of these that might have been ‘forced’. However, the report recommended that the federal government apologize to the many mothers, fathers and other family members affected by these girls having been forced into giving up their babies.<sup>117</sup>

On 21 March 2013, when prime minister Julia Gillard delivered that apology in the Great Hall, Parliament House in Canberra, she included the following words:

*To you, the mothers who were betrayed by a system that gave you no choice and subjected you to manipulation, mistreatment and malpractice, we apologize. We say sorry to you, the mothers who were denied knowledge of your rights, which meant you could not provide informed consent. You were given false assurances. You were forced to endure the coercion and brutality of practices that were unethical, dishonest and in many cases illegal.*<sup>118</sup>

These attitudes were slow to change, and its remnants continue to affect both policy and society’s views of single mothers. There are still people today who assume that all single mothers are wayward girls, although in these days of declining marriage rates and very high numbers of births outside marriage, these prejudices are losing their potency. Instead, as we shall see, they have been replaced by other new, and in many ways more insidious, preconceptions – and systems of control.

In retrospect, the three decades from the early 1970s until 2006 were the halcyon days for single mothers. Looking back, it is chilling to consider how ‘good’ things were by comparison, given how bad they have since become.

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116 [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Community\\_Affairs/Completed\\_inquiries/2010-13/commcontribformerforcedadoption/report/index](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2010-13/commcontribformerforcedadoption/report/index)

117 [www.ag.gov.au/about-us/national-apology-forced-adoptions/background-national-apology](http://www.ag.gov.au/about-us/national-apology-forced-adoptions/background-national-apology)

118 Excerpt from Julia Gillard, *National Apology for Forced Adoptions*, Great Hall, Parliament House, Canberra, 21 March 2013, [www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-03/Nationalapologyforforcedadoptions.PDF](http://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-03/Nationalapologyforforcedadoptions.PDF)



FIGURE 28

## evolution of payments policy for single mothers

Year	Act, benefit or program	Notes and comments
1926	New South Wales <i>Widows' Pension Act</i>	Applied only to 'acceptable family groups', excluding single mothers
1928	New South Wales <i>Family Endowment Act</i>	Payment of 5 shilling per child per week to all families with children under 14, 'illegitimate' children ineligible
1942	Widows' Pension introduced for women who had lost a partner and could not be expected to work due to their child-caring responsibilities or their age (over 50)	Excluded were single mothers, wives of prisoners, women deserted by de facto husbands, and women who left their husbands
1968	States Grants (Deserted Wives) Act	Created incentives for the states to provide uniform payments for all 'fatherless families', single mothers explicitly included
1973	Supporting Mother's Benefit	Six-month waiting period to get assistance
1975	<i>Family Law Act</i>	No-fault divorce enabled many women to leave unhappy marriages
1977	Supporting Parent's Benefit (SPB)	Single fathers now eligible
1979	Supporting Parent's Benefit (SPB)	Converted to full pension conditions, including fringe benefits
1980	Supporting Parent's Benefit (SPB)	Six month waiting period for eligibility abolished
1989	Sole Parent Pension (SPP)	Replaced Class A Widow Pension and SPB



1998	Parenting Payment Single (PPS)	Replaced SPP
2006	Welfare to Work	<p>New applicants for PPS children's eligibility age lowered from 16 to 8 years, meaning they were moved to Newstart, a much lower-paid benefit (as opposed to a pension) for unemployed people, once their youngest child turned 8</p> <p>Current PPS recipients were 'grandfathered' but still had to comply with the new work requirements</p>
2009	Family payments indexed to CPI, the increase in prices, rather than the higher average male wage which still applied to pensions	This impacted the rate of future increases in payments
2012	ParentsNext trialled in 10 highly disadvantaged areas around Australia	Teenage parents and 'jobless families' were required to take part in order to qualify for Parenting Payment
2013	'Grandfathered' PPS recipients moved to Newstart	80,000 single parents, mostly women, affected, losing between \$60 and \$100 per week
2018	ParentsNext rolled out nationally	Compulsory pre-employment program impacting most on single mothers
2020	JobSeeker Allowance introduced	Replaced Newstart Allowance with harsher compliance requirements
2021	ParentsNext extended a further three years until June 2024	Had been due to expire in June 2021

Source: Adapted from a table in P. Whiteford, 'Social security since Henderson', in P. Saunders (ed.) (2019). *Revisiting Henderson: Poverty, social security and basic income*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

The brief era of the Whitlam Labor government (1972–75) began the long overdue process of modernization of Australia, especially in areas such as women's rights, Aboriginal land rights, and a multitude of repressive rules and regulations governing personal conduct. Whitlam's was a government that attempted to remedy past injustice and discrimination and to give women the tools to exercise real economic choices. The government introduced paid maternity leave for public servants, and ensured single mothers were eligible; intervened in several equal pay court cases, winning an equal minimum wage for women; spent money on women's health and education, and promoted women's employment; and a childcare program was started (although it took until the Hawke government ten years later for the program to expand sufficiently to try to begin to meet the need).

It also acted to give women the tools to control their fertility. This was just one of many measures that, directly or otherwise, impacted on single mothers. In the very first few days of the new government, the 27.5 per cent luxury sales tax on contraceptives was abolished, as was the 37.5 per cent tariff on imported rubber contraceptives (such as condoms), and the contraceptive pill was put onto the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, bringing its price down to an affordable one dollar a month.<sup>119</sup> Federal government funding was provided for the first time to Family Planning Centres which advised women on how to control their fertility. Equally radical in purpose and impact was the introduction of the Supporting Mother's Benefit, the first ever federal government direct payment to single mothers. There was a six-month waiting period imposed that seemed unfair, and which took seven years to be abolished, but other benefits of the payment meant that it was transformative for the lives of single mothers and their children.

***Equally radical in purpose and impact was the introduction of the Supporting Mother's Benefit, the first ever federal government direct payment to single mothers.***

Also of huge significance was the passage of the *Family Law Act* in 1975 that introduced 'no-fault' divorce, enabling couples to divorce simply on the grounds of non-compatibility. The results were immediate and dramatic. 'The share of single parent families among families with dependent children increased from 9.2 per cent in 1974 to 12.6 per cent in 1980 and 15.6 per cent in 1987,' wrote Peter Whiteford, 'while the coverage of assistance from the Commonwealth government increased from around 57 per cent in 1974

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119 National Museum of Australia (n.d.). *Designing Moments: The pill*, [www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/the-pill](http://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/the-pill)

to 84 per cent in 1986.<sup>120</sup> It was not common back then to speculate that partner violence might have motivated many women to leave longstanding marriages now that it was no longer necessary to go through the laborious, and costly, court processes of establishing ‘fault’. Instead, most of the commentary concentrated simply on the ‘pent-up demand’ that was assumed to exist and which was the only reason for the huge jump in divorces after 1975.

*The negative stereotype of the ‘unmarried mother’ that still informs many people’s attitudes towards single mothers is now totally anachronistic.*

It is worth noting that the share of single parents among families with dependent children is about the same today as it was in 1987. In other words, 40 years on, easier divorce, changing attitudes towards having babies outside marriage and a decline in the marriage rate, together with a greater willingness for couples to cohabit prior to – or even instead of – marriage, are now cemented into our social mores and are reflected in the relatively stable family composition statistics over that time. It also means that the negative stereotype of the ‘unmarried mother’ that still informs many people’s attitudes towards single mothers is now totally anachronistic.<sup>121</sup> Most single mothers today have been in previous relationships: 58 per cent of the single mothers in my study who have experienced previous partner violence were divorced or separated, while a small number were widowed or still married.<sup>122</sup> A further 40 per cent of them had never married – that is, had not been in a registered marriage – but all had lived with a partner in the past.

*There was no expectation, let alone demand, that single mothers, including widows, seek employment or training while they cared for their young children.*

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120 Peter Whiteford, ‘Social Security since Henderson’, in P. Saunders (ed.) (2019). *Social Security Reform: Revisiting Henderson and basic income*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne. Unless otherwise stated, all the information in the following pages is drawn from this paper.

121 I am indebted to Peter Whiteford for pointing out to me the huge decline in teenage births over the past few decades. In 1971 there were 55.5 births per 1,000 teenagers; in 2017 that figure had declined to 9.2. This applied to both married and unmarried teenage mothers, implying greater and more effective use of contraception.

122 ABS Customized data 2021, Table 7 *Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By family composition and selected socio-demographic and household characteristics*.

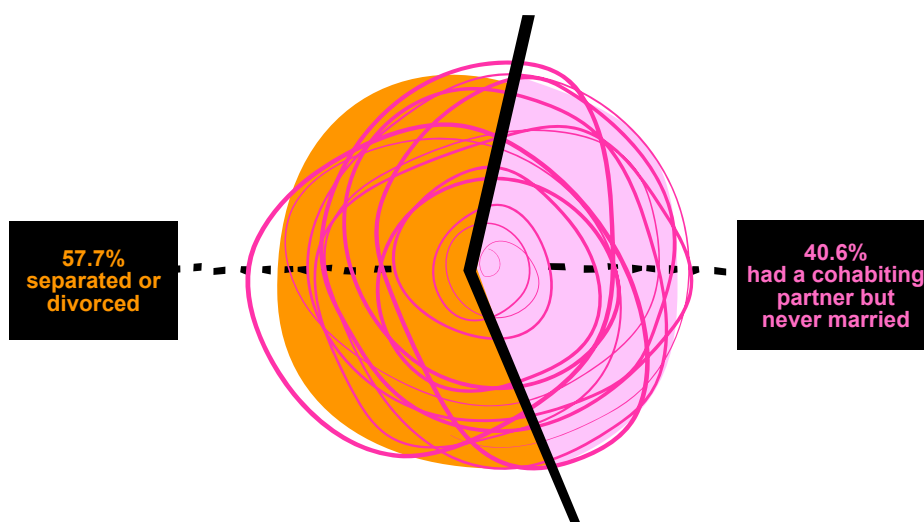
FIGURE 29

## experience of partner violence by registered marital status

AUSTRALIA 2016

185,700

women, 18 years and over, living in a single parent family with all children under 18  
- having experienced partner violence since age 15, by registered marital status



Source: ABS Customized Data Table 7

The Supporting Mother's Benefit was extended to cover single fathers in 1977 (and renamed the Supporting Parent's Benefit) and over the next decade or so a series of reforms ensured that the payment became equal in value and status to pensions (such as the age pension) and included access to fringe benefits. Widows were now covered by this (newly named, in 1989) Sole Parent Pension. There was no expectation, let alone demand, that single mothers, including widows, seek employment or training while they cared for their young children. But, despite several initiatives by the Hawke government to improve the financial benefits of single parents and the unemployed, as Emily Wolfinger has pointed out, during the 1980s public policy discussion began to shift from the 'problem' of the single mother to the 'problem' of welfare dependency, whereby single mothers' reliance on welfare, rather than their marital status, was deemed the social problem. 'While society has entered an age of liberal sexual attitudes and changing family structures where explicit moral judgments are less tolerated,' she writes, 'the denigration of single mothers persists via a construction that sees them as flawed economic citizens.'<sup>123</sup> Or, to put it another way, the objective of welfare in Australia was reframed 'from social justice to moral hazard'.<sup>124</sup>

123 Emily Wolfinger (2021). 'Australia's welfare discourse and news: Presenting single mothers'. *Global Media Journal, Australian edition*, vol. 15, no. 1, <https://www.hca.westernsydney.edu.au/gmjau/?p=1543>

124 Maury, et al. (2022). *The social safety net as a complex system failure for women*.

One initiative from this period was the creation of the Child Support Agency (CSA) in 1988 which was an attempt to ensure that separated parents, mostly fathers, contributed to the cost of raising their children. Previously such maintenance payments had been determined by the courts and were inextricably tied up in often bitter divorce proceedings; the payments were often arbitrarily determined, and it proved impossible to enforce compliance. The new agency, which had widespread support in its early days, was meant to make the process less emotional and fairer in its computation of payments which were enforced by the Australian Taxation Office. It was also seen as fairer because it required fathers to support their children (even if, as was often the case, they had gone on to have new families and now had minimal contact with their children from the earlier relationship).

*The objective of welfare in Australia was reframed  
'from social justice to moral hazard'.*

There is now considerable criticism of the operation of Child Support,<sup>125</sup> especially in relation to its treatment of women who have experienced domestic violence. Women are required to apply for child support from the father of that child, via Child Support in Services Australia, as a condition of receiving Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part A, the government payment for children that is income-tested. Maintenance payments are deemed part of assessable income: 'Generally, the more child support you get, or you're entitled to get, the less FTB Part A we pay you,' as the Services Australia website puts it.<sup>126</sup> There are numerous complaints that women's Family Tax Benefits are often reduced whether or not she actually receives the maintenance from her former partner. There are also issues around the woman needing to deal with her abusive former partner and the anxiety and fear this can potentially trigger. The CSA does provide dispensation for some women from applying for maintenance in cases where domestic violence is seen as an ongoing threat (which of course lets the former partner off the hook financially, which is hardly fair). There are numerous and complicated issues involved here that can only be flagged in this report, but it is necessary to understand that they add to the administrative burden and the extraordinarily complicated proceedings single mothers are subjected to when they try to claim their government entitlements.

The culmination of the moral hazard view of welfare entered policy in 2006 when the Howard government totally turned the social security system on

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125 The Child Support Agency was abolished in 2011.

126 <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/income-test-for-family-tax-benefit-part?context=22151#actiontest>

its head with the introduction of the Welfare to Work regime. This upended all previous rules and assumptions governing social security eligibility and obligations. It also, perhaps not incidentally, overturned the long-standing *categorical system* that defined Australia's income-support payments regime.<sup>127</sup> In the past, individuals received income support by virtue of belonging to a defined group: by being over age 65, or having a disability, or caring for children either as a single mother or a widow. Now single mothers who applied for the PPS after 30 June 2006 had two penalties applied to them: they were forced out of the pension system and onto the lower-paying, and less generously indexed, allowance regime. And they were no longer classified as mothers. Now, once their youngest child turned 8, they were deemed to be unemployed and transferred to the lower-paying Newstart Allowance. They were required to undertake 15 hours of employment or job search activities per week. Single mothers who were already in the PPS system were 'grandfathered', meaning they could remain on the PPS until their youngest child turned 16, but they still had to comply with the employment requirement once their youngest children turned 7. With a single and, I would argue, arbitrary stroke of the administrative pen, single mothers were transformed, in the eyes of the federal government, from being mothers to being seen as economic units, to be forcibly funnelled into the workforce as soon as possible.

*Single mothers were transformed, in the eyes of the federal government, from being mothers to being seen as economic units, to be forcibly funnelled into the workforce as soon as possible.*

There was a change of government in 2007 but not a change of policy: the Rudd Labor government continued Welfare to Work as part of their social inclusion agenda.<sup>128</sup> In 2009 Rudd ended the indexation of family payments to wages growth, which reduced the value of these payments by around \$20 per fortnight.<sup>129</sup> Then, in a move that still prompts anger and incredulity today, in 2012 the Gillard government abolished the grandfathered status of the single mothers who had been on PPS in 2006. The policy had been brought to budget cabinet by Bill Shorten, who was Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, and was presented as a cost-saving measure. Although some ministers opposed the

127 See Whiteford (2019). 'Social Security since Henderson'.

128 Myjenta Ellen Winter (2014). *Silent Voices, Invisible Violence: Welfare to work and the exploitation of single mothers who have experienced domestic violence*. Thesis, Southern Cross University, [researchportal.scu.edu.au/esploro/outputs/doctoral/Silent-voices-invisible-violence-welfare-to-work-and-the-exploitation-of-single-mothers-who-have-experienced-domestic-violence/991012821246202368](https://researchportal.scu.edu.au/esploro/outputs/doctoral/Silent-voices-invisible-violence-welfare-to-work-and-the-exploitation-of-single-mothers-who-have-experienced-domestic-violence/991012821246202368)

129 ACOSS (2017). *A Future for All Children: Addressing child poverty in Australia*. ACOSS Briefing, October 2017, [www.acoss.org.au/a-future-for-all-children/](https://www.acoss.org.au/a-future-for-all-children/)

move, Gillard supported it and so it passed. As of 1 January 2013, all PPS recipients had to comply with workforce participation requirements once their youngest children turned 6, and all recipients with children aged 8 or over lost their PPS entitlement.

As a result, a group of 80,000<sup>130</sup> single parents, most of them women, were moved to Newstart, losing between \$60 and \$100 a week, but saving the government \$728 million over four years.<sup>131</sup> Subsequent research showed that this move resulted in the rate of after-housing poverty among unemployed sole parents increasing from 35 per cent to nearly 60 per cent.<sup>132</sup>

**80,000 single parents, most of them women, were moved to Newstart, losing between \$60 and \$100 a week, but saving the government \$728 million over four years.**

In 2009, the Rudd government had already introduced a punitive penalty system, 'No Show, No Pay', that saw jobseekers (including single mothers newly reclassified as unemployed) docked one-tenth of their fortnightly income payments for non-compliance.<sup>133</sup> It was within this political environment, where employment was being prioritized over social security objectives, that in 2012 saw trials begin in economically highly disadvantaged areas around Australia for a new pre-employment program called ParentsNext.

In October 2013, I interviewed Julia Gillard before a large audience at Melbourne Town Hall. Gillard had been deposed as leader of the Labor Party, and, hence as prime minister, in June and this was her second public interview since then. (The first had been the evening before in the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House, where I had interviewed her before a capacity audience of more than 2600 people.) I was criticized overnight for not asking her about what she had done to single mothers, so was determined to ask the question early in the Melbourne interview and not,

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130 Ben Phillips (2015). *Living Standard Trends in Australia: Report for Anglicare Australia*. NATSEM, University of Canberra, p. 13.

131 Gabrielle Chan. 'Julia Gillard defends single parent benefit change'. *Guardian*, 2 October 2013, [www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/02/julia-gillard-single-parents-benefit](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/02/julia-gillard-single-parents-benefit)

132 P. Whiteford, B. Philips, B. Bradbury, D. Stanton, M. Gray, & M. Stewart (2018). 'It's not just Newstart. Single parents are \$271 per fortnight worse off. Labor needs an overarching welfare review'. *The Conversation*, 3 December 2018, [theconversation.com/its-not-just-Newstart-single-parents-are-271-per-fortnight-worse-off-labor-needs-an-overarching-welfare-review-107521](http://theconversation.com/its-not-just-Newstart-single-parents-are-271-per-fortnight-worse-off-labor-needs-an-overarching-welfare-review-107521)

133 *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Employment Services Reform) Act 2009*, cited by Winter in (2014). *Silent Voices, Invisible Violence*.



as in Sydney, to allow time to get away from me. Despite both nights' audiences being fierce fans of the former prime minister, there was audible hissing from the Melbourne crowd when I raised the issue. I have no doubt that Gillard was sincere in her answer, and in her belief that it was better for single mothers to be in employment than on welfare. I found it hard to disagree with the principles she outlined. The problem, however, was not with the principle – it was with the implementation. Maybe that was not apparent at the time, but we have certainly learned since that there was no realistic strategy for how single mothers, struggling with young children on incomes that had been suddenly drastically reduced, were going to be able to make the transition to satisfactory employment. How was a system designed to channel young unemployed people into jobs going to be able to help mothers, who need childcare and other supports that most unemployed people did not? It was not realistic, and it did not work.

*How was a system designed to channel young unemployed people into jobs going to be able to help mothers, who need childcare and other supports that most unemployed people did not?*

There appears to be very little research on whether single mothers' labour force participation increased as a result of Welfare to Work. However, an important study undertaken by ANU economist Ben Phillips in 2015 for Anglicare Australia, using numbers drawn from ABS Labour Force statistics on the workforce participation rates for single mothers and all females from April 2001 to April 2015, shows the following:

*... since the welfare to work changes in July 2006 overall participation rates of single parents has not greatly changed either in the absolute rates or relative to female participation in aggregate.*

*Most of the observed gains to both single parents and females as a whole happened prior to the GFC in 2008 – most of which was prior to welfare to work policy changes for single parents.*<sup>134</sup>

Phillips's data shows that in late 2013/early 2014 – that is, the period after the large group of single mothers was 'de-grandfathered' and moved onto Newstart – single mothers' participation rate actually fell below that for all females. More work needs to be done to document the long-term employment and other outcomes for single mothers of the Welfare to Work regime, now in its sixteenth year. But there is little to suggest that the scheme, both in its original design and its subsequent new requirements, has been beneficial for single mothers. One academic study, conducted in 2015, concludes that

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134 Phillips (2015). *Living Standard Trends in Australia*, p. 13



*... the reforms have decreased the financial wellbeing of single parents and their children, resulting in parents making the transition from welfare to work feeling less satisfied with their future security and standard of living, and higher poverty rates amongst the population of single parents with dependent children.*<sup>135</sup>

Some of the reduced financial well-being resulted from the lower income from the Newstart allowance, but single mothers were also penalized with higher effective marginal tax rates on any income they earned above the Newstart allowance.<sup>136</sup> These impacts have been recognized by Labor ministers, including by Bill Shorten, who later in 2013 appeared to walk back from the policy when he said, 'I think the measures we took have had the wrong consequences.'<sup>137</sup> 'The decisions that were made were too harsh,' Jenny Macklin – who was Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs at the time – told the ABC's *Background Briefing* radio program on Welfare to Work in 2015. 'People are in worse circumstances. If we had our time again, we would not have made those decisions.'<sup>138</sup>

Until its election victory in May 2022, Labor had not been in power federally since 2013, and so has not been in a position to revisit these decisions. The conservative Coalition governments that ruled since 2013 have done so – but only to make the policies harsher. In March 2020 the Newstart allowance was renamed, with perhaps deliberate irony, JobSeeker. All current Newstarters now became JobSeekers and, once their youngest child turned 8, all single mothers were moved from Parenting Payment Single (PPS) to JobSeeker. It was a long way from the Supporting Mother's Benefit, whose name clearly acknowledged the purpose of the payment. The impact of this switch can clearly be seen from the figures: in 1999 women made up 37 per cent of recipients of parenting payments but by 2018 that figure had dropped to 23 per cent. At the same time, the proportion of women on unemployment benefits had risen from 14 per cent in 1999 to 30 per cent in 2018.<sup>139</sup>

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135 M. Brady & K. Cook (2015). 'The impact of welfare to work on parents and their children'. *Evidence Base*, vol. 3, pp. 1–23.

136 Brady & Cook (2015). 'The impact of welfare to work on parents and their children'.

137 'Labor may rethink single mum welfare cuts'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 September 2013, [www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/labor-may-rethink-single-mum-welfare-cuts-20130922-2u7j2.html](http://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/labor-may-rethink-single-mum-welfare-cuts-20130922-2u7j2.html)

138 Jenny Macklin, interviewed on 'Welfare to Work', *Background Briefing*, ABC Radio, 27 September 2015.

139 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). *Unemployment and Parenting Support Payments*, 21 September 2021, [www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/unemployment-and-parenting-income-support-payments](http://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/unemployment-and-parenting-income-support-payments), Proportion of income support recipients aged 18-64, by sex and payment category, June 1999 to June 2018.

In 2021 the Parenting Payment was defined as follows:

### *Parenting payments*

*Parenting payments are paid in recognition of the impact that caring for young children can have on a parent's capacity to undertake full-time employment. Only one parent or guardian can be the principal carer and receive the payment.*

- *Parenting Payment Single (PPS): an income support payment for single parents where the youngest child is aged under 8. Single parents must satisfy part-time mutual obligation requirements of 30 hours per fortnight once their youngest child turns 6 (unless they have a partial capacity to work).<sup>140</sup>*

The purpose of the payment is to provide income while waiting for the youngest child to turn eight so the parent, in this case the mother, can supposedly hightail it into employment. As recipients of the PPS, single mothers currently (March 2022) receive \$892.20 per fortnight.<sup>141</sup> This payment drops to \$691.00 per fortnight<sup>142</sup> when their youngest child turns eight and they must move onto JobSeeker, a payment that the government states 'is available to people who are looking for work, who temporarily cannot work or study because of an injury or illness, or bereaved partners in the period immediately following the death of their partner, subject to meeting eligibility requirements.'<sup>143</sup> In the eyes of the government, their status as mothers has been extinguished when their child turns eight, an age at which most children cannot be legally left unattended.

***Their status as mothers has been extinguished when their child turns eight, an age at which most children cannot be legally left unattended.***

The most recent government weapon against single mothers is a program called ParentsNext, which was originally trialled in 2012 in ten economically disadvantaged areas in eastern Australia, with the stated aim of assisting parents of very young children with poor work histories and little education to prepare for employment. The program was rolled out nationally in 2018, including in areas with high Indigenous populations, with the objective of trying

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140 AIHW (2021). *Unemployment and Parenting Income Support Payments*.

141 [formerministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/](https://www.formerministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/)

142 [formerministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/](https://www.formerministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/)

143 AIHW (2021). *Unemployment and Parenting Income Support Payments*.

to meet Closing the Gap employment targets. After six months of operation, in December 2018, there were 75,259 participants, 95 per cent of whom were women, 68 per cent single parents and 19 per cent identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Since its inception, the program has been met with almost universal criticism.

For instance, in 2019 the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs References Committee found:

*At the heart of the issue are several key aspects, including the compulsory nature of ParentsNext, its use of the Targeted Compliance Framework to monitor and record participation, the sense of control it places over participants' lives, its gender bias, and the confusion around its purpose and aims.*

*The committee considers that these flaws indicate fundamental changes need to be made to ParentsNext and its approach.*<sup>144</sup>

Specific criticisms heard by the committee included the following:

*Some parents reported that they had been forced by their ParentsNext provider to attend activities such as library-run 'story time', playgroup or swimming lessons with their children, or instructed to undertake further education at their own expense when they already hold qualifications. Other parents described their frustrations in trying to exit the program after being incorrectly referred. Further reports detailed how parents had their income support payments cut off unexpectedly under the program's compliance model, including over the Christmas period, placing them and their children at risk and requiring emergency relief.*

*Half of all households in Australia which receive Parenting Payment live in poverty, with single mothers, who are overrepresented in this cohort, particularly at risk of financial stress. Children living in single parent households are more than three times more likely to grow up in poverty than children in couple families. While placing conditions on recipients of Parenting Payment is not a new concept, these media reports suggest that the design and implementation of the new ParentsNext program has resulted in unintended consequences for these vulnerable parents, particularly single mothers, and their children.*<sup>145</sup>

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144 Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs References Committee (2019). *ParentsNext, Including Its Trial and Subsequent Broader Rollout*, ch. 4, [parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024267/toc\\_pdf/ParentsNext,includingitstrialandsubsequentbroaderrollout.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024267/toc_pdf/ParentsNext,includingitstrialandsubsequentbroaderrollout.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)

145 Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs References Committee (2019). *ParentsNext*, paras 1.4 and 1.5, p. 1.

The committee recommended that ParentsNext not continue in its present form. Despite this, and despite a similarly critical assessment of the program by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights in 2021, the federal government announced that it was extending the program for a further three years, until 2024.

The committee heard evidence that ParentsNext appears to push parents into insecure, low-paying work rather than developing their ability to secure long-term employment. Singled out for criticism were many of the private sector or faith-based ‘providers’ who receive an ‘outcome payment’ where a participant achieves ‘sustainable employment’, which is defined as a minimum of 15 hours of paid work per week for at least 12 weeks. It was argued that this incentivizes providers to push women towards employment regardless of their circumstances and that such employment outcomes run counter to the program’s stated objectives (that is, to assist parents to achieve their education and employment goals). The committee highlighted the use of coercion by some providers to get participants to sign on for jobs that were clearly inappropriate. The Council of Single Mothers and their Children likewise argued that casual, insecure and low-paid jobs will continue to position women and children within the existing cycles of intergenerational disadvantage, propelling already disadvantaged parents into employment that holds little career development possibilities.<sup>146</sup>

***Evidence was given about another woman who had to take her baby to hospital in a pram, in the dark, because her car was unregistered.***

The administration of the program is criticized for being capricious, unrealistic, and often insensitive. Evidence was given to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights about a participant from Mildura who wanted help in paying for her driver’s license.<sup>147</sup> She was told she needed to pay for it herself and get reimbursed. She did not have the money, so had to let it lapse. As we know, being able to drive is almost essential for anyone seeking work. Evidence was also given about another woman who had to take her baby to hospital in a pram, in the dark, because her car was unregistered.

Ms Melissa Lee, a current ParentsNext participant in 2021, submitted to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights:

*I left a [domestic violence] marriage three years ago. I have been trying to rebuild my life since. I have no family support. My income is \$700/week. With that money I pay \$350/week in rent. There is*

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146 Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (2021). *ParentsNext: Examination of social security* (Parenting payment participation requirements – class of persons) instrument 2021, inquiry report; [2021] AUPJCHR 88, para. 3.12, p. 19.

147 Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (2021). *ParentsNext*, para. 3.20, p. 22.

*very little left over and I'm constantly going without food and other basics such as my antidepressants and things like Codral when I have a cold. Yet this program expects me to study when I can't afford the textbooks. It expects me to find work when I can't afford the astronomical deposit for daycare and before and after school care, which would be over \$1000 for both my children if I found full time work. It expects me to get my license when I can't afford a car.*<sup>148</sup>

The committee heard evidence that 52 per cent of all households receiving the Parenting Payment were living in poverty, and that the department (of Social Services) had reported that from 1 July 2018, 7,667 female participants had advised that they had experienced domestic violence (including 1,774 who identified as Indigenous, 1,103 who were homeless, and 1,797 who identified as having a disability). Other evidence was given that as many as 80 per cent of participants had been affected by domestic violence.<sup>149</sup>

FIGURE 30



Source: [www.dese.gov.au/parentsnext/resources/targeted-compliance-framework-parentsnext-participants](http://www.dese.gov.au/parentsnext/resources/targeted-compliance-framework-parentsnext-participants)

148 Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (2021). *ParentsNext*, para. 3.92, p. 54.

149 Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (2021). *ParentsNext*, para. 3.106, p. 61.

The Targeted Compliance Framework is the mechanism by which a participant's activity is monitored, and income support payments may be suspended or cancelled. Chillingly, with echoes of the much-condemned Robodebt program, it is administered through an electronic system, and some elements of it are automated.<sup>150</sup> For example, the guidelines note that ParentsNext providers must record a person's participation in an activity by close of business, and if they fail to do so the department's IT systems will automatically suspend the person's income support payment. The Parliamentary Joint Committee heard evidence of participants being given permission to leave early from an activity session, such as sitting in a provider's office checking out job ads on Seek.com, and subsequently being penalized – that is, losing payments – via the automated system because the provider forgot to log in the permission.

A submission from Dr Elise Klein of the Australia National University painted a picture of what life was like for people, especially single parents, during that period during the initial COVID response in 2020 when mutual obligations were suspended, and all welfare recipients received a generous fortnightly income supplement:

*[P]eople who had their mutual obligation suspended and then got the extra \$550 talked a lot about being able to engage in the labour market. People were not under the scrutiny of the punitive framework, and they felt better emotionally and psychologically. Their wellbeing improved. They were able to afford basic needs as a base to stand on. From that, they were able to use the time that was normally being taken up by being harassed by the mutual obligation framework. They were able to use that time not just in minutes but in terms of psychological time – the ability to think and plan for your life ahead. People were talking about engaging back with the labour market, looking for jobs, starting study and getting a bit of a plan together for their lives.<sup>151</sup>*

In March 2021 the federal government ended the \$550 per fortnight coronavirus supplement for JobSeeker recipients, meaning their incomes dropped from providing a reasonable living, as described above, to back below the poverty line. It was a devastating moment for those 1.17 million people.<sup>152</sup> Single parents had benefited 'significantly' from these supplements, so much so that 'the poverty gap for single parents was actually lower than that of couple families with children at June 2020.'<sup>153</sup> The poverty rate for children in single parent families actually

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150 Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (2021). *ParentsNext*, para. 2.15, p. 10.

151 Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (2021). *ParentsNext*, para. 3.50, p. 35.

152 AIHW (2021). *Unemployment and Parenting Income Support Payments*.

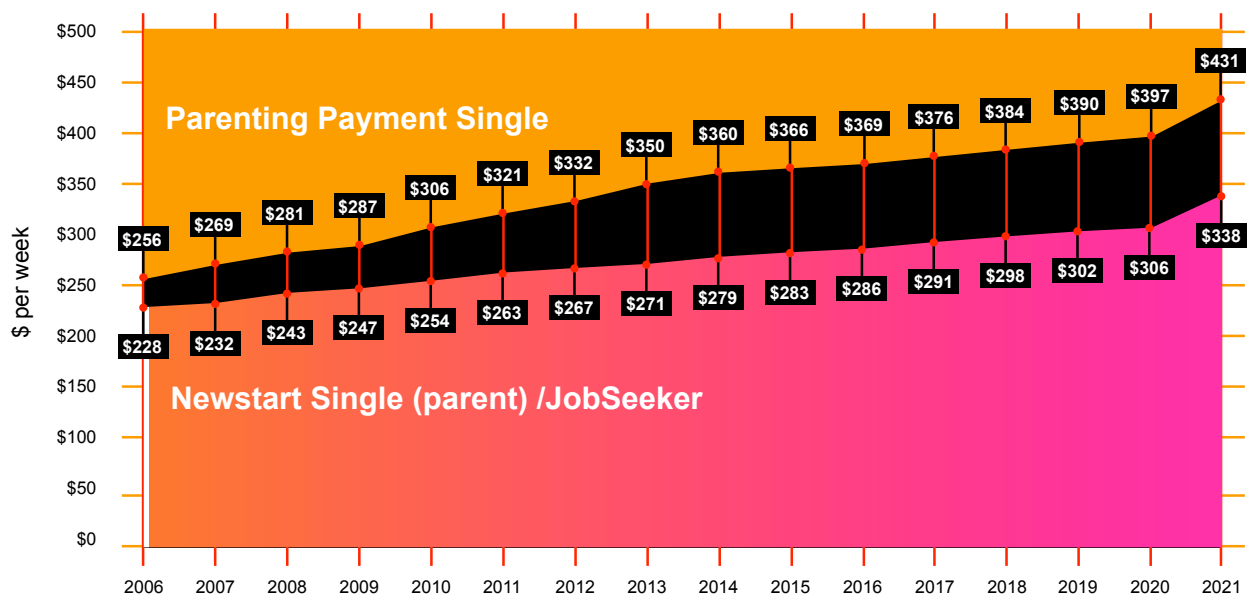
153 Ben Phillips & Vivikth Narayanan (2021). *Financial Stress and Social Security Settings in Australia*. ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, April 2021, p. 30.



declined from 39 per cent prior to COVID to 16 per cent while the supplement was in place, but then shot up again to 41 per cent once the COVID payments ended.<sup>154</sup> These kids and their mothers had had a taste of being treated with some decency by their government, but now it was over. Situation normal again.

FIGURE 31

## Parenting Payment Single vs Newstart/JobSeeker



Source: adapted with permission from table originally published by ACOSS in 2017: <https://www.acoss.org.au/a-future-for-all-children/>

In the 1990s, 25 per cent of Australians received some form of income support; by 2017 that figure had fallen to 16 per cent, comparable to the level in the early 1980s. The value of that income support had also been drastically recalibrated so that those people, such as single mothers, who had been forced off 'pensions' and onto 'benefits' – now called 'allowances' (making their recipients 'allowees') – saw their incomes decline precipitously.

As Peter Whiteford has pointed out, the single rate in 2017 was nearly three times in real terms more than it was in 1969, and 75 per cent more than it was in 1975. By contrast, in 2017 the single adult rate of Newstart (this is prior to JobSeeker) is only 7 per cent in real terms higher than it was in 1975.<sup>155</sup> As we have seen, the combined impact of single mothers being forced to move from the higher-paying pension to the pitiful 'allowance' has had a catastrophic, and continuing, financial impact. The Hawke government in the early 1980s had increased unemployment benefits and indexed them to the CPI. It had, says

154 Phillips & Narayanan (2021). *Financial Stress and Social Security Settings in Australia*, p. 31.

155 Whiteford (2019). PowerPoint presentation by Peter Whiteford, adapted from 'Social security since Henderson'.

Whiteford, an objective of maintaining both pensions and allowances at 25 per cent of male total average weekly earnings (MTAWE), which they achieved via annual discretionary increases rather than legislated wage benchmarks.<sup>156</sup> The Howard government introduced legislated benchmarking for pensions – but not allowances – to MTAWE in 1997. The gap between pensions and allowances has continued to widen ever since.

*In March 2022 age pensioner couples got a raise of \$30.20 per fortnight, while single parents got an increase of \$18.10.*

In early 2022, according to the Minister's media release announcing the new, indexed payments from March 2022 for the next six months, couples eligible for the age pension receive \$1488.80 per fortnight.<sup>157</sup> Recipients of the Parenting Payment Single – that is, single parents whose youngest child is aged under eight – get \$892.20 a fortnight. And because of the differing rates of indexation, the gap will grow and grow and grow in the manner described above by Peter Whiteford. In March 2022 age pensioner couples got a raise of \$30.20 per fortnight, while single parents got an increase of \$18.10.

Strikingly, there is no mention in the Minister's media statement about single mothers who are now 'JobSeekers' – because their youngest child is aged over eight – and how much they will receive. In fact, they are not acknowledged at all. The release mentions the new JobSeeker Payment rate for singles without children (\$642.70 per fortnight), but does not tell us how much a 'JobSeeker' with children will receive.<sup>158</sup> We know, from checking the Department of Social Services website, that the current payment for single mothers with children aged over eight – that is, JobSeekers with children – is \$691.00 per fortnight. Why are they not mentioned in the Minister's media statement? The public record of how many women receive the Parenting Payment Single is hidden deep in DSS databases. For the record, in December 2021 that number was 223,010 women (and 11,098 men). You must delve even deeper into the departmental demographic data to discover that in December 2021, there were 90,020 'not partnered' Principal Carers receiving JobSeeker.<sup>159</sup> This figure is not broken down by gender, so we are unable to be certain just how many of these are women, but we do know the chances are high that most of them fled violence, only to end up in absolute poverty.

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156 Whiteford (2019). PowerPoint presentation.

157 [formerm Ministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/](https://formerm Ministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/)

158 [formerm Ministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/](https://formerm Ministers.dss.gov.au/19508/march-indexation-delivers-boost-to-almost-5-million-australians/)

159 Department of Social Services Demographics (December 2021), [data.gov.au/data/dataset/dss-payment-demographic-data/resource/65515027-eb42-4257-9b32-6bfec21e00e8](https://data.gov.au/data/dataset/dss-payment-demographic-data/resource/65515027-eb42-4257-9b32-6bfec21e00e8)



The JobSeeker allowance is so scandalously low that employer groups are now calling for it to be increased.<sup>160</sup> Their call has been echoed by the Reserve Bank and even – in a sharp reversal of its attitudes in the 1980s, when it led the charge for welfare-to-work type policies – the OECD. That body has reprimanded Australia for the extremely low rate it pays to unemployed people. In its 2021 Economic Survey of Australia, the body found:

*The unemployment benefit replacement rate remains close to the lowest in the OECD and below estimates of the relative poverty line. This partly reflects prior indexation to consumer price index.*<sup>161</sup>

The OECD recommended that Australia ‘further increase the unemployment benefit rate and consider indexing the rate to wage inflation’. Adopting this recommendation would bring an immediate degree of financial relief to single mothers who have been consigned to this totally inappropriate category. A more appropriate policy change, in my view, would be to reverse the 2006 decision and allow women with dependent children to remain on the PPS until their youngest child reaches 16.

***The JobSeeker allowance is so scandalously low that employer groups are now calling for it to be increased.***

How has Australia come to this? In less than 50 years we have gone from boasting a welfare state where the economic and social well-being of almost all citizens was provided for when they were unable to fend for themselves, to the brutal and punitive system we have today. From once providing an almost universal guarantee of social security, successive federal governments have tightened the screws more and more on the most vulnerable, ensuring they continue to live in poverty. On what planet does an aged couple require an income from the state that is greater than that of a single mother trying to raise growing children, aged anywhere from 8 to 17, who need clothes, food, childcare, school uniforms and excursions and other educational expenses, not to mention the occasional treat? A single mother with two children aged 10 and 12 could receive as much as \$1189.66 a fortnight if she qualifies for the

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160 Josh Butler “‘This wasn’t my plan’: Tearful cancer patient pleads for JobSeeker increase’. *New Daily*, 9 March 2021, [thenewdaily.com.au/news/2021/03/09/jobseeker-increase-plea/](https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/2021/03/09/jobseeker-increase-plea/)

161 *OECD Economic Surveys: Australia* (September 2021), p. 5, <https://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/Australia-2021-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>

maximum of all supplementary payments.<sup>162</sup> This is especially the case given the disparate rates of home ownership among these recipients: 73 per cent of age pensioners own their homes, compared with 20 per cent on JobSeeker and just 11 per cent of those on the PPS.<sup>163</sup>

### *The punitive attitude towards single mothers is both hypocritical and cruel.*

We not only expect these women and their kids to live in poverty, but we force them to remain hidden from view. It is not until we *really* look that we discover that single mothers –of whom, as this report has shown, as many as three-quarters are single because they fled violent relationships – are required by the government to subsist, with their children, on below-poverty level income. They are expected to be invisible, to shrink into the shadows of modern Australian life. If the Minister who has statutory responsibility for their welfare will not so much as acknowledge their existence, what hope do they have?

The punitive attitude towards single mothers is both hypocritical and cruel. There is now a double standard in official Australian government policies towards mothers that is based on attitudes that are both outmoded and absurd. We punish single mothers if they are not in employment, while we penalize married mothers if they are. Our entire tax and welfare systems are built around the archaic ‘white-picket fence’ assumption that mothers with young children should be married and stay home to care for them. If they do not, we impose harsh financial penalties via the withdrawal of family benefits and the extraordinary cost of commercial childcare, which create effective marginal tax rates on income that are so high that employed women, especially in dual-income households, can in effect lose up to 100 per cent of their salaries. Single mothers, on the other hand, have no choice but to look for work, or alternative ‘mutual obligations’ satisfying activities such as volunteering (for as many as 50 hours per fortnight) once their youngest child turns six.<sup>164</sup> And if they do find a decent paying job, they too will be penalized by having their Family Tax Benefits payments reduced and having to pay huge sums for childcare. The inefficiencies of the tax transfer and welfare systems in Australia are at odds with stated government goals of increasing

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162 In addition to the base fortnightly JobSeeker rate of \$691, a single parent will receive an energy supplement of \$9.50, a Family Tax Benefit Part A of \$191.24 for each child aged 0 to 12 (\$248.78 for children 13–19), a further \$133.54 Family Tax Benefit Part B (if she is eligible), plus a Pharmaceutical Allowance of \$3.10 per week. This means a single mother with two children aged 10 and 12 could receive as much as \$1189.66 per fortnight. This is still around \$300 per fortnight less than age pensioners, who do not have to deal with the cost of children.

163 Department of Social Services Demographics (December 2021), Table: Payment recipients by payment type by homeownership and rental type.

164 [www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/what-are-your-parenting-payment-commitments-are?context=22196](http://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/what-are-your-parenting-payment-commitments-are?context=22196)

women's labour force participation. At the G20 meeting in Brisbane in 2014, the Abbott government committed to a 25 per cent reduction by 2025 in the gender gap between women's and men's participation. This is a huge issue, for another report, but we cannot overlook the entire impact on women's employment and the welfare system in discussions of the impact of partner violence on Australian women's lives.

*We punish single mothers if they are not in employment,  
while we penalize married mothers if they are.*

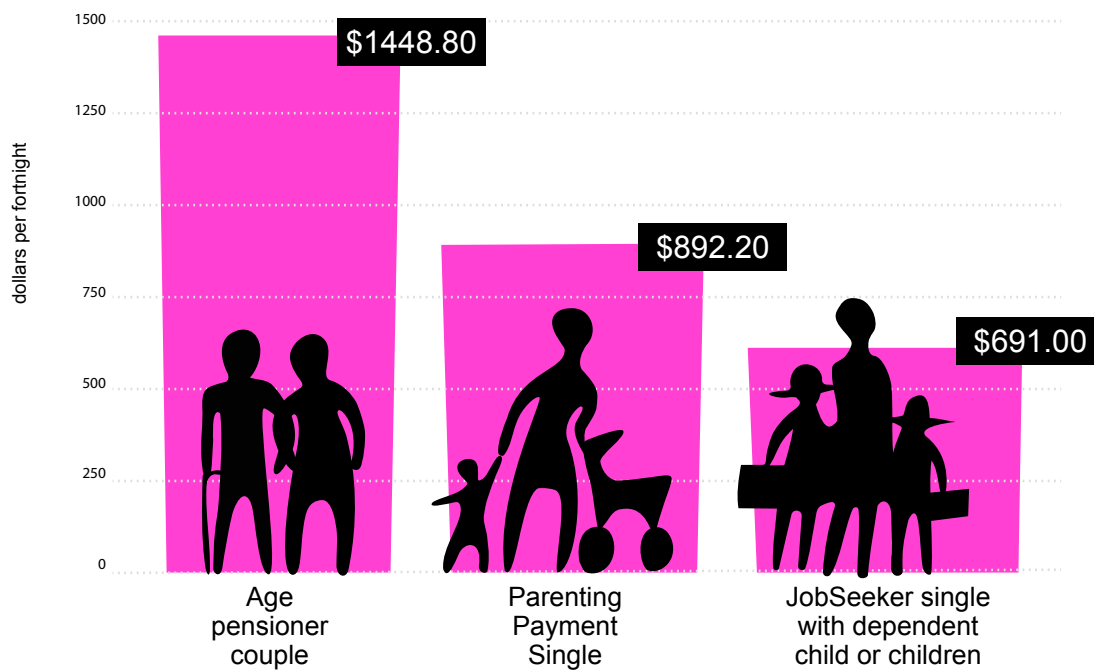
For decades now, and especially since 2011, when the federal government introduced its National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022, federal and state governments, as well as charitable organizations, the women's services sector and concerned individuals have condemned domestic violence and have encouraged women to leave such relationships. In doing so, all of us have – unwittingly – consigned many, if not most, of these women to lives of deprivation, if not outright poverty and misery. As Bruce Chapman and Matt Taylor have shown with their use of HILDA data to track the incomes of women who separate from violent partners, cited in the previous chapter, the drop in income can be as high as 45 per cent. Some women are never able to recover economically. Is this what we intend when we encourage women to leave violent relationships? This may not have been our intention, but we need to be fully aware that for far too many women this has been the outcome.

FIGURE 32

## government payments - base rates\*

\*Recipients may also be eligible for supplementary payments to cover energy, pharmaceuticals and the cost of children.

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*On what planet does an aged couple require an income from the state that is greater than that of a single mother trying to raise growing children, aged anywhere from 8 to 17, who need clothes, food, childcare, school uniforms and excursions and other educational expenses, not to mention the occasional treat?*



## Report recommendations

These recommendations are limited to reforms and changes directly addressed in this report that would see an immediate amelioration of the poverty currently experienced by single mothers. The findings illustrate unambiguously that around 50 per cent of single mothers escaping violent relationships receive incomes that are clearly inadequate. This finding is so incontrovertible that the only issue for government ought to be how quickly, and by how much, the payments for single parents can be substantially increased.

These recommendations do not address the wider issues of other forms of financial and/or in-kind support for women escaping violent relationships, nor the much bigger issues of a major overhaul of the social welfare system or the urgent reforms needed to address the widely-recognized inadequacies of the JobSeeker scheme whose payment amount is relatively and absolutely insubstantial; moreover, the financial support for recipients falls further relative to the situation of pensioners and allowees every six months because of CPI-only, rather than wage, indexation.

However, they include recommendations for improvement in data collection so that policy can be informed by more comprehensive information than is currently the case.

1. The Australian Government should change the eligibility rules so that the Parenting Payment Single allowance is available to all single parents until their youngest child reaches 16 or is still in high school.
2. The Australian Government should increase the Parenting Payment Single allowance rate so it is equal to the age pension single rate.

3. The Australian Government should change the indexation and benchmarking of the Parenting Payment Single so they align with how pensions are indexed. In practice, this will mean that the Parenting Payment Single would always equal 27.7% of male total Average Weekly Earnings (MTAWE) rather than the current benchmark of 25% of MTAWE.
4. The Australian Government should abolish the Mutual Obligations requirements for recipients of the Parenting Payment Single (currently imposed once the youngest child turns 6) and provide optional job-training and job-seeking opportunities to those parents who want them.
5. The Australian Government should abolish the ParentsNext scheme with immediate effect and investigate replacing it with a proven effective voluntary scheme for preparing young parents for employment.
6. This report and hence its recommendations would have benefitted immensely from longitudinal data that supplemented the invaluable cross-sectional data provided by the Personal Safety Survey 2016. The Australian Government should instigate an immediate scoping study into the feasibility of establishing a comprehensive longitudinal study whose focus included the behaviour of perpetrators in addition to including all forms of domestic abuse including financial and technological abuse in addition to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and which includes all population groups including, specifically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are currently not including in the PSS.

## APPENDIX 1

### Customized data prepared by Australian Bureau of Statistics for this report, 2021

<https://rebrand.ly/violenceorpoverty-tables>

#### Prevalence

Table 1	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence and partner emotional abuse since the age of 15, By family composition
Table 2	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months, By family composition
Table 3	Women aged 18 years and over, Experiences of current and previous partner violence in the last 12 months and last 5 years
Table 4	Women aged 18 years and over, Whether experienced violence and emotional abuse by a partner since the age of 15
Table 5	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence in the previous 5 years, By equivalized household gross weekly income and family composition
Table 6	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced abuse and witnessed violence towards a parent by a partner before the age of 15, By whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By family composition

#### Socio-demographic characteristics

Table 7	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By family composition and selected socio-demographic and household characteristics
Table 8	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By family composition and income
Table 9	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Whether experienced partner violence in the last three years, By income and socio-economic index of disadvantage
Table 10	Women aged 18 years and over, Whether experienced current partner violence since the age of 15, By labour force status

#### Characteristics of the most recent incident of physical assault by a male

Table 11	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Relationship to perpetrator of the most recent incident of physical assault by a male in the last ten years
Table 12	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Characteristics of the most recent incident of physical assault by a male previous partner in the last ten years
Table 13	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Actions taken and impacts following the most recent incident of physical assault by a male previous partner in the last ten years

## Characteristics of partner violence

Table 14	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Characteristics of previous partner violence over the course of the relationship
Table 15	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Actions taken and impacts of previous partner violence over the course of the relationship
Table 16	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Temporary separations from violent previous partner
Table 17	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Final separation from violent previous partner
Table 18	Women aged 18 years and over who experienced violence by a current partner since the age of 15 and who had temporarily separated, Reasons for returning to violent current partner

## Characteristics of partner emotional abuse

Table 19	Women aged 18 years and over living in a single parent family with children all under the age of 18, Characteristics of previous partner emotional abuse
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## Mean and median income

Table 20	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence since the age of 15, By median and mean equivalized household gross weekly income and family composition
Table 21	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence in the previous two years by median and mean equivalized household gross weekly income and family composition
Table 22	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months by median and mean equivalized household gross weekly income and family composition
Table 23	Women aged 18 years and over who ever had a partner, Whether experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months, By median and mean household and personal gross weekly income and family composition



QR code link to  
download tables



## APPENDIX 2

# A guide to the numbers from the customized ABS PSS data

## Prevalence of violence

thousands

<b>311.0</b>		Total women aged 18+ who have ever had a partner who are now single mothers with children 18 or under
<b>185.7</b>	(59.7% of 311.0)	Experienced partner violence since age 15
<b>220.2</b>	(70.8% of 311.0)	Experienced partner emotional abuse since age 15
<b>151.0</b>	(48.6% of 311.0)	Experienced physical assault by a male in the last 10 years
<b>112.9</b>	(74.8% of 151.0)	Experienced most recent incident of physical assault in the last 10 years by male previous partner
<b>39.8</b>	(35.3% of 112.9)	Most recent incident occurred 5 to less than 10 years ago
<b>25.3</b>	(22.4% of 112.9)	Most recent incident occurred 3 to less than 5 years ago
<b>159.2</b>	(85.7% of 185.7)	Violence occurred for first time when living together
<b>168.0</b>	(90.5% of 185.7)	Experienced previous partner violence while living together
<b>124.1</b>	(73.8% of 168.0)	Experienced previous partner violence more than once while living together

## Impact of violence

<b>81.2</b>	(71.9% of 112.9)	Physically injured in assault (Note: specific injuries listed)
<b>76.1</b>	(67.4% of 112.9)	Experienced anxiety or fear for personal safety for next 12 months
<b>57.3</b>	(50.8% of 112.9)	Did not work during 12 months after incident
<b>17.2</b>	(15.2% of 112.9)	Took time off work in 12 months after incident
<b>45.9</b>	(56.5% of 81.2)	Made one or more changes to usual routine due to physical injuries
<b>92.6</b>	(55% of 168.0)	Temporarily separated from violent previous partner
<b>168.0</b>	(100% of 168.0)	Finally separated from violent previous partner while living together
<b>126.6</b>	(75.4% of 168.0)	Said partner's violence or emotionally abusive behaviour was the main reason for leaving the relationship
<b>99.7</b>	(59.3% of 168.0)	Moved out of home after relationship ended
<b>74.5</b>	(74.7% of 99.7)	Left property or assets behind

### Characteristics of women during violent relationship

thousands

<b>128.2</b>	(76.3% of 168.0)	Were pregnant during relationship
<b>69.7</b>	(41.5% of 168.0)	Violence occurred during pregnancy
<b>35.3</b>	(50.6% of 69.7)	Violence occurred for the first-time during pregnancy
<b>113.3</b>	(67.4% of 168.0)	Had children in their care
<b>88.6</b>	(52.7% of 168.0)	Violence seen or heard by children
<b>93.1</b>	(50.1% of 185.7)	Were working while violence was occurring

### Current socio-economic characteristics of single mothers in 2016 who experienced partner violence since the age 15

<b>55.1</b>	(29.7% of 185.7)	Aged 25 – 34
<b>66.4</b>	(35.8% of 185.7)	Aged 35 – 44
<b>63.5</b>	(34.2% of 185.7)	Have one child
<b>74.2</b>	(40.0% of 185.7)	Have two children
<b>134.7</b>	(72.5% of 185.7)	Have non-school qualifications
<b>111.4</b>	(60% of 185.7)	Are currently employed
<b>49.9</b>	(26.9% of 185.7)	Employed full-time
<b>60.4</b>	(32.5% of 185.7)	Employed part-time
<b>62.9</b>	(33.9% of 185.7)	Not in the labour force
<b>110.4</b>	(59.5% of 185.7)	Had one or more cash flow problems in last 12 months



## Acknowledgements and gratitude

I am grateful to the Paul Ramsay Foundation for supporting my work on domestic violence since 2019 and for awarding me a year-long Fellowship in 2020 to undertake data work to better understand domestic violence in Australia, and to the University of Technology for hosting me while I undertook this work. I took up the Fellowship in February 2021, while I was still living in New York. During the early days of the pandemic, many of us learned to work from home, but in my case working remotely was also complicated by time differences, and I am grateful for how everyone accommodated this.

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previously in the Office of the Status of Women and in Prime Minister Paul Keating's office.

- Emeritus Professor Bruce Chapman AO, a renowned economist who is perhaps best known for his work on income-contingent loans, especially in the higher education sector.
- Dr Jananie William, a Senior Lecturer in Actuarial Studies at ANU's College of Business and Economics, whose expertise includes working with cross-disciplinary teams to address domestic and family violence, maternal health and the gender pay gap.
- Matt Taylor, a researcher with the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods. The team and I held regular Zoom meetings to discuss the data and its implications and, prompted by gaps in the findings of our cross-sectional data, Professor Chapman and Matt Taylor initiated a unique project, drawing on longitudinal data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) study to determine the financial costs to women of leaving violent relationships. The outcome has been two working papers, cited and extensively quoted from in this report, which will subsequently be submitted for publication in academic journals, thereby attracting the recognition and acclaim that this groundbreaking research deserves. I especially want to thank Professor Matthew Gray, head of the ANU's Centre for Social Research and Methods for releasing Mr Taylor to do this important work.

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Finally, I cannot praise Libby Blainey highly enough for the brilliant way in which she has executed the graphic design and data visualization brief. Although the statistics tell a mostly grim story, Libby's artwork, especially her choice of bright colours, has made this an uplifting document. Women are leaving violence and reclaiming their lives. We need to acknowledge and honour those who choose to leave and help them in any way we can as they move towards hope and happiness.