



Personal Safety Survey Analytical Paper #2: *Leaving partner violence, why do women stay?*

Introduction

Under the [National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022](#) (National Plan), the Australian Government committed to funding the Personal Safety Survey (PSS) every four years throughout the life of the National Plan. This commitment was a key priority of the National Plan and made in recognition of the need to build a strong and lasting evidence base.

The PSS is identified as the data source for measuring success against three of the six national outcomes under the National Plan namely that, *services meet the needs of women and their children experiencing violence* (national outcome 4), *justice responses are effective* (national outcome 5) and *perpetrators stop their violence and are held to account* (national outcome 6).

The PSS asks women* to report details about their relationship with partners they have experienced violence from since the age of 15. Data is available about whether the respondent has ever wanted to leave a current partner who has been violent towards her and if so, why she was unable to.

All data explored in this paper is from the [2016 PSS](#).

**Although men are asked the same questions, due to the smaller number of men who have experienced current partner violence, conducting this detailed analysis for men is not possible.*

Contents

Introduction	1
Definitions	3
Key Findings	4
Women who have separated from their current partner	4
<i>Women who returned</i>	4
Women who have never separated from their current partner	5
<i>Those who haven't wanted to leave</i>	5
<i>Those who have wanted to leave</i>	6
Appendix supporting tables	7
<i>Table 1</i>	7
<i>Table 2</i>	8
<i>Table 3</i>	9

Definitions

Partner: 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. This may also be described as a co-habiting partner. Includes current and former partners.

Intimate partner: Includes current partner (living with), previous partner (has lived with), boyfriend/girlfriend/date and ex-boyfriend/ex-girlfriend (never lived with).

Physical violence: The occurrence, attempt or threat of physical assault experienced by a person since the age of 15.

Physical abuse: Any deliberate physical injury (including bruises) inflicted upon a child (under the age of 15 years) by an adult. Excludes discipline that accidentally resulted in injury, emotional abuse, and physical abuse by someone under the age of 18.

Sexual violence: The occurrence, attempt or threat of sexual assault experienced by a person since the age of 15.

Sexual abuse: Any act by an adult involving a child (under the age of 15 years) in sexual activity beyond their understanding or contrary to currently accepted community standards. Excludes emotional abuse and sexual abuse by someone under the age of 18.

Sexual harassment: Is considered to have occurred when a person has experienced or been subjected to behaviours which made them feel uncomfortable, and were offensive due to their sexual nature.

Emotional abuse: Emotional abuse occurs when a person is subjected to certain behaviours or actions that are aimed at preventing or controlling their behaviour, causing them emotional harm or fear. These behaviours are characterised in nature by their intent to manipulate, control, isolate or intimidate the person they are aimed at. They are generally repeated behaviours and include psychological, social, economic and verbal abuse.

Incident: An 'incident' is referred to as an event of assault or threat, an occurrence or event of violence, abuse or assault that an individual has encountered in their life. It is possible that people have experienced multiple incidents of violence. Where a person has experienced more than one type of violence, they are counted separately in each type of violence they experience but are only counted once in the totals. Components therefore may not add to the totals.

Key Findings

The question of why women stay with partners who have been violent is complex. Such questions are difficult to answer using quantitative data from a nationally collected survey. However, the PSS contains data on the reasons recorded by women as to why they do not or cannot leave their partners.

PSS data shows that large numbers of women experienced anxiety or fear due to the violence from their current partner, and the reported reasons for still being with their partner include having nowhere to go or having no money or financial support to leave.

More common reasons for staying include that women want to try and work things out with their current partner or that they still love them. In some instances, the issues in the relationship have been resolved. Many of these women who have experienced violence from their current partner have only experienced one incident of violence. Contrary to common presumptions, concern for 'children's safety or well-being' was not a very common reason for returning to a violent partner.

Women who have separated from their current partner

In Australia, it is estimated that 275,000 women have experienced violence from their current partner since the age of 15. Of these, 30 per cent have separated at some stage from their partner and returned while 70 per cent have not separated.

Women who returned

Women who returned: why?

Of the 30 per cent of women who separated but then returned to their current partner (81,700 women), reasons were sought about why they returned.

The vast majority of women returned to the relationship because they wanted to try and work things out with their partner (58 per cent) or because they still loved their partner (57 per cent).

Half of the women who returned were promised by their partner that the violence would stop (49 per cent) and almost half reported that they had resolved their problems with their partner (47 per cent).

Smaller numbers of women reported returning due to shame or embarrassment (12 per cent), because they had no money or financial support (12 per cent), out of concern for their children's safety or wellbeing (10 per cent), or because they had nowhere else to go (7 per cent).

The least common reasons for returning included cultural or religious reasons (3.9 per cent) or concerns for own safety or wellbeing (2.3 per cent).

Refer to Table 22 of the [2016 Personal Safety Survey](#).

Women who returned: frequency of violence

Through the PSS women are asked how often the violence from their current partner occurred during the relationship (Table 17). Of all women who had experienced violence by a current partner, 45 per cent of women reported that the violence occurred once only during the relationship. A further 37 per cent reported that violence occurred 'a little of the time'.

Of the 30 per cent (81,700) of women who separated from their partner but returned, 39 per cent had experienced violence once only during the relationship, while 22 per cent reported experiencing violence all of the time, most of the time or some of the time.

Refer to Appendix Table 1.

Women who returned: frequency of anxiety or fear

Of the 30 per cent (81,700) of women who separated from their partner but returned, 40 per cent reported never having experienced anxiety or fear due to the violence, while 56 per cent had experienced anxiety or fear.

Of those who had experienced anxiety or fear, women who had returned to their current partner were more likely to report that the violence had occurred 'a little of the time or once only' (74.2 per cent) than 'all of the time or most of the time' (27.7 per cent).

Refer to Appendix Table 1.

Women who have never separated from their current partner

Of the 275,000 women who have experienced current partner violence, 70 per cent have never separated from their partner (193,400 women).

Those who haven't wanted to leave

Approximately half of the women who have experienced violence from a current partner but never separated have never wanted to leave (103,200 women, 53 per cent).

Refer to Table 22 of the [2016 Personal Safety Survey](#).

Women who have not wanted to leave: frequency of violence

Women who have not wanted to leave are more likely to report lower levels of frequency of violence throughout the relationship.

Of those women who have not wanted to leave, the majority reported experiencing violence once only (55 per cent). A third of these women (29 per cent) experienced violence 'a little of the time', while smaller proportions of women reported experiencing violence 'some of the time' (12.6 per cent) and very few (4.5 per cent) women reported experiencing violence 'all of the time or most of the time'.

Refer to Appendix Table 2.

Women who haven't wanted to leave: anxiety or fear

75 per cent of women who did not want to leave their relationship never experienced any anxiety or fear due to the violence from their current partner.

Refer to Appendix Table 2.

Those who have wanted to leave

89,700 women (46 per cent) who have experienced current partner violence and never separated, did want to leave.

Those who wanted to leave: main reason unable

These women were asked to report their main reason for being unable to leave. 25 per cent reported that they had no money or financial support, 22 per cent reported that they wanted to try and work things out with their partner. A further 15 per cent reported that they resolved the problems with their partner and 13 per cent reported that the main reason was because they still loved their partner.*

**Please use these data from Table 22 of the [2016 Personal Safety Survey](#) with extreme caution and as a rough guide only. There are large confidence intervals around the reasons for not leaving, meaning that most reasons are no more statistically likely than any other reason.*

Those who wanted to leave: frequency of violence

Compared to women who did not want to leave, those who wanted to leave were slightly less likely to experience violence once only.

The majority of women who had not separated but did want to leave, reported that the violence from their current partner occurred 'a little of the time' (49 per cent). A third reported that the violence occurred once only (34 per cent), while smaller proportions of women reported experiencing violence 'some of the time' (12 per cent) and very few (6.3 per cent) women reported experiencing violence 'all of the time or most of the time'.

Refer to Appendix Table 3.

Those who wanted to leave: frequency of anxiety or fear

Compared to women who did not want to leave, women who wanted to leave experienced anxiety or fear at a higher rate. 38 per cent of women who wanted to leave never experienced any anxiety or fear due to the violence from their current partner.

Around half of those remaining who did experience anxiety or fear reported that they experienced it 'all, most or some of the time' with the other half experiencing it 'a little of the time or once only'.

Refer to Appendix Table 3.

Appendix supporting tables

Table 1

Women who experienced violence from a current partner, those who temporarily separated and returned

	Estimated number of women ('000)	Proportion (%)	RSE of Estimate (%)	RSE of Proportion (%)
Frequency of violence during relationship				
All of the time, most of the time or some of the time	17.6*	21.5	28.9	26.6
A little of the time	29.7	36.4	17.8	13.7
Once only	31.7	38.8	16.6	12.1
Total women who separated and returned	81.7	100%	11.3	0.0
Whether experienced anxiety or fear due to violence				
Never experienced anxiety or fear	32.1	39.3	16.9	12.6
Experienced anxiety or fear	46.0	56.3	15.9	11.2
Total women who separated and returned	81.7	100%	11.3	0.0
Frequency of anxiety or fear experienced				
All of the time or most of the time	8.7*	18.9	40.5	37.2
Some of the time	17.1*	37.2	29.6	24.9
A little of the time or once only	23.3	50.7	19.3	10.9
Total women who separated and returned and experienced anxiety or fear	46.0	100%	15.9	0.0

Source: ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016

Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. Discrepancies may occur between sums of the component items and totals.

*Estimates with a Relative Standard Error (RSE) between 25% - 50% should be used with caution.

Table 2

Women who experienced violence from a current partner, those who have not separated and have not wanted to

	Estimated number of women ('000)	Proportion (%)	RSE of Estimate (%)	RSE of Proportion (%)
Frequency of violence during relationship				
All of the time or most of the time	4.8**	4.7	Np	Np
Some of the time	13.0*	12.6	39.8	Np
A little of the time	30.1	29.2	18.3	Np
Once only	56.7	54.9	13.4	Np
Total women who haven't separated and haven't wanted to	103.2	100%	10.5	Np
Whether experienced anxiety or fear due to violence				
Never experienced anxiety or fear	77.8	75.4	12.0	5.9
Experienced anxiety or fear	25.1	24.3	21.8	19.1
Total women who haven't separated and haven't wanted to	103.2	100%	10.5	0.0
Frequency of anxiety or fear experienced				
All of the time, most of the time or some of the time	5.2**	20.7	Np	Np
A little of the time or once only	17.8*	70.9	29.8	Np
Total women who haven't separated and haven't wanted to and experienced anxiety or fear	25.1	100%	21.8	Np

Source: ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016

Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. Discrepancies may occur between sums of the component items and totals.

** Estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use

*Estimates with a Relative Standard Error (RSE) between 25% - 50% should be used with caution.

Np: not available for publication. Please note that estimates without a published RSE are considered too unreliable for general use.

Table 3

Women who experienced violence from a current partner, those who have not separated but have wanted to

	Estimated number of women ('000)	Proportion (%)	RSE of Estimate (%)	RSE of Proportion (%)
Frequency of violence during relationship				
All of the time or most of the time	5.7*	6.4	46.3	44.7
Some of the time	10.9*	12.2	33.3	31.0
A little of the time	43.6	48.6	17.1	12.1
Once only	30.7	34.2	21.9	18.2
Total women who haven't separated but have wanted to	89.7	100%	12.1	0.0
Whether experienced anxiety or fear due to violence				
Never experienced anxiety or fear	34.0	37.9	18.9	14.5
Experienced anxiety or fear	57.5	64.1	14.2	7.4
Total women who haven't separated but have wanted to	89.7	100%	12.1	0.0
Frequency of anxiety or fear experienced				
All of the time, most of the time or some of the time	31.0	53.9	22.9	17.9
A little of the time or once only	27.0	47.0	20.5	14.7
Total women who haven't separated but have wanted to and experienced anxiety or fear	57.5	100%	14.2	0.0

Source: ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016

Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. Discrepancies may occur between sums of the component items and totals.

*Estimates with a Relative Standard Error (RSE) between 25% - 50% should be used with caution.

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