

Identifying the risks for Indigenous violent victimisation

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Introduction

It is not a new observation that Indigenous people in Australia experience violence at a higher rate than the general population. The impact of violence on Indigenous people and their communities has been widely documented by government and non-government inquiries, reports and commentaries. As in all populations, some individuals, families and communities are more likely to be victims of violence than others. Identifying who is at risk, and the circumstances that increase those risks, is important for the implementation of targeted preventative strategies, such as night patrols and family counselling, and other services, including hospitals and child protection. This paper summarises the demographic and social factors associated with being a victim of violence.

Much understanding of violence in Indigenous contexts has come from studies using qualitative data. This type of approach is conducive to Indigenous engagement, and has the capacity to provide a rich source of information about the types of factors associated with risk of victimisation and the complex interrelationships between those factors. However, it is inherently difficult to use qualitative studies to assess the relative importance of risk factors identified in specific instances to populations

more broadly. In contrast, analysis using quantitative data attempts to assess the extent to which the identified factors are relevant within the identified population, and therefore provides a complementary approach to qualitative analysis.

This paper draws on studies that use survey and administrative data (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006; Bryant & Willis 2008; Snowball & Weatherburn 2007) to summarise demographic and social factors associated with violence victimisation. While different methodologies, categorisations and scope of data sources pose some difficulties for integration, it is nevertheless possible to piece together a picture of violent victimisation risks in Indigenous contexts. This exercise is informative in highlighting some ways risk factors for violent victimisation in Indigenous populations are similar to, but also different from, those observed in the non-Indigenous population, and how perceptions of these differences vary, depending on the type of data examined.

Background: comparative rates of victimisation

Indigenous Australians experience violent victimisation at rates well above those of their non-Indigenous counterparts. Estimates vary of the rates of victimisation, depending on

the type of violence (for example, physical violence or sexual violence) and the way in which information about violence is collected (for example, surveys, hospital data or police data). Based on police statistics, rates of assault-related violence in the Indigenous population are typically three to four times those of the non-Indigenous population (SCRGSP 2009). However, records of assaults causing severe injuries or death show much higher rates of injury of Indigenous people. Indigenous people are 11 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to be hospitalised with assault-related injuries (SCRGSP 2009), and five to 10 times more likely to die as a result of assault-related incidents than their non-Indigenous counterparts (AIC unpublished data). The rates of reported Indigenous sexual violence victimisation are also higher than the non-Indigenous population although the differences are not as pronounced (1.5 to 3.5 times based on police data and depending on jurisdiction: SCRGSP 2009). The smaller disparity in rates for sexual violence may be affected by lower rates of reporting to police by Indigenous people.

Factors associated with increased victimisation

The antecedents to violence are complex, reflecting interactive effects of personal, familial, social, situational,

communal, historical and cultural characteristics.

For the purposes of this brief, risk factors for violent victimisation have been divided into four broad categories:

- sociodemographic factors - age, sex and relationship to the offender
- individual family and community risk factors (including alcohol abuse, stressors and housing mobility)
- historical factors (including removal from family and contact with criminal justice system)
- resources (including education, employment, and location).

There is evidence that the effects of risk factors are cumulative, in that the presence of additional risk factors increases the likelihood that an individual will experience violence (Snowball & Weatherburn 2007). For example, a person who engages in high risk alcohol consumption and experiences social stress will be at greater risk of violent victimisation than an individual who only experiences social stress.

While a factor may be associated with a greater likelihood of violent victimisation and is therefore identified as a risk factor, it is beyond the scope of this brief to investigate the causal relationships between these factors and violence or victimisation.

Sociodemographic factors

Sex

Indigenous females are equally likely to be a victim of violence as Indigenous males, hence sex is not a significant risk factor for violence victimisation in Indigenous populations (see, for example, Snowball & Weatherburn 2007). This differs markedly from non-Indigenous populations, where being male is a significant risk factor for violent victimisation (AIC 2009). This means that Indigenous females are disproportionately affected by violence when compared with non-Indigenous females. Typically, they are between five and nine times more likely to report violent victimisation to police than non-Indigenous females in the

same jurisdiction (SCRGSP 2009), and thirty-four times more likely to be hospitalised for assault-related injuries than their non-Indigenous counterparts (SCRGSP 2009). Death rates from violence for Indigenous females are very pronounced: in the Northern Territory, Indigenous females are 12 times more likely to die as a result of homicide than their non-Indigenous counterparts (SCRGSP 2009).

Age

Relationships between age and risk of victimisation are complex, and involve the victim's gender, the type of violence and the severity. In the general population, the risks of violent victimisation are greatest among young people in their mid-teens to mid-twenties, with the risk of victimisation decreasing with age. This pattern is evident for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (ABS 2002). However, there is a different pattern for violent victimisation resulting in hospitalisation. In the general population the highest rates of hospitalisations for assault-related injuries occur for people aged 15 to 24. For Indigenous females, peak rates of hospitalisation for assault-related injuries occur at ages 25 to 34, while for Indigenous males, the peak is 30 to 39 (Helps & Harrison 2006). Yet another pattern emerges in relation to homicide: Indigenous victims of homicide are likely to be younger than non-Indigenous victims, with a peak at age 25 to 34 for Indigenous victims, and age 35 to 49 for non-Indigenous victims. This difference reflects the much younger age profile of the Indigenous population, which has a median age of 20 compared with 37 for the non-Indigenous population (Bryant & Willis 2008).

Both the risk of domestic or family violence and the severity of violence may increase with age. The highest rates of serious physical violence victimisation in Indigenous populations are coincident with age-related peaks in risky alcohol consumption (AIHW 2008).

Nationally, rates of sexual assault in the total population are highest for victims aged from 10 to 14 years, irrespective of the victim's gender. However, among females, high rates of sexual assault occur throughout the

10 to 25 year interval, whereas among males, sexual assault tends to be more restricted to younger age groups (AIC 2009). No information exists regarding the age profiles of victims of sexual violence based on Indigenous status.

Relationship to the offender

As in the non-Indigenous population, the majority of violence in Indigenous communities is perpetrated by individuals known to the victim. However, a greater proportion of all violent incidents in Indigenous populations for males and females are family violence-related, whether recorded in police reports, hospitalisation statistics for assault-related injuries or homicides (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006; SCRGSP 2009). This may reflect a number of important social and cultural differences relating to the definition of, proximity to, and involvement with family in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Family structure

Nationally and internationally, broad relationships are noted between violence victimisation and type of family structure (Mouzos & Makkai 2004; Marcus & Swett 2002). Indigenous lone parents are more likely to be victims of threatened or physical violence than Indigenous non-lone parents (Snowball & Weatherburn 2007). Overall, Australian children who live in lone parent or a two parent step/blended family are more likely to be subject to substantiations of child abuse and neglect than those living in two parent 'intact' families (AIHW 2009).

Individual, family and community risk factors

These risk factors relate to individual, family or community functioning and perceptions of the environment.

Alcohol and other substance abuse

Snowball and Weatherburn's (2007) analysis indicates that high risk alcohol consumption is more strongly associated with the risk of victimisation than any other single

factor. An analysis of NATSISS data shows that the risk of being a victim of physical or threatened violence in the preceding 12 month period increases from 23 per cent among individuals undertaking low risk alcohol behaviour up to 42 per cent for individuals with high risk alcohol consumption (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006). Homicide statistics also bear out this relationship, showing that a high proportion of Indigenous homicides (70 per cent) involve both the victim and offender consuming alcohol, compared with 22.5 per cent in non-Indigenous homicides (Dearden & Payne 2009; SCRGSP 2009).

Although alcohol is regularly cited as one of the most important factors in the perpetuation of violence in Indigenous communities, there is surprisingly little further statistical information (such as hospitalisation data) that can tie alcohol or substance consumption with violent victimisation, particularly for Indigenous populations.

Social stressors

Social stressors (divorce or separation, death of a family member or close friend, serious accident, mental illness, witness to violence, gambling problem, pressure to fulfil cultural responsibilities, or discrimination/racism) are closely associated with violent victimisation for Indigenous people. Social stressors are the second most important risk factor after alcohol (Snowball & Weatherburn 2007).

The risk of victimisation increases markedly as the number of identified stressors accumulate, such that half of all individuals reporting six or more stressors have been a victim of threatened or physical violence in the past 12 months (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006). Further study is needed to determine whether stress is causally linked to violent victimisation, or if the identified stressors are associated with the levels of chaos, functionality or upheaval that commonly manifest in violent environments.

Housing mobility

Violent victimisation for Indigenous people is associated with greater housing mobility (Snowball &

Weatherburn 2007). It is unclear if this reflects inherent instability in the individual's life, is a consequence of violence or is unrelated.

Perceptions of violence in the community

While perceptions of violence do not necessarily reflect actual levels of violence in a community, they provide an indirect measure of community functioning. Perceptions of violence potentially impact on confidence in existing law and order strategies, as well as on community values, pride, and cohesiveness. Overall, the proportion of the Indigenous population who identify family violence (21 per cent) and assault (20 per cent) as problems in their neighbourhood or community are similar to the percentage who were threatened with, or experienced, physical violence in the past 12 months (ABS 2002). Although victimisation does not necessarily correspond with perceptions of violence in the community, victims of physical or threatened violence were twice as likely to perceive violence as a community problem than those who had not experienced violence (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006).

Historical factors

Contact with the criminal justice system

Indigenous Australians charged with a criminal offence prior to the age of 17 years are approximately twice as likely to report being a victim of threatened or physical violence as those not charged with a criminal offence in childhood (ABS 2002). Having ever been formally charged also increases the risk of being a victim of violence, particularly for females; 45 per cent of females aged over 15 who had been formally charged reported being a victim of threatened or physical violence in the past 12 months (compare with 32% for males; ABS 2002). Having another household member charged with an offence also increased the risk of later victimisation. The nature of the link between having been charged and experiencing victimisation is not well understood, but explanations include deficits in family functioning, high risk behaviour

and the fact that many individuals alternate between offending and victimisation (see further Bryant and Willis 2008).

Removal from family and cultural factors

Indigenous people who have been removed from their natural family are more likely to report having been a victim of violence or threatened with violence in the past 12 months than those who have not been removed from their family (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006; Snowball & Weatherburn 2007). Higher levels of violent victimisation are also seen among survey respondents who had relatives removed from their natural family, potentially indicating the consequences of such policies on broader family and community relations. While cultural aspects may also be protective factors for violence victimisation, whether the respondent identified with a clan, tribe or language group, or recognised homelands did not appear to be significant in terms of changing risks of violent victimisation at a broad level (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006; Snowball & Weatherburn 2007).

Personal history

Analysis of the Women's Safety Survey (ABS 1996) found that women who have been subject to violence, either as children or adults, are much more likely to experience physical and sexual violence as adults. Young women who experienced or witnessed family violence were twice as likely to be victims of violence in their adult relationships as those who had not been exposed to family violence. The International Violence Against Women Survey also indicated that experiencing abuse as a child is a significant risk factor for experiencing abuse as an adult (Mouzos & Makkai 2004).

Access to resources

People and communities have both material and intangible resources that enable them to avoid, deal with or recover from risky situations. This discussion considers how access to resources affects the risk of being the target of violence.

Remoteness

Respondents to the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey reported similar rates of victimisation whether they lived in remote communities, towns or cities. However this finding conflicts with information from hospitals, supported accommodation services and homicide records. Rates of hospitalisation for assault are higher in remote and very remote regions (Helps & Harrison 2006) and rates of homicide are about three times higher in remote, outer regional and very remote areas (SCRGSP 2007). Indigenous women in remote areas are more likely to access Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Services (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006) and rates of Indigenous homicide in outer regional, remote and very remote areas are significantly higher. Although it is possible that violence in remote areas is inherently more severe, it cannot be discounted that other factors, such as regional differences in access to, and use of health care services, impact on such statistics. Perceptions of violence also tend to be greater in remote areas. However, greater social connectivity between residents and higher levels of overcrowded housing within remote Indigenous populations are likely to markedly impact on perceptions of violence.

Education and employment

Available data do not show a strong relationship between education level and risk of victimisation for Indigenous people. However Indigenous people who are unemployed are more likely to be victims of violence than those either working or not in the labour force (ABS 2002).

Limitations and considerations

No single data source is able to provide a comprehensive overview of Indigenous violent victimisation, and each data source (interviews, surveys, service providers and criminal justice data) has strengths and weaknesses, samples different parts of the population and examines different victimisation events. The National

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey is an important and valuable source of information about the violent victimisation of Indigenous people, but it does not include information on people living in hotels, motels, hostels, hospitals, short-stay caravan parks, prisons or other correctional facilities. Many potentially useful sources of data do not include information about the Indigenous status of respondents. Some state and territory data collections include information about Indigenous status, but a lack of consistency between jurisdictions inhibits comparison between jurisdictions and aggregation of the data for a national picture. In recent times there have been improvements in criminal justice data in terms of the inclusion of Indigenous status and consistency across jurisdictions, but these data are known to be affected by the high rates of underreporting of violent victimisation.

Finally, while many risk factors are common across Indigenous and non-Indigenous people – marital status, income, residential stability, employment status and alcohol misuse – it cannot be assumed that the nature of the links is identical. Historical and cultural factors are likely to affect the manifestation of violence in Indigenous contexts.

The available sources of data, such as police, courts, hospitals and sexual assault services, leads to a tendency to focus on risk factors for adverse outcomes, as opposed to a focus on the personal, familial or community level factors that contribute to wellbeing and reduce the risk of violence. To support a strengths- and solution-based approach, surveys could incorporate measures of individual, familial and community wellbeing and strength. This might include perceptions of trustworthiness of people in the neighbourhood, community cohesion, and the ability of individuals and communities to resolve problems they face. Such solution-based approaches must take into account Indigenous perspectives regarding violence.

Risk factors and violence prevention

This research brief has outlined the known risk factors for violent victimisation of Indigenous people. While there are gaps in our knowledge, the evidence for some risk factors is sufficiently robust to guide crime prevention efforts. In particular, the evidence regarding the relationship of high risk alcohol consumption to victimisation, and the evidence that a large proportion of violence experienced by Indigenous people is family violence-related, warrants particular focus on these issues. The disproportionately high rate of violence experienced by Indigenous women is a point of concern. The cumulative nature of victimisation risk factors, including social stressors, suggests that any attempts to reduce violent victimisation will require a multifaceted and holistic approach that addresses risks both inherent and external to victims. Responses to violence must also recognise the individuals experiencing victimisation and provide the services and support they need.

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