



Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women

Summary of findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey for respondents aged 16–24 years

Violence against women is widely recognised as a global issue. It is an often invisible but common form of violence, and a violation of human rights. It has serious impacts on the health and wellbeing of those affected and exacts significant economic costs on communities and nations. More than one in three Australian women aged over 18 has experienced violence at the hands of a man since the age of 15 (ABS 2013).

There is growing international consensus that violence against women can be prevented, and changing attitudes is one important step. Attitudes that condone or tolerate violence are recognised as playing a central role in shaping the way individuals, organisations and communities respond to violence (VicHealth 2010). Measuring community attitudes and increasing knowledge around what influences these attitudes tells us how well we are progressing towards a violence-free society for all women. It also reveals the extent of the work that lies ahead, where to focus our efforts, and the messages and approaches likely to be effective.

Early adulthood is a life stage involving particular vulnerability to violence for both young men and women (Tucci et al. 2007). In the 2012 Personal Safety Survey (ABS 2013), which gauged experience of violence, 13% of young women aged 18–24 years who were surveyed reported that they had experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the survey. This rate was higher than that for any other age group of women. Violence has particularly serious consequences for young women given that exposure occurs at a critical life stage. Research shows that adverse experiences in adolescence have the potential to impact negatively on health, especially mental health, well into adulthood. More positively though, this developmental stage is also a time during which prospects for prevention are particularly strong.

In this report

- What are violence-supportive attitudes?
- Attitudes towards gender roles and relationships
- Influences and differences
- Explaining young people's attitudes
- Strategies for stronger environments

The 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey

In addition to the Personal Safety Survey, the National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS) is the other regular Australian Government survey designed to monitor the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. In 2012, VicHealth was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Social Services to undertake the NCAS. VicHealth led the project in collaboration with the Social Research Centre and The University of Melbourne as research partners.

The 2013 NCAS involved more than 17,500 twenty-minute telephone interviews with a cross-section of Australians aged 16 years and older. This is the third survey of its kind, with the first undertaken in 1995 and the second in 2009. The survey addresses four key areas:

- community knowledge of violence against women
- attitudes towards violence against women
- attitudes towards gender roles and relationships
- responses to witnessing violence, and knowledge of resources.

In addition to producing the main NCAS report, VicHealth utilised the survey data to analyse and report on various subgroups in the community. While violence against women is a whole-of-community issue, it is nevertheless important to document any differences that exist among particular segments of the community as this can help to develop more effective prevention strategies.

The *Young Australians' Attitudes towards Violence Against Women* report (the youth report) is a subset of the main NCAS project and focuses on the responses given by the 1923 young people aged 16–24 years who participated in the NCAS. The youth report considers differences within this group, and also compares this group with those aged 35–64 years who took part in the 2013 NCAS. This latter age group was chosen as it enabled results to be compared between two generations: young people and their parents.

This summary of the youth report presents the key findings of the youth sample of NCAS, and their implications for policy and practice. The full youth report, along with other NCAS reports and resources, can be accessed at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/ncas.

KEY OVERALL FINDINGS AMONG THE NCAS YOUTH SAMPLE

- Overall, young Australians have a good understanding of the range of behaviours that constitute violence against women, and are aware that these behaviours are against the law. This is based on findings from a number of survey questions.
- While there is some variation on individual questions, young people show a higher level of attitudinal support for violence against women than do those aged 35–64 years. They also have a lower level of understanding that such violence comprises more than physical violence and forced sex.
- While young people are as likely as those aged 35–64 years to have a high level of support for gender equality in public roles such as education and employment, they are less likely to support gender equality in decision-making in relationships. This may suggest that young people support gender equality in the abstract (e.g. women in public roles and employment), but less so in the context of their personal relationships. This is based on findings from a number of survey questions.
- Compared to young women, young men show a lower level of understanding of violence against women; a lower level of support for gender equality; and a higher level of attitudinal support for violence against women.
- Most young Australians (more than 90%, depending on the scenario) say they would intervene if they saw a woman being assaulted by her partner, but only 54% would know where to go for help with issues of violence against women. This was 5 percentage points lower than among 35–64 year olds and 4 percentage points lower among young people than in 2009.
- There has been a 10 percentage point decrease since 2009 in the proportion of young men who hold high levels of violence-supportive attitudes.
- The strongest influences on attitudes towards violence against women among young people are their understanding of the nature of violence and their attitudes towards gender equality.

Knowledge of violence against women

A good knowledge of the causes, dynamics, patterns and prevalence of violence against women is important to ensure appropriate responses by and towards those affected by violence (Flood & Pease 2006, 2009). A well-informed community is also better able to help prevent the problem (Carlson & Worden 2005; McMahon & Baker 2011;

O'Neil & Morgan 2010). Research has also shown that knowledge influences the formation of attitudes (Ajzen & Fishbein 2005; Chaiken & Trope 1999; Fazio 1990). For these reasons, the NCAS includes a number of questions to measure knowledge of violence against women. While young people's responses were generally similar to those of people aged 35–64 years, there were some notable differences (see table).

NCAS key findings: Young people's knowledge of violence against women

Encouraging results

- Young people have a good understanding that violence against women comprises a range of behaviours designed to intimidate and control women, not just physical assault. This is based on findings from a number of survey questions.
- Most young people (98%) recognise that partner violence is against the law.
- Most young Australians recognise that partner violence is perpetrated mainly or more often by men (71%) and that it is women who are most likely to suffer physical harm (87%). This reflects trends in the general population.

Areas of concern

- Young people are less likely to recognise non-physical, rather than physical, behaviours as violence against women.
- Only 60% of young people agree that violence against women is common. This is 11 percentage points lower than the 35–64 year age group.
- Only 50% of young men and 65% of young women recognise that a woman is more likely to be assaulted by a known person than by a stranger. Young people are 9 percentage points less likely to recognise this than respondents aged 35–64 years.
- There has been a decline in the percentage of young people recognising that partner violence is perpetrated mainly by men (from 37% in 2009 to 32% in 2013) and that women are more likely to suffer physical harm (from 90% in 2009 to 87% in 2013). A larger percentage in 2013 agreed that the fear involved in this violence was equally bad for both men and women (45% in 2009 to 49% in 2013). These trends are similar to those in the NCAS sample as a whole.
- Only 50% of young people recognise that women are more likely than men to experience fear as a result of partner violence, and this proportion declined by 4 percentage points between 2009 and 2013.
- More than half (57%) of young people believe that a main cause of violence against women is men being unable to manage their anger.

Attitudes towards violence against women

Attitudes contribute to violence against women because they influence expectations of what is acceptable behaviour. Our understanding of these expectations has a strong influence on our behaviour (Flood & Pease 2006, 2009). Community attitudes

influence how people respond to violence, from victims and their friends and families to law enforcement professionals, employers and policy-makers. The NCAS includes a number of questions to measure the strength of support for attitudes justifying, excusing, trivialising or minimising violence against women or shifting blame from the perpetrator of violence to the victim (see box).

WHAT ARE VIOLENCE-SUPPORTIVE ATTITUDES?

Five key categories of violence-supportive attitudes have been identified by researchers. These are attitudes that:

- **justify** violence against women, based on the notion that it is legitimate for a man to use violence, particularly against a woman with whom he is in an intimate relationship, in certain circumstances (e.g. the idea that partner violence is justified if a woman has sex with another man)
- **excuse** violence by attributing it to external factors (e.g. stress) or proposing that men cannot be held fully responsible for violent behaviour (e.g. 'rape results from men not being able to control their need for sex')
- **trivialise** the impact of violence, based on the view that the impacts of violence are not serious or are not sufficiently serious to warrant action by women themselves, the community or public agencies (e.g. 'women who are sexually harassed should sort it out themselves rather than report it')

- **minimise** violence by denying its seriousness, denying that it occurs or denying that certain behaviours are indeed violence at all (e.g. the idea that it's only rape if the woman physically resisted)
- shift **blame** for the violence from the perpetrator to the victim or hold women at least partially responsible for their victimisation or for preventing victimisation (e.g. the idea that women lead men on and later have regrets).

This does not mean that people who hold violence-supportive attitudes would necessarily use or condone violence themselves. However, such views expressed by influential individuals or held by a substantial number of people can create a culture where violence is not clearly condemned and even subtly condoned or encouraged.

NCAS key findings: Young people's attitudes towards violence against women

Encouraging results

- Less than 6% of young people are prepared to justify violence (depending on the scenario).
- Most young people do not agree that it is a woman's duty to stay in a violent relationship.
- Most young people agree with current policies that women should not be left to sort sexual harassment out themselves and that the violent person should be made to leave the family home.
- Most young people agree that violence against women is serious.

Areas of concern

- Up to 26% of young people are prepared to excuse partner violence (depending on the scenario).
- Twenty-six percent of young people agree that partner violence can be excused if the perpetrator regrets it; this is 9 percentage points higher than among 35–64 year olds.
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of young people agree that partner violence can be excused if the person is so angry they lose control. This is 6 percentage points higher than among 35–64 year olds.
- Ten percent of young people believe that partner violence can be excused if the offender is heavily affected by alcohol. This is 3 percentage points higher than for the 35–64 year age group.
- Two in five young people believe that 'rape results from men not being able to control their sexual urges' (an increase from 1 in 3 among young people in 2009).
- Young people are less likely than those aged 35–64 years to recognise non-physical forms of violence as serious (e.g. harassment by repeated phone calls/messages, and controlling a partner's money or social life).
- Although most young people (84%) agree that tracking a partner by electronic means without her consent is serious, 46% agree that it is acceptable to some degree.
- As in the general population, a large proportion of young people do not appreciate the barriers women face to ending a violent relationship. Eighty percent agree that 'it's hard to understand why women stay in violent relationships'. Sixty-one percent agree that 'a woman could leave a violent relationship if she really wanted to'; this is 14 percentage points higher than for the 35–64 year age group.
- Nearly 1 in 4 young people agree that partner violence is a 'private matter' to be handled in the family. This is 10 percentage points higher than for the 35–64 year age group.
- More than half of young people (52%) believe that women make up or exaggerate claims of partner violence in family law cases – a 9 percentage point increase from 2009.
- Up to 1 in 5 young respondents believe that there are circumstances in which women bear some of the responsibility for sexual assault. For example, 20% of young people believe that women often say 'no' when they mean 'yes'. This is 7 percentage points higher than for the 35–64 year age group.
- Thirty-nine percent of young people believe that 'a lot of times women who say they were raped led the man on and later had regrets'. This is 5 percentage points higher than for the 35–64 year age group.
- Nine percent of young people believe that violence can be excused if the victim is affected by alcohol, which is not different from the 35–64 year age group.

Attitudes towards gender roles and relationships

Attitudes to gender equality, and gender roles and relationships, have a significant influence on the formation of attitudes that support violence against women. People with weak support for gender equality tend to be more likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes. The NCAS includes a number of questions to measure attitudes towards gender roles and relationships.

The key findings (see table) show that while young people are as likely as those aged 35–64 years to have a high level of support for gender equality in public roles such as education and employment, they are less likely to support gender equality in decision-making in relationships. This finding is particularly troubling as male dominance in relationships is a risk factor for partner violence (VicHealth 2014: 34).

NCAS key findings: Young people's attitudes towards gender roles and relationships

Encouraging results

- Young people have a high level of support for equality in gender roles in the public sphere (e.g. areas related to education and employment).

Areas of concern

- Sizeable proportions of young people support male dominance of decision-making in relationships.
- Twenty-two percent of young people agree that men should take control in relationships, while only 16% of respondents aged 35–64 years agree with this statement.
- Thirty-five percent of young Australians agree that women prefer a man to be in charge of the relationship. This is 9 percentage points higher than for those aged 35–64 years.

Responses to witnessing violence, and knowledge of resources

The fourth area investigated in the NCAS concerns the willingness of the public to take action as bystanders to violence they witness. People who witness violence have an important role to play in both supporting women to avoid harm and preventing further violent behaviour. Information from these questions can help assess the need to strengthen community understanding about supporting women affected by violence and the resources required to provide this assistance. While young people's responses indicated a strong willingness to take action as bystanders, it is concerning that so many said they are unsure where to go for help (see table).

NCAS key findings: Young people's responses to witnessing violence, and knowledge of resources

Encouraging results

- The overwhelming majority (90–98%, depending on the scenario) of young people say they would intervene in some way if they saw a woman being assaulted by her partner.

Areas of concern

- Only 54% of young people would know where to get help for a problem about violence against women.
- Fewer young people in 2013 (54%) knew where to get help than in 2009, when 58% did.

Changes in knowledge and attitudes among young people between 2009 and 2013 NCAS

There was variability in the direction and degree of change between individual survey questions. There was a 10 percentage point decline in young men holding a high level of attitudinal support for violence.¹ Young men's understanding of violence² and attitudes to gender equality remained stable. Among young women, understanding and attitudes towards gender equality and violence remained stable between 2009 and 2013.

How do young people compare with people aged 35–64 years overall?

The results demonstrate that in many respects the young people who participated in the survey had similar attitudes to respondents aged 35–64 years. However, it was also clear that they diverged in several important respects. In general:

- young people show a lower level of understanding and a higher level of attitudinal support for violence against women¹ than those aged 35–64 years
- young people are as likely as those aged 35–64 years to have a high level of attitudinal support for gender equality in public roles such as education and employment, but they are less likely to support gender equality in decision-making in relationships.

Differences in attitudes and understanding among young people

Overall, young people show similar levels of understanding and share similar attitudes, regardless of their gender, background or social circumstances. However, certain groups show a moderately lower level of understanding of violence against women, a higher level of attitudinal support for violence and/or a lower level of attitudinal support for gender equality overall. These groups include:

- young men (as compared with young women)
- people born overseas in a non-main English speaking country (as compared to those born in Australia)
- unemployed young people (having a higher level of support for violence and a lower level of understanding)
- young people not living at home, with a partner or in shared housing (having a higher level of attitudinal support for violence and a lower level of support for gender equality).

However, overall differences between young people in these groups and all young people are not large.

Influences on understanding and attitudes

When the influences of all other factors included in the survey are taken into account, the strongest influences on attitudes towards violence against women among young people are their understanding of violence and their attitudes towards gender equality. Young people who understand violence against women as comprising more than physical violence and who support gender equality are less likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes. This is similar to the findings for the population as a whole.

After accounting for people's understanding of violence against women and attitudes towards gender roles and relationships, demographic factors have limited influence. Demographic factors with the strongest influence on attitudes towards violence against women are gender and country of birth.

Do young people's understanding and attitudes change with age?

A separate analysis of data examined whether there were any significant differences between young people aged 16–17, 18–24 and people 25–35 years. This offers some insight into whether people's attitudes and understanding change as they grow older. Gauging this with greater certainty would require a longitudinal study – one that follows the same group of people each time the survey is taken.

For young women, understanding of the nature of violence against women and attitudes towards violence and gender equality in roles and relationships improves between the youngest and oldest of the three age groups. However, among young men there is only a modest improvement in attitudes towards violence across the three age groups. There is no improvement across these age groups of young men in understanding of violence against women or attitudes towards gender equality in roles and relationships.

¹ Attitudinal support for violence is based on responses to a number of questions in the five categories of violence-supportive attitudes described on page 4.

² Understanding is based on responses to questions about whether violence is more than physical violence and forced sex.

Seeking to explain young people's attitudes

The literature on factors contributing to violence against women suggests that the issue is complex and has multiple contributing factors at the individual, organisational, community and societal levels. Significant underlying factors are inequalities between men and women and rigid gender roles and identities (Flood & Pease 2006, 2009; UN 2006; VicHealth 2007; WHO & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine 2010).

Data from the survey cannot explain the differences found between young people and respondents aged 35–64 years. This is because the survey measures knowledge and attitudes but does not explore how such knowledge is formed or how attitudes are influenced.

Existing research suggests that young people's attitudes are influenced by many of the same factors that apply to the population as a whole, factors such as gender, attitudes towards gender equality, support for traditional gender roles and identities, as well as acceptance of and exposure to violence and discrimination. However, some particular factors associated with the contemporary social environment have also been identified and need to be considered, along with factors associated with age and developmental stage (Connolly et al. 2010). These two clusters of influence (context, and age and stage) interact with one another, as shown in the diagram below.

Factors associated with age and stage

- Developmental stage – the stage of development of young people's emotional and moral capacity (Such & Walker 2004).
- Limited personal experiences of intimate relationships, including misinformation about gender and sexuality (Carmody & Willis 2006).
- Dependence on family – young people are deeply influenced by their specific family context and experience (e.g. to what degree they may have witnessed violence) (Harris & Wyn 2009; Lahelma & Gordon 2008).

Factors associated with the contemporary social context

- A greater belief that people's destiny lies in their own hands and an expectation that they will care for themselves, rather than relying on a social safety net. This can lead to a lack of appreciation for structural causes for social problems (Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009; Wyn & White 2013).
- The belief that gender equality has been achieved and so there is no longer a need to have a women's movement or to work to strengthen women's rights (Hall & Rodriguez 2003).
 - The emergence of what researchers are calling 'raunch culture' – the proliferation of sexually explicit and objectifying imagery of women (Keith 2013).
- The increasing perception that women are powerful, capable and self-determining, which reduces the likelihood of violence being understood in terms of power differences between men and women, and makes it less likely that women will be perceived as 'victims'. Some young men may also find perceived and actual shifts in gender roles and gendered power challenging (Keith 2013; Phipps & Young 2014; Robinson 2005).
- The rising significance of new media forms, especially social media – these media forms have hastened and extended the ways in which people communicate and connect. They also mean that young people are exposed to negative media representations of women at an earlier age and more often than previous generations (Draper 2011; Strassberg et al. 2012).

Strategies for stronger environments

Although gauging the attitudes held by young people specifically is important to guide future prevention programming, many of the factors contributing to the formation of these attitudes are likely to be found in broader organisational and community environments. Addressing these environments (e.g. the media and their portrayal of women, families and their parenting practices) will be important to strengthen young people's attitudes and behaviours. Strategies that reach young people themselves are also needed.

The findings of the survey reflect those found in other research related to young people's attitudes (see, for example, The Body Shop Australia 2006; Cale & Breckenridge 2015; National Crime Prevention 2001). This, along with research introduced earlier on the prevalence and impacts of violence among young people, indicates value in concentrating activity in the settings, for example schools and popular culture, that have a particular influence on the knowledge and attitudes of young people and through which young people can be reached.

Among the settings holding promise for reaching young people and strengthening the environments influencing their attitudes and behaviours are:

- sports and active recreation settings (Dyson & Flood 2007)
- media and popular culture (Keith 2013; Squires et al. 2006), in particular social media (American Psychological Association 2010; Crabbe & Corlett 2011; Draper 2011; Papadopoulos 2010; Phippen 2009)
- education settings, especially schools (Flood et al. 2009)
- the family (American Psychological Association 2010; Papadopoulos 2010).

Potential approaches and strategies for prevention designed to reach young people

As discussed earlier, research suggests that the social experience of contemporary young people is different to that of previous generations. This, along with factors associated with young people's age and stage of development, needs to be taken into account when designing strategies to raise awareness of and strengthen attitudes towards violence against women and gender equality among young people. There is a need for approaches that reach the population as a whole to be augmented with activities tailored to young people. Messages need to be framed with young people's particular social experiences in mind.

Practice experience suggests that the strategies below are most likely to be successful when they are incorporated as part of whole-of-organisation or whole-of-community approaches – such approaches recognise the influence of a wide range of aspects of the community or organisational environment on the development of violence-supportive attitudes, as well as the potential within them to achieve positive change (Flood et al. 2009; Holdsworth 2000). For example, in a school setting, there is a need to take a whole-of-curriculum and whole-of-school approach, whereby school communities embed gender equity and healthy relationships systemically and experientially.

Further, research indicates that young people prefer, and respond better to, strategies that are less 'top-down passive learning' and more action-based, interactive and peer-to-peer (Noonan & Charles 2009; Weisz & Black 2013; Wyn & White 2004). Peer relationships are critical to young people, making them an important resource in the development of prevention programs.

Potential strategies for prevention to reach young people include:

- **strengthening critical engagement with popular culture**
 - there is a need for increased support for young people to engage critically with popular culture and new media, and to develop their 'critical literacy' skills (American Psychological Association 2010, Crabbe & Corlett 2010; Fergus & Flood 2009; Papadopoulos 2010). The Reality and Risk project, originally based at Brophy Family and Youth Services, has sought to do this with regard to pornography by developing a range of resources called *In the Picture: Supporting Young People in an Era of Explicit Sexual Imagery*. This can be used by teachers and parents to support young people to think critically about this medium (Brophy Family and Youth Services, n.d.).

- **‘pro-social bystander’ approaches** – this name is often used for programs that support young people to take action to respond to known precursors to violence (Powell 2011, 2012). This approach was taken in the peer component of the Sexual Assault Prevention Program for Secondary Schools. It included training and support for the peer educators to take action in informal situations (e.g. by speaking up against friends who were demonstrating disrespectful behaviours), as well as taking a formal leadership role such as being involved in social and community activities to prevent sexual violence (e.g. classroom programs and health promotion events) (Imbesi & Lees 2011).
- **respectful relationships skill-based programs** – these aim to promote healthy and respectful models of sexuality and relationships between men and women and support the empowerment of young women (Ellsberg et al. 2014; Jewkes et al. 2014). An Australian example is the *Sex and Ethics Program* (Carmody 2008), a six week skill-based program providing young women and men opportunities to learn new ways of negotiating sexual intimacy. The long-term goal of the program is to build the capacity of young people to negotiate sexual intimacy and prevent sexual assault and to reduce unwanted, coerced sex in casual and ongoing relationships. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014) has released a resource to guide the implementation of respectful relationships programs in Victorian schools. The Australian Government and Our Watch have developed an online resource *The Line*, designed to assist young people to navigate interpersonal relationships (<http://theline.org.au>).
- **corporate responsibility and regulatory frameworks** – some of the antecedents to violence-supportive attitudes identified in the literature, such as the sexualisation and objectification of women and girls, can be addressed by strengthening corporate responsibility and ensuring that existing regulatory frameworks are appropriately enforced (see, for example, American Psychological Association 2010; Papadopoulos 2010). For example, the Victorian Government has adopted guidelines to ensure that all of its agencies develop positive, non-discriminatory portrayals of women in advertising and communication (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2012).
- **advocacy, especially social media advocacy** – there is considerable potential in advocacy undertaken by young people to address violence against women and its precursors (American Psychological Association 2010). A recent Australian example is the successful campaign to have the visa of a so-called ‘dating coach’ revoked, on the grounds that he was promoting violent and denigrating messages about women (Davey 2014). Similarly, parent groups have conducted social media campaigns to highlight the potential harms in products marketed to children and young people that sexualise and objectify young women (American Psychological Association 2010).

Conclusion

The *National Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010–2022* has a focus on violence prevention among young people. The results of the NCAS survey, together with other research, support this focus. They show that early adulthood is a time when the risk of violence is high, yet also one when there is great potential to support young people to establish equitable, respectful and, importantly, non-violent gender relations.

The positive change in the attitudes of young men between 2009 and 2013 is promising. It suggests the need to build on work being undertaken across Australia to ensure that young people have the best possible conditions for developing healthy, respectful and non-violent approaches to gender relations that will serve them well into adulthood.

Engaging young people themselves in prevention programs will be part of the solution. However, since young people’s attitudes and behaviours are shaped by those around them, it is also important that this is reinforced by efforts to build positive environments where young people live, work, learn and socialise. There is considerable scope to achieve this by strengthening and expanding on current prevention initiatives designed to drive cultural change through families, schools, sports and recreation, workplaces, the media and the wider community.

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