

The number of people impacted by family violence over time

Evidence suggests that the number of people impacted by family violence offending has been declining over the long-term. However, there is little evidence on whether this offending is being substituted with other forms of coercive and controlling behaviour.

Family violence is a pattern of behaviour that coerces, controls, or harms in the context of a close personal relationship. It can include being isolated from whānau or told what to wear. It is not just about things that are done to a person, but what they are prevented from doing and deciding for themselves.

Coercion, control, and harm can be achieved with or without physical abuse. It can also involve sexual, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and economic abuse.

The Family Violence Act 2018 recognises any pattern of coercive, controlling, and harmful behaviour as family violence, but does not directly criminalise it. If a protection order is in place, any family violence is a breach of the order – which is a criminal offence. Police can flag any offence as a family violence offence. Most family violence offences relate to specific incidents, such as physical or sexual assault, strangulation, threats to harm, and property damage. Patterns of behaviour, such as stalking and harassment, can also be flagged as family violence offences by Police.

The best information about the number of people impacted by family violence comes from surveys. Statistics from Police and other authorities do not reflect the true level of family violence because very little is formally reported. Trends in reported offences also reflect change in response agencies' behaviour rather than change in incidence.

Most survey measures focus on specific types of abuse, such as physical violence. Different surveys cover different aspects of family violence (like offences) and different population groups. While some ask questions about patterns of controlling behaviours, there is no consensus, locally or internationally, on how to measure these.

Offences by family members as measured in crime surveys includes physical violence, sexual assault, threats and harassment, and property damage by family and whānau members. In the justice system, family violence offences are flagged by Police.

Four surveys have captured data about family violence over time in Aotearoa

The Ministry of Justice uses crime surveys to estimate how many offences New Zealand adults experienced in the last 12 months. The **New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey (NZCASS)**¹ was collected in 2005, 2008, and 2013. It was then replaced by the **New Zealand Crime and Victims Survey (NZCVS)**²³, which has collected data annually since 2018. These surveys also ask about experiences of lifetime intimate partner violence (IPV) offences and controlling behaviours.

The 2019 **New Zealand Family Violence Study**^{4,5} surveyed adults about experiences of IPV. Results for women are comparable with a 2003 study. The questions cover both past-12-month and lifetime experiences of physical, sexual, and psychological IPV, and lifetime experiences of controlling behaviours and economic abuse.

The **Youth2000**⁶ survey series provides some information about the number of secondary school students impacted by family violence between 2001 and 2019. It has included consistent questions about witnessing violence at home in the last 12 months.

Each of these surveys cover different aspects of family violence and different population groups. Because of different approaches, estimates should not be directly compared across surveys.



Statistical significance describes our confidence that the difference between two survey estimates is real. Differences that are not statistically significant could be driven by who happened to be selected for the survey. All differences in this factsheet are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level unless otherwise stated.

Evidence suggests that family violence offending has declined since the early 2000s

The percentage of adults experiencing offences by family members declined from 10% in 2005 to 6% in 2013 according to the NZCASS.¹ The number of offences per 100 adults in the population fell from 30 to 22. This pattern coincided with a large decline in victimisation overall, including for violence by non-family members.

In 2018, the NZCVS found 2% of adults were impacted by offences by family members in the last 12 months.² There were 5 offences by family members per 100 adults. While these figures are substantially lower than the 2013 NZCASS estimates above, the two surveys cannot be directly compared because of differences in methodology.⁸

No further change was detected by the NZCVS between 2018 and 2019/20.² Results in 2020/21 showed a small decline in the percentage of adults experiencing offences by family members, but this change was not statistically significant.³ There was, however, a statistically significant decline in the percentage of adults experiencing offences by intimate partners (1.5% to 0.9%).

The New Zealand Family Violence Study found the proportion of ever-partnered women experiencing physical and psychological IPV in the last 12 months declined between 2003 and 2019 (Table 1).^{4,5} Sexual IPV also decreased, but the change was not statistically significant. These forms of abuse overlap with offending, although psychological IPV includes some behaviours that are not against the law (eg insults, humiliation).

Table 1: Percentage of ever-partnered women aged 18–64 impacted by IPV in the last 12 months^{4,5}

	2003	2019
Physical violence	5.0%	2.4%^
Psychological violence	8.4%	4.7%^
Sexual violence	1.8%	0.9%

^ Statistically significant difference compared with 2003 estimate

Between 2001 and 2019, Youth2000 surveys showed there was a decline in the proportion of secondary school students witnessing adults physically hurting others at home in the last 12 months (Table 2).⁶

Table 2: Percentage of secondary school students who witnessed violence in their homes in the last 12 months (2001–2019)⁶

	2001	2007	2012	2019
Witnessed adults hitting or physically hurting a child	21%	16%^	12%^	8%^
Witnessed adults hitting or physically hurting other adults	12%	10%^	7%^	6%^

^ Statistically significant difference compared with 2001 estimate

The proportion of women ever impacted by intimate partner violence remains high

Three surveys also collected information about respondent's experiences of IPV in their lifetime, as well as in the last 12 months.

According to NZCVS data collected between 2018 and 2020/21, 10% of men and 23% of women had ever experienced IPV (including physical violence and threats).^{2,3}

The NZCASS reported little change in the percentage of women ever experiencing assault, threats, or property damage by an intimate partner, declining from 29% in 2005 to 26% in 2013.¹ By comparison, there was a more substantial decline among men experiencing IPV during their lives (20% in 2005 vs 14% in 2013).

Despite finding fewer women had experienced physical or psychological IPV in the last 12 months in 2019 than 2003, the New Zealand Family Violence Study found no statistically significant change in the proportion of women experiencing either of these in their lifetime (Table 4).^{4,5} There was, however, a statistically significant decline in lifetime rates of sexual IPV.

Table 4: Percentage of ever-partnered women aged 18–64 impacted by IPV in their lifetime^{3,4}

	2003	2019
Physical violence	32%	29%
Psychological violence	34%	33%
Sexual violence	17%	13%^

^ Statistically significant difference compared with 2003 estimate

The 2019 study also found that 40% of women ever impacted by IPV had permanently left the relationship because of the abuse, up from 33% in 2003.⁷

Separating from an abusive partner is known to increase risk of being killed or seriously injured; survey results from the NZCVS show that adults who are separated are at more than five times the risk of experiencing offences by family members than adults overall. However, it is likely that, for most victims, at some point in the future after leaving the relationship, the experience of IPV would decrease. Hence, this increase in permanent separation may have contributed to the decline in past 12-month IPV while lifetime rates remained high.³

Results about trends in coercive and controlling behaviours are mixed

Some of the surveys have included questions about experiences of coercive and controlling behaviours by intimate partners, for example, by asking participants if their partner prevented them from seeing family, whānau, or friends.

The New Zealand Family Violence Study found that women are becoming more likely to experience controlling behaviours or economic abuse by a partner or ex-partner in their lifetime (Table 5).⁵

Table 5: Percentage of ever-partnered women impacted by IPV in their lifetime⁵

	2003	2019
Controlling behaviours	8%	13% [^]
Economic abuse	5%	9% [^]

[^] Statistically significant difference compared with 2003 estimate

The authors noted that people who use violence against their partners could be shifting towards these forms of abuse because current preventions and interventions focus mostly on physical and sexual forms of violence. However, women could also be becoming more aware of unhealthy behaviours in relationships, and therefore becoming more likely to report them in surveys.

In contrast, the NZCASS found that between 2005 and 2013, experiencing one or more controlling behaviours by a current partner in the last 12 months became less common for both men (25% to 17%) and women (20% to 14%).¹

Although awareness of coercive and controlling behaviours is growing, there is no consensus about how to measure these experiences. The mixed

approaches and findings make it difficult to conclude how these behaviours have changed over time.

Gaps remain in our understanding of family violence over time

As noted above, trends in controlling behaviours are not well understood. This is largely due to a lack of consensus about how to measure them. It is unclear whether a long-term decline in family violence offending reflects an overall reduction in the number of people impacted by family violence, or whether more visible forms of offending are being substituted with other forms of coercive and controlling behaviour.

Either way, demand for services that respond to family violence has increased over time. Police have recorded increasing numbers of callouts to family violence episodes and the Family Court has seen rising numbers of Family Violence applications. Reported family violence and prevalence results from surveys will differ, because a large proportion of family violence is not reported. With increased awareness and response, it is likely that reporting will continue to increase while prevalence continues to decrease.

Survey measures of family violence in some population groups and contexts are also inadequate, eg child abuse and neglect, elder abuse, dating violence, and dowry-related abuse. Some types of offences that constitute family violence are not included in the crime survey measures, eg breaches of protection orders. Some emerging forms of abuse are yet to be measured over time, eg image-based sexual abuse ('revenge porn').

Surveys are also likely to underestimate the types of family violence they do ask about. This is because people impacted by family violence are perceived to be less likely to participate in surveys, may define their experiences differently from how they are described in questionnaires, and/or may choose not to disclose their experiences.

The NZCVS is piloting new questions focusing on the impacts and harms caused by coercive and controlling behaviours, which will provide new insights as annual data accumulates. These questions will capture controlling behaviours by family and whānau members, in addition to intimate partners. Research about how these behaviours overlap with criminal offending will help the justice sector develop better policies and design better services for victims.

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