



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Statistical Bulletin 30

ISSN 2206-7302 (Online)

ISBN 978 1 922478 10 8 (Online)

March 2021

Abstract | Awareness of coercive control within the context of abusive intimate relationships is greater than ever before in Australia. However, there is limited research examining the different patterns and characteristics of abuse, particularly among large Australian samples.

This study examines the characteristics of violence and abuse reported by 1,023 Australian women who had recently experienced coercive control by their current or former partner. The most frequently reported behaviours were jealousy and suspicion of friends, constant insults, monitoring of movements and financial abuse. Over half of the respondents also reported experiencing physical forms of abuse (54%), including severe forms such as non-fatal strangulation (27%). One in three of these women also reported experiencing sexual violence during the survey period (30%). Women were much more likely to seek advice or support when they had also experienced physical or sexual forms of abuse.

Experiences of coercive control among Australian women

Hayley Boxall and Anthony Morgan

Our understanding of domestic violence has evolved considerably over the past 40 years (Walby & Towers 2018). While domestic violence was historically described as acts of physical violence with harm being measured in relation to injuries, it is now commonly understood to involve emotional abuse, harassment, stalking and controlling behaviours (Boxall, Morgan & Brown 2020; Hardesty et al. 2015). Similarly, research into the harms associated with domestic violence has extended to the health and wellbeing of victim-survivors and their families (Fedovskiy, Higgins & Paranjape 2008; Griffing et al. 2006; Krause et al. 2006), housing security (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019; Mission Australia 2019), and socioeconomic security (Morgan & Boxall 2020).

A key shift in the definition of domestic violence involved the inclusion of what is commonly referred to as ‘coercive control’ (Stark 2007) or ‘intimate terrorism’ (Johnson 2010). Although there is no consistent and agreed upon definition of coercive control (Dragiewicz et al. 2018), coercive control is often described as a pattern of behaviours within intimate relationships that results in the micro-regulation of the lives of victim–survivors (Stark & Hester 2019). Johnson (2010) and others describe perpetrators of coercive control as being motivated by a desire or need to dominate and control their partners, physically, economically, socially and emotionally.

Although abusers may use physical or sexual violence as a means of control, coercive control can also include a range of non-physical behaviours, such as interfering with victim–survivors’ relationships with their families, monitoring their movements, restricting their access to money, and emotionally abusive behaviours such as calling them names and insulting them (Dragiewicz et al. 2018; Stark 2007). Viewed in isolation, these behaviours may appear relatively benign or innocuous. However, within the context of the relationship they can provoke feelings of fear, intimidation or anxiety among victim–survivors. In other words, coercive controlling behaviours need to be viewed within the context of the relationship in order for their impact to be appreciated and understood (Dragiewicz et al. 2018).

Awareness of coercive control has increased significantly in Australia, in part because of the murder of Hannah Clarke and her three children in February 2020 by her former partner (King 2020). Media outlets reported that although Hannah had never disclosed any experiences of physical abuse, her former partner had attempted to regulate every aspect of her life, including what she wore and ate, her access to medical care and her social media accounts, and had been stalking her online (Gearing 2020; King 2020). Certainly, studies have shown that coercive controlling behaviours are associated with intimate partner homicide (Monkton Smith 2019). For example, analysis undertaken by the NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team identified that, among 112 incidents of intimate partner homicide that occurred between June 2000 and July 2019, coercive controlling behaviour was a feature of the relationship between couples involved in all but one case (excluding matters where this information was not available; NSW State Coroners Court 2020).

There has been a recent focus in Australia on how best to respond to coercive control, and wide-ranging debates on the efficacy or relevance of measures developed to address physical forms of domestic violence in preventing the recurrence or escalation of coercive controlling behaviours (Morgan et al. 2020). This includes a growing debate about the merits of criminalising coercive control (see, for example, McMahon & McGorry 2020; Walklate & Fitz-Gibbon 2019; Wangmann 2020).

To better understand coercive control, and to articulate the ‘lived realities’ of victim–survivors, it is necessary to describe the nature of coercive controlling behaviours, as well as their co-occurrence with physical and sexual violence. This information is essential for building understanding of coercive control among a wider audience, shaping discussions about the scope and impact of coercive controlling behaviours, and informing debate about the most effective responses to improve women’s safety.

Method

This paper draws on data collected by the Australian Institute of Criminology through an online survey of 15,000 women aged 18 years and over. The survey included questions about respondents' sociodemographic and relationship characteristics; experiences of physical or sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviour in the three months prior to the survey; and the history of domestic violence within the relationship.

The survey was conducted by i-Link Research Solutions between 6 May and 1 June 2020, and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Women were recruited through i-Link's online research panels, which comprise individuals who have consented to receive invitations to participate in a range of different online surveys.

For detailed information on the methodology, sampling strategy, safety protocols and limitations of the survey, please refer to the technical appendix of Boxall, Morgan and Brown (2020).

Key definitions

Domestic violence was defined as physical violence, sexual violence, or emotionally abusive, harassing and coercive controlling behaviours involving intimate partners. This includes attempted violence and face-to-face threats. A partner was defined as a person with whom the respondent was in a relationship at some point in the 12 months prior to the survey. This includes current and former partners, whether or not they lived with the respondent (eg dating partners, boyfriend/girlfriend).

Throughout this report, we distinguish between physical/sexual violence and coercive control. However, we acknowledge that physical/sexual violence is often a means by which abusers exert control over their partner and enforce behavioural compliance (Stark 2007). The co-occurrence of physical and non-physical forms of abuse is therefore a focus of this paper.

Respondents were recorded as having experienced physical violence if they answered yes to one or more questions about the following behaviours:

- choking, strangling or grabbing them around the neck;
- hitting them with something that could hurt them, beating them, stabbing them with a knife or shooting them with a gun;
- throwing anything at them that could hurt them, slapping, biting, kicking or hitting them with a fist;
- pushing, grabbing or shoving them; and
- physically assaulting them in any other way.

Sexual violence was defined as a situation in which a person's intimate partner forced them, tried to force them or threatened to force them to take part in sexual activity against their will.

In this study, coercive control was defined as experiencing three or more of the following emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours, indicating a pattern of behaviour (Patafio et al. 2021):

- threatening or abusing them online or using technology (eg over the phone or on social media);
- stalking them online or in person;
- constantly insulting them to make them feel ashamed, belittled or humiliated, or shouting, yelling or verbally abusing them to intimidate them;
- damaging, destroying or stealing their property;
- threatening to hurt their family, friends, children and/or pets;
- the perpetrator threatening to hurt themselves;
- monitoring their time and making them account for their whereabouts;
- using their money or shared money or making important financial decisions without talking to them;
- being jealous or suspicious of their friends;
- accusing them of having an affair;
- interfering with their relationship with other family members;
- preventing them from doing things to help themselves (eg going to medical appointments, taking medication); and
- restricting their use of their phone, the internet or the family car.

These 13 items were drawn from several sources, including the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory–Short Form Dominance–Isolation subscale (Tolman 1999). Other items relating to emotional abuse and stalking were based on the Personal Safety Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017), with the addition of a question about technology-facilitated abuse.

For further detail of the definitions used in this study, see Boxall, Morgan and Brown (2020).

Limitations

The survey was subject to several limitations, which have been documented in the technical appendix to Boxall, Morgan and Brown (2020). However, there are additional limitations to the current study that should also be acknowledged. First, the length of the survey limited the range of emotionally abusive and harassing behaviours that could be included. Although the items were selected due to their inclusion in other tools measuring coercive control, as well as research exploring different dimensions of coercive control, researchers have noted the importance of the context within which these behaviours occur (Dragiewicz et al. 2018). What this means is that other behaviours not examined as part of the current survey, which could be perceived as innocuous to an external observer, may be experienced as abusive or controlling by a victim–survivor.

Finally, the data used for this study were collected during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, during a lockdown period affecting all of Australia. Considering the impact of these lockdown conditions on people’s mobility, it may be that some of the behaviours that abusers had previously used to exert control over their partners (eg limiting their interactions with family members and friends) were less noticeable during this period and so were not reported. Conversely, there is evidence that the pandemic and associated containment measures amplified certain aspects of controlling behaviours by abusive partners (Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020).

Sample characteristics

Eleven percent ($n=1,023$) of respondents had experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey. The sociodemographic characteristics of this sample are presented in Table 1. The average age of women who experienced coercive control was 34.8 years. Women who identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (20% vs 4%), spoke a language other than English most of the time at home (35% vs 17%) or had a long-term health condition restricting their ability to undertake day-to-day activities unassisted (29% vs 11%) were significantly over-represented among women who experienced coercive control when compared with the sample of all women in current or former cohabiting relationships.

Nine in 10 respondents had completed Year 12 or equivalent (88%), with half (48%) reporting that they had a university qualification. One in four (27%) respondents reported their usual place of residence was in a regional or remote area, while 73 percent were living in a major city (as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics).

	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
18–24	240	23
25–34	332	32
35–44	228	22
45–54	141	14
55–64	63	6
65+	19	2
Average age (years)		34.8
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ^a	204	20
Non-English-speaking background	357	35
Current long-term health condition restricting everyday activities	291	29
Highest level of education completed		
Year 9 or below	17	2
Year 10/11 or equivalent	111	11
Year 12 or equivalent	135	13
Vocational certificate	265	26
University	495	48
Usual place of residence^b		
Major city	751	73
Regional or remote area	272	27

a: Denominator includes 9 respondents who did not provide their Indigenous status

b: Regional classification calculated using the respondent's postcode and concordance with the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018)

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Among women who had experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey:

- 76 percent were in a current relationship with their partner (24% former);
- 59 percent were cohabiting with their partner;
- 13 percent were pregnant (2% were unsure);
- 44 percent had at least one child with their partner (on average, 1 child); and
- 53 percent had at least one child living with them, either full time or part time (on average, 1 child).

Findings

Broadly speaking, the 13 different coercive controlling behaviours reported by women in the three months prior to the survey coalesced around a number of consistent themes. These are jealousy, monitoring of movements, financial abuse, social restriction, and emotional abuse or threatening behaviours. These groups are not distinct from one another and are likely to co-occur and form a pattern of behaviour over time (Fitzgerald et al. 2020). However, it is useful to describe the types of behaviour that constitute coercive control.

Jealousy

The most common form of controlling behaviour women reported was jealousy or suspicion of their friends and family members. Three in four women who experienced coercive control reported this in the three months prior to the survey (73%). The literature suggests that these behaviours may include complaining about the amount of time that the respondent had spent with friends, telling the respondent that their friends do not like them or their partner, or making false allegations against the respondent's friends (Stark 2007). One in two women experiencing coercive control also reported that their partner had accused them of having an affair with another person in the past three months (53%).

Monitoring of movements

Two in three women experiencing coercive control reported that their partner had monitored how they spent their time and their whereabouts in the three months prior the survey (65%). The frequency of these behaviours is particularly notable considering all of Australia was in lockdown during the survey period and so the mobility of respondents outside of their homes would have been highly restricted. Stalking, either online or in person, was also reported by two in five women who experienced coercive control (41%). Considering the highly covert nature of stalking behaviours, particularly those conducted online (Dragiewicz et al. 2018), it is likely that the true prevalence of stalking was much higher than was identified by respondents.

Financial abuse

Financially abusive behaviours were relatively common among women who experienced coercive control, with one in two respondents saying that their partner had used their own or shared money without consent or made important financial decisions without consulting them (56%). Other commonly reported forms of financial abuse identified in the literature include the offender:

- controlling all of the household income;
- limiting their partner's access to bank accounts;
- 'hiding' money or assets;
- forcing or pressuring their partner to spend money or sell property;
- limiting their ability to find and maintain employment; and
- accruing and refusing to pay debts (Postmus et al. 2020; Stylianou 2018).

Two in five women who experienced coercive control also reported that their partner had damaged, destroyed or stolen their property in the three months prior to the survey (43%). Damaging property can be used as a means of intimidation; the abuser's use of physical strength against an inanimate object (eg by punching a wall) may be used to demonstrate their ability to physically harm their partner. However, these behaviours can often be experienced as a form of financial abuse by women, particularly when they are required to repair or replace the damaged goods at their own expense (Stylianou 2018). This may increase feelings of financial stress and economic hardship.

Social isolation

Several of the behaviours reported by women who participated in the survey may have had the cumulative effect of increasing their isolation from family members and friends and other sources of support and help-seeking. This in turn may have increased the level of control that abusers had over women.

One in two women experiencing coercive control reported that, in the three months prior to the survey, their current or former partner had interfered with their relationships with other family members (54%). These behaviours may include telling women that their families do not love or support them, creating obstacles to seeing them and making false allegations against them (Coohey 2007). Two in five women who experienced coercive control reported that their partner had tried to keep them from doing things to help themselves (38%) and/or restricted their use of their phone, the internet or the family car (37%).

Emotionally abusive and threatening behaviours

Two in three women who experienced coercive control reported that their partner had either constantly insulted them to make them feel ashamed, belittled or humiliated, or shouted, yelled or verbally abused them as a means of intimidating them (67%). Research has shown that these behaviours can increase the level of control that offenders have over women by negatively affecting their self-esteem and self-worth (Teitelman et al. 2011), and intimidate women into 'compliance' related behaviours, which typically involve acquiescing to the perpetrator's demands in order to avoid physical harm (Fitzgerald et al. 2020).

Many of these behaviours are likely to have occurred online or using technologies such as mobile phones. Two in five women experiencing coercive control reported that their partner had abused or threatened them online or used other technologies (42%). Researchers have argued that the advent of new communication technologies has enhanced abusers' ability to 'persistently intrude on their target regardless of their location' (Douglas, Harris & Dragiewicz 2019; Dragiewicz et al. 2018: 611).

Threatening behaviours were not directed only to respondents. One in three women who experienced coercive control reported that their partner had also threatened to harm others as a means of intimidating them (33%). This may include family members, friends, shared children and pets. Finally, two in five respondents who experienced coercive control said that their partner had threatened to hurt themselves (39%). These findings are again consistent with other research examining women's experiences (Fitzgerald et al. 2020).

Table 2: Emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours experienced by women who experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey (n=1,023)

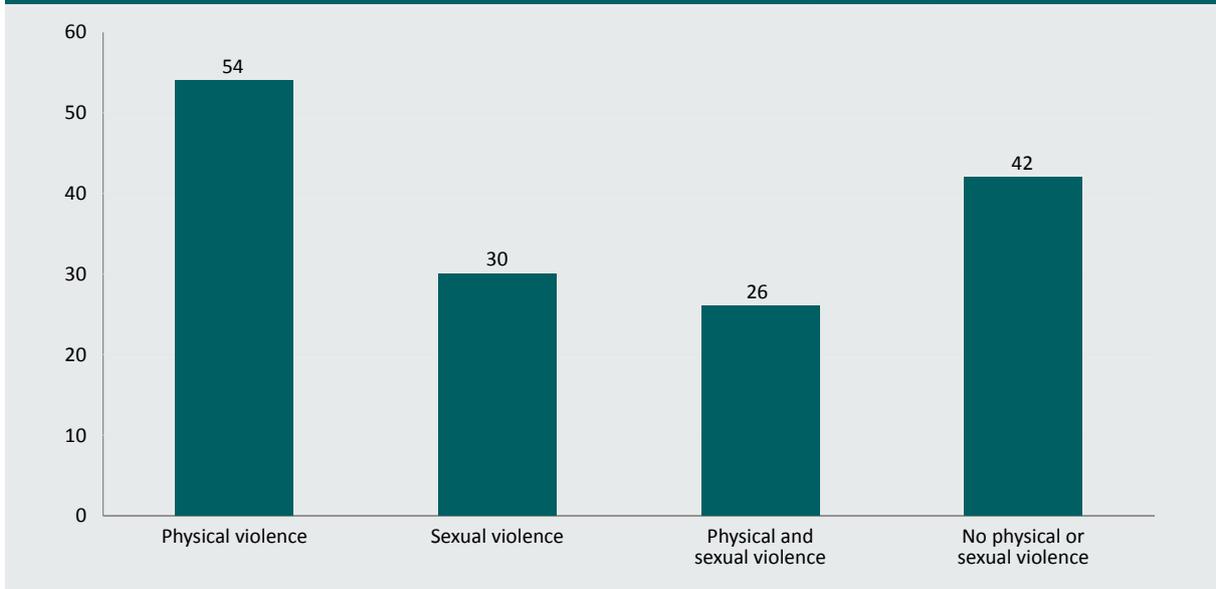
	n	%
Was jealous or suspicious of the respondent's friends	744	73
Constantly insulted the respondent to make them feel ashamed, belittled or humiliated; or shouted, yelled or verbally abused the respondent to intimidate them	685	67
Monitored the respondent's time and made them account for their whereabouts	660	65
Used the respondent's/shared money or made important financial decisions without talking to them	570	56
Interfered with the respondent's relationships with other family members	553	54
Accused the respondent of having an affair	543	53
Damaged, destroyed or stole the respondent's property	416	41
Threatened or abused respondent online or through the use of technology (eg mobile phone)	427	42
Stalked the respondent online or in person	422	41
Threatened to hurt themselves	404	39
Tried to keep the respondent from doing things to help themselves	385	38
Restricted the respondent's use of their phone, the internet or the family car	380	37
Threatened to hurt the respondent's family, friends, children and/or pets	337	33

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Co-occurrence of coercive control and physical/sexual violence

Women experiencing coercive control frequently reported that their partner had also been physically violent towards them in the three months prior to the survey. One in two women who had experienced coercive control also reported physical violence in the three months prior to the survey (54%). Among women who experienced coercive control, one in three reported sexual violence (30%), and 26 percent had experienced both physical and sexual violence (Figure 1). Overall, 42 percent of women who experienced coercive control had not experienced either physical or sexual violence. This means that most women who experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey also experienced physical and/or sexual violence.

Figure 1: Co-occurrence of physical/sexual violence among women who experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey, by violence type ($n=1,023$) (%)



Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

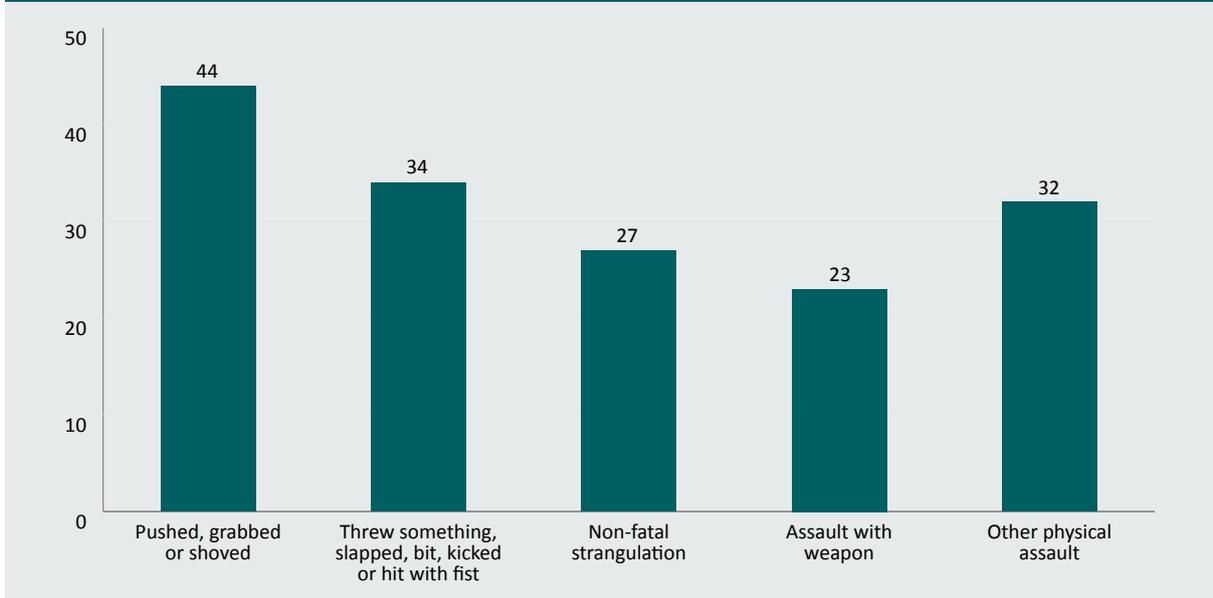
When looking at the specific forms of physical violence reported by women who experienced coercive control, as shown in Figure 2:

- two in five reported being pushed, grabbed or shoved by their current or former partner (44%);
- one in three said their partner had thrown something at them, slapped, bit, kicked or hit them with their fist (34%);
- 27 percent reported that their partner had strangled or choked them or grabbed them around the throat (non-fatal strangulation);
- one in four said their partner had assaulted them with a weapon, including a gun or knife (23%); and
- one in three (32%) said they had been physically assaulted in another way by their partner.

This includes actual, attempted and threatened behaviours.

This demonstrates not only that the co-occurrence of physical and non-physical forms of abuse was common, but that many of these women experienced severe forms of violence, including assaults with a weapon and non-fatal strangulation.

Figure 2: Co-occurrence of physical violence among women who experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey, by type of physical violence (n=1,023) (%)



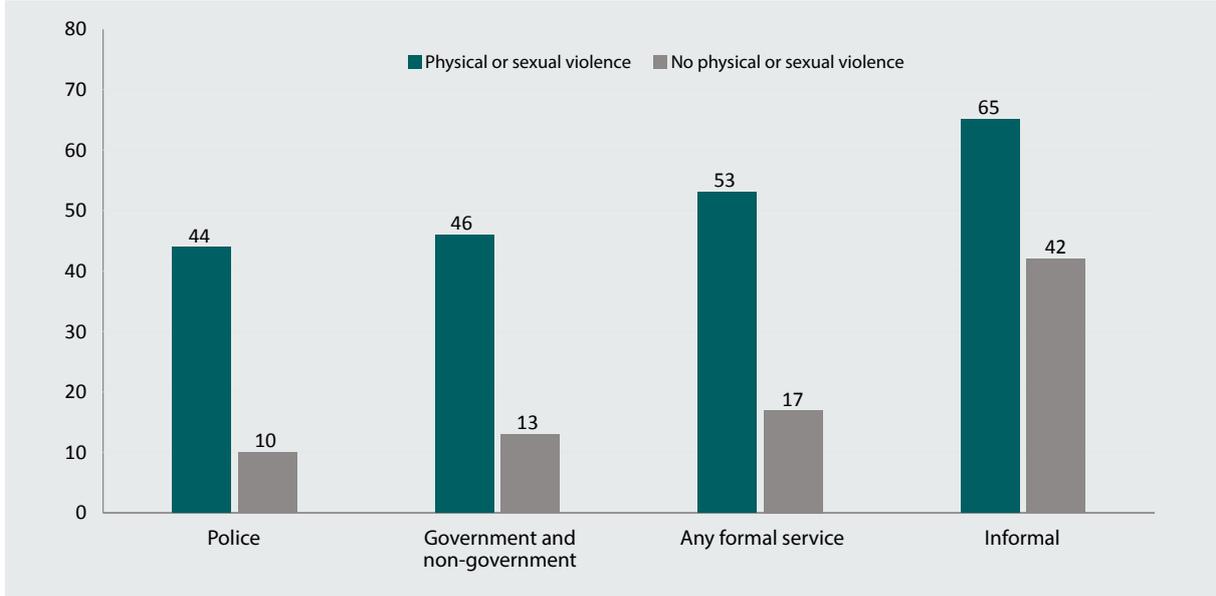
Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Help-seeking

Finally, women were asked whether in the three months prior to the survey they had sought advice or support from police, government or non-government support services or some other source because of their partner's behaviour. Overall, 30 percent of women who experienced coercive control said they had sought advice or support from police, 32 percent from a government or non-government support service, and 55 percent from another source.

However, rates of help-seeking were substantially higher among women who experienced coercive control and physical or sexual violence than among women who experienced coercive control but not physical/sexual violence (see Figure 3). This was true for all sources of support and advice: police (44% vs 10%), government or non-government support services (46% vs 13%), and other sources of support (65% vs 42%).

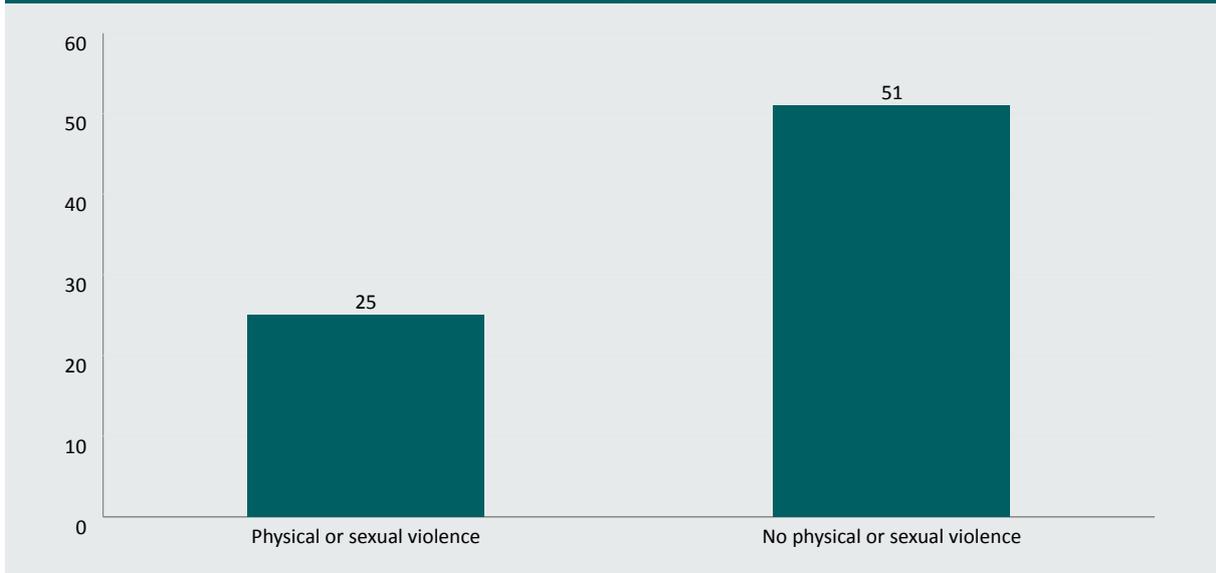
Figure 3: Help-seeking behaviours among women who experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey, by type of violence experienced and source of support (n=1,023) (%)



Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Overall, more than one-third of all women (36%) who had experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey said they had not sought help from any source. However, only one in four women who had experienced coercive control and physical or sexual violence said they had not sought support from either informal or formal sources (25%). This figure increased to one in two (51%) among women who had experienced coercive control but not physical or sexual violence (see Figure 4). In other words, many women who experienced coercive control did not seek advice or support unless they had also experienced some form of physical or sexual violence.

Figure 4: Absence of help-seeking among women who experienced coercive control in the three months prior to the survey, by type of violence experienced (n=1,023) (%)



Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Conclusion

This study has described the range of behaviours reported by women who were defined as experiencing coercive control in the three months prior to the survey. The most commonly reported behaviours related to interfering with their friendships, as well as monitoring their movements, insulting and belittling them and financial abuse. However, many women also experienced physical and/or sexual violence during this period. Importantly, women who had experienced coercive control were unlikely to seek help from formal or informal sources if they had not also experienced physical/sexual forms of abuse. Overall, the experiences reported by women highlight the complexity of describing coercive control and the need to avoid over-generalisations about what constitutes domestic violence.

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ISSN 2206-7302 (Online)
ISBN 978 1 922478 10 8 (Online)

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