



Family Violence

City of Port Phillip Health Profiles

Family violence is a prevalent and serious problem that has a profound impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and the broader community. In recognition of this, the National, State and local governments across Victoria have established family violence as a key priority for action. Consequently Council now has a legislated obligation to implement measures to reduce family violence and respond to the needs of victims.

What is family violence?

Family violence is any behaviour perpetrated against a family member that causes harm or distress. It includes financial, physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect.

- Family violence can affect anyone in the community; however, it is more commonly perpetrated by men against women and children (UN Women, 2015).
- 23% of Australian women have suffered violence at the hands of an intimate partner and each week, on average one woman is killed by a current or former partner.
- In Victoria, intimate partner violence contributes more to the disease burden (an estimate of the impact on the lives of sufferers) for women aged 18 to 44 years than tobacco use, high cholesterol or use of illicit drugs (Webster, 2016). The non-fatal impacts of family violence are far-reaching and include:
 - Physical injuries such as bruises, lacerations and broken bones
 - Sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies
 - Gastrointestinal conditions, gynaecological disorders and poor health status, including chronic pain syndromes and premature death
 - Stress, anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, self-harm and suicide attempts
 - Harmful alcohol use and homelessness (UN Women, 2015).

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How does family violence affect the Port Phillip community?

- While Port Phillip's incidence of family violence is below the Victorian average, rates have been increasing since 2016. It is expected that this trend will accelerate in 2020/21 due to the effects of COVID-19.
- In 2019/20 there were 1,354 incidents of family violence attended by police in Port Phillip, representing a 6 per cent increase on the previous year and a 22 per cent increase on incidents in 2015/16 (Hutcheson, 2017).



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- Incidents most frequently take place at residential locations and occur between current and former partners.
- A fifth of family violence incidents attended by police recorded a child or children as present (Hutcheson, 2017).

NB: It is estimated that only 25 per cent of family violence incidents are reported to the police. Consequently, the above data is unlikely to capture the full scale of the issue in our municipality.

How does Family violence affect some groups in our community?

While family violence can affect anyone within our community, some people are at heightened risk, as their experience of family violence may be compounded by the disadvantage and discrimination they experience in their daily lives. Consequently, effective delivery activity to both respond to and prevent family violence must address the specific needs of at-risk, vulnerable populations.

- **Children** exposed to family violence are more likely to have a range of health, developmental and social problems, both during childhood and later in life (Ayre, et al., 2016). 733,900 women in Australia who have experienced violence by a previous partner had children in their care during the violence; for 77 per cent of these women, the children witnessed the violence (Cox, 2016).
- At least 11 per cent of Victorian women who were admitted to hospital due to intimate partner violence were **pregnant** at the time. Half of these women had injuries to the abdomen, lower back, and pelvis (Cox, 2016).
- It is estimated that up to 14 per cent of **older people** experience family violence, often referred to as elder abuse. In Victoria over 90 per cent of perpetrators are relatives (City of Melbourne, 2020).
- **Women with disabilities** experience higher rates of family violence, which is more commonly protracted and perpetrated by more than one person (Victorian Government, 2016). They are at greater risk of violence from their intimate partners, extended family members, their carers and others in a position to exert control and power.
- **Aboriginal women** experience family violence at rates that are higher than non-Aboriginal women and with more serious consequences (Cripps, et al., 2019).
- There is no evidence that any **immigrant or refugee community or culture** is more violent than any another community, including the general community. However, there is ample evidence indicating that 1) the current family violence service system is not designed to meet the needs of diverse communities; and 2) preventing family violence initiatives have had limited traction with these communities (AMES Australia, 2016).
- One in three **LGBTIQ+** Australians report having experienced intimate partner violence (City of Melbourne, 2020).



How has COVID-19 affected family violence?

Victorian family violence practitioners reported (Pfitzner, et al., 2020) that the pandemic has led to:

- An increase in the frequency and severity of violence against women and an increase in first-time reporting by women
- An increase in the complexity of women's needs
- New forms of violence, including enhanced tactics to achieve social isolation and forms of violence specifically relating to the threat and risk of COVID-19 infection
- For many women experiencing violence during the lockdown period, it was more difficult to seek help.

Why is managing family violence important for our community?

- The impacts of family violence can be serious, far-reaching, and long-lasting, affecting an individual's physical and mental health, access to education and employment, relationships, financial security, social support, housing outcomes and, in some extreme cases, death.
- Family violence is a major national, state, and local issue. The Royal Commission into family violence (established in 2015) found existing Victorian programs were not able to; reduce the frequency and impact of family violence, support victim survivors, hold perpetrators to account for their actions and coordinate community and government services (Victorian Government, 2020).
- Many local governments and their community networks have acknowledged their responsibilities in creating safe and supportive environments in which all citizens can reach their full potential. This has culminated in development of specific local government plans to both improve responses to and prevent family violence. Consequently, in the current environment, there are many opportunities for Port Phillip to work with local, regional and state partners to progress this agenda over the next three years.

How are the State and Commonwealth Governments managing family violence?

The Commonwealth Government sets National Priorities through development of tri-annual action plans for responding to and preventing violence against women (Victorian Government, 2017). The government is also the primary funder of Our Watch, the peak National agency responsible for leading action to prevent violence against women. Small, medium, and large funding grants are also made available organisations that respond to family violence on an annual basis.

The Victorian Government has played a significant role in advancing activity to both respond to and prevent violence against women. Following the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Victorian Government has:



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- Created a Ministerial Portfolio solely focused on family violence
- Undertaken legislative reform to embed a focus on family violence across key sectors, including local government
- Developed rolling action plans which articulate state priorities to be addressed over ensuing years
- Established Family Safety Victoria, a Government Department leading the response to family violence and Respect Victoria, a statutory body tasked with preventing family violence
- Developed a coordinated and integrated service system to respond to the needs of those subjected to or perpetrating family violence
- Allocated substantial funding to trial field-based innovation in responding to and preventing family violence and embedding activity into the core business of cross sector organisations across the state
- Allocated sustained funding to 1) the Municipal Association of Victoria to support local government action to prevent violence against women in this arena, and 2) individual local governments which have established violence against women as a key priority for action.

What is the role of the Port Phillip City Council in responding to and preventing family violence?

In accordance with new legislative requirements upon Victorian local governments, Port Phillip will:

- Implement multi-level actions to address drivers of gender inequality existing across the organisation
- Ensure that all staff employed in health and human service delivery have undertaken professional development in risk assessment for family violence
- Ensure that the development of Council policies, programs and services consider the specific impacts of gender inequity of health, wellbeing and safety.

Recognising the importance of family violence to the community, Port Phillips can take additional actions to prevent family violence across the municipality over the next three years, by:

- Providing safe and gender-equitable facilities and public environments
- Playing a leadership role in collaborating and co-ordinating initiatives tailored to the local community that focus on advocacy, public education, community development and organisational change.

Who are our partners?

In order to facilitate a comprehensive, consistent and whole of community approach to addressing family violence, the Council is partnering with community organisations to deliver community interventions. Some of our key partners include:



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- Municipal Association of Victoria
- Southern Metro Primary Care Partnership Elder Abuse Network
- Women's Health in the South East
- Star Health
- Respect Victoria
- Our Watch
- VicHealth
- White Ribbon
- Family Safety Victoria
- Department of Health and Human Services.
- Victoria Police

What may change over the next five years?

In consecutive population surveys over the past ten years, Victorians have shown support for government resources to be directed towards managing family violence (ANROWS, 2018). This community support, alongside government commitment to the eradication of family violence is likely to culminate in:

- Increased expectations placed on local governments to lead local level action in both responding to and preventing family violence
- Improved coordination of activity designed to respond to and prevent family violence at the local level
- Legislative reform to broaden the definition of family violence to include coercive control
- Greater resourcing of the family violence sector to ensure there is available and appropriate support during periods of increased demand for support services and safe housing options
- Greater awareness of elder abuse as a form of family violence and increased resource allocation to address this issue
- Greater understanding of how pandemics and disasters such as COVID-19 can trigger or exacerbate risks of violence for women, such as the impact of losing social support networks, increased isolation, and financial and employment stress.

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