



MEDIA RELEASE

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Women experiencing domestic and family violence face a myriad of legal problems

Women experiencing domestic and family violence are ten times as vulnerable to legal problems as the rest of the population, according to new research from the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, ***Quantifying the legal and broader life impacts of domestic and family violence***. The paper found that, in a 12-month period, respondents who had experienced domestic and family violence (DFV) had 20 legal problems on average, including a wide range of family, civil and criminal law problems, compared to only 2 legal problems for the rest of the population.

Using data from the Legal Australia-Wide (LAW) Survey, which interviewed over 20,000 Australians, Dr Christine Coumarelos examined the prevalence and severity of legal problems faced by people experiencing DFV, the majority of whom were women. Notably, almost all respondents who experienced DFV in the previous 12 months (92%) also experienced another type of legal problem, compared with only about half of other respondents (49%).

Dr Coumarelos said: “Our analysis shows that people who experienced domestic violence were a massive 16 times more likely to experience a family law problem. They were also 3 to 6 times more likely to experience other crime problems and civil law problems – including consumer, credit/debt, employment, health-related, housing and rights problems. The results reinforce the evidence base on wrap-around services better meeting the needs of domestic violence clients, which underpins initiatives such as Domestic Violence Units and Family Advocacy and Support Services in the courts.”

Not only was DFV linked to more legal problems but these legal problems were also more likely to be serious, with four out of five respondents reporting that at least one of their legal problems had a “severe impact” on their everyday lives. President of the Law Society of NSW, Elizabeth Espinosa, said the paper’s findings illustrate the broad and far-reaching range of legal problems that some of the most vulnerable members of our community face, from family law issues through to employment, housing and debt problems.

“Combatting domestic and family violence requires a complex and coordinated response across all jurisdictions and human service providers,” Ms Espinosa said.

“This is a public health issue as well as a legal concern.

“This report supports the Law Society of NSW’s ongoing advocacy for outreach, awareness and the provision of specialist services that are appropriate to the needs of specific groups, that help prevent violence against women and children.”

NSW Attorney General and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence Mark Speakman said that the impacts of domestic and family violence extend beyond police and the courts to housing, health, employment and education for victim-survivors.

“That’s why, for example, we introduced Safer Pathway, which brings multiple human and legal services together in a one-stop-shop so victims have consistent access to coordinated support systems that suit their specific individual needs,” Mr Speakman said.

“We’re also investing record amounts in community legal centres that address critical gaps in available services, which means more domestic violence victims will get the free legal help they need.”

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The legal problems of respondents who had experienced DFV were more likely to lead to stress-related illness, physical ill health, relationship breakdown, loss of income or financial strain and having to move home, according to the Foundation's analysis. One in 8 respondents who experienced DFV reported being homeless during the 12-month period.

The 2012 LAW Survey remains the only comprehensive population-level assessment of legal need and problem-solving behaviour available in Australia. Legal needs surveys are the most reliable means for measuring legal problems and provide insight into access to justice from the community perspective.

"Importantly, it is only through comprehensive population-level surveys like the LAW Survey that we can quantify the impacts such as those identified in this paper. A new legal needs survey is desperately needed," said Foundation Director Geoff Mulherin.

Domestic and family violence has significant consequences for women's physical and emotional health and in some cases results in homicide. Previous research estimated that the cost to the Australian economy was \$22-26 billion in 2015-16.

Download paper, infographic and information sheet www.lawfoundation.net.au/publications/dfv



LAW Survey

The Legal Australia-Wide (LAW) Survey is the most comprehensive quantitative assessment of legal needs in Australia. It interviewed 20,716 people about 129 different legal problems (categorised into 12 problem groups), their responses to these problems and the outcomes they achieved. The LAW Survey found that legal problems are widespread, with half of all respondents experiencing a legal problem in the 12 months prior to interview. See **reports**



Legal Aid NSW Domestic Violence Unit study

The Domestic Violence Unit (DVU) of Legal Aid NSW began delivering services in January 2016. The Foundation conducted an evaluation of the early operation of the DVU, ***Legal Aid NSW Domestic Violence Unit: process evaluation of the first nine months***. The study found that the service was filling important service gaps. See **media release**

About the Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales

The Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales is an independent, statutory, not-for-profit organisation established in 1967 to advance the fairness and equity of the justice system, and to improve access to justice for socially and economically disadvantaged people. Through our research, the Foundation identifies legal need, and what strategies work to address that legal need, to support the planning and delivery of the most effective legal assistance services.

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