

## COVID-19 Monitoring Insights

# FAMILY VIOLENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

December 2020



### The Commissioner's monitoring and advocacy

The Commissioner for Children and Young People, Leanne McLean, is monitoring the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people in Tasmania – and advocating for their wellbeing to be central to response and recovery strategies.\* This brief is one of a series of snapshots on selected topics arising from the Commissioner's monitoring activities, particularly during April – June 2020. While evidence of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people is still emerging, these briefs are intended to provide some insights into the Tasmanian experience during the pandemic, and to outline key learnings for policy and practice across agencies and other organisations delivering services contributing to the wellbeing of Tasmanian children and young people.

***"Extra funds and support need to be available to victims of domestic violence, abuse and other important, urgent issues."***  
~ A young Tasmanian during a consultation with the Commissioner for Children and Young People

***"Educate kids, or anyone in this case, on people they can talk to and ways they can handle situations where they don't feel safe."***  
~ A young Tasmanian during a consultation with the Commissioner for Children and Young People

### Overview

Children and young people have the right to live free from all forms of violence and abuse.<sup>1</sup> However, there is emerging evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have increased the incidence and severity of family violence in many countries around the world, including Australia, with implications for the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. While evidence for an increase in family violence in Tasmania during the COVID-19 pandemic is still emerging, it is important that longer-term responses to the COVID-19 pandemic take into account the unique needs of children and young people who experience family violence and also address the underlying drivers of family violence.\*\*

While family violence can and does affect people regardless of their gender, the overwhelming

majority of family violence is perpetrated by men against women. These women are often mothers and the impact of this violence on their children can be immeasurable and invisible. Given the gendered nature of family violence, this paper discusses it including from the perspective of violence against women.



## The definition of “family violence” in Tasmania

In this state, family violence is defined by the *Family Violence Act 2004* (Tas). Family violence is limited to specified behaviour toward a spouse or partner (or former spouse or partner). However the Act specifically recognises that children and young people may be affected by this behaviour as victims in their own right. Under the Act, an “affected child” is defined as ‘a child whose safety, psychological wellbeing or interests are affected or likely to be affected by family violence’.<sup>2</sup>

## Family violence has adverse effects on children and young people

While many children and young people who experience family violence display high levels of self-efficacy and resilience, there is considerable evidence that the wellbeing of children and young people is adversely affected by exposure to family violence.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, adverse effects of family violence on children may persist even after parental separation, as separation may not bring an end to family violence.<sup>4</sup> Children and young people can experience direct harm from witnessing or being injured during family violence incidents. They may also be harmed by the emotional dynamics in families which experience family violence.<sup>5</sup>

*“While many children show great resilience, family violence can have a very profound impact on them. Children do not need to see or hear family violence to be affected. For children, the experience of living in a situation where their needs for love and security are secondary to the unpredictable, controlling behaviour of a violent parent, can be a form of complex trauma.”<sup>2</sup>*

## Around the world, family violence has increased or intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic

International and national evidence indicates that violence against women, including family violence, often increases during and after disasters and emergencies, driven by heightened stress, family disruption, social isolation, financial pressures and disruption to people’s usual personal and social roles.<sup>6</sup>

While it’s important to acknowledge that stress-related factors do not in and of themselves cause violence against women, many of the socio-economic conditions which are anticipated to arise from the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions — including higher unemployment, reduced incomes, increased use of alcohol or drugs, reduced mental wellbeing and housing insecurity — are known drivers of the severity and frequency of violence against women.<sup>7</sup> In April 2020, the United Nations noted a growing “shadow pandemic” of violence against women, with emerging data showing that since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls – and particularly family violence – has intensified.<sup>8</sup>

In acknowledgement of these concerns, new family violence initiatives have been introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, including the Australian Government’s National Partnership: COVID-19 Domestic and Family Violence (\$150m) and the Tasmanian Government’s response to family and sexual violence (\$2.7m).<sup>9</sup>

These are welcome additions to pre-existing family violence initiatives, including the *Australian Government’s Fourth Action Plan under the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children 2010-2022* and the Tasmanian Government’s *Safe Homes, Families, Communities: Tasmania’s Action Plan for Family and Sexual Violence 2019-2022*.<sup>10, 11</sup> See also the *Tasmanian Women’s Strategy 2018-2021* and *Health and Wellbeing for Women Action Plan 2020-23*.

Nationally, an online survey of 15,000 Australian women conducted in May 2020 by the Australian Institute of Criminology found that for many women, the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the onset or escalation of violence and abuse. In this survey, two-thirds of women who experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic said the violence had started or escalated in the three months prior to the survey.<sup>12</sup>

In Victoria, family violence practitioners reported an increase in the frequency and severity of family violence during the first period of restrictions, as well as an increase in first-time reports of family violence. They also reported that some perpetrators of family violence were employing enhanced tactics of control and isolation against women, related to the risk of COVID-19 infection.<sup>7</sup>

### Family violence in Tasmania during the COVID-19 pandemic

From monitoring activities, the Commissioner is aware that some family violence organisations have reported increased and more complex family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic in Tasmania. Some services experienced a surge in demand for their services during May, with women reporting concerns about family violence characterised by emotional abuse, social isolation, and coercion and control.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, there are reports that some men have exploited the restrictions on movement and 'stay at home' orders imposed in Tasmania in order to intensify their family violence, especially through further isolating women from friends, family or colleagues.<sup>14</sup> These reported experiences of intensified family violence during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic were not reflected in Tasmania Police family violence statistics. In fact, the number of family violence incidents reported to Tasmania Police declined during the first phase

of the COVID-19 pandemic: in June 2020, Tasmania Police advised that reports of family violence had decreased since the coronavirus restrictions were introduced in March 2020.<sup>14</sup>

However, official data on reported family violence incidents needs to be interpreted with caution because these figures may not provide an accurate picture of family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. The international and Australian experience suggests that a decrease in the number of reported family violence incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic may be a function of changed social conditions, including restrictions on people's movement, women spending more time at home with the perpetrator or reduced access to services, rather than fewer incidents or less severe family violence occurring.<sup>8</sup>



Certainly, during the first quarter of 2020, some Australian children and young people reported heightened family tensions, arguments and sometimes family violence arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, arising from family members living so closely together, financial stress and fewer outside supports and activities.<sup>15</sup>

The Commissioner has heard from some organisations delivering services to children and young people and their families in Tasmania that family violence may have been hidden during the stage 1 and 2 restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic – and that the full effect of the COVID-



19 pandemic on family violence may become more apparent over time, especially as Australian Government income support payments decrease or end, and families face greater economic insecurity.

However, it is possible that the incidence and severity of family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic may never be fully reflected in official statistics — but will instead be reflected in the experiences of Tasmanian families, including children and young people.



### Implications for policy and practice

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for Tasmania’s children and young people and the entire Tasmanian community, but it has also opened up opportunities for us to reflect on our usual ways of working and consider where we want to go from here to build an even better Tasmania. In doing so, it is important that we involve all members of the Tasmanian community, including children and young people, in a process of reflection, sharing ideas, identifying ways forward and enacting change.

Informed by the Commissioner’s monitoring and advocacy work during the COVID-19 pandemic, some implications for policy and practice directed at preventing and responding to family violence are proposed here as a starting point for future discussions:

- To strengthen our understanding of the effects of family violence on children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, it is important that official reports and service-level data on the incidence and severity of family violence are augmented by focused efforts to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of children and young people and their protective/non-violent parent or carer.<sup>3, 16</sup>
- To further our primary prevention and early intervention efforts in relation to family violence, children and young people need to be actively supported and enabled to talk about their safety from a young age, in a variety of settings.
- With the right responses and supports, children and young people who experience family violence can be very resilient. To ensure that children and young people affected by family violence can receive the supports they need, family violence pathways and service systems need to be more accessible and responsive than ever, including by being able to rapidly adapt service delivery in response to any spikes in family violence or further ‘lockdowns’.<sup>3, 16</sup>
- While acknowledging the numerous family violence initiatives announced by governments and organisations during COVID-19, efforts to address the drivers of gender-based violence against women, including by promoting gender equality and addressing structural discrimination and disadvantage, should continue to be high priorities in the context of COVID-19 response and recovery planning.<sup>6</sup>

**If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault, family or domestic violence:**

Call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit [www.1800RESPECT.org.au](http://www.1800RESPECT.org.au).

In an emergency, call 000.

For more information, visit [www.safefromviolence.tas.gov.au](http://www.safefromviolence.tas.gov.au), Tasmania's online central point of Information for family and sexual violence.

**If you have concerns for the safety or wellbeing of a child in Tasmania:**

Contact the Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line on 1800 000 123.

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\* In April 2020, the Commissioner released her COVID-19 monitoring framework, *Monitoring & Advocacy During COVID-19*, which is available here: <https://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/CCYP-COVID-19-FRAMEWORK-APRIL-2020-WEB-1.pdf>

\*\* Consistent with the Commissioner's powers and functions, children and young people are defined in this brief as being less than 18 years of age.



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