



# Evidence Snapshot: what we know about domestic, family, and sexual violence in the Northern Territory – and what we don't

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# The Northern Territory has some of the highest rates of domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) both in Australia and in the world.

This *Evidence Snapshot* draws upon data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the National Coronial Information System to present the high and severe rates of DFSV in the Northern Territory.

Women in remote and regional communities are 24 times more likely to be hospitalised for domestic violence than women in major cities, and those from remote and regional communities encounter significant barriers to reporting violence due to shame and stigma (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019).

Yet these rates, gathered from incomplete administrative data and national surveys, unlikely reflect the true extent of the problem. Administrative data often reflects only the cases of violence that have been reported to police and formal services, while national surveys often face significant challenges collecting responses from regional, remote, and very remote areas (see section below on 'Limitations of the data').

Despite these limitations, the data continues to show extremely high rates of domestic, family, and sexual violence in the Northern Territory, and that **this violence disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.**

By collating and communicating data in an accessible format, this Evidence Snapshot is intended to inform and support the Northern Territory DFSV Sector.

# The data presented in this *Evidence Snapshot* was obtained from the following sources:

### **The National Coronial Information System (NCIS) date of notifications between 1 July 2000 and 31 December 2021**

- The NCIS is a database containing information on deaths reported to a coroner in Australia and New Zealand. This *Evidence Snapshot* makes use of information about deaths reported to a Northern Territory coroner.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Australian Bureau of Statistics, Recorded crime – Victims data from years 2014 - 2021**

- Victims of a range of personal, household and family and domestic violence offences as recorded by police (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

### **The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey (PSS) from surveys conducted every four years from 2005 – 2021-2022**

- The ABS collects data on experiences of domestic, family, and sexual violence through the PSS. The PSS is conducted every four years and is collected from men and women aged 18 years and over about the nature and extent of different forms of violence experienced since the age of 15. It also collects data on feelings of safety (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> This Evidence Snapshot only includes NCIS cases in the NT where:

- the victim died as a result of an assault perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner, or a family member.
- the death was notified to a coroner between 1 July 2000 and 31 December 2021.
- the coronial investigation has concluded, and the case is closed on the NCIS.

## Domestic, family, and sexual violence in the Northern Territory is high – and reports have been increasing for at least five years.

The latest data released from the ABS Recorded Victims dataset is from 2021. In 2021, there was a 10% increase in assault victims from 2020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The victimisation rate for assault in the Northern Territory in 2021 was the highest in the ABS' 27-year time series (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

The ABS data shows that in 2021, 63% (almost two-thirds) of assault victims were female, 41% (two of every five) of assaults involved the use of a weapon, and 63% (almost two-thirds) of assaults were related to domestic-family violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

### DFSV in the NT compared to other jurisdictions

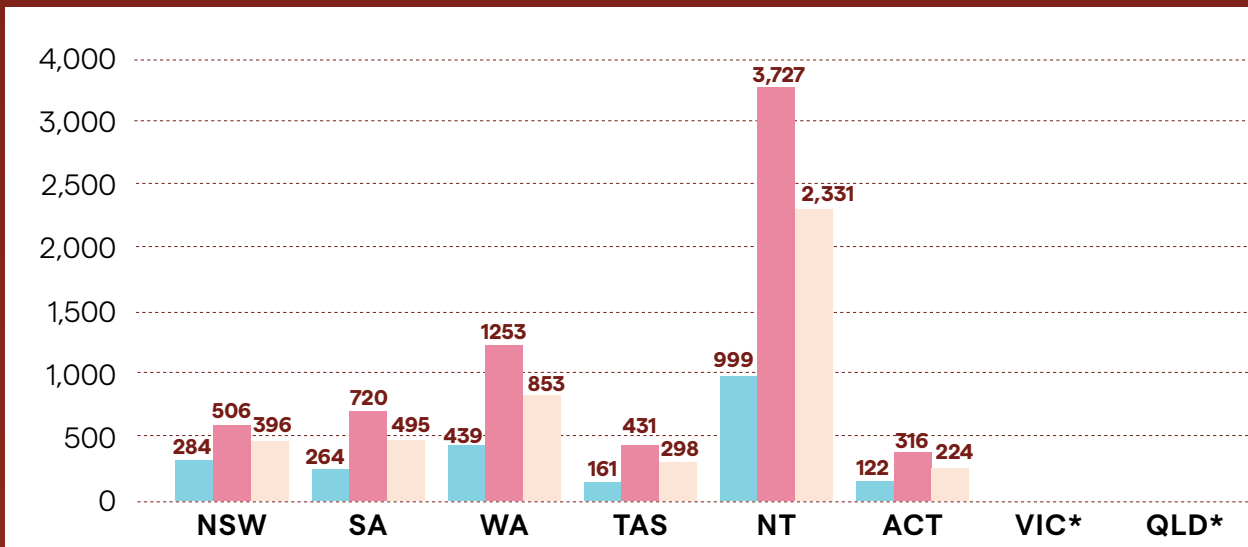
- DFSV rates in the Northern Territory are **far higher** than in other jurisdictions in Australia.
- In 2021, the rates of domestic and family violence related assault were **three times** the national average, and **five times** that of most other jurisdictions where data is reported.
- In 2021, the rate of domestic and family violence-related homicide in the Northern Territory was **seven times** the national average.
- Reports of sexual assault in the Northern Territory are falling comparative to other jurisdictions. Given the high rates of reported domestic and family violence in the Northern Territory, this suggests **significant underreporting**.

## Domestic and family violence-related assault

The disproportionately high rates of domestic and family related assault in the Northern Territory comparative to other jurisdictions has remained true over time. The graph below illustrates

rates of domestic and family related assault per 100,000 persons for each jurisdiction where data is available since 2014 using publicly available data as reported by the ABS.

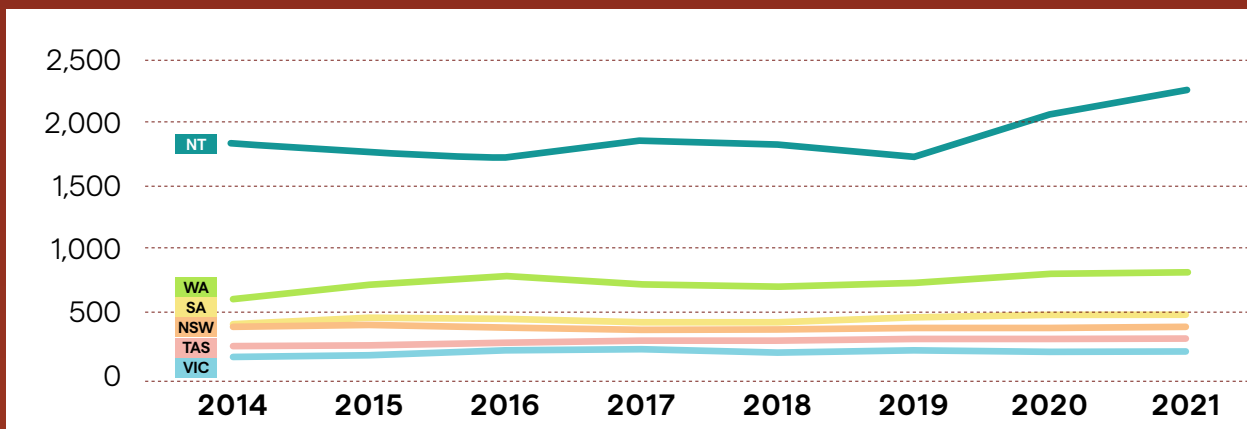
### Domestic family violence-related assault rate assaults per 100,000 persons in 2021



● Male Assault ● Female Assault ● Total Assault (ABS - Recorded Crime)

\*At the time of writing, 2021 data from Victoria and Queensland were not yet publicly available.

### Domestic family related assaults rate per 100,000 persons for all states and territories where data is available since 2014



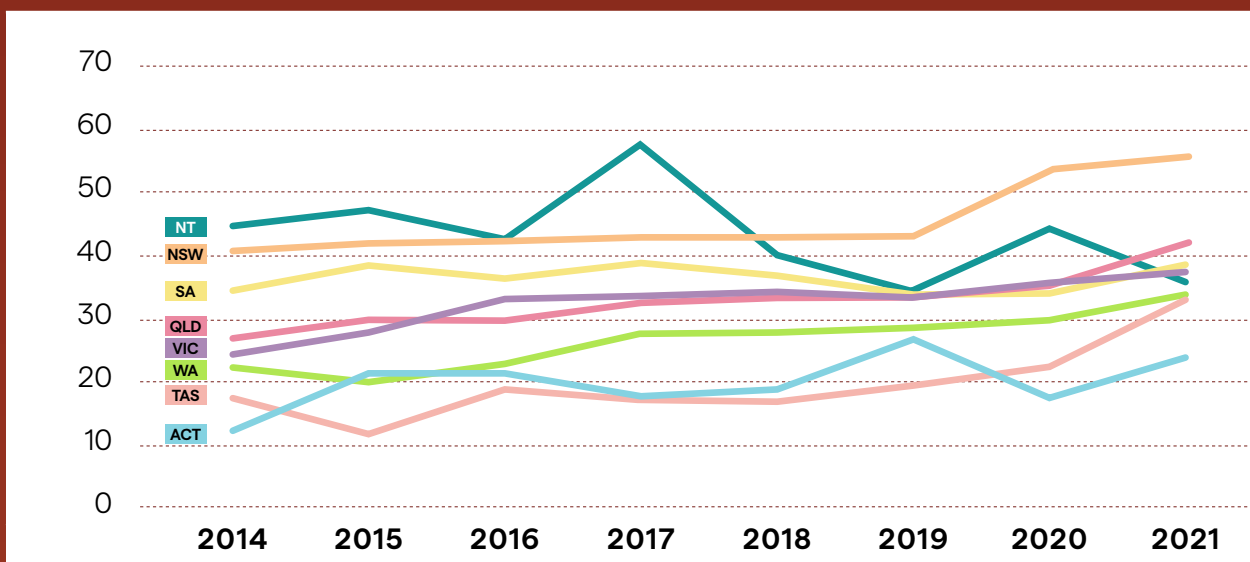
(ABS - Recorded Crime)

## Sexual assault

Reports of sexual violence in the Northern Territory are lower than reported rates of domestic and family violence assaults. There is evidence to show that intimate partner violence (or domestic violence) co-occurs with sexual violence (Cox, 2015). This is because sexual violence often occurs within the context of intimate partner violence. This means that where there are high rates of domestic violence, there are usually high rates of sexual violence. Whilst rates of sexual violence in the Northern Territory are unacceptably high, it is also likely that experiences of sexual violence are being significantly underreported and reports

to police and formal services have fallen. A fall in reports does not mean a fall in incidents. Services should anticipate that with an increase of awareness and decrease of stigma, reports of violence should increase as people are more likely to be able to identify and report (Our Watch, 2017). It has been theorised that stigma and shame in relation to sexual violence prevents people from reporting, and in the Northern Territory context, it is theorised that this may be linked to allegations of child sexual assault levelled at communities during the Northern Territory Emergency Response (the Intervention).

**Sexual assault rate per 100,000 persons for each state/territory since 2014**



(ABS – Recorded Crime)



### Personal Safety Survey total violence

The self-reported experiences of violence in the last two years among women aged 18 years and over in the Northern Territory appears to show that the prevalence is decreasing. When the proportions are

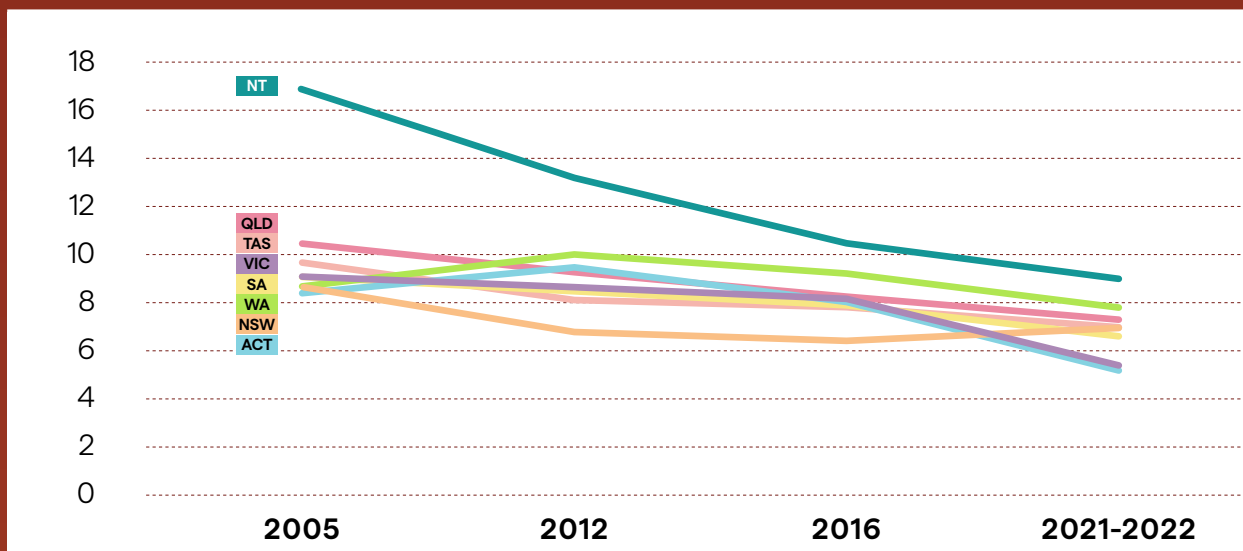
disaggregated by physical violence and sexual violence, it shows a significant fall in self-reports, particularly of the experience of sexual violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

#### Proportion of women aged 18 years and over in the Northern Territory who experienced physical and sexual violence in the last two years

YEAR	2005	2012	2016	2021-2022
Physical violence in the last two years	12.0%	11.8%	8.7%	8.2%
Sexual violence in the last two years	7.9%*	2.6%	3.2%	2.8%*

\* Estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution

#### Women aged 18 years and over, experiences in the last two years, by state and territory, time Series: proportion



(ABS – Personal Safety Survey)

Although this appears to show that the general trend is down, this self-report data is at odds with the Recorded Crime data – drawn from administrative data – which shows that domestic and family violence

is trending up. It is possible that Personal Safety Survey data does not reflect the true extent of domestic, family, and sexual violence due to potential errors (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023):

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Sampling error	“The estimates in this publication are based on information obtained from a sample survey. Any data collection may encounter factors, known as non-sampling error, which can impact on the reliability of the resulting statistics. In addition, the reliability of estimates based on sample surveys are also subject to sampling variability. That is, the estimates may differ from the results that would have been produced had all persons in the population been included in the survey.”*
Non-sampling error	<p>“Non-sampling error is any factor (other than those related to sample selection) that causes the data to deviate from the true population value and can occur at any stage throughout the survey process. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• selected people that do not respond (e.g. refusals, non-contact)</li> <li>• questions being misunderstood</li> <li>• responses being incorrectly recorded</li> <li>• errors in coding or processing the survey data.”*</li> </ul>
Relative standard error	“Only estimates with [Relative standard errors] less than 25% are considered reliable for most purposes. Estimates with higher [Relative standard errors] (between 25% and 50%) have been included in the publication but are flagged to indicate that they should be used with caution.”*

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\*Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023

In addition to these factors, participants also may not have disclosed their experiences for a myriad of reasons including shame, stigma and fear.

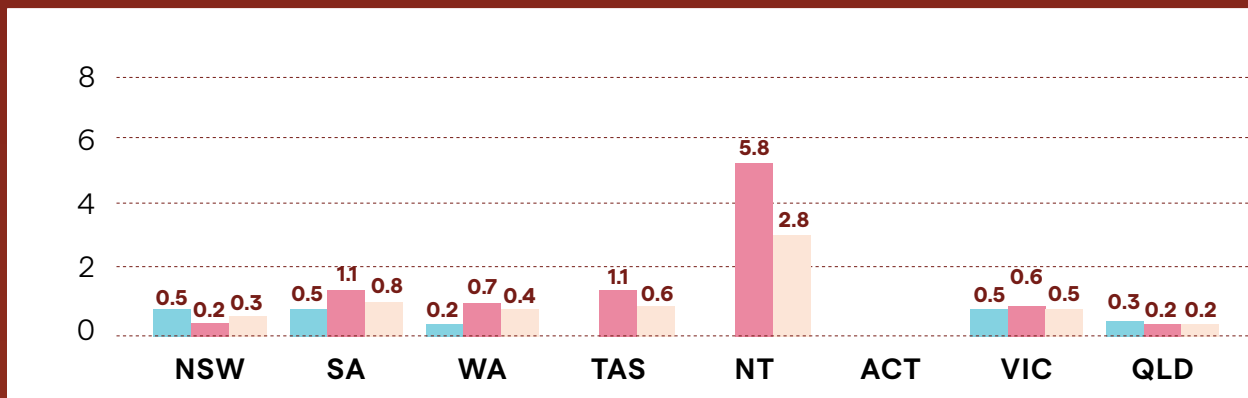
Despite these limitations, given it is self-reported, the Personal Safety Survey may serve to capture some violence that was not reported to police or other formal services.

### Domestic and family violence-related homicide

Domestic and family violence-related assaults are not only prevalent, the violence is often also severe. In the Northern Territory a weapon was used in 41% of total assaults and the rate of domestic and family violence related homicide is also far higher than in other jurisdictions.

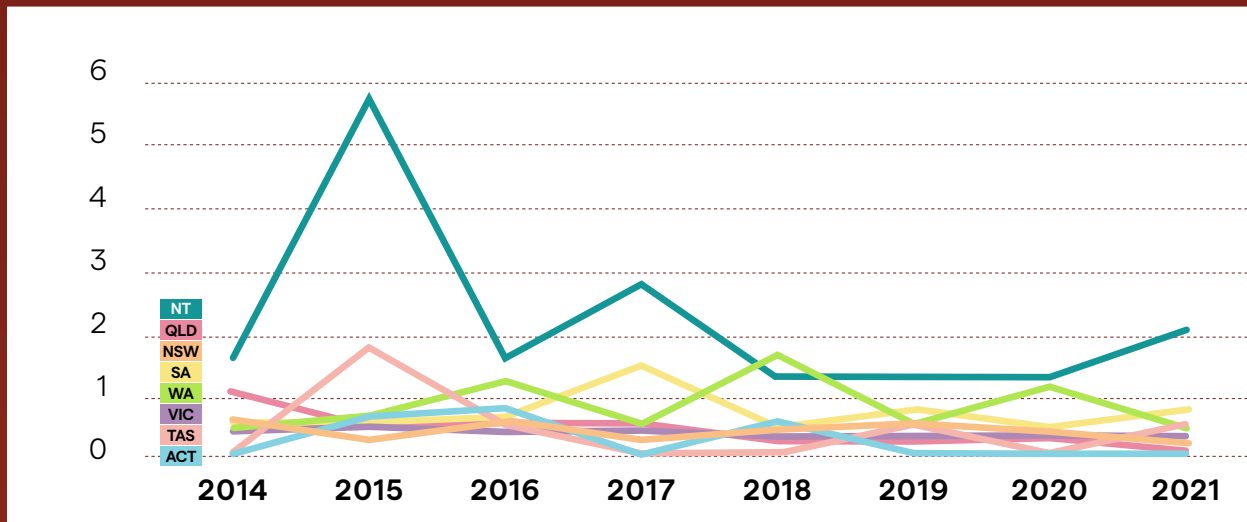
Rates of domestic and family violence-related homicides in the Northern Territory vary over time, but they remain higher than other jurisdictions, with few exceptions.

**Domestic family violence-related homicide rate per 100,000 persons, 2021**



- Male homicide and related offences(e)
- Female homicide and related offences(e)
- Total homicide and related offences(e) (ABS – Recorded Crime)

**Domestic family related homicides rate per 100,000 persons for each state/territory, 2014 - 2021**



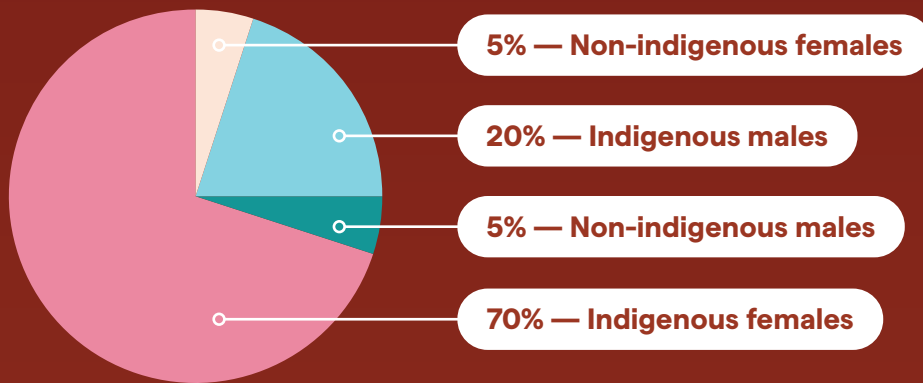
(ABS – Recorded Crime)

### Domestic and family assault deaths reported to the coroner in the Northern Territory

There were 153 deaths due to assault perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner or family member that were reported to a Northern Territory coroner from July 2000 to December 2021. It is important to note that this figure excludes cases where court proceedings are on-going and cases<sup>2</sup> which have not been formally closed by the coroner’s office. For example, this data does not list any intimate partner or family violence-related assault deaths in 2021 – yet at least three women were killed by intimate partners in Alice Springs in that year alone, and other gaps in the NCIS data are exemplified by the ABS data presented above.

With that caveat, from July 2000 to December 2021, there were an average of 12 (12.4) domestic and family violence-related assault deaths identified per calendar year in the Northern Territory.

**Intimate partner perpetrated assault deaths by sex and Indigenous origin of the deceased 2000-2021 (NCIS)**

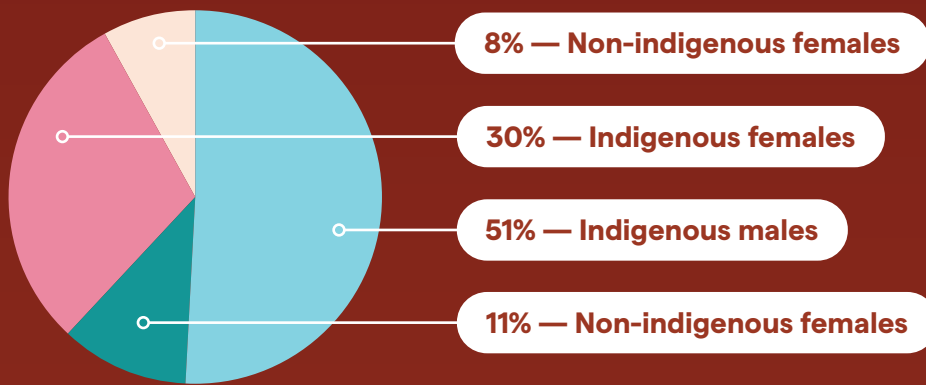


<sup>2</sup> The authors acknowledge that whilst the data makes reference to 'cases', these are real people's lives.

**In the Northern Territory, the vast majority of victims of intimate partner assaults resulting in death are Indigenous women.**

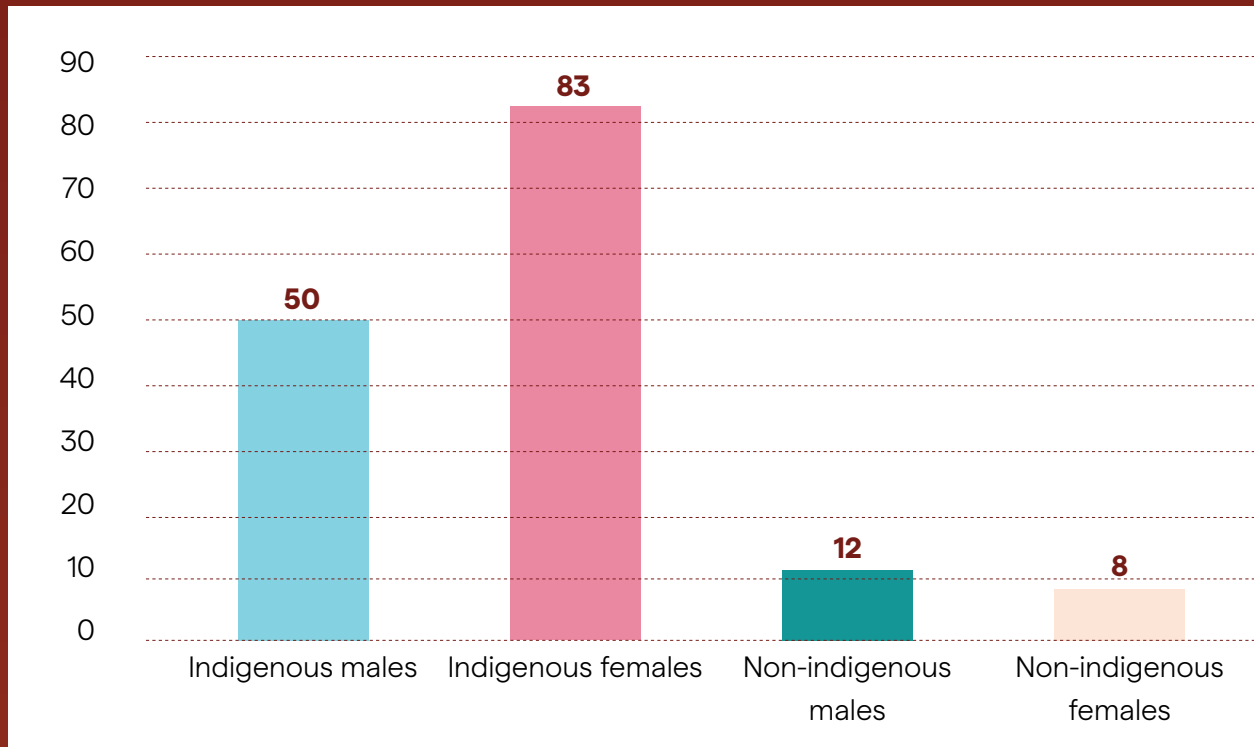
In the NT, between 1 July 2000 and 31 December 2021, 70% of the assault deaths by intimate partners were perpetrated against Indigenous women.

**Assault deaths perpetrated by family members by sex and Indigenous origin (coronial) of the deceased 2000-2021 (NCIS)**

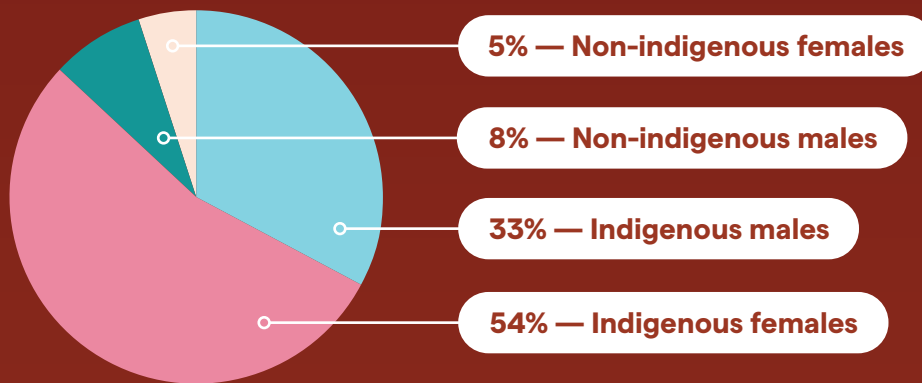


In the NT, between 2000-2021, the majority of victims of family violence assaults resulting in death were Indigenous men (51%), followed by Indigenous women (38%). These are family violence assaults perpetrated by a non-partner.

Total assault deaths by intimate partner and family member in the Northern Territory 2000-2021 by sex and Indigeneity (NCIS)



**Total assault deaths by intimate partner and family member in the Northern Territory 2000-2021 by sex and Indigeneity (NCIS)**



The total number of assault deaths includes both intimate partner and non-partner family violence assault deaths and shows that Indigenous women make up 53% of these assault deaths, followed by Indigenous men (33%), non-Indigenous men (8%) and non-Indigenous women (5%).



### **DFSV in the NT is gendered and disproportionately affects Indigenous women**

- Domestic and family related assault disproportionately affects Indigenous women in the Northern Territory who are **over eight times** more likely to be assaulted than non-Indigenous women or men, and **over three times** more likely to be assaulted than Indigenous men.
- Indigenous women in the Northern Territory are killed by intimate partners at **3.5 times the rate of Indigenous men**, and at **almost 13 times** the rate of non-Indigenous women and men.
- Indigenous men are disproportionately affected by (non-partner) family violence related homicide. Indigenous men are being killed by family members (other than a current or former partner) at **1.6 times** the rate of Indigenous women, **4.5 times** the rate of non-Indigenous men and **10.5 times** the rate of non-Indigenous women.
- Indigenous women are being killed by family members (other than a current or former partner) at **six times** the rate of non-Indigenous women and **almost three times** the rate of non-Indigenous men.
- Domestic and family related homicide of Indigenous women in the Northern Territory is **almost twice** that of Indigenous men, **almost seven times** that of non-Indigenous men and **ten times** that of non-Indigenous women.

## Incomplete data

The Northern Territory – like other jurisdictions in Australia – is heavily reliant on administrative data, such as that collected by police. Such data cannot show the true prevalence, as globally less than 40% of violence against women is ever reported to anyone, and less than 10% is ever reported to police (United Nations Economic and Social Affairs, 2015).

There are significant barriers to reporting which affect the data. Stigma and shame often prevent victim-survivors from disclosing or reporting. Other factors which affect reporting include mistrust of police and formal services, fear of child removal, and geographical remoteness and lack of services. These barriers mean that not all experiences of violence are reported, and are therefore, not captured in the data.

For example, one study found that nine out of 10 women who had experienced sexual assault in the past 10 years did not report it to police (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020). Therefore, data collected by police likely reflects only the severest of cases and/or cases where people have greater trust of the police, and/or are less likely to experience discrimination.

Data from the NCIS is also incomplete. This may be because ‘cases’ are not yet closed – for example, coroners may elect to, or may be required to, suspend closure of coronial investigations in relation to assault deaths until criminal court processes have been finalised. As a result, assault death figures for more recent years of data may be under-representative.

The Northern Territory also does not have a domestic violence death review board like other jurisdictions, such as New South Wales. The data coming through from the coroner’s office is therefore limited and often requires examination of coronial findings by individuals.

Moreover, only cases that are closed in the NCIS following coronial investigation are included in the database. Relevant cases may still be under coronial investigation and therefore not included. For example, the NCIS has recorded no assault deaths in 2020 or 2021 in the Northern Territory, yet the ABS has recorded 13 domestic and family related homicides and related offenses in the Northern Territory during these years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

## Limitations of national surveys

The Personal Safety Survey, a populational-level survey conducted nationwide by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, provides a more accurate picture than administrative data when it comes to the prevalence of violence experienced by Australians. Unlike administrative data sets which often capture only formal reports of violence to police or services, a national, randomised, large-scale survey can capture experiences of violence that have not been formally reported, but disclosed in a confidential and anonymised survey. However, because national surveys face considerable challenges collecting responses in very remote areas or in institutional settings, such surveys are unlikely to accurately reflect the true prevalence of violence in the Northern Territory. Moreover, COVID-19 pandemic may have affected data collected during this period, as public health measures may have impacted the ability for the surveys to be conducted and, globally, reports of violence against women sharply increased during this time (UN Women, 2020).

## Misalignment of DFSV definitions, categorisations, and data collection methods

The NCIS data is focused on victimisation rather than perpetration. Perpetrator relationship is a coded field within all NCIS cases where the Intent type is assault. This field does not imply the sex, gender identity or other information about the perpetrator, nor do all assault cases necessarily refer to 'murder' or 'homicide' incidents and, for example, may include manslaughter. In addition, the perpetrator's relationship to the deceased may either be unknown or may not be specified in the coronial file, in which case the field is coded as unknown perpetrator or not stated. Cases were only included in this report where the perpetrator's relationship to the deceased was known. As a result, the number of cases identified in the NCIS database may not be representative of the total number of relevant deaths. In addition, reporting of cases from the NCIS may vary over time due to differences in methodology and changes in case data, such as increases in case closure and data availability.

Triangulating other datasets with the cases contained in the NCIS also has limitations. Information contained in the NCIS may not be comparable with other data sources due to differences in data collection and classification. For example, the publicly available ABS data does not disaggregate by sex and Indigeneity, and therefore, makes it difficult to 'add' these cases to the NCIS data. Moreover, the ABS data reports 'homicides and related offences' whilst NCIS reports 'assault deaths' – these differing categorisations make it difficult to triangulate the data. Using media reports also has limitations as not all deaths are reported, nor are they necessarily reported in a way that provides the necessary information to complement other datasets.

Moreover, none of this data includes those deaths where domestic, family, and sexual violence is a contributing factor but could not be determined as the exact cause of death. For example, the inquest into the death of HD illustrates the limitations of data.

## **Lack of disaggregated data**

Finally, not all data that is captured is communicated or disaggregated. For example, in the Northern Territory, despite the fact that data about the gender, Indigeneity, and relationship between victim and offender is recorded by police, this is not disaggregated and/or communicated in NT Police crime statistics and reports (NT Police, 2023).

## Coronial inquest into the death of HD

The Northern Territory coronial inquest into HD could not determine whether the brain hemorrhage which killed H.D. was caused by the physical abuse from her intimate male partner, so her death has not been included in these figures.

*“The cause of death was subdural haemorrhage in the context of chronic alcoholism due to post traumatic stress disorder after the death of her first-born child.”*

– Judge Greg Cavanagh found in the coronial inquest into HD’s death

HD’s former partner has since been charged with failure to render care. Yet HD’s case exemplifies the complexity of determining domestic and family violence-related nature of deaths, as the significant history of abuse would indicate that domestic and family violence was, at the very least, a significant contributing factor to her death, yet she is still not included in these figures and indeed, this possibility was never investigated at the time of her death.

*“A crime scene wasn’t declared. It is likely that declaring it was affected by similar considerations to the failure to protect HD after complaints were made. In effect, the word of a fellow police officer weighed more heavily than it should, and her death was believed to be an overdose. In this case there was also the history of domestic violence including the recent reports that were at that very time being investigated.”*

– Judge Greg Cavanagh

## **Overall, the existing evidence – though incomplete – indicates that domestic, family, and sexual violence is disproportionately high and severe in the Northern Territory.**

We know that domestic violence disproportionately impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the Northern Territory – but we do not have the full picture due to limitations in the current data sets.

We know very little about who is perpetrating this violence, with little to no data collected or disaggregated according to perpetrators' relationship to the victim or perpetrator profiles. Similarly, we know that sexual violence in the Northern Territory is likely under-reported – but we do not know by how much. We know the Northern Territory needs a dramatic increase in funding to address the scale and severity of domestic, family, and sexual violence.

# 1

## Addressing the high rates of DFSV in the NT

- Implement a Federal needs-based funding model so the Northern Territory has the funds it needs to address domestic, family, and sexual violence.
- Develop public health initiatives to reduce stigma and shame among sexual violence survivors, and build upon the strong primary prevention work in the Northern Territory.
- Introduce long-term program funding cycles to support the good work led by specialist domestic, family, and sexual violence services and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in the Northern Territory.
- Support the Northern Territory domestic, family, and sexual violence workforce with adequate resources, training, and support mechanisms to address the high rates of vicarious trauma and burnout.
- Increase early intervention, tertiary response, and recovery programs in the Northern Territory to disrupt trajectories and increase supports for people who have experienced violence and accountability for people who have used violence.

## 2 Addressing the data gaps on DFSV

- Establish a Northern Territory Domestic Violence Death Review Board.
- Work with ABS, NCIS, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and others to improve data collection, disaggregation and reporting.
- Establish a national perpetration study on domestic, family, and sexual violence to gather much-needed data on violence perpetration, and ensure this is collected in very remote areas.
- Develop data collection and reporting guidelines for police and formal services that includes a gender and domestic, family, and sexual violence lens.
- Increase and improve training for police and healthcare workers to improve the identification, response, and reporting of violence.
- Work with ANROWS to develop jurisdictionally focused research projects to identify barriers to reporting and ways to address data gaps.



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