



Advocating for freedom
from violence



Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education

FAMILY VIOLENCE

AND ALCOHOL

DURING COVID-19

MAY 2020

KEY POINTS

A total of 53 frontline specialist domestic and family violence workers from 27 family and domestic violence services in New South Wales (NSW) were surveyed between 4 and 8 May 2020.

Nearly half (47 per cent) of the respondents reported an increase in their case load since COVID-19 restrictions began, 38 per cent reported no increase or decrease and 15 per cent reported a decrease.

Workers from a metropolitan service were more likely (58 per cent) to report a case load increase than those from regional services (37 per cent).

The most common reason for a reported increase in case load was demand from new clients (56 per cent), followed by demand from existing clients (20 per cent).

About half (51 per cent) reported that there has been an increase in the involvement of alcohol in family violence situations since the COVID-19 restrictions were introduced, while 40 per cent said alcohol's involvement had not changed and none of the respondents reported decreased involvement.

Current issues with alcohol use and family violence identified included:

- » increased alcohol use because of changed circumstances
- » alcohol use increasing verbal and physical abuse
- » alcohol adding to financial strain on the family.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 crisis is causing significant financial hardship, isolation, anxiety and stress within the Australian community. This has created an environment of heightened risk of family violence. The severity of existing family violence situations may increase due to isolation in the home, and new cases of family violence may be more likely with the significant strain on families.

Already there are early indications of an increase in family violence across Australia since COVID-19 restrictions began in March 2020.¹

Alcohol use has also been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, with data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) showing 14 per cent of those surveyed reported an increase in alcohol consumption.² Alcohol use is a major contributor to family violence.³ It is estimated in Australia that alcohol-related domestic assaults account for up to 50 per cent of all recorded domestic assaults.⁴ There is international evidence that alcohol use increases both the frequency and severity of intimate partner violence.⁵ In Australia, recent evidence shows alcohol use is associated with higher rates of physical violence and injury during intimate partner violence.⁶

In-depth interviews of Australian women with lived experience of alcohol-related intimate partner violence shows they experience a common cycle of escalating violence, linked to the progression of intoxication by their partner. This cycle is predictable from the woman's perspective, often making them fearful of their partner's drinking, and leading them to adopt strategies to protect themselves such as avoidance of the perpetrator during periods of heightened aggression.⁷

Understanding how alcohol use and family violence are impacted by COVID-19 is a priority for public health and safety.

This report presents the results of a survey of family violence services across New South Wales (NSW) between 4 and 8 May 2020. The purpose of this survey was to assess how alcohol's involvement in family violence has changed since the COVID-19 restrictions began.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Women's Safety NSW is a state-wide peak body for women's specialist services advocating for women's safety in the context of domestic and family violence through systemic reform and cultural change.

The survey was developed by Women's Safety NSW, in partnership with the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE). The survey was undertaken with frontline specialist domestic and family violence workers across NSW, including case workers, intake and referral officers, court advocacy workers, family advocacy support service workers, counsellors, Aboriginal specialist workers, Multicultural specialist workers, disability-focussed workers, crisis accommodation support workers and service coordinators.

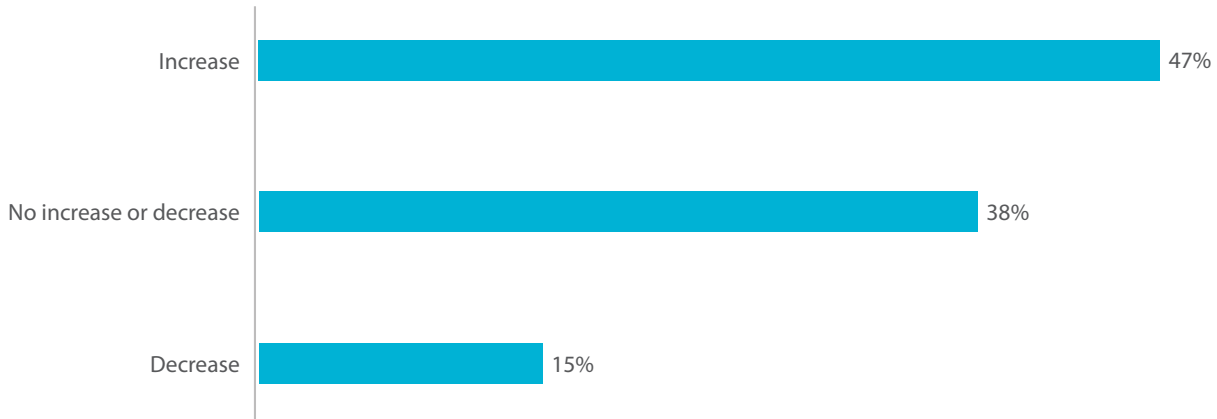
The survey was conducted between 4 and 8 May 2020. A total of 53 people from 27 services responded to the survey. The service locations were evenly spread across regional (51 per cent) and metropolitan (49 per cent) areas of NSW.

FINDINGS

CLIENT CASELOAD

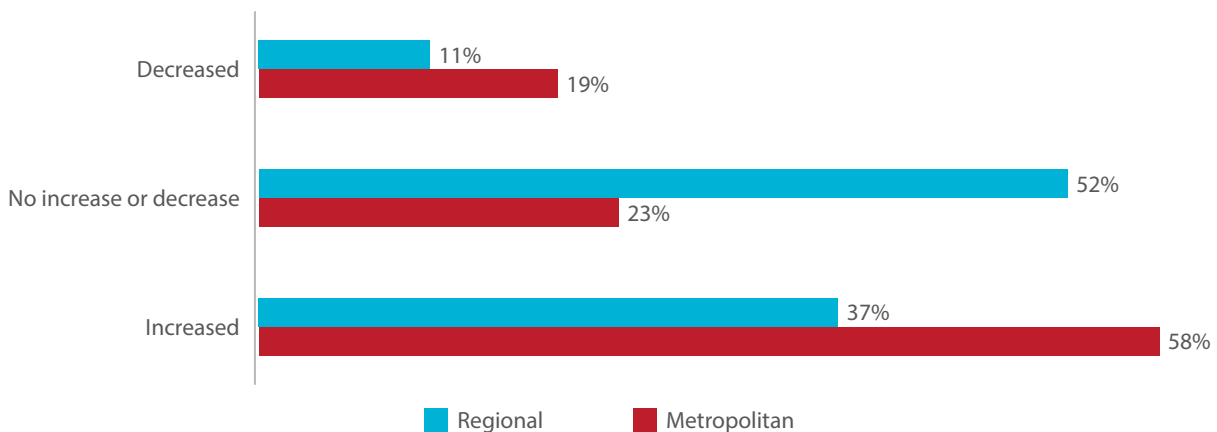
The survey asked workers about their current client caseload and how it compared to before COVID-19 restrictions were introduced in Australia. Figure 1 shows whether people reported an increase or decrease in caseload, or neither, since COVID-19 restrictions. Nearly half (47 per cent) reported an increase.

Figure 1 - Caseload change since COVID-19 restrictions began



Results on reported caseload were then analysed based on whether the respondent reported working in a regional or metropolitan location (see Figure 2). People in a metropolitan location were more likely (58 per cent) to report an increase than those in a regional location (37 per cent). While this indicates potential differences for families living in regional and metropolitan areas, it should be noted that some services may support clients across a large area, including both regional and metropolitan locations.

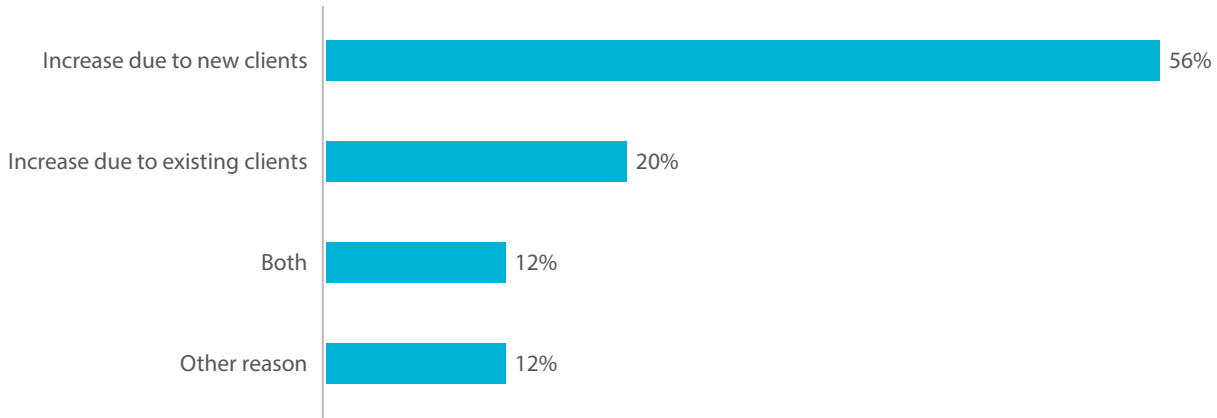
Figure 2 - Caseload change since COVID-19 restrictions began, regional vs metropolitan



REASONS FOR INCREASED CASELOAD

For people reporting an increase in caseload, the survey asked about the potential reasons for this (see Figure 3). Over half (56 per cent) reported that the reason was due to increased demand from new clients, while a fifth (20 per cent) reported it was due to increase in demand from existing clients, and 12 per cent reported it was due to both new and existing client demand.

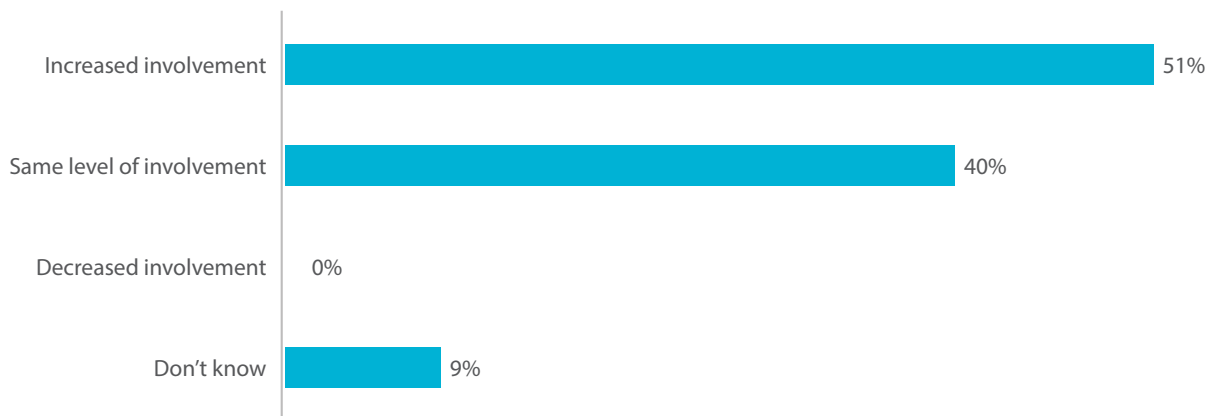
Figure 3 - Reasons for increase in caseload



INVOLVEMENT OF ALCOHOL IN FAMILY VIOLENCE SITUATIONS

The survey then asked if, in their experience, they were seeing a change in the involvement of alcohol as a stressor in family violence situations. Figure 4 shows that half (51 per cent) reported increased involvement of alcohol as a stressor in family violence situations since COVID-19 restrictions began. Four in ten (40 per cent) said that alcohol's involvement had not changed, while none of the respondents reported a decrease in the involvement of alcohol.

Figure 4 - Increase or decrease in involvement of alcohol as a stressor in family violence situations since COVID-19 restrictions began



HOW COVID-19 IS IMPACTING ON ALCOHOL USE AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Finally, the survey asked respondents to share their thoughts in an open-ended format. Respondents were asked, in their recent experience, how COVID-19 restrictions may be impacting on alcohol use and violence within families. An analysis of recurring themes emerging from their responses is below.

Increased alcohol use because of changed circumstances

Respondents reported they are observing situations where alcohol is being used as a coping mechanism for increased stress, boredom, pressures and isolation:

- “ Increase in alcohol due to pressures of losing income, isolation, children home schooling”
- “ More financial pressure and stress has anecdotally led to an increase in alcohol consumption as a stress-reliever..”
- “ More drinking at home. Drinking due to stress or boredom”
- “ I think that the restrictions have slightly increased alcohol consumption because of not being at work, increased stressors and financial hardships”
- “ Alcohol is being increasingly used as a coping mechanism for the extra stress associated with loss of employment, fear of the virus, isolation and coping with being stuck at home with children and partners”
- “ Clients have said he has more time to drink now as he isn't working, also heard clients say they are self-medicating with alcohol as they are bored or numbing his abuse”

Alcohol use increasing verbal and physical abuse

Respondents reported that in some cases, increased alcohol use is corresponding with increased verbal and physical abuse:

- “ Definitely an increase in alcohol related incidents. We are seeing this both in the home and also where perpetrators are contacting and verbally abusing woman whilst also not living in the home..”
- “ In most narratives alcohol is a factor and when alcohol is involved the severity of abuse/violence increases.”
- “ Due to COVID-19 and working from home and or lost their jobs because of COVID-19, has slightly increase[d] with the POI [person of interest] using alcohol and becoming violent, verbal abusive and intimidating.”

Alcohol adding to financial strain on the family

Some respondents highlighted that for families in financial hardship, purchasing alcohol can lead to further financial strain on the family:

- “ Another concern with increased alcohol use is the ripple effect of financial strain and lack of priorities for the family. Bills, rent and general living costs tend to be pushed to the back of the priority list so alcohol can be purchased”
- “ For some clients, cost of alcohol not an incentive or deterrent, rather seen as an essential. I have noticed there is very little thought given to spending on alcohol. Those partners will forgo food/ something for children before forgoing buying alcohol.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Women's Safety NSW and FARE would like to thank the frontline workers who participated in this survey. For further information on how Women's Safety NSW and FARE are supporting the community during COVID-19, please visit the following websites:

- www.womenssafetyNSW.org.au
- www.fare.org.au/covid19

Women's Safety NSW and the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country across Australia and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging.

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ISBN 978-0-6487068-8-5