

MEDIA RELEASE

Role of alcohol in family violence revealed by specialists in COVID-19 assessment

The seriousness of alcohol's role in family and intimate partner violence is evident in an Australian-first survey of specialists working in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In partnership with FARE, Women's Safety NSW today released the report, *Family violence and alcohol during COVID-19*, which assesses the caseload of a range of family violence specialists in crisis support, counselling, court advocacy and supported accommodation, including those with an Aboriginal, multicultural and disability-focus.

Women's Safety NSW CEO Hayley Foster says feedback from the 53 specialists surveyed is that almost half of them (47 per cent) are seeing an increase in their caseload, with the majority of the increase due to new clients and also higher demand from existing clients.

"Early on amid the COVID-19 social isolation measures there were indications of increasing family violence, and these new insights from our specialist services confirm that trend and help us better understand what is happening behind closed doors," Ms Foster said.

As well as client numbers escalating, specialists are seeing greater complexity in family violence incidents and 51 per cent of them are reporting an increase in the role of alcohol use.

"Our specialists are being told by women that alcohol is being used in response to stress, loss of employment, fears of the virus, isolation and being "stuck at home with children and partners", with some clients self-medicating with alcohol to numb the pain of abuse," Ms Foster said.

"This is extremely concerning as we are heading into a highly risky time for women and children seeking safety as the pandemic restrictions are slowly lifted," she said.

FARE CEO Caterina Giorgi says, "It is deeply worrying that more women and children across the community are experiencing family and partner violence, and that alcohol is increasingly involved in many of these abusive situations".

"Alcohol can increase the frequency and severity of family violence and there is an urgent need to address this holistically, including common sense measures like stopping the 'rapid delivery' of alcohol to people in their homes late at night," Ms Giorgi said.

"Action is also needed to ensure that women and children can live in safety and can access alcohol and other drug (AOD), mental health, health and family violence services. And this requires greater integration between these services and training across sectors," she said.

Ms Foster says this heightened level of family violence and alcohol-fuelled harm will last long after the pandemic is under control, which is why it's so important to improve referral pathways between health and specialist family violence services at this time.

“Many women experiencing violence are presenting at AOD, mental health and other health services and they need to be consistently linked in with specialist family violence supports in order for them to achieve safety,” Ms Foster said.

Key insights in *Family violence and alcohol during COVID-19*

- A total of 53 frontline women’s 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.
- 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).
- Around 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.

ENDS

Caterina Giorgi and Hayley Foster are available for interview.

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The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. Nearly 6,000 lives are lost every year and more than 144,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation’s greatest preventive health challenges.