

NCAS YOUTH REPORT

SEEKING GENUINE GENDER EQUALITY AND RESPECT

One in five young Australians believe there are circumstances in which women bear part of the responsibility for sexual assault and nearly half agree that tracking a partner by electronic means without consent is acceptable.



This is a finding of the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS) young people sample, a mirror to societal attitudes into which few people would feel comfortable looking. Survey findings on the subset of young people were released in September 2015.

Developed by VicHealth in partnership with The University of Melbourne, the Social Research Centre and experts across Australia, and supported by the Australian Government Department of Social Services, the NCAS provides a snapshot of community attitudes to violence over time and points to the need for future prevention activity. This national research has been carried out in 2009 and 2013; the latest surveying over 17,500 respondents across Australia including over 1,900 young people.

The beliefs and attitudes that people hold about violence against women have a significant influence on social norms; that is, the community beliefs about what is acceptable and not acceptable. Attitudes help to create a culture in which violence is considered acceptable – or, on the other hand, where it is rejected outright. Young people are particularly sensitive to social norms and can also have a role in influencing those around them.

From the perspectives of both witness and perpetrator, early adulthood is a life stage during which vulnerability to violence for men and women is heightened.

“We know that victims of violence against women are most commonly young women and that a large number of men who commit sexual violence against women do so for the first time before the age of 20. This violence has serious consequences for young people because they’re at a critical life stage,” said VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter.

The NCAS Youth Report identifies that young people largely support gender equality in the public sphere, such as in workplaces and in education. However, they are less likely to support gender equality in relationships and in the home – over one-third of young Australians think women want men to be in charge of relationships at home. This suggests that young people need more examples and more influences that promote respect and equality, instead of unequal power and control. The report also found that the best predictor of a young person’s attitude to violence is their understanding of violence and their attitude to equality. In other words, young people who understand the nature of violence and who support gender equality are more likely to reject violence against women.

The analysis from the young people’s survey subset pointed not only to the areas of concern, but more positively, to the ways in which the attitudes of young people can be influenced to bring about preventive action.

The survey found that young Australians have a sound understanding of violence against women and that they endorse activities which promote gender equality. It also showed that most young Australians (more than 90%) would intervene if they saw a woman being assaulted by their partner. Fewer young men hold high levels of violence-supportive attitudes* in the 2013 sample, compared with 2009 findings.

**For example, justifying violence against women, or trivialising the impact of violence*

“
Most young Australians (more than 90%) would intervene if they saw a woman being assaulted by their partner.”

In its new Mental Wellbeing Strategy (launched in December 2015), VicHealth supports initiatives that increase protective factors associated with mental wellbeing. Young adulthood is a critical time, especially in terms of educational opportunities, employability, friendships and relationships and participation in civic activity. Building resilience and social connection in young people is a pivotal focus of this strategy. VicHealth has identified positive and respectful relationships with others as one of the factors that strengthen and nurture resilience.

VicHealth Principal Program Officer, Mental Wellbeing, Renee Imbesi said that building strong environments is of equal importance to working with young people. “Environments like workplaces, education, sports, media and popular culture contribute hugely to the formation of attitudes on respectful relationships,” she said. “We will be working to ensure these environments have a positive influence on young people.”

Engaging young people through peer influence will also be part of the solution.

There are enough positive findings in the NCAS report that show the great potential to support young people with new prevention initiatives as well as build on existing work by VicHealth and other organisations to ensure that they can have the best possible conditions for developing healthy and respectful approaches to relationships that will serve them well into adulthood. ■