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MEASURING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA

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I. ABSTRACT

1. This paper describes the key sources of data for measuring violence against women in Australia and how the results relate to one another. It describes the differences in collection methodologies used in different surveys (including short module approaches and full specialised surveys) and considers some of the implications in relation to results. The paper draws on recent work to bring together and confront data from a range of survey and administrative sources around the issue of violence against women and personal safety more generally. There are a number of known issues in comparing data on assault from different collections in Australia, and some work is underway to determine appropriate approaches for future collections.

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Please note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the ABS. Where quoted or used, the paper should be clearly attributed to the author.

II. INTRODUCTION

2. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has a key role to play in producing national statistics on crime and justice to meet the needs of governments and the community in Australia. Among the important needs in this field is information relating to violence against women. This has been supported by a range of peak body government, community and research organisations at both national and state levels. It is relevant to note that the Australian government is currently running a national campaign, titled 'Violence Against Women, Australia Says No', through a variety of media. The campaign delivers the message that violence against women is a crime and explains what the public can do to help stop it.

3. To date, the 1996 Women's Safety Survey (WSS) has been the main source of information on violence against women. The ABS is currently planning to repeat this survey in 2005 with much the same content but extending it to also collect information about violence against men. This new survey is to be known as the 2005 Personal Safety Survey (PSS). Aside from this particular personal violence focussed survey the ABS has a number of other collections, including one based on police records and a national crime victims survey, which have provided important references for understanding the nature and extent of violence against women in Australia. A recent General Social Survey has provided some additional data.

4. Aside from these ABS activities it is important to note that Australia has been a participant in the series of International Crime Victims Surveys (ICVS) conducted since 1989 and in the 2003 International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS). In Australia, these surveys have both been coordinated by the Australian Institute of Criminology, with the latter being funded by the Office of the Status of Women (OSW) through the National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault. Fieldwork for the Australian component of IVAWS has been completed, with more than 6,000 interviews with women aged 18 to 69 years conducted in 2002-2003. The analysis of data from IVAWS are to be published soon. The 2004 round of the ICVS is also currently in the field.

5. This paper describes the aims and methods of these collections where data has already been published. It describes similarities and differences in violence prevalence rates obtained from these collections. Its primary aim is to show how the results relate to one another and to discuss possible reasons for differences where they exist. As data are available from specialised surveys and surveys in which some aspects of violence against women are obtained from short question modules, there is some opportunity to reflect on the consistency of the data obtained from both means.

III. MEASURING VIOLENCE

6. An important source of information about the prevalence of violence and other crimes in Australia comes from police statistics. However, these statistics only represent the level of recording of offences by the police and are known to underestimate the true extent of crime. People who experience incidents of physical and sexual assault, or threats of violence, often remain silent about such incidents (at least to the police). Non-reporting is a phenomenon that is common to most populations and tends to be more prevalent for personal rather than household crimes. It is particularly relevant to sexual assault and is common to men, women and children. Household surveys provide an opportunity to overcome the limitations of police statistics in

measuring the full extent of crime because they can ask questions about unreported crime. Specialised surveys also provide opportunities to investigate the circumstances and risk factors associated with the experience of violence and how it impacts on the victims life.

7. Whatever the means that may be used to produce good statistics, measuring violence in the community is a complex task. Asking survey questions tests people's memories about events that occurred in the past which may have been traumatic and may have involved incidents about which the victim has not previously revealed to any other person. There are definitional issues as to what should be included in violence which may affect the way in which survey questions are actually phrased. But even after the concepts have been determined the task of actually obtaining full details of all acts of violence, as conceived, may be influenced by numerous other factors. These include mode effects (ie, the means used to collect the data, be it a private personal interview, a non-private interview, the use of self completion questionnaires, or telephone interviews), and the willingness of respondents to reveal information in front of, or about, close relatives or friends who might be present at the time the survey questions are being answered. In cases of domestic violence the real possibility that some respondents could feel threatened by their partner by the act of providing information also comes into play. As with any survey, the ways in which questions are asked can also impact on the answers provided by respondents.

8. Notwithstanding the practical issues, there are no generally agreed or accepted standards for defining what constitutes violence. For the purposes of the Women's Safety Survey violence was broadly defined to refer to any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault. However, greater levels of specificity were used to define particular types of violence such as physical assault, physical threats sometimes in terms of specific actions. For instance physical assault was considered to involve physical force with the intent to harm or frighten a women. An attempt or threat to inflict harm was only included if a woman believed it was able to be carried out. Sexual assault included acts of a sexual nature carried out against a woman's will though the use of physical force, coercion, or any attempts to do this. Unwanted sexual touching was excluded from sexual assault but collected and reported separately.

IV. SOURCES OF DATA

9. This section provides a description of each of the national data collections which support analysis of violence against women in Australia. As well as describing the range of data available from each collection, the descriptions aim to provide some insights into the relative merits of each collection in terms of data collection methods, sample size and design. For the survey based collections the descriptions are complemented by the table on page 4 which helps to summarise some of the similarities and differences between the surveys.

Recorded Crime

10. Recorded Crime, Australia is an ABS coordinated collection compiled from police records of reported crimes from state and territory police agencies around the country. Compiled since 1993 it has been continuously improved and extended to include a broader range of offences and more detailed information about the victims and perpetrators. The annual publication *Recorded Crime Victims, Australia* (ABS, cat. no. 4510.0) presents details of numbers of offences recorded by police for a range of offences. Assault and sexual assault are included. Characteristics of the victims, including age and sex, and details about the offence such as location, weapon use, as well as the relationship between offender and victim, are provided by

the collection. As discussed, a key issue with this source is that many crimes, especially personal crimes, remain unreported.

National Crime and Safety Survey (ABS)

11. The National Crime and Safety Survey (NCSS) has been a regular household survey conducted by the ABS. Data have been collected in 1975, 1983, 1993, 1998 and most recently in 2002. In some states the survey has been conducted on a more frequent basis. The survey content covers: experiences of the crimes of break and enter, robbery, assault, motor vehicle theft and sexual assault; people's reporting (to police) behaviour, and people's feelings of safety in various settings. It has been designed to measure the prevalence of the different types of crime, to measure changes in crime rates and feelings of safety over time, to identify the characteristics of high and low risk subgroups, to assess reporting patterns for different offences and to explore some of the factors which affect the risk of victimisation.

12. As shown in table 1 the sample size is relatively large compared to the other surveys of interest in this review. Even so, for relatively infrequent crimes such as sexual assault, the sample size remains of insufficient size to allow much other than very broad level estimates of prevalence (eg women in broad age groups) to be presented with confidence. In other words, measures of sexual assault prevalence for subgroups involving more than one variable, (such as women by broad age group and marital status) tend to have high sampling errors associated with them and must be regarded with great caution. (Note: this is a problem for all of the surveys being reviewed.)

13. The mode of collecting NCSS information from households has changed over time. In 1983, the NCSS was conducted by personal interview. Since 1993, however, it has been a mail-back collection conducted as a supplementary survey to the ABS Monthly Labour Force Survey. All persons aged 15 years and over within selected households are within the scope of the survey, with the exception of a separate module on sexual assault which is only enumerated for persons aged 18 years or over. In 1993 and 1998, the sexual assault module was enumerated for females only and in 2002 it was also enumerated for males. The survey is expected to be conducted three-yearly in future. Results are published in *Crime and Safety, Australia* (ABS, cat. no. 4509.0).

Table 1. Major characteristics of surveys from which measures of violence against women are available

	1996 WSS	2000 ICVS	2002 NCSS	2002 GSS
Scope	Females aged 18 years and over Residents of private dwellings Australia wide excluding sparsely settled areas	Persons aged 16 years and over Residents of private dwellings Australia wide	Persons aged 15 years and over Residents of private dwellings Australia wide excluding sparsely settled areas	Persons aged 18 years and over Residents of private dwellings Australia wide excluding sparsely settled areas
Mode	Personal interview ensuring privacy	Telephone interview	Mail back self completion forms	Personal interview
Number of fully completed survey responses(a)	6,333 females	3,031 persons	41,000 persons	15,510 persons
Survey response rates	76%	57%	76%	91%
Nature of survey	Voluntary	Voluntary	Compulsory	Compulsory
Crime related data items	Physical violence Sexual violence Stalking Sexual harassment	A range of both household and personal crimes. Separate data is provided on both Physical Assault Sexual Assault	A range of both household and personal crimes. Separate data is provided on both Physical Assault Sexual Assault	Physical Assault only

(a) refers to survey forms where significant amounts of information were not missing.

Source: ABS, 2002, *Information paper: Measuring Crime Victimisation, The Impact of Different Collection Methodologies*, (cat. no. 4552.055.001) and Carcach C. and Makkai T., *The Australian component of the 2000 International Crime Victims Survey ICVS*) Paper No. 3, Australian Institute of Criminology Technical and Background Series.

Women's Safety Survey (ABS)

14. Supported by funding by the Australian Government's Office of the Status of Women and the then Department of Health and Family Services, the 1996 Women's Safety Survey was specifically designed to provide detailed information about women's safety at home and in the community. A major focus was on experiences of physical and sexual assault and closely associated forms of violence. It was also designed to support investigation of the nature and extent of violence experienced by women in terms of their relationships with the perpetrators of incidents. Among the many issues of interest supported by the survey were overall violence prevalence rates, lifetime experience of violence (ie since the age of 15), experience of partner violence (including experience of emotional abuse from current partners), and experiences of stalking and sexual harassment. Information was also collected on the actions that women took

after experiencing violence, including whether they reported it to the police, and about various consequences of violence. Information about feelings of safety were also collected.

15. The use of data collection procedures designed to maximise the full disclosure of experiences of violence was a particular feature of the survey. This was managed by having one respondent per household, a randomly selected female from all females aged 18 years or over within the household, being asked the interview questions by an experienced female ABS interviewer. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face with particular care taken to ensure that the respondent could speak freely, that is, in a private situation. Telephone interviews were available for respondents who did not wish to proceed with a face-to-face interview. The sample size (6,333 women) was designed to provide national estimates but not to support analysis for state and territory jurisdictions. Results were published in *Women's Safety, Australia* (4128.0).

16. Although the data from the WSS are now a number of years old, they remain at this time the only source of detailed information on many areas of interest in relation to violence against women. The survey provides a benchmark against which changes may be measured. As noted above a survey repeating the majority of the content from the WSS is planned for 2005, but with coverage of men as well as women. This new survey, once again with funding support for the women's component from OSW, has been named the Personal Safety Survey (PSS).

General Social Survey (ABS)

17. In 2002 ABS conducted a new multi-topic social survey known as the General Social Survey (GSS). Among other topics the survey collected data on personal safety and security, self-reported health, family engagements, engagements with wider social networks, educational participation, educational attainment, employment and other work activities, income, experiences of financial stress, experiences of personal stress, housing tenure, and access to transport. Together with additional question modules, it is intended that many of the same data items will be collected in future rounds which are expected to be run at four yearly intervals. Of particular relevance to this paper is the fact that the GSS provides an additional source of information concerning experiences of physical violence (for both men and women) which are able to be explored in terms of a range of other personal characteristics to help identify high and low risk groups. The question related to the experience of physical violence was purposely kept the same as that used in the NCSS (see appendix 1). Maintaining the same questions, question modules, or sometimes shortened modules that conceptually align with standard modules used in other specialised ABS surveys, has been a particular goal of the GSS. This has been done to promote the comparability of data from different sources.

18. Like the WSS the GSS was conducted by personal interview. However, there was no special effort to ensure that the selected household respondent (a randomly selected person aged 18 years and over who could speak for the household) was in a private situation when the interview was conducted. The sample size, was relatively large, ie involving some 15,000 households, but for female respondents would not have been dissimilar to that obtained for the WSS.

International Crime Victims Survey 2002 (Australian component)

19. Australia has been a participant in the ICVS which was first conducted in 1989 and repeated in 1992, 1996 and 2000. Australia did not take part in the 1996 survey. It is involved with the 2004 survey which is currently in the field. The ICVS is a fully standardised survey

conducted in quite a number of countries around the world. (Seventeen industrialised countries participated in the 2000 ICVS). It is designed to support international comparisons of crime victimisation and attitudes toward crime and the criminal justice system. The Australian Institute of Criminology has coordinated the Australian component of the survey. Like the ABS's NCSS the 2000 ICVS provides data about experiences of victimisation for a range of household and personal offences. Household offences for which data are collected in the ICVS include break and enter (attempted and completed); motor vehicle theft; motor vehicle damage; and theft from a motor vehicle while personal offences for which data are collected include robbery; assault; sexual offences (ie rape, attempted rape, indecent assault and offensive sexual behaviours); and theft from the person.

20. There are various differences between the NCSS and the 2000 ICVS. Compared to the ABS survey, the ICVS has a much smaller sample size (3,031) and a lower response rate (56%). The ICVS uses Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) as the data collection methodology. Residents of private dwellings aged 16 years and over were in the scope of the survey. Given the small sample size the prevalence rate estimates of relatively low prevalence crimes such as robbery and sexual assault have relatively high sampling errors associated with them. While national prevalence rate estimates for these low prevalence crimes are published, the survey does not support further analysis by other variables such as the age of the victim, even in broad categories.

V. COMPARISON OF VIOLENCE PREVALENCE RATES OBTAINED FROM DIFFERENT SURVEYS

21. The tables on the following pages show violence victimisation rates among women in Australia as measured by the three ABS surveys described above as well as those measured by the 2000 International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS). The first of the two tables presents numbers of victims and prevalence rates related to physical assault while the second provides similar data for sexual assault. The GSS did not measure the prevalence of sexual assault so the rows in the second table related to the GSS have been left blank.

22. To support like with like comparisons, the estimates from each survey have been calculated so they refer to the same population group, namely females aged 18 years and over. They have also been prepared so that the concepts of violence being measured align as closely as possible. Thus, they all relate to experiences of violence experienced in the 12 months prior to interview. Generally, and despite wording differences between the surveys, the measure of physical violence refers to actual experiences of physical assault as well as experiences of being threatened by physical violence (questions from the ABS surveys are given in the attachments). The definitions of sexual assault used, shown in the footnotes to table 3, also generally align with one another.

22. Since the estimates are all derived from sample surveys they are all subject to sampling errors. These are substantially affected by sample size and the fact that the estimates, especially for sexual assault, relate to crimes of relatively low prevalence. Once again to facilitate comparisons between the surveys, the range of offence related prevalence rate estimates obtained from each survey at the 95% level of confidence have been provided. These help to show whether the observations from each survey are significantly different or not.

Physical assault prevalence rates

23. Table 2 shows that the prevalence of physical assault experienced by women was spread over quite a large range: extending from a low of 4.0% (from the 2002 NCSS) up to 9.0% (from the 2000 ICVS). The rates from the surveys are all significantly different at the 95 % level of confidence, with the exception of those obtained from the ICVS and GSS (ie both could have been the same at around 7.9%). The assault rates from the GSS, WSS and ICVS are all significantly higher than the NCSS rate and both the ICVS and GSS rates are significantly higher than the WSS rate. Notwithstanding the fact the surveys were run in different years it appears that differences in survey modes and questions may have been important in Table 2, accounting for the large differences in results. As such they point to the difficulty in measuring the true rate of physical violence experienced by women.

24. Highlighting this difficulty is the large difference in physical assault prevalence rate estimates measured in the 2002 NCSS and the GSS (4.0% and 7.2% respectively). The problem is most apparent here because both surveys were conducted in the same year and the questions relating to physical violence were the same in both surveys. ABS investigations of the issue have surmised that survey mode effects (the use of self completion questionnaires versus personal interviews) and/or question introduction and order effects may have been important in accounting for the different results.

Table 2. WOMEN WHO EXPERIENCED PHYSICAL ASSAULT(a), - during the previous 12 months, Australia, Various Surveys

Offence category	1996 WSS(b)	2000 ICVS(c)	2002 NCSS	2002 GSS
Total population (number)	6,880,500	6,790,319	7,309,200	7,327,000
Assault victims (number)	404,400	627,635	294,200	528,000
Assault victims (prevalence)	5.9%	9.2%	4.0%	7.2%
95% confidence intervals	(5.3, 6.5)	(c)(7.8, 10.6)	(3.7, 4.3)	(6.5, 7.9)

(a) Females aged 18 years and over who experienced at least one incident of physical assault or threatened physical assault. (b) Includes all females who experienced an incident involving physical violence by either a male or female perpetrator. (c) Confidence intervals used available RSEs which were based on full population of persons aged 16 years and over. Therefore, confidence intervals will be these figures or greater.

Source: ABS, 2002, *Information paper: Measuring Crime Victimization, The Impact of Different Collection Methodologies*, ABS cat. no. 4552.055.001.

Sexual assault prevalence rates

25. In Australia sexual assault prevalence rates among women are substantially lower than physical assault prevalence rates. According to the 2002 NCSS, women were ten times more likely to experience physical assault than sexual assault (4.0% vs 0.4%) but the differences were lower in the other surveys from which the rates can be compared (Tables 2 and 3). When sexual assault rates are compared according to their source, those from the 2000 ICVS were highest (3.3%), followed by the 1996 WSS (1.5%) and the 2002 NCSS (0.4%). The estimates were all significantly different.

Table 3. WOMEN WHO EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ASSAULT, - during the last 12 months, Australia, Various Surveys

Offence category	1996 WSS(a)	2000 ICVS(b)	2002 NCSS(c)	2002 GSS(d)
Total population (number)	6,880,500	6,790,319	7,309,200	na
Sexual Assault victims (number)	100,000	224,100	28,300	na
Sexual Assault victims (prevalence)	1.5%	3.3%	0.4%	na
95% confidence intervals	(1.2 , 1.8)	(2.4 , 4.2)	(0.3, 0.5)	na

(a)Includes rape, indecent assault and attempts to force a women into sexual activity by a male perpetrator.

(b) Includes rape, attempted rape, indecent assault and offensive sexual behaviours. (c) Includes rape, attempted rape, indecent assault, and assault with intention of sexual assault. Confidence intervals used available RSEs which were based on the full population of persons aged 16 years and over. Therefore, confidence intervals will be these figures or greater. (d) Not measured.

Sources: ABS, 2002, *Information paper: Measuring Crime Victimization, The Impact of Different Collection Methodologies*, ABS cat. no. 4552.055.001. Carlos Carcach and Toni Makkai (2003). table 6, page 23. and ABS, 2004, *Sexual Assault in Australia: A statistical overview: Tables 2.1 and 2.2.*

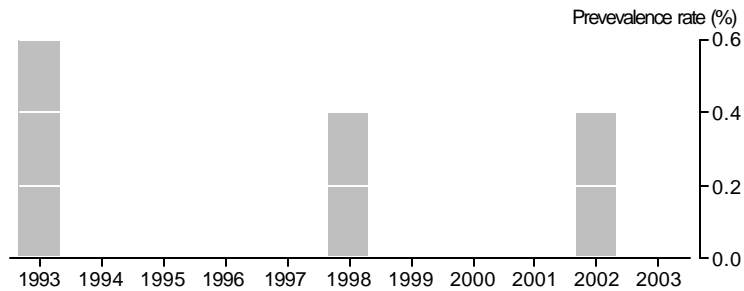
Sexual assault prevalence rate measured over time: single source estimates

26. One useful check on whether the differences in sexual assault prevalence rates shown in table 3 reflect changes in level over time (each survey was conducted in a different year), is to look at changes in the rates obtained from a recurrent collection where the concepts and methods have remained the same. Reference is made to the NCSS for this purpose, this being the only national survey that has been repeated to date. Data from the last three surveys are shown in Figure 1 on the following page. The rate for females in 2003 was the same as when the survey was conducted in 1998 (0.4%) and lower than the rate estimated in the 1993 survey (0.6%). The decrease in the prevalence rates between 1993 and 1998 was one-third, and the difference between 0.6% and 0.4% was statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

27. Compared to the NCSS series of estimates, the range and volatility of the sexual assault prevalence rate estimates taken from the 1996 WSS, the 2000 ICVS and the 2002 NCSS (moving from 1.5% to 3.3% and back to 0.4%) appear to be implausible. The large differences in estimates taken from different sources, when seen against the relative stability of estimates from the NCSS, warn against the possibility of using data from different collections to measure changes in levels of sexual assault over time. Once again, having allowed for sampling errors, the results suggest that differences in survey questions and data collection procedures are likely to be of importance in explaining the observed variations.

Figure 1.

FEMALE(a) SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMISATION, Australia, 1993–2002



(a) Female victims aged 18 years and over.

Source: ABS, *Crime and Safety, Australia, April 2002 (cat.no. 4509.0), Table 15.*

28. In contrast to the NCSS results which include incidents not reported to the police, recorded crime statistics show that sexual assault victimisation rates, for persons of all ages, have risen over the last decade (Figure 2). (Between 1993 and 2003 the increase was by about one third from 0.07% (69 per 100,000 persons) to 0.09% (92 per 100,000 persons) in the respective years). These changes could be attributed to a number of factors, such as changes in the propensity to report sexual assault to police, changes in police recording practices, or a combination of these factors. Changes in these data therefore may not necessarily reflect actual changes in the numbers or rates of incidents in the community.

Figure 2.

SEXUAL ASSAULT RECORDED PREVALENCE RATE, Australia, 1993–2003

Source: ABS, *Recorded Crime - Victims, Australia (cat.no. 4510.0).*

VI. CONCLUSION

29. Measurement of levels of violence in the community is complex and fraught with difficulties. Comparison of violence prevalence rates (namely physical and sexual assault) for women aged 18 years and over in Australia shows substantial variation between results. While giving the appearance of measuring the same social problems, results taken from different sources suggest the data are not directly comparable and raise questions as to the 'true' extent of violence. It is noteworthy that studies of data comparability referring to population groups other than women (ie males or all persons) and other types of offences, using seemingly comparable data, have shown the problem is not unique to measuring violence against women (ABS, 2002a, Carcach and Makkai, 2003).

30. ABS studies of differences in survey results (mostly unpublished but including those referenced) have pointed to a variety of possible explanations. These include differences in: sample size and design, survey scope, survey procedures (with mode of data collection, ie mail back forms, telephone interviews, or face to face interviews in which care is taken to ensure respondents privacy being examples), question wording and the way the in which questions are introduced, survey response rates and non-reponse biases, and the time periods to which the surveys refer. Even when a number of key elements, such as question wording and time reference periods are held constant and when sample size effects are taken into account, differences in outcomes remain apparent.

31. In view of these Australian experiences, to which the ABS has given close attention over recent years, the ABS is planning to do further work to develop a more coherent and better integrated set of data related to crime. Work will be directed at further understanding the differences between surveys, and in the concepts being measured, to determine the best models for collecting information on crime. This will include consideration of personal crimes such as assault and sexual assault and will also consider crimes affecting households such as break and enter. Without addressing these issues comparability and interpretability will continue to be compromised.

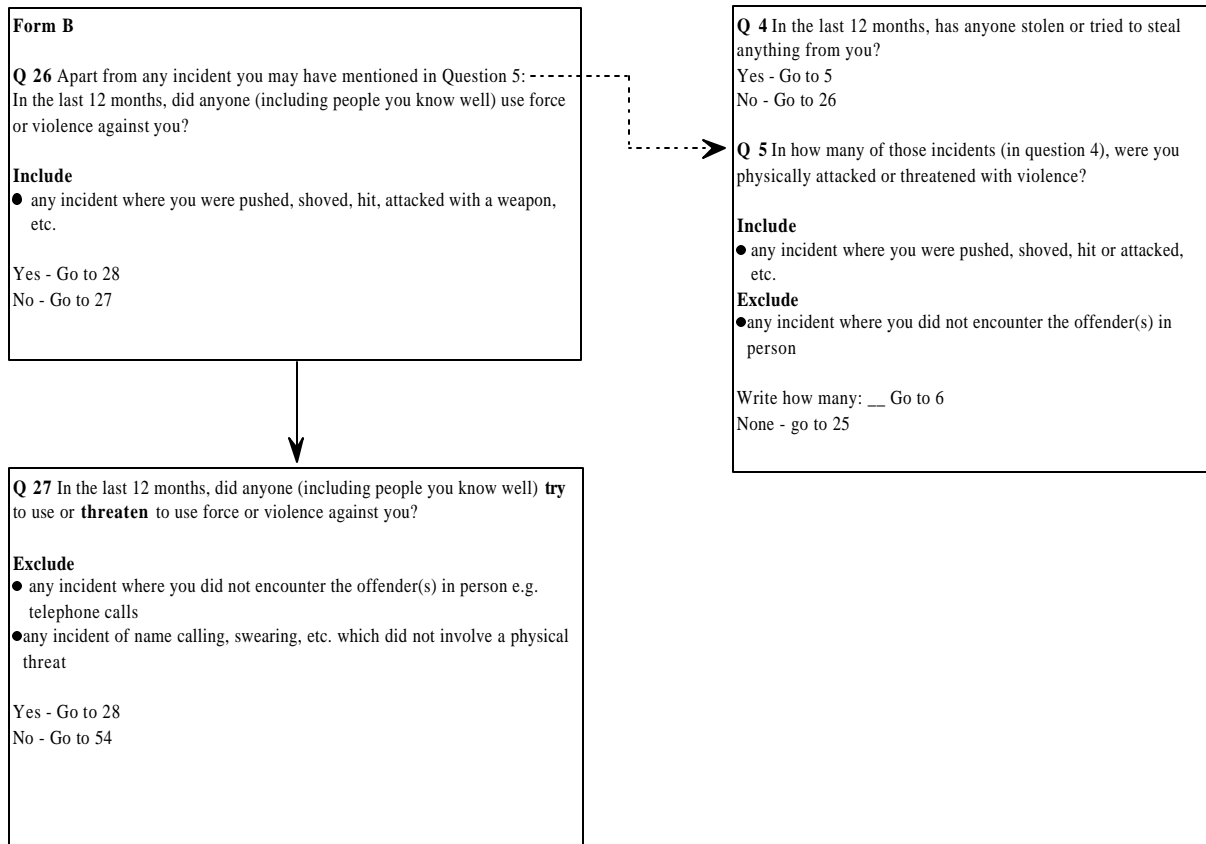
32. These considerations will also assess the use of short question modules in general surveys to produce estimates of crime that may also be used alongside estimates obtained from specialised surveys. The long term objective will be to take a consistent approach over time to provide reliable trend data even if the true prevalence rates remain open to debate.

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Survey questions used to measure experiences of physical assault in ABS Surveys

2002 National Crime and Safety Survey - 'Physical Assault' Question Sequencing



Assault victims (number) - 294,200

Assault victims (prevalence) - 4.0%

Adjusted for females aged 18 years and over

2002 General Social Survey (GSS)

The same questions were used as those shown for the 2002 National Crime and Safety Survey (NCSS). See above. However, there was no reference to a robbery question in the GSS.

The lead in statement to the above questions in the GSS was:

The next few questions are about crimes that may have happened to you.

1996 Womens Safety Survey - Physical Assault Question Sequencing

