

Dousing Threats and DFV

Media Reporting



**Joseph Lelliott, Lucy Noble-Dickinson
and Rebecca Wallis**

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Summary

This research update sets out and analyses preliminary findings from the project: Dousing Threats and Domestic and Family Violence (DFV). It contains information concerning the relationship between media reporting and dousing threats, drawn from interviews with non-government DFV services providers in Southeast Queensland.

Two key areas were examined in this research update:

- (1) The impact of media reports as a contributing factor to ‘copycat’ behaviour
- (2) The use of media reports as a tool by perpetrators to threaten and intimidate victims

Key Points

The following key findings were made:

- Media reports may influence patterns of DFV offending
- In some cases, media reports of the use of fire in DFV situations may be used by perpetrators to make threats.
- Media reporting may have a positive effect, particularly by raising awareness, but this must be balanced against any negative impacts

‘Dousing threats’ involve a threat by a perpetrator to ignite persons or property doused with flammable substances (commonly petrol or gasoline). Threats can also be made where there is no use of accelerant and threats are purely verbal or implied

Dousing Threats and DFV

In Australia, DFV is now often framed by the concept of coercive control. Perpetrators' coercive control over victims may entail, inter alia, physical violence, isolation, exploitation, threats, and surveillance.ⁱ Within this framework, certain behaviours may be distinguished as particular risk factors for escalating violence or homicide. The importance of identifying and raising awareness of these markers of increased risk or escalation is widely recognised. Among other benefits, doing so can facilitate better law enforcement and service provider responses, instigate law reform, and educate potential victims and the population at large.

While DFV can affect anyone, it is most commonly perpetrated by men, against women.
Coercive control is highly gendered

There continues to be uncertainty over the full range of DFV behaviours that may indicate increased risk of harm to victims. In turn, this creates the potential for certain markers of risk to be missed or misconstrued, especially where dangerous conduct may appear otherwise less risky or even innocuous. This can have serious consequences for individuals who experience DFV, especially where police do not identify dangerous situations and take appropriate actions. Such failures may compound other deficits in law enforcement responses to DFV, such as dual arrest and misidentification of perpetrators and victims.ⁱⁱ

In this context, threats associated with the use of fire against victims warrants further consideration. This has received recent attention in Queensland where this conduct has resulted in serious harm or death in a number of high-profile cases.ⁱⁱⁱ These events underscore the need to better understand dousing threats as a form of DFV and a risk factor for future use of fire, as well as potential problems with criminal justice responses to such threats.^{iv} There is some suggestion that dousing and related threats may be increasingly prevalent.^v Nonetheless, there is no research into the incidence, typology, and impacts of such threats, or on the efficacy of police responses.

The Study

→ Context

In the last several years, there have been a number of high-profile cases of domestic homicide involving fire in Queensland. A media analysis conducted as a first step in this study also uncovered numerous reports of non-fatal dousing and related conduct in Queensland and other Australian jurisdictions. These included media articles reporting perpetrators covering their partners in petrol and threatening to burn them and the house down,^{vi} dousing themselves and their house,^{vii} or throwing petrol on an ex-partner's car.^{viii} In April 2021, a man covered his family's house, pet dog, and himself in fuel then held a cigarette lighter while threatening to set his partner and children alight.^{ix} In 2020, one woman succeeded with a private prosecution of a threat offence against her former partner, after he had splashed her with petrol and held a lighter inches from her.^x For this project, case law searches were also conducted for dousing threats. While prosecutions of dousing threats in Australia appear to be fairly rare,^{xi} one illustrative example is the Victorian case of *R v Sullivan* (2014). The offender in that case was convicted of threat and endangerment offences after splashing mineral turpentine on the victim's stomach and legs and surrounding floor and sparking a cigarette lighter, in what the Court described as a 'particularly frightful episode of domestic violence' (para 41).

High-Profile Cases

The killings of Hannah Clarke and her children in 2020, and Kelly Wilkinson in 2021, drew substantial attention to dousing and the use of fire in the context of DFV. The influence of media reporting on these cases (and others) on DFV offending will be examined in a further Research Update in this series.

Despite reports of dousing threats, there has been little (if any) empirical research dedicated to this issue. There are also concerns that this form of conduct is not appropriately recognised or addressed by the criminal justice system. This study draws on interviews with DFV service providers to begin to address this knowledge gap. The research questions that guided the study examined:

- (1) the prevalence, form, and context of dousing and related threats;**
- (2) the impact of such threats on victims;**
- (3) legal responses; and**
- (4) best practices.**

→ Approach and Methodology

The study was exploratory in nature, and served as a pilot project to obtain some preliminary information about DFV service providers' perceptions of dousing threats as a phenomenon and about the criminal justice system response to these threats in Queensland. The research summarised in this Research Update was conducted in Queensland throughout 2021. Invitations and an information sheet were sent by the research team to 21 agencies identified as delivering DFV services within the southeast corner of Queensland. These included specialist services as well as larger organisations that provided specific DFV programs or services. Seventeen participants expressed interest in participating in the research, representing seven agencies. These were a mix of specialist and general services and had service coverage across Brisbane, the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast, Ipswich, and Toowoomba. Some agencies also provided outreach services to more regional and remote areas. In addition, the 17 participants occupied a number of different positions, ranging from frontline workers through to team leaders and senior management roles. Participants varied in age, gender, and experience. On the whole, although the study relied on a convenience sample, it captured a broad range of experiences and perspectives

from DFV providers in Queensland's south-east corner. In keeping with the ethical framework for the research, participants have been de-identified within this background paper and replaced with a participant number.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, with the structure of the interview reflecting the study's four research questions (above). Although an interview schedule was used to ensure consistency in questioning, participants were also given space to add details and to further elaborate on points of interest. Interviews were conducted either in person or via zoom, were recorded (with the consent of the participant) and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes. Ethics approval for this research was granted by the University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee in 2021 and the study complied with the terms of that approval (Ethics ID number: 2021/HE000210).

There are limitations to the approach and methodology of this study. In particular, the findings reflect the views and experiences of a small number of service providers who work in non-governmental services that assist women with DFV. The participants all work in Queensland and, as such, the extent to which the findings are relevant to other Australian jurisdictions is unclear. In keeping with the study's exploratory nature, findings lack some reliability and generalisability. Nonetheless, the study highlighted a number of issues for further research. The key focus of the current Research Update is on the role of media reporting, an issue that emerged as a strong and unexpected theme within the interviews with DFV providers.

Media Reporting and Offending: Background

Existing research on media reporting and DFV predominantly concerns portrayals of domestic violence in the media. This research, including a 2016 report from Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), has shown that representations of DFV can be sensationalistic, excessively explicit, include various myths and misrepresentations, and may perpetuate harmful gendered stereotypes.^{xii} A key theme emerging from this work is that the portrayal of domestic violence in news media tends to 'obscure... the notion that violence against women is a systemic social problem'.^{xiii} News media portrayal of domestic violence tends, instead, to be 'heavily skewed towards episodic framing'.^{xiv}

To date, there has, however, been little research into the impact of media reporting on patterns of domestic violence, or into the use of reports themselves as a tool to threaten. Investigation into the links between media and crime have tended to focus on general crime patterns and other forms of high-profile violent crime, rather than DFV specifically. There is also a body of literature concerning suicide reporting and copycat behaviour. This existing work indicates a significant, though complex, relationship between media reporting and suicide behaviours, as well as certain patterns of criminal offending. In a review of studies on the link between suicide and media coverage, Stack concluded that increased coverage of suicide in the media correlated with an increase in suicide rates.^{xv}

Research on 'copycat' crimes points to greater prevalence in cases where the method of violence or killing is described in graphic detail, including media reports stating very specific details on how and where the person carried out the act.^{xvi} Surette defines copycat crime as:^{xvii}

A situation 'where a primary cause of crime is found in offender exposure to media content about a prior crime'

In summary, research in this areas suggests that the media likely has a more significant influence on **how** people commit crimes rather than on **why** they commit crimes.^{xviii}

The Qld Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce

The recent report of the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce into DFV highlighted the potential for media reporting to play a role in how DFV is perpetrated. While acknowledging that there is a lack of 'any confirmed direct link between reporting domestic and family violence and copycat behaviour', numerous submissions to the Taskforce noted this phenomenon. A submission from the Queensland Police Service observed that '[t]he QPS would also welcome research on whether there are further ways the media can minimise any potential risk of harm to victims of DFV, including whether there is any link to imitation offending via media reporting'.¹

Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce, *Hear Her Voice, Volume 2* (2021) 94

Interview Findings on the role of media

The role and impact of media reporting in cases of dousing was not specified in the schedule of indicative questions that was used to guide discussions with service providers. Nonetheless, media reporting arose as a dominant theme during a number of interviews. Three subthemes emerged with respect to the role of the media: (1) that media reports and offending patterns were linked; (2) that media reports were used by perpetrators to make threats; and (3) that there is a tension between the positive and negative roles that media reporting can play in the context of DFV. These observations were based on DFV service providers' perceptions and experiences. Various participants noted the need for further research as to whether there is in fact a spike pattern in 'copy-cat' cases of dousing and related threats following a high-profile case.^{xix}

1. Links between media reports and offending patterns

A number of interviewees referred to the influence that the murder of Hannah Clarke and her children had on subsequent threats of dousing made by perpetrators. Several noted that high-profile cases such as the Clarke case led to an increase in similar patterns of offending. For example, participant 5 observed "*that after Hannah Clarke died, it was the one-year anniversary, it was a massive spike; a huge spike in those kinds of threats*".

"[T]hese dousing incidents or threats to burn... spike just like with any fatality and media interest in domestic violence or a high-profile [case where] a woman's killed, a family is killed. Then... you'll see, always, whether it's related to fire or dousing or whether it's something else, men will leverage those common media stories to instill fear and promote their agendas... as another form of control" – Participant 1

Participant 5 also commented that a significant number of men are "*specifically referring to the Hannah Clarke case and actually telling women 'you're going to end up just like her'. So they are actually making specific reference to that and other men having done the same thing*". Similar observations were made by participant 3, who explained that "*[p]ost the media attention around Rowan Baxter, there's more men identifying with that behaviour as something that they would do to maintain control*".

The links between media reports of the use of fire and offending patterns is likely not confined to this particular form of DFV behaviour. Participant 1 explained, for example: "*[i]n previous times, whenever there's a high profile, media murder, we'll have clients who have said that their perpetrators will turn the news up when the Baden-Clay matter is on TV*".^{xx} Most participants who drew a link between media reports and threats explained that this threatening behaviour was a manifestation of control. The media report became another available means by which to subjugate their partner. This connects to the second subtheme that arose in this space: the use of reports to make threats.

2. Perpetrators use media reports to make threats

Some of the quotes extracted above refer also to the use of media reports to make threats: "*men will leverage those common media stories to instill fear and promote their agendas*".^{xxi} One participant observed that media reports such as those on Hannah Clarke "*[...] gives perpetrators ideas, but they also - it's that understanding of how much fear that that's going to instil in a person and that's what it's about*".^{xxii}

Several participants went into detail on the ways media reports may be used as a tool to threaten. Participant 13 described a case where “[t]hey were watching TV together and it came on the news about Kelly Wilkinson [...] and he’s turned to her and said, ‘if you were more of a bitch that’s what you’d get’”.

“... what we saw a lot of perpetrators do was print the news story around Hannah Clarke and the children and just send it to their ex-partner who had the kids. No words on it, just ‘have a look at this’. Even the use of the news media cropped up a lot more and a lot of women who hadn’t been subjected to direct violence in years were calling our crisis service going, ‘he’s threatened to set us on fire and this is how he’s done it’” – Participant 3



Similarly, Participant 17 explained how perpetrators justified violence reported in high profile media reports, and how this became a threat in itself: “[...] I have had clients who [have described how their partners have] seen other high-profile dousing cases on the news and they’ve gone, yeah, that wouldn’t surprise me at all that whatever drove that man to do that and they’ve said that while they’re watching the news in front of [the client]”. In another interview, a participant noted that Hannah Clarke’s name was mentioned in the context of threats by a perpetrator prior to engaging in actual dousing conduct against the victim’s property.^{xxiii}

3. The tension between the positive and negatives roles that media reporting can play

Despite the potential negative effects of media reporting in terms of threat availability and impact, the role of the media was also valued by participants. Participant 6 explained, for example, that “in some ways, [the media coverage of dousing cases has] given copycat ideas and sparked that thought in their [perpetrators’] mind [...] but then on the other hand, it’s also really helped women to recognize things a bit earlier as well...”.

“[...] it’s good to have [domestic violence cases] in the media so people are aware of the severity and the significance of the violence that women go through... but at the [other] end of the stick... is this more weapons for perpetrators to use against their victims, is this more of a scare tactic that people can use?...” – Participant 13

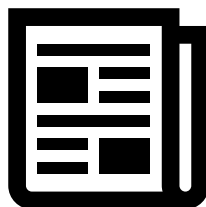
One potential positive effect of increased reporting of particular forms of DFV, such as dousing threats and the use of fire, is that victims may recognise the behaviour and identify it with their own experiences.

“I know anecdotally that after the Hannah Clarke murders, we had a huge number of women increase in calling, talking about having, had been threatened to be doused, and talked about the – so yeah, quite potentially, and that was like quite a lot. It was something – I know our intake worker at the time said was really traumatising for her because there were so many people relaying stories that sounded very similar to the Hannah Clarke murders. So I say they probably do, and definitely I’ve had a lot of the people that I’m supporting make a lot of reference to seeing similarities in the cases that have been in the media more recently” – Participant 8



Participant 4 observed that victim’s may be more likely to report dousing threats due to media reporting: “[...] *I don't know whether women might not necessarily disclose it either on the first time, but you know, maybe we're getting more reports of it because there's much more media around it, much more awareness*”. A similar comment was made by participant 10, who stated that “*A lot of people are now recognising that that's more than just what they'd brushed off previously and now they're bringing it to the forefront of a discussion of concern for themselves. Yeah, definitely since it became a big media thing with Hannah it has been that increase that I'm getting feedback about it as well*”.

The themes that emerged regarding the role of media in the context of dousing threats therefore revealed a tension between the utility of heightened awareness for victim-survivors and the misuse of reporting as a tool of abuse by perpetrators. This indicates the need for more targeted research to continue to examine this phenomenon in order to address the issues in a nuanced and meaningful way.



More Information

This Research Update is part of a series of papers that provide insight into our project on dousing threats. Other papers address:

- The prevalence, form, and contexts of dousing threats
- Dousing threats and coercive control.
- Dousing threats and the criminal justice response.

If you want more information on the project, please contact Joseph Lelliott or Rebecca Wallis.



Joseph Lelliott

Joseph is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Law at UQ, with expertise in criminal law and human rights



Rebecca Wallis

Rebecca is a Lecturer in the School of Law at UQ, with expertise in criminal law, criminology, and the law of evidence



Lucy Noble-Dickinson

Lucy is an LLB student in the School of Law at UQ

Contact Detail

Dr Joseph Lelliott: j.elliott1@uq.edu.au

Dr Rebecca Wallis: r.wallis1@uq.edu.au



law.uq.edu.au

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- ^{xix} Participants 1, 5, 15.
- ^{xx} Participant 14.
- ^{xxi} Participant 1.
- ^{xxii} Participant 5.
- ^{xxiii} Participant 13.