

Serious assaults in New Zealand disturbingly high, research finds

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University of Otago researchers have found that serious assaults in New Zealand have been steadily rising and are now at disturbingly high levels, especially among young males, Maori and Pacific people, and those from deprived neighbourhoods.

Lead author Emeritus Professor John Langley, of the University of Otago's [Injury Prevention](#) Research Unit, says this new study, published in the *New Zealand Medical Journal (NZMJ)* today (Friday), is the first comprehensive [statistical analysis](#) of this category of violence in over two decades.

It throws into serious doubt judicial and Police statistical claims in recent years that New Zealand is becoming a less violent society.

"It also brings into focus the need for the Government to effectively tackle the alcohol issue if it wants to significantly reduce serious assaults," he says.

Professor Langley, and University of Otago co-author Dr Pauline Gulliver, found that in New Zealand between 2000 and 2009 there were 8006 serious non-fatal assaults – 76% of these were male victims (6335). The female serious assaults totaled 1671.

Averaged out, the annual rate of serious assault is around 800 (79% of these males) a year – which is roughly two-thirds of the same serious injury category for [road crashes](#).

To be included in the "serious assault" category, the victim had a 6% or worse chance of dying as result of their injuries.

Among women, the serious assault level had fluctuated up and down over the nine-year period, but for males, particularly in the 15-to-24 age group, the numbers had risen particularly dramatically between 2004 and 2009.

Bodily force was the most common method of injury (nearly half of the serious assault cases for women, and 45% of the male cases), followed by use of a blunt object. The third most prominent cause of serious injury was a sharp object or knife.

By far the majority of serious assaults for males (1397) where the location of the event was known occurred on the streets and highways, closely followed by the male's home (1188), followed by a trade or service area (583). For females, the majority of serious assaults, 855, took place in the home, with 156 on the streets and 58 in a trade or service area. Head injury accounted for 72.6% of all serious non-fatal injuries, and the 8006 incidents required a total of 35, 186 hospital bed-days.

Maori accounted for almost half (48%) of female serious non-fatal assaults, and one-third (32%) of males in the same category. Pacific Island people also featured prominently among the male victim statistics, having a rate only slightly lower than Maori males. The study also showed that if you lived in a deprived household or neighbourhood, your risk of serious assault was much higher.

"This study provides new and recent insights into serious non-fatal assaultive hospitalisations. The trends we have observed are concerning, especially since there is no evidence of any recent abatement. This raises questions about our efforts to reduce such harm," he writes in the *NZMJ*.

The last study to examine non-fatal assault was published in 1995, and looked at assaults resulting from hospital admission between 1979 and 1988. That study also identified males, particularly Maori, as being of elevated risk of assault, with bodily force the most common method of injury.

Professor Langley points out that a large proportion of serious assaults involve young to middle-age males assaulting similarly aged [males](#). Despite this, historically the prevention focus has been on domestic violence.

"While this mismatch between the burden and prevention is starting to be addressed, I question the adequacy of our prevention responses," he says.

Excessive alcohol consumption is a common causal factor in many assault incidents. Professor Langley argues there is sufficient evidence base which shows that reduced alcohol advertising, and higher taxes on alcohol are likely to have a significant and relatively rapid effect on assaults. He is concerned that the Government has so far indicated it does not intend pursuing these strategies.

Provided by University of Otago

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