

Socio-economic Background and the Incidence of Partner Violence: Evidence from HILDA

Bruce Chapman and Matt Taylor*
Australian National University

1 Introduction

Using 14 waves from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia (HILDA) longitudinal survey, Chapman and Taylor (2022) report extensive analysis of the financial consequences of (apparent) partner violence (PV) for Australian women. While the focus of that exercise concerns PV and financial well-being, as part of this research we were able to explore briefly the socio-economic background of women who are identified as having experienced PV. This note reports these findings.

2 A Peculiarity and a Sample Size Caveat with Respect to Measuring PV in HILDA

It is recognised in Chapman and Taylor (2022) that HILDA is not an ideal instrument for identifying and accurately measuring PV, the major problem being that while people are asked if they experienced “physical violence” in the 12 months prior to the survey, the actual source of the assault is not available¹. This issue of identification of the origin of the experience could matter quite a lot, given that other data sources² suggest that only around 53 per cent of violence against women is perpetrated by a current or a previous partner. The other 47 per cent or so could arise from experiences at work, in a non-domestic social environment, involving a non-partner family member, or with respect to being robbed.

The lack of precise identification of the origin of the violence reported in HILDA is the basis for the Chapman and Taylor approach to measuring PV and this needs to be explained and understood in interpretation of what follows. We focus on women who separate from their partners in the period immediately following the reporting of being a victim of violence. The motivation for this is that we are confident that most, even the vast majority, of the violence reported by the women in our HILDA sample will be domestic in origin because it was followed by separation from their partner. With this method it seems to follow that a preponderance of the separations identified occurred *because of, and not incidental to*, the violence having been perpetuated by a partner.

This leads to two separate essentially statistical concerns. The first is that the methodology used to derive measures of PV from HILDA must mean that we are dealing with a select and

*We are grateful to Anne Summers, Mary Ann O’Loughlin, Jananie William, Tim Higgins and Deborah Loxton for broad feedback and for being highly supportive of our work. The errors and omissions are ours.

¹ The question asked in HILDA is “Have you experienced physical violence in the last year?” There is not a follow-up question concerning the source of the violence.

² See: ABS, *Personal Safety Survey*, various years.

non-random sample of women identified as victims. Since we are only measuring PV followed by separation, we are thus unable to identify the consequences of, or associations of background variables with, for women who experience PV yet don't then separate. Attempts to generalize our findings to the population as a whole need to be resisted.

Second, the need to impose restrictions on the data to detect with some confidence the incidence of PV has meant that we are left with only 62 unique observations of HILDA PV victims, a figure which doesn't allow confident assessments of the statistical significance of the results. This becomes clear through a recognition of the wide confidence intervals in the findings presented below.

The bottom line is that the necessarily restricted nature of our enquiry must lead to caution in the interpretation of the findings, and certainly unease about generalizing the results. That is, this is an exercise with suggestive and indicative associations only, yet ones we believe add importantly to the growing evidence concerning the incidence and consequences of PV. In a critical policy area with less-than-ideal data, what is reported here adds to an informed understanding of the financial consequences of PV.

3 Methods and Results: PV and Socio-economic Background

The research question posed is: what is the association between socio-economic background and the experience of PV for women? There are different ways to approach this issue, with the simplest being an examination of the percentage of women we consider likely to have experienced PV in the lead up to separation and its relation to measures of relative income at the time of the PV. A key point is that we are identifying the socio-economic circumstances of women who are then subjected to PV, and not their circumstances afterwards.

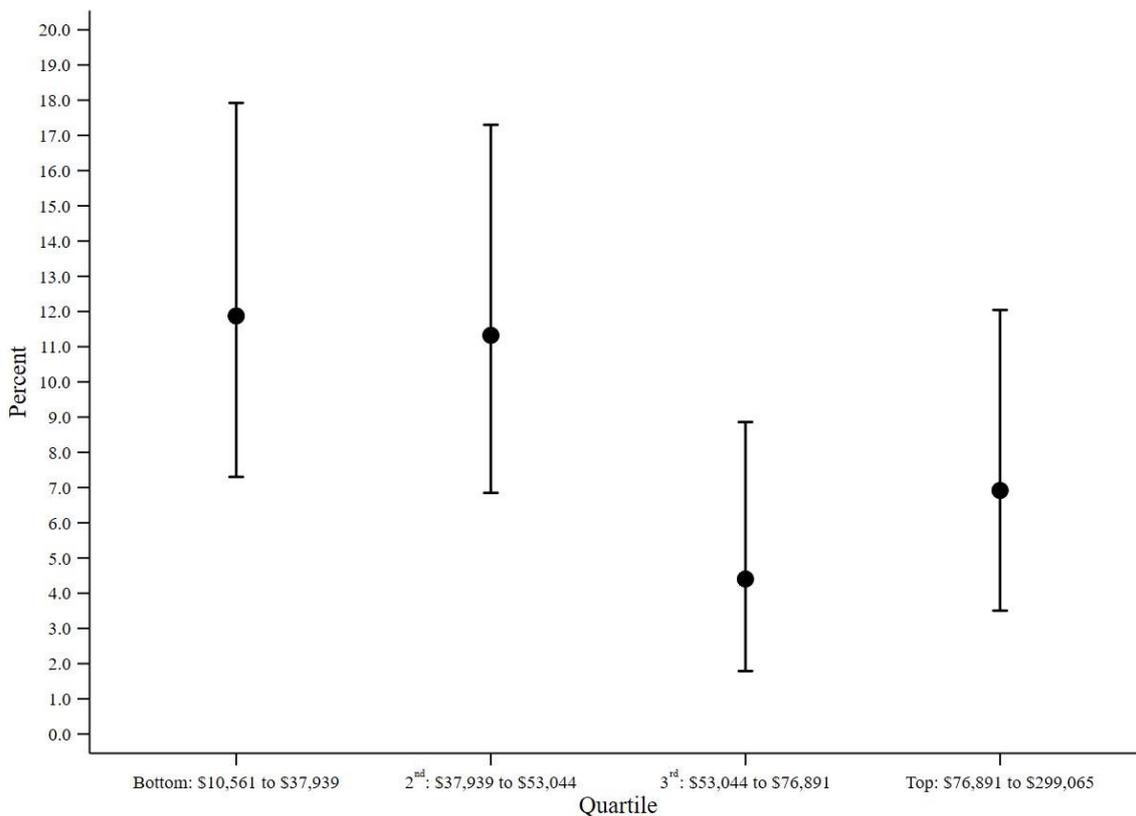
One advantage of leveraging the longitudinal data contained in the HILDA survey is that we can observe measures of income while women who may have experienced PV shared a household with their (potentially) abusive partner. This is in contrast to cross-sectional surveys, such as the ABS Personal Safety Survey, where the incomes of women who report having experienced PV in their lifetime will – for the most part – be measured many years after their experience of violence. More specifically, our estimates are formed from the average of the incomes reported in the two financial years prior to separation.

Our reporting approach recognizes that relative income can be examined in different ways, such as with respect to what is known as “equivalized household incomes” (EHIs). EHI is the total annual income of all household members adjusted to take into account the number and demographic characteristics of people this income supports. The measure is derived by weighting household income by the number and age of household members, since children require less financial support relative to adults for any given level of well-being.

Our measure of PV experience with respect to socio-economic background using EHIs as measured in HILDA is illustrated in Figure 1 for each quartile (25 per cent) of EHIs. The results show the incidence of the experience of physical violence in the immediate period preceding separation, with the main points being that the probability of PV is:

- (i) Around 12 per cent in the two bottom quartiles of EHIs;
- (ii) About 4 and 6 per cent for women in the third and fourth highest quartiles of EHIs respectively;
- (iii) This translates into the absolute numbers of those separating after experiencing PV being 19, 18, 7 and 11 respectively by EHI quartiles going from bottom to top; and
- (iv) The revealed confidence intervals are quite large relative to the means, with the evidence suggesting there is no statistically significantly different results, at the 95% level, between EHIs quartiles which is a consequence of a small sample size.

Figure 1
Likelihood of PV by EHI Quartile

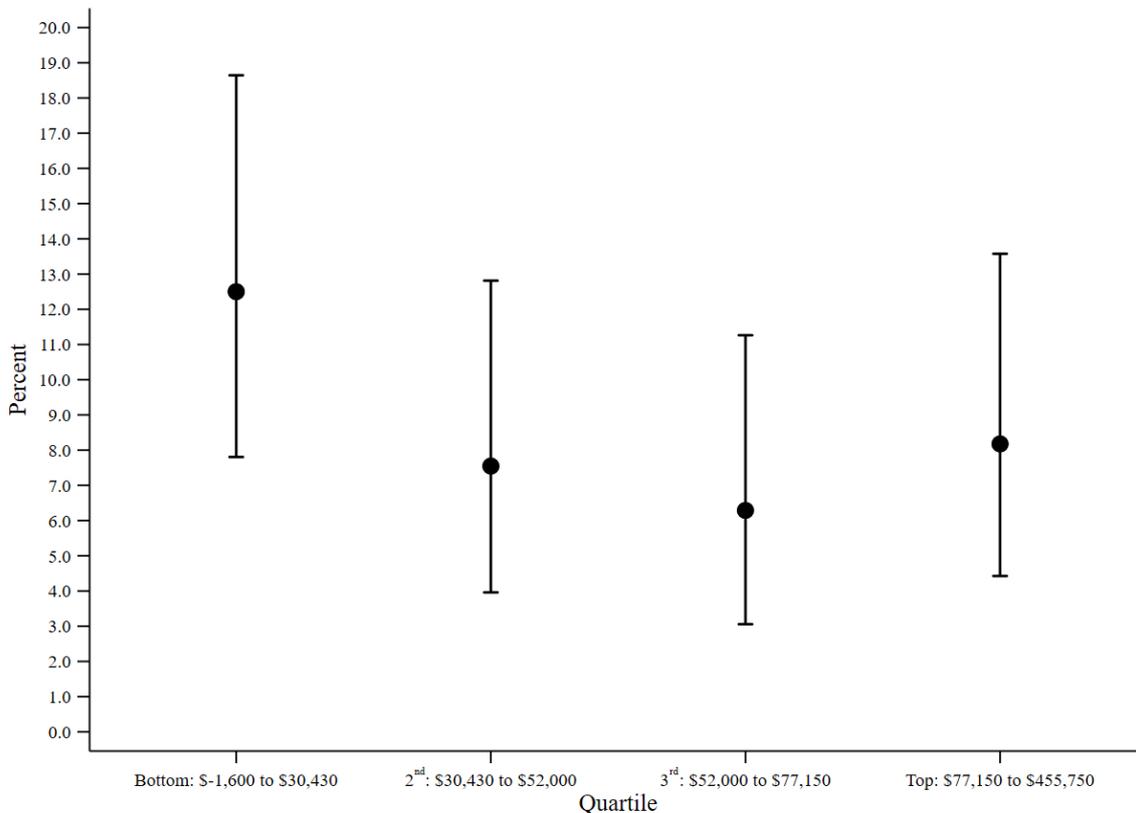


An alternative and closely related indicator of socio-economic background is more straightforward than is the use of EQHIs involving partner’s annual income in the year before the separation takes place. PV probabilities with respect to socio-economic background using quartiles of this measure of income distributions are illustrated in Figure 2.

The results show the percentage of recently separated women likely to have experienced PV by quartiles of this income measure of socio-economic background. The results show the incidence of the experience of physical violence in the immediate period preceding separation, with the main points being that the probability of PV is:

- (i) Around 12.5 and 7.5 per cent in the bottom and second to bottom quartiles of partner’s incomes respectively;
- (ii) About 6 and 8.5 per cent for women in the third and fourth highest quartiles of EHI’s respectively;
- (iii) This translates into the absolute numbers of those separating after experiencing PV being 20,12, 10 and 13 respectively by partners’ income quartiles, from the bottom to the top; and
- (v) The revealed confidence intervals are quite large relative to the means, with the evidence suggesting there is no statistically significantly different results at the 95% level between partners’ incomes quartiles, a consequence of a small sample size.

Figure 2
Likelihood of PV by Partner’s Income Quartile



4 Discussion

From an examination of HILDA we are able to report the different probabilities of the experience of PV with respect to two conventional measures of socio-economic background (EHIs and partner's income), based on the definition and measurement of PV explained and adopted in Chapman and Taylor (2022). It has to be recognised that the sample sizes are very small, and the nature of the identification of PV is such as to imply that the data are not representative of the population as a whole. The analysis is very much indicative and certainly less than definitive.

Even so, there are results from the exercise which are suggestive of the likelihood that no simple story can be told about the socio-economic background of those experiencing PV. For example, the idea that PV is a phenomenon confined only to the poorest households is not strongly supported by our findings, although it seems to be more likely to happen in such environments. Our measure of PV, limited as it is, implies around 20 per cent or somewhat more of the measured incidence might be occurring in the highest income households.

Reference

Bruce Chapman and Matt Taylor (2022), "Partner Violence and the Financial Well-Being of Women: HILDA Research Results", Australian National University, mimeo.