

## Strange looks from over the fence

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COMPLAINTS about neighbours prying into each others' private lives have increased sharply over the past year, figures released by the NSW Community Justice Centres show.

The centres, which provide free mediation between warring parties - including neighbours, families and community organisations - dealt with 6410 cases in the last financial year.

Of these, 2628 cases involved bickering neighbours - a similar figure to the previous year.

But the number of complaints about invasion of privacy jumped from 781 in 2005-06 to 1267 last financial year. The centres also recorded 445 complaints about threats of violence or objects being thrown, 1949 complaints over shouting or abuse and 2643 complaints about people refusing to negotiate.

Issues involving fences and noise caused by children, animals and birds remained stable compared with the year before.

The increase in privacy concerns could be the result of people becoming more aware of their rights, the centre's acting director, Gabriela Pirc, said.

"What may not have been a statistical trend a few years ago may have actually been there. It's just that we weren't reporting on it because the person that had contacted us may not have been aware that the neighbour was invading their privacy."

She said a range of issues fell into the invasion of privacy category. "Generally it could be people going onto their [neighbour's] property. We get a lot of people looking into each others' yards or people feeling that the other person is maybe spying on them [or] listening to what's being said in the neighbouring house."

The Christmas holidays usually result in a spike in neighbour dispute referrals. "With the festive season you find a lot more people spending time at home. Also with the warmer weather people tend to spend a lot more time outdoors and not inside the home [and] there's school holidays. There's a lot more going on in the neighbourhood."

More than 1200 cases dealt with last year were non-domestic-related apprehended violence orders referred by local courts. A large amount of these involved neighbour disputes.

Ms Pirc said communication was the best way to ensure the disputes did not escalate into dangerous situations: "Be open. Try and discuss the concerns that you are having." Mediation sessions were arranged in 40 per cent of cases, with agreement reached in 80 per cent of these.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/12/12/1197135558252.html>