



No. 195

# Young Australians and Domestic Violence

David Indermaur

*Up to one-quarter of young people in Australia have witnessed an incident of physical or domestic violence against their mother or stepmother. These findings come from a survey of 5,000 Australians aged between 12 and 20 from all States and Territories in Australia. Data of this nature have not been available before, and it must be noted that what is included within the definition of domestic violence is crucial to the amount reported.*

*The rate of witnessing varied considerably depending on the nature of household living arrangements. For example, the witnessing of male to female parental violence ranged from 14 per cent for those young people living with both parents to 41 per cent for those living with "mum and her partner". Young people of lower socioeconomic status were about one and a half times more likely to be aware of violence towards their mothers or fathers than those from upper socioeconomic households. Indigenous youth were significantly more likely to have experienced physical domestic violence amongst their parents or parents' partners. In the case of male to female violence, the rate was 42 per cent compared to 23 per cent for all respondents, and for female to male violence the rate was 33 per cent compared to 22 per cent.*

*The findings in relation to the effect of witnessing domestic violence on both attitudes and experience give support to the "cycle of violence" thesis: witnessing parental domestic violence is the strongest predictor of perpetration of violence in young people's own intimate relationships. This paper is a contribution to policy development in diverse family and community arrangements.*

**Adam Graycar**  
Director

**I**n 1998 and 1999, an investigation into young people's experience of, and attitudes towards, domestic violence was undertaken by the Crime Research Centre at the University of Western Australia and Donovan Research. This research was funded by National Crime Prevention and the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs under the funding plan of Partnerships Against Domestic Violence. It represents the largest research project of its kind ever conducted in Australia. Because of the subjective and sensitive nature of this topic, the investigation involved gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to create a comprehensive picture of the experience of domestic violence in the lives of young Australians.

This brief overview will summarise some of the salient findings of young people's experiences of violence in their own relationships, their experience of witnessing adult domestic violence and their attitudes towards violence. The implications of the findings for understanding young people's experience of domestic violence and prevention will be briefly highlighted. The full report of the research (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research forthcoming) includes an extensive literature review and

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE  
OF CRIMINOLOGY

*trends*

&

*issues*

in crime and criminal justice

February 2001

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24220 8



Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9221

Fax: 02 6260 9201

For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series, visit the AIC web site at:

<http://www.aic.gov.au>

methodological details. It also includes a full discussion of definitions and the benefits of using the term “family violence”, particularly with Indigenous Australians. The term “dating violence”, although widely used in the United States, is not widely recognised in the Australian context and thus is described explicitly, if inelegantly, as violence in young people’s intimate relationships.

The focus here will be on selected findings from the survey of 5,000 young people. The survey frame was 12 to 20-year-old Australians, in and out of school, from all States and Territories of Australia. The use of a stratified random sampling technique meant that all Australian young people within the major pre-defined groups (age, gender, attending/not attending school, State or Territory and socioeconomic status) had an equal and random chance of being selected. Those not at school (2,000) were reached through a street intercept survey, whilst those at school (3,000) were surveyed in the classroom. Young people who responded to the survey completed a questionnaire which contained a range of questions comprising attitude scales and victimisation measures. A modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus 1979) was used as a basis for estimating the extent of violence in relationships that young people had experienced either as victims, perpetrators or as witnesses of parental domestic violence.

**Experience**

*Witnessing Adult Domestic Violence*  
Traditionally, the number of young people exposed to domestic violence has been estimated from the results of surveys administered to adults. Victimisation surveys ask women about the violence they have experienced and some of these surveys also ask women whether, to their knowledge, children had

witnessed the violence. The largest survey of adult women’s victimisation experiences in Australia, the Women’s Safety Survey (ABS 1996), received completed responses from 6,300 women with a response rate of 78 per cent. This survey found slightly higher estimates of the rate of domestic violence than usually found in general crime victimisation surveys. The figure reported by the Women’s Safety Survey is more in line with surveys using detailed questioning for incidents of domestic violence (for example, Ferrante et al. 1996).

The Women’s Safety Survey found that one in 12 women who were married or in de facto relationships had experienced some violence from their current partner. Much higher levels were found when previous relationships were considered. Further, seven in 10 women who reported violence by a previous partner also reported that they had children in their care at some time during the relationship and almost half (46%) said that these children had witnessed the violence. In terms of those women who had experienced violence from their current partner, almost four in 10 reported that the violence had been witnessed by children in their care. These findings, whilst not providing a precise estimate

of the number of Australian children exposed to domestic violence, gave the first quantitative glimpse of the extent of the problem. Another perspective is revealed by surveying young people directly.

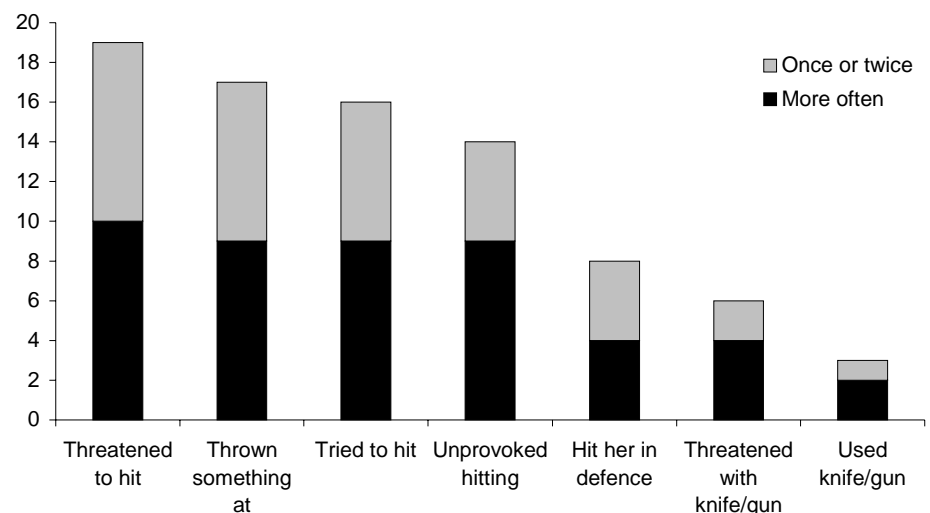
From the survey conducted by the Crime Research Centre and Donovan Research, about one-quarter (23%) of the 5,000 young people reported at least one act that could be described as physical domestic violence against their mothers or stepmothers. The rate of physical violence was derived from responses to six items on the measuring instrument pertaining to physical violence:

- thrown something at;
- tried to hit;
- hit in defence;
- hit although not being hit;
- threatened with knife or gun; and
- used knife or gun.

These items form a sub-set of the 11 specific acts contained in the measuring instrument, the Conflict Tactics Scale.

If we only count those three situations where an actual act of violence was initiated, hence removing *attempts, threats and self-defensive hitting*, and just including *thrown something at her, hit her even though she didn’t hit him and used a knife or gun*, then one in five young

**Figure 1: Violence against the mother—the percentage of young Australians who report witnessing one of seven physical forms of violence against their mother/stepmother by the mother’s male partner**



people report witnessing one or more of these acts at least once. The proportions of young people who reported witnessing threats to hit as well as each of the six acts of physical violence against their mother are shown in Figure 1.

One of the most important problems faced when talking about domestic violence (or any violence) is the matter of definition. This issue cannot be brushed aside and a superficial treatment of the subject leads to much confusion. There is a world of difference between throwing an object at someone in a fit of rage and the systematic abuse of someone to demean and humiliate them. However, both of these events may be lumped together in general definitions of violence. The amount of domestic violence observed will largely depend on what is included in the definition of domestic violence. As the definition becomes more restrictive and includes less behaviours, its observed prevalence diminishes (see Ferrante et al. 1996; Indermaur 2000).

It follows that to understand the phenomenon of violent victimisation, including the patterns described here, it is necessary to conceptualise a continuum of violence from least severe to most severe, as reflected in Figure 1. Severity may be seen as a function, not only of the degree of physicality associated with a particular act, but also the frequency, the context and the meaning of the act. The prevalence, incidence and pattern of violence described will be determined by which particular point on a continuum of coercive acts is taken as “domestic violence”. As more restrictive definitions of behaviour are used, the prevalence of incidents decreases. Thus, it is of little value to cite estimates of the rate of domestic violence without a clear and precise definition of domestic violence and a sound methodology for gauging the prevalence and incidence of the behaviour. What is not

**Table 1:** *Young people’s awareness of physical domestic violence—contrasting the total sample with those living in households with high-risk parental behaviour*

	Male to female violence	Female to male violence
<b>Awareness amongst total sample</b>	23.4	22.1
<i>Households where male carer:</i>		
Gets drunk a lot (14%)	55.0	49.6
Hits children—other than for bad behaviour (10%)	55.3	43.0
<i>Households where female carer:</i>		
Gets drunk a lot (6%)	56.4	55.6
Hits children—other than for bad behaviour (6%)	50.4	50.4

contestable is that too many young people are exposed to distressing and disturbing acts of violence by and against one or both of their parents. We have not known until now what the precise rates of witnessing certain violent acts have been and so we do not know whether the prevalence of these behaviours has been increasing, decreasing or remaining static. Without this information we cannot be sure which of our efforts to prevent domestic violence are effective.

The nature of the violence observed is one factor to consider in judging severity; another is frequency. With most forms of violence, about half the sample who claim to have witnessed violence indicated that they had only witnessed the violence once or twice. Clearly, we would be doing a great disservice to many young people exposed to entrenched patterns of violence if we treated their experience as equivalent to that of young people who may have been exposed only once in their lifetime to an act of violence.

The rate of witnessing varied considerably depending on the nature of the household or living arrangements. For example, the witnessing of male to female parental violence ranged from a low of 14 per cent for those young people living with both parents, to a high of 41 per cent for those young people living with “mum and her partner”. Females, older teens, those of lower socioeconomic status and those not living with both parents were found to have been more likely to have witnessed adult domestic violence. In regard to

the greater awareness of females, this likely reflects their greater awareness of, and sensitivity towards, domestic relationship issues. Similarly, an increase in awareness of physical violence also occurs with age quite apart from the increase in exposure time that will naturally affect lifetime prevalence measures. Young people in households of lower socioeconomic status are about one and a half times more likely to be aware of violence towards their mothers or their fathers than those from upper socioeconomic households. Indigenous youth are significantly more likely to have experienced physical domestic violence between their parents (or parents’ partners). The higher rate encompasses both male to female violence (42% compared to 23% for all respondents) and female to male violence (33% compared to 22%).

The survey also asked young people whether their parents (or parents’ partners) with whom they lived:

- “get drunk a lot”;
- “take drugs”;
- “gamble a lot”; or
- “hit the children for reasons other than bad behaviour”.

Table 1 shows the proportion of young people who have witnessed parental violence in households where alcohol abuse is occurring, and where the children are being hit for reasons other than bad behaviour. The four figures shown in brackets represent the incidence of alcohol abuse or hitting in the total sample. As shown in Table 1, in over half (55%) of those

households where the male carer gets drunk a lot, the young person witnessed male to female violence. However, such households represent only 14 per cent of the total group surveyed.

From the responses of young people we can estimate that one in 10 live in households where the male carer has hit them and/or their siblings for other than bad behaviour. In these households, 55.3 per cent of young people report having been aware of male to female physical domestic violence occurring at some time. This is more than double the rate for the sample as a whole (23.4%).

Young people perceive one of the major causes of domestic violence to be what the perpetrator has learnt in their own upbringing (the “cycle of violence” thesis). Young people also clearly see alcohol intoxication as one of the major “causes” of domestic violence. Young people differed in their perceptions of how common domestic violence was. These perceptions appeared to be influenced by the young person’s own experience and were related to demographic factors. For example, compared to other groups, witnesses to parental domestic violence, Indigenous young people, girls and older teens all perceived domestic violence as being more prevalent in society.

*Experience in Intimate Relationships (Dating Violence)*

Almost 70 per cent of the young people surveyed had had a boyfriend or girlfriend at some stage. About one in three of these young people (both males and females) reported incidents in their personal relationships that could be defined as “physical violence”. The definition here included only those items on the Conflict Tactics Scale that involved physical contact as well as “threats with a gun or knife” and “threw something at you”.

The reported victimisation rates naturally increase with age. Forty-two per cent of 19 to 20-

year-old women who have had a boyfriend admitted experiencing some form of physical violence from a boyfriend at least once. The rates for male victimisation appeared to be no different from those of females. However, follow-up questions revealed the different experiences of the victims. These questions asked whether the young person felt afraid or was injured by any of the instances of “violence” they had experienced. Almost one-third (30%) of 19 to 20-year-old women reported they had been frightened or hurt by one or more of the instances of “violence”, whereas only one in eight (12%) 19 to 20-year-old men reported the same. This experience of fear, or more likely “terror”, is taken as the key characteristic of domestic violence for most victims and workers.

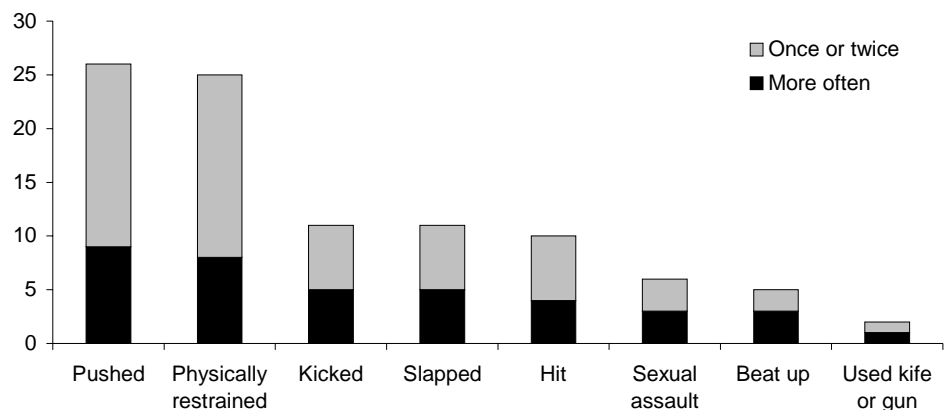
We thus return again to the importance of definition. The term “violence” is generally used by most people to refer to acts that frighten the victim. Looking just at those who have experienced threats or actual physical violence (technical victims of violence), half of female victims experienced fear where only 11 per cent of males did. Thus, the gender disparity commonly recognised in domestic violence, and reflected in criminal statistics, is revealed by the subjective experience of the aggression: girls are at least four times as likely as boys to have been frightened by an

episode of intimate aggression. Gender disparity also emerges when we focus on sexual violence. Fourteen per cent of females (but only three per cent of males) indicated that they had been sexually assaulted. Naturally the figure is higher (20 per cent for females) if we focus on the prevalence amongst 19 to 20-year-olds.

Young women from lower socioeconomic areas were significantly more likely to be the victim of relationship violence than those from higher socioeconomic areas. Those young people who had attitudes that were most supportive of violence were also more likely to report perpetrating violence in their relationships. However, larger differences were found on the basis of whether the young person had witnessed domestic violence in the home.

Young people growing up in homes where there has been couple violence (both male and female carers perpetrating and being victimised by domestic violence) were more likely to be victims of relationship violence and perpetrators of violence in their intimate relationships. For example, they were twice as likely to have been forced to have sex and four times as likely to have admitted forcing their partner to have sex. Overall, the best predictor of perpetration (and victimisation) of violence in young people’s relationships was found to be witnessing certain

**Figure 2: The victimisation of young Australian females by boyfriends**



Note: Figure indicates the percentage of young women who have ever been victimised in terms of specific behaviours experienced.

types of male to female violence in the home.

There seems, therefore, to be further support here for the “cycle of violence” thesis. It is worth remembering, however, that we are talking about increased probability, not fate. The majority of those who have grown up in violent homes do not go on to perpetrate violence in their relationships. The link between witnessing and perpetrating is complex and mediated by a number of social and situational factors.

### Attitudes

Most young people reject the use of violence in relationships—yet a small pocket still retain attitudes supportive of violence. Again, there are great differences in the sample of young people. Not surprisingly, the same factors associated with higher rates of witnessing and higher rates of violence in relationships were also predictors of pro-violence attitudes. These include:

- socioeconomic status (the more disadvantaged have more pro-violence attitudes);
- age (younger);
- gender (males); and
- Indigenous status (Indigenous).

However, this does not mean that attitude causes violence—it could be that attitude is associated with the use of violence but does not operate as an active causative factor. The test would be to see if successfully changing attitudes would result in a reduction in the levels of violence. The results of these endeavours in the United States are somewhat mixed (see Indermaur, Atkinson & Blagg 1998).

Young people were classified into three groups on the basis of their attitudes to violence. The group most supportive of violence in relationships is characterised mostly by demographic factors found in the first attitudinal analysis (younger age group, male and a witness to parental domestic violence). To give some idea of the extent to

**Table 2:** Differences between the attitudinal clusters in the degree to which they endorse six statements about the use of violence in relationships

Statement	Anti-violence group	Pro-violence group
It's alright for a guy to hit his girlfriend if she makes him look stupid in front of his mates	2	14
It's OK for a boy to make a girl have sex if she's flirted with him or led him on	3	18
It's OK for a guy to put pressure on a girl to have sex but not to physically force her	5	20
If a guy hits a girl he loves because he is jealous, it shows how much he feels for her	7	22
Most physical violence occurs in dating because a partner provoked it	21	40
When a girl hits a guy it's really not a big deal	20	34

Note: The figure shown is the percentage of young people in the two opposed clusters that endorsed the particular statement.

which young people endorse statements supportive of violence, and also the differences between them, the responses of the two opposing attitudinal clusters are contrasted in Table 2.

The survey revealed important differences amongst young people in terms of their attitudes to violence. In general, young people were willing to classify a broad range of behaviours as “domestic violence”. However, a small proportion of young people still do not classify extremely violent behaviours as domestic violence. Young males and Indigenous youth are over-represented in this group. These were also the two demographic factors most consistently linked to pro-violence attitudes.

In terms of young people's attitudes to sexual violence, 12 per cent of males agreed with the statement “It's okay for a boy to make a girl have sex if she has led him on”. Three-quarters expressly disagreed with the statement. Fifteen per cent of males agreed with the statement “It's okay for a guy to put pressure on a girl to have sex but not to physically force her”. Seventy per cent expressly disagreed with the statement.

Although international comparisons must be considerably qualified, the results of the survey do not suggest a large difference between Australian attitudes and those found in the United States.

### Prevention, Policy and Further Research

The most important policy implication of this research is the reinforcement it provides for an approach to domestic violence prevention that recognises the differences that exist in the community. Certain sectors of the Australian community experience levels of domestic violence that are much higher than other sectors. The findings in relation to the effect of witnessing domestic violence on attitudes, but more particularly on experience, give support to the cycle of violence thesis. Witnessing parental domestic violence has emerged as the strongest predictor of perpetration of violence in young people's own intimate relationships.

These results suggest that preventative efforts should include not only stemming current domestic violence but also helping children from homes

where domestic violence is occurring. Priority should lie with those homes where there is evidence of a serious and sustained history of domestic violence and where children are exposed to the violence.

The operation of a cycle of violence together with social marginalisation has the potential of concentrating violence in certain disadvantaged areas. The implication is that strategies to prevent domestic violence must have particular relevance to disadvantaged communities, and their effectiveness must be evaluated in terms of the differences they make to those communities suffering the most violence. Most important, rather than a universalist approach that may waste resources on young people who are not at risk or who are at less risk, an integrated approach is needed amongst service delivery agencies to identify pockets in the community where risk factors exist and to implement intensive intervention strategies. Given the high levels of violence and the seemingly endemic pattern of this violence, intervention with Indigenous families needs to be a matter of highest priority.

Other policy implications of this research point to the need for a more thoughtful analysis of the meaning of violence. This analysis would include an attempt to articulate who is particularly affected and how violence affects people. Although an initial reading of some results suggest that boys and girls perpetrate the same amount of violence in their relationships, this is misleading. Deeper analyses of all the results reveal that girls are affected more often than boys by the use of physical force in a relationship. Further, from the accounts of young people as witnesses to parental violence, we also observe that more serious forms were perpetrated by males on female partners than vice versa. For example, with the item *unprovoked hitting*, 14 per cent of young people claim to have

witnessed male to female violence, whereas only nine per cent claim to have witnessed female to male violence. The greater seriousness of male to female violence compared to female to male violence is further reflected in the effects reported by the young people who witnessed parental violence. The effects of male to female violence are twice as severe when measured by:

- the rate of relationship break-up;
- hospitalisation;
- children missing school;
- children receiving counselling; and
- the rate at which the young person who has witnessed domestic violence has told another about the incident(s).

The mistaken view that males and females experience similar levels of violence developed because of a superficial understanding and measurement of violence. The gender disparity debate (see Bagshaw & Chung 2000) has highlighted the need for more rigorous and critical thinking in this area and is discussed at length in the full report.

Recognition that "violence" is not a singular phenomenon, but a descriptor used in a variety of contexts, points to the need to make meaningful distinctions. These distinctions are vital for planning, policy and funding. Such distinctions can guide the adoption of a triage strategy so that the most serious forms of violence are dealt with as a matter of priority.

The report on young people's attitudes and experiences of domestic violence is useful, then, in explaining some of the apparent anomalies in the field, but is most important in reinforcing our concern for those young people growing up in homes where domestic violence is a routine part of life. There is a growing awareness that domestic violence can have a devastating effect on these children. The immediate needs of the children is one concern; preventing them

from being burdened by a horrible inheritance is another. Acting now can not only help alleviate current suffering but also be the most powerful means of preventing future family violence.

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996, *Women's Safety Survey 1996*, cat. no. 4128.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Bagshaw, D. & Chung, D. 2000, *Women, Men and Domestic Violence*, Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, Canberra.
- Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research (forthcoming), *Young People and Domestic Violence: National Research on Young People's Attitudes to and Experiences of Domestic Violence*, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra.
- Ferrante, A., Morgan, F., Indermaur, D. & Harding, R. 1996, *Measuring the Extent of Domestic Violence*, Hawkins Press, Sydney.
- Indermaur, D. 2000, "Violence in Australia: Patterns and politics", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, vol. 33, pp. 287-99.
- Indermaur, D., Atkinson, L. & Blagg, H. 1998, *Working With Adolescents to Prevent Domestic Violence*, National Crime Prevention, Canberra.
- Straus, M. 1979, "Measuring intrafamily conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics (CT) Scales", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 41, pp. 75-88.

Dr David Indermaur is a Senior Research Fellow at the Crime Research Centre, University of Western Australia, and an Associate of the Australian Institute of Criminology



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:  
Dr Adam Graycar, Director  
Australian Institute of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

**Note: Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice are refereed papers.**