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Abstract | Developing effective strategies to reduce domestic violence offending requires an understanding of perpetrator characteristics, offending patterns and recidivism.

This study consolidates the Australian evidence base through a systematic review of 39 quantitative studies that examined domestic violence offending and reoffending. Despite the wide range of data sources, samples and measures of violence, findings are remarkably consistent across studies.

The findings further reinforce the importance of targeting male perpetrated violence, and reducing violence in Indigenous communities. Alcohol featured in a significant proportion of domestic violence incidents. Finally, the study demonstrates the importance of reducing repeat offending, particularly among prolific offenders, to reduce overall rates of violence.

Domestic violence offenders, prior offending and reoffending in Australia

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A growing body of Australian research aims to better understand domestic violence. While many studies have examined the characteristics and patterns of domestic violence offending, they have tended to adopt a jurisdictional focus. To our knowledge, there has been no attempt to develop a comprehensive understanding of what characterises domestic violence offenders and offending across Australia, which is important for the development of effective and targeted criminal justice responses.

This systematic review consolidates Australian quantitative studies to develop an overall picture of what is known about domestic violence offenders, offending and reoffending in Australia. Three research questions are addressed:

- What are the individual characteristics of domestic violence offenders?
- What proportion of domestic violence offenders have a prior history of offending?
- How prevalent is reoffending among domestic violence offenders?

Method

Search strategy

Searches were conducted in the following nine databases of peer-reviewed and grey literature: Australian Federal Police Digest, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Australian Family and Society Abstracts (AFSA), CINCH, Humanities and Social Sciences Collection, PubMed, Socindex, Violence and Abuse Abstracts and the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. Broad search terms including 'domestic violence' and 'family violence' were used, with variations to suit specific databases. For AFSA, CINCH and the Humanities and Social Sciences Collection the terms 'offenders' and 'perpetrators' were also included. All searches were limited to Australian studies published between 1990 and 2018.

Additionally, the websites of the following organisations were manually searched: Australian Institute of Criminology, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, Analysis and Policy Observatory (formerly known as Australian Policy Online), NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Victoria's Crime Statistics Agency, South Australia's Office of Crime Statistics and Research and the Criminology Research Advisory Council.

This search identified 2,995 records, which were screened for inclusion. This screening process resulted in 347 full-text articles, which were then assessed for eligibility (Figure 1).

Study selection and data extraction

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed with a focus on primary, peer-reviewed studies and grey literature that examined domestic violence offenders and offending in Australia using quantitative methods. Studies were excluded if they:

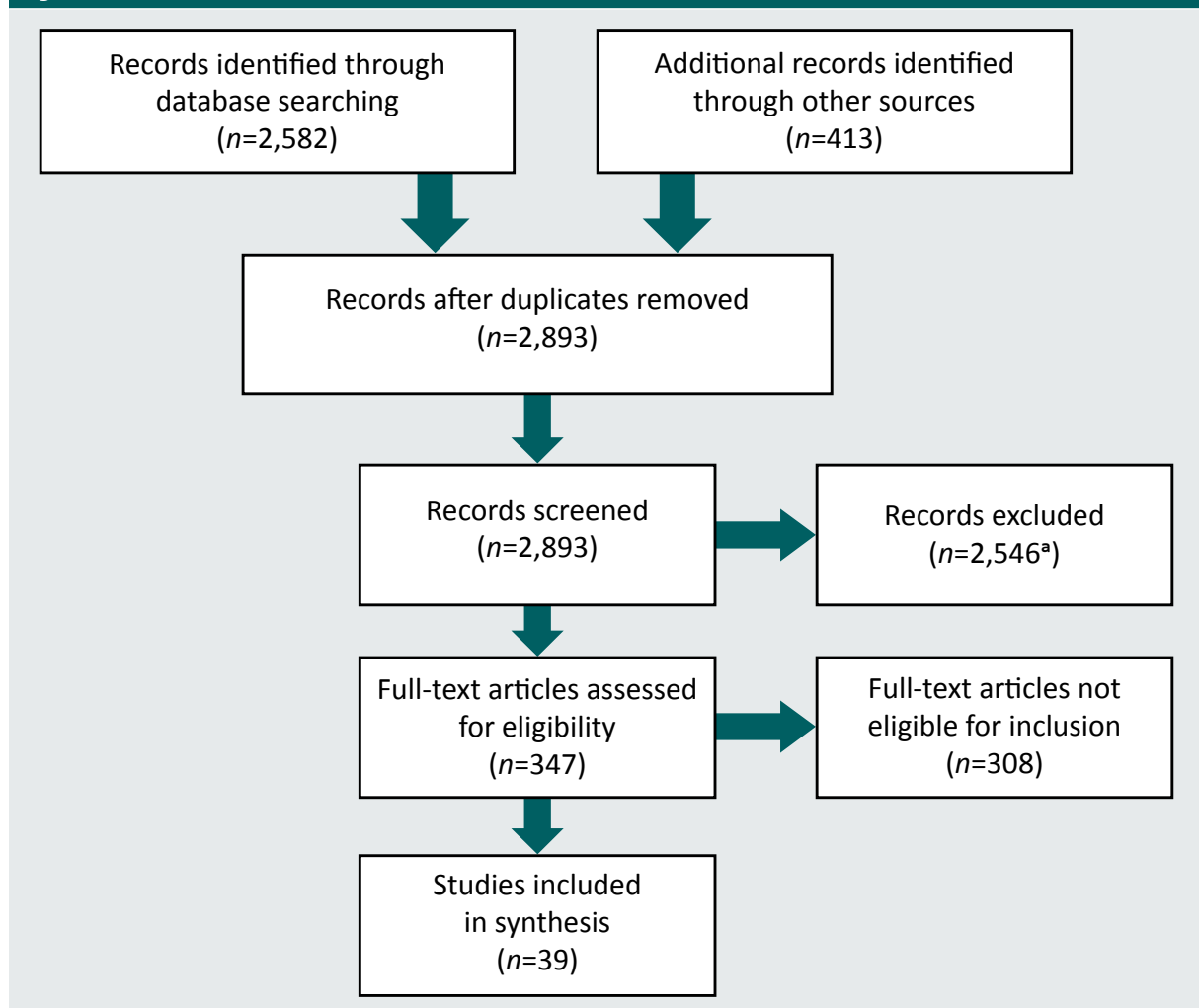
- were published prior to 1990 or after December 2018;
- used non-Australian data;
- analysed qualitative data (eg focus groups, interviews) using qualitative content analysis techniques only;
- were based on surveys about people's victimisation experience, but not their experience as perpetrators;
- did not distinguish between domestic violence offending and broader offending categories such as interpersonal violence or family violence (or the proportion related to domestic violence was less than 50%);
- were limited to homicide offences, rather than violence more broadly; and/or
- focused on the effectiveness of specific interventions (eg treatment programs, policing responses).

A standardised coding form was developed to ensure that information was extracted consistently from each study. Where available, information was collected on the author, year and jurisdiction of each study; offender characteristics (age, gender, Indigenous status, socio-economic status, prior offending); event characteristics (alcohol and other drug involvement); and reoffending (prevalence, risk factors).

This study adopted the definition of domestic violence used in the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children (Council of Australian Governments 2011). Domestic violence, which can occur within current or former intimate relationships, comprises a wide range of behaviours including physical, sexual, psychological and emotional abuse (Council of Australian Governments 2011; Morgan & Chadwick 2009). Studies with a broader definition of family and domestic violence were included in the review only where the intimate partner component of the sample was discussed separately, or the majority of the sample comprised incidents involving intimate partners.

This review focused on domestic violence offending in its broadest sense. Studies that focused on intimate partner homicide were not included. This is because detailed national-level analysis of homicide involving intimate partners is available from the Australian Institute of Criminology's National Homicide Monitoring Program reports (eg Bryant & Bricknell 2017), and the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network's (2018) *Data report*. Further, intimate partner homicide is the most extreme form of violence, whereas this paper is concerned with general patterns of offending and repeat offending.

Figure 1: Search results



a: Figure includes 1 study (Brain Injury Australia 2018) which the authors did not make available for review

Results

Study characteristics

A total of 39 studies were included in the review (Figure 1). The majority of studies examined jurisdiction specific data ($n=37$, 95%), primarily from New South Wales, followed by Victoria and Queensland (Table 1). Most studies were published between 2008 and 2018 ($n=31$, 79%), and more than half ($n=24$, 62%) since 2014. This reflects the growing interest in domestic violence and, in particular, violence against women as a policy and research priority.

Given the focus on quantitative research, studies included in the review tended to rely on administrative and survey data. Police records were the most common source ($n=28$, 72%), followed by court records ($n=16$, 41%), indicating that our current understanding of domestic violence offending (as distinct from victimisation) in Australia largely reflects reported incidents. This is noteworthy given that a large proportion of domestic violence offending goes unreported (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017). Although there have been significant improvements in the way police record whether an incident was domestic violence related, police data are of limited use in understanding patterns of offending—especially given reporting rates remain at around 30 percent (for female victims; ABS 2017). Survey data on offender and offending characteristics are typically collected as part of surveys of victims (such as the ABS *Personal Safety Survey*). Offender surveys are comparatively rare.

Most of the studies focused on offender characteristics, with fewer studies examining reoffending. The studies in this review examined various types of violence, but tended to focus on physical violence. A small number of studies looked at the characteristics and prevalence of protection order breaches.

	<i>n</i>	%
Jurisdiction		
National	3	8
New South Wales	15	38
Victoria	10	26
Queensland	6	15
Tasmania	4	10
Western Australia	4	10
South Australia	3	8
Australian Capital Territory	1	3
Northern Territory	1	3
Year of publication		
1990–1995	–	–
1996–2000	2	5
2000–2005	4	10
2006–2010	5	13

Table 1: Study characteristics (n=39) (continued)

	<i>n</i>	%
2011–2015	11	28
2016–2018	17	44
Data source		
Police data	28	72
Court data	16	41
Case files	4	10
Corrections data ^a	1	3
Survey/interview data	5	13
Focus		
Offender characteristics	33	85
Reoffending	16	41

a: Excludes studies in which corrections data were used to account for time in custody when measuring reoffending

Note: Individual studies may fall into multiple categories, so percentages may not add to 100 (except for date)

Source: Patterns of domestic violence offending, 2019 [Computer file]

Offender characteristics

Thirty-three studies examined the characteristics of domestic violence offenders, including gender ($n=21$), age ($n=14$), Indigenous status ($n=8$), employment and socio-economic status ($n=4$), mental health status ($n=4$), alcohol and drug use ($n=12$) and prior offending ($n=12$).

Gender

The research consistently demonstrated that the majority of domestic violence perpetrators were men (Table 2). Across 21 studies of known domestic violence offenders and protection order respondents, men accounted for between 75 and 94 percent (median=83%) of all offenders. Overall, men accounted for around five in six domestic violence offenders recorded by police.

Importantly, although analyses of female perpetrated violence have been relatively rare, there was evidence that the circumstances of female perpetrated violence and male perpetrated violence were different. Specifically, incidents and relationships in which women were perpetrators of domestic violence frequently involved bi-directional violence, meaning they were often victims of violence as well (Mouzos & Smith 2007). That is, where women were the respondents to a protection order, there were often mutual orders in place (Sentencing Advisory Council (SAC) 2016; Stewart 2000). Stewart (2000) reported that, while 17 percent of protection order respondents were female, half of them had also applied for or been granted a protection order.

Table 2: Gender of offenders (%)

	Range	Median
Male offenders	75–94	83
Female offenders	6–25	17

Source: Patterns of domestic violence offending, 2019 [Computer file]

Only one Australian population-level survey has measured the prevalence of domestic violence offending by men and women in the general population (Headey, Scott & de Vaus 1999). Headey, Scott and de Vaus (1999) re-analysed data from the International Social Science Survey Australia and found that men (3.4%) and women (3.6%) were equally likely to report having been violent towards their partner. As well as being inconsistent with the results from studies using police data (even accounting for reporting rates, which are not markedly different between men and women), this study produced results that differ substantially from the findings of victimisation surveys (eg ABS 2017). Headey, Scott and de Vaus' (1999) results have been criticised for a range of reasons, including that they relied on measures of violence that excluded sexual violence and violence post-separation, which are much more common among female victims (Taft, Hegarty & Flood 2001).

Age

Findings across multiple studies indicated that a large proportion of domestic violence offenders were aged between 30 and 45 years (Cussen & Lyneham 2012; Donnelly & Poynton 2015; Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Grech & Burgess 2011; Kerr, Whyte & Strang 2017; Miller et al. 2016; Millsteed & Coghlan 2016; Mouzos & Smith 2007; People 2005; SAC 2016; Van Tongeren, Millsteed & Coghlan 2016). The median age of offenders reported by Fitzgerald and Graham (2016) in New South Wales and Millsteed and Coghlan (2016) in Victoria was 34 years. Perpetrators aged less than 29 years were more likely to be generalist offenders than those aged over 40, meaning they were more likely to have committed offences other than domestic violence offences (Coghlan & Millsteed 2017).

The age profile of domestic violence offenders reflects the timing of serious intimate relationships, such as marriage and cohabitation, as well as other significant life events such as pregnancy, birth or separation (SAC 2016). Of course, this does not downplay the risk of violence at other ages, which often involves other family members. There is, for example, growing recognition of the significant impacts of adolescent family violence directed at parents and siblings (Fitz-Gibbon, Elliott & Maher 2018), or towards elderly family members (Kaspiew, Carson & Rhoades 2016). Further, the age of onset or age of first contact with police for domestic violence offending may be lower, given these results relate to the mean age of offenders. International research has shown that the age of onset for domestic violence offending is between late adolescence and early adulthood (eg Aldarondo 1996).

Indigenous status

Consistent with findings regarding the over-representation of Indigenous women as victims of domestic violence (AIHW 2018), the review found that Indigenous men and women were also over-represented among offenders (Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018; Grech & Burgess 2011; People 2005). In the studies included in this review, between 10 and 53 percent of domestic violence offenders identified as Indigenous (Birdsey 2013; Donnelly & Poynton 2015; Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018; Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Ringland & Fitzgerald 2010). People (2005) concluded that Indigenous people were around eight times more likely than non-Indigenous people to commit a domestic assault that was reported to the police, while Grech and Burgess (2011) found that Indigenous women were around 10 times more likely to be perpetrators of domestic assault than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Further, Indigenous offenders were more likely to be generalist offenders, meaning they were more likely to have diverse criminal histories (Coghlan & Millsteed 2017).

Consistent with other research, Indigenous over-representation among domestic violence offender populations was particularly noticeable in court and prison settings. For example, Douglas and Fitzgerald (2018) analysed criminal and civil court records of people named as respondents on domestic violence orders in Queensland and found that, although only 21 percent of respondents were Indigenous, Indigenous people comprised a third (34%) of offenders found guilty of contravening their orders, and half (53%) of those sentenced to a period of incarceration for this offence.

Employment and socio-economic status

A small number of studies ($n=4$) examined the socio-economic status of offenders. Perpetrators of physical violence were found to have higher levels of unemployment (Mouzos & Smith 2007) and were more likely to be from more disadvantaged areas (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016). Conversely, non-physical forms of violence such as shouting, provoking arguments and controlling behaviours were found to be more common among offenders with higher levels of education and employment. Miller et al. (2016) found that those who self-reported coercive controlling behaviours were more likely to have completed Year 12 or above (or the equivalent) and to earn \$100,000 per annum or more.

Mental health

Estimating the prevalence of mental illness among domestic violence offenders was made difficult by a lack of research, the different definitions of mental illness that have been applied, and the absence of clinical diagnosis information. Two studies conducted in Victoria estimated that the prevalence of mental health issues or depression, as assessed by police, among domestic violence offenders was between 14 and 20 percent (Miller et al. 2016; Van Tongeren, Millsteed & Petry 2016). Results from another Victorian study using the same measure suggested that mental illness was more prevalent in incidents involving an intoxicated offender (29%; Sutherland, McDonald & Millsteed 2016). There are challenges for police, however, in distinguishing between intoxication and mental illness.

Three studies explored the role of suicidal ideation and self-harm among offenders. Estimates of the prevalence of these behaviours among domestic violence offenders ranged from three to 10 percent (Miller et al. 2016; Sherman et al. 2016; Van Tongeren, Millsteed & Petry 2016). While Sherman and colleagues (2016) found that 10 percent of the most serious domestic violence offenders had a police record of threats or ideation of suicide or self-harm, the proportion was higher among the 79 offenders who had committed or attempted homicide (20%, $n=16$).

Alcohol and drug use

Twelve studies reported on the involvement of alcohol or other drug use in domestic violence incidents, some with multiple estimates based on different jurisdictions and data sources. All 12 studies examined alcohol consumption, while five also reported on illicit drug use. Almost all relied on police data, which are known to have limitations (Morgan et al. 2018). In particular, most of the studies examined did not give specific information about whether the offender and/or victim was intoxicated and/or affected (by either drugs or alcohol), what substance had been consumed, the information used to make these assessments (eg breathalyser, direct questions or observation), or the length of time that elapsed between the violence and contact with police (ie whether the offender had time to 'sober up').

Adopting the most inclusive definition (that alcohol or drugs had been consumed by someone involved in the incident), between 19 and 66 percent (median=36%) of domestic violence incidents were alcohol related, while between one and 13 percent were drug related (median=4%; Table 3). Offenders were more likely to have consumed or to have been affected by alcohol than drugs during domestic violence incidents. Estimates of the proportion of incidents involving an offender who had consumed or who was affected by alcohol ranged from 12 to 50 percent (median=34%; Boxall et al. 2018; Douglas & Godden 2002; Miller et al. 2016; Sutherland, McDonald & Millsted 2016; Van Tongeren, Millsted & Petry 2016). This was six times higher than the proportion of domestic violence incidents involving an offender who had been using drugs (1–12%, median=5%; Boxall et al. 2018; Miller et al. 2016; Van Tongeren, Millsted & Petry 2016).

Further, Sutherland, McDonald and Millsted (2016) found that alcohol use was associated with more severe acts of violence reported to the police, and was more likely where there was evidence of escalating frequency and severity of violence. Miller et al. (2016) also found that the severity of the violence increased with the amount of alcohol consumed. Violence was also associated with heavy episodic drinking and coercive controlling behaviour, while both drug and alcohol use were associated with an increased likelihood of recidivism.

	Range	Median
Alcohol involvement		
Alcohol-related	19–66	36
Offender had consumed or was affected by alcohol	12–50	33
Drug involvement		
Drug-related	1–13 ^a	4
Offender had consumed drugs	1–12 ^a	5

a: Upper limit based on one study, which measured drug use by ‘other person involved’ (victim or offender) in most recent incident of domestic violence (Miller et al. 2016)

Source: Patterns of domestic violence offending, 2019 [Computer file]

Prior offending

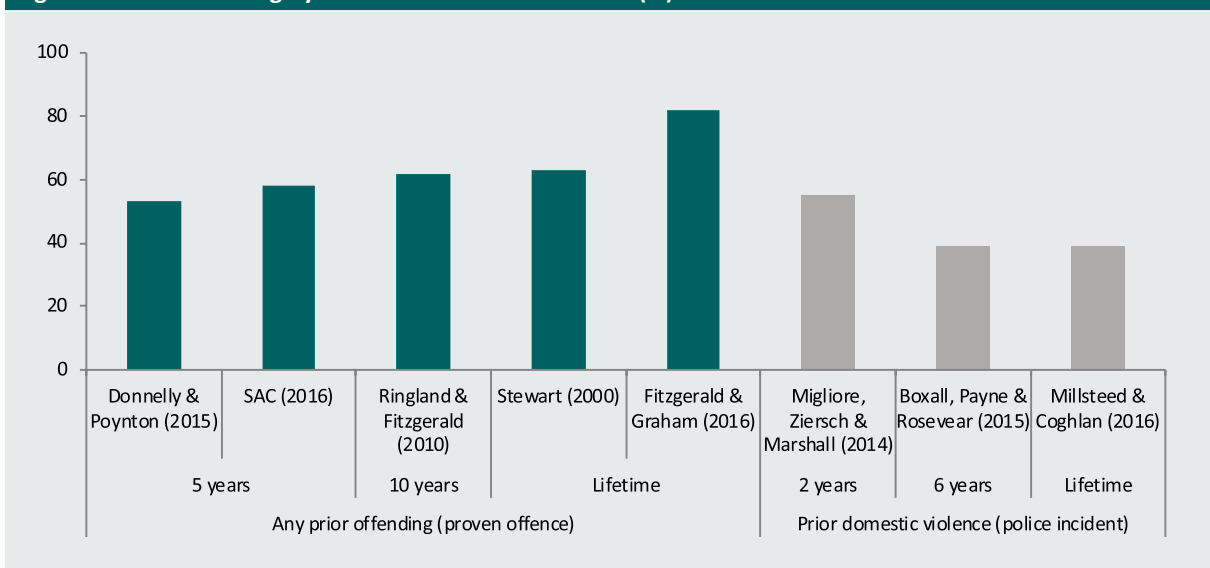
Twelve studies examined the offending history of domestic violence offenders. A significant proportion of domestic violence offenders who came into contact with the criminal justice system had a prior history of domestic violence (Figure 2; see *Appendix A* for more information). The exact proportion depended on the type of data used (police vs court data), the measure of domestic violence (all offences vs breach offences) and the period of analysis. Studies using police recorded crime data found between 39 percent (lifetime; Millsted & Coghlan 2016) and 55 percent (Migliore, Ziersch & Marshall 2014) of domestic violence offenders had a prior history of violence towards an intimate partner. Four studies reported the prevalence of prior proven protection order breaches among domestic violence offenders, with estimates ranging from six to 13 percent.

Unsurprisingly, prior offending estimates increase when they include violence that was not reported to the police. One study looking at a sample of domestic violence incidents involving ‘first-time’

offenders (someone who had not been reported to the police before as a perpetrator of domestic violence) found that almost two-thirds (62%) had been violent towards their partners (based on offender and victim self-report information; Boxall et al. 2018).

Many domestic violence offenders were generalist offenders—that is, domestic violence formed part of their overall offending behaviour (Boxall, Payne & Rosevear 2015; Millstead & Coghlan 2016; SAC 2016; Weatherburn & Rahman 2018). Findings regarding the prevalence of any prior offending (ie not specific to domestic violence) were remarkably similar. Six studies, all using court data on proven incidents, produced estimates of prior offending that ranged between 53 percent (past 5 years) and 82 percent (lifetime; Boxall, Payne & Rosevear 2015; Donnelly & Poynton 2015; Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Ringland & Fitzgerald 2010; SAC 2016; Stewart 2000).

Figure 2: Prior offending by domestic violence offenders (%)



Source: Patterns of domestic violence offending, 2019 [Computer file]

Reoffending

Sixteen studies examined domestic violence reoffending, including the prevalence of recidivism among domestic violence offenders ($n=11$) and the individual risk factors for reoffending ($n=12$).

Prevalence of reoffending

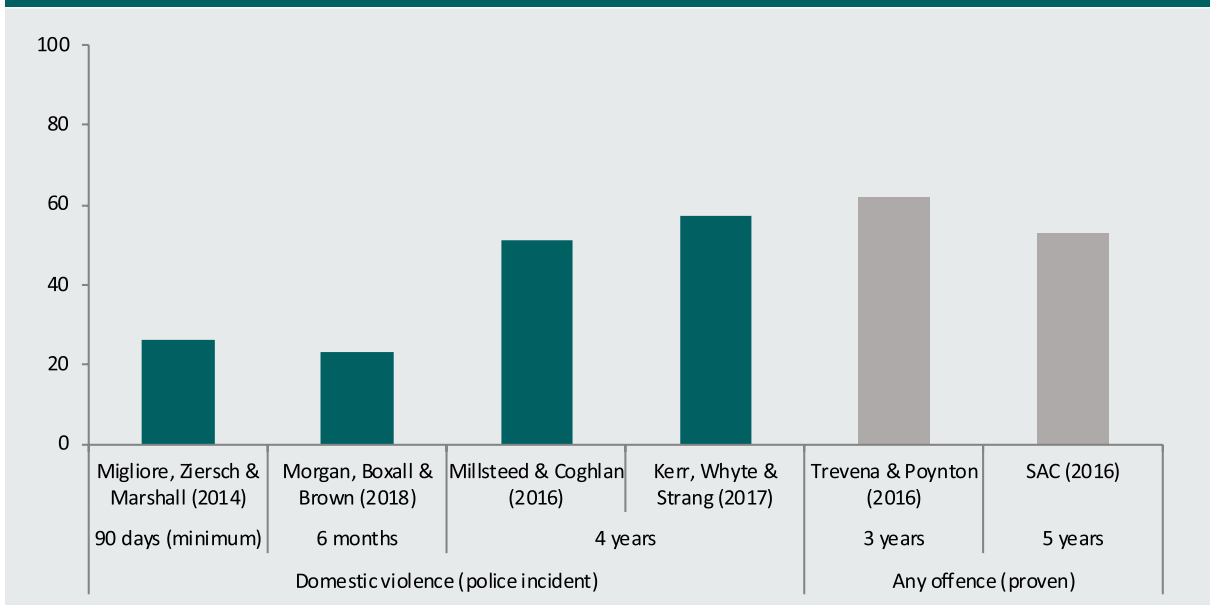
Where recidivism was measured, there were differences in the samples, time scales and measures adopted. For instance, some studies measured recidivism as any incident proven in court, whereas other studies were based on police apprehensions. This made it difficult to produce an overall estimate (or range).

The evidence clearly showed that a significant proportion of domestic violence offenders reoffended (Figure 3; see *Appendix B* for more information). Using police apprehension data, Millsteed and Coghlan (2016) found that one in two offenders (51%) recorded by police as the perpetrator of at least one family violence incident were involved in another recorded incident within four years. Meanwhile, Morgan, Boxall and Brown’s (2018) analysis of short-term reoffending patterns found that 23 percent of offenders committed a further domestic violence offence within six months, with the highest risk period being the weeks and months following an incident. They also found that the rate of short-term reoffending—defined as reoffending within 30 or 60 days—increased significantly with each repeat offence.

Estimates are lower, unsurprisingly, among studies using offences that proceeded to court and resulted in conviction (proven offences). Trevena and Poynton (2016) found that one in five offenders had a further proven offence within the next 12 months, and around one-third within the next three years (34% of those who received a suspended sentence, and 30% of those who received a custodial sentence). Around half of these subsequent proven offences involved violent offending. The prevalence of general reoffending was higher than that of domestic violence reoffending (Migliore, Ziersch & Marshall 2014; Trevena & Poynton 2016).

Other research focused on offender compliance with protection orders. Poynton et al. (2016) found that between five and 20 percent of apprehended domestic violence orders in New South Wales were breached and that the breach rate was higher for final orders that were longer in duration. The analysis of police narratives undertaken by Napier, Poynton and Fitzgerald (2015) found that breach offences most often occurred at the victim’s home and involved face-to-face contact between the offender and victim. In their sample, Napier, Poynton and Fitzgerald (2015) found that two in five breach offences involved a perpetrator affected by alcohol. Similarly, Miller et al. (2016) found that domestic violence incidents were more likely to involve recidivist perpetrators when the offender was affected by alcohol.

Figure 3: Repeat offending by domestic violence offenders (%)



Source: Patterns of domestic violence offending, 2019 [Computer file]

Risk factors for reoffending

Across 12 studies, five individual-level risk factors were consistently identified as being associated with general reoffending by domestic violence perpetrators: gender, age, Indigenous status, socio-economic status and prior offending.

Gender

Compared with women, men were at a greater risk of general reoffending (SAC 2016), domestic violence reoffending (Millsteed & Coghlan 2016), violent domestic violence reoffending (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016), and protection order breaches (Napier, Poynton & Fitzgerald 2015; Trimboli 2015).

Age

The risk of recidivism decreased with age (Millsteed & Coghlan 2016; SAC 2016). That is, relative to older offenders, offenders aged less than 35 years were at a greater risk of domestic violence reoffending (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Millsteed & Coghlan 2016). Similarly, younger protection order respondents tended to breach orders more quickly than respondents aged over 50 (Poynton et al. 2016).

Indigenous status

Most offenders who breached a protection order were non-Indigenous (Napier, Poynton & Fitzgerald 2015; Trimboli 2015). However, orders against Indigenous offenders were breached more quickly and more frequently (Poynton et al. 2016). Indigenous offenders had a higher likelihood of violent domestic violence reoffending than non-Indigenous offenders (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016).

Socio-economic status and employment

Two studies found that unemployed offenders were more likely to reoffend than those who were employed (Mason & Julian 2009; Millsteed & Coghlan 2016). Those in highly disadvantaged areas were also at a greater risk of violent domestic violence reoffending compared with those in the areas of least disadvantage (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016).

Prior offending

As has been consistently shown with reoffending more generally, there was a strong association between the number of prior offences and reoffending, such that the higher the number of prior offences, the greater the likelihood reoffending (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Millsteed & Coghlan 2016; Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018; SAC 2016). This was true for general offending (SAC 2016), domestic violence offending (Millsteed & Coghlan 2016; Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018), violent domestic violence offending (ie assault, intimidation or stalking; Fitzgerald & Graham 2016) and breach offences (Bulbeck et al. 1997; Trimboli 2015; Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018). Further, having a prior breach offence was a risk factor for committing a further domestic violence offence (Mason & Julian 2009; Millsteed & Coghlan 2016; Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018) or a violent domestic violence offence (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016). Mason and Julian (2009) concluded that breaching a protection order was the strongest predictor of repeat offending. People who reoffended were significantly more likely to have a violent offending history than those who did not reoffend (Bulbeck et al. 1997; Mason & Julian 2009; Trimboli 2015).

Other predictors of reoffending

Two studies examined the predictive validity of risk assessment tools for domestic violence offending (as distinct from repeat victimisation) and, in doing so, analysed a wider range of variables thought to be associated with an increased risk of reoffending (Mason & Julian 2009; Millsteed & Coghlan 2016). Mason and Julian (2009) found that stalking, past threats and jealous behaviour by the offender were associated with an increased risk of reoffending. Millsteed and Coghlan (2016) found that reoffending was more likely when the index incident (the incident reported to the police) involved alcohol or drug use by the offender and/or the victim, when the victim was pregnant or had recently given birth, and when children were present. Mason and Julian (2009) found that offenders were less likely to reoffend when the index incident involved violence, while Millsteed and Coghlan (2016) observed a similar pattern following incidents where the police recorded a criminal offence against the perpetrator (eg assault causing grievous bodily harm). Repeat offenders were less likely to own firearms; however, this may be because their licences were revoked following the initial incident. Mixed results were found for mental health, although different definitions were applied.

Importantly, no single risk factor was predictive of repeat offending by itself. Instead their effect was cumulative—that is, multiple risk factors together had some ability to predict reoffending. Also, many risk factors were prevalent among both recidivist and non-recidivist offenders. Overall, the two risk assessment tools examined were only moderately successful at predicting reoffending. Each gave a higher risk ‘score’ to a randomly selected case where repeat domestic violence occurred than to a case where repeat offending did not occur around 70 percent of the time. In other words, they were reasonably accurate in predicting who would reoffend (discriminating between reoffenders and non-reoffenders). This is consistent with findings from international research (Messing & Thaller 2013).

Concentration of reoffending

There is growing recognition that domestic violence offending is concentrated among a relatively small group of offenders or couples. Three Australian studies examined the concentration of offending among domestic violence offenders. Millsteed (2016) found that seven percent of perpetrators in Victoria with more than five offences were responsible for 31 percent of all recorded incidents over a five-year period. Using the Cambridge Crime Harm Index—a weighting for each crime event based on the number of days of imprisonment associated with each category of crime—Sherman et al. (2016) found that a very small minority of repeat offenders (2%) were responsible for half of all harm (50%), while the vast majority of offenders (75%) were responsible for a small proportion of harm (9%). Most recently, and using the same index, Kerr, Whyte and Strang (2017) analysed domestic violence incidents in the Northern Territory and found that eight percent of couples accounted for 27 percent of the harm associated with domestic violence.

Discussion

Developing effective strategies to reduce domestic violence offending requires an understanding of perpetrator characteristics, offending patterns and recidivism. To date, Australian research in these areas has largely been piecemeal and has tended to focus on a specific jurisdiction. This study consolidates the Australian evidence base through a systematic review of 39 quantitative studies that examined domestic violence offending and reoffending.

Despite the wide range of data sources, samples and measures of violence, findings are remarkably consistent across studies. Several conclusions may be drawn in relation to domestic violence offenders—at least those who come to the attention of the police—that are well supported by Australian evidence. Although many of these findings are not new, the strength of the evidence across multiple studies and jurisdictions adds greater weight to their significance.

The majority of offenders who came into contact with the justice system for domestic violence offending were men. It is for this reason that measures to reduce domestic violence have, justifiably, focused on male perpetrated violence against female victims (Council of Australian Governments 2011). While not the focus of the current study, there are important differences between male and female offenders in the circumstances and drivers of domestic violence. In particular, women are more likely to use violence in self-defence or in response to historical violence perpetrated by their partner (Mackay et al. 2018). These differences need to be reflected in the responses to violence by men and women.

Indigenous men were over-represented among domestic violence offenders who came to the attention of police. Indigenous women were also over-represented among victims (AIHW 2018). This trend persisted across the time frame for this study (1990–2018). Disproportionate rates of violent offending involving Indigenous perpetrators, and persistently high rates of reoffending, emphasise the need for evidence-based interventions that can address the complex interplay of drivers of domestic violence in Indigenous communities (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016). Recent research has highlighted the importance of innovative place-based models that are Indigenous-led and owned, and which are underpinned by a focus on social and emotional wellbeing (Blagg et al. 2018).

Related to this is the need for interventions to be targeted at areas with higher levels of disadvantage, particularly where there is a higher concentration of repeat offenders. The likelihood of domestic violence reoffending appears to be higher in more socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Voce and Boxall's (2018) review of domestic violence victimisation studies found that women from socio-economically disadvantaged areas were more likely to report abuse to the police, possibly because they had more limited access to other sources of assistance. This is unlikely to fully explain the increased risk of repeat offending, but it highlights the need to address the gaps in services in those communities that need the most support, and the need to overcome the barriers that prevent offenders and victims accessing services (Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; State of Victoria 2016).

Alcohol use by offenders featured prominently among domestic violence incidents. Although the causal relationship between alcohol and domestic violence is still debated, cross-sectional, prospective, temporal and laboratory studies have all shown that excessive use of alcohol contributes to the occurrence and severity of domestic violence (Leonard & Quigley 2017). Effective interventions to reduce alcohol-related domestic violence, whether they focus on supply or demand, are a necessary and important feature of the response to domestic violence (Miller et al. 2016).

Both prior offending and reoffending were common among domestic violence offenders. There are three important conclusions that can be drawn from this research. First, a very large proportion of offenders involved in domestic violence incidents attended by police, and who then move through the justice system, are recidivist offenders. Reducing reoffending benefits victims, but can also significantly reduce overall levels of violence.

Second, reducing reoffending requires effective interventions targeted at offenders in contact with the criminal justice system. Programs should be assessed on their ability to reduce reoffending. This requires high quality and rigorous program evaluations.

Third, many domestic violence offenders have previously committed or will go on to commit non-domestic violence offences. They are generalist offenders. Wan and Weatherburn (2016) drew a similar conclusion in their study of recidivism by violent offenders more generally—many of whom had a prior domestic violence offence. Domestic violence occurs in a context of individual, relationship and situational factors (Morgan & Chadwick 2009), many of which are also risk factors for reoffending more broadly.

There are, of course, limitations to this study. The focus of the review was necessarily narrow, meaning that certain aspects of domestic violence offending, perhaps better analysed using qualitative methods or information provided by victims, were not able to be examined. Further, most of the studies included in this review examined domestic violence offenders and incidents reported to the police. Information about offenders, incidents and reoffending patterns was therefore limited to the data collected by police, which are primarily for identification and investigative purposes.

This means that there are some significant gaps in our knowledge. Questions remain as to whether the characteristics of offenders and patterns of offending and reoffending differ depending on whether the violence is reported to the police. Patterns of reoffending, including the escalation of violence between intimate partners, are not well understood. The role of illicit drugs has received relatively little attention compared with alcohol, as has mental illness. Finally, most studies focused on large geographic areas. There has been limited attempt to understand variation between places. These local variations may provide useful insights into environmental influences (eg service availability) that may inform effective place-based responses.

These limitations and gaps aside, this paper has drawn together the large Australian evidence base on domestic violence offending. The findings of this review should be used to inform the development of targeted prevention and criminal justice strategies, and also as a basis for future research and data collection.

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*Denotes studies that were included in the systematic review ($n=39$)

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Appendix A

Table A1: Prior offending among domestic violence offenders				
Study	Any prior offence (%)	DV-related prior offence (%)	Measure	Time frame
Boxall, Boyd, Dowling & Morgan (2018)		62	Self-report (victim or offender)	Lifetime
Boxall, Payne & Rosevear (2015)	69	39	Police recorded incident	6 years
Donnelly & Poynton (2015)	53		Proven offence	5 years
Fitzgerald & Graham (2016)	82		Proven offence	Lifetime
Migliore, Ziersch and Marshall (2014)		55	Police recorded incident	2 years
Millstead & Coghlan (2016)		39	Police recorded incident	Lifetime
Ringland & Fitzgerald (2010)	62		Proven offence	10 years
		6 ^a	Proven offence	2 years
Sentencing Advisory Council (2013)		13 ^a	Proven offence	2 years
Sentencing Advisory Council (2016)	66		Police recorded incident	5 years
	58		Proven offence	5 years
Stewart (2000)	63		Proven offence	Lifetime

a: Breach of a domestic violence order

Note: Van Tongeren, Millstead & Petry (2016) was excluded because it used the same sample as Millstead & Coghlan (2016) and did not disaggregate between domestic and family violence offenders

Source: Patterns of domestic violence offending, 2019 [Computer file]

Appendix B

Table B1: Prevalence of reoffending among domestic violence offenders							
Study	Any (%)	DV (%)	Violent DV (%)	Breach (%)	Sample	Measure	Time to reoffence
Fitzgerald & Graham (2016)	–	–	8	–	Adult offenders found guilty of a DV offence who received a non-custodial penalty	Proven offence	2 years
Kerr, Whyte & Strang (2017)	–	57	–	–	Domestic violence offenders detected for their first offence (within the unique dyad)	Police apprehension	4 years
Migliore, Ziersch & Marshall (2014)	36	26	–	–	Defendants who received an intervention order and had at least 90 days of non-custodial time following the issue of an order	Police apprehension	90 days (minimum)
Millsteed & Coghlan (2016)	–	51	–	–	Individuals recorded by police as the perpetrator of at least one family violence incident	Police apprehension	3 years 9 months (minimum)
Morgan, Boxall & Brown (2018)	–	23	–	–	Individuals recorded by police as the perpetrator of at least one domestic violence incident	Police apprehension	6 months
	–	16	–	–			90 days
	–	14	–	–			60 days
	–	5	–	–			14 days

Table B1: Prevalence of reoffending among domestic violence offenders							
Study	Any (%)	DV (%)	Violent DV (%)	Breach (%)	Sample	Measure	Time to reoffence
Poynton, Stavrou, Marott & Fitzgerald (2016)	–	–	–	5	All ADVOs granted in NSW, excluding POIs with provisional orders only or where an interim order was granted but there was no time (in the study period) for a final order to be granted	Proven breach of a provisional order	Duration of order (up to 2 years)
	–	–	–	9		Proven breach of an interim order	
	–	–	–	20		Proven breach of a final order	
Sentencing Advisory Council (2016)	53	–	–	–	Adults sentenced in the Magistrates Court for breaching a family violence intervention order or a family violence safety notice	Proven offence	5 years
Trevena & Poynton (2016)	37	20	8	–	Adults with a proven DV-related local court appearance who were given a suspended sentence (up to 24 months)	Proven offence	1 year
	61	34	16	–			3 years
	38	20	7	–	Adults with a proven DV-related local court appearance who were given a full-time prison sentence (up to 12 months)		1 year
	62	32	15	–			3 years

Notes: ADVO=apprehended domestic violence order. Mason & Julian (2009) was excluded because the follow-up period was inadequately described. Van Tongeren, Millstead & Petry (2016) was also excluded because it used the same sample as Millstead & Coghlan (2016) and did not disaggregate between domestic and family violence offenders

Source: Patterns of domestic violence offending, 2019 [Computer file]

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