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Abstract | This study examines the officially recorded criminal careers of 2,076 domestic violence offenders and 9,925 non-domestic violence offenders in New South Wales in the 10 years following their first police proceeding.

Group-based trajectory modelling was used to examine both domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending. Special attention is given to the degree of versatility in offending, and to the interplay of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending trajectories.

Domestic violence offending often formed part of a broader pattern of offending. While trajectories of low-frequency domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending were most common, domestic violence typically increases as non-domestic violence offences begin to decline. Importantly, there was variability in the offending profiles of domestic violence offenders. This was amplified when non-domestic violence offending was analysed, indicative of a complex array of underlying risk factors.

The criminal career trajectories of domestic violence offenders

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Growing recognition of the prevalence and impacts of domestic violence has intensified efforts in Australia to better understand and address this crime (Council of Australian Governments 2011). However, developing appropriate and effective responses to domestic violence requires understanding how, when and why these behaviours start, and then persist, escalate or decrease over time.

A number of studies have examined the so-called 'cycle of abuse', referring to the fluctuating patterns of violence and calm over time that are thought to characterise abusive relationships (eg Walker 2016). Research has also examined pathways into domestic violence offending—who starts offending and why (Chiodo et al. 2012; Lussier, Farrington & Moffitt 2009; Magdol et al. 1998). However, domestic violence research has historically neglected the broader longitudinal patterns of perpetrators' criminal careers, and many of the longitudinal dimensions of domestic violence (eg offending frequency and versatility, patterns of escalation and de-escalation) remain poorly understood.

Much of the limited research on the criminal careers of domestic violence offenders has examined whether they are 'generalists' (ie criminally versatile) or 'specialists' (ie limited in their offending to domestic violence; Piquero et al. 2006; Weatherburn & Rahman 2018). Most domestic violence offenders appear to be criminally versatile, with domestic violence comprising only one component of a broader pattern of general offending that includes many non-domestic violence offences (eg Bouffard & Zedaker 2016; Boxall, Payne & Rosevear 2015; Buzawa & Hirschel 2008; Fitzgerald & Graham 2016; Klein & Tobin 2008; Hilton & Eke 2016; Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018; Piquero et al. 2006; Richards et al. 2014; Stansfield & Williams 2014). This points to a common set of developmental and dispositional risk factors underlying domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending, and suggests that more generalised intervention measures for criminal and antisocial behaviour, rather than narrower domestic violence-specific interventions, may be better suited to many offenders.

From a targeting perspective, criminal careers research is useful for identifying 'high-risk' offenders (Loinaz 2014; Petersson & Strand 2017). A small number of domestic violence offenders have been found to account for a disproportionate amount of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending (Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019). The flipside of this is that the majority of domestic violence offenders are low-frequency offenders, accounting for only a small number of domestic violence and non-domestic violence related offences (Piquero, Theobald & Farrington 2014; Richards et al. 2013; Verbruggen et al. 2019).

Research on the criminal careers of domestic violence offenders is also useful for identifying when to target interventions (Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018). Studies have shown that domestic violence typically begins later in offenders' criminal histories (Klein & Tobin 2008) and increases in frequency as offenders enter their early twenties, just as their involvement in non-domestic violence offending is decreasing (Johnson et al. 2015). This corresponds with the ages at which many people enter their first serious relationship, which has been shown to suppress many forms of offending (Laub & Sampson 2003) but may also increase the risk of domestic violence (Carbone-Lopez, Rennison & Macmillan 2012; Devries et al. 2010; Johnson et al. 2015; Shortt et al. 2012). These findings highlight the need for careful planning around the timing of interventions for domestic violence offenders.

Aims and methods

This study builds on previous international research by examining domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending trajectories in the officially recorded criminal histories of an Australian sample of male offenders. It aims to address the following research questions:

- What is the age of onset, frequency, persistence and versatility of recorded offending among domestic violence offenders, and how do these compare with offenders who commit non-domestic violence related offences?
- What are the different offending trajectories among domestic violence offenders, and how do these trajectories differ from one another in terms of the onset, frequency, persistence and versatility of recorded offending?
- What is the relationship between recorded domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending trajectories among domestic violence offenders?

The focus of this study is on understanding the extent to which domestic violence offenders are involved in other forms of offending, the extent to which domestic violence is the beginning or continuation of a broader pattern of offending, and the differences between the offending patterns of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offenders. The focus on male offenders reflects the fact that men account for the overwhelming majority of domestic violence offenders who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Sample and data

This study examines the officially recorded criminal and custodial histories of a sample of 2,076 domestic violence offenders and 9,925 non-domestic violence offenders born in or after 1984. The first recorded offence of all offenders in this sample was committed during the period March 2008–09, and the records of all offenders in the 10 years from this first offence were analysed. All offences were proceeded against by NSW Police Force (NSWPF). Offence descriptions were coded using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification scheme (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011). Minor traffic offences (ie speeding, parking fines) were excluded. Domestic violence offenders were those who had been proceeded against for at least one violent or non-violent offence flagged as domestic violence-related (ie committed against a current or former intimate partner) in the NSWPF Computerised Operational Policing System during the observation period. Data were provided by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR).

Thirteen percent of offenders in the sample were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The average age at which offenders committed their first recorded offence was 17 years ($SD=2.27$). Almost half of the sample were 16–18 years of age when they committed their first recorded offence (44%), while a further third were 19–21 years of age (30%). There was a high degree of socio-economic disadvantage in the sample. A third of offenders (33%) ranked in the lowest quartile of the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA; ABS 2018) at their first police proceeding, and a further quarter ranked in the second lowest quartile (29%). Most offenders resided in a major city at their first police proceeding (64%), and only two percent resided in areas classified as remote or very remote, as measured by the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA; Hugo Centre for Migration and Population Research 2018).

Analytic strategy

Domestic violence offenders (as defined above, $n=2,076$) were compared with non-domestic violence offenders who had at least one violent offence recorded during the observation period, including homicide, manslaughter, physical assault, stalking, threats, kidnapping/deprivation of liberty and/or robbery (violent (non-domestic) offenders; $n=2,755$) and with offenders who had no domestic or other violent offences recorded (non-violent offenders; $n=7,170$). The comparison was undertaken on the basis of the following criminal history characteristics:

- age of onset—the age at which an offender committed the first offence for which they had been proceeded against;
- frequency—the total number of offences an offender was recorded as having committed within the observation period;
- persistence—the total number of times an offender was proceeded against by police. Recidivism was assessed based on whether an offender had been proceeded against more than once; and
- versatility—the variety in recorded offending throughout a criminal career. It is assessed using the diversity index (*DI*), which represents the probability that two offences drawn randomly from an individual's offending history will be different (Piquero et al. 1999). Scores closer to one are indicative of greater versatility. A bias-correction method (Francis & Humphreys 2016) was used to account for low offence frequencies. Domestic violence offenders were also classified based on whether all of their offences were flagged as domestic violence-related (ie domestic violence-only offenders).

The domestic violence and non-domestic violence criminal histories of domestic violence offenders were also compared on these characteristics.

Semi-parametric group-based trajectory modelling (GBTM), a common approach to criminal careers research (see DeLisi & Piquero 2011), was used to identify statistically archetypal trajectories representing the heterogeneous longitudinal offending patterns of domestic violence offenders within the first 10 years of their criminal histories. Two trajectory models were estimated separately for domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending. Zero-inflated Poisson models, which account for intermittency in offending, were used to generate offending trajectories, representing the number of domestic violence or non-domestic violence offences committed per year of offenders' criminal histories. Incarceration periods were controlled for by modelling trajectories against the proportion of each year that offenders were free to offend (ie exposure time; Piquero et al. 2001). The optimal number and form of trajectories was determined using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), the average posterior probabilities of group membership (ie the average probability of individuals classified into a trajectory group actually belonging to that group), and the odds of correct classification for each group (see Nagin 2005).

These two sets of trajectory groups were cross-tabulated to examine the overlap between trajectories of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending. Importantly, while this classify–analyse approach has been the dominant approach to examining the overlap of trajectories charting different behaviours or characteristics over time, including for domestic violence offenders (Piquero, Theobald & Farrington 2014; Richards et al. 2013; Verbruggen et al. 2019), it ignores the uncertainty in trajectory group membership (Roeder, Lynch & Nagin 1999). To account for this, dual trajectory modelling, which models the association of two trajectory models on the posterior probabilities of group membership rather than the proportion of offenders classified into each group, was also used to analyse the association of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending trajectories (Nagin 2005).

Limitations

While some inferences about the likely characteristics of offenders in each trajectory group may be made, it was not possible to empirically examine the developmental and dispositional antecedents of offending trajectories, and these inferences should be interpreted cautiously. Additionally, as this study only examines offending that has come to the attention of police and resulted in some form of proceeding, it is not possible to determine the extent to which criminal history characteristics reflect real trends in offending (ie patterns of violence and abuse experienced by victim–survivors), versus trends in the detection and apprehension of offenders by police. This is particularly true of non-physical forms of domestic violence, including coercive controlling behaviours (where physical or sexual violence is not present), which are less likely to come to the attention of police or result in some form of proceeding (Boxall & Morgan 2021; Stark 2012). Some critics suggest that the under-reporting of non-physical forms of domestic violence is in part attributable to current Australian domestic violence criminal legislation and associated law enforcement investigation and prosecution processes being focused on 'incidents' of violence and abuse rather than patterns of repeated behaviours that may be experienced by victim–survivors over time (see, for example, McMahon & McGorry 2020). Relatedly, the current data do not allow for the specific examination of other forms of violence within the family, and its association with violence against current or former intimate partners. These limitations aside, an understanding of the trajectories of domestic violence offenders who are in contact with police is important for informing responses, particularly criminal justice.

Findings

Criminal history characteristics of domestic violence offenders

Domestic violence offenders, on average, committed their first offence of any kind at 16.4 years of age, and committed 19.3 offences over the 10-year observation period (Table 1). They were proceeded against by police an average of 7.3 times, and the vast majority were proceeded against more than once (95%). Their offending was highly diverse ($DI=0.72$).

Table 1: Overall criminal history characteristics of offenders, by offender type

	Age of onset ^a	Frequency	Persistence		Versatility
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Recidivist % <i>(n)</i>	<i>DI M (SD)</i>
Domestic violence offenders (<i>n</i> =2,076)	16.4 (2.4)	19.3 (19.3)	7.3 (5.0)	95 (1,982)	0.72 (0.20)
Violent (non-domestic) offenders (<i>n</i> =2,755)	16.8 (2.1)	9.4 (11.8)	4.3 (3.6)	78 (2,161)	0.64 (0.33)
Non-violent offenders (<i>n</i> =7,170)	17.8 (2.1)	3.2 (4.6)	2.0 (1.6)	45 (3,256)	0.29 (0.39)

a: Age of onset missing for five offenders—four non-violent offenders and one violent (non-domestic) offender

Note: Chi-square used to compare offender groups on recidivism, and analysis of variance used to compare groups on all other variables. Domestic violence offenders are treated as the base category in all comparisons. P-values for post hoc bivariate comparisons adjusted using Scheffe's method. All differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). *M*=mean; *SD*=standard deviation; *DI*=diversity index

Source: NSW BOCSAR 2018 [dataset]

Domestic violence offenders ($n=2,076$) differed significantly from violent (non-domestic) offenders ($n=2,755$) and non-violent ($n=7,170$) offenders on all criminal history characteristics ($p < 0.001$ for all main and post hoc comparisons; Table 1). Domestic violence offenders began offending at a younger age ($F(2, 11,993)=433.8$) and committed a larger number of offences across the 10-year observation period ($F(2, 11,998)=1976.7$). They were also proceeded against more often ($F(2, 11,998)=2,669.8$), were more likely to reoffend ($\chi^2(2)= 2,100.0$) and were more versatile ($F(2, 11,998)=1,770.2$).

Expanding on the latter finding, all but 74 domestic violence offenders (96%) committed at least one non-domestic violence offence during the observation period. Domestic violence offenders were also responsible for a disproportionately large amount of the non-domestic violence offending in the sample. Despite accounting for 17 percent of offenders, domestic violence offenders committed around a third of non-domestic violence offences ($n=29,079$, 36%), and almost half of all (ie domestic violence and non-domestic violence) offences ($n=39,818$, 45%).

Next, the domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending histories of domestic violence offenders were compared (Table 2). These analyses exclude the 74 domestic violence-only offenders. Domestic violence offenders:

- began their non-domestic violence offending earlier than their domestic violence offending (16.5 years vs 20.3 years; $t(2,001)=54.7$, $p < 0.001$);
- committed a greater number of non-domestic violence offences (15.5 non-domestic violence offences vs 3.7 domestic violence offences; $t(2,001)=-33.4$, $p < 0.001$);
- were proceeded against more often for non-domestic violence offending (6.6 non-domestic violence proceedings vs 1.9 domestic violence proceedings; $t(2,001)=-47.4$, $p < 0.001$); and
- were twice as likely to commit further non-domestic violence offences as they were domestic violence offences, if they reoffended (McNemar's $\chi^2(1)=921.9$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2: Domestic violence and non-domestic violence criminal history characteristics of domestic violence offenders (n=2,002)

	Age of onset	Frequency	Persistence	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Recidivist % <i>(n)</i> ^a
Domestic violence offending	20.3 (3.5)	3.8 (4.1)	1.9 (1.4)	43 (848)
Non-domestic violence offending	16.5 (2.5)	16.1 (17.5)	6.6 (4.8)	93 (1,830)

a: n=1,967 domestic violence offenders who were proceeded against two or more times

Note: Chi-square used to compare offender groups on recidivism, and analysis of variance used to compare groups on all other variables. All differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). *M*=mean; *SD*=standard deviation

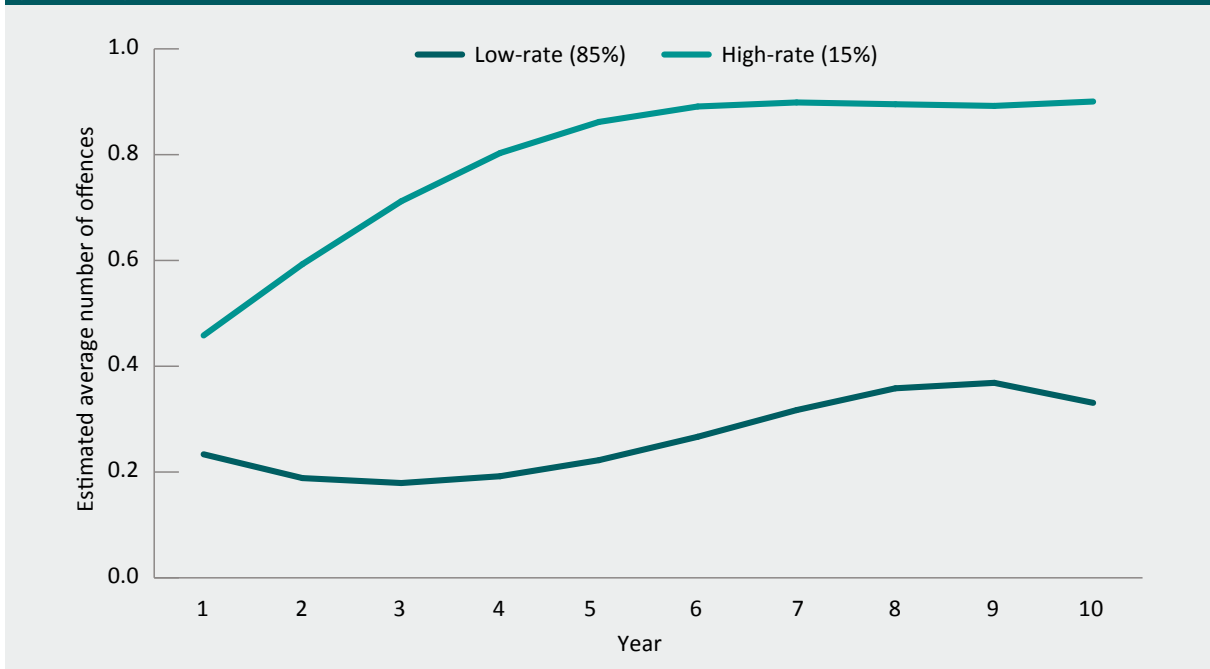
Source: NSW BOCSAR 2018 [dataset]

Taken together, these findings suggest that for the vast majority of offenders, domestic violence was part of a broader pattern of offending behaviour, and typically followed non-domestic violence offending. However, it is important to consider that the non-domestic violence offending in this sample likely includes other forms of family violence that were not recorded as such. This is particularly likely for incidents involving non-physical forms of violence (eg property damage) and where perpetrators were juveniles. Sixty-nine percent of the domestic violence offenders in the sample (n=1,426 offenders) had other types of violent offending recorded, and a third had violent offending recorded as juveniles. Eight hundred and eleven of these offenders, or 39 percent of all domestic violence offenders, had violent offending recorded at least one year before their first domestic violence offences. Coupled with the fact that many domestic violence incidents (particularly those involving juvenile offenders) go unreported to police (ABS 2017; Boxall, Morgan & Brown 2020; Fitz-Gibbon, Elliott & Maher 2018; Miles & Condry 2016), conclusions around the sequencing of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending should be drawn cautiously from these results.

Offending trajectories of domestic violence offenders

Using GBTM, a two-group trajectory model of domestic violence offending, with both trajectories reflecting cubic polynomial functions, was selected. This model consisted of low-rate (n=1,761, 85%) and high-rate (n=315, 15%) domestic violence offending groups (Figure 1). The low-rate trajectory, encompassing most offenders, exhibited less frequent domestic violence offending, with a small peak towards the end of the observation period. The high-rate trajectory peaked earlier and exhibited a higher frequency of domestic violence offending. Importantly, the labels ascribed to these groups are relative; at an average of one domestic violence offence per year or fewer, the yearly rate of offending across both groups is quite low.

Figure 1: Domestic violence offending trajectories, limited to domestic violence offenders (n=2,076)



Note: The average posterior probability of group membership for individuals classified into each trajectory group exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nagin 2005; low-rate=0.89, CI=0.89–0.90; high-rate=0.83, CI=0.83–0.86). The odds of correct classification exceed the recommended threshold of 5.0 for the high-rate group (32.2) but not the low-rate group (1.5). However, this two-group solution was used nevertheless due to its acceptable ratings on the other measures of fit. It also matches the two-group model generated by Richards and colleagues (2013)

Source: NSW BOCSAR 2018 [dataset]

Offenders in these trajectory groups differed significantly ($p < 0.001$) on all domestic violence criminal history characteristics (Table 3). High-rate offenders committed their first domestic violence offence at a slightly younger age compared to low-rate offenders (19.3 years vs 20.3 years; $t(2,074) = -4.6$), committed more domestic violence offences during the observation period (10.2 vs 2.6; $t(2,074) = 41.2$) and were proceeded against more often for domestic violence (3.4 vs 1.6; $t(2,074) = 23.7$). Noting that high-rate offenders started their domestic violence earlier on average, and therefore had longer within the observation period to reoffend, compared to low-rate offenders they were substantially more likely to reoffend at least once after being proceeded against by police for domestic violence for the first time (82% vs 34%; $\chi^2(1) = 252.6$). Differences in the proportion of domestic violence-only offenders in each trajectory group, while significant, were negligible (high-rate=1% vs low-rate=4%; $\chi^2(1) = 7.4$).

Table 3: Criminal history characteristics of domestic violence trajectory groups (n=2,076)

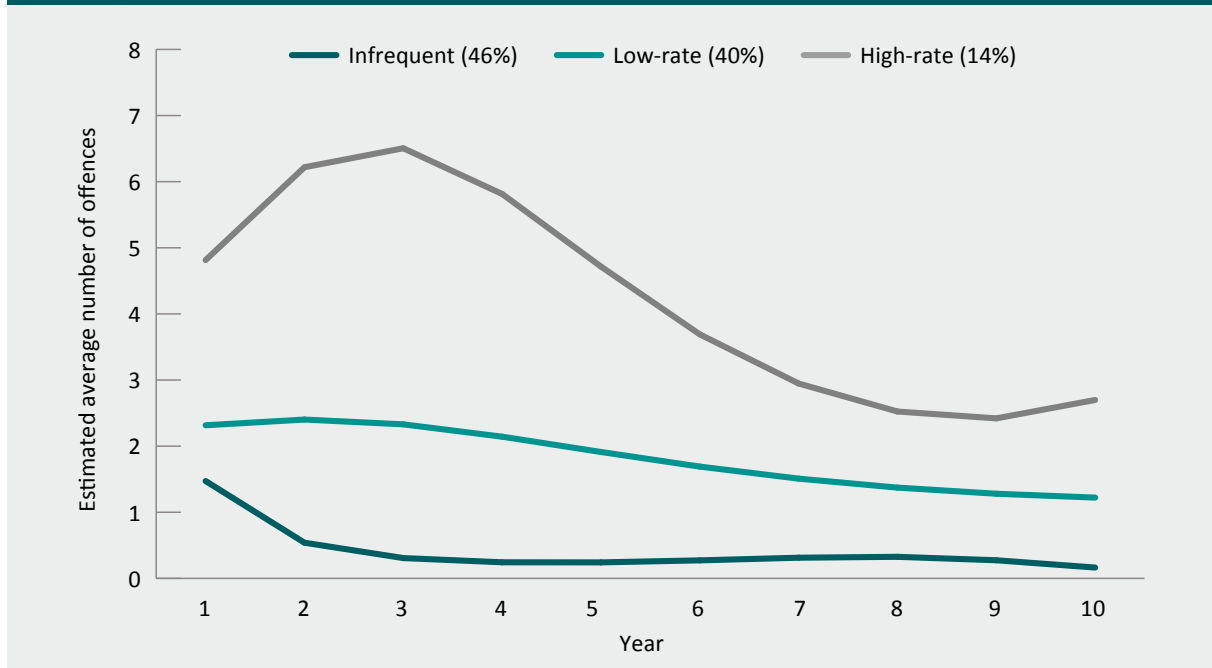
	Age of onset	Frequency	Persistence		Domestic violence-only
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	Recidivist %(n)	%(n)
Low-rate	20.3 (3.5)	2.6 (2.0)	1.6 (1.0)	34 (604)	4 (71)
High-rate	19.3 (3.5)	10.2 (6.1)	3.4 (2.2)	82 (259)	1 (3)

Note: Chi-square used to compare offender groups on recidivism and domestic violence-only, and analysis of variance used to compare groups on all other variables. All differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). M=Mean; SD=standard deviation

Source: NSW BOCSAR 2018 [dataset]

A three-group trajectory model of non-domestic violence offending, with two trajectories reflecting cubic polynomial functions and one reflecting a quadratic polynomial function, was selected, consisting of infrequent ($n=949$, 46%), low-rate ($n=831$, 40%) and high-rate ($n=296$, 14%) offenders (Figure 2). All three groups exhibited de-escalation in rates of non-domestic violence offending during the observation period, albeit to different degrees, and they started to converge towards similar offending rates by the end of this period. These three non-domestic violence trajectory groups differed significantly on all non-domestic violence offending parameters ($p < 0.001$ for all main and post hoc comparisons; Table 4).

Figure 2: Non-domestic violence offending trajectories, limited to domestic violence offenders (n=2,076)



Note: Average posterior probabilities of group membership exceed 0.70 for all three groups (infrequent=0.93, CI=0.92–0.94; low-rate=0.92, CI=0.91–0.93; high-rate=0.93, CI=0.92–0.95), and the odds of correct classification exceed 5.0 for all three groups (infrequent=16.6; low-rate=18.6; high-rate=88.3). The number and form of these trajectory groups also matches those identified by Richards and colleagues (2013)

Source: NSW BOCSAR 2018 [dataset]

Table 4: Criminal history characteristics of non-domestic violence trajectory groups (n=2,076)

	Age of onset ^a	Frequency	Persistence		Versatility
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	Recidivist %(n)	DI M (SD)
Infrequent	17.4 (2.3) ^{b,c}	4.0 (2.7) ^{b,c}	2.8 (1.9) ^{b,c}	74 (704)	0.67 (0.27) ^{b,c}
Low-rate	16.0 (2.4) ^{c,d}	17.9 (8.6) ^{c,d}	8.1 (3.4) ^{c,d}	99 (830)	0.76 (0.09) ^d
High-rate	14.9 (2.4) ^{b,d}	46.0 (23.0) ^{b,d}	12.8 (5.6) ^{b,d}	100 (296)	0.74 (0.08) ^d

a: Excludes those without at least one non-domestic violence offence (n=2,002), all of whom were classified into the infrequent group (n=875)

b: Differs significantly from low-rate group (p<0.001)

c: Differs significantly from high-rate group (p<0.001)

d: Differs significantly from infrequent group (p<0.001)

Note: Chi-square used to compare offender groups on recidivism, and analysis of variance used to compare groups on all other variables. P-values for post hoc bivariate comparisons adjusted using Scheffe's method. M=mean; SD=standard deviation; DI=diversity index

Source: NSW BOCSAR 2018 [dataset]

The final stage of this analysis examined the intersection of the domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending trajectories described in Figures 1 and 2 (Table 5). This was done by cross-tabulating these two sets of trajectories. The joint probabilities of group membership—the probability of an offender being included in a domestic violence trajectory group *and* a non-domestic violence trajectory group—generated with dual trajectory analysis are also examined to account for uncertainty in trajectory group membership.

Table 5: Association of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending trajectories for domestic violence offenders (n=2,076)

Domestic violence trajectory groups	Non-domestic violence trajectory groups % (n; joint probability)		
	Infrequent	Low-rate	High-rate
Low-rate	43 (898; 0.41)	31 (653; 0.25)	10 (210; 0.07)
High-rate	3 (51; 0.02)	9 (178; 0.17)	4 (86; 0.09)

Note: For comparison, when the association of these two trajectory models is examined using a conventional classify–analyse approach, the results are statistically significant ($\chi^2(2)=140.3$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.26$)

Source: NSW BOCSAR 2018 [dataset]

On both measures, domestic violence offenders were most likely to exhibit patterns of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending consistent with lower rate trajectories (domestic violence low-rate × non-domestic violence infrequent=43%, joint probability=0.41; domestic violence low-rate × non-domestic violence low-rate=31%, joint probability=0.25). Offenders were equally likely to follow trajectories consistent with low-rate domestic violence offending and high-rate non-domestic violence offending (10%), high-rate domestic violence offending and low-rate non-domestic violence offending (9%), although discrepancies in the joint probabilities here are notable (0.07 and 0.17, respectively). Relatively few followed trajectories approximating high-rate domestic violence offending and high-rate (4%; joint probability=0.09) or infrequent (3%; joint probability=0.02) non-domestic violence offending. Overall, the most pertinent finding from this final comparison is that there is considerable heterogeneity in the offending patterns of domestic violence offenders, especially once other forms of offending are considered.

Discussion and conclusions

Findings are consistent with those of prior research showing that domestic violence offenders are versatile in their offending, and that domestic violence typically occurs as part of a broader pattern of non-domestic violence offending. The number and nature of the offending trajectories identified also match those found by Richards and colleagues (2013) and reveal a number of important trends regarding the interplay of domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending.

Key finding 1: Compared to other offenders, domestic violence offenders are more prolific, more persistent and start offending earlier.

Collectively, the domestic violence offenders in this sample recorded a higher number of offences during the observation period than non-domestic violence offenders, were proceeded against by police more often, and started offending from a younger age. Importantly, they also exhibited a higher degree of offending versatility than non-domestic violence offenders, and almost all had engaged in other forms of offending.

Key finding 2: Domestic violence offending trajectories differ from non-domestic violence offending trajectories.

The offending trajectories identified in the current study show that increases in the rate of domestic violence offending over time coincided with decreases in the rate of non-domestic violence offending across all trajectory groups. This is consistent with prior research showing later peaks in domestic violence offending (Johnson et al. 2015; Klein & Tobin 2008), and points to the influence of age-specific life events (eg entry into serious relationships, pregnancy, children) which can simultaneously serve as protective factors against non-domestic violence offending in early adulthood (Sampson & Laub 1993) and risk factors for domestic violence offending (Johnson et al. 2015).

Key finding 3: Most domestic violence offenders commit domestic violence and non-domestic violence offences infrequently.

A low frequency of domestic violence offending is strongly associated with a low frequency of non-domestic violence offending. Further, offenders in the current sample were most likely to follow low-rate trajectories of both domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending. The extent to which offenders in the sample can truly be considered 'low frequency' is constrained somewhat by the omission of offending for which no police proceeding was recorded. Similarly, our ability to classify these offenders as 'low frequency' is limited by potential under-reporting of non-physical forms of violence such as emotional abuse, which may continue to escalate even as physical forms of violence de-escalate or stabilise. Nevertheless, this finding is consistent with other Australian research arguing that many domestic violence offenders engage infrequently in both domestic violence and non-domestic violence offending. This in turn suggests that at least some domestic violence offending is underpinned by a weak and generalised individual disposition towards crime, which probably manifests differently across different ages, as opposed to a specific disposition towards domestic violence (Felson & Lane 2010; Lussier, Farrington & Moffitt 2009; Moffitt et al. 2000).

Key finding 4: There is evidence of a small group of domestic violence offenders for whom domestic violence is the primary component of their offending careers.

While low-rate domestic violence offenders also tended to commit non-domestic violence offences at a lower rate, the high-rate domestic violence offenders did not necessarily follow high-rate trajectories of non-domestic violence offending. Although a small proportion appeared to be chronic versatile offenders, the high-rate domestic violence offenders were more likely to follow a trajectory of persistent but low-frequency non-domestic violence offending. This points to the existence of a small group of prolific domestic violence offenders who commit domestic violence as part of a broader pattern of chronic offending, and a larger group for whom domestic violence figures more prominently in their criminal histories.

Implications

In Australia, significant attention is being paid to the socio-cultural factors that are thought to perpetuate domestic violence (eg gender inequity, attitudes minimising or endorsing violence against women) along with primary prevention measures addressing these (see, for example, National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children; Council of Australian Governments 2011). Offender-focused responses addressing attitudes supportive of domestic violence, most notably men's behaviour change programs, are also being increasingly emphasised (Mackay et al. 2015). Without downplaying the importance of these factors and interventions, the current study reinforces the importance of tailoring individual-level interventions to the unique circumstances of offenders in contact with the criminal justice system. No one intervention is going to be effective across all situations and offenders.

The most common offending pattern observed among domestic violence offenders in this sample—late onset, low frequency, intermittent and versatile—is consistent with numerous typological frameworks that have identified a large group of offenders who do not limit their offending to domestic violence (Boxall, Rosevear & Payne 2015; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart 1994; Johnson 2010; Johnston & Campbell 1993). For these offenders—who are in contact with the criminal justice system—their involvement in both domestic violence and other types of offending could be explained by a more general disposition towards crime and antisocial behaviour. Research has shown that, like offenders generally, many domestic violence offenders have chaotic lives, weak connections with others, and are highly impulsive and reckless (eg Payne, Higgins & Blackwell 2010). Timely police and justice responses such as arrest and protection orders have been shown to be more effective with first-time and less frequent domestic violence offenders (Dowling et al. 2018). These responses may be best suited to these offenders, coupled with generalised therapeutic, psychoeducational and other service responses that target factors underpinning criminal and antisocial behaviour more broadly (eg alcohol/drug counselling, clinical psychological treatment, cognitive-behavioural programs, social and employment skills programs).

Considering that many high-rate domestic violence offenders were also involved in other forms of crime, a similar argument could be made for interventions which include generalised criminal justice, health and service responses for this group as well. However, the variability in their non-domestic violence offending, coupled with a lack of information on the context and motivations for their abusive behaviours, makes understanding their offending more difficult with the current findings. Certainly, for those high-rate domestic violence offenders who frequently commit non-domestic violence offences as well, generalised responses may be appropriate, albeit at a higher dosage (ie more intensive or longer-term; Cui et al. 2012).

However, as the findings demonstrate, for some high-rate domestic violence offenders, violence towards their intimate partners featured more prominently in their criminal histories than other forms of crime. It is possible that these offenders are the 'patriarchal terrorists' (Johnson 2010) who use violence and abuse, including coercive controlling behaviours, as part of a broader pattern of behaviour focused on dominating their partners. The offending of this group may be underpinned by factors associated with offending generally *and* domestic violence specifically (eg adherence to gender norms and attitudes towards male violence, witnessing domestic violence as a child; Capaldi et al. 2012). Domestic violence-specific therapeutic and psychoeducational programs, along with intensive responses emphasising victim protection, may be more appropriate for these offenders.

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