



Adolescent Family and Dating Violence and the Criminal Law Response

Heather Douglas¹ · Tamara Walsh²

Accepted: 1 February 2022 / Published online: 11 March 2022
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Abstract

The criminal law response to adolescent family and dating violence is understudied in Australia. The aim of the present study was to examine the charges and sentences adolescents face when they perpetrate acts of violence against family members or intimate partners, and to better understand the personal circumstances of these adolescents, including whether they have been diagnosed with a mental illness, whether they have a criminal history and whether they have been subject to child protection interventions. We undertook a two stage study analyzing unpublished statistical data and case files held by the Youth Justice department in Queensland, Australia. We found that the most commonly charged offence was contravention of a family violence protection order in the context of adolescent dating violence. We found that many of the adolescents charged with adolescent family and dating violence related offences faced significant challenges and that Indigenous young people were significantly overrepresented in family violence related charges, especially for contraventions of a family violence protection order. Whilst criminal law responses are uncommon in parent–child and sibling violence contexts, family violence protection orders are over-utilized as a response to adolescent dating violence. Such orders when breached result in criminalization of the young person. Resources should to be (re)directed away from the criminal law system and into community-led, place-based initiatives that address the drivers of crime and incarceration.

Keywords Adolescent family violence · Adolescent dating violence · Criminal law · Family violence protection orders

Introduction

Both adolescent family violence (AFV) and adolescent dating violence (ADV) have received increased attention from researchers and policy makers in recent times. AFV is an ‘umbrella term’ used to refer to a young person’s violence towards their family members (Boxall & Sabol, 2021:2). AFV includes child-to-parent violence and sibling violence as well as an adolescent’s violence to other family members such as cousins, aunts and uncles (Boxall & Sabol, 2021:2). Adolescent dating violence (ADV) involves abusive behavior by an adolescent by or towards their adolescent intimate partner (Adams et al., 2021). Both AFV and ADV can include physical, sexual or psychological/emotional abuse.

While adolescence is a time of increased stress which can result in tensions within families, AFV is considered

distinct from ‘normal’ adolescent behavior (Conteras & Cano, 2014:901). Having said this, AFV is prevalent in the community and its prevalence is likely to be underestimated because it often remains unreported (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2018:4; Routt & Anderson, 2011:2). While the application of diverse definitions makes reliable prevalence estimations difficult, Boxall and Sabol (2021:1) suggest that between 7–13% of families experience AFV. Holt (2016:490) reports that between 6.5% and 10.8% of young people have hit their parents on at least one occasion in the past one to three years, while O’Hara et al., (2017:184) report a prevalence rate of between 5 and 22% of the population. Depending on how sibling violence is defined, between 21 and 46% of young people have experienced sibling violence (Desir & Karatekin, 2021:21–3). In their Victorian study of AFV, Boxall and Sabol (2021:4) identified ‘other family members’ who were victims, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and carers, in 11% of reports of AFV made to police. ADV is also reported to be common despite the fact that violent crime amongst this age group has declined overall (Adams et al., 2021: 6; Glass et al., 2003: 227). ADV prevalence rates of up to 48% have been reported in the literature

✉ Heather Douglas
douglass@unimelb.edu.au

¹ Melbourne Law School, The University of Melbourne, Carlton, VIC, Australia

² The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

(Glass et al., 2003: 228). As with intimate partner violence, ADV is highly gendered: adolescent girls are more likely to be victims of ADV, or more likely to receive serious injuries as a result of ADV, than adolescent boys (Daff et al., 2018: NP5595; Glass et al., 2003: 227). Witnessing domestic violence and experiencing abuse as a child are risk factors for both AFV and ADV (Moulds et. al., 2019b: 4).

While Australian research on AFV (Boxall & Sabol, 2021; Campbell et al., 2020; Douglas & Walsh, 2018; Elliott et al., 2020; Moulds, Day, et al., 2019) and ADV (Daff et al., 2018; Moulds, Malvaso, et al., 2019) is increasing, significant gaps in knowledge remain. For example, there is limited research on how AFV and ADV are responded to within the youth justice system (Moulds, Day, et al., 2019). It is not clear what kinds of offences young people tend to be charged with when they perpetrate AFV and ADV, the age of young people who are charged and sentenced, and what kinds of penalties are imposed. Importantly, the experience of Indigenous young people in the Australian context remains underanalysed.

Drawing on data held by the Youth Justice Department in Queensland, Australia, we investigated family violence (FV) offences committed by young people. We defined ‘young people’ (or ‘adolescent’) as aged between 10 to 17 years because this corresponds to the age of criminal responsibility in Queensland. We defined FV offences as criminal offences committed in circumstances where the victim was a member of the accused’s family, an intimate partner, or a previous intimate partner. First, we analysed administrative data collected by the Youth Justice department¹ in Queensland on FV offences committed by young people. We then undertook a qualitative analysis of 30 Youth Justice case files involving FV offences. In this paper, we consider what kinds of FV offences young people are charged with, how they are sentenced and the relationship between the perpetrator and victim in prosecuted cases. We also discuss the context of the offending behaviour, the youth justice and other responses that were implemented, and the differences between cases involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people. Finally, we examine the personal circumstances of young people charged with FV offences, including whether or not they have mental health issues or other disabilities, and whether or not they have been victims of violence or abuse themselves.

¹ As of June 2021, Youth Justice is part of the Department of Children, Youth Justice, and Multicultural Affairs in Queensland.

Literature review

Over the past two decades, there has been increased research interest in AFV (Cottrel, 2004; FitzGibbon et al., 2021; Routt & Anderson, 2015). Statistics in Australia suggest that the problem of AFV may be increasing, or families may be more likely to report such violence. For example, in the state of Victoria, between 2010 and 2015, reported FV incidents where the perpetrator was under 19 years increased from 4,516 to 7,397 incidents (Royal Commission, 2016:150).

Research has identified some important general findings about AFV. For example, young people who perpetrate AFV often have mental health problems (Kennedy et al., 2010:517), particularly depression (McClosky & Lichter, 2003). Aggressive behaviour is particularly prevalent among children with cognitive and developmental disabilities (Brosnan & Healy, 2011:438; Coogan, 2014:e4), although research suggests that aggressive behaviour among young people may also be ‘learned’. For example, some literature has begun to explore the relationship between intimate partner violence perpetrated by fathers and AFV perpetrated by their sons (Simmons et al., 2018:38). Failure to understand the reasons behind the young person’s violent behaviour may discourage disclosure and result in inappropriate interventions (Coogan, 2014:e7).

Circumstances in Which AFV and ADV Occurs

Most international research on AFV has focused on identifying the characteristics of young people who engage in child-to-parent violence (Simmons et al., 2018). Research has found that child-to-parent violence is a gendered phenomenon, the majority of perpetrators are boys (sons) and the majority of victims are women over 40 years of age (mothers) (Holt & Lewis, 2021: 796; Daly & Wade, 2016).

A young person who is violent towards their parent is more likely to come from a single parent household than other young people who use violence (Contreras & Cano, 2014; Routt & Anderson, 2011) and in most reported cases of AFV, the victim-mother is the sole parent (Haw, 2010:7; Kennedy et al., 2010:518). Some studies (Conteras and Cano, 2014; Holt & Lewis, 2021: 800) note that increased stress within the household, rather than the fact of single parenthood itself, may underpin conflict between parents and children.

Some studies have suggested that adolescents who engage in child-to-parent violence are more likely to have been abused themselves than young people who use violence against people other than their parents (Holt & Lewis, 2021: 793; Contreras & Cano, 2014). If a child witnesses their mother being abused, they are more likely to use child-to-parent violence (Kennedy et al., 2010; Routt & Anderson, 2011; Simmons et al., 2018: 38–39).

Sibling violence, sometimes referred to as sibling bullying (Dantchev & Wolke, 2019), is less gendered than child-to-parent violence (Desir & Karatekin, 2021: 22;). Research suggests that sibling violence is more common in families where children have been exposed to FV or child maltreatment (Desir & Karatekin, 2021: 23; Eriksen & Jensen, 2009). Similar to child-to-parent violence, researchers have identified that family dynamics including high levels of parenting stress and frustration, unclear boundaries, parental dysfunction, and conflict or violence in the family or in the parent–child relationship are often present where there is sibling violence (Eriksen & Jensen, 2009). Sibling violence can be very harmful to victims, resulting in low self-esteem and adult emotional difficulties and the perpetration of sibling violence is associated with the perpetrator carrying out other forms of aggression (Desir & Karatekin, 2021: 24). AFV may also extend to other family members, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins (Boxall & Sabol, 2021). Holt and Birchall (2021: 2) have highlighted the ‘research deficit’ in relation to AFV towards grandparents, aunts and uncles in a recent study.

In relation to ADV, an Australian survey of 5,000 young people aged 12 to 20 found that about one-third of all boys and girls who have been in a dating relationship have experienced some measure of physical violence in one or more of those relationships (Flood & Fergus, 2008:17). Some studies show similar rates of aggressive behaviour perpetrated by boys and girls against the partners or previous partners (Daff et al., 2018: NP5595), however girls experience more severe victimisation than boys in dating relationships (Daff et al., 2018: NP5595; McClosky & Lichter, 2003:405). Research has identified that living together, increased length of relationship and poor conflict and anger management skills are positively related to the perpetration of violence between young people in relationships (Dardis et al., 2015:138–9).

Researchers have recognised similarities between AFV and ADV and intimate partner violence between adults. They may all involve the use of tactics of power and control (Daly & Nancarrow, 2010:153), victims may be reluctant to report to police or to other services (Howard & Abbott, 2013; Routt & Anderson, 2011:10) and victims may wish to maintain the relationship but remain safe (Haw, 2010:31).

Responding to Adolescent Family and Dating Violence

Responses to AFV and ADV vary. In Australia, courts can impose civil family violence protection orders (FVP orders) on young people although, depending on the jurisdiction, FVP orders may only be available in the context of ADV and not AFV (Campbell et al., 2020). These orders may include a range of conditions such as not to be violent to the victim or to stay away from the victim (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2018:27). In

both AFV and ADV contexts, police may charge perpetrators with criminal offences including assault, wilful damage or sexual offences. In situations where police consider other children (eg. siblings) in the home to be at risk of harm, child protection authorities may be called upon to respond. This may discourage mothers from reporting the violence because they do not want their children to be removed from their care (Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2018:27). Campbell et al’s (2020) research illustrates the variability in responses to AFV and ADV between three Australian states. They found that FVP orders were not available as a response in Tasmania, but were routinely made against young people in Victoria, while in Western Australia, young people were often charged with criminal offences (Campbell et al., 2020:68, 73–4).

Criminal law responses to AFV and ADV are generally not supported by practitioners or families (Douglas & Walsh, 2018; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2021). The issue of responsibility must be understood differently when young people use violence. Whilst adult perpetrators of intimate partner violence are fully responsible for their violence and have the capacity to live independently, adolescent perpetrators of violence in their relationships may not have the developmental capacity to understand the consequences of their behaviour, and where violence is perpetrated against a parent, they may rely on their victim for nurturing, guidance and support (Douglas & Walsh, 2018).

Research has consistently shown that the less interaction young people have with the criminal law system, including police, the better the outcomes in terms of reoffending (Douglas & Walsh, 2018; McAra & McVie, 2010). Yet, when it comes to AFV and ADV, ensuring the safety of victims is a matter of critical importance. Interventions need to be directed at securing the safety of household members, including any other children that are present. In the context of AFV, what is often desired is reconciliation (Douglas & Walsh, 2018; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2021). Literature on successful program intervention for AFV suggests that restoring relationships, reducing household stress and changing attitudes towards violence is important if the offending behaviour is to be addressed (Burck, 2021). Even in situations of ADV, interventions that take a trauma-informed approach, with the aim of improving relationships, have proven effective (Moulds, Day, et al., 2019; Moulds, Malvaso, et al., 2019: 14–15).

Study Context

In Queensland, the *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* (2012) (Qld) (DFVP Act) defines domestic and family violence (FV) to include physical and sexual violence but also coercive and controlling behavior and various forms of non-physical violence (DFVP Act, s. 8). The DFVP Act (ss. 13, 19) covers a range of relationships including

intimate personal relationships, family relationships (persons ‘connected by blood or marriage’) and informal care relationships. An informal care relationship exists between two people where one is dependent on the other person for help in daily living but excludes the relationship between a parent and a child (DFVP Act, s20). In Queensland, FVP orders are not available in child-parent AFV or sibling AFV but they are available in the context of ADV (DFVP Act, s22).

The DFVP Act enables a person who has experienced FV and is fearful of further FV (the aggrieved) to apply for a FVP order² to protect them from future violence from another person (the respondent). The conditions of the FVP order may require the respondent to stay away from the aggrieved. If the conditions are not complied with by the respondent, the respondent may be charged with contravening a FVP order (DFVP Act, s.177). This is a criminal offence that has a maximum penalty of three to five years’ imprisonment depending on the circumstances.

Since 2015, Queensland’s Department of Justice has required that all cases in which any offence occurred in circumstances where the victim is, or was, in an intimate personal, family or informal care relationship with the perpetrator of the offence be ‘flagged’ (‘FV-flagged offence’) so that charging trends can be tracked (*Penalties and Sentences Act 1992* (1992) (Qld), s12A).

Children as young as 10 years of age can be charged with criminal offences in Queensland. The principle of *doli incapax* applies in respect of children aged 10 to 14 years of age, which means that a child between the ages of 10 and 14 years maybe criminally responsible where ‘it is proved that at the time of doing the act or making the omission the person had capacity to know that the person ought not to do the act or make the omission’ (*Queensland Criminal Code 1899* (1899) (Qld), s29). When children aged between 10 and 17 years are prosecuted for criminal offences, they are subject to the *Youth Justice Act 1992* (1992) (Qld) (YJ Act) which aims to recognize the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration of youth who are engaged with the criminal justice process.

In Queensland, the purpose of the *Child Protection Act 1999* (1999) (Qld) (CP Act) is to protect children (s4). At the time our research was undertaken, the Youth Justice department (working under the YJ Act) and the Child Safety department (working pursuant to the CP Act) were two separate departments but since our research was completed, the two departments have been combined.

In Queensland, the Indigenous population accounts for 4.6 percent of the population (Queensland Government,

2018: 2). However, Indigenous children are disproportionately represented in both the youth justice and child protection systems. Over 70% of children in youth detention in Queensland on an average day in 2019–2020 were Indigenous children (Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs, n. d.) and in Queensland, Indigenous children are 8.5 times more likely to be in out of home care than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020). Furthermore, there is a strong relationship between these two systems, with young Indigenous Australians involved with youth justice much more likely than non-Indigenous young people to have received child protection services (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2020:1).

Study Approach and Limitations

We undertook this research with the aim of improving our understanding about young people who are charged with FV offences and how the youth justice system responds to AFV and ADV. We wanted to find out what offences young people were charged with when they committed FV offences and what penalties were imposed by the courts. We sought to ascertain whether adolescents who are charged with FV offences are identified as having experienced or witnessed FV in the past, and whether they have mental health issues, a disability or a child protection history. We were also interested in learning more about the influence of gender and Indigeneity on offending and victimisation in AFV and ADV cases.

Our study involved two phases. First, we analysed unpublished administrative data collected by the Queensland Youth Justice department. We were provided with basic information concerning every young person who was charged with a FV-flagged offence in the period between 2013/14 and 2018/19. The department provided us with a deidentified spreadsheet with information on 734 offences involving 270 young people that had been flagged as involving a FV offence during that period. The number of cases that were flagged as involving a FV offence increased over time.³ This is partly attributable to the fact that FV offences have only been routinely flagged since October 2015. Prior to October 2015, the court had the discretion to flag a matter but this was not mandated. It is also likely that over time, the courts have become more familiar with the flagging requirement, and have flagged relevant matters more consistently. Therefore, the increase in the number of young people who are identified to have committed a FV offence may not be

² We have used the term ‘family violence protection order’ (FVP order) to refer to civil protection orders aimed at protecting a person from domestic and family violence.

³ Number of cases flagged as involving an FV offence by year and number: 2013–2014:n19; 2014–2015: n20; 2015–2016: 35; 2016–2017: n44; 2017–2018: n62; 2018–2019:n90.

reflective of an increase in young people committing FV offences each year.

Information that was provided in respect of each of the 270 young people included: age and gender of the young person; and whether the young person was known to child protection services, had witnessed FV, and had an intellectual disability or mental illness. A limitation of this administrative data is that it did not provide individuals' criminal histories so we were not able to determine whether higher penalties were associated with the young person's criminal history or not.

The second phase of this study involved a qualitative analysis of 30 Youth Justice department files. The Youth Justice department provided us with access to 30 electronic files they randomly selected relating to 30 young people who had been charged with at least one FV-flagged offence between 2013/14 and 2018/19. The files included more detailed information on 30 young person's charges, court appearances and sentencing outcomes, as well as demographic and family information, and whether there were any 'alerts' in place pertaining to the young person, for example if the young person was at risk of suicide, or was known to be violent. Within the files was a range of documents including prior conviction records, charge sheets with details of the facts underlying charged offences, pre-sentence reports, sentencing outcomes and detailed case notes written by Youth Justice workers. The case notes contained information about youth justice interventions that had been initiated, and interactions that had occurred between Youth Justice officers and young person.

We extracted as much data as was available in the files that corresponded to pre-determined variables. Those variables included: family history; whether any diagnosis of mental illness or other psychopathology was noted; whether any disability (physical, sensory or cognitive) was noted; any child protection history; any criminal history; the circumstances surrounding any FV offence; the nature of any criminal law response to FV offending (including whether an FVP order was in place); and the sentence imposed.

Data was extracted from each file by both researchers, working in partnership, and entered into a data collection template. The extracted data was then coded according to the pre-determined variables. Data corresponding to each variable was transferred into a spreadsheet by one researcher, and subsequently reviewed by the other. Where any discrepancies were identified, the data was reviewed again to achieve agreement. Most of the files contained information about mental health, disability, and prior history of drug use as entered by Youth Justice officers. Basic child protection history was available for all files, including the calendar years in which there was contact between the young person and the Child Safety department and the broad type of intervention that occurred (such as 'intake' or 'placement'). For the

purposes of our discussion, we have identified whether the young person had contact with the Child Safety department prior to turning ten (the age of criminal responsibility in Queensland) or from the age of ten. We refer to the information extracted from the files as 'file data' in our discussion of the results.

None of the files included information for every pre-determined variable, and some files were more detailed than others. The files of young people who received more intensive case management (often because they had committed multiple offences and were at high risk of receiving a custodial sentence) included more documents, and therefore contained more detail, than those involving young people who had committed only a single offence. The inconsistency in the amount of data available for each young person is a limitation of this study. Further, the inclusion of specific information in both the administrative data and the file data was dependent on the perspectives and judgement of Youth Justice staff, or others who entered the data. We could not cross-check any of the data to confirm that the information was entered correctly, nor were we able to clarify or seek further information on any specific aspects of the data. This should also be viewed as a limitation of this research.

In drawing exclusively on Youth Justice data, our sample was limited to proven offences that were prosecuted and sentenced. Since most AFV and ADV is unreported (Boxall et al., 2015: 3), the small proportion of matters that proceed through the courts may not be representative of families' experiences in a general sense. Our reliance on Youth Justice data, however, does allow for a comparison of our findings with other studies whose samples have been drawn from juvenile court/justice system matters (including Kennedy et al., 2010; Contreras & Cano, 2014) and assists us to understand the kinds of matters that are more likely to result in criminal law responses.

Results

As noted above, the administrative data was a spreadsheet including information on 734 offences, involving 270 young people, that had been flagged as involving a FV offence between 2013/14 and 2018/19. Of the 270 young people with FV-flagged offences, 18% ($n=49$) involved a female accused and the remaining 82% ($n=221$) involved a male accused. Of the 30 files we examined, 23% ($n=7$) were female and 76% ($n=23$) were male.

Sixty percent of the flagged cases in the administrative data ($n=161$) concerned Indigenous young people and 37% ($n=100$) concerned non-Indigenous people. Information on Indigenous status was not available for nine of the flagged cases. There was a slightly lower proportion of Indigenous young people represented in the file data compared to the

Table 1 Personal Circumstances of Accused by FV-Flagged Case (Administrative Data)

| Challenges | Total (<i>n</i> = 270) | | Indigenous (<i>n</i> = 161) | | Non-Indigenous (<i>n</i> = 100) | |
|--|-------------------------|------|------------------------------|------|----------------------------------|----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Abusive parent | 75 | 27.8 | 43 | 31.1 | 32 | 32 |
| Witnessed DV | 70 | 25.9 | 51 | 31.7 | 18 | 18 |
| Low intelligence and developmental delay | 30 | 11.1 | 20 | 12.4 | 10 | 10 |
| Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder | 2 | 0.7 | 2 | 1.2 | 0 | 0 |
| Suicide attempt | 55 | 20.4 | 29 | 18.0 | 26 | 26 |
| Psychosis | 3 | 1.1 | 1 | 0.6 | 2 | 2 |
| Depressed | 37 | 13.7 | 12 | 7.5 | 25 | 25 |
| Anxiety | 38 | 14.1 | 16 | 9.9 | 22 | 22 |
| Conduct disorder | 7 | 2.6 | 4 | 2.5 | 3 | 3 |
| Other mental health issue | 12 | 4.4 | 7 | 4.3 | 5 | 5 |

administrative data. Of the 30 files, 13 (43%) concerned Indigenous young people, of whom 10 were male and three were female.

Within the administrative data, the median age of the young people at the time they were charged with a FV offence was 16.5 years. All of the young people represented in the file data were aged between 14 and 17 years when they committed the FV offence, and most (*n* = 25) were 16 or 17 years of age.

Notably, just over half of the young people in our file data (*n* = 16, 53%) were themselves parents, or were expecting a child. Of the 13 Indigenous young people in the file data, eight (61.5%) had children of their own, whilst only three of non-Indigenous people (23%) had children or were expecting a child. In the following sections we explore the key issues arising from the administrative and file data.

Personal Circumstances

Of the 270 FV-flagged cases in the administrative data, 44% (*n* = 118) had either witnessed or experienced FV, 28% (*n* = 75) were identified as having an abusive parent, and 26% (*n* = 70) were identified as having witnessed FV. Eleven percent (*n* = 30) were identified as having an intellectual impairment (see Table 1). There were very high rates of mental health problems within the administrative sample. Half of the young people were noted to have a mental health disorder. Around 14% of the young people (*n* = 37) were identified as ‘depressed’ and 20% (*n* = 55) had made a suicide attempt. The rate of mental health problems was significantly higher amongst the non-Indigenous young people: 50% of the non-Indigenous young people were noted to have a mental health issue, compared with 30% of the Indigenous young people. Around 8% (*n* = 12) of the Indigenous young people were identified as ‘depressed’ compared with 25% (*n* = 25) of the non-Indigenous young people. Ten percent

(*n* = 16) of the Indigenous young people were identified as having ‘anxiety’, while 22% (*n* = 22) of non-Indigenous youth were identified as having ‘anxiety’.

Only two of the 30 files mentioned a history of FV in the young person’s family of origin (files 13 and 14). This may be because the case workers were focused on current circumstances for the young person.

Many of the files contained information about the young person’s mental health, and often multiple mental health problems were identified. Just over half of the young people (16 of the 30 files) were noted to have mental health issues, including four of the 13 Indigenous young people. The most common mental or psychological impairments identified across all the files were depression (*n* = 7), psychosis (*n* = 5), ADHD (*n* = 5), ASD (*n* = 5), self-harm (cutting) (*n* = 5) and anxiety (*n* = 4). Twelve of the young people had experienced suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, and one file was closed because the adolescent committed suicide at 17 years of age (file 22). Four of the young people were stated to have an intellectual impairment, including one who had been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

In addition to this, many of the young males had experienced traumatic events, displayed aggressive behaviour and had been referred to ‘anger management’ programs but had not received a formal diagnosis. For example, file 7 involved an Indigenous young person who was one of many children in the family. He had experienced significant trauma, grief and loss throughout his life, including the loss of several siblings by suicide. The worker completing the file note observed that because of the short period of time between the tragedies he faced, he ‘did not have a chance to develop a healthy grieving response’. He had attempted suicide on several occasions, but each time had been taken to hospital and had recovered. He told his worker that he ‘used ice [crystal methamphetamine] to cope’. The file noted that he had a ‘mild intellectual impairment’ and that he had experienced

child protection interventions on a number of occasions but had never been placed in out of home care. This young person had a detailed offending history over a three year period involving drugs, car theft and assault, and he had been in detention. The FV matter involved a breach of a FVP order, at the age of 17, where his girlfriend was the aggrieved. He had approached her house and had thereby failed to comply with a condition to stay away. He had completed a probation order in relation to this matter, but the file noted that he was in detention on other matters when his file was closed.

In 15 of the 30 files, drug use was identified. All of these 15 young people were male, and most ($n = 14$) had been charged with an ADV offence; only one had been charged with an AFV offence, for sexual abuse of a sibling. The types of drugs used varied and included most commonly ice, cannabis and alcohol. Eight adolescents disclosed that they used ice, one of whom was Indigenous. All of the young people who used ice also had mental health issues identified in the file notes, specifically depression or suicidal ideation. Notably, none of the seven female young people in the sample were identified as using drugs or alcohol.

In some of the files, the young person had experienced an episode of psychosis that was associated with their drug use. In file 15, it was reported that the young person had developed a psychotic disorder as a result of using ice. He had lost significant weight and the file noted that his 'body was shutting down, [his] liver hurts'. He had a lengthy child protection and criminal history, the latter mainly because of his use of drugs. He had a difficult upbringing, his mother used heroin and he had been drinking and taking drugs since he was 12. The file identified that he was now 16 years old, he had a baby and had breached a FVP order where the aggrieved was his partner. The file reported that he was in custody for a range of offences relating to his drug use and violence.

Criminal History

The administrative data did not provide criminal history information, however many of the files included extensive information on the young person's criminal history. Most of the young people ($n = 19$) in our file sample had been charged with offences on other occasions, additional to the FV-flagged offences. Of these, 15 had been charged with more than four offences in addition to the FV offences. Most of the male young people ($n = 17$) had been involved with the criminal law system prior to the flagged FV offence, whilst only one female young person had a prior record of engagement with the criminal law system prior to her first FV offence (file 8). Notably, she was Indigenous and her prior record was minimal, with only one prior offence of public nuisance noted for which she had been ordered to attend mediation. The other six females

had no criminal history prior to their first FV offence. Four of these females (two of them Indigenous people) had only ever been charged with breach of a FVP order (files 1, 9, 28, 30). The other two had only ever been charged with ADV-related offences: one with property damage (file 27), and the other breach of a FVP order and assault causing bodily harm (file 26).

Only six of the 23 male young people in the study had no criminal history prior to their first FV offence. Of these six, three had committed their first offence in the context of ADV and three had committed their first offence in the context of AFV.

Child Protection Involvement

Twenty-three percent ($n = 62$) of the young people with FV-flagged cases in the administrative data had a child protection history: in 11% ($n = 24$) of cases, the accused young person was subject to a child protection order at the time of the offence, whilst in 19% ($n = 52$) of cases, the young person had been subject to a child protection order in the past.

In all but one of the 30 files ($n = 29$), the young person had a child protection history, that is, there was a child protection order currently in place in respect of the young person or the young person's own children, or an order had been in place in the past. Eighteen of the young people (60%) had an extensive child protection history, that is, they had been subject to child protection intervention on more than three occasions. In most cases ($n = 17$), engagements with the child protection system began before they reached the age of ten years: 11 adolescents first encountered the child protection system after they reached the age of ten. Only one of the young people in the file data, a non-Indigenous female (file 28), had no history of involvement with the child protection system. She also did not have a criminal history. She was aged 17 when she was charged and convicted of contravening a FVP. She received only a reprimand from the court.

Relationship between victim and perpetrator

The administrative data did not allow us to identify the relationship between the adolescent who was charged with the FV offence and the victim, nor were we provided with information on whether the young person was themselves a parent. However, we were able to elicit this information from the 30 files we had access to. Most files ($n = 24$, 80%), involved ADV, that is, at least one victim was a current or former intimate partner, and one of these files identified two intimate partner victims. Six files (20%) involved AFV and in three of these files, multiple victims were identified: mothers were victims in two cases, fathers were victims in two cases, siblings were victims in four cases, and the victim

was a cousin in one case. Two files involved both ADV and AFV and two of the files, the victim was not stated.

In three files, the young person had committed both ADV and AFV. File 12 concerned an Indigenous young person who was charged with contravening a FVP order where his partner was the aggrieved. The file noted he had been babysitting with his girlfriend and there was an argument that ended with him punching her in the face and injuring her. At the same time he was convicted of a range of assaults against his father, brother and sister along with several other offences including stealing. He was sentenced to 10 months youth detention for the assault on his father. He had numerous prior convictions for a variety of offences including stealing, assaults, property damage and nuisance. The file noted he had an extensive child protection history, ‘negative formative’ childhood experiences including FV in his family and he used alcohol.

In another case (file 5), a young non-Indigenous male had committed serious offences of violence against his former partner. There had been an argument and he held a pillow over her face, held a knife to her throat and punched her. He was placed on 12 months’ probation with requirements to attend anger management course and specific FV intervention program. A FVP order had also been issued protecting his girlfriend, and naming his mother as another protected person, however the notes indicated that the mother had requested this order be lifted because she wanted her son to be able to continue living with her.

In three of the cases where a family member was the victim, sexual offences had been committed against a younger female relative. All of the young people who offended in this way were male and none were Indigenous young people. In all three cases, the young person had been identified as having ADHD, engaging in self-harm, experiencing anxiety and having suicidal thoughts. Child protection services had previously been involved in the lives of all three of these young people, although two of them had no engagement with the criminal law system prior to the sexual offence matter (file 17, 24). In one file (file 17) it was noted in the file that the young person was ‘addicted’ to internet pornography. He had raped and sexually assaulted a much younger member of his family. As a result, he had served time in youth detention and had also been placed on a probation order.

The majority ($n = 24$) of young people in the file sample were respondents on FVP orders. There was often no information in the file about who had applied for these orders (eg. whether a police officer had applied for the order or if the aggrieved had themselves successfully applied for the order), or the reasons for the application. However, in some of the files, notes and sentencing reports provided further information on the circumstances in which charges were laid. Contravention charges were issued in a wide variety of circumstances, ranging from

being physically proximate to an aggrieved in breach of an FVP order, through to serious acts of violence causing injury. In one case (file 19), the file noted that the young person was both the respondent and aggrieved on cross-FVP orders with his partner.

For thirteen of the young people, six of whom were Indigenous, the most serious offence they were charged with was contravention of a FVP order. Five of these young people were female, three of whom were Indigenous. As noted above, in Queensland, young people can only be respondents on FVP orders in cases of ADV, and the victim was a partner or ex-partner of the young person who was charged. Circumstances in which contravention charges were laid ranged from attending the victim’s house in breach of order conditions (file 28), to slapping (file 1), to serious threatening behavior, for example threatening their partner with scissors (file 8). In five of the 13 cases involving contravention of a FVP order, the young person received a reprimand and no other penalty. In seven matters the young person was placed on a good behavior bond or a probation order, and in one case the outcome was unclear.

Most serious charge and penalties

The administrative data provided information on what the most serious FV-related charge was in each case. In most cases (56%; $n = 152$), the most serious charge was contravention of a FVP order. In 52 of the cases (19%), the most serious charge was an act intended to cause injury. Act intended to cause injury is a more serious offence, and attracts a more severe penalty than contravention of a FVP order. In 20 cases (7%), the most serious offence was a property offence, and in 14 cases (5%), the most serious charge was a sex offence.

There were gender differences when it came to the most serious charges. Male young people were significantly more likely to be charged with more serious offences compared to females ($t(82.22) = 2.553$, $p = 0.013$). Females were more likely to be charged with contravention of a FVP order, and males were more likely to be charged with sex offences and act intended to cause injury.

There were also significant differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young persons’ most serious charge. Indigenous young people were significantly more likely to be charged with more serious offences ($t(222.33) = 2.104$, $p = 0.036$). Whilst there was no significant difference between Indigenous young people and others in terms of sexual offending, Indigenous young people were more likely to have an act intended to cause injury as their most serious charge whereas non-Indigenous young people were more likely to have contravention of a FVP order as their most serious charge. In 32% of the cases involving Indigenous young people, the most serious charge was an

Table 2 Most Common Types of Offences Charged (Administrative Data)

| Most serious offence charged (based on National Offence Index.)* | Number (n) and percentage (%) of children charged with 1 or more of this offence | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--|----|--------|----|----------------------|----|--------|----|-------|-----|
| | Known Indigenous | | | | Known Non-Indigenous | | | | Total | |
| | Male | | Female | | Male | | Female | | n | % |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | | |
| FVP order Contravention | 68 | 46 | 1 | 10 | 44 | 30 | 20 | 14 | 147 | 100 |
| Acts intended to cause injury | 47 | 66 | 5 | 5 | 17 | 24 | 2 | 3 | 71 | 100 |
| Property damage and environmental pollution | 10 | 59 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 29 | 1 | 6 | 17 | 100 |
| Sexual assault and related offences | 7 | 54 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 38 | 0 | <1 | 13 | 100 |

* For information about the National Offence Index see: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018

acts intended to cause injury, compared with only 19% of the cases involving non-Indigenous young people (see Table 2).

There was also a statistically significant difference in the kind of penalty received by Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people. Indigenous young people were more likely to receive a more severe penalty than other young people ($t(196.54) = 3.042, p = 0.003$). As noted earlier, the administrative data did not provide individuals' criminal histories so we were not able to determine whether higher penalties were associated with the young person's criminal history or not.

For nine young people, six of whom were Indigenous, the most serious FV-related offence they committed was an offence of physical violence, such as wounding, assault or strangulation. In all of these cases, the victim of the offence was the young person's intimate partner. In most of these cases ($n = 7$) the sentence involved some form of supervision order, such as a probation order or community service order. For example in one case (file 5) the 16-year-old male young person was ordered to serve 12 months of probation for charges of strangulation and assault causing bodily harm of his female partner. The probation order required him to attend 'counselling, anger management and a specific [FV] intervention'.

In three cases, the most serious FV-related charge was a property offence. In all of these matters, the young person was convicted of wilful damage and the young person's partner was the victim. In one of these matters (file 27) the wilful damage charge involved the young person setting fire to something at her ex-partner's house and she received a good behavior bond. In another matter (file 11) the young person had a lengthy child protection history and lengthy criminal history. He had used ice for two years and had met the victim, with whom he had a baby, in detention. In addition to being charged with wilful damage and stealing, he was also charged with four contraventions of FVP orders. He was ordered to serve a period of detention.

Detention was rarely ordered in response to offences involving FV. In 19 of the cases in our file sample, some form of community supervision order was made, even where the violence was very serious in nature. For example, file 3 involved a 17 year old Indigenous young person who was convicted of wounding his partner. It was reported that he suffered from depression and anxiety and was placed on suicide alert after his girlfriend, the mother of his baby, broke up with him. He was placed on probation for 12 months. The order required he 'attend cultural activities, a parenting program, [FV] counselling, mental health appointments and anger management'. A final file entry stated that he was living with his god-father and his daughter and was in stable employment. The notes stated that there was still a FVP order in place with a condition that he not contact his daughter's mother but 'he did not want to' contact her.

Discussion

The young people in this study who were charged with criminal offences involving AFV and ADV had complex needs, high rates of mental illness, and were often known to the youth justice and child protection systems prior to any FV offending. The gender breakdown in our data was highly skewed towards male offenders which is likely due in part to the high proportion of ADV in our sample. The administrative data identified that nearly one quarter (22%) of the young people with a proven FV offence had a child protection history. All but one of the 30 children in the file data had engaged with child protection services in the past, however it is possible that, in some cases, this resulted from referral by police or Youth Justice because they were charged with an offence. Also, in many cases, their child protection involvement concerned their own children, rather than any concerns about the young person's own safety. More than half of the young people in our file data ($n = 16, 53%$) were

themselves parents, or they or their partner were pregnant, including most of the Indigenous young people in the file sample (8 of 13). Given that only around 3% of Australian children engage with the child protection system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020) the high level of engagement with child protection services of this cohort suggests that many of them are grappling with extremely challenging circumstances within their family environment. The administrative data confirmed that a very high proportion (44%) of young people had witnessed or experienced FV in their family of origin, for example.

Both the administrative data and the file data highlighted the complex personal circumstances faced by almost all the young people who were charged with offences associated with FV. Many of the young people represented in our data were identified as suffering from mental health issues. Whilst non-Indigenous young people were more likely to have a mental health disorder recorded, the proportion of Indigenous young people identified with mental health challenges was still high, at 30%. Many others were identified as having an intellectual disability, ASD or ADHD. This has implications for their understanding of, and capacity to comply with, court orders. It may be difficult for young people generally to understand the conditions of FVP orders, but these difficulties will be intensified in circumstances where they have an intellectual disability or mental health challenges. The file data indicated that drug and alcohol use was common, and some of the young people had progressed to using ice (methamphetamine). Studies have identified there may be links between ice use and violent behavior (Brecht & Herbeck, 2013).

This research makes three particularly important contributions to our knowledge about FV-related offending of young people in an Australian context.

First, analysis of both the administrative and file data demonstrated that Indigenous young people were over-represented amongst young people charged with FV offences. They were charged with more serious FV-related offences and received more serious penalties as a result. The administrative data indicates that most (60%) of the young people charged with FV offences are Indigenous young people. Indigenous people make up less than five percent of the Queensland population (Queensland Government, 2018: 2), so they are vastly overrepresented in this context. Furthermore, Indigenous young people were charged with more serious offences compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts, and more serious charges lead inexorably to more serious penalties being imposed. This suggests that the prosecution of FV offending contributes to the over-criminalization of Indigenous young people, which is widely regarded to be a 'national disgrace' (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2018).

Second, our analysis indicates that, in Queensland, flagged FV offences most commonly occurred in the context of ADV. Whilst the administrative data did not specifically identify the relationship between the young person charged and the victim, the high number of FVP order contraventions in this sample (56% of all cases and 64% of the cases involving Indigenous young people) indicates that most of these cases involved ADV. This is because in Queensland, a young person can only be named as an aggrieved or respondent on a FVP order if they are in an intimate partner relationship. The file data also indicated that criminal law responses are most common in cases of ADV as most of the files (24 out of 30) concerned young people who were respondents on FVP orders. For thirteen of these young people (six of whom were Indigenous), the most serious offence they were charged with was a contravention of a FVP order. This could suggest that young people who engage in AFV are less likely to experience criminal law responses than those who engage in ADV, however further research is required to confirm this.

Third, while based on a small sample of case files, our data suggests that the FVP order system and associated contravention charges can have the effect of drawing young women, and especially Indigenous women, into the criminal law system (Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2018; Durfee & Goodmark, 2019). Of the seven women in our file data sample, six had no criminal history prior to the FV-flagged offence. Five had only been charged with contravening a FVP order, it may be that these young women would not have engaged with the criminal law system at all had it not been for the FV-related charge. This is particularly troubling given what we know of females who perpetrate family violence offences – they tend to be acting in self-defence or defence of others, and the injuries they cause are usually minor (Boxall et al., 2020a, b). Our results may suggest that the FVP order system is contributing to young women's involvement in the criminal law system, however this issue needs further research.

In many cases, the files we analysed suggested a high level of attentiveness by Youth Justice employees to the needs and future safety of the criminalized young people they were working with. Several files documented Youth Justice employees' efforts to help young people engage with programs to address their concerns including culturally appropriate programs, drug and alcohol support and mental health interventions. Recent reviews of Australian intervention programs specifically designed to target AFV and ADV provide reason for optimism. For example Moulds et al. (2019a) reviewed a pilot of the KIND program for AFV and ADV in South Australia, which is based on a cognitive behavior therapy model, utilizing one to one therapy, group therapy and family therapy sessions. They identified that participants found the program was useful and worthwhile, however the sample of eight young people

was very small (Moulds et al., 2019b). Boxall et al. (2020a, b) reviewed the Adolescent Family Violence Program (AFVP) in Victoria. AFVP is focused on AFV and utilizes intensive family case management involving weekly meetings between the young person, their family members and a support worker, and voluntary group work which typically involves young people and their parents or carers meeting separately to discuss the violent behaviours and learn skills to reduce its frequency and impact (Boxall, Dowling, et al., 2020; Boxall, Morgan, et al., 2020: 3). Boxall and her colleagues (2020a, b: 12) found the program provided benefits to many of the young people and their families involved. Some parents reported they were better able to manage their children's behavior and respond to triggers for violent behavior, and there were some self-reported reductions in violence (Boxall Dowling, & Morgan, 2020a; Boxall, Morgan, et al., 2020: 12).

The Step Up program is probably the most well-known and evaluated AFV intervention program (Gilman and Walker, 2020: 98). Developed in the US, Step Up is a 21 week parent and youth intervention that draws cognitive behavior therapy and on abuse and respect wheels, adapted from the Duluth model, that 'reinforce a positive approach to conflict resolution along with cognitive restructuring, problem-solving and motivational approaches' (Gilman and Walker 2020: 96). In their review of the Step Program, Gilman and Walker (2020: 103) found that program completion reduced general recidivism.

Whilst there were a few optimistic outcomes documented in the files we analysed, including young people completing education and courses, finding employment and developing family relationships, overwhelmingly the closing notes on files were not positive. Many of the young people experienced homelessness, continued to struggle with mental illness, drug use and relationships, and were in adult prisons when their Youth Justice files were closed. It seemed to us that many of the challenges these young people faced in their personal lives were exacerbated by the use of criminalization in response to the young person's violent behaviour.

Conclusion

Our study raises concerns about the role of the criminal law system specifically in responding to ADV. In particular our study shows that Indigenous young people are disproportionately caught up in the FVP order system. We question the utilization of FVP orders in response to ADV (see also Campbell et al., 2020). While FVP orders are a civil mechanism, breaching a FVP order is a criminal offence, potentially punishable by imprisonment. FVP orders do not support young people towards rehabilitation or reintegration into their communities and contraventions, as criminal

offences, contribute significantly to young people's engagement with the criminal law system. The young people in our study, especially Indigenous young people, were faced with extraordinary social, cognitive, mental health and material challenges. FVP orders and their associated criminalisation do not address or assist with any of these underlying issues. In this context we note the calls of others (Burck, 2021; Fitz-Gibbon, Elliot & Maher, 2018) for interventions that attend to the safety of victims while also addressing the young person's challenges and we extend this call to the need for such interventions to be available in the context of ADV. In relation to Indigenous young people, we particularly support the recommendations of recent studies that have called for resources to be (re)directed away from the criminal law system and into community-led, place-based initiatives that address the drivers of crime and incarceration (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2018: rec. 4).

Acknowledgements We would like to thank the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs, Queensland, who provided the data for this project and Dr. Leah Sharman for her assistance with data analysis.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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