

Summarising the evidence

ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE IN THE HOME

Context brief



Australian Government
Australian Institute of
Family Studies



To what extent will addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women help to prevent adolescent violence in the home?

This brief is part of a suite of resources produced as part of the *Summarising the evidence* project. Visit the [project page](#) for the accompanying research summary, information about the scope and aims of the project and how it was conducted.

Respect Victoria gratefully acknowledges the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and all authors in conducting this work.

This brief is a companion document to a research summary by Campbell and Wall² that explores the prevalence, nature, drivers and reinforcing factors of adolescent violence in the home (AVITH). Respect Victoria have used the findings in that summary, as well as other academic and practice literature to consider how far existing approaches to preventing men's violence against women take us towards better understanding why AVITH occurs, and how we can prevent it before it starts.

THE GENDERED DRIVERS AND REINFORCING FACTORS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*¹ identifies four gendered drivers of men's violence against women:

- the condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

These drivers are each addressed with actions to prevent violence against women. These actions challenge the social contexts that allow violence to occur and help to address reinforcing factors that make violence more likely (explained in more detail below). The essential actions to address the gendered drivers are:

- challenge condoning of violence against women
- promote women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships
- build new social norms that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes
- support men and boys to develop healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships.

Understanding these drivers – and importantly, the actions to prevent them – are an important foundation for primary prevention efforts. This work helps us to understand the dynamics that allow violence to occur, including how power and control are used and abused.

Alongside the gendered drivers, *Change the story* also identifies further factors that can serve to reinforce violence against women. These do not predict violence against women on their own, but may influence the likelihood, prevalence or dynamics in different settings and contexts:

- condoning of violence in general
- experience of, and exposure to, violence (particularly during childhood)
- factors that weaken prosocial behaviour (e.g. disasters and crises; settings where there is heavy alcohol consumption)
- resistance and backlash to prevention and gender equality efforts.

INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING PREVENTION

Change the story emphasises that other forms of structural oppression intersect with gendered inequality to shape how and why men's violence against women occurs. However, more work is needed to understand how they combine to shape the drivers of different forms of gendered and family violence and the way they are experienced across our communities.

The following evidence guides and frameworks have begun to explore these intersections, mapping shared and distinct drivers across different communities and developing tailored prevention approaches:

- *Changing the picture: a national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children* which looks at how the gendered drivers play out as they intersect with colonialism for Aboriginal women³
- *Changing the landscape: A national resource to prevent violence against women and girls with disabilities* which looks at how violence against women with disability is shaped by the intersection of ableism and the gendered drivers⁴
- *Pride in prevention* which looks at the role of heteronormativity and cisnormativity alongside rigid gender roles in driving violence against LGBTIQ+ persons⁵
- *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women* which considers how intersections between the gendered drivers and other forms of structural oppression can be addressed to prevent violence against women who are from immigrant and refugee communities.⁷

Understanding the impact of different sources of oppression will also help us refine and expand upon the known actions to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women, creating safer communities for everyone.

What is adolescent violence in the home?

Adolescent violence in the home (AVITH) is broadly defined as physical, psychological, or economic violence carried out by adolescents against parents, grandparents, siblings, kinship carers, or other family members. However, as Campbell and Wall point out, there is no universally accepted definition adopted in Australia.²

There is limited evidence on the prevalence, dynamics and drivers of AVITH. This is in part due to varied definitions making it difficult to estimate prevalence, which in turn makes it difficult to understand the social determinants and drivers.⁶ AVITH is also an under-reported, under-researched issue that is not well understood in the community.

Additionally, there are different points of view as to whether violent behaviours used by young people with disability and/or psychological disorders should be defined as AVITH. Doing so leads to young people with disability and mental illness being treated as offenders rather than young people in need of support.

It is important that the experiences of such young people and their families are kept visible and considered in prevention and response policies and practices.²

We do know, however, that AVITH is complex. It needs to be understood in the context of societal norms and different expectations of family roles, including the legal and social responsibilities parents and carers have to their children. Pressures resulting from these norms and expectations can lead to parents and carers feeling shame, guilt or minimising the violent or abusive behaviours they experience. Violence used against parents may be informed by different risk factors than, for example, violence used against a sibling. Violence also may be an expression of the powerlessness that young people experience in the context of violence used by adults.² We know that most young people engaged with the criminal justice system, including those who have used violence, have experienced family violence, abuse, neglect, or other trauma.⁸

Understanding why and how AVITH occurs, and the actions to prevent and respond to it requires different approaches than those used for adult-perpetrated violence. However, as discussed in the next section, adult violence - particularly men's intimate partner violence against women - plays a key role in many instances of AVITH.

What do we know about gender and adolescent violence in the home?

In attempting a gendered analysis of AVITH, it is important to remember that this form of family violence refers to diverse and differently gendered relationships and power dynamics between young people using violence, and the family members who are harmed (e.g. parents, siblings, or other relatives).

Women and girls are more likely to be victim survivors, both as parents and siblings.² Some studies indicate that young men are more likely to use violence in their home than young women.^{9,10} However, a national study in Australia found that girls and gender diverse respondents assigned female at birth were more likely to self-report use of violence.¹¹ Types of violence used by young people are often gendered, with young men more likely to use physical violence and young women more likely to use emotional and verbal violence.^{2,9,12}

Literature about AVITH points to the role of trauma in increasing the risk of use of violence by children and young people. Many people who experience trauma do not go on to use violence. However, practice and research evidence suggest that trauma, including exposure to domestic violence, is correlated with use of AVITH. An Australian prevalence study found that 89% of young people who reported using violence against a family member had themselves experienced child abuse in their family, including violence that targeted them, witnessing violence, or both.¹¹ Qualitative findings from this same study show that young people of all genders described their use of violence as retaliatory, i.e. defending themselves or another victimised family member, or a reaction to cumulative experiences of abuse.¹¹

Mothers who are sole parents are the cohort most likely to experience AVITH.² Some studies show that young people who experience abuse because they have witnessed intimate partner violence^a between

^a The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-32 highlights that children and young people are impacted as a result of violence occurring in their home and should be considered victim-survivors in their own right even where they are not directly targeted by abuse.

adults in their home are more likely to use AVITH.¹³ Such abuse is most commonly perpetrated by men against women and includes deliberate attempts by former male partners to damage relationships between mothers and children. This might look like a former partner abusing court and custody processes to assert power over the mother which can also place children at risk if the perpetrator of abuse successfully gains unsupervised custody. Children's experiences of parental violence can also include an adult perpetrator coaching or encouraging children to surveil their mothers or to behave in ways that continue to or heighten abuse against the children's mother post-separation.² In these situations, mothers and children can go on to experience systems abuse, or abuse of court and custody processes, at the hands of a partner or parent who has abused them. This may include a child or mother being disbelieved, and having custody awarded to a violent parent.¹⁴

These discussions highlight four key points. First, the importance of understanding the broader contexts in which AVITH occurs. As noted in *Change the story*, young people of any gender who experience child abuse where they are targeted directly or where they witness abuse of another family member may be at higher risk of experiencing other forms of violence, or using violence themselves.^{1(p.49)} In the context of AVITH, as we have highlighted above, young people who experience child abuse report that their use of violence is retaliatory. Second, much of the child abuse that is experienced by young people who use violence in their homes occurs in the context of adult men's violence against women. Third, most studies show that young men are more likely to use AVITH than young women (noting that there is limited data on non-binary young people's use of AVITH). This highlights the importance of building better understanding of young men's experiences of family violence and the related trauma, and subsequent use of violence.¹⁵ Finally, there remain definitional issues and complexities related to AVITH and the experiences of young people with disability. These issues point to the importance of understanding and addressing different sources of structural oppression and the gendered drivers in order to prevent AVITH.

Where might addressing the gendered drivers help in preventing AVITH?

Addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women to reduce intimate partner violence, alongside early intervention and response approaches, will likely have a parallel preventative effect on reducing the overall prevalence of AVITH.

The social conditions that encourage and endorse use of violence by boys are well explained in *Change the story* and *Men in focus*.¹⁵ These frameworks describe how male-to-male peer relations can emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women, and how rigid gender stereotypes can encourage men and boys to use aggressive and controlling behaviours to affirm their masculinity and compensate for feelings of inadequacy. As such, programs that help men and boys embody more positive and respectful masculinities may also help to prevent some AVITH used by boys, including where abusive or disrespectful behaviour against women is encouraged by a male caregiver, or where it is used because boys lack the capacity to remove themselves to safety or communicate about their experiences in another way.^{16,17}

In the context of AVITH, women and girls are more likely to experience violence as mothers, carers or siblings.^{2,18} Some literature suggests that they may often act protectively in relation to other members of the household experiencing or at risk of abuse, as adult carers or as young people where violence is present. For example, mothers are more likely to be expected to take on the primary caregiving role to adolescents or children using difficult or violent behaviours,¹⁹ and older sisters may feel responsible for

protecting younger siblings and use reactive force against a perpetrator.¹¹ This aligns with rigid gender stereotyping of women as nurturers and primary carers, and the belief that children's behaviours are a reflection of their mother's capacity and parenting.²⁰ These stereotypes impose pressure on women to manage their children's behaviours, or else face the shame and stigma of being 'failed' parents. Addressing rigid stereotypes and their impacts on people of all genders will help to lessen this burden on women through more fairly acknowledging and distributing parenting responsibility and contributions and breaking down some of the barriers to identifying AVITH. These are key elements to support both the prevention and response to AVITH.

Addressing rigid gender stereotypes may also help to more accurately assess prevalence and dynamics of AVITH. One study suggests that where girls and young women use violence, parents might be more likely to want to discipline or address their behaviour as deviant, whereas a similar degree of violence or disrespect from young men might be tolerated.¹⁷

Future directions for preventing adolescent violence in the home

Consistent definitions to help measure and understand the issues

A clear definition of AVITH in research, policy and practice will help to accurately establish prevalence and dynamics, which are often obscured by varied interpretations of the issue. Careful attention must be given to ensuring that the experiences of young people with disability and those with mental health issues are positioned appropriately to ensure they receive an appropriate service response and are not criminalised.

Better data to help us understand the intersectional drivers of AVITH

A holistic, lifecycle view of primary prevention should also include an intersectional analysis of the social context in which AVITH is occurring. This should include an examination of the ways different forms of overlapping structural power and inequality drive AVITH such as racism, ableism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, ageism and colonisation. This perspective also helps us to understand the impact of these overlapping forms of structural power on the likelihood of criminalisation of children with disability, and culturally and racially marginalised children within the child protection and other response systems.^{8,21} A comprehensive picture of how and why AVITH is perpetrated and experienced will make it possible to develop a clearer understanding of the normative, structural and attitudinal shifts alongside those described in *Change the story* that will help to effectively prevent AVITH.

Currently, research, policy and practice literature about AVITH draws heavily on justice system data.²² As discussed above, comparisons across other studies are challenging due to inconsistent definitions of the issue. This limits what we know about the context in which AVITH occurs. There is also a risk of bias in these data, as some minoritised communities face continued issues of systemic discrimination and over-policing, meaning that some cohorts of young people are more likely to be over-represented in the data.^{8,23,24} Where there are barriers to culturally safe or otherwise tailored and supportive social services, and risks of child removal into out of home care, this may limit early intervention or help-seeking by families. As a result, a young person's first service encounter may be with the justice system, or they may arrive there through a strained out of home care system.⁸ Improved investment in the delivery and

evaluation of wrap-around, trauma informed support, addressing barriers to help-seeking and implementing early intervention and response centred on young people's well-being is critical to building comprehensive prevalence data that can be disaggregated across demographic categories. This in turn will help to inform more impactful primary prevention efforts that will contribute to the long-term reduction of AVITH in Australia.

The Victorian Family Violence Research Agenda 2021-24 named building better understanding of the prevalence, drivers and protective factors of adolescent family violence in the home and in intimate partner relationships as a key research priority.²⁵ This focus is a promising start, however more needs to be done nationally, including within service and response sectors, to build shared understanding of how and why violence occurs and to use this as the basis for targeted primary prevention.

Improve wellbeing focused supports for young people with disability

People with disability are far more likely to be the victim of violence, than to use it themselves. Where violent behaviours are used, it is important to consider the context and intent of the behaviour. Services and policy makers need to consider violent behaviours used by young people with disability as distinct from other categories of AVITH. It is also vital to keep their experiences as well as their families' experiences in view. This includes:

1. ensuring robust, accessible family support
2. reducing stigma around disability and neurodivergence, including coping behaviours young people may use
3. understanding the support needs of young people, including how to communicate, ensure safety, and manage frustrations
4. responding to challenging behaviours from disabled, neurodivergent, and mentally ill young people in a wellbeing-focused therapeutic setting, rather than the justice system
5. offering respite for young people and for carers, and
6. addressing gendered and ableist drivers at all levels of the social ecology.

Such interventions, which focus on well-being rather than restrictive measures like police intervention, chemical restraint, or forced hospitalisation, are vital in early intervention and in any crisis or incident response.

Early intervention services are better situated outside the criminal justice system and they work best when they provide opportunities for young people using violence to be assessed for disability and impairments that may impact their behaviours. In the absence of this early intervention support, the youth justice system is functioning as a holding space for disabled children and young people. One in 3 children in the Victorian youth justice system have cognitive difficulties that impact their day to day functioning, but many have not been formally diagnosed with disability.²⁶ Without diagnosis, support, or community-based service responses, disabled young people may be referred to child protective or other response services that do not have the capacity to provide appropriate supports.²² As a result, the young people's contact with child protection and other social services may serve as entry pathways into the youth and ultimately adult justice systems.^{8,17} People in the justice system typically do not receive the disability supports they need.²⁷

Insufficient focus on young people's experiences of disability in early intervention and crisis responses to AVITH is reflective of a much broader systemic issue around the way that disability tends to be positioned in social policy. The *Care criminalisation of children with disability in child protection systems* research

report captures the 'invisibility of the disability experience' and identifies how not centring the voices of young people with disability sustains the trajectory of progressive marginalisation for these young people.²⁸ Centring better understanding of the support needs of young people with disability and their families will help to inform tailored and effective approaches to prevention of AVITH.

Improved recognition of children and young people as victim-survivors

Identifying and supporting children and young people as victim-survivors of family violence in their own right is a critical step in understanding and ultimately preventing AVITH.^{11,17} This is particularly important given the associations between witnessing adult-perpetrated violence and AVITH as we highlighted above.² AVITH that is retaliatory in nature needs a distinct focus, as do the experiences of many young women who experience and use violence in the context of caring for other siblings. Providing trauma-informed early intervention and support for young people using violence is an important remedial measure and may also represent a proactive strategy to prevent future harm.

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Further reading

All resources from Summarising the evidence can be found on the [project page](#).

Research summaries

- Adolescent violence in the home (E Campbell & L Wall)
- Child maltreatment: a snapshot summary (D Higgins & G Hunt)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated against women by men (Respect Victoria)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated by women against men (M Salter & D Woodlock)
- Online violence and harassment perpetrated against women (B Harris)
- Non partner sexual violence (A Quadara)
- Sexual harassment occurring in the world of work (S Charlesworth & C Deen)
- Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer (E Stevens, R Kaspiw & R Carson)

Context briefs

- Summarising the evidence: Exploring what we know about drivers of violence against women, family violence and other forms of gendered violence - Project overview
- Summarising the evidence: Adolescent violence in the home
- Summarising the evidence: Child maltreatment
- Summarising the evidence: Elder abuse
- Summarising the evidence: Online harassment and abuse against women
- Summarising the evidence: Women's intimate partner violence against men
- Summarising the evidence: Work-related sexual harassment

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Acknowledgement of Country

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture.

We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside Aboriginal communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

Victim survivor acknowledgement

Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those who did not survive, and to their loved ones.



Respect Victoria is the state's dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women. Our vision is a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women.

To achieve our vision, we lead and support evidence-informed primary prevention and act as a catalyst for transformational social change. Primary prevention aims to stop violence from occurring in the first place, by changing the culture that drives it. We drive coordination and effectiveness of the prevention system. We build and promote primary prevention knowledge and evidence. We keep prevention on the public and policy agenda. We guide prevention wherever Victorians live, work, learn and play. We raise awareness that violence against women is preventable and influence community conversations to fuel social change.

We are an independent voice, with functions, powers and duties enshrined in legislation.