

Data Snapshot

Child Witnesses of Family Violence

An Examination of Victoria Police
Family Violence Data

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Key terms

Family Violence

According to the Family Violence Protection Act (2008), family violence is defined as physical, sexual, emotional, verbal and other abusive behaviours directed at family members.

Family Violence Incident

An incident reported to Victoria Police, where police attended and completed a family violence Risk Assessment and Management Report (L17 form). Family violence incidents do not necessarily involve a criminal offence but can encompass a wide range of family violence behaviours as described under the Family Violence Protection Act (2008).

Child Witness

A person who is under the age of 18 years and who was recorded by Victoria Police as present at or otherwise affected by a family violence incident. This can include children who were not physically present during a police recorded family violence incident, but usually resided at the location where the incident took place.

Victim-Survivor

The victim of a family violence incident, or of a criminal incident.

Protected Person (Complainant)

A person who is protected by a family violence intervention order or a family violence safety notice.

Primary Aggressor

An individual who, by his or her actions in a family violence incident and through known history and actions, has caused the most physical harm, fear and intimidation.

Respondent

The person against whom an application for an intervention order has been made, or a family violence safety notice has been issued.

Intimate Partner

Any relationship type recorded by police that indicates there is or has been a domestic or intimate partnership between two people.

Other Familial Relationship

Familial relationships including siblings, cousins, grandparents and other extended or familial like relationships, including kinship relationships.

Introduction

Globally, it is estimated that as many as 275 million children have been exposed to family violence (UNICEF, 2006). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey conducted between 2016 and 2017 estimated that 418,000 women (68%) and 92,220 men (60%) who had experienced family violence reported that a child in their care had seen or heard the incident (ABS, 2017). Family violence has been identified as a national health and welfare issue which not only affects victims, but also the children exposed to it (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2003).

Childhood exposure to family violence can lead to negative short-term and long-term outcomes for health and wellbeing. These include impaired cognitive functioning, mental illness, poorer academic outcomes, externalising (e.g. showing aggression toward others) and internalising (e.g. experiencing fear, anxiety), behavioural issues, learning difficulties and low self-esteem (Edleson, 1999; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Wolfe et al., 2003). Research has also examined the relationship between childhood exposure to family violence and perpetration of family violence in adulthood (Ehrensaft, 2003; Stith et al., 2000). Though many studies have reported a positive association between these factors, methodological weaknesses in these studies limit the potential to draw firm conclusions and discount external influences (Kimber et al., 2018; Fergusson et al., 2006).

In its March 2016 report, the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) highlighted that children who witness family violence are not 'passive witnesses or secondary victims', but rather individuals who have been directly impacted by violence (Victorian Government, 2016). The RCFV recommended that children who witness violence be regarded as direct victims of family violence, with access to the same protections as others who experience violence. This idea is further reflected in the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008*, which specifies that witnessing or being exposed to the effects of family violence is a distinct form of violence and meets criteria for protection under the Act.

Research and Victorian legislation are clear that children who witness violence are an important subset of those affected by family violence, however information about the prevalence and characteristics of these children in Victoria is limited. This data snapshot presents a first look at data collected by Victoria Police at family incidents about children who have been exposed to or otherwise affected by family violence.

In this data snapshot the following research questions are explored:

- What is the prevalence of family violence involving child witnesses?
- Who are child witnesses?
- What are the characteristics of family violence incidents involving child witnesses?
- Do family violence incidents involving child witnesses differ between major cities and regional/remote areas?
- Do family violence incidents involving child witnesses differ from incidents that do not?
- Do family violence incidents involving intimate partner relationships where children are present differ from those involving intimate partner relationships where children are not present?
- What are outcomes for children who witness family violence?

Family Violence and Child Witnesses

Defining Exposure

Historically, childhood exposure to family violence has been characterised as witnessing family violence first-hand (McTavish et al., 2016). However, the act of witnessing family violence can differ greatly between incidents. Edleson (1999) and Humphreys (2007) found children may be exposed to violence through hearing violence, being asked to participate in the abuse (e.g. being asked to spy on a parent), being blamed for the violence occurring, being used as a hostage and intervening to stop the violence. Research additionally found that witnessing the aftermath of violence, which can include telephoning emergency services, seeing a parent's injuries and seeing parents arrested can result in a similar level of trauma for a developing young person as direct exposure (Richards, 2011). Research has acknowledged that negative outcomes can also result from the child simply being aware of family violence in the home (Wathen & MacMillan, 2013). Accordingly, the definition of exposure has been expanded in the literature to include terms such as 'living with violence' and 'being affected by violence' (Powell & Murray, 2008).

Difficulties of Assessing Exposure

There are several difficulties associated with assessing children's exposure to family violence, the foremost being that relevant data is rarely collected by police or service providers (Gewirtz & Medhanie, 2008; Victorian Government, 2016). When this data is collected, researchers have found that it often adheres strictly to legal definitions and police protocols, and therefore relies heavily on police training in data collection; factors which may threaten the accuracy and completeness of case data (Nordham & Pritchard, 2018; Osofsky, 2003). As family violence is often underreported and commonly only reported as a last resort, the full extent of children's exposure to family violence may not be accurately captured in administrative data (Howard & Abbott, 2013; Phillips & Vandebroek, 2014). Additionally, victims with children may be even more unlikely to report family violence than those without children, given the fear of being separated from their child or children by protective services (Fugate et al., 2005; Logan & Walker, 2004). When family violence is reported to police, parents and guardians may also underestimate the extent to which a child has been exposed (Zimmerman & Pogarsky, 2011). Though the data used in this report is the best available on the subject at the time of this writing, it is important to consider potential limitations that may exist when examining and interpreting the data.

Future Contact with the Justice System

Children who witness family violence in the household are more likely to re-engage with the justice system in the future, either as a victim or a perpetrator (Bensley et al., 2003; Ernst et al., 2009). Wood and Sommers (2011) suggest that this may be the result of a dose-response relationship, that is, the stronger the experience of witnessing violence, the

stronger the likelihood of perpetrating or becoming a victim of violence. Though several studies have found support for this hypothesis (Heyman & Slep, 2002; Israel & Stover, 2009; Moylan et al., 2010; Whitfield et al., 2003), some researchers caution that childhood exposure to family violence does not guarantee re-engagement with the justice system. Furthermore, some children who experience family violence may show comparable or better psychological and behavioural outcomes than children who do not (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Margolin & Gordis, 2004; Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009).

Risk and Protective Factors for Exposure to Family Violence

Research on the risk and protective factors for family violence has often examined the literature as a whole, rather than specifically focusing on incidents involving child witnesses (MacMillan & Wathen, 2014). Furthermore, most research has focused on risk factors as opposed to protective factors, and factors at an individual level rather than a societal level (McTavish et al., 2016; Capaldi et al., 2012). The World Health Organisation and the London School of Hygiene and Tropic Medicine (2010) consolidated these factors into a four-level model: individual factors (e.g. education, income, exposure to maltreatment, mental illness, substance use), relationship factors (e.g. multiple partners, resistance to peer pressure), community factors (e.g. poverty, community sanctions) and societal factors (e.g. gender and social norms). A meta-analysis by Yakubovich et al. (2008) examining risk and protective factors for women identified that experiencing an unplanned pregnancy and having parents who had not completed high school were risk factors, whilst being married and being older were protective factors. Several factors also showed a clinical but statistically non-significant positive association with family violence, including women's alcohol and drug use, experience of child abuse, antisocial behaviour during adolescence, cohabitation with partners, negative relationship with parents, low social support and low education. A large, multi-national study by Abramsky et al. (2011) found similar results, but also highlighted that risk and protective factors may vary between cultural settings as gender norms and expectations shift.

Intimate Partner Violence Between Partners Who Have and Do Not Have Children

Research on family violence has consistently found that it is more likely to occur in intimate partner relationships between partners who have children (Acevedo et al., 2013; Atteraya et al., 2015; Deveci et al., 2007; Friedemann-Sánchez & Lovatón, 2012; Gage, 2005; Peek-Asa et al., 2017; Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2006; Sabri et al., 2014). Two studies additionally reported that having more children in the household was associated with an increase in the amount of physical violence (Deveci et al., 2007; Sabri et al., 2014). A potential explanation for these results may lie in a diathesis-stress model (Hankin & Abela, 2005). This model proposes that a pre-existing vulnerability, which may be biological, psychological or situational, coupled with the experience of a stressor, leads to a negative outcome.

In these studies, families with children often had lower levels of income and employment compared to families without children. The amplification of personal responsibility and the financial costs associated with child rearing may increase the level of stress within an intimate partner relationship, which could result in a greater level of violence (Renzetti & Larkin, 2009; Weatherburn, 2011).

Methodology

Victoria Police Data

Information on child witnesses in this snapshot comes from data collected by Victoria Police via a Risk Management and Assessment Report (L17 Form). Children recorded on the L17 form as having been present at / witness to / exposed to / or otherwise affected by family violence were analysed. While not all children included in this group may have directly witnessed violence, the term 'child witness' is used throughout to describe children exposed to violence.

The Victoria Police Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) is a live operational crime recording system used by Victoria Police. It stores records about criminal offences, family violence incidents and related information including records of intervention orders and family safety notices.

Data used in this report was extracted from LEAP on 18 July 2019.

SEIFA Data

Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) is a product developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) that ranks areas in Australia according to their relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. The indexes are based on data from the five-yearly Census. This report utilises the ABS 2033.0.55.001 socio-economic indexes publication (ABS, 2016b) for the index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) (Victorian ranking) to examine associations between child witness presence and socio-economic factors. IRSAD summarises information about the economic and social conditions of people and households within an area, including both relative advantage and disadvantage measures, with a lower score denoting the higher prevalence of disadvantage and lower prevalence of advantage indicators. The IRSAD quintiles are used in this report, with meaning assigned on a scale of 1-5 to rank Victorian Statistical Area 1 blocks by how advantaged or lacking in disadvantage they are compared to the whole of Victoria.

In this report, IRSAD data is applied to police reported family violence incidents using the latitude and longitude coordinates recorded by police to represent where an incident was alleged to have taken place.

Remoteness Structure

To categorise the geographical locations of incidents where children are present, this report utilised the ABS 1270.0.55.005 Australian Statistical Geography Standard for Remoteness Structure (ABS, 2016a). This standard divides Australia into 5 classes of remoteness based on a measure of relative access to services: major cities of Australia,

inner regional Australia, outer regional Australia, remote Australia and very remote Australia. This report further consolidates these structures into major cities or remote or regional areas. Similar to the application of IRSAD ratings, the remoteness structure was applied to family violence incident locations at a Statistical Area 1 level.

Population Data

Estimate residential population (ERP) data is collected from 3101.0 Australian Demographic Statistics, September 2018 (ABS, 2018). ERPs for data in 2018-19 are based on projected population estimates developed by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

Incident and Unique Witness Populations

Much of the data contained within this report concerns family violence incidents attended by Victoria Police where one or more children are recorded as present, or not present but otherwise affected by violence. Statistics concerning the number of incidents reflect the number of family violence incidents that involved at least one child witness. Statistics concerning the number of unique witnesses are based on the number of individual witnesses who were recorded at one or more family violence incidents.

Intimate Partner Relationships Who Have and Do Not Have Children

A single-year cohort of unique couples was developed to assess differences in intimate partner abuse in relationships with and without children.

Couples who experienced their first police reported intimate partner violence incident (index incident) in 2014-15 were identified in the data, and then designated as having children if they met one or more of the following criteria:

- They were involved in a family violence incident with a child witness recorded; or
- A family violence intervention order or safety notice existed between the parties and included children as additional protected persons.

Outcomes Cohort

To examine if child witnesses had future contact with the justice system following a family violence incident, a cohort of child witnesses who were recorded as witnessing their first family violence incident during the financial year 2014-15 was isolated, and incidents involving these individuals after their index incident were analysed.

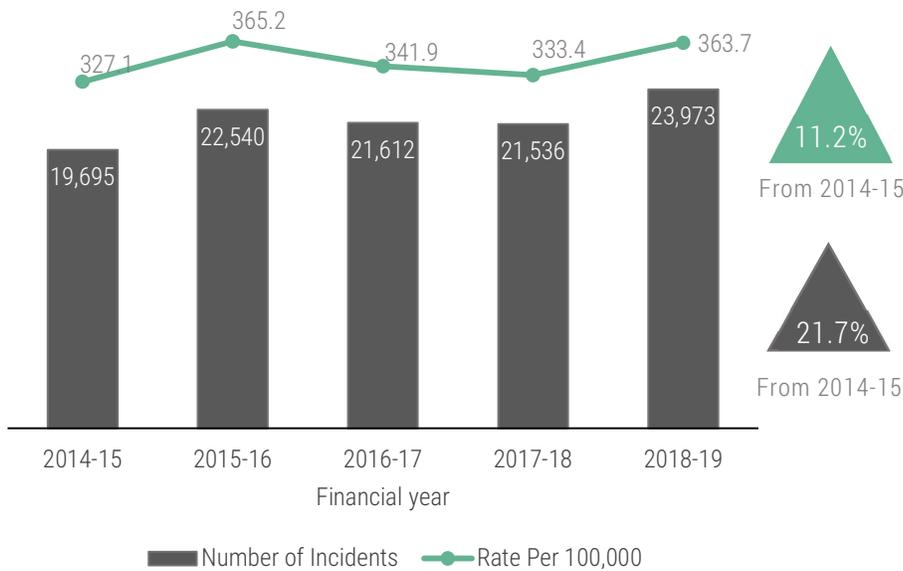
Results

Key Findings

- One in 50 children in Victoria witnessed a police recorded family violence incident in 2018-19.
- Most incidents witnessed by children occurred between intimate partners and involved male aggressors and female victim-survivors.
- Nearly two-thirds (66.1%) of child witnesses were 9 years of age or younger in 2018-19 and 35% were under the age of 5.
- 56.1% (11,771) of incidents witnessed by children recorded multiple types of abuse. The most common type of violence was verbal abuse, which was recorded in 72.3% (17,332) of incidents.
- The rate of incidents was 1.8 times higher in regional and remote areas than in major cities. These areas were also more likely to record situational risk factors such as drug and alcohol use, and were associated with lower ranked areas for socio-economic advantage.
- Intimate partner violence occurring in relationships with children was more likely to involve assault and repeat incidents. It was also more likely to occur over a longer period of time and involve Family Violence Intervention Orders and Safety Notices.
- 77.2% of children who witnessed a police reported family violence incident had a future interaction with the justice system within five years of witnessing an incident. 62.2% of children became protected persons on Family Violence Intervention Orders, and over half (53.8%) witnessed subsequent family violence incidents.

Prevalence

Number of family violence incidents – 109,356 family violence incidents occurred between 1 July 2014 and 30 June 2019 where police recorded at least one child witness under the age of 18 years old

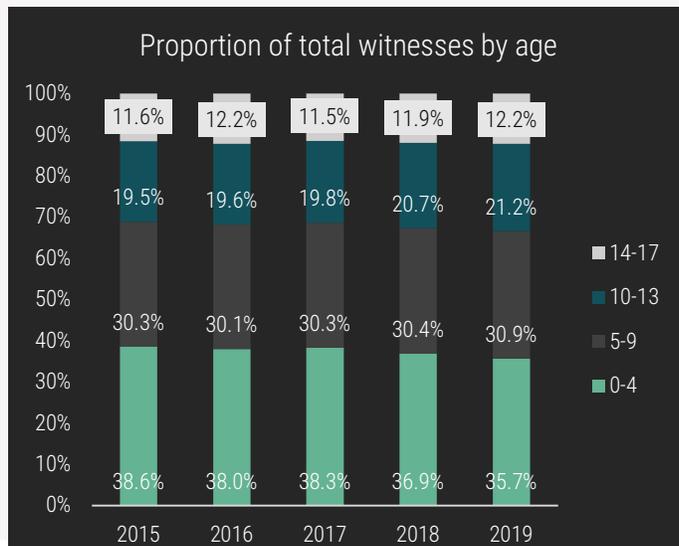


23,973 family violence incidents attended by police in 2018-19 recorded one or more child witnesses.

This accounted for **nearly 30%** of all family violence incidents occurring in that financial year.

The number of incidents involving child witnesses **increased 21.7%** from 2014-15, compared with a 14.8% increase in incidents that did not involve child witnesses. This increase may, in part, be influenced by changes in police recording practises over time.

Number of child witnesses – There were 111,159 unique children under the age of 18 recorded as a witness to at least one family violence incident between 1 July 2014 and 30 June 2019.



32,705 unique children were recorded by police in 2018-19 as a witness to family violence, an increase of 20.9% from 2014-15.

Over two-thirds of child witnesses were 9 years of age or younger, however the proportion of witnesses over the age of 9 has been increasing since 2014-15.

The rate of witnessing family violence across the past five years **did not significantly differ** between males and females.¹

¹ Significance determined using a one-way ANOVA ($p = .81$)

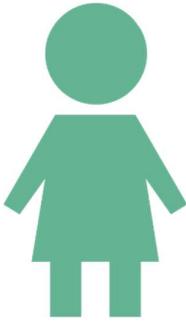
1 in 50 children in Victoria had contact with police in 2018-19 as a witness of a family violence incident.

		2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Male	# of children	13,800	15,396	14,976	15,078	16,832
	Rate per 100,000	2,037.1	2,215.3	2,113.5	2,093.8	2,288.4
Female	# of children	13,246	14,484	14,407	14,530	15,872
	Rate per 100,000	2,062.5	2,198.4	2,145.8	2,132.5	2,279.3

Who are child witnesses?

The following data includes unique children who were recorded as witnessing at least one family violence incident between 1 July 2018 and 30 June 2019.

32,704 unique children were recorded as a witness to a family violence incident by Victoria Police in 2018-19.

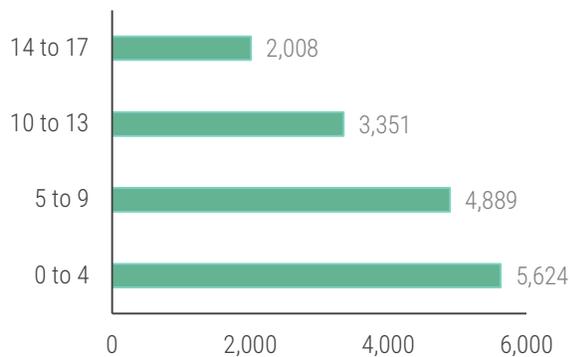


48.2%
(15,872)
of child
witnesses
were female

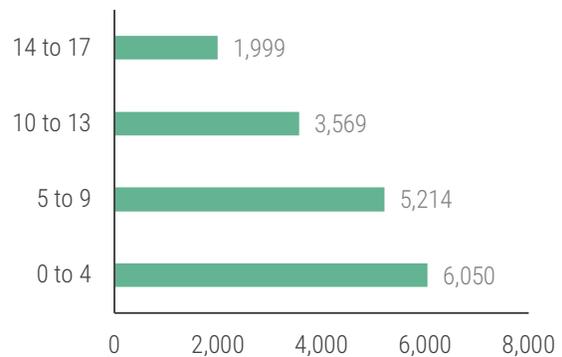


51.1%
(16,832)
of child
witnesses
were male

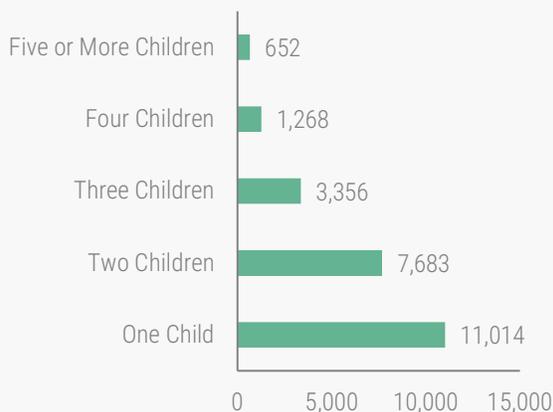
Number of female child witnesses by age



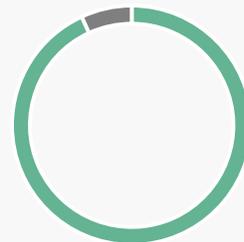
Number of male child witnesses by age



78% of incidents in 2018-19 involved either one or two child witnesses.



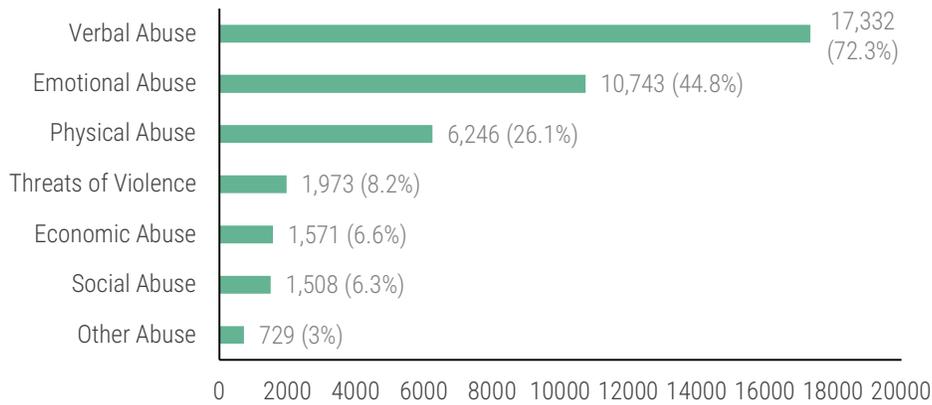
92.6% of witnesses were recorded by police as present¹ for at least one incident occurring in 2018-19



¹ Child witnesses can be recorded by Victoria Police as present at a family violence incident, or as not present, but usually residing with the primary aggressor and/or victim-survivor.

What do children witness?

The following data includes all family violence incidents involving a child witness which occurred between 1 July 2018 and 30 June 2019.



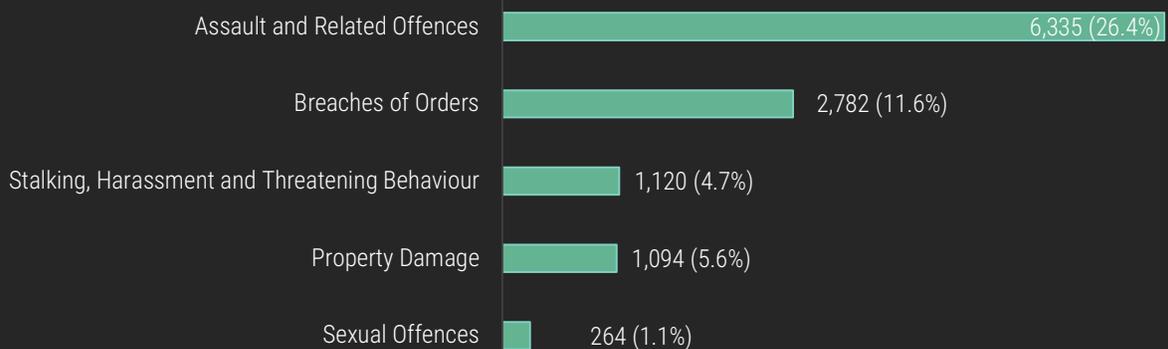
Verbal abuse was the most common type of abuse recorded at incidents involving child witnesses in 2018-19, occurring in **72.3%** of all incidents

Number of abuse types recorded in an incident		
Number of types of abuse recorded	#	%
1	9,216	43.9%
2	6,781	32.3%
3	3,256	15.5%
4 or more	1,734	8.3%

56.1% of incidents recorded more than one type of abuse



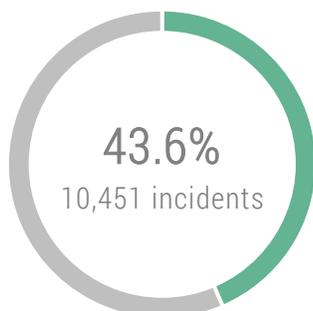
50.1% of incidents witnessed by children involved a related criminal offence. The most common principal offence type was **assault and related offences**, which were recorded in **26.4%** of all family violence incidents involving a child witness.



Who are involved in incidents witnessed by children?

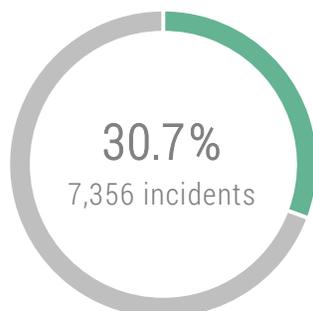
The following data concerns the relationship between a primary aggressor and victim-survivor for family violence incidents involving at least one child witness between 1 July 2018 and 30 June 2019.

Current Partner



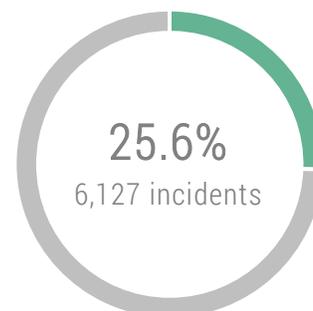
Variable	#	%
Sex of Primary Aggressor		
Male	8,736	83.6%
Female	1,695	16.2%
Age of Primary Aggressor		
0 to 19	135	1.3%
20 to 29	2,465	23.6%
30 to 39	4,268	40.8%
40 to 49	2,735	26.2%
50 to 59	660	6.3%
60 and older	104	1.0%
Sex of Victim-Survivor		
Male	1,705	16.3%
Female	8,732	83.6%
Age of Victim-Survivor		
0 to 19	194	1.9%
20 to 29	2,901	27.8%
30 to 39	4,415	42.2%
40 to 49	2,426	23.2%
50 to 59	376	3.6%
60 and older	40	0.4%

Former Partner



Variable	#	%
Sex of Primary Aggressor		
Male	6,177	83.6%
Female	1,172	16.2%
Age of Primary Aggressor		
0 to 19	74	1.0%
20 to 29	1,657	22.5%
30 to 39	2,855	38.8%
40 to 49	2,177	29.6%
50 to 59	460	6.3%
60 and older	66	0.9%
Sex of Victim-Survivor		
Male	1,176	16.0%
Female	6,167	83.8%
Age of Victim-Survivor		
0 to 19	110	1.5%
20 to 29	2,004	27.2%
30 to 39	3,029	41.2%
40 to 49	1,834	24.9%
50 to 59	290	3.9%
60 and older	20	0.3%

Other Familial Relationship



Variable	#	%
Sex of Primary Aggressor		
Male	3,693	59.9%
Female	2,458	39.9%
Age of Primary Aggressor		
0 to 19	1,795	29.1%
20 to 29	1,289	20.9%
30 to 39	1,237	20.1%
40 to 49	1,070	17.4%
50 to 59	457	7.4%
60 and older	230	3.7%
Sex of Victim-Survivor		
Male	1,726	28.0%
Female	4,430	71.9%
Age of Victim-Survivor		
0 to 19	1,374	22.3%
20 to 29	824	13.4%
30 to 39	1,150	18.7%
40 to 49	1,437	23.3%
50 to 59	788	12.8%
60 and older	501	8.1%

Child witnesses are recorded by police if they normally reside or have regular contact with either party involved in an incident, however there is no available data which can be used to determine a child witnesses' relationship to the parties involved in a family violence incident. The relationship categories described above refer to the relationship between the victim-survivor and primary aggressor.

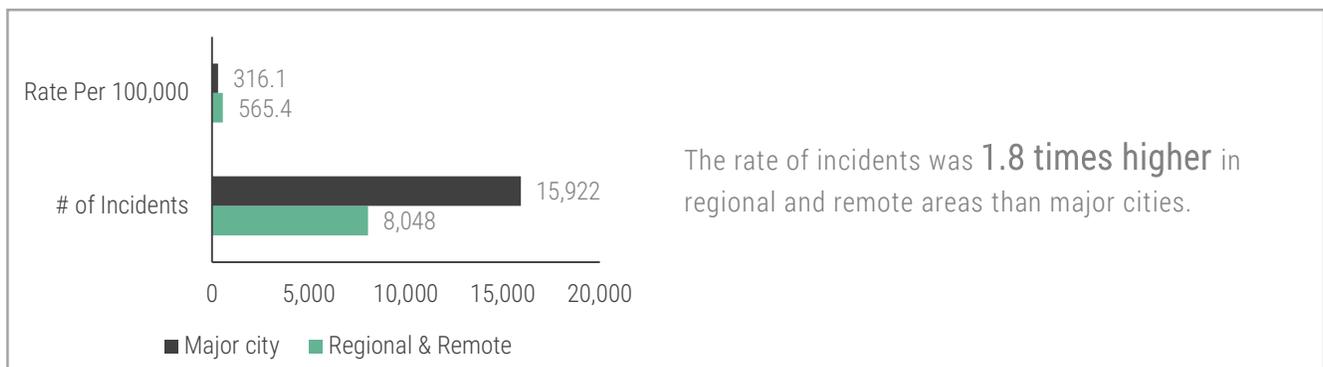
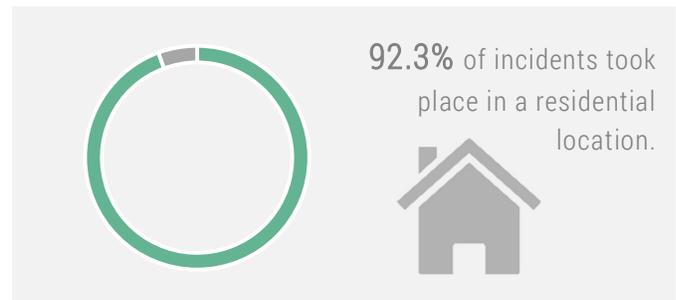
Across all relationship types, most incidents involved a female victim-survivor and a male primary aggressor. Both victim-survivors and primary aggressors were most often aged between 30 and 39. Over three quarters of incidents involving a child witness took place between current or former intimate partners.

Where do children witness family violence?

Incidents by Top 20 Local Government Areas in 2018-19

Local Government Area	# of Incidents	Rate per 100,000
Latrobe	1,025	1,355.8
Swan Hill	227	1,095.2
East Gippsland	503	1,062.9
Wellington	430	970.3
Mildura	504	900.5
Benalla	117	831
Mitchell	362	782.2
Greater Shepparton	502	753.3
Horsham	150	752.2
Gannawarra	79	750.6
Central Goldfields	99	745.2
South Gippsland	194	650.9
Warrnambool	212	603.2
Melton	971	589.9
Bass Coast	210	581.8
Northern Grampians	63	556.0
Southern Grampians	88	546.2
Baw Baw	289	542.5
Ballarat	559	510.7
Colac-Otway	108	501.9

Rate per 100,000 distribution of incidents across Victoria



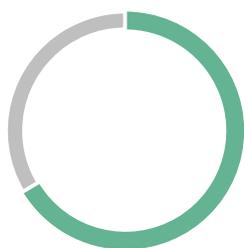
Family violence incidents involving child witnesses took place in areas with lower rankings of socio-economic status. Over a third of incidents (**8,566**) took place in the lowest ranking areas in Victoria for socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. The average quintile ranking for incident locations was **2.4**.



Do incidents involving child witnesses differ between major cities and regional/remote areas?

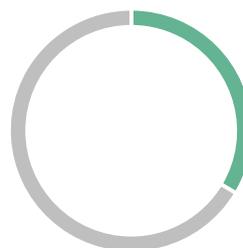
The following data concerns the relationship between a primary aggressor and victim-survivor for family violence incidents involving at least one child witness between 1 July 2018 and 30 June 2019.

Major City



66.4% (10,451) of all family violence incidents took place in a major city

Regional or Remote Area



33.6% (8,048) of all family violence incidents took place in a regional or remote area

Variable	Major City		Regional/Remote Area		Chi-square <i>p</i> value
	Num. of Incidents	% of Incidents	Num. of Incidents	% of Incidents	
Primary Aggressor Sex					
Male	12,430	78.1%	6,174	76.7%	<.05
Female	3,462	21.7%	1,864	23.2%	
Victim-Survivor Sex					
Male	3,023	19.0%	1,584	19.7%	N.S.
Female	12,870	80.8%	6,458	80.2%	
Relationship Type					
Current Partner	7,304	45.9%	3,147	39.1%	<.001
Former Partner	4,656	29.2%	2,699	33.5%	
Other Familial	3,960	24.9%	2,202	27.4%	
Location Type					
Residential	14,762	92.7%	7,370	91.6%	<.01
Community	824	5.2%	497	6.2%	
IRSAD Quintile					
1	4,283	26.9%	4,283	53.2%	<.001
2	3,503	22.0%	1,961	24.4%	
3	3,340	21.0%	1,233	15.3%	
4	2,996	18.8%	462	5.7%	
5	1,625	10.2%	89	1.1%	
Related Criminal Offences					
Criminal Offence Recorded	7,809	49.0%	4,089	50.8%	N.S.

Average IRSAD Quintile for Major Cities: **2.6**



Average IRSAD Quintile for Regional/Remote Areas: **1.8**



Types of Abuse

Abuse Type	Major City		Regional/Remote Area		Chi-square <i>p</i> value
	# of Incidents	% of Incidents	# of Incidents	% of Incidents	
Verbal abuse	11,623	73.0%	5,707	70.0%	<.001
Emotional abuse	6,876	43.2%	3,865	48.0%	<.001
Physical abuse	4,299	27.0%	1,946	24.2%	<.001
Use of threats	1,284	8.1%	689	8.6%	<i>N.S</i>
Economic abuse	1,121	7.0%	449	5.6%	<.001
Social abuse	958	6.0%	550	6.8%	<.05

Victim-Survivor Risk Factors

Risk Factor	Major City		Regional/Remote		Chi-square <i>p</i> value
	# of Incidents	% of Incidents	# of Incidents	% of Incidents	
Mental health issues	2,149	13.5%	1,677	20.8%	<.001
Social isolation	1,736	10.9%	1,090	13.5%	<.001
Alcohol use	1,563	9.8%	1,363	16.9%	<.001
Drug use	1,251	7.9%	1,168	14.5%	<.001

Primary Aggressor Risk Factors

Risk Factor	Major City		Regional/Remote		Chi-square <i>p</i> value
	# of Incidents	% of Incidents	# of Incidents	% of Incidents	
Controlling/jealous behaviour	5,019	31.5%	3,059	38.0%	<.001
Alcohol use	3,909	24.6%	2,982	37.1%	<.001
Drug use	3,629	22.8%	2,808	34.9%	<.001
Mental health issues	3,446	21.6%	2,487	30.9%	<.001
History of violence	3,124	19.6%	1,783	22.2%	<.001
Unemployed/truant	2,222	14.0%	1,567	19.5%	<.001

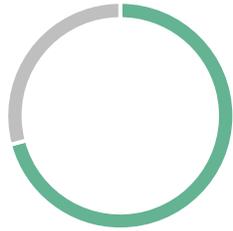
Overall, in both major cities and regional or remote areas, males were more likely to be primary aggressors and females were most often victim-survivors of family violence. However, outside of major cities there was a slight but significant increase in the proportion of female primary aggressors.

One of the most notable variations between family violence incidents in remote or regional areas and major cities was the difference in socio-economic status. Over half of the incidents taking place outside of major cities occurred in areas ranked lowest in the state for comparative socio-economic advantage/disadvantage. In major cities, only roughly a quarter of incidents took place in the most socially disadvantaged areas.

All the analysed risk factors concerning victim-survivors and primary aggressors were found to be significantly more likely to be recorded in regional or rural areas than in major cities, highlighting the complex needs faced by people in these areas. These factors include drug and alcohol use, mental health issues for both victim-survivors and primary aggressors, as well as unemployment for primary aggressors.

Do incidents involving child witnesses differ from incidents that do not?

Incidents with Child Witnesses



29.1% (23,973)
of incidents involved a child witness

Incidents without Child Witnesses



70.9% (58,384)
of incidents did not involve a child witness

Variable	Incidents with child witnesses		Incidents without child witnesses		Chi-square <i>p</i> value
	# of Incidents	% of Total	# of Incidents	% of Total	
Primary Aggressor Sex					
Male	18,607	77.6%	43,819	75.1%	<.001
Female	5,326	22.2%	14,329	24.5%	
Victim-Survivor Sex					
Male	4,608	19.2%	16,013	27.4%	<.001
Female	19,330	80.6%	42,270	72.4%	
Relationship Type					
Current Partner	10,451	43.6%	19,774	33.9%	<.001
Former Partner	7,356	30.7%	13,848	23.7%	
Other Familial	6,127	25.6%	24,758	42.4%	
Location Type					
Major City	15,922	66.4%	40,113	68.7%	<.001
Regional or Remote	8,048	33.6%	18,264	31.3%	
Residential	22,135	92.3%	51,317	87.9%	<.001
Community	1,321	5.5%	5,068	8.7%	

Average IRSAD Quintile: **2.4**



Average IRSAD Quintile: **2.5**



Most family violence incidents reported to Victoria Police do not involve a child witness, with nearly 3 in 10 incidents recording a child witness.

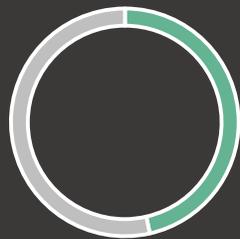
Overall, incidents involving a child witness were significantly more likely to occur between intimate partners (current or former) and involve a male primary aggressor and female victim-survivors. Incidents were also more likely to occur in a regional or remote area and at residential locations.

These findings suggest that most children are likely witnessing episodes of violence between their parents or caregivers, and this violence is more often directed against a mother by her partner.

Does intimate partner violence differ between couples who do and don't have children?

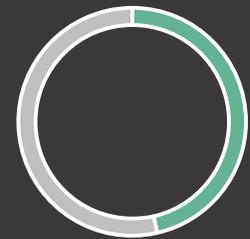
The following data includes unique intimate partner relationships that involved a family violence incident recorded between 1 July 2018 and 30 June 2019.

Intimate Partners that have Children



46.2%
8,198 relationships

Intimate Partners that do not have Children



53.8%
9,543 relationships

Variable	Intimate Relationships that have Children		Intimate Relationships that do not have Children		Chi-square
	# of Incidents	% of Incidents	# of Incidents	% of Incidents	<i>p</i> value
Primary Aggressor Sex					
Male	6,993	85.3%	7,600	79.6%	<.001
Female	1,183	14.4%	1,867	19.6%	
Victim-Survivor Sex					
Male	1,193	14.6%	1,905	20.0%	<.001
Female	6,994	85.3%	7,612	79.8%	
Current or Former Partner					
Current	6,056	73.9%	7,271	76.2%	<.001
Former	2,129	26.0%	2,257	23.7%	
Bi-directional Violence					
Yes	1,502	18.3%	961	10.1%	<.001
Criminal Offence Recorded					
Yes	4,324	52.7%	3,873	40.6%	<.001
Selected Criminal Offences					
Assault related	3,452	42.1%	2,844	29.8%	<.001
Stalking, harassment, threatening behaviour	988	12.1%	739	7.7%	<.001
Breach of FVIO	2,515	30.7%	1,513	15.9%	<.001
FVIO or FVSN recorded					
FVIO	5,911	72.1%	4,913	51.5%	<.001
FVSN	3,128	38.2%	2,377	24.9%	<.001

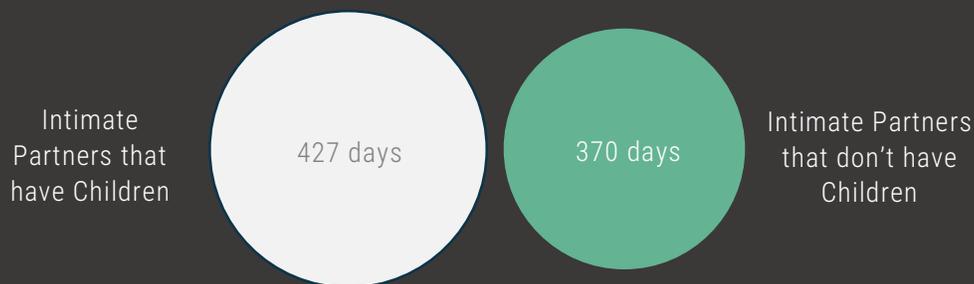
Median number of days between first and latest police reported incident



Percentage of relationships with more than one police reported incident



Average length of issued Family Violence Intervention Orders



Analysis revealed that intimate partner violence occurring in relationships between people that have children differed from relationships without children with respect to the severity and longevity of violence and ongoing interactions with justice system entities.

Relationships between people who had children were more likely to involve bi-directional violence (e.g. where both parties had been recorded by police as primary aggressors of violence against one another) than relationships between people without children. Incidents between those with children were also more likely to involve recorded criminal incidents between parties, including assault and related offences, breach of order offences, and stalking, harassment and threatening behaviour offences. For relationships that involved more than one police reported incident, the length of time between the first and last incident was nearly twice as long for relationships between couples that have children, indicating that violence in these relationships endures for a longer period.

Relationships between couples that had children were more likely to have a Family Violence Safety Notice or Family Violence Intervention Order (FVIO), and when FVIOs were granted, they were typically in place for longer periods of time than for protective orders between couples without children.

What are outcomes for child witnesses?

The data below includes children who witnessed a police reported family violence incident between 1 July 2013 and 30 June 2014, and their future recorded involvements with the justice system to June 30, 2019.

Ages 0 to 4 (8,447 children)

Variable	#	%
Child Witness Sex		
Male	4,376	51.8%
Female	4,042	47.9%
Number of Incidents Witnessed		
1	3,221	38.1%
2	1,693	20.0%
3	1,094	13.0%
4	738	8.7%
5 or more	1,701	20.1%
Future Contact with Victoria Police		
Victim: FV incident	603	7.1%
Victim: Crime	741	8.8%
Protected person	5,616	66.5%
Witness	5,226	61.9%
Primary aggressor	25	0.3%
Offender	5	0.1%
No Future Contact	1,837	21.7%

Ages 5 to 9 (6,492 children)

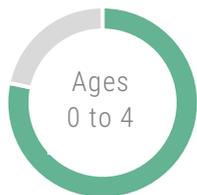
Variable	#	%
Child Witness Sex		
Male	3,315	51.1%
Female	3,147	48.5%
Number of Incidents Witnessed		
1	2,809	43.3%
2	1,407	21.7%
3	749	11.5%
4	512	7.9%
5 or more	1,015	15.6%
Future Contact with Victoria Police		
Victim: FV incident	720	11.1%
Victim: Crime	878	13.5%
Protected person	4,116	63.4%
Witness	3,696	56.9%
Primary aggressor	217	3.3%
Offender	310	4.8%
No Future Contact	1,502	23.1%

Ages 10 to 13 (4,239 children)

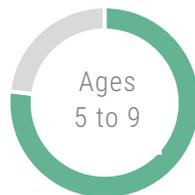
Variable	#	%
Child Witness Sex		
Male	2,121	50.0%
Female	2,111	49.8%
Number of Incidents Witnessed		
1	2,110	49.8%
2	898	21.2%
3	514	12.1%
4	282	6.7%
5 or more	435	10.3%
Future Contact with Victoria Police		
Victim: FV incident	858	20.2%
Victim: Crime	1,112	26.2%
Protected person	2,485	58.6%
Witness	2,129	50.2%
Primary aggressor	535	12.6%
Offender	844	19.9%
No Future Contact	949	22.4%

Ages 14 to 17 (2,749 children)

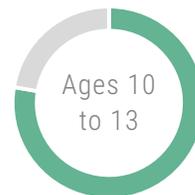
Variable	#	%
Child Witness Sex		
Male	1,331	48.4%
Female	1,416	51.5%
Number of Incidents Witnessed		
1	2,001	72.8%
2	448	16.3%
3	175	6.4%
4	60	2.2%
5 or more	65	2.4%
Future Contact with Victoria Police		
Victim: FV incident	655	23.8%
Victim: Crime	888	32.3%
Protected person	1,413	51.4%
Witness	748	27.2%
Primary aggressor	534	19.4%
Offender	709	25.8%
No Future Contact	721	26.2%



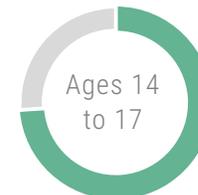
78.3% (6,610) of children had future contact with the justice system.



76.9% (4,990) of children had future contact with the justice system.



77.6% (3,290) of children had future contact with the justice system.



73.8% (2,028) of children had future contact with the justice system.

Discussion

Child Witness Outcomes in the Justice System

Most child witnesses re-engaged with the justice system after their first reported family violence incident, supporting previous findings (Bensley et al., 2003; Ernst et al., 2009). However, this analysis moved beyond traditional victim-perpetrator outcomes and found that child witnesses were also likely to re-engage with the justice system as a complainant on either a FVIO or a FVSN. Whilst this shows that interventions are being made to protect child witnesses, the efficacy of protection orders has not yet been firmly established (see Dowling et al., 2018). Future research could test the utility of protection orders in preventing repeat family violence and protecting victim-survivors.

Intimate Partner Relationships Between Partners Who Have Children and Who Do Not Have Children

More incidents were recorded as taking place between intimate partners who did not have children than intimate partners that had children. Though this result challenges previous findings (Acevedo et al., 2013; Atteraya et al., 2015; Peek-Asa et al., 2017), it may be explained by underreporting in families with children, given the parental fear that reporting family violence may lead to separation from their children by protective services (Fugate et al., 2005; Logan & Walker, 2004). Despite the difference in the number of incidents, intimate partners that had children typically experienced more episodes of police reported family violence, as well as violence occurring over a longer period, and were more likely to be associated with family violence involving serious criminal conduct, including assault-related offences. These findings expand on previous research that reported that increases in the number of children in the household was associated with increases in physical violence (Deveci et al., 2007; Sabri et al., 2014). Future research could examine moderating variables between the presence of children in the household and family violence outcomes.

Implications for Intervention

Given that almost one-third of family violence incidents involved a child witness in the period between 1 June 2018 and 30 July 2019, opportunities for intervention should be identified to support child witnesses and existing initiatives should be expanded to encompass them. In line with the existing evidence base, these programs should be characterised by early intervention, employ a multidisciplinary approach that includes both law enforcement and social services, and adhere to a holistic perspective that involves the perpetrator, the victim-survivor and the child witness (Richards, 2011). One of the primary barriers to the implementation of effective intervention strategies has been

the lack of studies which evaluate their efficacy with adequate and generalizable samples (Wathen & Macmillan, 2013). It is imperative that future research provide a theoretically driven, evidence-based framework from which effective interventions can be created.

Additionally, one of the common recommendations from previous research has been to increase community awareness of family violence (Capaldi et al., 2012; Sabri et al., 2014; UNICEF, 2006). In order to address this issue, community education strategies must also be implemented alongside intervention programs to increase public awareness and knowledge of family violence. Children often have few avenues of advocacy and family violence is frequently framed as an issue between adults, yet evidence continues to demonstrate the hazardous impact that witnessing family violence can have on young people's development and outcomes. As such, children should not be left out of discussions surrounding primary prevention and community awareness of family violence.

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