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Adolescent sibling violence in Victoria

The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence identified that more work was needed to understand how best to prevent sibling violence, as well as to support its victims¹. There is a scarcity of research examining this form of family violence², though some research suggests a relationship between sibling violence perpetration at a young age and perpetration of other forms of family and non-family violence in adulthood³. In order to help address early offending behaviour and provide effective victim support, a strong understanding of the characteristics of sibling violence in Victoria is needed.

As a first step, this paper explores patterns of sibling offending by examining the frequency of police-recorded adolescent sibling violence in Victoria, as well as the characteristics of perpetrators and victims. Victoria Police complete an L17 Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management report form where they have attended an incident and there was, or was a risk of, family violence. However, this form does not currently capture sibling relationships between perpetrators and victims (these would be recorded as "other family member", along with aunts, uncles, cousins, and other family relationships). Sibling relationships are able to be captured by police when a criminal offence is recorded, so this paper examines criminal offences where the victim and perpetrator were recorded as siblings. It should be noted this will underestimate the true extent of adolescent sibling violence in Victoria as incidents may not come to the attention of police, and for family incidents that do and are recorded by police (L17 forms) these do not necessarily involve a criminal offence. For example, of all 65,154 family incidents recorded by Victoria Police during 2013–14, Victoria Police laid charges as a result of 43%¹.

For the purposes of this paper sibling violence was defined as any *Crime against the person*⁴ where the victim and perpetrator were recorded as siblings and both parties were under the age of 18 years at the time the offence occurred. This study examined all offences meeting these criteria recorded as occurring during the five years ending 30 June 2017. This study uses sub-incidents as its counting unit. An incident recorded by police can comprise multiple offences, which are recorded as separate sub-incidents. A sub-incident is therefore a distinct course of criminal action and represents one type of offence (for example, serious assault or murder) that occurred within a criminal incident. It is important to note

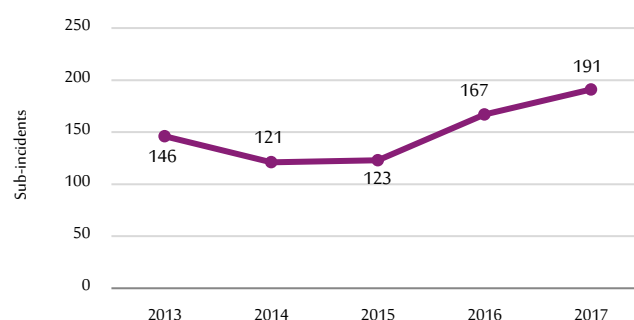
that where perpetrators or victims were recorded for more than one sub-incident, age was calculated based on the date the first sub-incident occurred within the study period. As the Crime Statistics Agency (CSA) does not hold court outcome data for recorded crime statistics, it should be noted that all sub-incidents and offenders are alleged rather than proven and may not go on to be prosecuted.

1. Did the number of sibling violence sub-incidents change during the five-year period?

The annual number of sub-incidents of sibling violence increased from 146 in 2013 to 191 in 2017.

During the study period there were 748 recorded sub-incidents of sibling violence. The annual number decreased from 146 in 2013 to 121 in 2014, before increasing to 191 in 2017 (Figure 1). A Kendall's rank order correlation showed this increase over the five-year period was statistically significant ($N=60$, $\tau_b=0.25$, $p=0.007$).

Figure 1. Annual number of recorded sibling violence sub-incidents during the five years ending 30 June 2017



2. What types of offences involved siblings?

Common assault was the most frequently recorded type of sibling violence.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of sibling violence sub-incidents were assaults. *Common assault* offences comprised 36.0% of sibling violence, which was therefore the most frequently recorded offence type overall. A further 23.3% of sub-incidents were *Serious assault*. The next most commonly recorded offence type was *Indecent assault* followed by *Incest*.

Table 1. Sibling violence sub-incidents by CSA Offence Group

CSA Offence Group	Number	%
Common assault	269	36.0
Serious assault	174	23.3
Indecent assault	114	15.2
Incest	90	12.0
Rape	54	7.2
Threatening behaviour	39	5.2
Other dangerous or negligent acts endangering people	5	0.7
Stalking	3	0.4
Total	748	100

3. What were the characteristics of perpetrators of sibling violence?

Around three-quarters of perpetrators of sibling violence were male. The average age of perpetrators was 14.7 years old.

During the five-year study period, 528 unique alleged perpetrators of sibling violence were identified. The average age of perpetrators was 14.7 years old ($SD=1.7$), with 77.8% male and 22.2% female. Eleven per cent ($n=57$) of the perpetrators were aged 10-12 years, 32.8% were aged 13-14 years, 40.5% were aged 15-16 years, while 15.9% were 17 years old. The majority of perpetrators were born in Australia ($n=481$, 91.1%), with 5.1% born in a country other than Australia, and 3.8% with an unknown country of birth. Eight per cent ($n=42$) were recorded as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 67.8% were recorded as non-Indigenous, while 24.2% had an unknown Indigenous status.

4. What were the characteristics of victims of sibling violence?

Fifty-nine per cent of victims of sibling violence were female. The average age of victims was 11.9 years old, and around one-quarter were aged under 10 years old.

This study identified 571 unique victims of sibling violence. The average age of victims was 11.9 years ($SD=3.9$), with 58.5% female and 41.5% male. Around one-quarter ($n=146$, 26.0%) of the victims were under 10 years old, 22.4% were aged 10-12 years, 22.2% were aged 12-14 years, 22.1% were aged 15-16 years, while 7.7% were 17 years old. A large proportion of victims had an unknown country of birth (41.2%) or an unknown Indigenous status (36.3%), so reliable figures could not be determined.

5. What were the characteristics of relationships between perpetrators and victims of sibling violence?

In around three-quarters of sibling violence sub-incidents the perpetrator was older than the victim. In 46.2% of sub-incidents a brother offended against his sister.

The age difference between the perpetrator and victim of each sibling violence sub-incident was calculated. For 77.5% of sub-incidents the perpetrator was older than the victim, for 18.9% the perpetrator was younger than the victim, while for 3.6% the perpetrator and victim were the same age. The average difference in age was 3.1 years, where the perpetrator was older than the victim ($SD=3.6$; median=3.0). The relationship most often recorded between the perpetrator and victim was a brother offending against his sister (46.2%; $n=347$). The next most common type of relationship was where a brother offended against his brother (34.0%),

followed by a sister against her sister (13.9%), and a sister against her brother (6.0%).

6. What proportion of perpetrators had been a victim of family violence in the previous five years?

Thirty per cent of perpetrators of sibling violence were recorded as a victim of a family incident in the five years prior.

As shown in Table 2, 30.1% ($n=159$) of sibling violence perpetrators were recorded as the victim of at least one family incident in the previous five years (the affected family member on an L17 form). Eighteen per cent of perpetrators were recorded as the victim of one incident, 5.9% were the victim of two incidents, while 6.1% were the victim of three or more incidents. Of those recorded as the victim of at least one family incident, 71.1% ($n=113$) had been a victim where their parent was the recorded perpetrator, 37.7% ($n=60$) by another family member, 7.6% by a current partner ($n=12$), and 2.5% ($n=4$) by a former partner⁵.

Table 2. Sibling violence perpetrators with family incident victimisation in the five years prior

Prior victimisation incidents	Number	%
0	369	69.9
1	96	18.2
2	31	5.9
3+	32	6.1
Total	528	100.0

Summary

Overall, the frequency of sibling violence increased significantly during the five-year study period, from 146 sub-incidents in 2013 to 191 in 2017. Most perpetrators of sibling violence in Victoria were male (77.8%), and 58.5% of victims were female. The most common type of recorded sibling violence was common assault, followed by serious assault. In 77.5% of sub-incidents the perpetrator of sibling violence was older than the victim, and in 46.2% of sub-incidents a brother offended against his sister. More in-depth research is planned to further examine patterns of how violence develops between siblings over time, and the relationships between sibling violence and other types of family violence.

¹ State of Victoria (2016). Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations, Parliamentary Paper No. 132.

² Meyers, S. (2017). Lifting the veil: the lived experience of sibling abuse. *Qualitative Social Work*, 16(3) pp.333–50.

³ Hoffman, K.L., Kiecolt, K.J. and Edwards, J.N. (2005). Physical violence between siblings: a theoretical and empirical analysis. *Journal of Family Issues*, 26(8), pp.1103–1130.

⁴ Crime Statistics Agency (2015). *Offence Classification*. Melbourne: Crime Statistics Agency.

⁵ Proportions sum to more than 100% as one person can experience multiple incidents.