

Young men's experiences of domestic abuse

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From Boys to Men Research Study

- The *From Boys to Men Project* explored why some young men become perpetrators of domestic abuse.
- It also sought to establish what more could be done to reduce the number of young men who become perpetrators.

The study has involved three phases:

1. A survey of 1200 school children (aged 13-14), including an evaluation of a school-based domestic abuse prevention programme.
2. Thirteen focus groups with young people (aged 13-19).
3. **Life history interviews with 30 young men (aged 16-21) who have experienced domestic violence as victims, perpetrators and/or witnesses.**

Phase III: Background

- Children's attitudes towards domestic violence are moderated by both their own experiences of abuse and the responses of those able to offer support and propose solutions (Jaycox et al., 2006; Lieberman, 2007).
- Knowing why some young men who have lived with domestic abuse become abusers is a question social scientists have yet to answer convincingly (Morley and Mullender, 1994).
- A complex set of contingencies determine whether or not children reproduce what they have witnessed, including the developmental history of the individual and their physical and emotional well-being (Vizard et al, 2007).

Phase III of the *From Boys to Men Project* aimed to understand the experiences of young men affected by domestic abuse and examine how some young men become victims or perpetrators of domestic abuse.

"It's good having a girl with you, next to your side who you know you can trust." (Keith)

Domestic Abuse in Intimate Relationships

Over two thirds reported having perpetrated abuse against a female partner, most admitting at least one physical assault. Many also reported having been a victim of partner abuse, although none had experienced life-threatening forms of violence from a partner.

- Many remembered relationships that were positive initially.
- Potentially lethal violence was sometimes perpetrated in the context of 'fighting' with partners over more trivial matters: **"I just smacked her straight in the middle of the nose, blacked out both her eyes... she hit me back so I knocked her clean out, punched her dead hard"** (Spencer).
- Some participants struggled to contain difficult emotions and had few sources of support to which they could turn.
- Some of those who had grown up in violent homes viewed themselves as having demonstrated restraint by hitting walls as opposed to their partners.
- Some men were relatively accomplished at using the threat of violence to control partners, while others had limited insight into why they had behaved in abusive ways.

"I pulled out a lighter out of my pocket and I said 'I'm going to burn you, you black bastard if you don't give me my jacket back.'" (Wayne)

"I'm not saying that I can't learn new things and I can't take opinions on board, but as for anyone being able to change my opinion... It's more difficult now than then." (Duane)

Phase III: Method

- In-depth, life history, interviews were conducted with 30 men aged 16-21 who had experienced domestic violence as a victim, witness or perpetrator.
- Participants were recruited through youth offending services, probation, an alternative education programme and family support services.
- Most reported a range of vulnerabilities and forms of disadvantage:
 - Histories of institutional care and housing instability;
 - Poor mental health and alcohol and substance misuse;
 - Learning difficulties and attention deficits;
 - Involvement in crime, periods of imprisonment, community based supervision and electronic surveillance.

"But the things I do is because I've seen my dad do it... I want to win cos I've seen my dad do it... winning battles by doing what he's doing." (Tim)

Home Lives and School Experience

Most young men's childhoods were characterized by disruptive home lives: e.g. substance using parent, prolonged parental absence, parental imprisonment, death/illness of a parent, reliance on extended family for care, and/or a parent with a public reputation for violence.

Most had interrupted patterns of schooling. Many had truanted, caused disruption and had been excluded from school. While teachers sometimes failed to spot connections between young men's behaviour and their home lives, young men themselves were often unprepared to disclose to teachers:

"I'd never tell the teacher anything about my life... because teachers don't listen to you ... If the teacher's not going to listen to you no one else is going to listen to you." (Andrew)

I was so mad at myself that I couldn't fight my gran's boyfriend ... he was a grown man... From that day, I promised myself I'd never, ever, ever, ever put myself in that situation again. Never. (Duane)

Domestic Violence in the Childhood Home

- Those who witnessed family violence described feelings of powerlessness, insecurity and helplessness, resolving to protect females and challenge bullying male aggressors in the future.
- Murderous feelings were expressed towards fathers and other adult men who had abused mothers. **"I put my dad up by the wall with the same carving knife and said 'how would you feel?... It's not nice is it?'"** (Nigel).
- But vengeful violence was also threatened and perpetrated against mothers who were regarded as neglectful, having failed to protect them in the past, or behaving in hurtful ways: **"a poisoned bitch... Just evil"** (Carl).
- Some adopted the role of family disciplinarian after abusive fathers left.

Responses to Violence

15 participants had been arrested for domestic violence offences, 10 having been convicted for violence towards a partner or family member. Many were known to social services because of the violence they had grown up around and/or the risks they now presented to women and children.

- Constructive and containing responses to violence were rare in participants' lives.
- Efforts by grandparents, counsellors and criminal justice workers sometimes helped young men to contain angry feelings, at least temporarily.
- Many had little recollection of service providers talking to them about the 'fights' and 'arguments' they had experienced in relationships.
- The failure to explore the causes and consequences of these fights and arguments can be a missed opportunity to engage perpetrators and potential perpetrators.