

Research focus

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Adolescent violence towards parents

The paucity of attention paid to adolescent violence towards parents is indicated by the sparse literature on the topic. Clearly, there is an urgent need to conduct research into this aspect of family life. A research study will, therefore, be designed to explore the perspectives of parents who experience adolescent violence and to determine the direction for developing effective policies and services to address the needs of parents and young people.

Reviewing the literature

Violence within the family context is of concern as it exists within all cultures, family backgrounds, and socio-economic situations (Ministry of Social Development, 2002).

The family violence literature to date has primarily focussed on intimate partner abuse and child abuse. Although now gaining greater attention, the issue of adolescent violence towards their parents has been a neglected area (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Bobic, 2004; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Eckstein, 2004; Peek, Fischer, & Kidwell, 1985). In New Zealand the available information about adolescent violence towards parents comes from articles published in the popular press (Aldridge, 1995; Stickley, 1998) and anecdotal evidence from organisations such as Tough Love, the police, and community intervention and prevention services that work with people affected by violence.

The lack of research literature on adolescent violence towards parents is of concern as noted in recent reports, such as *Te Rito: New Zealand Family Violence Prevention Strategy* (Ministry of Social Development, 2002), *Beyond Zero Tolerance: Key issues and future directions for family violence work in New Zealand* (Fanslow, 2005) and *An Agenda for Family Violence Research* (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2006). No direct research on the topic appears to have been undertaken in New Zealand. More extensive information and additional literature on violence towards parents, however, is available from overseas sources; some is based on data from surveys conducted in the United States, other

information comes from the Canadian National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Brezina, 1999; Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Cottrell, 2001, 2003; Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Peek et al., 1985; Ulman & Strauss, 2003). Several articles from Australia also address the topic (Bobic, 2002, 2004; Gallagher, 2004a, 2004b).

The prevalence of adolescent violence towards parents is difficult to establish. Estimates of incidence within the available literature vary from 5-18% of families experiencing this phenomenon. A small number of studies from overseas have examined survey data based on quantitative measures; however, much of this information is ten to thirty years old (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Eckstein, 2004). The available statistics generally focus on the use of physical violence by children or adolescents towards their parents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Bobic, 2004; Eckstein, 2004; Peek et al., 1985). The type of violence is usually categorised as "hitting" (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Peek et al., 1985), although verbal and emotional abuse may also be included (Eckstein, 2004). However, other developmentally relevant behaviours, more commonly found in the youth literature, for example, financial abuse and damage to property, are largely neglected.

Explanations regarding the cause and continuation of adolescent violence towards parents, as well as information about the most effective ways of assisting parents, are limited (Bobic, 2004). Cottrell (2001) suggests there is no single and definitive explanation for violence towards parents. Rather, a range of multifaceted and interconnected dynamics contributes to this behaviour. These dynamics may include biological, psychological and social factors, as well as those related to youth culture (Martin, 2002), and risk factors linked with youth offending (McLaren, 2000, 2002). In line with current information regarding interpersonal violence, both male and female youth participate in all forms of violence towards parents (Cottrell, 2003), while women are most likely to be at risk of becoming targets of the violence (Agnew & Huguley, 1989).

The link between growing up in the context of family violence and the continuation of violent behaviour onto the next generation is becoming increasingly highlighted in current

family violence discourse. There is also evidence to suggest that where there is violence between parents, and/or parents are violent towards a young person, there is greater risk of the young person becoming violent towards his or her parent (Bobic, 2004; Ulman & Strauss, 2003). Furthermore, adolescents who abuse their parents often abuse their siblings as well (Harbin & Madden, 1979; Heide as cited in Eckstein, 2004). However, more extensive studies are needed to explore the issue further and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the development of violent behaviour in some adolescents.

As with other types of interpersonal violence and abuse, it is likely that adolescent violence towards parents is more widespread than the available literature and studies suggests. Under-reporting is likely to be influenced by the nature of the relationship between the young person and their parents. Internal factors such as parental shame and fear of blame and external factors such as community judgement of their capacity to parent (Bobic, 2004) may also contribute to parents denying or minimising their experiences and maintaining secrecy (Agnew & Huguley, 1989). Cottrell and Monk (2004) suggest that reluctance to disclose is likely to be exacerbated by the limited access to means of intervention. Social service agencies increasingly recognise the prevalence of this type of violence. However, research that could provide practice models of how to respond to this type of violence is also lacking (Cottrell, 2001).

There is also scant information about whether adolescent violence towards parents relates more to family violence or to youth violence in general. Theoretical approaches to family violence have centred on adult-initiated violence and may be limited in their application to adolescent-initiated violence (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Peek et al., 1985). Research and theoretical frameworks relating to youth violence may address these limitations. As integrating frameworks may be useful in addressing adolescent violence towards parents (Bobic, 2004; Cottrell & Monk, 2004), by combining knowledge from the fields of family violence and youth violence we may be able to more effectively expand our understanding of the phenomenon.

Proposed research

The New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse has identified adolescent violence against parents as a significant gap in research on all forms of family violence (NZFVCH, 2006). The level of youth violence within our communities is also of concern. Where one issue ends and another begins may not be clear-cut. However, what is clear is the need for New Zealand-based research to explore the phenomenon of adolescent violent behaviour within the context of the family. The literature review that is reported upon here provides the basis for the development of a research proposal that will contribute to the filling of this gap.

The proposed study will be designed to explore parents' experiences of violence perpetrated by adolescents (aged 14 to 17 years) in their care. Young people aged 14 years and over are held accountable for offending under New Zealand legislation and are at an age at which intervention through statutory agencies may be required. Parents from varying family configurations will be invited to take part in the research. This will include representation from Pakeha, Maori, Pacific, and Asian populations. Attention to ethnic diversity will be important as a necessary step towards meeting the needs of all families who experience adolescent violence towards parents. Ethical considerations will also be important, particularly those concerning cultural issues (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001; Ruwhiu, 2001; Tolich, 2002) and safety issues (Ellsberg, Heise, Pena, Agurto, & Winkvist, 2001).

The research will take a mixed method approach where both quantitative and qualitative data are sought. The option of using this approach in a longitudinal study will also be considered. Data collection will focus on experiences of all types of violence, including physical violence, psychological, emotional and financial abuse, and damage to property and material goods.

Adolescent violence towards parents is a complex area. There is little evidence-based information that can assist families or research that can support practitioners working with families who are experiencing this type of violence. This review of the literature is an initial step towards developing a study that can attend to the need for New Zealand-based research on adolescent violence towards parents and contribute to building theory about

this type of interpersonal violence. It is hoped that it will also stimulate discussion about how the phenomenon might be addressed.

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