

**Title:**

Sibling Violence: Understanding Experiences, Impacts, and the Need for Nuanced Responses

**Authors:**

1. **Dr Karla Elliott** (Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne)  
*Lead Author; Corresponding Author*  
  
207 Bouverie St, The University of Melbourne  
Victoria, 3010, Australia  
karla.elliott@unimelb.edu.au  
+61 3 90357952
2. **Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon** (Criminology, School of Social Sciences, Monash University; Monash Centre for Gender and Family Violence Prevention)  
  
20 Chancellors Walk, Monash University  
Clayton, Victoria, 3800, Australia  
Kate.FitzGibbon@monash.edu  
+61 3 99052616
3. **Professor JaneMaree Maher** (Sociology, School of Social Sciences, Monash University; Monash Centre for Gender and Family Violence Prevention)  
  
20 Chancellors Walk, Monash University  
Clayton, Victoria, 3800, Australia  
Janemaree.Maher@monash.edu  
+61 3 99052949

**Word length:**

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/1468-4446.12712](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12712)

This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved

8,382

**Date of submission:**

3<sup>rd</sup> January 2019

**Funding Information:** Monash University

**Conflict of Interest:** None

**previous Manuscript ID:** BJOS-1991

DR. KARLA ELLIOTT (Orcid ID : 0000-0002-8985-4533)

Article type : Original Article

## **Sibling Violence: Understanding Experiences, Impacts, and the Need for Nuanced Responses**

### **Abstract**

Sibling violence is an under-researched field, and the impact of adolescent family violence (AFV) in particular on siblings is not yet well understood. The Australian study *Investigating Adolescent Family Violence in Victoria* elicited responses from siblings who had experienced AFV from their brothers or sisters, as well as reflections from parents and practitioners on the difficulties of addressing AFV directed towards siblings. This article explores characteristics of sibling violence identified in this study, impacts of the violence on siblings, parents and families, and responses to sibling violence in Victoria, Australia. Siblings described experiencing severe physical, psychological and emotional violence, and beyond this recounted a range of difficulties such as not being believed by the adults in their lives; the violence being dismissed as normal sibling behaviour; an inability to access support services without the help of parents or other adults; sadness and distress at the loss of the sibling relationship; and resentment towards parents for their perceived inaction against the violence. Practitioners highlighted the dearth of services and resources available for siblings affected by AFV, and the inadequacies of current Child Protection responses. This research sheds light on the hidden issue of sibling violence and highlights the need for nuanced responses rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

**Keywords:** Sibling violence; adolescent family violence; family violence; child protection; intergenerational violence

## Introduction

Family violence presents in myriad forms and configurations, but one of the most underexplored of these is sibling violence. Eriksen and Jensen (2009: 184) note that few studies 'have directly addressed the extent, dynamics, correlates, or effects of sibling violence'. In this article we seek to contribute to research and understandings of sibling violence by exploring the experiences of siblings affected by violence, the impacts of this violence, and barriers to accessing help and services. We focus particularly on the experiences of siblings affected by adolescent family violence (AFV) carried out by brothers or sisters, though some sibling participants noted violence continuing into adulthood. Insights from parents and service providers are also drawn upon in this article. Siblings are some of the most hidden affected family members of this already hidden form of family violence.

Within Victoria specifically and Australia more broadly, the term 'family violence' has been adopted as preferred terminology to 'domestic abuse' or 'domestic violence'. The terminology of family violence reflects and brings to the fore the familial structure within which such violence takes place. Family violence as a term is therefore helpful for uncovering the issue of sibling violence. Edwards, Ribbens, McCarthy and Gillies (2012: 732) argue the need for sociology to retain a focus on the concept of 'family', which, they argue, 'allows sociologists to capture important aspects of people's connected lived experiences, and to engage directly in political debates about contemporary family policies and their consequences'.

AFV can be defined as 'violence by a child or young person used against a parent, carer or sibling that takes place "within a wider backdrop of family violence" (Holt 2012, 294)' (Fitz-Gibbon, Elliott and Maher 2018). We consider sibling violence as violence carried out against a person by her or his brother or sister. As the excerpts from participants throughout this article highlight, sibling violence can include forms of violence such as physical, emotional, sexual, psychological and economic abuse. Phillips and Grupp (2009) argue that common discourses coding violent behaviour from siblings as 'normal sibling conflict or rivalry'

invisibilise sibling violence, obscuring the experiences of those siblings who have been victimised and hindering interventions into this form of violence. For this reason, and because participants in this research were asked to define AFV themselves, we utilise a broad definition of sibling violence in order to capture a wide range of sibling experiences of violence. There is much debate over the definition of 'adolescence', with the Victorian *Royal Commission into Family Violence* (2016) noting that different agencies in Victoria define adolescence as being anywhere from zero to 25 years old.

As Eriksen and Jensen (2009) point out, much research on sibling violence focuses on young children, leaving unexplored sibling violence in adolescence and adulthood. The study *Investigating Adolescent Family Violence in Victoria* elicited qualitative survey responses from 23 siblings aged 16 or older in Australia who had experienced violence from their brothers or sisters. These siblings reflected on violence they had experienced or were experiencing during adolescence, though for some the violence extended beyond the period of adolescence. The voices of the sibling participants drive this article and our analysis, bringing important understandings and awareness to this underexplored issue. Excerpts from siblings are supplemented with survey responses from parents who witnessed AFV carried out by one of their children against his or her brothers and sisters, and interviews and focus groups conducted with 45 service providers and experts in the Victorian family violence and legal sectors. We begin by reviewing previous research on sibling violence before considering the survey participants' experiences of sibling violence, the impacts of this violence, and responses to sibling violence in Australia. The siblings' survey responses highlight that this form of violence needs to be identified and addressed, and that nuanced responses are required.

### **Sibling violence: an under researched issue**

Sibling violence has been noted as a highly prevalent form of family violence, and one of the least researched (Eriksen and Jensen 2009; Kettrey and Emergy 2006; Relva, Fernandes and Mota 2013). Much work on sibling violence draws on quantitative studies stemming from the United States (US), with research by Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz (1980) first drawing

attention to the issue in the US in 1980 (see more recently Caffaro 2014[1998]). Wiehle's (1997) qualitative research with 150 survivors of sibling violence, also in the US, identified severe psychosocial problems ongoing into adulthood for affected siblings.

Hoffman and Edwards (2004) argue that while the focus of much research on sibling violence has been on physical violence, psychological and emotional abuse must also be considered as prevalent and severe aspects of sibling violence. They draw on feminist theory, social learning theory and conflict theory to devise a theoretical model for investigating and understanding sibling violence. This model leads them to suggest that:

cultural norms, structural arrangements in families and society, divergent interests among siblings, and parents' tolerance of sibling violence all create a social environment that fosters the likelihood that engaging in abusive behavior will be reinforced, successful, and rarely negatively sanctioned (Hoffman and Edwards 2004: 197).

Hoffman and Edwards (2004) outline the inability of siblings to simply leave violent situations in the home during childhood and adolescence. Eriksen and Jensen (2009), again in the context of the US, review research on the impacts and effects of sibling violence, including trauma, effects on relational ties, anxiety, eating disorders, and problematic drug and alcohol use (see also Kettrey and Emery 2006). Dantchev and Wolke (2019) find in the United Kingdom that children who carry out sibling bullying 'are more likely to show antisocial behavior in early adulthood'.

Phillips and Grupp (2009) draw on Foucauldian and Butlerian understandings of discourse and power to consider the ways sibling violence is silenced in the US and portrayed as benign, or as normal sibling behaviour or rivalry. This silencing, they argue, minimises and normalises sibling violence, serving to hide its impact and limit the ability of those affected to identify and speak out against it (Phillips and Grupp 2009; see also Khan and Rogers 2015; Wiehe 1997[1990]). In the US, Kettrey and Emery (2006) found that those who experienced sibling violence could not recognise the behaviour(s) as violence, while Caffaro (2014[1998]) highlights the importance of de-normalising sibling violence in schools and in families. Khan and Rogers (2015: 451), exploring perceptions of sibling violence in the English context,

suggest that childhood experiences of sibling violence could lead to ‘a normalization of physical [sibling violence] that is symptomatic of a cyclical relationship between child abuse and acceptance of interpersonal violence within later (e.g., adult) intimate relationships’.

Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro (2005) focus more specifically on sibling incest, citing evidence that estimates it occurs three to five times as often as father-daughter incest. They note the difficulties that arise from ‘the lack of universally acceptable criteria for distinguishing abusive sexual contact from normal sexual exploratory behavior’ (609), but ‘question the concept of sexual contact between siblings as a mutually consensual experience’ (618). Like AFV more broadly, sibling incest is minimised and overlooked, with shame and guilt perpetuating silence around the issue (Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro 2005).

In Australia, the Victorian *Royal Commission into Family Violence* (RCFV 2016: vol. 4, 150-2) described AFV as a ‘distinct form of family violence’, noting that it occurs in all communities and geographic areas of the state and accounts for approximately one in 10 family violence incidents reported to Victoria Police. Looking specifically at sibling violence, the Royal Commission highlighted several of the data limitations that presently hinder an accurate understanding of the phenomenon. Specifically, the Commission noted that while data from the Children’s Court specifies that in nine per cent of cases over a one-year period (2013-14) the affected family member was the sibling of the respondent, Victoria Police data does not distinguish between ‘siblings’ and ‘other family members’ in records of police attendance at a family violence incident. This makes it difficult to estimate how many incidents of sibling violence are being attended and reported to police in Victoria.

Beyond the work of the RCFV, Walker and Woerner’s (2018) report on ‘adolescent sibling violence’ in Victoria analysed violence against siblings in cases where a criminal offence was recorded. Though this form of counting is likely to underestimate the extent of the issue, they found sibling violence increased significantly over the past five years in Victoria. Walker and Woerner found that around three-quarters of those committing sibling violence were male, with an average age of 14.7 years old. 59 per cent of siblings identified as affected by violence were female, with the average age of those affected 11.9 years. 46.2 per cent of cases involved a brother offending against his sister, 34 per cent a brother against his

brother, 13.9 per cent a sister against her sister, and 6 per cent of cases involved a sister offending against her brother. The report adds that 30 per cent of those carrying out sibling violence 'were recorded as a victim of a family incident in the five years prior' (Walker and Woerner 2018: 2). Eriksen and Jensen (2009: 202-3) similarly highlight the gendered character of sibling violence, finding that '[o]verall, boys are significantly more likely than girls to engage in sibling violence' (see also Kiselica and Morrill-Richards 2007; Krienert and Walsh 2011; Relva, Fernandes and Mota 2013).

Thus, sibling violence can in some ways be seen to share similarities with family violence more broadly, including in terms of its gendered character, experiences of shame and stigma, the forms of violence experienced, and victims' reluctance to report. However, throughout this article we demonstrate why sibling violence requires consideration in its own right. We highlight some of the challenges and complexities of sibling violence that distinguish it from other forms of violence, leading to the necessity for nuanced understandings and tailored responses.

### **Investigating Adolescent Family Violence in Victoria: Study Methods**

The study *Investigating Adolescent Family Violence in Victoria* sought to understand experiences of AFV and gain insights from practitioners and experts into the issue and current responses in Victoria. The study adopted a multi-methods approach, combining focus groups and in-depth interviews with a range of experts, family violence and youth service providers, legal practitioners, general practitioners (GPs) and health service providers, and an online, open, anonymous survey that sought to capture the voices of those who have experienced or carried out AFV. Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven GPs and seven experts on AFV in Victoria working in the fields of child and youth health, wellbeing, and support, particularly in relation to family violence. Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 24 service providers and justice professionals, as well as one focus group with seven health service providers. The project therefore canvassed the knowledge of 45 experts, service providers, legal practitioners, GPs and health service providers with experience in the field of AFV. These participants were

recruited through the lead researchers' networks as well as through Twitter and a monthly email digest collated by members of the project team.

The online survey was made available through the survey development software Qualtrics to capture voices of those over the age of 16 who had either experienced or carried out AFV, or both. The survey included closed questions to capture demographic data, and open-ended questions about the context in which the AFV occurred, the services involved (if any), and what forms of reporting took place (if any). The survey was distributed through Twitter and the monthly email digest, and by asking service providers and experts to pass information about it on to their clients. 138 responses were received, 18 of which were excluded from the sample as blank (n=14) or because the participant did not have any experience of AFV (n=4). This left a sample size of 120 survey responses. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants throughout this article to ensure anonymity, and the appropriate ethics approval was sought and granted. An additional ethical consideration for this research was the use of an online survey, rather than interviews, for those who had experienced AFV. The survey ensured free and voluntary participation and enabled those who had experienced AFV to anonymously share as much or as little of their stories as they liked. While the survey was targeted at persons affected by AFV or adolescents who use violence, no responses were received from adolescents who had used violence in a family setting. The study's analysis was thus confined to the experiences of those affected by AFV. In this article, we focus primarily on the data gathered from the 23 survey responses received from siblings affected by AFV, with added reflections on sibling violence from the service providers and experts, as well as from parent survey participants who reflected on their experiences witnessing and managing sibling violence.

Though some research suggests sibling experiences of AFV are less gendered (Holt 2016; Howard 2015), 22 of the 23 affected siblings who responded to our survey identified as female. Participants could choose from a set of age ranges in the survey. From these ranges, one participant indicated they were aged 16-19; two were aged 20-25; seven were aged 26-30; four were aged 31-35; two were aged 36-40; five were aged 41-50; one was aged 51-60; and one was aged 61-70. For country of origin, 16 of the sibling participants indicated Australia; three indicated Australia with another background; two indicated other 'western'

countries; one stated they were born in another 'western' country but raised in Australia; and one did not specify a country of origin. The one male sibling participant reported experiencing sibling violence from his older siblings, but did not specify the gender of these siblings. Of the women participants, nine experienced sibling violence from an older brother; six from a younger brother; three from a brother of an unspecified age; two from an older sister; one from a sister of an unspecified age; and one had witnessed violence between her brother and father. Sibling violence in our study therefore presented in gendered ways, with those affected mostly women, and those carrying out the violence mostly referred to as brothers.

This pattern of violence carried out by older siblings was observed by service providers and experts interviewed for this research, who found that adolescents who use violence in the home typically do so against persons who are either younger and/or physically weaker than them. As one expert relayed:

[The behaviour is] often putting down or bullying often their mother, or it might be as well a younger sibling or siblings ... the criminality of the behaviour isn't something that comes up, except where the behaviour is sexual in nature and is targeted at siblings usually, although sometimes a female parent. ... In my experience ... it's overwhelmingly adolescent male violence towards female parent, overwhelmingly, and sometimes also younger siblings. (Expert Interview)

### **Presentations of sibling violence**

By drawing directly on the voices of the 23 individuals who participated in our research and recounted their experiences of sibling violence, a key aim of this article is to provide insight into the largely undocumented phenomenon of sibling abuse. In order to do so, the following two sections examine experiences of violence in adolescence, the prevalence of recursive and intergenerational violence, and the impacts of sibling violence, including experiences of family relationship breakdown and conflict.

## *Experiences of violence in adolescence*

The siblings in our research were both directly and indirectly affected by violence carried out by their brothers or sisters. The violence included physical, psychological, emotional, financial and sexual violence and abuse. Service providers too reflected on the severity of violence directed towards siblings they had encountered in their professional work. The following excerpts highlight some of this violence:

My sister became increasingly violent following the separation of my parents when she was ten and I was six. She was verbally and emotionally abusive (towards the whole family), and this escalated to physical and sexual violence (against me only) by the time she was 14 to 15 ... The abuse is characterised by secrecy (usually only occurring in the home) and threats of harm if I told anybody or got help. (Emily, sister)

My younger brother ... acted violently towards our mother and me ... I would get involved and try to stand between my mother and brother and de-escalate the situation, but not very well. (Sarah, sister)

Sisters in our research were targeted by their brothers through sexual violence in several instances, with verbal abuse from brothers often including a focus on bodies and weight. Tessa, for example, recounted that her brother 'told me I was ugly and a bush pig. No one can imagine the ongoing and permanent psychological impact being told that every day of your life as a child, teen and young adult. That you are fat, disgusting, and worthless'. Kristy's brother was physically violent towards her, but would also engage in a range of other abusive behaviours:

My older brother terrorised me when we were young. He was physically violent ... and he would also, for example, break into the toilet while I was in there. ... I also remember if I was having a private conversation with my mum, about my period for example, he would often come in and demand information. (Kristy, sister)

Another sister, Chelsea, described escalating violence from her brother over the years, including cutting holes in her underwear, obscenities scratched into her car, and attempted rape:

Childhood violence by my younger brother escalated when he was 13. Bites, scratches and punches escalated into nipple cripples and groin punches. Black eyes the day before major events caused me to miss state finals and my school formal because my mother forbade me to bring shame on the family. Speaking about it was forbidden on the grounds of 'family loyalty'. Other incidents involved cutting holes in my underwear and the destruction of study notes. The word 'cunt' was scratched into the door of my first car. The same car had all the wheel nuts loosened. Friends did not visit due to the violence, which became increasingly sexual. Attempted rape when on a holiday. Killed my dog. (Chelsea, sister)

While not directly identified by name by participants in our research, sexual violence extending to incest must also be recognised as a form of sibling violence (on incestuous abuse see further Middleton 2012).

Shame surrounding sibling violence is mentioned by Chelsea in the above excerpt, as it was by Nicole who stated 'my family were "comfortable" – private schools – very much "street angels/home devils", don't talk about it, it was a shame you didn't share'. Emily too shared that:

I begged my mother to call the police on many occasions (including one incident where my sister was holding a knife to my throat), however, she was very scared and also committed to 'keeping up appearances' in our middle-class suburb. She was also fearful of my sister getting a criminal record and this hindering her employment prospects down the track.

Similarly, Tammy wrote:

We did not access any support services. As a middle/upper-middle class family with children in private schools it wasn't something that was discussed.

These experiences of shame match findings surrounding the prevalence of feelings of shame and stigma in families affected by AFV more broadly (Fitz-Gibbon, Elliott and Maher 2018; Holt 2016; Howard 2015). The Royal Commission (RCFV 2016, chapter 23: 150) concluded that stigma and shame associated with AFV was 'most devastating' and that it 'arises from unfair assumptions about the victim's ability to be a good parent ... Shame is exacerbated by lack of community awareness about this form of violence. All these factors create enormous barriers to seeking help'.

### *Recursive and intergenerational violence*

Daly and Wade (2016) suggest that in cases of AFV, the adolescent carrying out the violence may also be or have been a victim of family violence perpetrated by an older male in the family (see also Hoffman and Edwards 2004 on intergenerational violence). In our study, service providers reflected that some of the young people they had been working with who were carrying out AFV had been, or continued to be, victims of violence themselves. One practitioner told us 'currently I have a 13-year-old male [in my service] who's come from quite a traumatic history with his mum, and now is in his dad's care ... he's violent at home towards his siblings, because it's all he knows'. Another spoke of the issue of some young people not wanting to leave the family home as they see themselves as protectors for their mother or younger siblings:

Some young people don't want to leave [the family home], especially if there's continued violence, because they see themselves as a protective factor for mum. So if they leave, what does that then mean for mum or the younger siblings? So they just choose not to leave, to keep everyone safe. (Service Provider)

Alisha (sister) spoke to the difficulty of the issue of protecting siblings when she stated '[my brother] did not like that I held him accountable for his actions or tried to protect my younger siblings from him'.

Another sibling participant, Anna, described how her and another sibling would attempt to protect their mother from their violent sister, stating 'my older sister beat and berated both me and my younger sister for all of our adolescence and into our 20s. ... Mum copped a lot of emotional abuse from [her] as well, so we tried to protect mum and deal with it ourselves'. One service provider drew out some of the complexities of AFV by identifying the positive role siblings could play in a violent young person's life and pathway to change, noting:

In terms of siblings, that can be a great motivator for a young person to engage [with services] ... So, identifying that their younger siblings are having these terrible experiences because of their use of violence can be a motivating factor for young people as well. ... 'Would it be alright if I was talking to your younger sibling in ten years' time about the same things as you're talking to me about with your dad?' ... And then they'll say 'No, it's not okay'.

The use of a sibling in this way requires some caution and a delicate balance to be struck between trying to best address the needs of the adolescent using violence and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of siblings in the home. These observations and experiences from service providers and siblings point to some of the complexities of family violence, highlighting that it can involve multiple generations and family members carrying out the violence as well as multiple victims, and shining a light on the complex dynamics and webs of familial relationships.

## **Impacts**

The impacts of sibling violence were described by siblings and by parents throughout our study as severe. Siblings in this research detailed ongoing and serious impacts of violence on their lives, including their ability to work, maintain adequate mental health and sustain intimate and familial relationships. The following responses focus on some of these impacts as they were experienced by participants:

It has taken me years to realise and work through the full impact of my brother's actions towards me. I developed anorexia and then bulimia. My issues around food and body image persist to this day and have impacted on my social skills and my relationships. I suffer from severe depression ... I remain depressed. My work suffers. I don't trust people and easily cut friends out of my life for perceived slights. I am so sad all the time. (Tessa, sister)

It made me never want to visit home. It made the times spent at home, visiting, which should have been happy times, filled with tension and threats of violence. (Bianca, sister)

I feel overwhelmingly guilty for not trying hard enough to fix things. (Hannah, sister)

One impact focussed on by several of the participants was the breakdown of family relationships as a result of sibling violence. Some participants described moving out of home early in order to escape their violent sibling, and some emotionally recounted the breakdown of the former relationship with their sibling. One mother highlighted both these issues, relaying the impacts of sibling violence and the breakdown of relationships:

Our daughter ... suffers from anxiety and panic attacks and moved out of home because she could no longer live with the brother she was once very close to. (Carole, mother)

Chelsea revealed she 'left home at 18 and have spent most of my life avoiding this brother', while Frances described moving out of the family home as soon as she turned 18, acquiring her driver's license and beginning an apprenticeship. Hannah, on the other hand, explained how she 'delayed moving out of home for years, because I felt I needed to protect my mum and younger brother from [the older sibling]'. Regardless of whether they remained physically present in the home, several siblings described the subsequent breakdown of familial relationships. Anastasia and Alisha poignantly described this:

I do not love [my brother] anymore. I loved the eight-year-old who was my best friend in the entire world and was closer than a twin to me, but that person is gone. He wishes I loved him, mum wishes I loved him, but I can't. (Anastasia, sister)

My mum claimed that she was terrified [the violent brother] would kill himself, asked me on more than one occasion what I did to provoke him, and eventually encouraged me to leave home ... I am now estranged from my mum and most of my siblings, including my brother. (Alisha, sister)

The siblings in our research at times felt a sense of frustration or blame towards their mothers, who they saw as failing to keep them safe from their violent siblings during their adolescence. The following quotes illustrate some of the feelings of blame experienced by sibling survey participants:

My parents, especially my mother, would make excuses for my brother's behaviour, apologise for him, say things like 'It's just the way he is', or chastise me when I became angry or otherwise intolerant of his behaviour. They would make concessions for him and his behaviour and hold me to a higher standard. They would never stick up for me when my brother would start arguments. (Bianca, sister)

I began by excusing my parents and loving them. ... In recent years it has hit me how much they failed me, especially as I see my brother hasn't changed and continues to live a good life, while I have fought so hard just to survive the impact of his abuse. (Tessa, sister)

I was always in the second seat, despite being a really good kid and ending up at uni. It was always about him. My mum is particularly biased towards looking after him, even now. (Jordan, sister)

Some mothers who responded to the survey, however, described another perspective to this, highlighting the dilemma they faced: ensuring the safety and care of both the affected sibling(s) and their child who was using violence. A sense of guilt and responsibility for not being able to keep other members of their family safe permeated responses, as the quotes from the following two mothers illustrate:

Sadly, our middle child was the recipient of the violence and has significant trauma, anxiety and depression issues. As parents, we could not keep him safe, and as a mother I feel devastated for his suffering. (Katrina, mother)

In hindsight, I should have taken my friend's advice and removed [the violent adolescent] from the family home, because the cost has been great for other family members. I did investigate housing services. ... We were scared of contacting police as we didn't want to be a DHS [Department of Health & Human Services] case. On one occasion our son smashed his brother's head into a stone wall. Instead of taking him to outpatients, I kept him home and watched for concussion symptoms. I greatly regret this decision, but also know why regarding the reasons as above. A terrible dilemma. We wanted to involve police at times but couldn't because of effects and ramifications for the whole family. (Katrina, mother)

As these quotes demonstrate, the impacts to families of sibling violence was felt by all members of the family, parents and siblings included, and extended beyond those directly targeted by the violence to those who witnessed this form of abuse. Family members involved highlighted the impacts as difficult and distressing within and beyond childhood and adolescence.

### **Responding to sibling violence in the context of AFV**

The Royal Commission (2016, chapter 23: 149) noted of AFV that there is currently 'no systemic response to the needs of these young people and their families'. Our research

supports this conclusion, revealing a dearth of responses and resources available for addressing sibling violence specifically and AFV more broadly (on the latter, see Fitz-Gibbon, Elliott and Maher 2018). While a small number of programs for AFV were being run in Victoria at the time of our research<sup>1</sup>, service providers interviewed noted a lack of capacity, funding and time, alongside the difficulty of working with both the adolescent carrying out the violence and the affected sibling(s). Two service providers explained:

I don't have the capacity to do case management because we don't have that level of resourcing, and quite often I have a strong alliance with the young person [using violence] in terms of their journey of change. And that makes it actually quite complex to be working with younger siblings who are at risk and to be considering their needs. Not to say that I can't do both those things, but I think that there is a bit of a gap from my point of view in terms of how it is that case management occurs, and how it is that you work therapeutically around a young person's violence in the home. (Service Provider)

We focus mainly on violence towards the carer. We obviously work and try and address violence for the siblings as well, but one of our requirements is violence towards their current carer. (Focus Group Participant)

Similar gaps in service responses have been identified elsewhere. Caffaro (2014[1998]), for example, suggests in the context of the US that training for service providers and professionals around sibling violence is required. Our research supports this recommendation in our identification of the need to ensure there are responses available for and tailored towards both the adolescent using violence and any siblings within the home affected by that violence. At present, critical gaps in the response in Victoria to this form of violence leaves both parties inadequately supported.

---

<sup>1</sup> See RCFV (2016, vol. 4, 160-5) for details of programs addressing AFV available in Victoria at the time of the Commission's research. Other interventions addressing AFV globally include Break4Change in Europe (see Wilcox et al. 2015); The Non Violent Resistance Programme in Ireland (see Lauster et al. 2010); and work on nonviolent resistance in Israel (see Omer 2004).

### *Adults as gatekeepers to accessing help*

Beyond the violence they experienced, siblings recounted difficulties such as not being believed by the adults in their lives, or the violence being dismissed by parents as 'normal sibling behaviour'. During adolescence or childhood, siblings in our research were unable to access assistance without the help of parents or other adults. They often viewed this as curtailing their options for safety from the violence and seeking assistance. As Phillips and Grupp (2009: E12) note, a 'child's description and appeal for help may not even be heard because of the relative powerlessness of his or her embodied voice within the context of society that does not recognize children as legitimate stakeholders due to age and place in the family'.

Jordan's story makes apparent some of the difficulties of not being believed, and of adults acting as gatekeepers – and in her case barriers – to accessing help:

I tried to tell school counsellors, talk to my parents and even other adults I trusted. No one believed it was that bad. I would try to tell them I hated being alone with him, but everyone just told me it was normal sibling angst and I was overreacting. The counsellors were often condescending; being empathetic, I knew straight away they weren't taking me seriously. And my mum was in denial that it was as bad as it was. (Jordan, sister)

Other sibling participants in our research described similar experiences:

People told me how 'lucky' I was to have a brother like him. The adults in my life didn't get him help and told me just to ignore him ... I'd feel terrified ... He was violent, aggressive and cruel. No adults in my life stood up to him. (Tessa, sister)

It never occurred to me to seek support, as it was something we did not discuss. It was put down to ongoing issues with my brother and my dad in the first instance,

and later as an issue between siblings when he continued to target me. To this day, [my family] do not understand his actions in the context of violence. (Alisha, sister)

Some participants recounted being advised by police not to report the violence at all, with Belinda's story again framing the issue of recursive violence and the presence of multiple people using violence in the home:

Police picked up [my] brother after stealing my car – I was URGED not [to] press charges, as it would 'destroy my brother's life'. ... I'm terrified he'll find me, break in and kill me. In hindsight, I wish I had pressed charges ... I also wish I'd called the police on my father more often. (Belinda, sister)

Police were called at one point and told me that I could be ruining my brother's life if I reported [the violence]. (Claire, sister)

While not the direct focus here, these responses highlight the critical role and influence police can have in their gatekeeper interactions with families experiencing AFV more broadly, and specifically their influence on siblings affected by AFV. Our research revealed mixed experiences when families contacted police (Fitz-Gibbon, Elliott and Maher 2018). This echoes previous research in the United Kingdom by Condry and Miles (2016), which highlights the need for a differential policing response to AFV in comparison to family violence perpetrated by adults. Specialised police training is essential to ensure effective frontline responses to adolescents who use violence and to protect siblings affected by AFV.

#### *Child Protection and removal of children from the home*

Some survey participants, mainly mothers, described situations in which Child Protection had removed either the violent adolescent or the affected sibling(s) from the family home in an attempt to keep the sibling(s) safe. Service providers, experts and, for the most part, survey participants noted the inadequacy of the response of removing children from the

home on its own, stressing that it fails to address the complexities of AFV. One expert noted that more severe cases of AFV are reported to Child Protection, which can lead to the removal of the violent adolescent into kinship care, while another reflected that in their experience cases of AFV involving siblings are 'the ones that are more likely to get Child Protection involved'. One expert spoke about the problems surrounding removal of children from the home in cases of AFV and sibling violence, explaining:

Child Protection will act if the violence is against a younger sibling. So they're elected to protect the child at risk of the violence, and that may at times mean the child [sibling] is removed from the family home. The victim of the violence is removed for their own safety, which is a really inadequate response because it still leaves the mother unprotected. It means the young person using the violence doesn't get any support to change his or her behaviour, and the mother also then loses the child from her care. ... often the lens is on the child that's at risk from their siblings or another child's use of violence, not to actually do anything to address the offending behaviour in the adolescent. ... So it's that tricky thing of holding the vulnerability of the young person but also being clear their behaviour is unacceptable, and intervening around the safety and wellbeing of the other children in the home.

Service Providers explained some of the further complexities around sibling violence and Child Protection and the removal of children from the home:

I've got a client who's 17 and a half, and he's perpetrating family violence against his mum and his nine-year-old sibling, and Child Protection have recently removed the siblings and said it's a result of his behaviours. It's quite complex: mum was sectioned and stuff as well, so there's more to it than just that. ... We had this big plan of putting him into [a program] where he could stay and learn independent living skills and stuff, but they won't take him because he's on a Child Protection Order, that Child Protection won't close, so then we're kind of stuck in this rut of, well, what do we do? Because he's 17 and a half, it's like, the best bet to improve their relationship is to get him out, so he can live independently and then build it up a little bit more. (Service Provider)

At the pointy end, the police might have been called out to their house, there's been an incident of family violence, and the police are worried about mum or the other siblings in the house and they've applied for an intervention order ... so you get a young person coming along who might have been removed from their home to live with another parent or another family member. But then their mum comes along to court and often obviously mum's not supportive of the police application. She feels, I guess, often really distraught that things have escalated that far, and that she's opposed to criminalising her child in that regard. And even if the police have the power to go ahead and ask the magistrate to make an intervention order, even if the mum's not supportive, but then you just know that she's never going to call the police if there's an incident at home because of the ramifications for the child. (Service Provider)

There's a real lack of adequate [inaudible] for young people that don't have the protective factor of the help-seeking parent or families. Particularly those who expose younger siblings to the risk of the violence and that have been removed from the home and placed in out-of-home care, residential care, and are in the statutory system now. And they just live in resi [residential care] and they don't have their families around them, and it reinforces the trauma, their abandonment, whatever else. (Service Provider)

One sibling participant's story illustrates how the threat of having a child removed from the family home can act as a barrier to siblings seeking to access help:

When my brother tried to keep me from leaving the house when I was 17, I was afraid his three-year-old son would be taken from my parents' care, as they all lived in the same house. ... This deterred me from going to the police at the time. It did not seem like an option, as my parents would not have liked me to come forward. (Bianca)

A mother who participated in the survey reflected on the hard decision over whether to have an adolescent using violence removed from the home, and this was informed by the need to protect his siblings. This mother's response captures the tension between the need to protect other children in the family and the fear of criminalising the adolescent using violence:

Police took out an intervention order against him [the adolescent using violence] on behalf of me and my daughters, and he was removed from the home and into DHS [Department of Health & Human Services] care. He was 14 and I was heartbroken. I felt like a failure as a parent and I was very concerned about his wellbeing. Due to a shortage of places, DHS started putting enormous pressure on me to ask the court to allow me to take him back home, but I knew that to keep my other children safe, I had to refuse. It was extremely difficult in the face of comments like 'but you are his mother, and you're responsible for him, whatever he does' and 'there are no places for him, he may have to sleep in our offices tonight'. I had to stand firm and keep saying, 'I have three children who are my responsibility, not just one, so for the safety of my other two children, he can't come back home'. (Zoe, mother)

The views from service providers and experts, and the stories relayed by survey participants, support the findings of the Royal Commission (2016), which recognised that removing a young person from the family home should be avoided wherever possible, but that in cases where there appears to be no other option, families should be provided with appropriate supported accommodation. Unlike situations of intimate partner violence, where the goal is often to remove the perpetrator from the home and extricate the primary victim safely from the relationship, simply removing an adolescent using violence without further care, services or therapeutic responses was not seen as appropriate in cases of AFV and retaining the family structure safely was often the key outcome sought by those affected. While it is appreciated that, in cases where there is an ongoing risk of violence, removal of the adolescent from the family home may be the only option, it does little to address and resolve the reasons why an adolescent is using violence and further divides families.

In the Australian context, it is important to acknowledge the Stolen Generation, 'the systematic removal of indigenous Australian children from their families, largely for the social engineering purpose of the gradual and systematic annihilation of Aboriginal cultural identity' (van Krieken 1999: 297). The *Bringing Them Home* (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Australia) 1997) report identifies that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their kinship networks but were also often separated from their siblings. The impacts of this forcible removal of children continue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia to this day (see for example National Inquiry 1997; Marchetti and Ransley 2005).

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to draw attention to the underexplored and poorly understood experience of sibling violence, particularly violence carried out by adolescents against their brothers and sisters. Centring the voices and experiences of affected siblings reveals layers of complexity and difficulty when identifying appropriate responses to, and the impacts of, AFV. In highlighting these complexities, this research aims to bring attention to some of the hidden family members affected by AFV specifically, and by family violence more broadly. Though we have focussed here on experiences of sibling violence during adolescence and childhood, future work should consider sibling violence across the life course. Some participants reported violence continuing into early adulthood and later in life, and the characteristics of this continuing violence and its implications - including how it connects with sibling violence during adolescence and childhood - need to be elucidated and better understood. Our research was unable to address directly the experiences of those who have used sibling violence, another task for future research.

The stories of siblings in this research revealed that sibling violence was often dismissed as normal sibling behaviour or minimised within families due to feelings of shame and guilt. Service providers noted there is currently little support available for affected siblings, and participant responses confirmed the inadequacy in most instances of children being

removed from the home. Mothers were faced with the complex and competing responsibilities of ensuring the safety of all children in the home, including both the adolescent using violence and the affected sibling(s). The difficulties of this task were reflected in the blame sometimes apportioned to mothers by affected siblings.

The voices of siblings who responded to our survey highlight the severe nature and impacts of this complex form of family violence, and the limited means adolescent or child siblings have for addressing the violence. With sibling violence a highly prevalent form of family violence (Eriksen and Jensen 2009; Kettrey and Emergy 2006; Relva, Fernandes and Mota 2013), this research highlights the necessity of listening to and understanding the experiences of individuals who experience violence from their brothers and sisters, and of developing more effective, nuanced, and age appropriate responses. It points to the need to assist affected siblings, while at the same time supporting parents and the young person using violence and, ideally, keeping the family unit intact. Importantly, the creation of support services and specialised frontline responses for persons affected by sibling violence must be accompanied by clear strategies to facilitate access to those supports by those who need them. As our research reveals, numerous barriers exist that impede a young person's ability to seek help external to the family when affected by sibling violence.

## **Bibliography**

**Caffaro, J.V.** 2014 *Sibling Abuse Trauma: Assessment and Intervention Strategies for Children, Families and Adults*, New York: Routledge [first published New York: Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press, 1998].

**Caffaro, J.V. and Conn-Caffaro, A.** 2005 'Treating Sibling Abuse Families', *Aggression and Violent Behaviour* 10: 604-23.

**Condry, R. and Miles, C.** 2016 'Adolescent to Parent Violence and the Challenge for Youth Justice' in M. Bosworth, C. Hoyle and L. Zedner (eds) *Changing Contours of Criminal Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Daly, K. and Wade, D.** 2016 'Gender and Adolescent-to-Parent Violence: A Systematic Analysis of Typical and Atypical Cases' in A. Holt (ed.) *Working with Adolescent Violence and Abuse Towards Parents: Approaches and Contexts for Intervention*, Abingdon; New York: Routledge.

**Dantchev, S. and Wolke, D.** 2019 'Sibling Bullying at 12 Years and High-Risk Behavior in Early Adulthood: A Prospective Cohort Study', *Aggressive Behavior* 45: 18-32.

**Edwards, R., Ribbens McCarthy, J. and Gillies, V.** 2012 'The Politics of Concepts: Family and its (Putative) Replacements', *The British Journal of Sociology* 63(4): 730-46.

**Eriksen, S. and Jensen, V.** 2009 'A Push or a Punch: Distinguishing the Severity of Sibling Violence', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 24(1): 183-208.

**Fitz-Gibbon, K., Elliott, K. and Maher, J.** 2018 'Investigating Adolescent Family Violence in Victoria: Understanding Experiences and Practitioner Perspectives', Melbourne: Monash Gender and Family Violence Research Program.

**Hoffman, K.L. and Edwards, J.N.** 2004 'An Integrated Theoretical Model of Sibling Violence and Abuse', *Journal of Family Violence* 19(3): 185-200.

**Holt, A.** 2012 'Researching Parent Abuse: A Critical Review of the Methods', *Social Policy and Society* 11(2): 289-98.

**Holt, A.** 2016 'Introduction', in A. Holt (ed.) *Working with adolescent violence and abuse towards parents: approaches and contexts for intervention*, New York: Routledge, Abingdon.

**Howard, J.** 2015 'Adolescent Violence in the Home: How is it Different to Adult Family Violence?', *Australian Institute of Family Studies*.

**Kettrey, H.H. and Emery, B.C.** 2006 'The Discourse of Sibling Violence', *Journal of Family Violence* 21: 407-16.

**Khan, R. and Rogers, P.** 2015 'The Normalization of Sibling Violence: Does Gender and Personal Experience of Violence Influence Perceptions of Physical Assault against Siblings?', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 30(3): 437-58.

**Kiselica, M.S. and Morrill-Richards, M.** 2007 'Sibling Maltreatment: The Forgotten Abuse', *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 85: 148-60.

**Krienert, J.L. and Walsh, A.** 2011 'My Brother's Keeper: A Contemporary Examination of Reported Sibling Violence using National Level Data, 2000-2005', *Journal of Family Violence* 26: 331-42.

**Lauster, E. et al.** 2014 'Practical Strategies for Coping with Child-to-Parent Violence: The Non Violent Resistance Programme in Practice', *Irish Probation Journal* 11(Oct): 208-221.

**Marchetti, E. and Ransley, J.** 2005 'Unconscious Racism: Scrutinizing Judicial Reasoning in 'Stole Generation' Cases', *Social & Legal Studies* 14(4): 533-52.

**Middleton, W.** 2012 'Ongoing Incestuous Abuse during Adulthood', *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 14(3): 251-72.

**National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Australia)** 1997 'Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families', Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

**Omer, H.** 2004 *Nonviolent Resistance: A New Approach to Violent and Self-Destructive Children*, Cambridge University Press; Cambridge.

**Phillips, D.A. and Grupp, K.** 2009 'Sibling Violence Silenced: Rivalry, Competition, Wrestling, Playing, Roughhousing, Benign', *Advances in Nursing Science* 32(2): E1-E16.

**Relva, I.C., Fernandes, O.M. and Mota, C.P.** 2013 'An Exploration of Sibling Violence Predictors', *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research* 5(1): 47-61.

**Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV)** 2016 'Report and Recommendations', Victoria: Royal Commission into Family Violence.

**Straus, M.A., Gelles, R.J., and Steinmetz, S.K.** 1980 *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*, Anchor Books: Garden City.

**Van Krieken, R.** 1999 'The Barbarism of Civilization: Cultural Genocide and the 'Stolen Generations'', *The British Journal of Sociology* 50(2): 297-315.

**Walker, S. and Woerner, J.** 2018 'Adolescent Sibling Violence in Victoria', Melbourne: Crime Statistics Agency.

**Wiehe, V.R.** 1997 *Sibling Abuse: Hidden Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Trauma*, 2nd edn., Sage: Thousand Oaks [first published in 1990].

**Wilcox, P. et al.** 2015 'Responding to Child to Parent Violence: Executive Summary', <http://www.rcpv.eu/78-rcpv-executive-summary-may-2015-english/file>.

### **Acknowledgements**

Our gratitude goes to the participants in this research, both those who shared their experiences of violence through the online survey, and the experts, family violence and youth service providers, legal practitioners, general practitioners and health service providers who contributed their insights. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Professor Jane Coles, Dr Deborah Western and Dr Heather McKay to this research, and to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful suggestions.



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

**Author/s:**

Elliott, K;Fitz-Gibbon, K;Maher, J

**Title:**

Sibling violence: Understanding experiences, impacts, and the need for nuanced responses

**Date:**

2020-01-01

**Citation:**

Elliott, K., Fitz-Gibbon, K. & Maher, J. (2020). Sibling violence: Understanding experiences, impacts, and the need for nuanced responses. BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY, 71 (1), pp.168-182. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12712>.

**Persistent Link:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/286934>