

Sibling-to-sibling violence in Australia: Summary Report

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we come together to conduct our research and recognise that these lands have always been places of learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders – past and present – and acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and their ongoing leadership in responding to domestic, family and sexual violence.

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Sibling-to-sibling violence in Australia

Background

International research suggests that sibling-to-sibling violence (SSV) is one of the most common forms of domestic and family violence (Morrill et al., 2018). Despite this, very little research has explored SSV in-depth and as such, there is limited understanding of the nature and contexts within which these behaviours occur, including in Australia.



The lack of research on SSV is likely due to several reasons. First, it is very difficult to differentiate between SSV and sibling 'rivalry' or 'conflict' (Lopes, Relva & Fernandez, 2019; Tippett & Wolk, 2015). While the latter is viewed as relatively normal and developmentally appropriate, particularly among children, the former involves a persistent pattern of behaviour that is intended to, or are experienced as abusive, and have a negative impact on the targets (Lopes, Relva & Fernandez, 2019). Because of this definitional confusion, often the two behaviours are conflated, leading to the minimisation of SSV as minor behaviours that have minimal (if any) lasting impact.

However, an emerging body of research has demonstrated the importance of developing the evidence base around SSV to inform programs and services that can support families to address these behaviours when they emerge (Elliott, Fitz-Gibbon & Maher, 2020). For example, research has shown that children and young people who are violent and aggressive towards their siblings are also at higher risk of perpetrating these behaviours towards their intimate partner(s) later in life (Noland et al., 2004). In explaining these findings, authors have pointed to the importance of sibling relationships for supporting social development and conflict resolution skills.

As Noland and colleagues (2004: 15) suggest, 'the sibling relationship may act as a blueprint for subsequent peer relationships'. It has also been suggested that children and young people who are abusive towards their siblings may be role modelling behaviours that they have observed within their families, including their parents. Certainly, one of the strongest predictors of SSV is adverse childhood experiences, including childhood experiences of violence between family members (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a; Noland et al., 2004; Nowakowski-Sims, 2019).

Understanding the occurrence of SSV is important for disrupting emergent trajectories of perpetration. There is consistent evidence that SSV can have significant impacts on victim-survivors and their families, as well as for the young people who use violence. Identified impacts include trauma, anxiety and poor mental health, eating disorders, and the misuse of alcohol and drugs (Elliott, Fitz-Gibbon & Maher, 2020; Eriksen & Jensen, 2009; Kettrey & Emery). However, research suggests these impacts are often underestimated and minimised by family members and clinicians, even when the behaviours are described as 'extreme' and persistent (Phillips et al., 2018).

There is a clear need to develop greater understanding of the prevalence, nature and impact of SSV, including region-specific evidence. The purpose of this Summary Report is to provide a picture of SSV perpetration and victimisation, as reported by a sample of young people living in Australia. This is intended to fill a gap in current understandings of the prevalence and nature of SSV in Australia, and to inform improved policy and practice responses to this form of domestic and family violence.

Study design

This Summary Report draws on data collected as part of a national study of young people's use and experiences of family violence in the home (see Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a; 2022b). For that study, a national survey of young people (16-20 years old) living in Australia was conducted to examine participants' experiences and use of family violence in the home. Survey invitations were sent to members of online research panels managed by Open Research Unit during September - October 2021. Participants were asked a series of close-ended and free-text questions about their sociodemographic characteristics, their current living arrangements, their experiences and use of different forms of violence in the home (as both a victim and perpetrator), the related impacts of their experiences and use of violence, disclosure experiences and support needs. Importantly, the sample was recruited using non-probability protocols (i.e., the sample was self-selecting) and as such, the findings are not representative of the broader Australian population.

A total of 5,021 young people completed the survey, of which 4,340 reported that they had at least one sibling. Sibling was defined broadly to include foster, adopted and step-siblings.

Defining sibling-to-sibling violence

As noted above, one of the main barriers to conducting research on SSV is the lack of clarity around appropriate operational definitions that differentiate between abuse and developmentally appropriate forms of conflict and rivalry. However, several studies exploring SSV have addressed this issue by focusing on behaviours that are repeated and occur as part of a pattern of behaviour over time which has a detrimental impact on the individual. This is succinctly summarised by Lopes, Relva and Fernandez (2019: 12), who argue that “one way to distinguish rivalry and violence is...by the repetition of behavior: it is violence when an intentional and repeated pattern of physical and/or psychological aggression acts occurs on a sibling and it entails suffering for him/her’.

Some studies have also included specific behaviours as being demonstrative of an intent to harm and control, regardless of their frequency and/or impact. These behaviours include sexual abuse and coercion, threats to kill, non-fatal strangulation and threats to harm others (Phillips et al., 2018).

For the current analysis, young people were classified as victim-survivors or users (i.e., perpetrators) of SSV if they met at least one or both of the following criteria:

1. First, the young person self-reported that they have been subjected to or had perpetrated non-fatal strangulation, threats to kill, threats to kills or harm others (lateral violence) and/or sexual abuse against a sibling, and/or
2. Second, the young person self-reported being subjected to or using frequent abusive behaviour (at least monthly) perpetrated by or against a sibling.

In addition to non-fatal strangulation, threats to kill, threats of lateral violence and sexual abuse, for the purposes of defining this sample ‘abusive behaviours’ was defined broadly to include other forms of physical violence, emotional and verbal abuse, property damage, threats to harm or hurt the young person, as well as gender and sexual-identity based abuse. Importantly, due to the limitations of the dataset, we could not differentiate between the frequency of SSV and other forms of DFV (e.g., child-to-parent abuse) where multiple perpetrators or targets of abuse were identified (e.g., mother, father, grandparents). Because of this, criteria two was further limited to young people who were using or subjected to at least one frequent abusive behaviour (e.g., verbal abuse) and said that this had only involved a sibling. **Because of this additional criteria, it is likely that we have underestimated the prevalence of SSV within the sample.**

FINDINGS

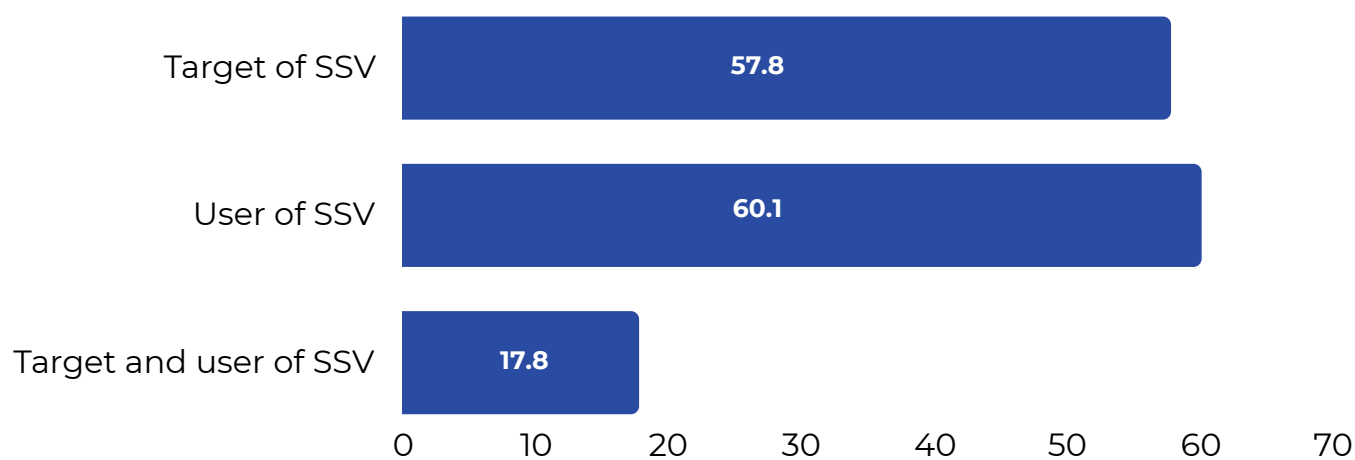
The prevalence of sibling violence victimisation and perpetration

Overall, 303 young people in the sample self-reported that they had been subjected to or used SSV prior to 18 years old, using the above criteria. Of this cohort:

- 57.8 % (n = 175) said they had used SSV;
- 60.1% (n = 182) said they had been subjected to SSV.

There was a high-level of overlap between being a target and user of SSV, with 17.8% of young people in this cohort (n = 54), reporting experiences of both victimisation and perpetration (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Prevalence of SSV (%) (n = 303)



Source: Survey of adolescent family violence in Australia: Perspectives from young people, 2021 [Computer file]

Types of SSV reported by young people

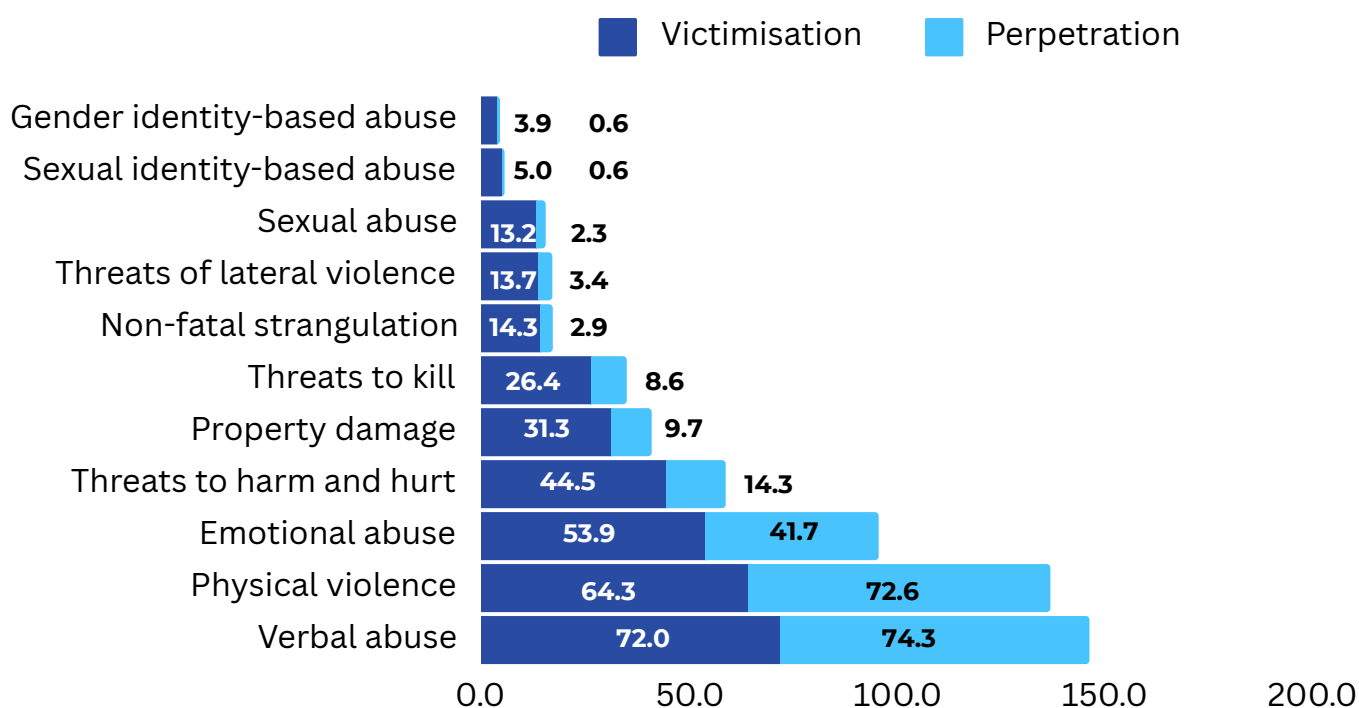
The most common form of SSV reported by young people was verbal abuse, with over 70% saying that they had been subjected to (72.0%, n = 131) or had used these behaviours (74.3%, n = 130) against a sibling. Similar results were observed for physical violence, with 64.3% (n = 117) saying they had been subjected to these behaviours by a sibling, and 72.6% (n = 127) reporting using these behaviours.

Although less common, a large number of young people reported experiences of:

- **Threats to kill:** 26.4% (n = 48) had been subjected to these behaviours and 8.6% (n = 15) said they had perpetrated them;
- **Threats of lateral violence:** 13.7% (n = 25) had been subjected to these behaviours and 3.4% (n = 6) said they had perpetrated them;
- **Non-fatal strangulation:** 14.3% (n = 26) had been subjected to these behaviours and 2.9% (n = 5) said they had perpetrated them (see Figure 2).

Further, 13.2% (n = 24) of young people said they had been subjected to sexual abuse perpetrated by a sibling, and 2.3% (n = 4) said they had perpetrated these behaviours against a sibling.

Figure 2: Types of SSV reported by young people (%) (n = 303)

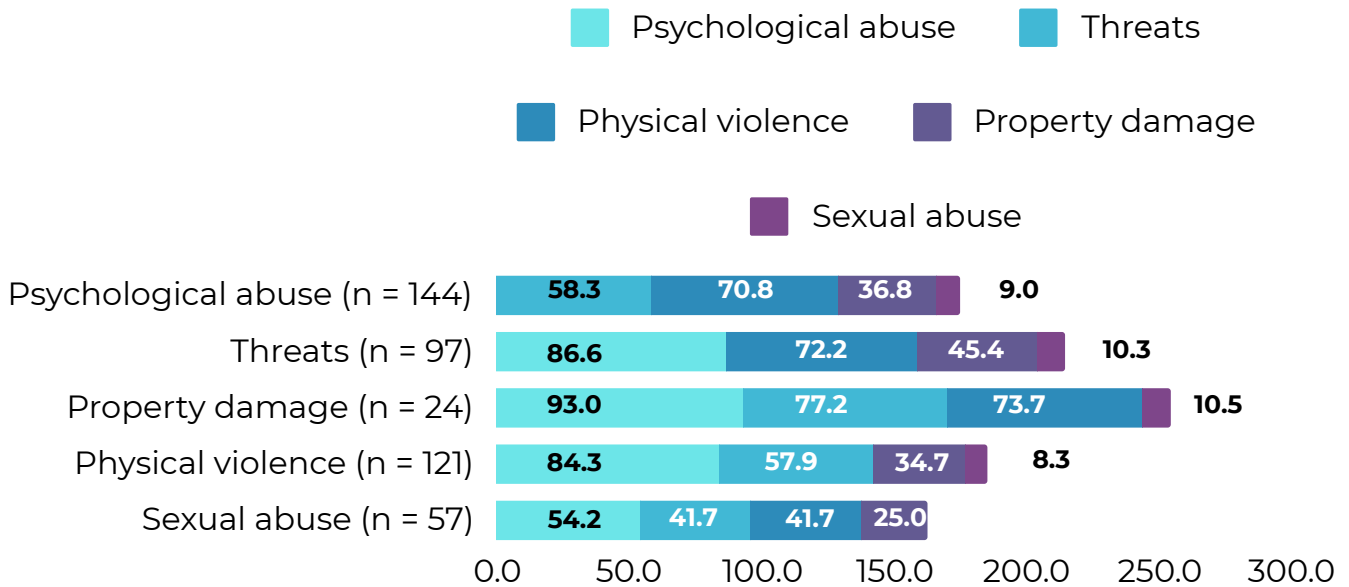


Source: Survey of adolescent family violence in Australia: Perspectives from young people, 2021 [Computer file]

There was a high-level overlap between different types of SSV reported by young people. This suggests that SSV was rarely experienced as isolated incidents of abuse, but rather broader patterns of behaviours encompassing physical, sexual and non-physical forms of SSV.

For example, as shown in Figure 3, over 80% of young people who reported being subjected to threats (86.6%, n = 84), property damage (93.0%, n = 53) and physical violence (84.3%, n = 102) said they had also been subjected to psychological abuse. Further, approximately 10% of young people subjected to psychological abuse (9.0%, n = 13), threats (10.3%, n = 10), property damage (10.5%, n = 6), or physical violence (8.3%, n = 10) had also been subjected to sexual abuse. Meanwhile, among young people who reported being subjected to sexual abuse, just over half (54.2%, n = 13) self-reported that they had experienced psychological abuse, 41.7% (n = 10) had experienced threats or physical violence, and 25% (n = 6) had experienced property damage.

Figure 3: Co-occurring forms of SSV reported by young people (%)

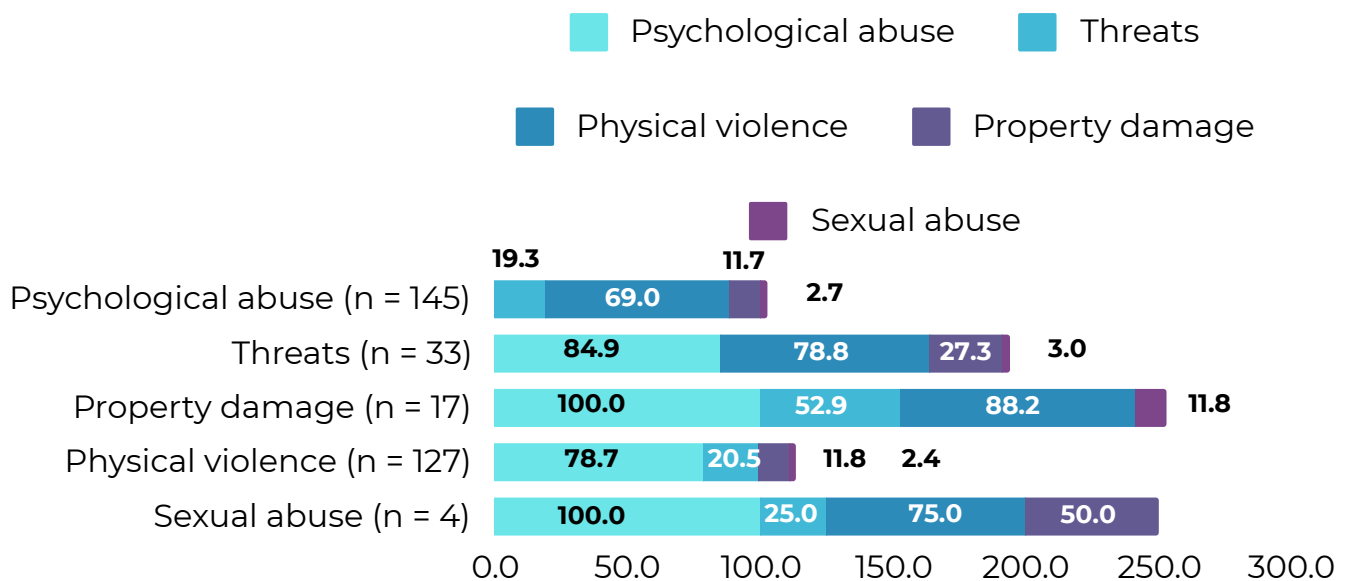


Note: Psychological abuse includes emotional abuse, verbal abuse, gender identity based abuse and sexual identity based abuse. Threats includes threats to harm/hurt the young person, threats to kill the young person or threats of lateral violence. Physical violence includes non-fatal strangulation.

Source: Survey of adolescent family violence in Australia: Perspectives from young people, 2021 [Computer file]

Similar patterns emerged when we looked at the self-reported experiences of young people who had used SSV. As shown in Figure 4, over 80% of young people who had used threats (84.9%, n = 28), property damage (100%, n = 17), physical violence (78.7%, n = 100) and sexual abuse (100%, n = 4) had also used psychological forms of SSV. Further, 70% of young people who had used psychological abuse (69%, n = 100), threats (78.8%, n = 26), property damage (88.2%, n = 15) and sexual abuse (75%, n = 3) had also used physical forms of SSV.

Figure 4: Co-occurring forms of SSV used by young people (%)



Source: Survey of adolescent family violence in Australia: Perspectives from young people, 2021 [Computer file]

Characteristics of young people who experienced SSV

This data also provides insights into the characteristics of young people who had reported using or being subjected to SSV. To avoid double-counting, from this point in the analysis we separated the cohort into three mutually exclusive groups:

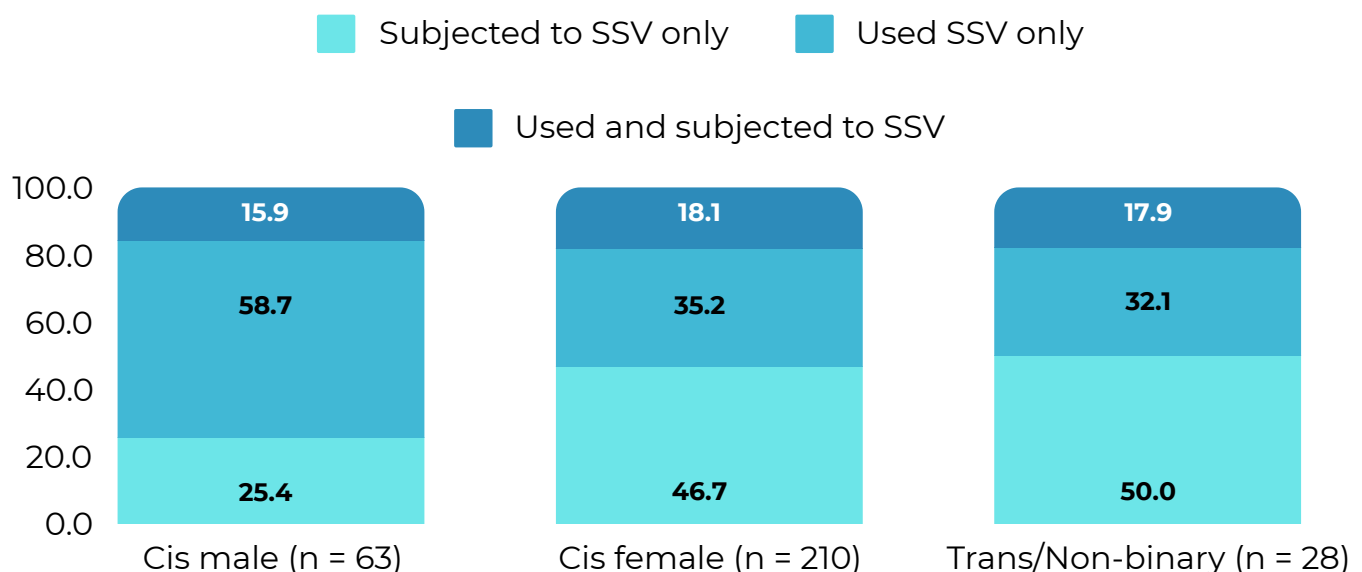
1. self-reported being subjected to SSV only (Group 1; n = 128),
2. self-reported using SSV only (Group 2; n = 121), and
3. self-reported using as well as being subjected to SSV (Group 3; n = 54).

We used chi square tests of independence to determine whether any differences between the groups would be observed in the general population.

Only one difference emerged across the three groups; gender identity (Figure 5). A larger proportion of cis female (46.7%, n = 98) and trans/non-binary young people (50%, n = 14) reported they had been subjected to SSV (but not perpetrated it), compared to cis males (25.4%, n = 16). Meanwhile, a larger proportion of cis males (58.7%, n = 37) said they had used SSV (but not been subjected to it) compared to cis female (35.2%, n = 74) and trans/non-binary young people (32.1%, n = 9). However, a similar proportion of cis female (18.1%, n = 38), cis male (15.9, n = 10) and trans/non-binary young people (17.9%, n = 5) said they had both used and been subjected to SSV. These differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 12.92, p < 0.05$).

Place of usual residence (major city vs regional/remote), Indigenous status (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander vs non-Indigenous), health status (living with a disability vs not living with a disability), sexual identity (LGB+ vs heterosexual) and country of birth (Australia vs a country other than Australia) did not differ significantly across the three groups.

Figure 5: Gender identity of young people, by SSV group (%)



Source: Survey of adolescent family violence in Australia: Perspectives from young people, 2021 [Computer file]

Intersection between SSV and other forms of DFV

Although the focus of the current Summary Report is SSV, as part of the survey we also asked young people about their experiences of DFV between other family members, as well as their experiences of being subjected to or using abusive behaviours against other family members (e.g., parents and grandparents). This allowed us to look at the co-occurrence of SSV with other forms of family violence (e.g., child abuse and child-to-parent abuse)

Experienced DFV between other family members

Approximately 90% of young people across the three groups had also experienced DFV between other family members. In particular, all but one young person who had been subjected to and used these behaviours said they had experienced DFV between other family members (98.2%, n = 53).

Target of abuse perpetrated by other family members

Over half of young people who had experienced SSV reported that they had been subjected to DFV perpetrated by another family member (i.e., other than their sibling). Over half of young people in Group 1 (57.0%, n = 73), Group 2 (60.3%, n = 73), and Group 3 (53.7%, n = 29) said they had also been abused by another family member (other than a sibling).

Among young people who had been subjected to SSV and abuse by another family member, the most commonly identified perpetrator of abuse was their mother (46.4%, n = 84), followed by their father (45.3%, n = 82). In comparison, much smaller proportions of young people said they had been subjected to abusive behaviours perpetrated by other family members, including stepmothers (3.9%, n = 7), stepfathers (5.0%, n = 9), grandparents (3.9%, n = 7), foster carers (1%, n = 2) and/or extended family members (e.g., cousins, 3.9%, n = 7).

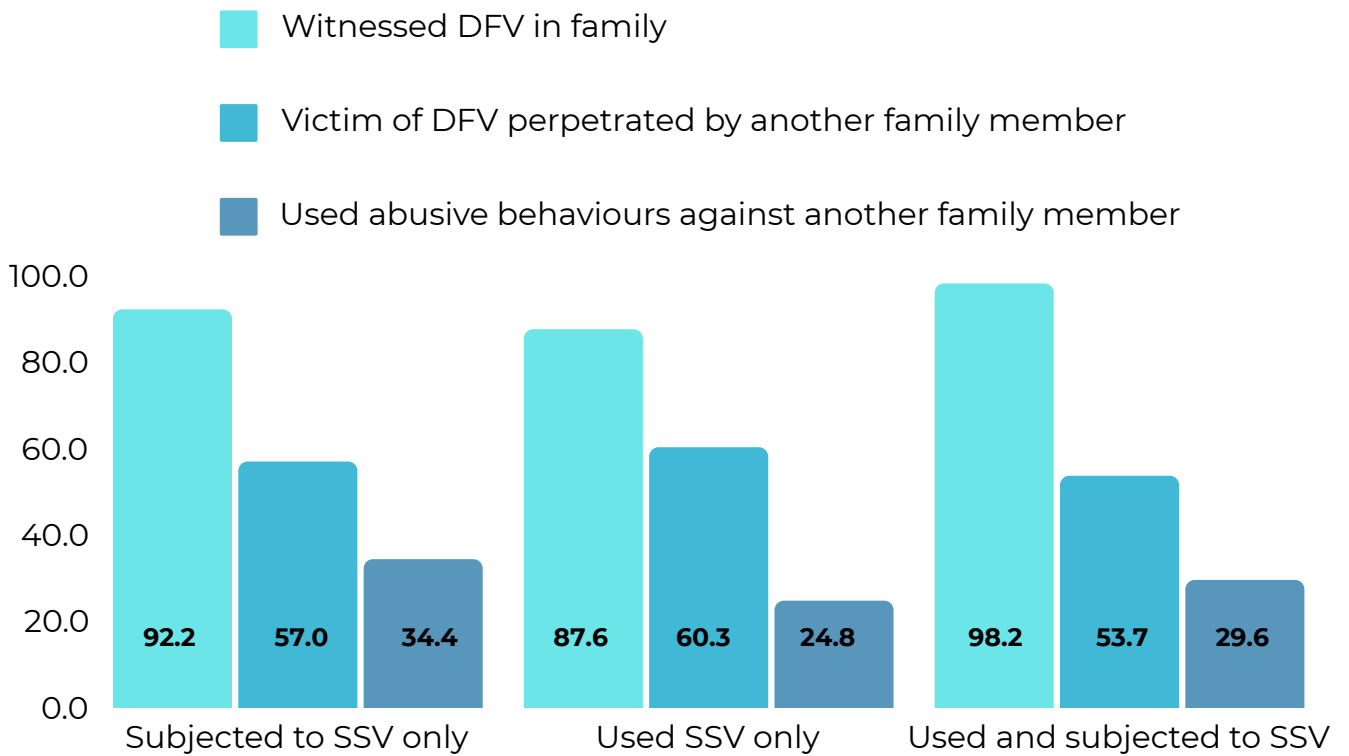
Perpetration of abuse against other family members

Approximately 25% of young people across the three groups reported that they had used abusive behaviours against their family members (other than sibling). A third of young people in Group 1 (34.4%, n = 44) said they had used abusive behaviours against another family member. Meanwhile, 24.8% (n = 30) of those in Group 2, and 29.6% (n = 16) of young people in Group 3 also reported using abusive behaviours against another family member. Interestingly, this means that approximately 70% of young people who had used SSV appeared to be targeting their sibling in isolation from other family members.

Among those young people who reported they had used abusive behaviours against a sibling as well as another family member, the most commonly identified family member was their mother (22.3%, n = 39), followed by their father (16%, n = 28). Overall, a quarter of young people said that they had used abusive behaviours against their mother or father as well as a sibling. This suggests a significant overlap between young people's use of SSV and child-to-parent abuse.

Much smaller proportions of young people said they had used violence against other family members, including stepmothers (1.1%, n = 2), stepfathers (1.7%, n = 3) or grandparents (1.1%, n = 2).

Figure 6: Prevalence of other forms of DFV reported by young people, by group (%)



Source: Survey of adolescent family violence in Australia: Perspectives from young people, 2021 [Computer file]

One of the limitations of this dataset is that it does not allow us to understand the reasons why other forms of DFV (e.g., child-to-parent abuse) frequently co-occurs with SSV. However, broader research examining the occurrence of child-to-parent abuse has found that mothers are often identified as both the targets and users of abuse by young people (see, for example, Boxall & Sabol, 2020; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2021). This finding has been attributed to women often being the primary carers of children and young people, and as such responsible for enforcing boundaries and discipline (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2021). This can lead to conflict, and in turn the use of unacceptable forms of disciplinary behaviour by mothers, as well as young people using violence against their carers. These issues are likely exacerbated in situations where mothers have themselves experienced intimate partner violence, leading to the dissolution of relationships and becoming a single parent.

The impact of abuse on young people

As part of the survey, young people were asked whether the abusive behaviours they had been subjected to and/or used against their family members, including their siblings, had had a negative impact on them across a number of domains. These domains were: physical wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, education achievement and attendance, cultural wellbeing and social wellbeing.

Young people reported that SSV and other forms of family violence they had experienced and/or used had significant impacts on them. Specifically, reported impacts were highest for young people subjected to SSV only, and lowest for those young people who reporting using but not experiencing these abusive behaviours:

- **Emotional wellbeing:** Over 70% of young people reported impacts on their emotional wellbeing, which was lowest for users of SSV only (71.1%, N = 86) and highest for young people subjected to SSV only (85.8%, n = 109).
- **Physical wellbeing:** Almost 40% of young people who had been subjected to SSV only (39.7%, n = 50) or been subjected to and used SSV (39.5%, n = 20) reported impacts to their physical wellbeing, which decreased to 18% (n = 21) for young people who had used these behaviours but experienced them.
- **Social wellbeing:** 61.1% (n = 77) of young people subjected to SSV only said the abuse had impacted their social wellbeing, which reduced to 48.1% (n = 25) of young people who had used and been subjected to SSV, and further to 38.7% (n = 46) of young people who had used SSV only.
- **Cultural wellbeing:** Approximately 10% of young people reported that the abuse had impacted their cultural wellbeing, and this was consistent across all three groups.
- **Participation in school:** 36.2% (n = 46) of young people subjected to SSV only said the abuse had impacted their participation in school, which reduced to 27.8% (n = 15) of young people who had used and been subjected to SSV, and further to 21.7% (n = 26) of young people who had used SSV only.
- **Education achievements:** 40.8% (n = 51) of young people subjected to SSV only reported that the abuse had impacted their education achievements, which reduced to 30.8% (n = 16) of young people who had used and been subjected to SSV, and again to 26.1% (n = 31) of young people who had used SSV only.

CONCLUSION

This Summary Report contributes to our understanding of the nature and characteristics of SSV as experienced by a sample of young people living in Australia. What emerged is that SSV was often described as a pervasive pattern of behaviour involving multiple forms of abuse. It was rare that young people reported being subjected to or using one form of SSV in isolation. Instead, it was more common that young people described patterns of abuse that included physical violence, psychological abuse (verbal and emotional abuse) and property damage.

Further, this study found that SSV rarely occurred in isolation from other forms of DFV. In particular, the vast majority of young people who had experienced SSV said that they had also experienced DFV between other family members, while half said they had been subjected to abusive behaviours perpetrated by other family members. Similarly, approximately a quarter of young people in this sample reporting using abusive behaviours against a family member other than their sibling. In particular, violence towards parents was common within the sample. These findings emphasise the need to view and respond to SSV as situated within broader family dynamics and intergenerational abuse.

SSV has pervasive and significant impacts on young people and this study further affirms this. This research also supports nuance in understanding who is most impacted by SSV, noting that impacts experienced were less frequently reported by those who had solely used SSV and were higher for those who experienced and used SSV and highest for those who had only experienced SSV without reporting use of SSV.

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