

## **In the aftermath of violence conference – June 2014**

### **Responding to adolescent to parent violence**

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#### **Adolescent to parent violence: the police response to parents reporting violence from their children**

Adolescent to parent violence, defined here as the threat or use of violence and/or damage to property from 13-19 year olds towards their parents, is not a new phenomenon. Terms such as 'parent abuse', 'child to parent violence', and 'battered parent syndrome' are also used to describe violence and other sorts of abuse (emotional, financial, verbal) perpetrated against parents and can be found in literature from a range of disciplines dating back to the late 1970s (see for example, Harben and Madden, 1979). Despite the developments in knowledge, understanding and responses to other types of family violence and abuse (i.e. intimate partner violence, child abuse, elder abuse) since this time, adolescent to parent violence has remained a somewhat taboo topic and is only just beginning to emerge on the policy and criminological agenda in the UK (Condry and Miles, 2013). The majority of literature on adolescent to parent violence derives from overseas and from disciplines including family studies, adolescent/youth studies, psychiatry, therapeutic and social work (for an overview of literature, see Kennair and Mellor, 2007; or Holt, 2012). Just a handful of studies are reported in criminological journals (e.g. Kethineni, 2004; Snyder and McCurley, 2008; Walsh and Kreinert, 2007, 2009) and it is only very recently that academics in the UK have begun to explore the dynamics of this complex phenomenon and consider how it might be appropriately responded to.

Previous studies have considered practitioner responses (e.g. Holt, 2012; Holt and Retford, 2012; Nixon, 2012), youth justice responses (e.g. Condry and Miles, 2012; Holt, 2009; Hunter et al., 2010) and how family law might be implemented in this area (e.g. Hunter and Piper, 2012). However, scant attention has been afforded to the role of the police, who are often the first port of call for families experiencing adolescent to parent violence and thus paramount in shaping the response to the problem and parents' impressions of how their victimisation is perceived by the 'outside world'.

This article provides the first examination of UK police policy and practice in responding to reported incidents of violence perpetrated by adolescents towards their parents. The data derive from a large-scale ESRC-funded project concerned with mapping the contours of adolescent to parent violence; examining how cases are managed and processed within the criminal justice system; exploring the work of expert practitioners who work with families who disclose adolescent to parent violence; and obtaining narrative accounts from parents and young people about their experiences of and responses to this kind of family violence. The study involved analysis of police statistical and case file data and interviews with police, youth offending team case workers, expert practitioners, parents and adolescents.

This article draws upon data from 100 'most recent' police case files from two English police forces, and 20 interviews with police officers in these forces ranging from frontline 'uniformed' officers to senior specialist domestic violence officers. The findings provide a crucial insight into current police practice in this area and highlight some of the particular challenges police face when responding to adolescent to parent violence. Some of these difficulties are unique to adolescent to parent violence but there are also clear parallels to be drawn with problems identified in the broader domestic violence policy framework. The article also illustrates how the lack of recognition and awareness surrounding adolescent to parent violence has significant consequences for the way in which police respond to reported incidents, which in turn has far-reaching implications for the families concerned. The discussion concludes by considering how criminal justice policy and practice might be developed in this area, in order to meet the complex needs of families experiencing adolescent to parent violence.

### **The problem of adolescent to parent violence**

Despite the silence surrounding adolescent to parent violence at policy level, literature on the topic can be found across a range of disciplines and countries, with the majority emanating from the US, Canada and Australia. A key focus of research has been to develop theory surrounding possible causes and risk factors for adolescent to parent violence, often drawing upon self-report data in retrospective surveys of young people, which offer an insight into the prevalence of the problem as well as the backgrounds and social demographics of individuals involved in this type of family violence (see for example, Agnew and Huguley, 1989; Brezina, 1999; Calvete et al. 2013; Gallagher, 2004; Kratcoski, 1985; McCloskey and Lichter, 2003; Pagani et al., 2004; Peek et al., 1985; Ulman and Straus, 2003). There are also a number of qualitative studies, which tend to derive from from therapeutic settings, concerned with describing the dynamics and experiences of families disclosing adolescent to parent violence (see for example, Charles, 1986; Cottrell and Monk, 2004; Eckstein, 2004; Harbin and Madden, 1979; Howard and Rottem, 2008; Jackson, 2003; Sheehan, 1997). A handful of international studies have analysed large datasets from police statistics on recorded cases of adolescent to parent violence (Evans and Warren-Sohlberg, 1988; Howard, 2011; Kethineni, 2004; Snyder and McCurley, 2008; Walsh and Kreinert, 2007, 2009; Routt and Anderson, 2011). These data offer a more statistically robust account of the prevalence and characteristics of incidents and the individuals involved; however, they are restricted to reported cases and may only represent the tip of the iceberg of a problem which is likely to be characterised by a large degree of under-reporting.

In the UK, literature on adolescent to parent violence is comparatively sparse; however, an emerging body of research indicates that many parents experience violence and abuse from their children (e.g. Mirlees-Black, 1996; Browne and Hamilton, 1998; Holt, 2009; Hunter et al, 2010; Parentline Plus, 2008, 2010). Our study involved the first analysis of police data in the UK and revealed that over a one year period from 2009 to 2010; 1,892 incidents of violence and/or criminal damage from adolescents (aged 13-19) towards their parents were reported across the 33 London Metropolitan police boroughs (Condry and Miles, 2013). The growing awareness of adolescent to parent violence has provoked new academic interest in the UK which has explored parents' experiences of violence and abuse from their children and the potential role that youth justice, domestic violence, social care, child protection and family law services may play in responding to parent abuse (Holt, 2009; Hunter et al., 2010; Hunter and Piper, 2012; Nixon, 2012). What is almost completely lacking, however, is an examination of the role of the police in responding to reported incidents. Holt and

Retford (2012)'s research concerning practitioner responses to parent abuse included three interviews with police officers; yet to the best of our knowledge, no research has specifically analysed police policy and practice in this area in the UK and there has been no research in the UK analysing police files for reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence. This is a surprising omission, as police are often the first or emergency port of call for parents who are victimised by their children and paramount in determining how seriously parents believe their victimisation is taken by the authorities. Indeed, a common theme in the existing literature is parents feeling that they are not taken seriously and that they are blamed by police and other authority figures (Cottrell, 2004; Cottrell and Monk, 2004; Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt, 2009; Hunter et al., 2010; McKenna et al., 2010; Nixon, 2012). Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) highlight the importance of the police response to domestic violence, which they describe as a 'key moment': '[T]heir arrival at a domestic violence incident represents the point where abuse hidden from public scrutiny moves from private into the social arena' (p.221).

### **Police policy on adolescent to parent violence**

The lack of official recognition of adolescent to parent violence in the UK means that there is no specific police policy or guidance on how to respond to reported incidents. Hunter et al. (2010) highlight the difficult position that parent abuse occupies, neither fitting neatly into child protection nor a domestic violence policy framework. Police-led child protection services will only get involved if there is a risk to a child in the family home; and domestic violence policy is only invoked if the officers responding to an incident identify a case as falling under the remit of domestic violence. Historically, the definition of domestic violence required perpetrators to be aged over 18, however, in March 2013 the age parameter was lowered to age 16. The current definition of domestic violence and abuse covers:

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass but is not limited to the following types of abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional. (Home Office, 2013).

At the time our data were collected (during 2011), any reported incidents of violence towards parents from adolescents aged 18 or 19 should therefore have been flagged<sup>1</sup> as 'domestic violence' and could be referred to the relevant police Domestic Violence Unit. Cases involving 13-17 year old adolescents however, would not necessarily be flagged as domestic violence and could be responded to in the same way as incidents of violence or criminal damage between strangers. Under the new definition, any cases involving adolescent perpetrators aged 16 and over ought to be flagged as 'domestic violence'. This is a significant development (primarily aimed at addressing domestic violence in teenage relationships) which will increase the number of adolescent to parent violence cases officially recognised as domestic violence and potentially raise the profile of the problem.

A further sign that adolescent to parent violence is emerging onto the domestic violence agenda comes from the recent *Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary* report on improving responses to

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<sup>1</sup> Incidents identified as domestic violence invoke relevant police policy and are highlighted on the police database as domestic violence

domestic violence (HMIC, March 2014), which explicitly states that the definition of domestic violence includes incidents of child to parent abuse (p.29). It seems that adolescent to parent violence is gaining recognition as a form of domestic violence and as a police matter. What is less clear, however, is how the growing awareness of adolescent to parent violence might translate into police practice, and how appropriate or useful current police responses to domestic violence are for this complex form of family violence.

Police policy on domestic violence has made significant advances over the past 30 years. Since the late 1980s a host of measures have set out to improve the criminal justice response to domestic violence, which had previously been criticised for not taking the issue seriously or providing appropriate support to victims of domestic violence (Hoyle and Sanders, 2000). The 1990s saw the introduction of Domestic Violence Units and specialist Domestic Violence Officers within each police force (prompted by the Home Office Circular 66/90), accompanied by a 'pro-arrest' policy which encouraged police to arrest perpetrators of domestic violence regardless of the victim's wishes (Hoyle and Sanders, 2000). More recently, Specialist Domestic Violence Courts have been set up to provide tailored responses to domestic violence, and police and courts have been equipped with a number of tools to assist them in responding to incidents. For example, the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act (2004) made common assault an arrestable offence and strengthened the laws surrounding restraining and non-molestation orders (Hoyle, 2008). There have also been advances in methods used to identify and manage risk surrounding domestic violence, including the widespread adoption of the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment (DASH) risk assessment tool; and the establishment of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferencing (MARAC) and Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) (Groves and Thomas, 2014; HMIC, 2014).

Despite these efforts to develop effective proactive and reactive responses to domestic violence, concerns continue to be raised about policy and practice in this area. Over a decade ago, Hoyle and Sanders (2000) questioned whether the pro-arrest policy might lead to the denial of victims' agency and increased levels of fear and violence. Empirical evidence suggested that victims' non-criminal justice preferences and refusals to prosecute may in fact be entirely rational, and that a 'victim empowerment' model might involve the option of arrest alongside supportive and potentially restorative measures (for example, perpetrator programmes), rather than the criminal prosecution route (Hoyle and Sanders, 2000). In 2008, Hoyle raised concerns over the use of domestic violence risk assessment tools, which are essentially victim-focused, based upon assumptions that victims always wish to terminate abusive relationships, and place the onus on victims to manage their own risk through security measures and compliance with the police:

In the UK, the risk management techniques are directed firmly at helping victims to reduce their risk of victimisation. The responsibility is clearly to be shared between victims and criminal justice. The perpetrators are not encouraged to be accountable for their behaviour; they are assumed to be determined by their characters and environments towards offending. They do not take into account the potential for change, a potential many victims embrace. (Hoyle, 2008: 335).

These concerns surrounding the police response to domestic violence may be especially pertinent to reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence, where parents are likely to be highly resistant to police intervention which may lead to estrangement and criminalisation of their child.

Further anxieties have been raised in the recent HMIC (2014) report into police responses to domestic violence, which highlighted various problems in police practice and made a number of recommendations for improvement. The weaknesses identified in the report include organisational failures (i.e. to take domestic violence seriously); a lack of resources and staff training in domestic violence; inconsistency and variation in the police response to reported incidents; and poor identification and management of risk. Interestingly, the report also criticises some forces for not pursuing sufficient 'evidence-led' prosecutions (i.e. without the support of victims) and for adopting restorative measures to resolve domestic violence incidents: 'the use of restorative justice in intimate partner relationships is not appropriate' (HMIC, 2014: 15).

It was noted above that adolescent to parent violence is beginning to emerge onto the domestic violence agenda and that cases involving older adolescent perpetrators (aged 16 and over) now fall within the domestic violence definition. It therefore seems timely to examine how police currently respond to reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence and to identify the particular nuances and challenges associated with this form of domestic violence. Within the general context of concerns surrounding domestic violence policy and practice highlighted above, the article also considers how criminal justice strategies might be developed in this area to best meet the specific needs of families experiencing adolescent to parent violence.

### **A snapshot of reported incidents in two police forces**

The discussion below draws upon data from 100 police case files and 20 interviews with police officers<sup>2</sup>, and explores police experiences of responding to incidents involving adolescent to parent violence. The case files related to reported incidents of violence (or threats of violence) and/or criminal damage from 13-19 year olds towards their parent(s)/carer(s). The contents included attending officer notes, police memos, witness statements, forensic evidence, background checks from the Police National Computer (PNC) and documents prepared for court. In-depth interviews were conducted with uniformed (frontline) officers (n=4) and specially trained domestic violence officers (n=16) with experience of responding to reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence. The interviews generated narrative accounts of officers' experiences of dealing with adolescent to parent violence and their perceptions of the nature of the problem. Combined, the data from police case files and interviews provide a valuable insight into police policy and practice surrounding adolescent to parent violence and the role of the police in responding to reported incidents. The following section provides a statistical overview of the types of incidents the police encountered in this sample, before qualitative analysis of interview data explores the practicalities of policing adolescent to parent violence.

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<sup>2</sup> 50 case files and 10 interviews derived from a London Metropolitan Borough force; 50 case files and 10 interviews derived from a Home Counties force.

**Table 1: Nature of recorded offence**

	Frequency	Per Cent
Common Assault	43.4	43.4
ABH	16	16.2
GBH	5	5.1
Criminal Damage	29	29.3
Affray	2	2
Threats to Kill	1	1
Other Violent Offence	3	3
Total	99	100

*N varies due to missing data*

**Table 1** presents a breakdown of the nature of recorded offence, showing that common assault accounted for 43.4 per cent of incidents, and criminal damage accounted for 29.3 per cent. The analysis also revealed that 90 per cent of all incidents reported to the police took place within the home; 18 per cent involved a weapon of some kind; and 31 per cent resulted in an injury to the victim. In 63 per cent of the case files analysed, there was evidence (from statements or previous convictions) that the adolescent perpetrator had a history of violent conduct, and in 55 per cent of all cases, there was a history of violence from the adolescent towards the parent victim<sup>3</sup>. This illustrates that in a majority of cases there is a pattern of behaviour and that the incident reported to the police is not the first of its kind. In many cases there was insufficient information in the file and many parents may not have disclosed a history of violence to the police, so the actual figure is likely to be higher.

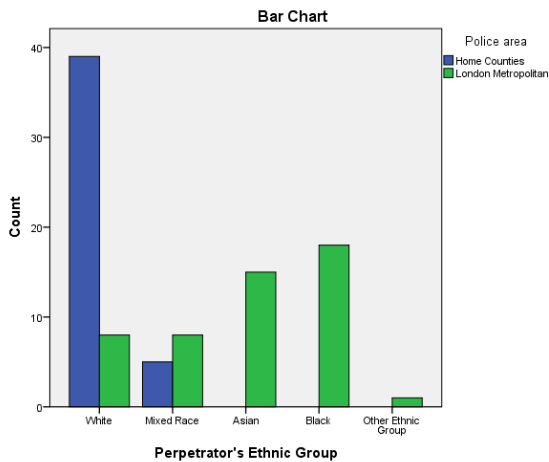
The analysis of age revealed that for adolescent perpetrators reported to the police for violent behaviour towards their parents, the mean age was 17 and the modal age was 19. The age of the parent victims ranged from 31 to 83, with a mean age of 46 and a modal age of 43. The analysis of gender revealed that 72 per cent of incidents reported to the police in these two forces were perpetrated by a male child and 28 per cent by a female child. The gender of victims mirrored the perpetrators: 72 per cent of victims in this analysis were female and 28 per cent were male. These findings suggest that the majority of reported incidents of adolescent-to-parent violence are perpetrated by sons and that the majority of victims are mothers. However, the analysis of perpetrator-victim relationship illustrates that this does not necessarily reflect a son-to-mother phenomenon - only 45 per cent of reported incidents in this sample involved a son-mother relationship. A further 20 per cent were perpetrated by daughters towards their mothers and 18 per cent by sons towards their fathers. Just 5 per cent of reported incidents involved a daughter-father relationship.

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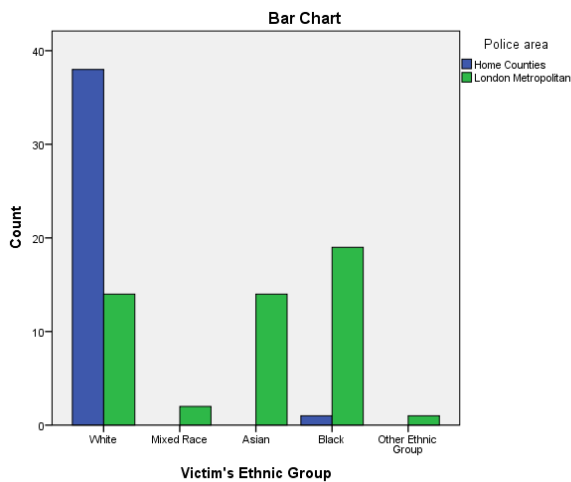
<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, parents reporting violence are termed 'victims' and adolescents using violence against their parents are termed 'perpetrators'. It is acknowledged, however, that 'perpetrators' may also be secondary victims of domestic violence and that the boundary between victim and perpetrator may be blurred in this complex form of family violence (see Condry and Miles, 2012, 2013).

The analysis of ethnicity revealed that 50 per cent of perpetrators and 58.4 per cent of victims in reported cases were from a White ethnic background, suggesting an over-representation of individuals from non-White ethnic backgrounds. However, when this analysis is further broken down by police area, it can be seen (in **Figures 1 and 2**) that the apparent over-representation derives from just one of the two police areas, the London Metropolitan Borough which has a high proportion of non-White residents in the population.

**Figure 1: Perpetrator's ethnic group by police area**



**Figure 2: Victim's ethnic group by police area**



**Police responses to reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence**

Of the one hundred cases analysed here, the perpetrator was arrested in 94.6 per cent of cases. It was difficult to determine the case outcome from often limited information in the files, but there was evidence in 41.8 per cent of cases that the perpetrator was either not charged or that the charges were subsequently dropped, usually due to parent victims withdrawing their statements or asking police not to prosecute their child. Many of the cases involving younger adolescents were referred to youth justice services. In order to learn more about how the police process and manage

cases of adolescent to parent violence, the discussion in this part of the paper incorporates quantitative case file data with qualitative data from police interviews pertaining to what happens in response to a report of a parent being victimised by their adolescent child.

*Who deals with reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence?*

The lack of official recognition of adolescent to parent violence means that the way in which incidents are recorded and responded to is often left to police discretion. Reports are initially responded to by the uniformed officers on shift, and their interpretation of the incident plays a key role in determining who oversees the processing of a case. At the time of data collection, if an incident involved an adolescent aged 18 or over, the uniformed officers would complete a DASH risk assessment and potentially refer the case to the domestic violence unit; however, if the perpetrator was aged 17 or under, it would fall outside of the domestic violence definition and would not require any special action. In the Metropolitan force, there was an unwritten policy advocated by the Borough Commander Chief Superintendent that domestic violence officers should not only deal with all cases of adolescent to parent violence falling within the official definition of domestic violence, but that it should also deal with any cases deemed to be 'in the spirit' of domestic violence, on the premise that they were best placed to adequately respond to these cases. In practice, this meant that any cases of adolescent to parent violence (regardless of the age of the perpetrator) with a history of violence from the child towards the parent or any particularly serious cases could be referred to the Domestic Violence Unit. Any cases not fitting these criteria would be dealt with by the uniformed officers.

It's a bit of a judgement call really on each. It's down to the DS, like myself, and the DSs up in the violent crime unit. We will decide between us. Sometimes there's arguments, but, you know, we'll decide between us who, who it sits best with. But generally, if, if there's previous, and there's an escalation and there's a pattern, I will tend to take it, because it's gonna continue. (Domestic Violence Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.5).

In the Home Counties force, the policy was more rigid. Following a DASH risk assessment, the domestic violence team would deal with 'medium' or 'high' risk cases involving adolescents aged 18 and over; any others would be managed by the uniformed officers. This meant that the domestic abuse team in this force dealt with relatively few cases of adolescent to parent violence, as they were usually deemed to be 'standard' risk:

[G]enerally speaking those where high risk are identified are between couples.... certainly there are cases where adolescents will, for want of a better word, terrorise or abuse parents but it isn't typical that they would be graded as high risk unless there is indication that serious, serious harm, usually identified as physical but obviously potentially psychological harm, is gonna be caused and what you tend to find is that that generally speaking doesn't come through to us at a high level. (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.15).

**Table 2** presents a breakdown of the age of perpetrator by the responding police unit for the police case files analysed in this research (n=99 due to missing data for one case). It shows that of the 49 cases involving 13-17 year olds, 45 were dealt with by uniformed officers and 4 were dealt with by the relevant Domestic Violence Unit (all four of these were in the Metropolitan Borough). Of the 50 cases involving perpetrators aged 18 and 19, 26 were dealt with by the Domestic Violence Unit; 2 by



the Child Protection Unit (due to other children in the house being at risk); and 22 were dealt with by uniformed officers. All of these latter 22 cases were in the Home Counties police force, presumably because the DASH risk assessment estimated they involved a 'standard' level of risk. Overall, two-thirds of adolescent to parent violence incidents in this sample were dealt with by uniformed officers.

**Table 2: Age of perpetrator by responding police unit (n=99)**

	13 yrs	14 yrs	15 yrs	16 yrs	17 yrs	18 yrs	19 yrs	Total
Domestic Violence Unit	1	1	0	2	0	13	13	<b>30</b>
Child Protection Unit	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	<b>2</b>
Uniformed Officers	2	9	12	12	10	9	13	<b>67</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>99</b>

*N varies due to missing data*

*How are cases managed and responded to?*

Due to their emergency response role, uniformed officers tend to initially respond to all reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence, regardless of whether or not they are later referred to a specialist unit. These officers are therefore crucial in determining how the case progresses. A common theme emerging from the interviews was the importance of uniformed officers collecting evidence and taking witness statements, so that if the victim refused to prosecute or later withdrew the allegations, there would be the potential to pursue an 'unsupported prosecution'.

Basically we load onto uniform colleagues that, when they go, they seize, you know, they make note of, you know, the disarray in the room, you know, anything broken. Layout of the room is, should be covered in statements. Any injuries that are seen, they deal with positively. So basically, it's a robust response ... (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.16).

The quote below from a domestic violence officer illustrates the level of responsibility and discretion afforded to the officers who initially attend a report of adolescent to parent violence:

[T]he majority of things that are done are done by our uniform colleagues at the scene if they feel that it warrants perhaps a caution or a reprimand which can be given there and then if the circumstances, you know, fall within, again the guidelines for those disposals. They're trained not to arrest juvenile offenders, i.e., people under the age of sixteen because obviously it's an unpleasant place to be in custody but at the same time, you know, some circumstances warrant the arrest of the person committing the offence no matter what it is. A lot of the time where children are involved and I say children, sort of like fourteen upwards, sometimes the best course of action is just to remove them for the night, take them to a friend or a neighbour or another family member so each party has time to cool down, calm down, think logically about what's happened and then the next morning everything's okay and the person that called the Police is feeling very silly for calling the Police but of course, because it's been reported, it has to be looked into. (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.12).

The interviews with uniformed officers emphasised that when attending reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence, they have to make quick decisions and judgements about the best course of action, depending on what they find at the scene:

Maybe just come round and but maybe sort of scare the child into thinking, 'Oh my God the Police are involved.' In future we might go further but it is generally with families that we know, know really well so we'd just get called round there and that...but a lot of the time they would

be arrested as well, it depends how serious it was and it depends what the parents want then and there, so it's, again you've got to judge it. (Uniformed Officer, Home Counties, Int.14).

What I've done before is ... where I was quite concerned about the offender's behaviour. So the child, he was a teenager, he wasn't yet 18, and he, and because I was concerned about his behaviour and the, the safety of his younger sister and his Mum, I, I did do, I, I wrote out a DASH form, I did all the, the questions from a DASH form and, and I did make a referral. (Uniformed Officer, Home Counties, Int.18).

The level of discretion expressed by uniformed officers was also evident in the accounts given by domestic violence officers, who highlighted the importance of assessing each case on its merits when deciding who deals with a case and what might be the most appropriate response:

[I]t does also come down to how much history there is as well once you've done the research and stuff with it. If you've got tons of it then clearly this is something that has been going on for a long time and it's not getting addressed and it's not changing. If it's something, you know, that is a first time, you know, you've obviously got to take that into consideration and be proportionate with, with, you know, how it's dealt with both sort of how you're dealing with it and also how the final outcome and disposal is, is gonna be. (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.7).

A key theme which emerged from the police interviews was the tension between serving the interests of a 'positive intervention policy' required for all domestic violence cases, and respecting the wishes and needs of potentially vulnerable victims, who may want help but do not necessarily want their child to be prosecuted. Although the policy requires some positive 'action', it seems that in practice, most adolescents who are reported for violence against their parents will be initially arrested as a matter of routine.

[P]eople don't like to say it, but it basically means positive arrest, we arrest everybody no matter what. If you phone the Police and say, "I've been slapped by my child or my dad or my boyfriend but I don't want anything done," we will always arrest. (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.4).

If we turned up and someone's got, say the parent's got a very serious injury, you know, a bad cut, and, and it's quite, you can see it's quite obvious that it's because they've been in a fight with, or they've been assaulted by the, the child, then we wouldn't even, even if they said, "Don't arrest them," we, we'd go ahead and arrest even if with, even if there didn't happen to be another witness. It wouldn't matter at that point. The, the priority at that point would just be, be positive, make positive action, make the arrest, and try and get, deal with all the, all the evidence after the arrest. (Uniformed Officer, Home Counties, Int.18).

However, it was also acknowledged that arrest is not always desirable, especially if it goes against the parents' wishes. In some cases, the 'positive intervention' was described as resolving the situation informally at the scene, or making a referral to a domestic violence service:

[T]he emphasis that we place on Officers is to have a positive, it's not a, it's not an arrest policy, it's a positive approach policy, so if you don't think arrest is proportionate, in many very many minor cases and as long as you can justify that decision, then that's absolutely fine but you manage the situation, you manage the risk, i.e. remove parties or you, you know or you take the risk away. (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.19).

In the Metropolitan police force, a support worker from a local specialist domestic violence service worked in-house alongside the domestic violence team, so regardless of any other interventions, the police would refer families reporting adolescent to parent violence to this service:

They can actually be used for anything really. And they're pretty good. Even if it doesn't fall within their remit as well, you know, the DV remit, they will still, they will still give advice or take on people that, it doesn't necessarily fall within their remit ... And they will sometimes help the victim, because the victim doesn't want to prosecute against son or daughter, but wants them out of the house, doesn't want them back, for whatever reason. (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.5).

In addition, some interviewees described working in partnership with social services; although this tended to be in cases involving other children potentially at risk:

I would always email Social Services and let them know what's been, what's happened so they, we would email them a report which contains the basic events and also our risk assessment of the situation and any risk factors that have been ticked on the risk assessment form that is done at the scene, we would add those in so that they have the full, full picture of the whole incident and risk level to the victim. (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.13).

Well sometimes there's families where, for example, a nineteen year old smashing the place up, mum also might have some younger children so that's an environment not good for them and so Social Services will get involved and try and speak to them and see if there are any issues they can help with and they might have Council, well they do have Council meetings where they get other agencies in so they will discuss it as a problem because obviously the Partnership Agency Act which we all abide to, so you'd have us, you'd have Social Services, you'd have Housing and everyone would meet and say, "Well what's the problem, how can we help?" (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.2).

### *Challenges encountered in policing adolescent to parent violence*

What was clear from almost all of the interviews was that in dealing with reported incidents of adolescent to parent violence, the police face a number of challenges which are unique to this type of family violence. Unlike domestic violence between intimate partners, cases involving adolescent perpetrators against their parents pose practical issues specific to the age of perpetrators and the parent-child relationship. One problem highlighted was the difficulty sometimes faced in finding an appropriate adult for police interviews, given that this is usually a role taken on by parents. Domestic violence policy requires police to assess the risk to the victim and, in high risk cases, manage the risk through removing perpetrators from the home. However, parents are responsible for providing a home for their children and there will sometimes be no viable alternative to returning an adolescent to their home address. Police are under pressure not to keep juveniles (under 18) in police cells, local authority care is scarce and only available for under 16 year olds, and it can be difficult to secure local authority housing and support for under 18 year olds. This means that many adolescents who have been violent towards their parents face homelessness if they are not returned home, creating difficulties for police:

If they're under sixteen ... Social Services have a duty of care towards them and it's easier because ultimately if I phone them up and say, "Right, I've got little Jimmy here who's fourteen, he's bashed up his mum and she won't have him home," they have to house him, they've got a legal obligation to but once they're over sixteen, there's no obligation. Send them up to the Homeless Person's Unit and they say, "We haven't got anywhere for you, here's some, here's some hostels that may or may not be able to have you, if not you're on your own." (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.4).

Ultimately, it seems that many parents will willingly or reluctantly allow their child to return home, in spite of potentially facing further victimisation and police recognising that they may be at risk:

[W]hen it becomes parents and their children [compared to intimate partner relationships], I think it is a lot more complicated because the parents are ultimately responsible for, feel that they're ultimately responsible for looking after and nurturing that child ... in all three cases the biggest problems were, if we intervened and we could obviously possibly charge, keep, keep the, the children or the teenagers out of the house, they would have, quite often, nowhere to go and the parents would say, "Well I can't have them on the streets, I don't want them to go into care, you know, I'd rather them be under my roof." (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.4).

[Y]ou yourself know that the child will probably be going back home and the risk assessment is the same, the way we do it is the same but obviously you acknowledge in that risk assessment that, you know, mum wants the son home and realistically the chances of further offences is, is probable but we can't intervene, we've done all we can. (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.4).

Another challenge consistently raised by the police is dealing with parents who call the police for help without having a chance to think through the potential consequences. Interviewees provided numerous examples of parents calling the police because they are at the end of their tether and in a state of crisis but subsequently resisting measures which will lead to their child being criminalised. Often, it seems that parents call the police because they require immediate help - they want a violent situation to be diffused and their child to be temporarily (or sometimes permanently) removed from their care:

Quite often, as I say, the, the thing that I've been asked for more, for most, is, to get them somewhere else to stay. "Can you find him or her somewhere else to stay? Can you get them housing and then I haven't got to have them back, I'll be...if they're safe in a little, you know, even if it's a bedsit or a room in a hostel that's definitely theirs then I'll keep them out, you know, I'll still love them, I'll still see them but I won't have them home". (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.4).

I can think of countless occasions, mothers, it could be mothers whose son, you know, single mothers maybe, whose sons are running riot, taking their credit card every day, stealing cigarettes, stealing alcohol, stealing the car, victimising them, basically dictating the rules, taking, the parental responsibility of themselves and not allowing the, say maybe weaker parents to, to exercise any control themselves ... are desperate not to stigmatise them but want help and can't, you know, accept the fact that they're being held at knifepoint sometimes cos they do call for that assistance in the, in the short-term and for the emergency but, but will not support any Police action and don't want to criminalise their children for what they see as potentially something that is a, a blip, a stage that they're going through. (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.15).

Once the immediate crisis situation has been diffused, and as a result of not wanting their child to be criminalised, police say that many parents later refuse to provide a statement and appear to be surprised that the police want to arrest and/or prosecute their child:

They are not aware, they, basically they come to us, they solely come to us for help, not, a lot of them say, "Well I weren't aware of this, I didn't want you to arrest him, I just wanted, I just wanted to see if you can, you could help me," but they've told us already so we're, our hands are tied. They, they, yeah, they just say, "Well, whoa, whoa, hold on, I don't, I don't want him

arrested, you know, I just need some help, some advice, somewhere to, you know, somewhere to go." (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.9).

The majority, again, once the situation's been diffused, and they've spent time in custody, their, their, their son or daughter... By the time you contact them, sometimes they have got to a stage where there's been a break, they then think they've spent seven or eight hours in custody in the cell, so they tend to turn around and say, 'I don't want any further action being taken now' ... we tend to get a lot of people that, you know, don't want to press charges against their own son or daughter. Which is understandable, because they're their parents. (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.5).

The issue of parents refusing to make a statement against their child, or making a statement and later withdrawing it, clearly presents a conundrum to police, who are trained to implement a positive intervention, work towards a prosecution, and manage any risk to the victim:

You get frustrated ... in theory you, you would perhaps follow policy and, and, and make a statement yourself to write about what you've seen, what you've heard, the emotional appearance of the, the victims, what dialogue you've had with them, what they've told you and what they've disclosed about it and the theory then follows that you would make the arrest and conduct the interview and move on with the prosecution case. The practise is that without that evidence you've, you've nothing, the CPS will almost invariably refuse to run cases without, without, you know, a person to give evidence in Court. (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.15).

In such cases it is possible to pursue an unsupported prosecution and in serious cases or cases where the parent has made an initial statement, this course of action is sometimes deemed appropriate. However this is considered very difficult as it requires going against the wishes of the parents or issuing them with a court summons, and is unlikely to result in a prosecution.

You try and avoid a victimless [prosecution]. But at the end of the day, if the victim can't or won't face dealing with it, then we have to take, take the burden off them. And sometimes, you know, I'll take statements from women that want to withdraw their support. And I explain to them, you know, this doesn't mean the case will stop. The case is more than likely going to carry on, but it'll record the fact that, you know, you're not supporting it. You're not leading it. We are. Or the CPS are. And sometimes they'll ask for a summons. (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.16).

As a result of the difficulty in securing an unsupported prosecution, and in the interests of serving parents' wishes as well as police policy on youth offenders, in many cases of adolescent to parent violence the police will use their powers of discretion to deal with cases informally and divert the adolescent from the criminal justice system. Many interviewees supported the idea of a 'buffer' system or 'halfway house' through which parents could report incidents of adolescent to parent violence to the police in order to obtain help and support without potentially criminalising their child:

I think sometimes we don't want to criminalise somebody so young because of the ongoing implications it may have with future work, job, you know, their, their whole life ... maybe we're not the right agency to be helping at that early age. Maybe, you know, somebody like Social Services, the Probation, while not criminalising them they can step in and sort of guide them away from the path they're on. (DV Officer, Home Counties, Int.12).

If we could speak to them on scene, probably take them away, talk to him and find out what the matter is, refer them to any agency we feel he needs to be referred to. I think we should, we would get more results that way. (DV Officer, Metropolitan Borough, Int.10).

A few of the interviewees in the Home Counties force also talked favourably about 'Youth Restorative Disposals' (YRDs) which enable police to divert juveniles who have committed minor offences away from the criminal justice system through a restorative measure, which will usually receive the full support of the parent victim:

I think [the Youth Restorative Disposal is] brilliant. It's only been in existence for about three years, but it means that the victims have some say over how they want a suspect dealt with, and it means that we save an enormous amount of time and, and effort. (Uniformed Officer, Home Counties, Int.18).

For less serious cases of adolescent to parent violence, the YRD appeals to police as it offers a workable compromise that enables parents to feel that their complaint is being taken seriously by the police without criminalising their child and satisfies the police need to respond positively to a complaint without prosecuting an adolescent against their parent(s)' wishes. YRDs are only recorded locally, which means that they are not recorded on the Police National Computer. However, this measure is only available for juveniles (aged 10-17) who have not previously received a Reprimand, Caution or Final Warning, and would not be appropriate for more serious or repeat incidents, which would require more formal criminal justice procedures (for more information on YRDs, see Rix et al., 2011).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This article has presented statistical data from police case files and narrative accounts obtained in in-depth interviews with police officers about their experiences of responding to reports of adolescent to parent violence. This is the first time that the police response to this phenomenon has been examined in the UK and the analysis provides a crucial insight into how cases are processed and managed, as well as identifying important difficulties in policing adolescent to parent violence. The statistical analysis of one hundred case files for reported incidents provides an overview of the type and nature of incidents reported to the police and the characteristics of the families involved in reported cases. Despite incidents involving older adolescents falling under the definition of domestic violence and one force employing a policy whereby cases are treated as domestic violence if they appear 'in the spirit' of domestic violence regardless of age; the analysis showed that two-thirds of reported incidents were processed and managed by uniformed officers rather than specially trained domestic violence officers, even when involving perpetrators aged 18 and 19. The lack of official recognition of adolescent to parent violence means there is little consistency in who deals with incidents and whether they are identified as a form of domestic violence.

As things stand, there is no policy or specific training for police on adolescent to parent violence, and how individual officers respond to incidents is largely down to discretion. Some officers may identify an incident as falling under the umbrella of domestic violence, arrest the adolescent and conduct a DASH risk assessment; others may view the incident as a trivial and/or family matter and resolve any issues at the scene. For the victim, the implications of such discretion could determine how they perceive their complaints are received by the authorities, whether or not they report any further incidents, what kind of support services (if any) they are referred to and, crucially, whether the violence from their child continues and/or escalates. The police undoubtedly need to be able to exercise some discretion and judgement; however, the level of variation in current police responses

to adolescent to parent violence is potentially detrimental to many families and may place parents at risk of further victimisation. The recent change in the definition of domestic violence has lowered the age parameter to 16 and so more cases will technically fall under the remit of domestic violence policy. It remains to be seen how this will affect the proportion of cases referred to Domestic Violence Units and how they will be responded to.

The interviews also revealed significant challenges encountered by all police ranks in responding to reports of adolescent to parent violence, which are exacerbated by the lack of policy guidance in this area. These include the understandable reluctance of parent victims to engage with police; resistance to make statements and support police action; withdrawal of statements and refusal to prosecute their child; practical difficulties arising from the age of young perpetrators; and reaching an acceptable outcome for the parent and child. Inextricably bound with these challenges are the inherent tensions between meeting the demands of a positive intervention policy, satisfying risk assessment procedures, diverting juvenile offenders away from the criminal justice system, and meeting the needs and wishes of parents.

The recent HMIC (2014) report criticises the use of restorative measures in cases of domestic violence, however, many officers interviewed in our study favoured the use of youth restorative disposals in less serious cases. There are notable concerns with this disposal: in addition to the age restriction, it is only appropriate in minor or 'one-off' incidents; it does not necessarily involve referring families to specialist services and programmes equipped to address the problem; and this restorative measure may fail to reflect the potential impact of abusive behaviour from adolescents towards parents. This is especially concerning given that parents are extremely reluctant to criminalise their child, may be disempowered by their child, and may have experienced multiple episodes of violence prior to contacting the police. It therefore needs very careful handling by trained facilitators given that it could result in increased risk to the parent. Notwithstanding this, a restorative approach may be favourable in situations where termination of the parent-child relationship is unlikely. It also enables police to divert young offenders away from the criminal justice system whilst acknowledging the wrong that has been done (thus serving as a positive intervention) and involving parents in the solution or outcome.

Adolescent to parent violence is a unique and complex form of domestic violence that demands a sensitive and nuanced response. As discussed earlier, concerns have long-since been raised over how appropriate a criminal justice response and, in particular, a pro-arrest policy might be for domestic violence between intimate partners (Hoyle and Sanders, 2000). This seems especially pertinent in the case of adolescent to parent violence, where there are very real and potentially rational justifications for parents not wanting their child to be arrested or prosecuted. It is clear from analysing police case files and interviews that while parents are in need of emergency assistance from the police, in most cases their long-term wishes are to develop and maintain a non-violent relationship with their child. Rather than criminal prosecution, separation and potential estrangement, it may be that restorative, diversionary measures involving tailored support outside of the criminal justice system are more appropriate. In support of Hoyle's comments about domestic violence risk assessment (2008: 335), there is justification here for a shift away from deterministic and solely victim-focused management of risk, towards a more restorative, victim and perpetrator focused approach which considers the capacity for change.

Police officers interviewed in this research favoured the prospect of a police response which would enable parents to report violence from their child to the police and access help and support without the consequence of criminalising their child. Parents need to have confidence in their ability to report incidents to the police and receive a sensitive response to ensure safety and to prevent a parent feeling that their victimisation has been compounded by an inappropriate response. An ideal response would enable parents' reports to be taken seriously; appropriate safety measures to be put in place; referrals to be made to relevant support agencies; and, where appropriate, prosecution processes to be undertaken. Diversionary measures will not be appropriate for some families but for those who do not wish to prosecute or criminalise their child; a 'positive intervention' might support a restorative measure or referral to a specialist intervention programme. Such an approach has successfully been implemented in parts of the US, whereby juveniles convicted of violence against their parents are diverted onto a 20 week 'Step-up' programme; a restorative intervention involving parents and adolescents working together to address the violence (see Routt and Anderson, 2011 for a full discussion). In the UK, a small number of Youth Offending Teams are adopting this and other localised specialist programmes for use with families they encounter who are experiencing adolescent to parent violence. Growing awareness surrounding this form of family violence appears to be accompanied by the gradual development of support services for families in a handful of areas. However, at present this is on a localised basis and tends to be down to the hard work of individual practitioners with little resources or funding. There is clearly scope for a more standardised and consistent police response to adolescent to parent violence, underpinned by an official recognition of the problem and the development of coherent policy and specialised training in the complexities of adolescent to parent violence.



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