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Abstract | Differences between male and female perpetrated domestic violence are widely acknowledged. However, there is a lack of Australian data on the circumstances of female perpetrated violence.

This study analysed 153 police narratives of domestic violence incidents involving a female person of interest (POI). Results were consistent with international studies. Half of the episodes involved either self-defensive or retaliatory violence—otherwise known as violent resistance—meaning the POI had been a victim of prior violence by their partner or the episode involved a male victim who was abusive in the lead-up to the incident. Violent resistance was more common in incidents involving Indigenous women.

The findings highlight the different motivations for female perpetrated domestic violence, and the importance of understanding the complex dynamics of violent episodes.

Female perpetrated domestic violence: Prevalence of self-defensive and retaliatory violence

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Domestic violence is a gendered crime, with women being much more likely than men to be the victims of violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017; Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019) and to experience a range of associated harms such as homelessness, assault-related injury and death (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017). However, women also account for up to one in five domestic violence offenders proceeded against by police (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Results of the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) Personal Safety Survey show that around 650,000 men in Australia have experienced threatened or actual violence (including sexual violence) from a female partner since the age of 15.

Much of the research on female perpetrated domestic violence has focused on the characteristics of offenders, and the nature of their abusive behaviours. The risk profiles of male and female domestic violence offenders are similar in many respects, although studies have shown that women are more likely to experience certain mental health issues and personality disorders, and to have histories of trauma and abuse (including child abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence), and are less likely to misuse alcohol or be involved in non-violent offending (Lasky 2016; Mackay et al. 2018; Spencer, Cafferky & Stith 2016). Female perpetrators are more likely to use weapons, but less likely to strangle, punch or kick their victims (Archer 2002; Melton & Belknap 2003), meaning injury is more likely to occur in the context of weapon use (Archer 2000; Caldwell, Swan & Woodbrown 2012; Felson 1996; Felson & Cares 2005). Female perpetrated domestic violence is less likely to be planned or premeditated (Felson & Massoglia 2012) and more likely to result in physical retaliation by male victims (Feld & Straus 1989; Felson 1996; Kruttschnitt et al. 2018).

An important difference between male and female perpetrated domestic violence is that women are more likely to use self-defensive and retaliatory violence—violence used to protect themselves and others from an abusive partner (Dasgupta 2002; Elmquist et al. 2014; Hamberger 1997; Kernsmith 2005; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012; Mackay et al. 2018). For example, Kernsmith (2005) interviewed 125 offenders participating in a batterer treatment program, most of whom were court-mandated to attend, and found that women were more likely than men to nominate self-defence (29% vs 17%) and retaliation (42% vs 22%) as a motivation for their violence. Miller and Meloy (2006) reported higher estimates, with two-thirds of the women they interviewed indicating that they used violence as a means of protecting themselves from their abusive partners, while 39 percent of women who spoke to Stuart and colleagues (2006) reported the same motivations.

The prevalence of self-defensive and retaliatory violence among female domestic violence offenders has led some researchers to suggest that all female perpetrated domestic violence should be viewed as 'violent resistance' (eg Kernsmith 2005). Miller and Meloy have similarly argued 'the truly violent woman is an anomaly' (2006: 104). However, others have cautioned against this over-simplification. Numerous studies have identified a range of motivations for female perpetrated domestic violence, many of which mirror those underpinning male violence (eg jealousy and control; Carrado et al. 1996; Elmquist et al. 2014; Graham-Kevan & Archer 2005; Harned 2001; Kernsmith 2005; Li et al. 2015; Mackay et al. 2018; Miller & Meloy 2006; Melton & Belknap 2003; Swan, Gambone & Fields 2005; Ward & Muldoon 2007). As Dasgupta (2002: 1373) argues: 'To compartmentalize women's motivations for engaging in violent behavior towards intimate partners as either self-defense...or retaliation...is to disregard the complexities of women's lives'.

Further, the limitations of previous research looking at female perpetrated domestic violence should at least make us wary of making grand statements about what motivates women to abuse their partners. In particular, the majority of these studies involved speaking to women court-mandated to participate in domestic violence treatment. Two points need to be made here. First, although there are limitations associated with using any data source that relies on domestic violence being reported to the police, treatment populations certainly represent the ‘pointy end’ of the criminal justice process. Second, speaking to offenders about their involvement in crime is valuable, but researchers have cautioned against taking everything they say at face value. As noted by Bottoms and colleagues, the ability of offenders to explain their own behaviour is ‘constrained, in explanatory terms, by lack of self-awareness and lack of full contextual awareness’ (2004: 375). These issues are particularly important to keep in mind when dealing with domestic violence perpetrators, who use a range of tactics to minimise their role in the abuse and shift blame to others, particularly the victim (Henning, Jones & Holdford 2005). We should not discount the motivations and causes that offenders themselves attribute to their use of violence, but we need to use a range of data to look at these issues.

Understanding the contextual and situational characteristics of female perpetrated domestic violence and, in particular, the extent to which it involves self-defensive and retaliatory violence, has important implications for efforts to prevent it. To date, little Australian research has examined women’s use of violence against their partners. Of particular relevance to this topic, and indeed to domestic violence in Australia generally, is the significant over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples among both perpetrators and victims (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018; Hulme, Morgan & Boxall 2019). While research has drawn attention to the heightened risk of domestic violence victimisation among Indigenous women, an often overlooked finding is the elevated risk of perpetrating violence against partners and family members (Bartels 2012; Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018; NSW Department of Health 2011; Wundersitz 2010). Very few studies to date have directly and specifically examined the circumstances of Indigenous women’s use of violence against their partners, or how it differs from violence used by non-Indigenous women (but see Bartels 2012; Bryant & Willis 2008; Olsen & Lovett 2016).

Aim and method

The current study, which was commissioned by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, aimed to better understand the characteristics of female perpetrated domestic violence, to identify any differences and similarities between episodes involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders, and to estimate the prevalence of self-defensive and retaliatory violence in episodes involving female offenders. The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) was provided with police narratives for 200 randomly selected episodes of domestic violence reported to the NSW Police Force in 2016 where a woman was identified as the person of interest (POI), and the male victim was her current or former partner (hereafter referred to as her partner). Stratified random sampling was used to ensure that an equal number of narratives were extracted for POIs who identified as Indigenous and non-Indigenous ($n=100$ for each). The AIC was also provided with police domestic violence apprehension histories (victimisation and offending) for the female POIs and male victims identified in the episodes, for their lifetime. It is important to note that the women included in this sample were only reported for domestic violence offending—they were not necessarily charged, detained or convicted of any offence.

Data from these narratives were coded using a framework based on a crime script for domestic violence first proposed by Boxall, Boyd, Dowling and Morgan (2018), and modified for the current study. Coding was undertaken by two researchers working collaboratively to resolve questions and issues as they arose. One hundred and fifty-three narratives were retained for analysis (74 Indigenous, 79 non-Indigenous). Forty-seven narratives were excluded, for one or more of the following reasons:

- there was insufficient information to allow coding (61%);
- the officer completing the narrative had expressed concerns about the accuracy of the information given to them (34%);
- both partners were identified by police as POIs (ie bi-directional violence; 13%); and
- the violence was classified by police as an 'argument only' offence (2%).

Consistent with NSW legislation (Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007), domestic violence was defined as including both physical (eg assault) and non-physical forms of abuse (eg emotional/psychological abuse, verbal abuse, stalking and intimidation, financial abuse, property damage).

Definition of self-defensive and retaliatory violence (violent resistance)

For the purpose of this paper, self-defensive and retaliatory violence was defined as episodes involving one or both of the following conditions:

- the female perpetrated domestic violence was immediately preceded by abusive or threatening actions from the male partner (physical intimidation, abusive language, threatening gestures or movements towards the female POI etc); and/or
- the female POI was previously involved in a domestic violence incident where they were identified as the victim and their male partner as the POI.

The historical measure was included in the overall estimate to be consistent with research showing that women may use violence pre-emptively to avert their partner's anticipated abuse. In the context of ongoing violent relationships, the seemingly innocuous or trivial actions of their abusive partner may actually foreshadow the use of violence and trigger a 'fight or flight' response in women, which may manifest as lashing out with aggression. This is particularly likely among women who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex PTSD as a result of their own victimisation as either children or adults (Goldenson et al. 2007; Salter et al. forthcoming; Thompson, Hannan & Miron 2014). Historical abuse is particularly relevant when examining female perpetrated domestic violence, with evidence highlighting the gendered nature of its impact. In particular, female victims of domestic violence are more likely than male victims to report feeling fearful as a result, and to experience trauma-related symptoms like anxiety and hyper-vigilance (Follingstad et al. 1991; Hamberger & Guse 2002; Kernsmith 2005).

Critically, the definition of self-defensive violence used in this paper differs from the legal definition of 'self-defence'. Under s 418 of the Crimes Act 1900 (NSW), a person is not criminally responsible for actions taken that they genuinely believe are necessary to protect themselves, someone else or property, as long as it is a reasonable response to the circumstances as they perceive them. The term self-defensive violence, as described above, is much broader than the legal definition of self-defence (Leisring & Grigorian 2016).

Finally, the authors acknowledge that self-defensive and retaliatory violence are not the same thing; the motives underlying these two forms of violence are quite different (Leisring & Grigorian 2016). Retaliatory violence is motivated by anger or frustration on the part of the POI (ie 'I was so sick of him hurting me that I snapped'), and self-defensive violence is more likely to be a fear-based response to a perceived threat (ie 'I wanted to stop him from hurting me'; Hamberger 1997). These motives can, of course, overlap or occur alongside other emotions and motives (Leisring & Grigorian 2016). Because it was not possible to easily differentiate between retaliatory and self-defensive violence, the two categories were combined, and will be referred to from this point on as 'violent resistance' (Johnson 2010; Kernsmith 2005).

Limitations

The strengths and limitations of police narratives as a source of data for the analysis of domestic violence episodes have been discussed in detail elsewhere by the authors (Boxall et al. 2018). Briefly, it is important to remember that the information contained in police narratives reflects investigative rather than research concerns, and can ignore certain details of interest to researchers. Further, narratives emphasise the tangible, objective elements of a domestic violence episode, and can neglect thoughts and emotions underpinning the behaviours of those involved. Nevertheless, police narratives, out of necessity, give sequenced accounts of domestic violence episodes and contain extensive detail on what happened based on information gathered from multiple sources (ie POIs, victims, witnesses and other third parties, physical evidence). As such, they are an informative and practical data source for researchers interested in how and why domestic violence episodes occur, and the circumstances in which they occur. Further, police narrative data allows us to estimate the proportion of female perpetrated domestic violence reported to the police that may involve violent resistance motives. This said, the stratified sampling methods used for the current study mean that readers should be cautious about applying the findings to all incidents involving female offenders.

Results

Relationship and violence characteristics

Almost two-thirds of the female POIs were still in a relationship with their male partner (60%) at the time of the episode, while half were living with their partner (50%; Table 1). In one-third of episodes involving a couple who were still together, there was evidence of relationship instability (eg allegations or revelations of infidelity, multiple break-ups and reconciliations) in the six months leading up to the domestic violence episode (33%). Nearly half of the couples had one or more children (including step-children and children from previous relationships; 42%), and a small proportion of female POIs (6%) were pregnant at time of the incident. As shown in Table 1, Indigenous women were more likely than non-Indigenous women to have been in a relationship with the male victim at the time of the domestic violence episode (74% vs 46%, $\chi^2(1)=12.54$, $p<0.05$), and these relationships were more likely to exhibit some degree of instability (44% vs 17%, $\chi^2(1)=7.16$ $p<0.05$).

Table 1: Relationship characteristics of female perpetrated domestic violence episodes, by Indigenous status

	Indigenous ^a		Non-Indigenous ^b		Total ^c	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Currently in relationship*	55	74	36	46	91	60
Relationship instability ^{d*}	24	44	6	17	30	33
Living together	36	49	41	52	77	50
Children	28	38	36	46	64	42
POI pregnant	4	5	5	6	9	6

*statistically significant at $p<0.05$

a: $n=74$

b: $n=78-79$ due to missing data across variables

c: $n=152-153$ due to missing data across variables

d: Limited to those couples in a relationship at the time of the domestic violence episode

Source: Female domestic violence crime script dataset 2019 [AIC computer file]

Most domestic violence episodes occurred solely in a residential location (64%) and almost all were preceded by a verbal conflict between the POI and the victim (and occasionally third parties; 92%). Other adults were present in almost half of episodes (43%). At least one party (either the victim or offender) was under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs in one-third of episodes (32%). Interestingly, male victims (23%) were as likely as female POIs (27%) to have been under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs during the episode.

As shown in Table 2, there were some differences in the situational characteristics of domestic violence incidents involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. Episodes involving a non-Indigenous female POI were more likely to be preceded by verbal conflict (99% vs 85%; $\chi^2(1)=9.77$, $p<0.05$) and less likely to occur in a residential location (56% vs 73%; $\chi^2(1)=4.55$, $p<0.05$). Further, the male partners of Indigenous women were significantly more likely to be intoxicated at the time of the incident (31% vs 15%, $\chi^2(1)=5.47$, $p<0.05$). A larger proportion of Indigenous women were intoxicated (34% vs 20%), but this was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(1)=3.57$, $p=0.059$).

Table 2: Situational characteristics of female perpetrated domestic violence episodes, by Indigenous status

	Indigenous ^a		Non-Indigenous ^b		Total ^c	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Preceding conflict*	63	85	78	99	141	92
Residential location ^{d*}	54	73	44	56	98	64
Bystander present	32	43	34	43	66	43
Female POI used alcohol/drugs	25	34	16	20	41	27
Male victim used alcohol/drugs*	23	31	12	15	35	23
Any alcohol/drug use by victim or POI	29	39	20	25	49	32

*statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

a: $n=74$

b: $n=78-79$ due to missing data across variables

c: $n=152-153$ due to missing data across variables

d: Residential location defined broadly to include any private dwelling owned/rented by the offender and/or victim, or other parties (eg friend or family)

Source: Female domestic violence crime script dataset 2019 [AIC computer file]

Consistent with previous research, women used a weapon in one-third of domestic violence episodes (34%; Table 3). Weapons included furniture, kitchenware, knives and other sharp objects, appliances and electronics (eg a laptop). Male victims were recorded as having a physical injury (ie bruising, laceration, bleeding or internal injury) in half of the episodes (50%). In contrast to previous studies, victim injury was not more likely in episodes where the female POI used a weapon ($\chi^2(1)=1.17$, $p=0.279$). Male victims retaliated violently against their partner in 43 percent of episodes, with women experiencing physical injury in 15 percent of episodes. Similar patterns were observed for Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders.

Table 3: Weapon use and injury in domestic violence episodes involving female perpetrators, by Indigenous status

	Indigenous ^a		Non-Indigenous ^b		Total ^c	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Weapon used	28	38	24	30	52	34
Male victim injured	37	50	39	49	76	50
Male victim retaliated physically	30	41	36	46	66	43
Female POI injured	9	12	13	17	22	15

a: $n=73-74$ due to missing data across variables

b: $n=76-79$ due to missing data across variables

c: $n=149-153$ due to missing data across variables

Source: Female domestic violence crime script dataset 2019 [AIC computer file]

Violent resistance

Violence precipitated by the abusive actions of partners

As shown in Table 2, almost all domestic violence episodes emerged from a conflict between the POI and the victim (92%). Conflicts typically concerned the state of the relationship (eg infidelity, emotional neglect, separation), children (eg custody, care arrangements) or various trivial issues (eg one partner saying or doing something that annoyed the other). Most of these conflicts (79%) transitioned to violence at a discernible ‘tipping point’ (Table 4; Boxall et al. 2018). In incidents involving non-Indigenous women, the tipping points were more likely to be a disagreement over access to children (0% vs 16%; $\chi^2(1)=5.68, p<0.05$).

Critically, in one in five episodes (20%), the woman appeared to have become violent in direct response to her partner’s aggression or verbal and emotional abuse (eg insults and name-calling, or language or actions intended to coerce, control, intimidate, denigrate, humiliate or shame). For example, in one episode the couple got into an argument after the male victim asked the female POI whether she was seeing other men. The argument escalated until the man shouted in the woman’s face and called her a whore. The woman responded by punching him in the mouth. In another episode, the couple were lying in bed and the man began touching the female POI as a prelude to sex. The woman refused, getting out of bed, walking into the bathroom and closing the door, at which point the man forced his way in, grabbed her by the collar and started screaming abuse in her face. She head-butted him and slapped him in the face in response. In these episodes it appears that the women were retaliating against the abusive actions of their male partners or acting in anticipation of the abuse escalating to violence.

	Indigenous ^a		Non-Indigenous ^b		Total ^c	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Male victim attempted to leave*	11	15	23	29	34	23
Violence or abuse by male victim	15	21	15	19	30	20
Accusations or revelations of infidelity	12	17	11	14	23	15
Male victim ignored female POI	6	8	14	18	20	13
Disagreement over access to children ^{d*}	0	0	6	16	6	9
Attempts to end relationship ^e	1	1	3	4	4	3
Calling/threats to call police	4	6	1	1	5	3
Other	30	43	31	40	61	41
Any tipping point	58	82	59	76	117	79

*statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Note: Domestic violence episodes could have more than one tipping point

a: $n=70-71$ due to missing data across variables

b: $n=78$

c: $n=148-149$ due to missing data across variables

d: Only those with children examined; see Table 1 for n

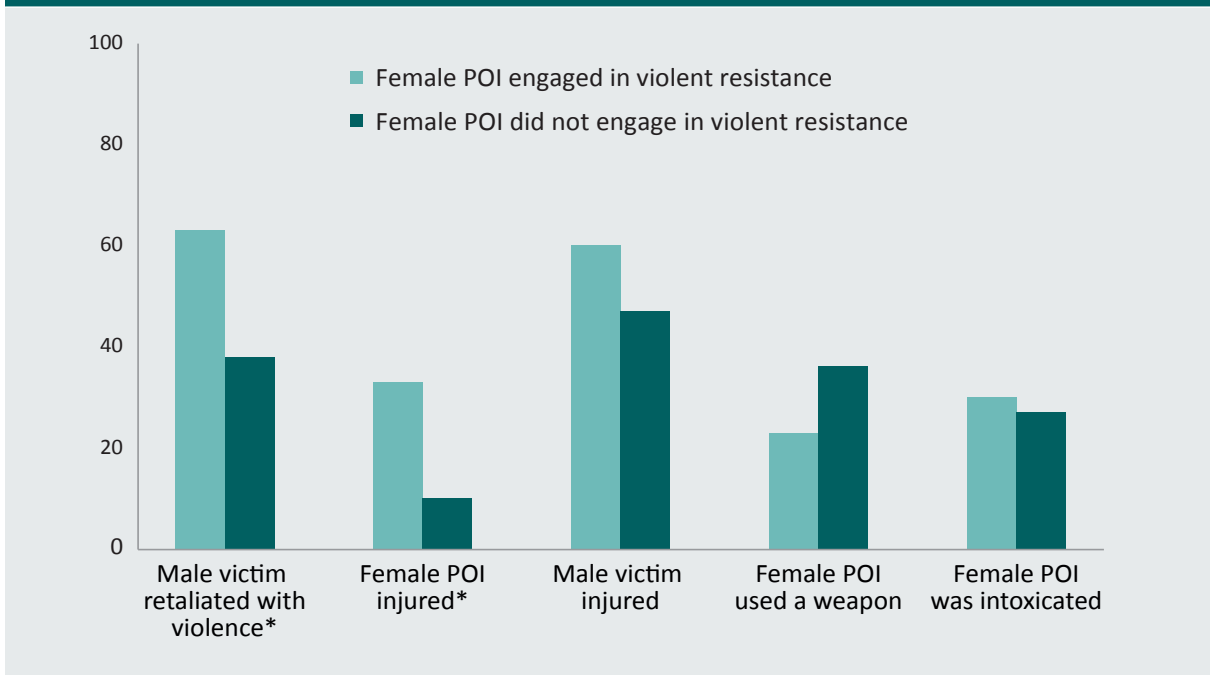
e: Only those in a relationship at the time of the episode examined; see Table 1 for n

Source: Female domestic violence crime script dataset 2019 [AIC computer file]

In episodes where a woman retaliated against the abusive actions of her partner, the male victim was more likely to respond with violence (63% vs 38%; $\chi^2(1)=6.37(1)$, $p<0.05$), and to injure the female POI (33% vs 10%; $\chi^2(1)=9.99$, $p<0.05$). This was despite the severity of female perpetrated violence—based on victim injury, the use of weapons and POI intoxication—being the same whether the episodes involved violent resistance or other motivations (see Figure 1).

Further analysis of episodes involving violent resistance identified weapon use as the only difference between episodes involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous female POIs. Indigenous women were significantly more likely than non-Indigenous women to use weapons in episodes involving violent resistance (47% vs 0%; $\chi^2(1)=9.13$, $p<0.05$).

Figure 1: Incident characteristics, by use of violent resistance (%)



*statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Note: $n=147-149$ due to missing data across variables

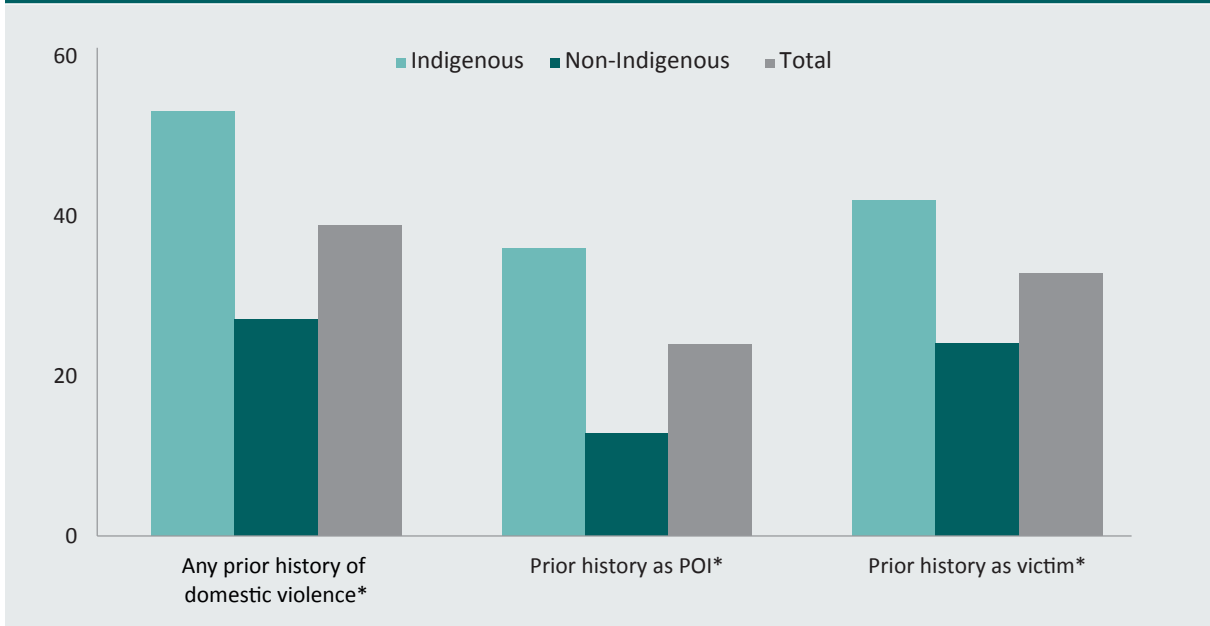
Source: Female domestic violence crime script dataset 2019 [AIC computer file]

History of recorded violence within the current relationship

More than one-third (39%) of female POIs had a history of prior contact with the NSW Police Force for domestic violence within the current relationship, either as a victim or POI. Women were more likely to have had contact with police as a victim of domestic violence perpetrated by their current male partner (33%) than as a repeat POI (24%).

As shown in Figure 2, Indigenous female POIs were significantly more likely than non-Indigenous POIs to have had prior contact with police for domestic violence as either a victim or POI (53% vs 27%; $\chi^2(1)=10.94$, $p<0.05$), and for perpetrating domestic violence against their current partner (36% vs 13%; $\chi^2(1)=11.83$, $p<0.05$). They were also nearly twice as likely as non-Indigenous women (42% vs 24%; $\chi^2(1)=5.53$, $p<0.05$) to have been a recorded victim of violence by their male partner.

Figure 2: Prevalence of recorded history of domestic violence within current relationship, by Indigenous status (%)



*statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Source: Female domestic violence crime script dataset 2019 [AIC computer file]

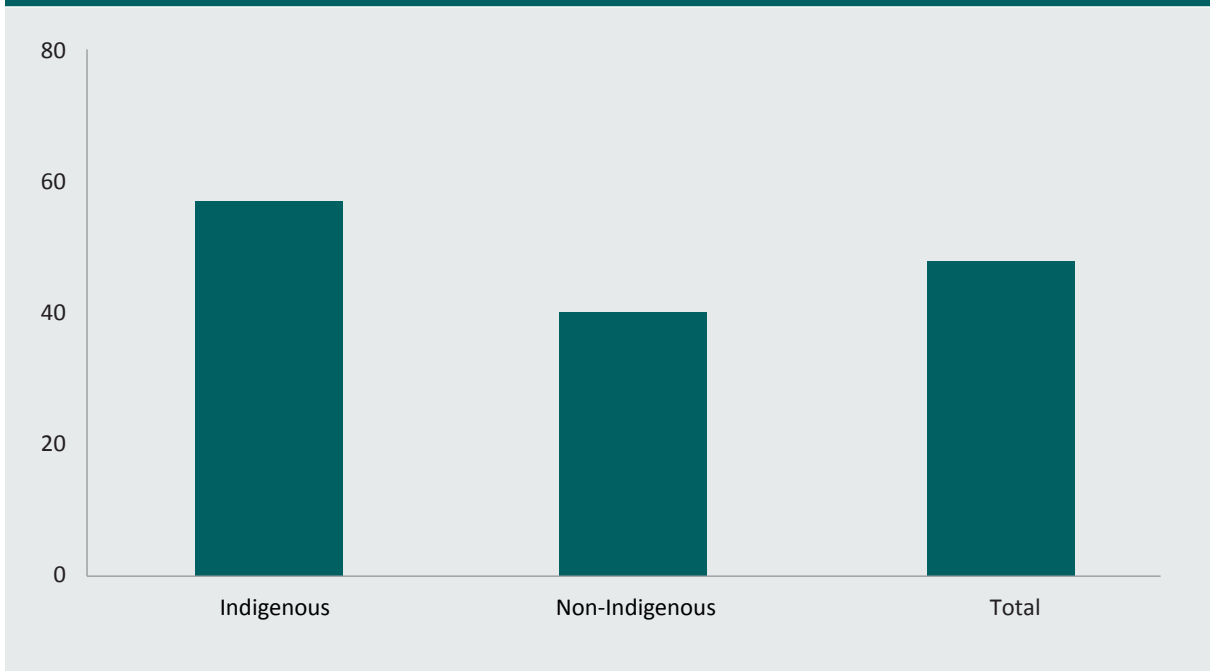
History of recorded violence in any relationship

Although previous relationships were not included in the overall estimate of self-defensive and retaliatory violence in Figure 3, it is important to note that, when these relationships were taken into account, the proportion of women who had experienced domestic violence as a victim increased from 33 percent to 75 percent. The proportion of women identified as a POI also increased from 24 to 56 percent. Indigenous women were statistically more likely than non-Indigenous women to have been victimised previously (91% vs 61% $\chi^2(1)=18.15, p < 0.05$) or identified as a POI (78% vs 35%; $\chi^2(1)=28.62, p < 0.05$) within the current or a previous relationship. Overall it appears that women were more likely to have histories of domestic violence victimisation than perpetration.

How much female perpetrated domestic violence was violent resistance?

Taking the two measures together, half of female perpetrated domestic violence episodes involved violent resistance (48%, $n=72$). In 20 percent of episodes ($n=30$) the violence was directly preceded by a tipping point involving the abusive actions or intimidation of the male partner, and 33 percent of episodes ($n=50$) involved a female POI who had previously been a victim of violence by their current partner, based on police apprehension data. Eight episodes of female perpetrated violence involved a POI who had been a prior victim of recorded violence by their partner and who was responding to immediate abuse or intimidation. Indigenous women were statistically more likely to engage in violent resistance than non-Indigenous women (57% vs 40%; $\chi^2(1)=4.44, p < 0.05$).

Figure 3: Overall estimates of violent resistance (%)



Note: Excludes 3 episodes where there was no prior recorded history of violence against the female partner within the relationship, but where information about the presence of abuse preceding her use of violence within the episode was missing

Source: Female domestic violence crime script dataset 2019 [AIC computer file]

Summary and conclusions

The findings from this study are largely consistent with the broader research into the situations in which women perpetrate violence against their male partners. Of particular note:

- female perpetrated domestic violence commonly occurred in the process of or subsequent to separation, and in the context of extended relationship instability (Spencer, Cafferky & Stith 2016);
- a significant proportion of women used weapons during violent incidents (Felson 1996); and
- men frequently retaliated violently against their partners, resulting in injury to the women (Babcock et al. 2019; Feld & Straus 1989; Kruttschnitt et al. 2018).

There were a number of differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous female perpetrated domestic violence episodes. Indigenous women were more likely to still be in a relationship with their partner at the time of the incident, but these relationships were often unstable. Incidents involving Indigenous women were also more likely to involve intoxication (of the male victim and female POI), and to occur in residential settings. Indigenous women were also statistically more likely to have been apprehended previously by the police for violence towards their partner, and to have been identified as victims of domestic violence from their partner.

Unfortunately, there is very little research to draw upon to explain the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women's histories of contact with police for domestic violence. However, Nancarrow's (2019) analysis of police reports and interviews with service providers and police prosecutors highlighted that when reported for domestic violence, Indigenous women were less likely to engage with the police or court processes for various reasons, including language barriers and lack of understanding about what is expected of them, exacerbated by complex relationships between the police and Indigenous peoples that can result in mistrust and fear. Regardless of the reasons, this lack of engagement could lead to Indigenous women not disclosing their experiences of domestic violence to police, and any subsequent charges or orders not being contested/defended in court.

At least one in two episodes (48%) involved violent resistance, where women were responding to the abusive actions of their partner, and/or reacting to the actions of their partner within the context of previous abuse. Limitations aside, this estimate is consistent with previous research which asked female offenders directly about the causes underpinning their use of violence (eg Miller & Meloy 2006). It is probably an underestimate, given the figure is based on recorded violence and information provided to police during the investigation. There are a number of important reasons that a female perpetrator—or male victim—might be unwilling to share this information with police (Drijber, Reijnders & Ceelen 2013). Similarly, incidents where the male and female were both identified as POs were excluded from the sample, and these incidents may have involved women who were responding to the abusive actions of their partners. Indigenous women were more likely than non-Indigenous women to use violence for violent resistance purposes (57% vs 40%).

In some cases of violent resistance, the threat to the woman was obvious—for example, the victim calling her names, shouting at her or intimidating her physically (eg crowding her, refusing to let her leave/trapping her in a room; 20%). In other situations (33%), the threat could not be easily discerned from the description given by the police, but the woman had been a victim of prior recorded violence by the male victim. These women may have been responding to subtler warning signals, such as the victim's emotional state or intoxication, or even his facial expression, demeanour or movements (Dasgupta 2002; Hill 2019; Kernsmith 2005; Miller & Meloy 2006). This heightened threat perception may be more prevalent among women with significant abuse histories (as children or adults) or complex trauma (Goldenson et al. 2007; Salter et al. forthcoming; Thompson, Hannan & Miron 2014). It is important to highlight that when previous relationships were taken into account, the proportion of women who had experienced domestic violence as a victim more than doubled, from 33 percent to 75 percent. These rates of victimisation are much higher than those reported in the broader community, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) estimate that one in four women have experienced abuse since the age of 15. These findings are consistent with recent research that examined prior victimisation among women in prison in Victoria (Walker, Sutherland & Millstead 2019).

The findings from this study contribute to a growing body of research that highlights the need to understand the contexts within which women use violence. The high rates of prior victimisation—even relying solely on official data—emphasise the important role of trauma in shaping how women respond to the perceived threat of abuse within their relationships, and also how they engage with services and the criminal justice system more broadly (Salter et al. forthcoming). A recent study by Salter and colleagues (forthcoming) for the Australian National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety identified that women with complex trauma may present as vague, confused, angry and highly emotional when engaging with law enforcement and other criminal justice personnel, which can affect how they are perceived and responded to.

However, this research also confirms that there is a cohort of women who do not appear to use violence for violent resistance purposes. The distinction is important, as the response to these two broad types of violence may be very different. The treatment and support needs of women who commit violence in response to or as part of a violent relationship will differ from those of perpetrators whose violence is motivated by other factors.

Finally, the results also highlight the challenges faced by frontline responders, particularly police, when responding to domestic violence incidents involving two partners who are violent (regardless of motive), or who have a history of violence (Hill 2019; Martin 1997; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling 1994). The data for this study were based on incidents attended by police. The perpetrators in these incidents may not have subsequently been convicted of an offence, but they were identified as a perpetrator by the officers who attended the scene. Given the bi-directional violence that occurred in many of these episodes—historically, immediately prior to the incident or in response to violence by the female perpetrator—these findings illustrate the complexity of domestic violence episodes, and the importance of studies such as this one for understanding the dynamics of female perpetrated violence.

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