

Adolescent to Parent Violence and Youth Justice in England and Wales

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Adolescent to parent violence is a problem which remains largely unarticulated within youth justice policy literature and academic discourse in England and Wales. This article presents research evidence suggesting that adolescent to parent violence is a significant problem which needs to be clearly addressed in the youth justice policy agenda. Although it is widely recognised by practitioners and regularly encountered in their work, there is a 'silence' at the policy level and a lack of appropriate support services or responses. The article considers reasons for the absence of adolescent to parent violence in youth justice policy and argues for the importance of recognising and defining the problem and for the development of appropriate responses.

Keywords: Child to parent violence, parent abuse, youth justice, parenting.

Introduction

In this article we draw upon the preliminary findings from an ESRC-funded research project which represents the first large-scale study of adolescent to parent violence in the UK. The study has a wide remit and explores the extent and nature of adolescent to parent violence, parents' and adolescents' experiences and how cases are responded to within the criminal justice system. We focus here on preliminary data that we have collected in the first year of the study within the field of youth justice. This includes interviews with three experienced parenting workers, three policy leads from the Youth Justice Board (YJB), two consultant forensic psychologists working within a youth offending service and two experts on adolescents and family violence who work within two different third-sector organisations. During our fieldwork, we have visited several different youth offending teams in the South East of England and attended four parenting practitioner forums at the YJB in 2011. These visits provided the opportunity to pose questions directly to twenty-five parenting workers in youth justice about their experience and understanding of this problem.

The exploratory research conducted in the first stage of this project has enabled us to begin to map the contours of the problem of adolescent to parent violence and to try to conceptualise how it fits – or does not fit – with current youth justice policy and practice. Because this form of family violence is largely unarticulated in both academic and policy discourse, we suggest that sketching out these emerging issues at an early stage has particular value: to interpret and give shape to the experiences and opinions that have been shared with us to date, to begin to build a flexible framework to which

others might add or develop as studies of this form of family violence multiply, and to place the problem in the context of the current structures of youth justice policy and services which are undergoing significant changes.

The article begins by outlining the limited and sparse literature on this topic and considers how parent–child relationships have been constructed in youth justice policy. It then examines practitioners' perspectives on adolescent to parent violence and asks why this form of family violence is absent from youth justice policy when it is so widely recognised by those in the field. A number of reasons are identified and we suggest that a fundamental dissonance between the construction of families in youth justice and recognising parents as potential victims may be particularly important. We conclude by considering how youth justice should respond to the challenge of adolescent to parent violence.

Reported incidence

It is difficult to gauge the prevalence of adolescent to parent violence as there are few statistics on reported cases and those that are reported to the police are likely to only reflect a small minority of incidents, given the difficulty of reporting one's own child. Most literature is international, often therapeutic in origin or derived from self-report studies (for reviews, see Kennair and Mellor, 2007 and Holt, this volume). In the US, there have been three studies which analyse reported cases of child to parent violence using the National Incident Based Reporting System (Walsh and Krienert, 2007, 2009; Snyder and McCurley, 2008). One of these studies found that 51 per cent of juvenile domestic assault offenders victimised a parent, and that almost eight out of every ten domestic aggravated and domestic simple assault victims of juvenile offenders were parents or siblings (Snyder and McCurley, 2008).

In the UK, there are no national figures for adolescent to parent violence. However, a recent study analysing Metropolitan Police data for 2009–10 found that in this one-year period 1,914 cases of adolescent to parent violence¹ were reported to the police across the London Metropolitan Boroughs (Condry and Miles, 2011). Research using alternative sources of data also indicates that adolescent to parent violence is a significant problem: Hunter *et al.* (2010) found that 11 per cent of 256 families in Family Intervention Projects had experienced this problem and a recent report by the UK charity Parentline Plus (2010) revealed that the helpline received 22,537 calls between June 2008 and June 2010 from parents struggling to cope with aggressive behaviour from their children; 7,000 of these calls involved incidents of physical aggression.

The primary focus of this article is on practitioners' experiences of adolescent to parent violence and its place in youth justice. However, we introduce an illustrative example of one mother's account of living with violence from her adolescent son to illuminate some of the complex issues facing these families and will return to her account at various points in the article. Julie, a single mother of Jack (aged fourteen), was interviewed in an inner-city youth offending team. She had been assaulted a number of times by Jack, but had also been fined for Jack's non-attendance at school. She described her particular experience of living with a violent adolescent:

[If I argue back] he throws things around, or hits me. I try hard just to walk away. I'll walk out the door, or I'll walk into the bedroom and read a book. But then if I do that and ignore him, he'll come into the bedroom and throw everything off the side across the floor, he'll throw

things at me, because I'm ignoring him. So sometimes I just stomp out and go 'oh well, see ya'. But I shouldn't have to be the one to walk out. What I think is that if he's got the anger problem, he should be the one that goes 'well, time out, I'm going for a walk'. It shouldn't have to be me to walk out to get away from him smashing into me, or the place.

Jack's violence towards his mother was part of a broader spectrum of controlling behaviour which had led to her altering her own actions and reactions to avoid or minimise violence. Julie's experiences encapsulate a number of important dimensions of the complexities of adolescent to parent violence and the difficulties it presents for youth justice, in particular the contradiction between constructing parents as victims of their children's offences and discourses of parental accountability which have dominated youth justice policy in recent years.

Youth justice policy in England and Wales

Youth justice was at the forefront of New Labour's criminal justice agenda when they came to power in 1997 and a wide range of reforms were introduced. A number of these reforms centred on the responsabilisation of young people and their families, along with the birth of a new form of parenting expertise in the shape of parenting practitioners working within youth justice. Over the coming years, a new body of knowledge and ways of talking and thinking about parenting developed which constructed parents of young offenders and parent-child relationships in very particular ways.

Within this agenda, there was a focus on 'problem families' and a 'parenting deficit' as a cause of youth offending. It was said that parents who could not or would not face their responsibilities and control their children would be made to do so. Ultimately, this resulted in criminalising 'inadequate parenting' (Muncie, 1999) and an individualised analysis which failed to take account of structural inequalities. A series of developments in legislation specifically held parents directly responsible for crimes committed by their children, most notably the Parenting Order introduced in the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* and further widened in its use in the *Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003*. This is a civil order, although a parent who does not comply without reasonable excuse commits a criminal offence. The continuing assumption underlying parental responsibility laws such as the Parenting Order is that parents of young offenders have not accepted responsibility and that they can be forced to do so with court orders and financial penalties (Arthur, 2005).

Burney and Gelsthorpe point to a flaw in the then Home Secretary Jack Straw's statement that 'Parenting orders will help and support those who are genuinely trying to control their children's unacceptable behaviour. Sanctions will be available for the minority who stubbornly evade their parental responsibilities' (HC, 8 April 1998, Col. 375, cited in Burney and Gelsthorpe, 2008). If parents are 'genuinely trying to control their children's unacceptable behaviour', why should they require compulsion in order to access help and support? (Burney and Gelsthorpe, 2008: 474)

These measures also make assumptions about the ability of parents to control their children. As Henricson and Bainham have said, 'the attribution of blame to parents for their children's behaviour up to the age of 16 underestimates children's independence and overestimates the ability of parents to control the behaviour of young people as they grow older' (2005: 103). This assumption is particularly problematic in the case of parents

who are experiencing violence from their adolescent children and resonates with Julie's account. She was aware of the expectation within youth justice and the education system that she ought to be able to control her son and that she would be held responsible for his actions. She had already been taken to court and fined for his non-attendance at school and was terrified that she was at risk of receiving a prison sentence. She kept a pile of letters and other records to try to prove that she was doing all she could:

I'm dead scared of being taken back to court . . . Everything I've tried, it don't work . . . I've tried pulling him out of bed, I've tried splashing water on his face, I've dragged him out the front door with boxer shorts on and just threw his clothes at him, and nothing has worked. He'll just lay in bed, and when he gets up, he'll sit there wrapped in a quilt watching TV.

Although the language of youth justice is gender-neutral, it is primarily mothers who receive parenting support and who are given parenting orders (Drakeford and Calliva, 2009). One practical explanation for this gender imbalance is that many of these families are headed by single mothers. However, there may also be important assumptions about maternal responsibility and perceptions of mothers as the guardians of family morality. As Holt (2009a) has said, these orders are primarily 'mothering orders' and the physical and emotional labour involved in parenting a child in the youth justice system is in the main provided by mothers. Hunter and Nixon (2001) have shown how there is also an important gender dimension to the problem of anti-social behaviour, which they say has not been acknowledged by either policy-makers or practitioners. Women are more likely to be the recipients of these measures, despite most of the behaviour being committed by men, and blamed for their failure to discipline their wayward sons or partners. At the same time, our work shows that mothers are more likely than fathers to report their adolescent child to the police for violence, with 77.4 per cent of reports being made by mothers (Condry and Miles, 2011). Adolescent to parent violence is therefore a significant issue and a gendered, hidden phenomenon in need of further investigation.

The professional discourse on adolescent to parent violence

From our discussions with parenting practitioners, youth justice practitioners, police officers and domestic violence workers, adolescent to parent violence would appear to be a widespread problem routinely encountered in their work. Most youth justice practitioners told us they could identify families experiencing this form of family violence in their current caseload:

I was at a meeting last week, I think a Child Protection meeting, where a parent was bearing bruises where the young person had obviously been hitting her. (Parenting Worker in youth offending team)

One expert in adolescents and domestic violence who trains practitioners from a range of fields, including youth justice, social work and domestic violence, commented that she was increasingly being asked for information and guidance about adolescent to parent violence:

[Practitioners attending the courses] say that they get so many calls every day, about child to parent violence. And loads of social workers are reporting that's the big issue that they're working on. But no-one really knows how to respond to it, because it doesn't neatly fall into the definition of domestic violence. So I think there's a real gap still in the knowledge around how to deal with it.

There was a view amongst many parenting practitioners we spoke to that current programmes within youth justice had not been designed with families experiencing adolescent violence in mind and did not meet their needs. Specifically, tailored interventions were necessary to take account of the particular circumstances of these families. However, with no guidance or existing programmes, practitioners had to adapt programmes designed for other uses or invent their own.

In particular, as one consultant psychologist working within youth justice explained, families experiencing adolescent violence often have very complex histories which need to be understood if interventions are to work. Cognitive behavioural parenting programmes that focus on changing a parent's responses to an adolescent child *in situ* are not able to address deep rooted problems:

So I think you need a much more unique family-focused approach. You know, there's not a 'one size fits all'. And that's the difficulty with your Triple P parenting [programmes] and things like that; they're not really taking into account family history, family structure, how it operates. All those things are coming down over the generations. [These programmes are] saying 'This is a behaviour that needs to be changed. If you change the contingencies, you change the behaviour.' And that of course doesn't happen.

Furthermore, in his experience, these parents are often exhausted and at 'breaking point' and some of the changes demanded by these programmes require considerable personal resources:

What's really interesting for me is that in the cases that we do tend to see it is often the mums in the families who are completely burnt out, you know. And so the strategy, and what people are trying to teach them – to be consistent, to sort of be doing the same thing all the time, to apply the same strategies – they can't do it. They just can't, you know, they get too tired, they just, you know, over time it just degrades to a position where actually the intervention is no longer any use, because they just can't maintain it.

Parents experiencing violence need their own support which will entail more than generic parenting programmes in youth justice can provide.

A policy gap

Despite practitioners' widespread acknowledgement of adolescent to parent violence, there is a virtual silence on this issue at the level of policy. There is no guidance within the youth justice system on how practitioners should respond to the problem. It does not fall within the official definitions of domestic violence (from the Home Office or Association of Chief Police Officers, for example) which require the perpetrator to be eighteen or over, and youth justice discourse restricts its focus to public forms of offending and antisocial behaviour rather than offences within the home (see Hunter and Piper, this volume, on

the legal gaps). The YJB produces a wealth of information and policy documents on all aspects of youth justice for practitioners, parents and victims of crime. Its website² has a range of resources and information on parenting within youth justice and highlights the problem of youth violence in secure custody and in schools, but currently makes no mention of youth violence in the home.³ Similarly, there is very little academic literature within the field of youth justice on this form of family violence.

Why is there such a 'silence' at the policy level when it is a problem fully recognised by those 'on the ground'? There may of course be a number of reasons, including the exclusion from the official definition of domestic violence, a lack of acknowledgement that adolescent to parent violence is a form of family violence in its own right, stigma and shame experienced by parents and reluctance for a variety of reasons to report their own child or to seek help. Furthermore, it cannot be located within existing policy and legal frameworks and the ways in which these frameworks construct the child, parents, victims and perpetrators (Hunter *et al.*, 2010: 274).

Indeed, we would argue that there is a fundamental dissonance between the ways in which young offenders and their parents are constructed in youth justice and understanding parents to be victims of their own children's violence. Adolescents are understood as potential offenders in the public sphere, but not within the home, and it is assumed that parents (and mothers in particular) are able to assert power and control over their children, all of which does not allow for a conceptualisation of mothers or fathers as victims who might be controlled or abused by their children (see also Holt, 2009b).

As we have seen, a young person's violence within the home is perceived to be the product of poor parenting and a parent therefore responsible for their own predicament. One consultant psychologist working within a youth offending service thought that this contributed to a lack of interest on the part of policy-makers and those with influence in the youth justice realm:

I don't think there's sympathy for the parents; you know, I think if your sort of offspring is antisocial or whatever, then if it happens to you in your house, well you've kind of brought it on yourself type thing. I don't think people are, at a high level, that much interested.

Additionally, there may be a broader resistance to the very uncomfortable idea of adolescent to parent violence which is contrary to the ways in which parent-child relationships and power dynamics within families are understood.

There are a number of consequences flowing from this policy 'silence'. When the problem of adolescent to parent violence is not named and is not part of an organisation's agenda, it becomes difficult to identify cases and to gauge an estimate of its prevalence. Parents may be reluctant to report because the problem is not identified and there is a lack of services addressing their needs. Julie took her son to her family doctor seeking help with his violence, but the problem was not taken seriously as family violence:

When I took him to the doctors, he was diagnosed with suffering from depression, [the doctor] said 'well don't hit your mother, punch a wall'. He punched the wall the other day, so he went 'well the doctor said punch a wall', and I said 'well yeah, but now you've hurt your knuckles, so that was a bit of a dumb thing to do'. It's like, 'punch a pillow, yeah, but don't punch a wall!'

Julie said this was the limit of her family doctor's advice – she was not recognised as a victim in need of help nor referred to any other services.

Another consequence of the policy 'silence' is a lack of specialist knowledge about adolescent to parent violence and support for the problem. Specifically designed interventions are rarely available and develop in only a piecemeal fashion. There are a handful of localised interventions and programmes which have been devised within youth offending services to specifically address the problem of adolescent to parent violence. One example that has run for two years is Break4Change, a multi-agency programme run in Brighton and Hove which is located within a youth offending team. This runs parallel groups for parents and young people over a twelve-week period. Families can be referred from a range of different services and not all will have had contact with the youth justice system. Staff have reported high levels of satisfaction from participants and reduced levels of violence, but the programme is yet to be formally evaluated. This is the most established specific programme in the UK of which we are aware, having been written by workers in a youth offending team, and developed independently at a local level.

However, there are few horizontal channels of communication across the youth justice service and for the most part practitioners in various youth offending teams and family support services are unaware of each others' programmes. There are youth offending teams in every local authority in England and Wales and although they are all subject to the same guidance and steering from the YJB they also operate fairly autonomously. As one expert in adolescent and domestic violence said:

The YJB is dealing with these disparate [youth offending] teams – they're so independent in a way. It's not like probation, where there are standardised programmes for adult probation, validated programmes. If you're going to run a domestic violence programme, you are running the same one as every other area in the country. And someone central knows who's running what. The thing about Youth Justice is that the YJB don't even know if some areas might have a course already on CPV [child to parent violence].

It is also difficult for issues such as adolescent to parent violence to feed 'upwards' to policy-makers. Although there are forums through which issues can be raised, such as the YJB's parenting practitioner forums, the sheer breadth of the youth justice system means that many issues are competing for attention and it can be difficult for a new issue to emerge onto the policy agenda. There might also be the need for someone with influence to push an issue forward. As an attendee at a parenting practitioner forum said:

Practitioners all say 'Yeah, that [adolescent to parent violence] happens a lot'. So maybe there needs to be a drive from somewhere saying 'Actually this is a very big problem that affects 60 per cent of parents', or something. Which may involve some research, like yours, to sort of go forward to the Department for Education or to the Ministry of Justice and say 'This is actually quite a big problem in parenting now. We need to, you know, have a look at this.' But I think, we know it exists, and it's maybe it's almost like a complacency.

Although within the YJB there is an awareness of the need to improve these channels of communication and attempts are being made to facilitate a more 'bottom-up' approach in which practitioners are able to influence policy-making decisions, in practice it seems likely that the only way to raise the profile of an issue like adolescent to parent violence

and engage with policy-makers is through creating a robust evidence base. Currently, there is a small amount of emerging research on adolescent to parent violence in the UK which will need to continue to develop in order to form a convincing base of evidence showing adolescent to parent violence to be a significant problem and a unique form of family violence requiring focused interventions and innovative approaches. The hidden nature of this phenomenon and the lack of fit with prevalent conceptions of parent-child relationships and notions of parental responsibility and control contribute to the complexity of this undertaking.

Conclusion

Adolescent to parent violence is a problem that has emerged in a small and recent body of academic research and has been identified by practitioners as widespread. In this article, we have sought to locate the place of adolescent to parent violence within youth justice and to consider some of the possible reasons for the policy 'silence' on this issue. One key reason, we have argued, is the fundamental dissonance between responsabilising parents within youth justice and the construction of parents as victims of their children's violent offending.

Parental accountability measures were central to New Labour's youth justice agenda and have continued in the first year of the coalition government. Whether there will be changes in any of these measures remains to be seen, but the current government claims an ongoing emphasis on parenting and families, and support has been expressed for the continued use of parenting orders (e.g. Ministry of Justice, December 2010). In October 2010, it was announced that the YJB would be abolished and currently there is uncertainty over its future. This year there have been severe cuts in youth offending teams' budgets. Decisions about how those reduced funds are to be spent will be made at the local level, and many youth offending teams are restructuring to take account of these changes. The challenge to youth justice policy will be to find ways to innovate and respond to adolescent to parent violence in a time of such significant flux and change.

Adolescent to parent violence is a youth justice issue and needs a clearly defined response within youth justice policy because it is routinely present within youth justice practice. However, there is a tension between the well-developed academic critique of criminalising and inappropriately responsabilising parents within youth justice policy (e.g. Goldson and Jamieson, 2002; Burney and Gelsthorpe, 2008) and the need to provide appropriate services for parents presenting with very real support needs. Furthermore, many adolescents who are violent towards their parents will not be in the youth justice system and responses designed to support parents experiencing violence need not necessarily be delivered within criminal justice. Indeed, it may not be the most appropriate arena to provide support if parental accountability is entrenched and systemic. In some local authorities, parenting support has been relocated within broader services for children and families and it may be that these services are a more appropriate place for such support to be delivered, removing potential stigmatisation of adolescent to parent violence and criminalisation of poor parenting. Another potential avenue for support might be specialised domestic violence services.

As the youth justice system and parenting services within local authorities develop, there will be a pressing need to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and of innovative solutions designed to address problems in localised contexts. It is important for youth

justice to be able to respond creatively and flexibly and to have a policy agenda which allows for innovative solutions to newly identified problems. At a minimum, youth justice policy needs to recognise and clearly define adolescent to parent violence and to provide guidelines for practitioners mapping potential responses.

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Notes

- 1 This includes the offences of violence against the person, criminal damage, robbery and sexual offences (see Condry and Miles, 2011 for further discussion).
- 2 www.yjb.gov.uk accessed April 2011.
- 3 Other than one reference to the Break4change programme on The Directory of Emerging Practice page.

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