



Pathways from intimate partner violence to intimate partner femicide

Summary of Findings

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Executive Summary: Pathways from Intimate Partner Violence to Intimate Partner Femicide

Background

In 2018, Professor Paul Mazzerole and his team from Griffith University were awarded a QCS Research Grant to undertake a project titled 'Pathways from Intimate Partner Violence to Intimate Partner Femicide'.

Male-perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV) is an important issue for corrections generally due to the proportion of offenders in custody who have committed this type of offence and also because of the risk IPV represents to previous, current and future partners. Assessing the risk to women from their current or former partners presents challenges and has implications for their protection as well as for appropriate treatment of offenders. In addition, although there is growing research into male-perpetrated IPV, there are notable gaps in knowledge about potential pathways from IPV to intimate partner femicide (IPF). Moreover, identifying who among those many women who experience IPV is most likely to be at high risk of IPF remains a significant challenge within policy and practice.

Potential links between IPV and IPF include the escalation explanation and the typology explanation. An 'escalation' framework posits that IPF is the result of an already existing pattern of non-lethal IPV that turns lethal. Such a framework highlights the circumstances associated with an escalation of violence, for example during period of relationship breakdown. On the other hand, a 'typology' framework suggests that IPF is the result of specific offender characteristics, such as controlling behaviour and extreme jealousy, that are distinctly different from the characteristics of IPV offenders.

The Study

This study aimed to build upon current knowledge in this area by comparing men who have committed non-lethal IPV with men who have committed IPF. The intention was to examine whether these groups can be differentiated only by the actual extent to which their violence harmed an intimate partner (that is, the groups look generally similar in their characteristics, and vary only in terms of how much their violence against a partner has escalated), or whether individual characteristics differ between these two groups and can therefore be used to gauge risk of IPF.

Method

The self-report data came from two sub-samples, both of which were collected through face-to-face interviews at custodial and community correctional facilities in Australia. Data

from men who had perpetrated IPF was collected between 2013 and 2018 across Australia and forms part of the Australian Homicide Project, which was funded through an Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant. Data from men who had committed IPV was collected in 2020 in Queensland through a Queensland Corrective Services research grant.

Offenders were compared across four areas (socio-demographics, substance-use problems, offending history, and beliefs about relationships factors). Analyses used Fisher's Exact Tests (chi-square) and Independent Samples t-tests.

Results

The following were the key findings:

- the IPF sample (n = 55), relative to the IPV sample (n = 17), had attitudes that were more supportive of violence towards women, were less likely to report being on welfare or having alcohol-use problems, and were more likely to report being employed
- in the year leading up to the incident, the IPF sample was less likely to report having a domestic violence order against them, to having been imprisoned, or to having been violent to towards a partner.

Discussion

These findings appear to support a typology framework, in that men who perpetrate IPF possess certain characteristics that make them distinguishable from men who perpetrate IPV. In other words, lethal violence (in the current study) appears to be a result of specific perpetrator characteristics, as opposed to an escalation of violence per se.

However, caution is required in interpreting these findings as the sample size was small and measures used were self-report. Importantly, the findings need to be replicated using a larger sample. Furthermore, given the self-report nature of the data, it is possible offenders used impression management techniques to portray themselves in a positive light, or were not able to accurately recall the prevalence of, for example, domestic violence orders.

If replicated using a larger sample size and triangulating the results with data from official sources, findings may have implications for criminal justice and correctional agency responses to intimate partner violence. Importantly, the results of the current study call into question the assumption that IPV perpetrators escalate toward IPF. If this is the case the potential policy implications would be substantial in that the efficiency and efficacy of current policy responses are impacted to the extent that they may not reflect the actual risks and behaviours that are occurring. Given finite resources and the importance of correct classifications, assessment of risk needs to accurately predict and distinguish between offenders in 'high' versus 'low' risk categories. Policy refinements may be needed to better establish the criminogenic risks for re-offending across varying forms of partner violence, both lethal and non-lethal.

Given that the results of this study are tentatively supportive of a typology approach, it may further be important not to implement a 'blanket IPV treatment approach' to the rehabilitation of offenders who have committed violence in intimate relationships. Based on the results of the current study, such 'one-size-fits-all' approaches may not capture the nuances between IPV and IPF offenders, though more research is required to grow the evidence base. Identification of the key criminogenic needs of IPV and IPF perpetrators have significant implications for program completion, effectiveness and ultimately recidivism reduction.

