



Spotlight 3: Episode 6

Podcast Transcript

Spotlights is a series of online events and publications focusing on a particular group of victim/survivors who are often hidden from services. As part of SafeLives Spotlight on domestic abuse and young people, this week my colleague Emma has come to the University of Manchester to speak to Dr. Caroline Miles, a Lecturer in Criminology and Joint Programme Director for the Criminology degree in the School of Law. Caroline, talks about her joint research with Dr Rachel Condry that looks at adolescent to parent violence from the perspective of the young person. We hope you find it both interesting and informative.

Emma=E

Dr. Caroline Miles=C

E: Today I've come to Manchester to speak to Dr Caroline Miles about adolescent to parent violence and how it affects the young people causing harm. Hi Caroline, thanks for joining me today to create this podcast.

C: Hi Emma, thank you for having me. I'm really pleased that this issue is being included in one of your Spotlight on young people and domestic abuse. There's been such a lot of hard work in trying to raise the profile of child to parent violence, so it's really good to see that its being recognised and talked about.

E: Earlier on in the Spotlight we've had the opportunity to speak to Helen Bonnick about the general concept of adolescent to parent violence-how its defined, what it can look like and who it can affect. We've also had the chance to speak with parents who have experienced adolescent to parent violence, however, we haven't yet spoken in much detail about the effects on the young person who is causing the harm. Can you tell about the research that you've done regarding child to parent violence, and what aspects of this concept your research focused on?

C: Yeah, of course. So the research I was involved in was an ESRE funding project called 'Investigating Adolescent violence towards parents' and this was conducted at the University of Oxford between 2010 and 2013 by myself and Dr. Rachel Condry. So the focus of this research was on deliberate physical violence directed at mothers or fathers by their adolescent child. And we looked at adolescents aged 13-19 yrs.

So at the time we conducted this research there was very little academic research on the issue in the UK, although there was a lot of anecdotal evidence from practitioners

working with parents in a support capacity. For example, people working in DV support services or youth justice. And actually they came across adolescent to parent violence almost routinely in their day to day work. So despite some historic efforts to raise the profile of adolescent to parent violence, it was still a really taboo topic and under the radar of official statistics or conceptualisation of family violence. And it was also clear that when parents were disclosing adolescent to parent violence to the police or to a support service, they were often not receiving a very supportive response. So sometimes parents were either not believed or not taken seriously. Sometimes they were blamed or sent on parenting course, or encouraged to prosecute or criminalise their child against their wishes. So actually what most parents want is for the violence to stop and to access some help for themselves and for their child.

So our project at a number of aims, not least to raise the profile of adolescent to parent violence. Given that so little was known about this form of family violence, it was important for us to analyse data on the prevalence of adolescent to parent violence in the police statistics and to explore the characteristics of the families involved and the types of incidents reported to the police.

So the first stage of our research involved analysing some police data from the metropolitan police. So we looked at cases over a one-year period, from April 2009 to March 2010. But we also wanted to conduct a really detailed exploration of adolescent to parent violence to gain an understanding of how it was experienced, managed and negotiated by the parents and young people involved and how it was responded to by police and other criminal justice and support agencies who came into contact with it. So, we conducted over a 100 interviews with parents, young people, police officers, youth justice workers and practitioners working in relevant support services about their experiences of adolescent to parent violence. And this gave us a really unique data set and a really informed understanding of the problem, and it led to the first Home Office Guidance on responding to adolescent to parent violence.

E: Thanks Caroline. Can you tell me a little bit about your decision to include young people in your research?

C: Yes. So, including the adolescents' perspective was really important to our research because the voices of young people who are violent towards their parents have, to a greater extent, been lacking from existing research and literature. So in order to fully understand this complex issue it's really essential to explore it from the parents' perspective, but to also explore the pathways leading to adolescent to parent violence from their perspective. So it was really important to us to hear their accounts and to generate some knowledge about of how they understand and explain and manage their behaviour, and to identify what their needs are.

And this is really important in informing policy and practice, in how to respond to reports of adolescent to parent violence. So as I said earlier, although some parents' reports of this was not taken seriously, other parents were encouraged to prosecute their child, which raises concerns surrounding the criminalisation of young people, which is often the last route that parents want to go down.

So a crucial aspect of our research was to learn about adolescent to parent violence from the young person's perspective and make some recommendation on how to

develop sensitive and effective responses that don't necessarily involve the criminalisation of the young person. So responses that work for parents, but importantly also meet the needs of adolescents as well.

E: And what were the key findings from your research in relation to young people?

C: In total, we interviewed 20 young people who had been or currently were being violent towards one or both of their parents-and we included step parents and grandparents in that definition as well. And all of the young people we interviewed were at the time attending some kind of support service for their abusive behaviour. Two of the young people that we interviewed were sons, and eight were daughters. So incidentally, although police statistics show that adolescent to parent violence is highly gendered-so our police data analysis showed that 87 percent of adolescents who were reported for adolescent to parent violence were male, and that supports kind of similar data analyses that have been conducted in America, actually there appeared to be more of a gender balance in the adolescents accessing support services. So it might be that parents are less likely to report their daughters to the police compared to their sons. They might feel less frightened of a daughter or they might feel that it's less socially acceptable to phone the police in response to violence from a daughter. So there was more of a gender balance in the support service cases that we looked at.

I'd say that our key findings from interviewing these young people who'd been violent towards their parents was firstly the sheer complexity of adolescent to parent violence. So it was quite clear that there was no single cause of this behaviour, but there were a number of potential pathways or triggers. And secondly, that many of the young people we interviewed were very vulnerable in some way. So this had important implications in terms of how adolescent perpetrators, and I say that in inverted commas, are constructed. So one of the significant differences between adolescent to parent violence and intimate partner violence, is that it's very difficult to ascertain blame or dichotomise parents and adolescents into victim and perpetrator roles. So often the lines between victim and perpetrator are very blurred in cases of adolescent to parent violence, and the adolescent perpetrators, again in inverted commas, are also victims, for example victims of violence in the home or sexual abuse, or other adverse family circumstances.

Additionally, we found that many of the young people were fully aware that their feelings and their behaviour towards their parents was problematic and they wanted to stop or change their behaviour with the right help and support.

E: So you touched on pathways and triggers that lead young people to be violent towards their parents. Can you kind of explain a little bit more about your thoughts are around those?

C: Yeah, no problem. Our research shows that there are many different pathways leading towards adolescents being violent towards their parents, and that it can occur across all sectors of society. So some of the families that we interviewed were very middle class and the parents were professionals, and in a few of the families there were no obvious or clear reasons for the violence and in these cases the parents were completely lost as to why their child was being violent to them and said that there was no history of family problems. However, we did find that in the majority of the families

that we spoke to there were adverse circumstances affecting the family, including a history of parental conflict-things like parental separation and divorce, in many of the cases the child had been removed from their parental care at some stage. There was parental alcohol or drug misuse and often a long history of conflict between the adolescent and the parent going back quite a long way.

In some of the cases that we looked at the adolescent also had mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, self-harm or suicide attempts. In some of the cases the adolescent had been diagnosed with ADHD, Asperger's, or autism, and in some of the cases the adolescent was using or misusing alcohol or drugs. There were also some cases where the young person had been bullied at school and had problems with friendships. And there were cases where the adolescent had been sexually abused by a family member or either a parent, a step parent, or a brother or an uncle.

So there was lots of different family kind of problems that young people talked about, but by far the most common pathway talked about by both parents and adolescents was a history of domestic violence in the family. And so in some cases the adolescent had been directly victimised by their parents, in all of the cases that we looked at it was the father or the step father, sometimes very severely, and in many cases the adolescent had witnessed extreme violence and abuse between their parents.

So I think the key point here, is that with the exception of a few cases, where there appeared to be a history of no violence or other familial problems, the majority of young people that we spoke to that were violent towards their parent, had experienced or were experiencing difficulties in their family life.

E: And in families where adolescent to parent violence is happening, what have been the professional responses and how have the young people you've spoken to found these responses helpful or unhelpful?

C: Well, all of the young people that we spoke to and interviewed as a part of our research were actually using the support service, so it is biased to a certain extent. So they were either involved with a broad domestic abuse support service, or they were using a specialised adolescent to parent violence support service if that was available. And they were generally very positive about the support that they were now receiving, which mostly involved group work, alongside some individual work and the support service also did parallel work with the parents at the same time.

Similarly, most of the parents we interviewed were very positive about the support service they were currently receiving support from. However, the parents did give us numerous examples of really unhelpful or even harmful responses that they previously received before they came into contact with this support service. So these quite unhelpful or harmful responses involved quite often police not taking their reports of the violence seriously, perhaps making them feel blamed and responsible for the violence that they were receiving. Parents told us about police forcing them to have their abusive child back in the home against their wishes, and which of course would never happen if it was an adult partner or ex-partner perpetrating the violence. Sometimes, police who did take it serious told the parents that the only course of action is to support a prosecute their children, which is obviously the last thing that lots of parents want to happen. And sometimes, children who were returned from the police, if their parents didn't want to prosecute, felt further empowered because they

hadn't been prosecuted. And there were stories also of parents being effectively punished where they had prosecuted their children, by having to pay their children's court fines, because parents are responsible for paying their children's fine, and also parents being court ordered to attend parenting courses as a result of reporting the violence to the police. So in other words, parents were often the ones who were affectively punished for reporting the violence to the police, and this was then potentially as dangerous, as it further empowered their child.

It was also recognised by the professionals we interviewed that parents who were being abused by their children were completely burnt out. They were way beyond the stage of being able to effectively practice the kind of advice they were given on parenting courses. And actually, the support required was much more intensive and sustained than a parenting course allows for. And lots of the parents supported this by saying that the parenting courses were for people who were having much lower level problems than their child being at the stage where they are controlling them or being violent towards them.

So parents said that they find it extremely difficult to access this appropriate support for themselves for their child, and this was often because it didn't exist or was oversubscribed. So there are a few dedicated support services for child to parent violence across the country, but they do exist in pockets and not standardised at all, and where they do exist they tend to be very quickly oversubscribed because there is such short supply. So many of the parents that we spoke to said that they tried a number of routes to access some kind of support for their families, including going through the school, going through social workers, or their GPs even. All of the parents who were now receiving this support were extremely relieved to have found an appropriate support service, and that was one which took the violence seriously, but also responded to it constructively and often without the involvement of the criminal justice system.

The adolescents we interviewed were also really positive about the support services that they were working with and said that it was really important to them to be listened to without judgement. And that was a really key thing, this idea of not being judged. So to feel that their issues were being taken seriously and that they were being given useful tools to help them to stop being violent and abusive towards their parents.

So they said things like, whilst they were encouraged by the support services that took responsibility for their behaviour and to recognised the harm that they were causing, that they also felt that they weren't being blamed or labelled as bad but actually they were being supported in addressing those really complicated emotions underlying their behaviour and that they were being supported in developing a non-violent relationship with their parents.

E: So taking all of this into consideration, what would you recommend as an effective response to adolescent to parent violence?

C: Our interviews with adolescents' parents and all of the practitioners we spoke to working with families experiencing adolescent to parent violence were all quite similar: that they all pointed towards an effective response as one that takes adolescent to parent violence as a serious but also as a really complex phenomenon, and provides

a holistic response which is tailored to the needs of the particular family. So this also recognises that adolescent to parent violence is a potentially serious form of domestic violence, it's not just children adolescent's kicking off, doing what teenagers do, but that it is a serious form of domestic violence, but also recognising that these families have multiple needs, including the parents and the adolescent safeguarding needs. So this kind of response enables parents to receive the appropriate emergency support and safety planning that they might need through the police, and it also enables an effective criminal justice response where this is supported and wanted by the parents. And there certainly were some parents that did need that criminal justice intervention, they did want to prosecute their child because it was so serious they felt that was the only way to move forward.

So in those involving severe violence where prosecution is the most appropriate response, and in cases where the parent needs that emergency assistance or safety planning, such as their child being safely removed from the scene temporarily, the police need to be well informed about child to parent violence, and they need to be prepared to support the parents as required. However, an effective response also needs to involve robust diversionary responses that don't necessarily involve prosecuting the young person, especially if that's not what the parents want, but still leads to adequate support being provided to the family. So referring to appropriate support services in the area, and making sure that the parent feels safe in the home. So effective responses recognise the vulnerability of the parent receiving violence from the child, but also recognises the vulnerability of the child and provide adequate safeguarding of their needs. So support needs to be holistic, it needs to look at what's good for the whole family, it needs to be non-judgemental and it needs to work towards building positives rather than focusing on the negatives. And providing often long-term, tailored and intensive support to parents and their children.

E: That's great. Caroline, that's been so interesting, thank you so much for sharing your time and for giving us some information about what is a very important and very complex issue.

C: You're more than welcome, thank you very much for having me.

Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more about SafeLives Spotlight on young people and domestic abuse, please go to our website SafeLives.org.uk, where we will be uploading new content every week-each exploring a different aspect of young people and domestic abuse. If you'd like to participate in the discussion, you can go to our website to sign up for a live webinar on March 3 between 1pm-2pm, and also join in the live Twitter Q&A conversation on March 15th between 1pm-2pm-just go to [#SafeYoungLives](https://twitter.com/SafeYoungLives).