

Family Violence Prisoner Survey 2015 Summary Report



Background

In line with the Victorian Government's commitment to reducing family violence and reducing reoffending, Corrections Victoria launched the Family Violence Service Reform Strategy in September 2015 to guide its response to family violence in the correctional system. The aim of the Strategy is to reduce the risk of family violence perpetrators' risk of reoffending, identify gaps in service delivery and identify opportunities to improve Corrections Victoria's response to family violence. The Strategy focuses on five initiatives:

- identifying family violence perpetrators
- delivering targeted family violence programs and services to perpetrators
- supporting prisoners and offenders who are victims of family violence
- creating an environment for cultural change
- working with other service systems.

As part of the initiative *creating an environment for cultural change*, Corrections Victoria conducted a family violence prisoner survey in order to understand prisoners' experiences, understanding, and attitudes towards family violence. The findings from this survey are intended to inform the prison system's engagement with prisoners in its response to family violence. The survey results may also provide information that can assist with the development of future education and awareness campaigns across the corrections system.

Methodology

In October 2015, a total of 4,225 surveys were sent to prisoners in participating prisons. Participation in the survey was strictly voluntary.

The survey was also translated into Vietnamese to encourage participation from Vietnamese-born prisoners, who make up the largest non-English speaking cohort within the Victorian correctional system.

The survey comprised a total of 31 questions, including seven questions on background demographic information, 20 Likert-Scale questions (five-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), and four open-ended questions.

1,070 survey responses were received, representing an overall response rate of 25 per cent. The response rates differed significantly across different prisons, and ranged from 12 per cent to 84 per cent. Response rates were higher for female prisoners (31 per cent) than for male prisoners (25 per cent).

Findings

Figure 1 (see Page 2) represents the key statistical findings from the survey. Findings that have been highlighted in light blue apply to female prisoners, while those in dark blue represent findings that apply to male prisoners. The white boxes in the centre represent findings that are common across both genders. The survey found that approximately one in four prisoners admitted to committing family violence. The majority of prisoners (approximately 75 per cent) also admitted to feeling uncomfortable when witnessing abusive behaviour.

Male and female prisoners differed significantly in their experience of family violence. Female prisoners were:

- more likely than male prisoners to be victims of family violence (two-thirds compared to half)
- more likely to be victims only, without also being perpetrators (50 per cent compared to 31 per cent).

On the other hand, male prisoners were:

- more likely to have not had any previous experience with family violence (31 per cent compared to 23 per cent of female prisoners)
- six times more likely than female prisoners to report being perpetrators only.

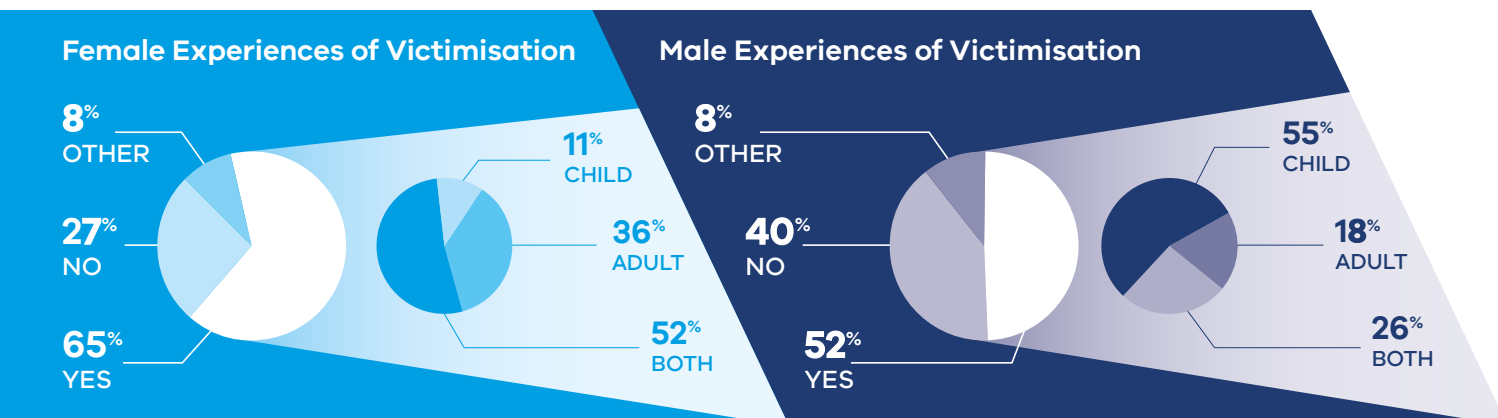
Figure 1: Key statistical findings from the survey



The proportion of male prisoners who indicated they were perpetrators was lower than expected, given that a significant proportion of male prisoners are subject to an intervention order. It is possible that perpetrators of family violence were less likely to participate in the survey, or where they had participated, chose not to indicate that they had been a perpetrator.

Male prisoners were far more likely to report being a victim of family violence as a child only, while female prisoners were more likely to experience long-term victimisation and violence as an adult. 55 per cent of all male prisoners who reported being a victim of family violence experienced violence only as a child, compared with only 11 per cent of female prisoners. More than half of female prisoners who reported being a victim of family violence experienced victimisation both as a child and adult, and 36 per cent of female prisoners experienced violence as an adult only. These differences are illustrated in Figure 2.

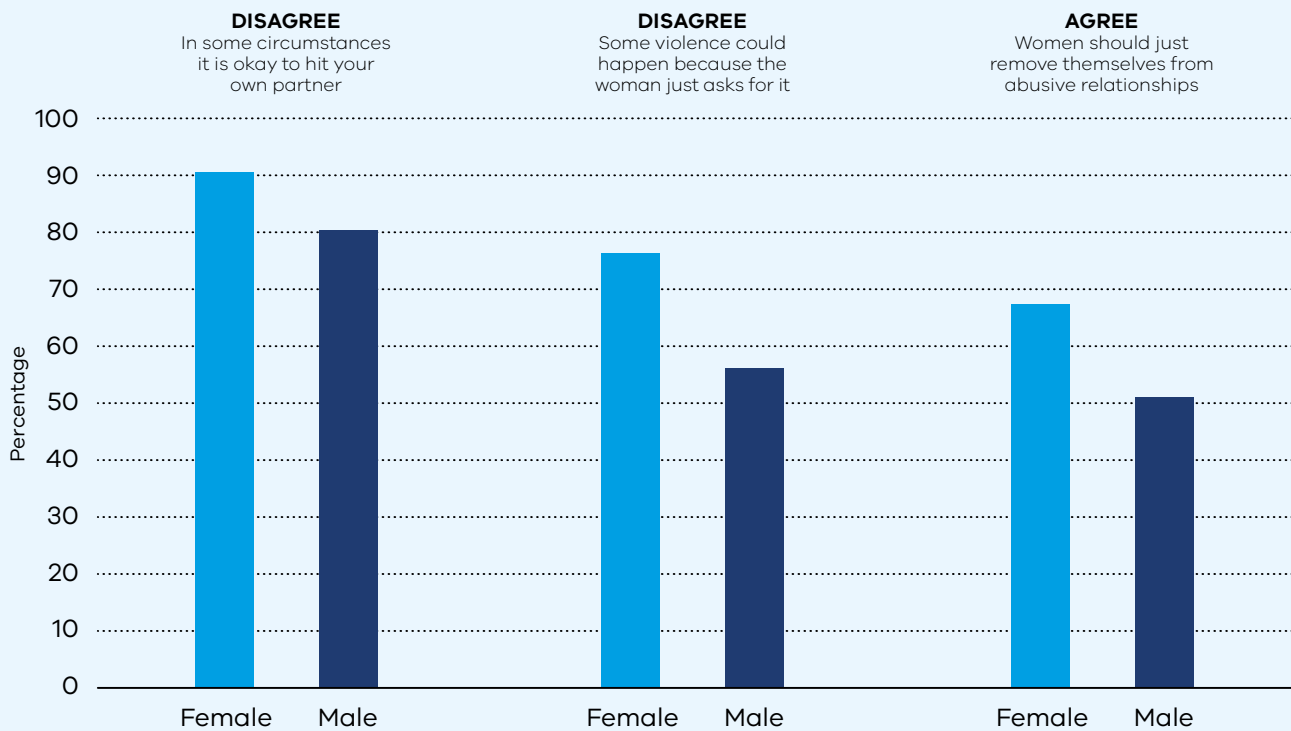
Figure 2: Female and male prisoners' experiences of victimisation



The survey found that prior experience of family violence was associated with some differences in prisoners' attitudes towards family violence. Prisoners who did not have any prior experience with family violence were more likely to respond affirmatively to the statement that 'family violence is an issue, but it doesn't have anything to do with me'. Prisoners without any prior experience of family violence were also more likely to disagree with the statement that 'in some circumstances it is okay to hit your partner'. This indicates the presence of a 'bystander' effect, where prisoners who did not have any experience of family violence may feel unable or be unwilling to intervene when witnessing acts of family violence.

In contrast, prisoners who did have prior experience of family violence were more likely to respond affirmatively to the statement 'I can do something to stop the cycle of family violence'. Unsurprisingly, perpetrators were less likely to disagree with the statement 'in some circumstances it is okay to hit your partner', compared to non-perpetrators. However, perpetrators who were also victims were the least likely to disagree with this statement, compared to prisoners who were perpetrators only. This suggests that perpetrators who were also victims are more likely to have normalised violent behaviours in relationships, and are most likely to hold attitudes that condone violence.

Some gender-based differences were also evident in responses to questions designed to elicit understanding about prisoners' attitudes towards family violence. Figure 3 shows that, overall, female prisoners are more likely than male prisoners to display attitudes against family violence. They are more likely to disagree with statements that engage in victim-blaming. Female prisoners were also more likely to agree that women who are in abusive relationships should remove themselves from these relationships.

Figure 3: Male and female prisoners' attitudes towards family violence

While female prisoners were likely to disagree with statements that engage in victim-blaming, a number of the qualitative comments from prisoners indicated that some female prisoners felt partially responsible for condoning violence by failing to leave. The following quotes from female prisoners in response to the question "Do any of your behaviours contribute to the problem of family violence?" demonstrate this phenomenon.

“Staying in the relationship, not being brave or supported enough on knowing how to leave.”

“The more it [the abuse] happened, the lower my confidence and self-esteem went, which gave the appearance that their behaviour worked – they had a docile, subservient wife.”

On the other hand, male prisoners who responded to the same question often tended to blame external factors, such as substance addiction and mental illness, for their abusive behaviours. The victim's actions were also a common theme in male prisoners' responses, where some behaviours were perceived by male prisoners as 'provoking violence'.

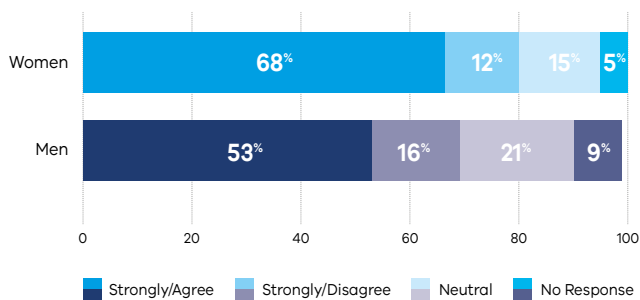
“Though not using it as an excuse (sic). My mental health issues being depression, low self-esteem and drug use contributed to my behaviour.”

“Yes! Alcohol is a problem. I need to stay on top of my depression and stay on my medication.”

“It's her fault if she done what she was told we would have no problems.”

Overall, the majority of prisoners indicated support for responses to family violence in prisons. Female prisoners were more likely to agree with the statement that the issue of family violence should be dealt with in prisons, and further, more than half of all male prisoners also agreed with this statement. Figure 4 shows the breakdown of responses to the statement 'The issue of family violence should be dealt with in prisons.'

Figure 4: Prisoners' responses to dealing with family violence in prison



Female prisoners were also more likely to encourage a fellow prisoner to participate in a family violence-related program (73 per cent, compared with 61 per cent of male prisoners), and were more likely to support a campaign to raise awareness against family violence (88 per cent, compared with 79 per cent of male prisoners).

Survey limitations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners were under-represented among the survey respondents. At the time of analysis, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners made up eight per cent of the prison population, whereas only two per cent of the survey respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. However, some Aboriginal prisoners may have consciously chosen not to identify themselves in the survey responses.

The survey also relies on prisoners' disclosure of information about family violence. Given the sensitivity of the subject, it is possible that the actual proportion of family violence victims and offenders are underestimated.

Conclusion

The Family Violence Prisoner Survey highlighted a number of key issues regarding family violence among prisoners. The key findings are:

- Family violence is a significant issue among prisoners. Compared to the general population estimates, both victims and perpetrators are over-represented in the prison population. This is despite probable under-reporting among prisoners
- The majority of female prisoners reported experiencing some form of family violence over their lifetime. Female prisoners tend to either experience long-term victimisation (both in childhood and adulthood) and in their adulthood only
- Male prisoners who reported experiencing some form of family violence were more likely to have experienced victimisation as a child only
- Female prisoners showed a better understanding of family violence and were more likely to display attitudes against family violence
- Prior experience of family violence was associated with different attitudes towards family violence. Prisoners who were both victims and perpetrators were most likely to hold attitudes condoning violence
- Prisoners who had never experienced family violence provided responses indicating that they were unwilling or unable to respond to acts of family violence
- Qualitative comments from female prisoners who had experienced family violence in prison appeared to indicate that these prisoners have lower self-esteem and self-confidence, and are likely to blame themselves for violence
- Perpetrators of family violence showed a tendency to externalise their abusive behaviour by attributing their behaviours to external factors, including blaming the victim for provoking violence
- The majority of prisoners are supportive of prison-based responses to family violence.

These findings will guide Corrections Victoria's future strategies to contribute to community safety by addressing family violence attitudes among prisoners before their release.

For more information

visit: www.corrections.vic.gov.au
 Email: corrections@justice.vic.gov.au
 Phone: (03) 8684 6600

