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Policy Recommendations on Countering Early Perpetration of Domestic Violence

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Policy Recommendations on Countering Early Perpetration of Domestic Violence

The following recommendations aim to assist policy and program makers to prevent and counter domestic violence committed by early perpetrators.

Introduction

Early perpetrators are defined as individuals aged 15 to 25.

Domestic violence is defined as intimate partner violence and all other violence between family members, such as child abuse and elder abuse. This includes physical, sexual, psychological/ emotional and economic violence, and neglect of children, older adults and people with disabilities. The term domestic violence is interchangeable with similar terms used in the EU, such as domestic abuse and family violence.

Intimate partner violence largely refers to spouses and people who are dating — both current and former partners. It also includes relationships that are more temporary or fluid in nature, which are more common among young people. This type of intimate partner violence closely resembles broader violence among peers, such as sexual violence.

These recommendations are applicable to all aspects of countering early perpetration of domestic violence through primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. This includes perpetrator interventions and victim-survivor support services.

Recommendations

Overview of Early Perpetration Initiatives

1. **Invest in targeted programs and services to counter early perpetration of domestic violence and break the cycle of abuse.**

Member states should prioritise countering early perpetration of domestic violence, as involvement in domestic violence at an early age can perpetuate cycles of harm and abuse, for both perpetrators and victim-survivors.[i]

2. **Build skills capacity within the domestic violence children's specialist support sector to work in gender-specific ways with children and support boy-victims showing early signs of violence perpetration.**

Research indicates that boys who are child victims of domestic violence, perpetrated by their parent/carer are potentially at a higher risk of later perpetration of violence; both in intimate partnerships but also in some cases, peer and youth violence. There is a greater need for specialist support services within the domestic violence victim support sector to develop gender-specific ways of working with boy child-survivors which is masculinity aware and challenges early signs of normalisation of violence and negative attitudes around perpetration. We recommend enhanced

collaboration and capacity building work between services with expertise in youth perpetration and services that support child victims.

3. **Design and deliver tailored and youth-driven early perpetration initiatives that address the diverse needs and experiences of young people.**

Programs and services focused on early perpetration should target the significant range of domestic violence needs and experiences among young people, as well as the people around them that are also affected. In particular, perpetrator programs and victim-survivor support services should be individualised in their approach to young people. To ensure these initiatives are effectively targeted, young people should have a voice in their development and implementation.

- Tailored initiatives should be designed and delivered in a manner that recognises the varying life stages of this cohort: from a 15-year-old adolescent to an 18-year-old new to adulthood, and a more independent person in their early-to-mid twenties.
- Initiatives should recognise regional and cultural contexts and acknowledge the intersectionality of power structures such as age, gender, race, religion, class, sexuality and ability.[ii]
- The main focus of early perpetration initiatives should be boys and young men who commit intimate partner violence, as they remain the largest cohort of early perpetrators. However, it is important that attention is also given to:
    - girls and young women who commit intimate partner violence
    - intimate partner violence in LGBTIQ relationships
    - 15- to 25-year-olds who commit domestic violence against family members such as their parents, children and siblings
    - children who are victim-survivors of domestic violence and showing early signs of perpetration, as research shows that boys in particular who are victim-survivors are a higher risk of later perpetration of violence[iii].

4. **Build comprehensive support networks for young people by fostering collaboration among organisations to create a holistic approach to countering early perpetration of domestic violence.**

Efforts to counter early perpetration should recognise that young people are unlikely to be dealing with domestic violence in isolation. There should be coordination, and information sharing where appropriate, with programs and services focused on related issues such as mental health challenges, trauma from past events such as child abuse, alcohol and drug addiction, and financial hardship. These issues may appear before, during or after domestic violence, with cause and effect often complex and unclear.

One example is that young people who perpetrate domestic violence may also be engaging in other forms of violence. These other forms of violence may be more easily recognised than domestic violence, meaning collaboration between youth offending services and domestic violence services is vital. Another example is pregnancy, as young men can begin or increase violence when their partner becomes pregnant, and young women in abusive relationships are at greater risk of becoming pregnant.[iv]

Understanding Domestic Violence and Young People's Relationships

5. **Invest in education programs that equip young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to build healthy, respectful relationships and prevent and respond to domestic violence.**

Initiatives to counter early perpetration must recognise that young people often have limited experience of intimate relationships.[v] Therefore, young people deserve extensive education to enable them to fully understand and recognise the broad and intricate aspects of domestic violence, such as power inequities in relationships and harmful gender norms. This education should be applied in conjunction with initiatives such as UNESCO's comprehensive sexuality education[vi] and campaigns on consent[vii], respectful relationships[viii], sexual and reproductive health and rights[ix], and contraception and family planning[x].

Education about domestic violence should include information such as:

- domestic violence is not only physical or sexual in nature, but can also be psychological/emotional or economic; with all forms having the potential to be equally harmful[xi]
- domestic violence perpetrator behaviours are numerous and can include acts or threats of assault, rape, stalking, harassment, jealousy, entitlement, aggression, intimidation, humiliation, gaslighting, isolation, financial control, online abuse, image-based abuse, self-harm, harm to children or pets, and damage to property[xii]
- perpetrators often employ coercive control — a pattern of abusive behaviours used to control, manipulate and dominate to instil fear in victim-survivors, wear down their sense of identity and independence, and entrap them in a violent relationship by closing off options for accessing safety and support[xiii]
- domestic violence often escalates or increases in severity and frequency over time, with changing levels of risk and harm to the victim-survivor[xiv]
- domestic violence risk factors include recent or imminent separation, financial difficulties, mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, unemployment, school absenteeism, and the addiction or misuse of alcohol or other drugs.[xv]

6. **Develop educational resources that accurately reflect the diverse and complex nature of young people's relationships.**

In designing and delivering education about domestic violence, early perpetration initiatives must acknowledge that young people tend to view and experience intimate relationships differently than older people. Young people are more likely to be in temporary or multiple relationships, and their relationships are more likely to fluctuate. As such, the term 'intimate relationships' could refer to romantic partnerships, dating relationships and any connections where emotional and physical intimacy is present.[xvi]

7. **Foster open and supportive environments where young people can discuss relationships, challenge harmful norms, and develop the skills to build healthy and respectful connections.**

Efforts to counter early perpetration should allow young people to discuss and examine the subject matter in a safe environment. This may lead to ideas being challenged or resisted, which is understandable given the complexities of the topic. However, while curiosity should be encouraged, young people must be informed about firm boundaries for acceptable attitudes and behaviours. This must be communicated clearly but without assigning blame or shame. For boys and young men, communication should focus on healthy masculinities and not shy away from discussing issues through a gender lens. The overall aim should be to empower young people to make informed decisions that enhance the health, safety and wellbeing of themselves and those around them.

8. **Develop programs and services that recognise the unique challenges and vulnerabilities faced by young people involved in domestic violence and support them to learn from their experiences.**

Early perpetration initiatives should recognise that young people's limited experiences can lead them into situations for which they are not fully prepared or are overwhelmed by, such as where the expectations or tolerance of those involved are mismatched. Their lack of experience also makes it difficult for young people to determine and set limits against abusive behaviours and contributes to their vulnerability of being exposed to harm or committing abuse.[xvii] With this in mind, perpetrator programs must strike a balance between confronting young perpetrators' harmful behaviour and providing them with support to reform and grow.

People and Settings

9. **Empower young people as leaders in countering domestic violence by equipping them to positively influence and support their peers, including through bystander intervention programs.**

When young people seek support, they often turn to other young people. As they navigate their youth, friends act as sounding boards or confidants. This extends to those in an intimate relationship, particularly in relation to issues of sexual exploration and consent.[xviii] As such, education about domestic violence for young people should recognise how young people learn together and from each other. It should also highlight the key role of bystanders, who can intervene and help the perpetrator and the victim-survivor access professional support.[xix]

10. **Strengthen the ability of adult role models to recognise, prevent and respond to domestic violence committed by early perpetrators.**

Adults play an important role in guiding and influencing young people. For boys and young men at risk of perpetrating domestic violence, there is a significant responsibility for their male role models, such as fathers, uncles, older brothers, teachers, coaches, and employers/supervisors. Adults must be aware that the way they live their own lives is an example for young people and that young people will often repeat or mirror behaviour they observe. Adults must also be taught how to guide young people, such as by being curious and asking questions, being reflective, getting involved when something seems not right rather than turning a blind eye, and pointing young people to professional guidance when appropriate.[xx]

11. **Develop collaborative partnerships among organisations serving young people in various settings and equip them with the tools to address domestic violence.**

Early perpetration initiatives should reach young people where they live, learn, work and socialise. This involves collaboration between early perpetration programs and services and the people and organisations that operate in these settings. Supporting families and schools is essential, as home and school are fundamental safe spaces where young people are guided through childhood and adolescence. Beyond that, places where young people experience newfound independence are also important.

- Workplaces and recreational settings such as sports clubs, arts precincts and community organisations can help to lead young people by promoting cultures of respect and by not tolerating inappropriate attitudes or behaviours.
- Tertiary education institutions such as universities are particularly vital, as they can assist young people at the stage of life when they are often away from their traditional support systems for the first time.
- Hospitality businesses such as bars, nightclubs, restaurants and cafes may not know the young people frequenting their venues as much as other settings involving young people. However, the activity in these venues exacerbates the risks and challenges for young people, due to the higher likelihood of young people using alcohol and other drugs, combined with social pressures common in young people's formative years.[xxi] Hospitality businesses should be supported to clearly establish firm boundaries for acceptable behaviour and provide assistance to those in need.
- Social settings such as parties or informal gatherings without external supervision provide an additional challenge. Young people require knowledge to navigate these instances of elevated risk to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of all involved. As such, early perpetration initiatives should prepare and empower young people for these situations as part of their educational guidance.

Information, Digital Communications and Technology

12. **Deliver information literacy programs that enable young people to critically evaluate information and protect themselves from harmful content.**

Efforts to counter early perpetration should understand what information and content young people receive and how they receive it, from various sources including:

- traditional media (such as television, radio, newspaper and magazine outlets)
- social media (such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok)
- messaging apps (such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Snapchat, Discord and Viber).

These entities are an important element in efforts to raise awareness and debunk misinformation and disinformation. However, the Internet's inherent openness means young people need critical thinking skills to know how to navigate the vast amounts of information and content available. Young people benefit from guidance and discussion on complex topics such as pornography and social media influencers.[xxii]

13. **Recognise the impact of digital communications on young people's relationships and develop strategies to address the unique challenges posed by online interactions.**

Early perpetration initiatives should ensure that young people's online behaviour is treated with the same level of consideration as offline behaviour. This involves recognising how young people incorporate digital communication tools into their lives in a manner that blurs the line between online and offline socialising. They engage with partners, friends, family and broader society through social media, messaging apps and online gaming, and potential partners through dating apps. Digital communication can add stress to young people's relationships, as it demands instant availability and response and can create a longing for confirmation.[xxiii]

14. **Leverage young people's digital literacy to prevent and address technology-facilitated abuse while promoting responsible online behaviour.**

Early perpetration initiatives should focus on young people's strong technology skills. It can be positive in helping young people find reliable information and professional and peer support in a timely manner. It can also be negative in enabling abusive behaviour such as online harassment or stalking, hacking accounts to steal data or deny access, and distributing sexually-explicit images or videos without consent (known as 'revenge porn'). The way young people use technology complicates these issues, as they can consider it acceptable to do things such as share passwords, check a partner's phone, or send sexually explicit content.[xxiv]

Research Gaps

15. **Invest in research on early perpetration of domestic violence to ensure policy and program interventions are evidence-based and effective.**

Research is fundamental to countering early perpetration of domestic violence. Clear and effective policies and programs rely on understanding the full extent of the problems and knowing which solutions work and which don't. There are numerous data and research gaps in relation to the early perpetration of domestic violence that require immediate attention.

- Data on teen dating violence (TDV) varies greatly across Europe. There is a need for further research to gain a comprehensive understanding of TDV.
- Data on the effectiveness of early perpetration prevention programs is scarce and their methodological quality needs to be improved. These programs need to be thoroughly assessed to demonstrate their positive impact. For example, in the case of TDV some studies point to the increase of this type of violence, which reflects that prevention programs currently available might not be effective enough to prevent this type of violence.
- Data on childhood risk factors for youth violence perpetration is limited. To improve understanding of the adverse childhood experiences of young perpetrators there is a need for broader data collection. This will help to deepen understanding about how to intervene at earlier stages as well as the cross-over or concurrence of domestic violence perpetration and victimisation and other forms of abuse.
- There is limited data available that supports understanding of the ways in which early perpetration of domestic violence co-presents with other forms of youth violence and gender-based violence (e.g. serious youth violence, child criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation). Currently the understanding focuses on intimate partnerships but there are

gaps in understanding how this can manifest amongst or within other criminal activity and youth violence.

- Emerging reports indicate that young people are being impacted by negative online spaces which promote harmful masculinity messages, sometimes called 'masculinity influencers' or 'the manosphere'. However, there is limited understanding about whether this is arising as an issue in practice with young perpetrators and effective intervention approaches.
- As internet-enabled technology is constantly developing, there is a need for domestic violence perpetrator services working with young people to share information alerts about new forms of technology that are being utilised as tactics in early perpetration of domestic violence among young people.
- There are research gaps in domestic violence perpetration contact and interventions for young people who are not residing in their parental home, e.g. in residential schools, children's homes, colleges, universities.

Conclusions

The outlined policy recommendations provide a multi-faceted framework to prevent and counter the early perpetration of domestic violence among individuals aged 15 to 25.

Recognizing the complex and interconnected nature of domestic violence, these recommendations emphasize the importance of a holistic, youth-centered approach grounded in prevention, intervention, and education.

These recommendations' prevention and intervention strategies call for a collective commitment from policymakers, practitioners, educators, and communities.

Addressing the early perpetration of domestic violence requires a sustained, proactive effort to challenge harmful norms, empower young people, and provide comprehensive support systems. By investing in education, collaboration, and research, we need to foster safer environments and healthier relationships, ultimately reducing domestic violence and promoting the wellbeing of young people and their communities.

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