Family Violence: Beyond the usual suspects

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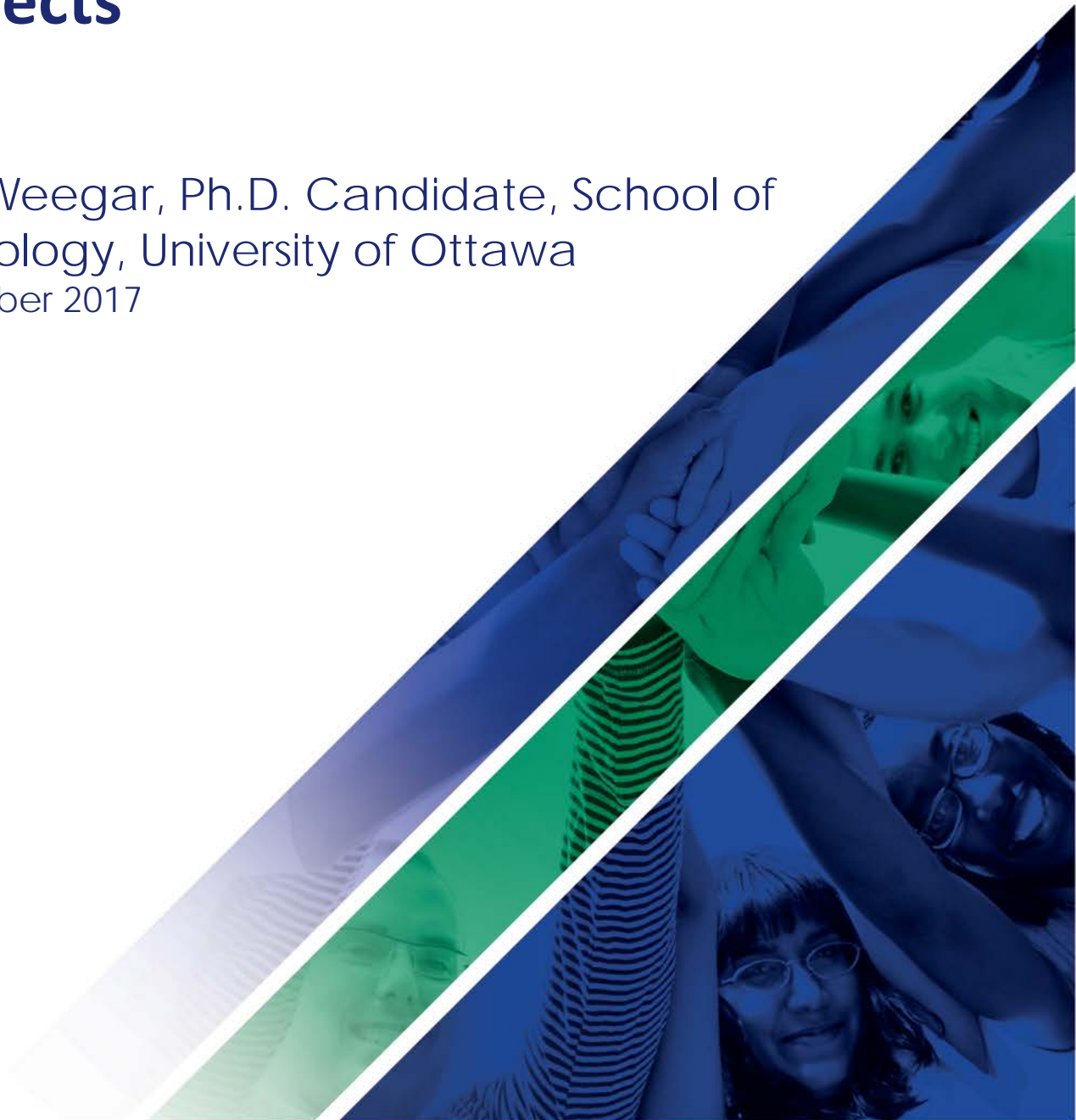
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Executive Summary

Family violence is a public health issue of local and national importance. Violence against children, violence toward older adults, and violence between spouses/intimate partners are usually the targets of research and efforts to address family violence. However, Canada-wide and Ottawa-based data on violence and homicides in families show a considerable number of incidents involving non-spousal family members. This includes siblings, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, cousins, or in-laws, related by blood, marriage, or adoption. For example, one-fifth of the homicides in Ottawa in 2016 involved non-spousal relatives. Recent national data also found that nearly one-quarter of homicides and 14% of family violence incidents involved non-spousal family members.

Canada-wide data trends also suggest that non-spousal family violence rates may be rising, yet the reasons why are unknown. In fact, violence among this group of family members is rarely discussed. Therefore, this report aims to review research findings related to this issue. It intends to help service providers and the public better understand why, when, and how non-spousal family violence happens. It also highlights the need for research, prevention strategies, and interventions that address family violence between non-spousal relatives.

In general, very little research to date has focused on non-spousal family violence, especially for extended family relationships (e.g., nieces, nephews, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, cousins). The small amount of research that does exist usually involves siblings and child-to-parent violence. Sibling violence is often found to be the most common form of family violence. However, the abuse of siblings is often misinterpreted as normal sibling behaviour, which interferes with efforts to better understand and address this type of violence. Children who act violently toward their parents are also overlooked and misunderstood. Still, research confirms that some adolescent and adult children use violence to resolve conflicts with their parents. Research findings also illustrate some factors that put non-spousal relatives at risk of using violence, especially if they have a history of seeing or experiencing abuse, or they hold positive views toward violence. While these findings are revealing, more research is needed to improve our understanding.

Non-spousal family violence programs also seem to be missing, so services that target other forms of family violence should be used in the meantime. Primary prevention and building public awareness should be priorities, especially using what we know about key determinants of health (e.g., supporting healthy relationships, education). Ways to identify non-spousal relatives at-risk of using violence and early intervention should also be considered.

Introduction

Family violence is an important public health issue and widely studied research topic, although complex and still not entirely understood. Many definitions of family violence exist. It can include violence, abuse, and unhealthy conflict by one family member toward another that has the potential to lead to poor health, injury and, in rare cases, death (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2016). Much of the existing literature in this area has focused on violence between intimate partners (also known as spousal violence, dating violence, or domestic violence), violence against children (also known as child abuse and neglect, or child maltreatment), and violence toward older adults (also known as elder abuse or mistreatment). Literature focusing on other abusive relationships in families (e.g., between siblings, child-to-parent), defined as "non-spousal family violence" for the purpose of this report, is very limited in scope though gaining attention among scholars. For instance, Goodlin & Dunn (2010) argue that much of the existing family violence literature has ignored the family as a system when focusing on singular relationships like intimate partners, thereby neglecting critical information about violence that may be occurring among other family members.

The true prevalence of non-spousal family violence is unknown. In Canada, regular reports on family violence are published through the analysis of data from nation-wide police reports. Most recently, nation-wide incidence data on violent crimes verified by Canadian police services has shown that non-spousal family members (e.g., nieces, nephews, uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws) are the victims in 14% of all police-reported incidents of violence, or 53% of police-reported family violence incidents (Figure 1; Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics [CCJS], 2017). However, these statistics are likely to underestimate the actual prevalence of violence by non-spousal family members (i.e., the true proportion of the population who has experienced non-spousal family violence) because they do not include information about incidents that were not reported to the police, which is typical for cases of family violence (Chan, 2011; Perrault, 2015; Perreault & Simpson, 2016). Additionally, while other Canadian nation-wide sources on family violence include unreported incidents (i.e., anonymous self-report data reports produced by Statistics Canada), these reports do not separate acts of family violence committed by spousal/ intimate partners from those involving non-spousal perpetrators.

Figure 1. Victims (%) of all police-reported violent crimes in Canada, 2015.

All Violent Crime

Non-Family
74.1 %

Family
25.9%

Family Violent Crime

Family
(non-spousal)
13.7%

Family (spousal /
intimate partner)
12.2%
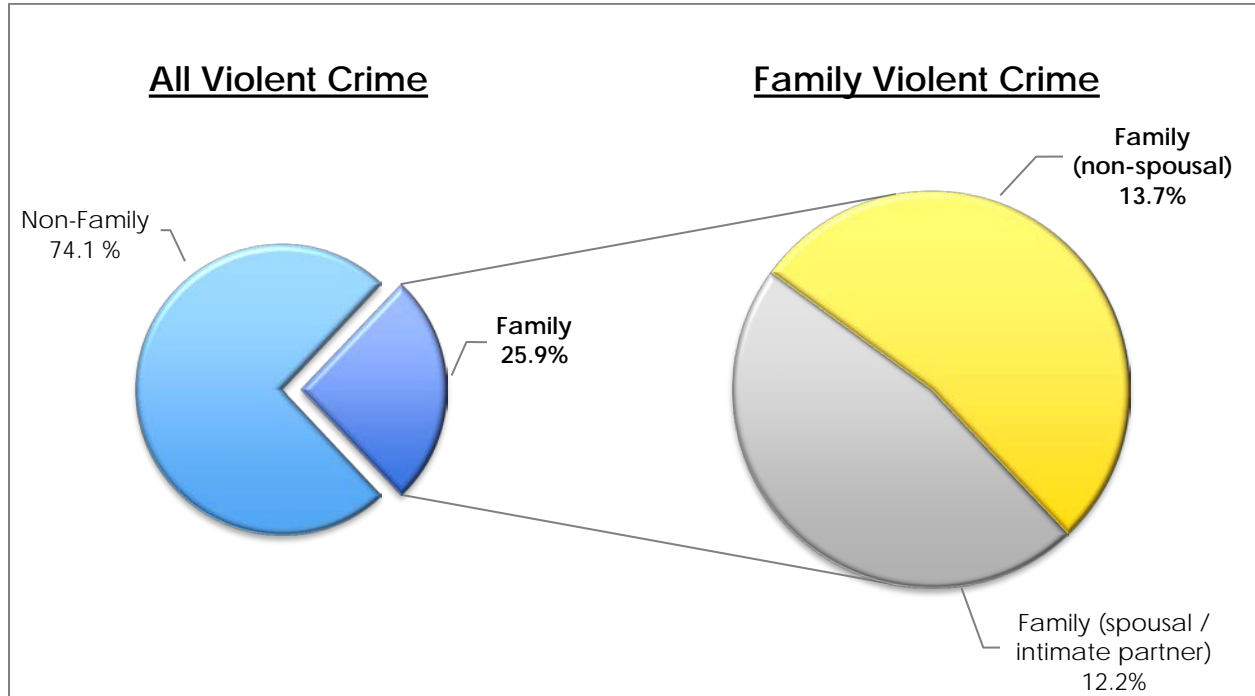
In extreme and rare circumstances, family violence can lead to homicide. Detailed information on various relationship types for family-related homicides in Canada is available. Aggregate reports using data from 2005 to 2014 have shown that the average number of solved homicides committed by non-spousal family members per year is higher than the average number committed by current or ex-spouses or common law partners (18.1% and 14.5% per year, respectively; CCJS, 2016). In 2015, family members committed 40.4% of all solved homicides in Canada, with non-spousal family members committing 54.4% of all solved family-related homicides in Canada (Figure 2; CCJS, 2016). Recent reports also show that non-spousal family homicides increased from 73 to 99 in Canada, from 2014 to 2015 (17.7% and 22.0% of all solved homicides each year, respectively), whereas the number of homicides involving a current or former intimate partner declined (20.8% in 2014 and 18.4% in 2015; CCJS, 2016).

Locally speaking, there were 24 homicides in Ottawa last year. Five (20.8%) of these homicides involved non-spousal family members, which is comparable percentage-wise to national statistics on relationship types for solved homicides in 2015 (Figure 2). Notably, in Ottawa last year, none of the solved homicides involved intimate partners (Ottawa Citizen, 2016). Considering local and national evidence for family violence involving non-spousal members, as well as recent national data indicating rising homicides among non-spousal family relationships, this report has been commissioned to examine the literature relevant to non-spousal family violence. It is intended to help service providers and the public better understand why, when, and how non-spousal family violence happens, and to highlight the need for prevention programming for family violence and homicides that do not involve intimate partners, or violence toward children or older adults. Drawing from sources from the U.S, U.K., and Canada, this report examines non-spousal family violence among different abusive relationship types (i.e., sibling violence, violence toward parents) and what we know about non-spousal family homicides. This report will end with suggestions for prevention and intervention

Figure 2. Victims (%) of all solved homicides in Canada, 2015.
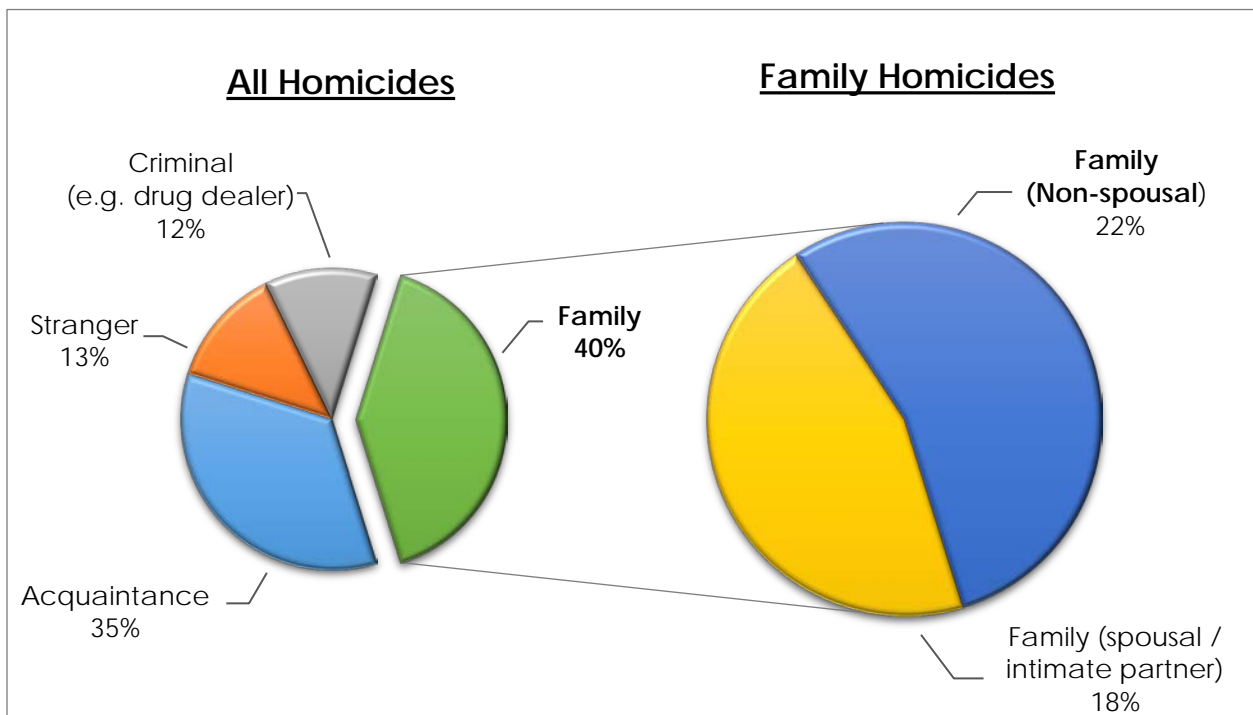
As an aside, according to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (2016), it should be highlighted that the recent rise in non-spousal family homicides in Canada was mainly due to an increase in homicides committed by extended family members (e.g., nieces, nephews, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws, etc., related by blood, marriage, or adoption). Despite this surprising finding, the information presented herein will be structured largely around studies involving sibling violence and adolescent/adult child-to-parent violence, as the existing literature has focused largely on these abusive relationships and neglected extended family victims and perpetrators almost entirely. This highlights a critical need for future studies to explore family-related violence and homicide with diverse extended family members.

Examining Non-Spousal Family Violence

We have learned from existing research literature on intimate partner violence, child abuse, and elder abuse that no single factor can accurately predict when, how, or to whom family violence will occur. We also know that what leads to family violence is a mix of individual, family, social, and environmental factors, and how these factors work together is complex. That being said, existing family violence research has predominately found that violent acts in adulthood are more common among those that have directly or indirectly experienced violence in childhood. For instance, in a recent Canadian study that used nation-wide adult self-report data, Perreault (2015) found a clear association between childhood maltreatment and experiencing violent crimes (e.g., physical and sexual assault) during the previous 12 months, even when several other known risk factors for violence were taken into account, such as drug use and mental illness. More specifically, adults who had experienced physical and/or sexual abuse as children were twice as likely to be violently victimized as adults compared to those who had not been abused. Likewise, perpetrators of family violence have also been found to be victims of violence. In other words, many of the same factors increase the risk for being abusive or violent and being a victim of family violence, and why this happens is not clear (PHAC, 2016).

Of the few studies that report specifically on non-spousal family violence, many cite the strong influence of past victimization, such as a history of child maltreatment (e.g., Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Lyons, Bell, Fréchette & Romano, 2015). However, other pathways to non-spousal family violence have been proposed (e.g., individual tendency toward anger and blame, isolation, and absent coping mechanisms for chronic strain, results in violence toward family members; Walsh & Krienert, 2014). The following two sections will explore what we know about non-spousal family violence in more detail, focusing specifically on sibling and child-to-parent incidents involving adolescent/adult perpetrators and adult victims.

Sibling Violence

Sibling violence remains one of the least studied forms of family violence, though it is frequently cited as the most prevalent form (Caffaro, 2014; Eriksen & Jenson, 2006). While sibling relationships have received increasing attention in the family violence literature in recent years, the physical abuse of siblings is often minimized (Finkelhor, Turner & Ormrod, 2006), and severe injuries inflicted with intent may be depicted instead as an accident or horseplay (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005). Researchers also tend to focus on preschool and school age children who perpetrate violence, perhaps because sibling relationships are sometimes portrayed to mature and lessen in their verbal and physical aggression in adolescence and adulthood. Such depictions, however, ignore the violence and abuse that has long been proven to exist among siblings, including adolescents and adults (Button & Gealt, 2010; Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Khan & Rogers, 2015). For instance, in a large sample of sibling physical assaults reported to law enforcement agencies in the U.S. from 2000 to 2005, representing 33,066 children, youth, and young adults, just over one-third of cases (37.6%) involved young adult offenders (18-21 years) and 49.8% of physical assaults were committed by 14-17 year olds (Krienert & Walsh, 2011). Research also indicates that the incidence of sibling violence may decrease with age (Button & Gealt, 2010), though injury and violence severity tend to increase with age (Finkelhor et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, little has been done to determine and validate the unique factors that contribute to older sibling violence, though several theoretical models have been offered. Using strongly supported theories and diverse research findings from other areas of family violence, Hoffman and Edwards (2004) estimate that several types of negative interaction among family members work together to encourage violence and abuse in older sibling relationships. First, social learning suggests that experiencing and witnessing verbal conflict, violence, and abuse by significant others is predicted to exert considerable influence on negative sibling behaviour. Second, siblings are forced to share and participate in division of labour within an individual family unit, resulting in differing interests that can lead to conflict, violence, and abuse. Lastly, traditional gender roles and family attitudes supporting the use of violence to resolve conflict can increase negative interactions. Evolutionary perspectives on sibling violence tend to highlight that the innate power imbalance and involuntary nature of sibling relationships may prime siblings for violent conflict from an early age, particularly without effective conflict resolution resources (Archer, 2013). Other research has also supported the relationship between sibling violence and negative behaviors such as substance use, delinquency, and aggression (e.g., Button & Gealt, 2010), as well as with exposure to other forms of family violence (e.g., Kiscelica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). However, more recent research is needed.

Parent Violence

Adolescent or youth violence toward parents (also known as child-to-parent violence) included acts intended to cause physical, psychological, or financial harm to a parent, or to exert power and control over him or her (Cottrell, 2001). This type of violence is different from other forms of family violence because parents still have to parent and hold power (e.g., financially support the family), which often makes the option of leaving the relationship very difficult. Similar to sibling violence, exposure to other forms of family violence (e.g., child maltreatment or violence between parents) can increase the risk of adolescents' violence toward their parents (Cottrell & Monk, 2004; Lyons et al., 2015). A weak bond with parents, adolescent depression and/or substance use, and certain parenting practices (e.g., power-assertive strategies) are examples of other risk factors for parental abuse by adolescents (Calvete, Orue & Gámez-Guadix, 2013; Ibabe, Jaureguizar & Bentler, 2013; Ibabe & Bentler, 2016).

However, parental violence involving adult children is incredibly understudied. One of the first and few studies to publish about family violence between parents and adult children surveyed 489 university undergraduate students in the U.K. regarding their experience of maltreatment during childhood and their use of violence as a conflict tactic with parents in the previous year (Browne & Hamilton, 1998). Findings from this study indicated that 14.5% of the sample reported using violent tactics toward one or both of their parents, such as slapping, pushing or shoving. Results also suggested that 3.8% of the sample used severely violent conflict tactics toward their mother and/or father in the past year (e.g., hitting with an object, threatening with a weapon). Interestingly, this study also explored whether adult children used similar conflict tactics to those of their parents, and found that violence by the parent toward the respondent almost always preceded parental abuse (i.e., around 80% of respondents who showed violence toward their parents had parents who also used violence on them). Still, this study is dated and there remains a significant gap in parental violence research involving adult children.

Non-Spousal Family Homicides

As stated earlier in this report, recent increases have been observed in the number of homicides committed by family members other than current or ex-spouses or common law partners in Canada (CCJS, 2016), and the mechanisms behind this recent increase are unclear. Interestingly, the rise in non-spousal family homicides in Canada was mostly due to an increase in homicides committed by extended family members. Though the next section will attempt to illustrate what we know about this extreme form of family violence, it should be noted that existing studies on family homicide have largely explored sibling and parent homicides, while neglecting extended family victims and

perpetrators entirely. Thus, considering the rise in extended family homicides and the dearth of research, there is a critical need for future studies on extended family violence and homicide.

Siblicides

Studies on sibling homicides (also known as siblicides) are emerging, though still limited in scope (Walsh & Kiernet, 2014). It has been estimated that siblicides account for as many as 8%–10% of all familial homicides (Gebo, 2002). Most siblicides involve adults rather than adolescents, with brothers-killing-brothers as the most common relationship dyad, and sisters-killing-sisters as the least common dyad (Bourget & Gagne, 2006; Gebo, 2002; Marleau & Saucier, 1998; Underwood & Patch, 1999; Walsh & Kiernet, 2014). For example, using data from the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics in their investigation of 265 single-victim cases of siblicide in Canada between 1978 and 1995, Marleau & Saucier (1998) found that over three-quarters of both offenders and victims were 19 or older, and a brother killed a brother in 81% of cases. Bourget and Gagne (2006), who studied coroner's files from 1991 to 2000 in the province of Québec, found that the average age of sibling homicide victims was 37 years, whereas offenders' mean age was 33 years, and all but one of the cases involved adults. More recent research on siblicides in Canada is unavailable; however, a recent U.S. study of 1,002 sibling homicides involving youth and young adults that took place between 2000-2007 found that older brothers were still the most frequent offenders against both male and female siblings, with arguments reported as the most common factor leading to the homicide event (54%; Walsh & Krienert, 2014).

Little is known about why some youth and adult siblings who engage in family violence ultimately murder their siblings. Using other theories that delineate pathways to family violence (e.g., classic strain theory; Broidy & Agnew, 1997), Walsh and Krienert (2014) propose several interacting mechanisms that may explain how sibling violence culminates in siblicide. First, they propose that emotional responses to chronic strain have a significant impact on the likelihood of violent behaviour occurring, such that externalizing emotional reactions (i.e., anger, blame) are more likely to result in violence. Second, they highlight that chronic strain, together with isolation and absent prosocial coping mechanisms, may result in aggression and violence. Taken together, siblings who chronically strained and isolated, respond with externalizing reactions (i.e., anger, blame), and lack prosocial coping mechanisms, may be more likely to respond to sibling conflict with violence that, in acute situations, could escalate to siblicide. While this model provides some direction, more thorough examinations of strain and related mechanisms, and research support with diverse samples in the context of siblicide, are needed.

Parricides

Research on the act of parricide, or the killing of one's parent (also known as patricide and matricide, the killing of one's father and mother, respectively), also exists, although many of these studies are quite dated. Work to date suggests that parricides represent a very small proportion of all family homicides; for instance, drawing from 27 years of reported homicides in the U.S. (1976-2003), parricides represented 3.9% of homicides committed by individuals aged 21 and younger, and there was a decreasing trend over time (Walsh, Krienert & Crowder, 2008). Research has also suggested that the age when males and females commit parricide peaks for both genders in late adolescence to young adulthood (17 to 25 years of age), whereas the age of victimization for fathers tend to peak earlier than for mothers (early and late 50s, respectively; Heide, 2014; Heide & Petee, 2007; Walsh et al., 2008). Existing studies, both national and international in scope, also reveal that patricides occur more often than matricides and males are more likely to be both offenders and victims (Hillbrand, Alexandre, Young & Spitz, 1999; Heide & Petee, 2007). In terms of what leads to this lethal violence, more dated research has suggested that younger offenders act in extreme response to abuse inflicted by their father and/or mother (e.g., Heide 1994), whereas older offenders of parricide act out of severe mental illness (e.g., Millaud, Auclair, & Meunier, 1996). More recent research, however, proposes a more nuanced picture; although prior child abuse may be prevalent in families that have experienced parricide, parricide could also be the end of an escalating process that began as low-level child-to-parent violence and eventually culminated in homicide (Walsh & Krienert, 2009). Future research is needed to thoroughly evaluate these hypotheses.

Addressing Non-Spousal Family Violence

Family violence is complex, so it is not surprising that few interventions have been found to consistently and effectively prevent it (Wathen et al., 2012). Furthermore, much of the existing research on this topic often relies on "official" source data (e.g., police reports), which means data on contextual factors is often unavailable, preventing the opportunity to contextualize existing findings in a meaningful way toward understanding protective and intervention factors. Considering this and lacking research on non-spousal family violence, it is unsurprising that research about the effectiveness of prevention strategies for this subset of violence is hardly available. Furthermore, there appear to be no violence prevention or intervention programs developed specifically for non-spousal family violence. However, local, national, and international strategies, frameworks, and initiatives that aim to address family violence do exist, particularly for violence against women and children. For instance, the Government of Canada's Family Violence Initiative began in 1988 and aims to prevent family violence, promote public awareness on its risk and protective

factors, encourage collaboration across sectors, and support data collection, research, and evaluation (PHAC, 2016). Thus, we can learn from other initiatives that have been used to target more recognized forms of family violence.

First and foremost, many experts insist on a primary prevention approach to reducing family violence (i.e., focusing on healthy relationships, social supports, and the determinants of health; PHAC, 2016). Primary prevention strategies can include whole-school approaches to violence prevention and building healthy relationships skills, home visitation programs that target isolated or chronically distressed families, and marketing campaigns that encourage bystanders to step in and speak out when violence occurs. In Alberta (Canada), Project Shift (www.preventdomesticviolence.ca) was initiated to explore the root causes of spousal violence and build a primary prevention framework in Alberta, including research mobilization through partnerships with diverse community stakeholders (e.g., government, community organizations). Notably, in 2012, Project Shift researchers published a review of domestic violence plans from around the world that identified common theories, strategies and actions (Wells, Claussen, & Sandham, 2012a). While very few evidence-based programs were identified, common elements supported by research evidence emerged: limiting access to alcohol, ensuring healthy relationship curriculums for youth in schools, and media campaigns. Though the focus of this review was on spousal violence, these findings could be used in the interim to inform tailored primary prevention approaches for non-spousal family violence.

Public awareness/media campaigns could also be particularly useful for non-spousal family violence, particularly to counteract social normalization and minimization (Kettrey & Emery, 2006; Phillips, Phillips, Grupp, & Trigg, 2009). For instance, if family members are better able to detect detrimental sibling interactions, their likelihood of seeking professional intervention may increase (Khan, 2017). Whether these campaigns are successful in changing beliefs and attitudes is often uncertain and difficult to measure, though some preliminary evidence is emerging for their effectiveness (Wells, Koziey, & Ferguson, 2012b). Such efforts also have the potential to bring attention to problems with current research methods, such as analyses that do not provide enough detail to properly distinguish abusive relationship types within family violence. Some key recommendations for such campaigns include utilizing television and online sources, leveraging social media channels for disseminating information, and preparing toolkits for journalists about how to properly frame stories of family violence (e.g., current statistics, contact information for reliable field experts, examples of how to frame such stories within the larger, social context; Wells, et al., 2012b). Building awareness among professionals (e.g., teachers, youth workers) who are in a position to detect early signs and prevent this form of familial abuse could also be valuable (Kettrey & Emery, 2006; Phillips et al., 2009). For instance, with child maltreatment and intimate partner violence, ongoing

training to health care professionals has been highlighted as a key point of intervention for recognizing signs of violence, or families who may be at risk (Dubowitz, Lane, Semiatin, & Magder, 2012).

Lastly, the role of early intervention (i.e., adopting a proactive stance) has been highlighted, especially treating with families with children and/or youth exposed to significant forms of maltreatment, or an adolescent who is chronically aggressive toward their parent. For instance, considering theories that highlight links between non-spousal family violence, lacking conflict resolution skills, and/or positive views of violence (e.g., Albert, 2013, Hoffman & Edwards, 2004), education programs that teach non-violent approaches for resolving conflict could be developed and offered to at-risk families, such as those with child maltreatment histories (Tucker & Finkelhor, 2015). Support for early intervention efforts are also grounded in the life course perspective, which highlights the potential for interventions to reduce or "reverse" the effects of adverse experiences such as family violence, conceivably preventing the intergenerational transmission of violence (Logan-Greene, Nurius, Hooven, & Thompson, 2013).

Conclusions

Family violence is a significant public health issue of local and national importance. It impacts are extensive and enduring, even for less severe forms. Recent Canadian data suggests that non-spousal family violence rates are stable and may be increasing, though the reasons behind this are unknown. Studies of sibling and parental violence involving adolescents and adults indicate this is not a new form of family violence, though rigorous and extensive research studies are desperately needed, especially for extended family relationships. In the interim, it remains important to utilize what we do know from existing research on sibling and parental violence among adolescents and adults, as well as other family violence literature, to inform tailored prevention and intervention approaches. Primary prevention approaches, including public awareness/media campaigns, are foremost, particularly strategies that use what we know about the social determinants of health (e.g., awareness, healthy relationships, safe communities). Efforts to reduce non-spousal violence should also include identification and early intervention with adolescents and adults at-risk of perpetrating family violence, such as those with maltreatment histories (and access to their perpetrators) and/or long-standing aggressive tendencies. This could include treating the effects of violence toward children (e.g., externalizing behaviour problems, trauma-related symptoms), as well as child-to-parent violence, to prevent its manifestation as other forms of family violence, and potential progression into family homicide. In the longer term, there remains a critical need for the development and evaluation of programming that targets non-spousal family violence.

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