

# Boys, Childhood Domestic Abuse, and Gang Involvement

Violence at Home, Violence On-Road

## OVERVIEW

This book offers radical and important insights into a hidden social problem – the neglect of boys and young men’s relationships to domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in childhood. Boys have been previously the blind spot in DVA policy and professional practice, neglected due to the perception they are potential perpetrators rather than victims. Nowhere is this more pertinent than in the case of boys and young men who are criminalised and labelled as gang-involved by the time they are in their teenage years.

This book focuses on understanding about how boys in this context navigate their journey to manhood, with the constant presence of violence in their lives, in the context of poverty and wider racial marginalisation.

Drawing on interviews with survivors using music elicitation as a tool brought in-depth and rich narratives which show the lived experience of violence in childhood. These stories were contextualised more widely through analysis of all Serious Case Reviews where a child has died and had experienced both childhood DVA and adolescent life on-road. The use of a masculinity lens assists the understanding of the gender-specific ways that boys experience violence and helps us consider the ways in which we can support them better.



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## CONCLUSIONS

- The findings in this book show that there are threads in the life-history narratives around masculinity, vulnerability, and violence, which run through from the men's DVA experience to their on-road and gang-experience. These findings provide insight which is useful for front-line agencies which are currently siloed into different 'planets' and are working on distinct constructions of victim/perpetrator, victim/offender, which these men do not easily fit into.
- The current political strategic boundaries between domestic abuse, male victims, and serious youth violence policy does not support a full and humanizing approach to those affected. There needs to be serious consideration of the way in which the current siloed policy and support structures create gaps for vulnerable young people.
- Early experience of male violence can impact on boys' sense of masculine identity. Loaded with pressure to protect, to provide, and be strong, against the experience of being victimised and subordinated through abuse creates complex conflicts for some boys.
- Using a masculinity lens enables us to understand the complexities of the co-existence of vulnerability and violence. Where expressions of protest masculinity are identified, which is an exaggerated and aggressive form of masculinity performance expressed as a response to marginalisation, a vulnerable masculinity can also co-exist. They are two sides of the same coin.
- Invulnerable external presentation can be developed as a mask to complex underlying trauma. Violence was the means through which the men negotiated their position between these poles. In attempting to shift between subordinated childhood masculinity to agentic protest masculinity was a process of navigating the patriarchal world in which they resided. Violence victimisation was an expression of vulnerability, which perpetration attempted to invert.
- This book shines a light on lesser heard forms of abuse for boys, including rape in the family, sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation. These tend to be known as forms of 'violence against women and girls' and the findings aid understanding of how boys perceive these experiences.
- Although the broader acknowledgement of childhood trauma through the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) work is important in practice, it can result in the specifics of DVA as a distinct experience being overlooked. Likewise, although the Public Health approach to serious youth violence has gained traction and yielded impressive results, there is scope for an enhanced and integrated acknowledgment of the specific impact that DVA, as a form of gender-based violence, has on children.
- For some boys who experience violence and abuse at home school can be a place where they begin to enact violence themselves. Understanding this as a specific masculinity related coping strategy in the particular context of child survivors of DVA, can shift the professional thinking to support focused first.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- I recommend closer joint work between DVA (and Gender-Based-Violence organisations) with youth offending/gang outreach organisations. There is a significant gap in both policy work and practice that acknowledge the overlaps between child survivors of DVA and young people involved in serious youth violence, on-road, and gang-involvement.
- Support services for children who have experienced DVA have been cut significantly in the past decade. This is not only due to the wider cuts related to austerity, but also because of the increasing shift in DVA support work to provision for 'high-risk' victims without adjoined children's support. Now children are explicitly recognised as direct victims through the Domestic Abuse Bill (2021) there needs to be a dramatic rethink on the ways in which children are supported both during and after an abusive adult perpetrating DVA is present in their lives.
- As a result of developing a gendered understanding of how children process DVA, I recommend future work to involve the development of gender-specific and masculinity-aware interventions for male child survivors. This needs to be in a way which does not convey an essentialist reproduction of the social learning theories which equate male children with future perpetration yet do recognise that boys experiencing early male violence can impact on their own identities and may affect the way in which they instrumentalise violence themselves.
- The study used a unique and innovative arts-based method of music elicitation. Using music as a listening tool proved very effective in promoting empowering and co-productive engagement and has great potential for further work with marginalized young people.
- There needs to be established training and agreed terminology within the child protection sphere, both in practice as well as the Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) process, as analysis revealed a lack of consistency and understanding in reports on young people who experienced DVA at home and involvement in suspected involvement on-road, in gang and county lines. Analysis of SCR's indicated a tendency to focus on surveillance and policing of young people in this position, rather than support related to the DVA.

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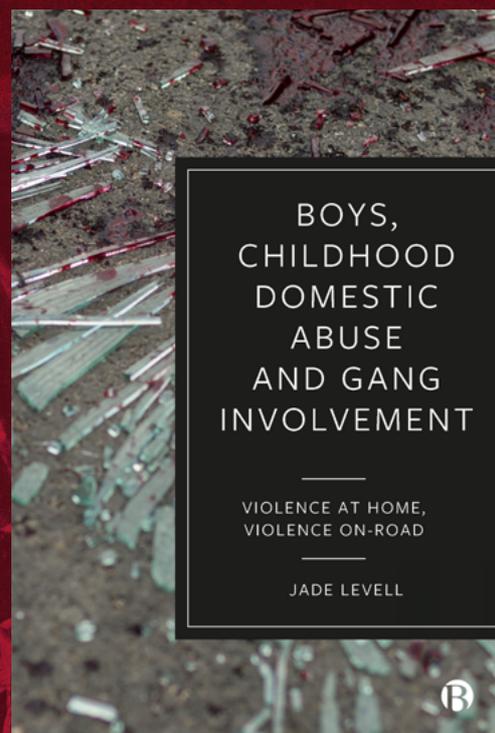
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