



National Centre for Longitudinal Data

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Domestic violence in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

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Key statistics

- Approximately 6 per cent of mothers reported they had been afraid of their current partners. Those mothers were more likely to report higher levels of hostility and physical violence between them and their partners compared to mothers who had not been afraid of their partners.
- Compared to mothers in relationships not characterised by domestic violence (DV), mothers who reported they had been afraid of their partners reported lower levels of family cohesion. A similar pattern was found in the child's report on family cohesion.
- Compared to mothers not experiencing DV, mothers experiencing DV were much more likely to be in a DV situation in future years, but were also much more likely to be single in future years.
- Most of the demographic characteristics investigated were not related to the occurrence of DV. However, partners of mothers experiencing DV were more likely to have a long-term (that is, 6 months or more) medical condition(s) compared to their counterparts.
- Compared to mothers and their partners not experiencing domestic violence, those experiencing DV were more likely to suffer psychological distress.
- Mothers experiencing DV were also more likely to rate their neighbourhood as unsafe, to report less social support and to face higher numbers of stressful life events and more financial hardship.
- Mothers experiencing DV were more likely to report lower levels of parenting efficacy and their children were more likely to have social and emotional problems compared to their counterparts.

Domestic violence in the LSAC context

The impact of domestic violence is an important focus for investigation. This research summary reports the results of research looking at domestic violence in young families using data from *Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*.

LSAC has not collected direct measures of domestic violenceⁱ but has included a couple of indicatorsⁱⁱ since Wave 1:

1. How often is there anger or hostility between you and your partner? (collected since Wave 1)
2. How often do you have arguments with your partner that end up with people pushing, hitting, kicking or shoving? (collected since Wave 1)
3. Have you ever been afraid of your current partner? (collected since Wave 4)

As the last indicator, 'been afraid of partner', has previously been validated and recognised as a good DV indicator (e.g., Sohal et al. 2007ⁱⁱⁱ), the following analyses employed this as a DV indicator and used data collected in Wave 5 in 2012 when children were 8–9 years (B cohort) and 12–13 years (K cohort). Table 1 indicates the numbers and percentages of mothers in each cohort by whether they had been afraid of their partner.

Table 1: Outline of DV grouping: frequency of reporting DV by child age^{iv}

| | Been afraid of partner? | Frequency | % |
|--|-------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Mothers of children aged 8–9 (B Cohort) | Yes (DV group) | 206 | 6.1 |
| | No (Non-DV group) | 3,170 | 93.9 |
| | Total | 3,376 | 100.0 |
| Mothers of children aged 12–13 (K Cohort) | Yes (DV group) | 199 | 6.4 |
| | No (Non-DV group) | 2,917 | 93.6 |
| | Total | 3,116 | 100.0 |

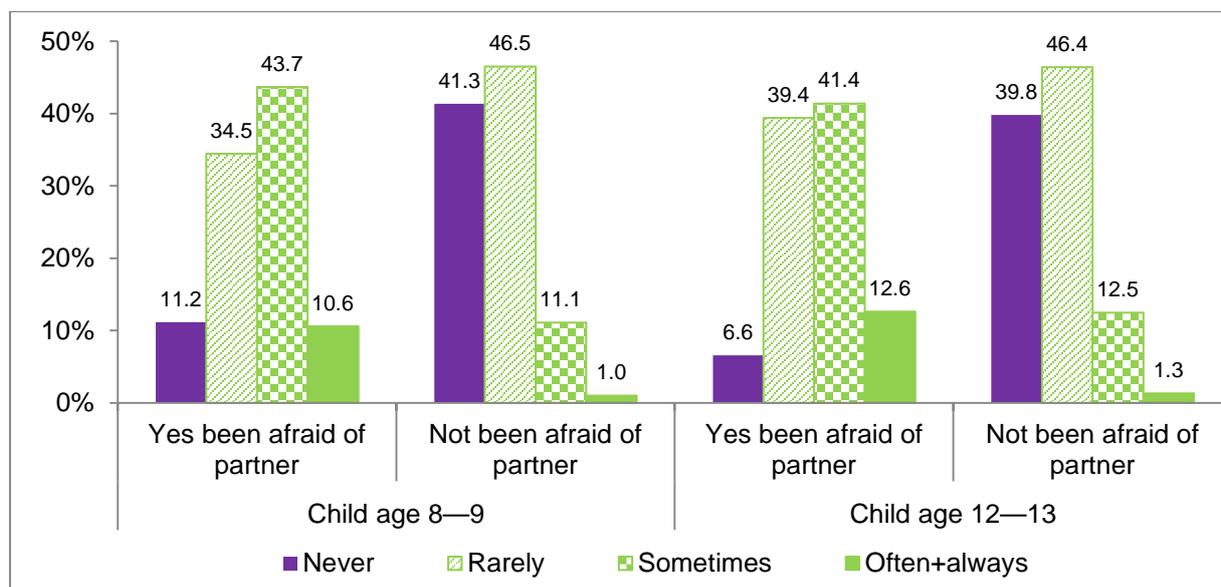
Summary of research findings

Prevalence

Figures 1 and 2 compare the DV group with the non-DV group in terms of partner hostility and physical violence.

Mothers in the non-DV group were less likely to report anger or hostility with their partners compared to those in the DV group in both cohorts. Mothers in the DV group were approximately ten times more likely to report that there was often or always anger or hostility between themselves and their partners (Figure 1).

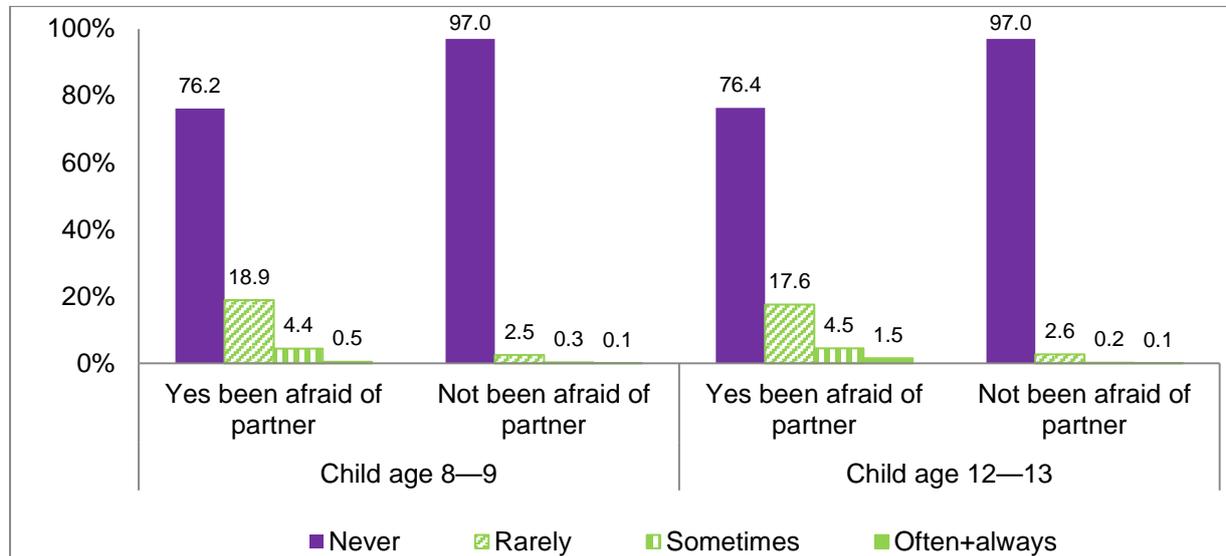
Figure 1: How often is there anger or hostility between you and your partner? (mother report)



| | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid |
| Never | 11.2 | 41.3 | 6.6 | 39.8 |
| Rarely | 34.5 | 46.5 | 39.4 | 46.4 |
| Sometimes | 43.7 | 11.1 | 41.4 | 12.5 |
| Often or always | 10.6 | 1.0 | 12.6 | 1.3 |

Even though the prevalence of arguments that ended in physical violence (Figure 2) is a lot lower than partner hostility, a similar pattern was identified: mothers in the non-DV group were less likely to report arguments that ended in physical violence between themselves and their partners than mothers in the DV group.

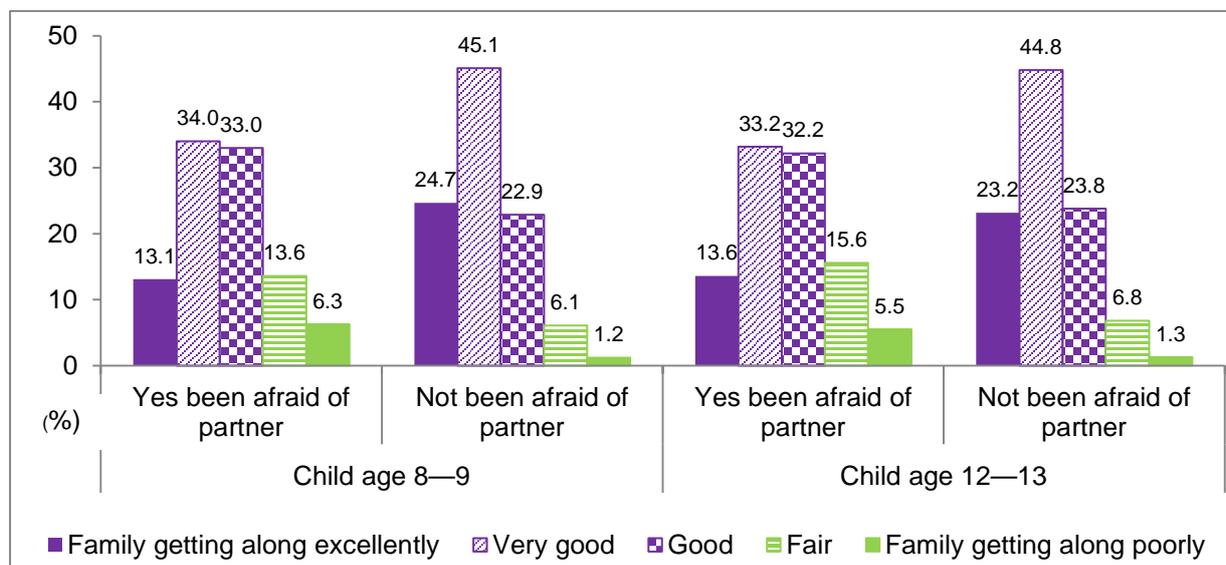
Figure 2: How often do you have arguments with your partner that end up with people pushing, hitting, kicking or shoving? (mother report)



| | Child age 8-9 Yes been afraid | Child age 8-9 Not been afraid | Child age 12-13 Yes been afraid | Child age 12-13 Not been afraid |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Never | 76.2 | 97.0 | 76.4 | 97.0 |
| Rarely | 18.9 | 2.5 | 17.6 | 2.6 |
| Sometimes | 4.4 | 0.3 | 4.5 | 0.2 |
| Often or always | 0.5 | 0.1 | 1.5 | 0.1 |

Figure 3 shows mothers' perceptions of their families' ability to get along with one another. Although the data did not identify the family members in conflict, it is likely to reflect the overall picture of family cohesion to some extent. Mothers in the DV group reported lower levels of family cohesion compared to their counterparts.

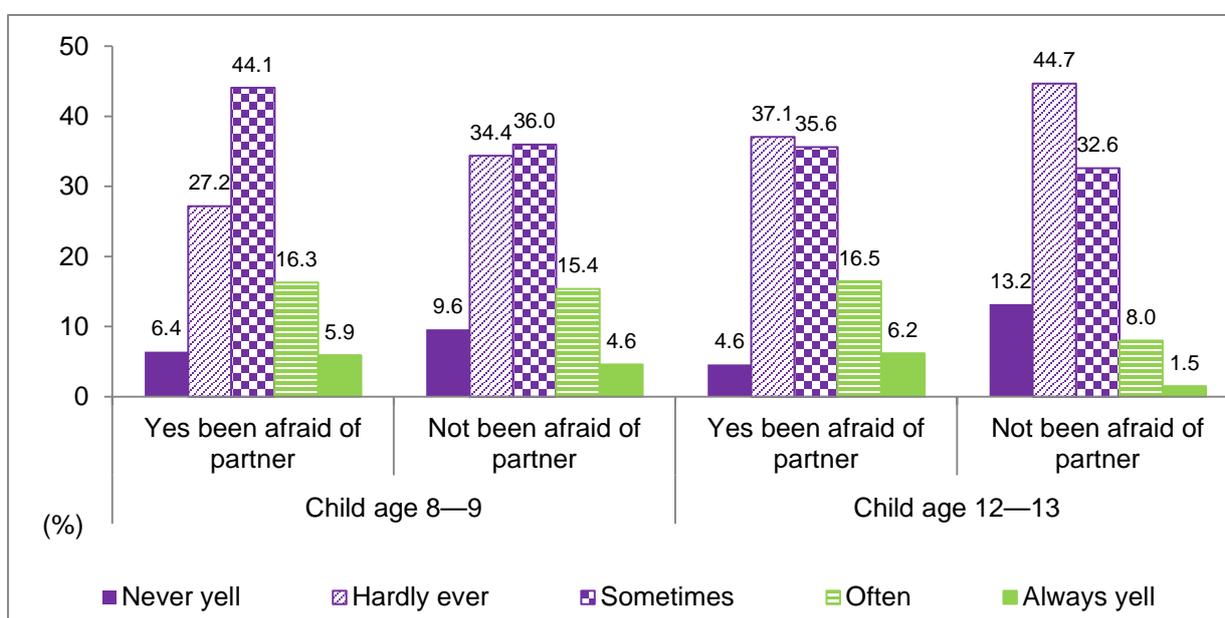
Figure 3: Family ability to get along with each other (mother report)



| | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid |
| Family getting along excellently | 13.1 | 24.7 | 13.6 | 23.2 |
| Very good | 34.0 | 45.1 | 33.2 | 44.8 |
| Good | 33.0 | 22.9 | 32.2 | 23.8 |
| Fair | 13.6 | 6.1 | 15.6 | 6.8 |
| Family getting along poorly | 6.3 | 1.2 | 5.5 | 1.3 |

Violence or conflict between parents is likely to affect the child's views on their family cohesion. As shown in Figure 4, children (especially those aged 12–13 years) whose mothers were in the DV group were more likely to report that people in their families yelled at each other often or always compared to those whose mothers were in the non-DV group.

Figure 4: Family yell at each other (child report)

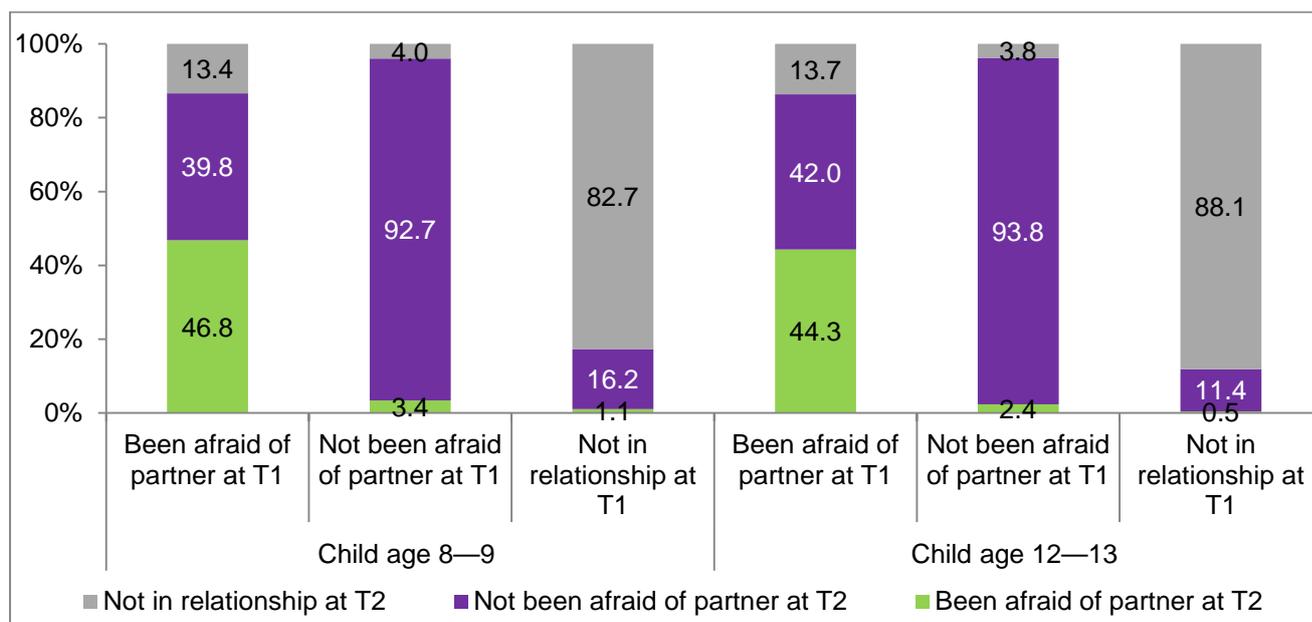


| | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid |
| Never yell | 6.4 | 9.6 | 4.6 | 13.2 |
| Hardly ever | 27.2 | 34.4 | 37.1 | 44.7 |
| Sometimes | 44.1 | 36.0 | 35.6 | 32.6 |
| Often | 16.3 | 15.4 | 16.5 | 8.0 |
| Always yell | 5.9 | 4.6 | 6.2 | 1.5 |

Relationship transition

Mothers who reported they had been afraid of their partners in Wave 4 (T1) were more likely to be single parents in Wave 5 (T2) (13%) compared to mothers who reported they had not been afraid of their partners in Wave 4 (4%), while the majority of mothers who had been afraid of their partners were still living with a partner in Wave 5 (Figure 5).^v Among mothers with a study child aged 8–9 years, 47 per cent who reported they had been afraid of their partners in Wave 4 also reported they had been afraid of their partners in Wave 5; on the other hand, 40 per cent of mothers reported they were not afraid of their partner at Wave 5. A similar pattern was found among mothers of children aged 12–13 years. However, it should be noted that some of these mothers may have had different partners in the two waves.

Figure 5: Relationship transitions from Wave 4 (T1) to Wave 5 (T2)



| | Child aged 8-9 | Child aged 8-9 | Child aged 8-9 | Child aged 12-13 | Child aged 12-13 | Child aged 12-13 |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| | Been afraid at T1 | Not been afraid at T1 | Not in relationship at T1 | Been afraid at T1 | Not been afraid at T1 | Not in relationship at T1 |
| Not in relationship at T2 | 13.4 | 4.0 | 82.7 | 13.7 | 3.8 | 88.1 |
| Not been afraid at T2 | 39.8 | 92.7 | 16.2 | 42.0 | 93.8 | 11.4 |
| Been afraid at T2 | 46.8 | 3.4 | 1.1 | 44.3 | 2.4 | 0.5 |

Demographic characteristics by DV groups

Demographic variables were investigated to see whether there were differences between the DV and non-DV groups. The groups were differentiated by some demographic and parental characteristics variables in bivariate analysis (Table 2). However, only mother's and/or father's medical conditions maintained its statistically significant effects on the prediction of a mother being in the DV group in multivariate regression analysis.

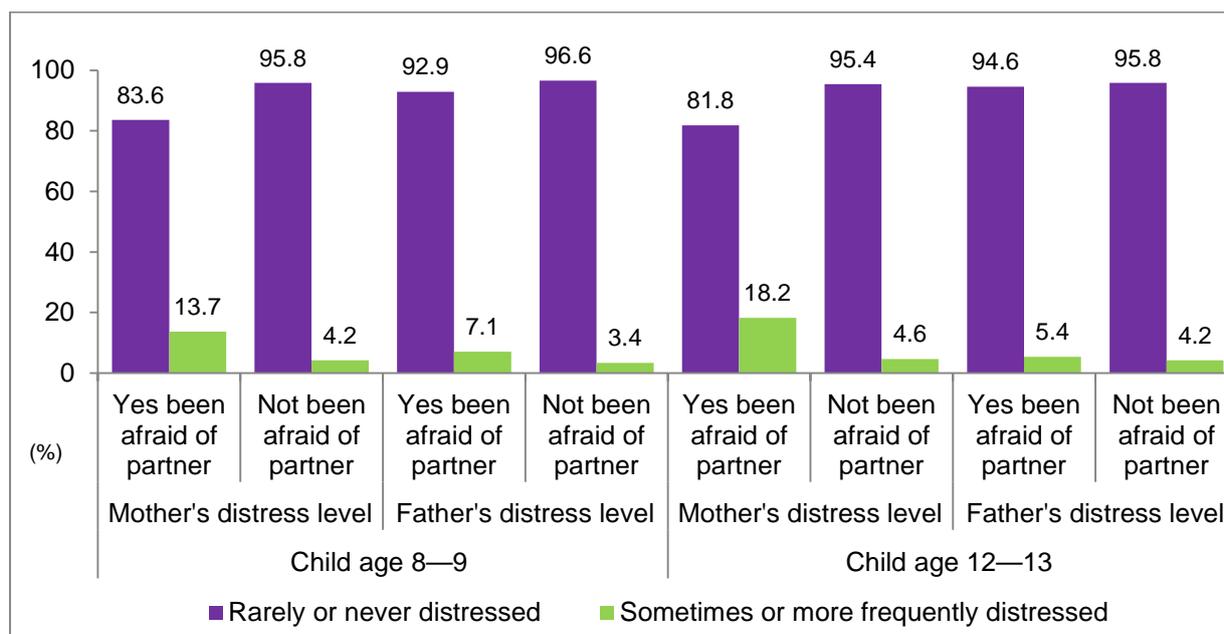
Table 2: Bivariate analysis of demographic characteristics by differentiation of DV and non-DV groups

| Demographic and household characteristics | Child age 8–9 years (B cohort) | Child age 12–13 years (K cohort) |
|---|---|--|
| State of residence | No difference | No difference |
| Remoteness | No difference | No difference |
| Socio-economic status indicator ^{vi} | Lower SES (marginal) | No difference |
| Number of siblings | No difference | No difference |
| Mother's age | No difference | No difference |
| Father's age | No difference | No difference |
| Mother's country of birth | No difference | No difference |
| Father's country of birth | No difference | No difference |
| Mother's year of arrival in Australia | No difference | No difference |
| Mother's year of arrival in Australia | No difference | No difference |
| Mother's language spoken at home | No difference | No difference |
| Father's language spoken at home | No difference | No difference |
| Child's language spoken at home | No difference | No difference |
| Mother's Indigenous status | No difference | No difference |
| Father's Indigenous status | More likely to be Indigenous | No difference |
| Mother's education level | Fewer years in schooling | No difference |
| Father's education level | Fewer years in schooling (marginal) | No difference |
| Mother's employment | No difference | No difference |
| Father's employment | More likely to be not employed | More likely to be not employed |
| Mother's medical condition ^{vii} | More likely to have medical condition(s) (marginal) | More likely to have medical condition(s) |
| Father's medical condition ^{viii} | More likely to have medical condition(s) | More likely to have medical condition(s) |

Mental health and wellbeing^{ix}

Kessler 6, a standardised and validated measure of non-specific psychological distress, was used to investigate whether there were differences in mothers' and fathers' mental health in the DV and non-DV groups. The level of psychological distress of mothers and fathers was different between the two groups (Figure 6). Mothers in the DV group were three times more likely to report high levels of psychological distress compared to those in the non-DV group for both age groups. Partners of mothers in the DV group were twice as likely to report high levels of psychological distress when children were aged 8–9 years but only a small difference was found for fathers of children aged 12–13 years.

Figure 6: Mother's and father's mental distress level (mother & father report)

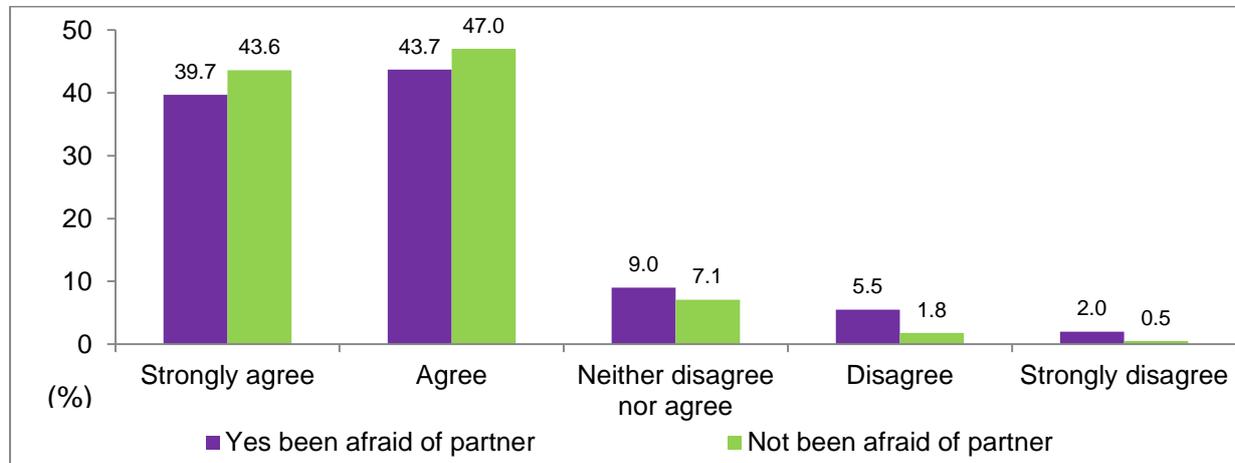


| | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Mother's distress level | Mother's distress level | Father's distress level | Father's distress level | Mother's distress level | Mother's distress level | Father's distress level | Father's distress level |
| | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid |
| Rarely/never distressed | 83.6 | 95.8 | 92.9 | 96.6 | 81.8 | 95.4 | 94.6 | 95.8 |
| Sometimes/more frequently distressed | 13.7 | 4.2 | 7.1 | 3.4 | 18.2 | 4.6 | 5.4 | 4.2 |

Neighbourhood safety

Figure 7 shows that mothers of children aged 12–13 years in the non-DV group were more likely to agree with the statement, “This is a safe neighbourhood” than those in DV group. Data is only available for mothers of children aged 12–13 years (K cohort).

Figure 7: Neighbourhood safety perception (mother report, Child age 12–13, K cohort)

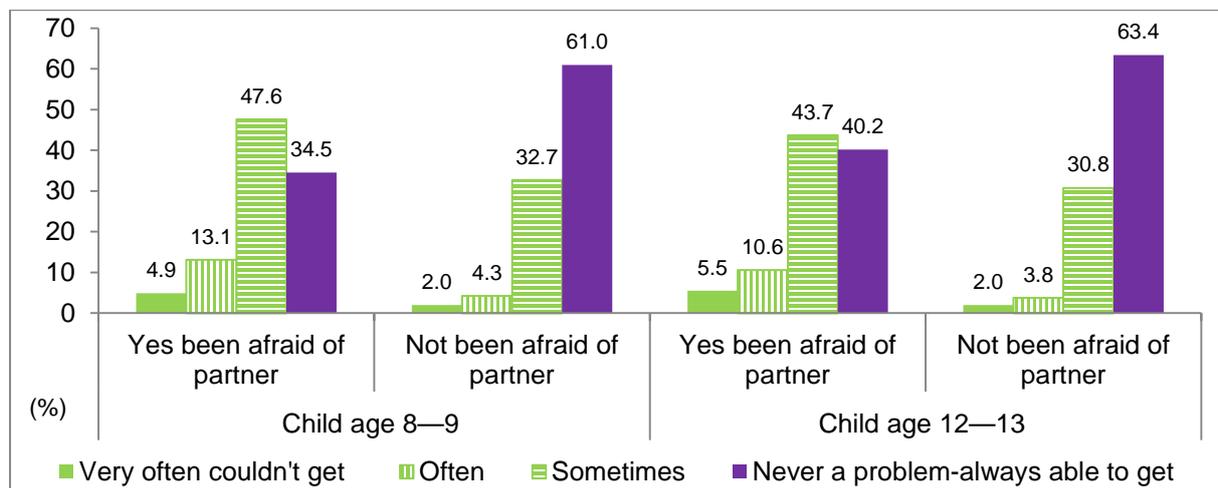


| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree or disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------|---------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Yes been afraid of partner | 39.7 | 43.7 | 9.0 | 5.5 | 2.0 |
| Not been afraid of partner | 43.6 | 47.0 | 7.1 | 1.8 | 0.5 |

Social support

Differences were also found regarding social support. Mothers in the DV group were more likely than those in the non-DV group to report that they could not get support when they needed it (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Need support but could not get it (mother report)

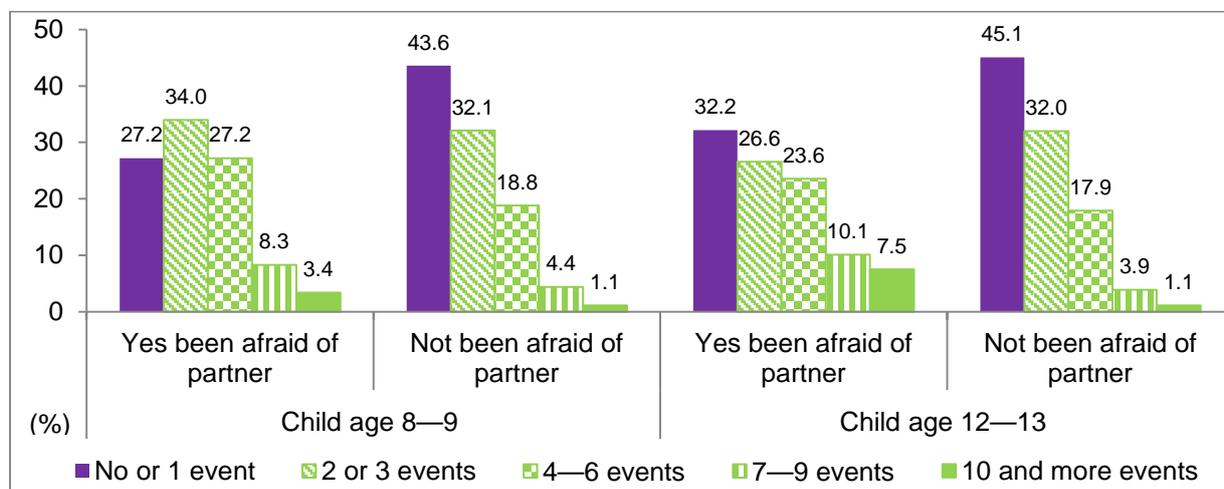


| | Child age 8-9 Yes been afraid | Child age 8-9 Not been afraid | Child age 12-13 Yes been afraid | Child age 12-13 Not been afraid |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Very often couldn't get help | 4.9 | 2.0 | 5.5 | 2.0 |
| Often | 13.1 | 4.3 | 10.6 | 3.8 |
| Sometimes | 47.6 | 32.7 | 43.7 | 30.8 |
| Never a problem-always able to get help | 34.5 | 61.0 | 40.2 | 63.4 |

Stressful life events and financial hardship

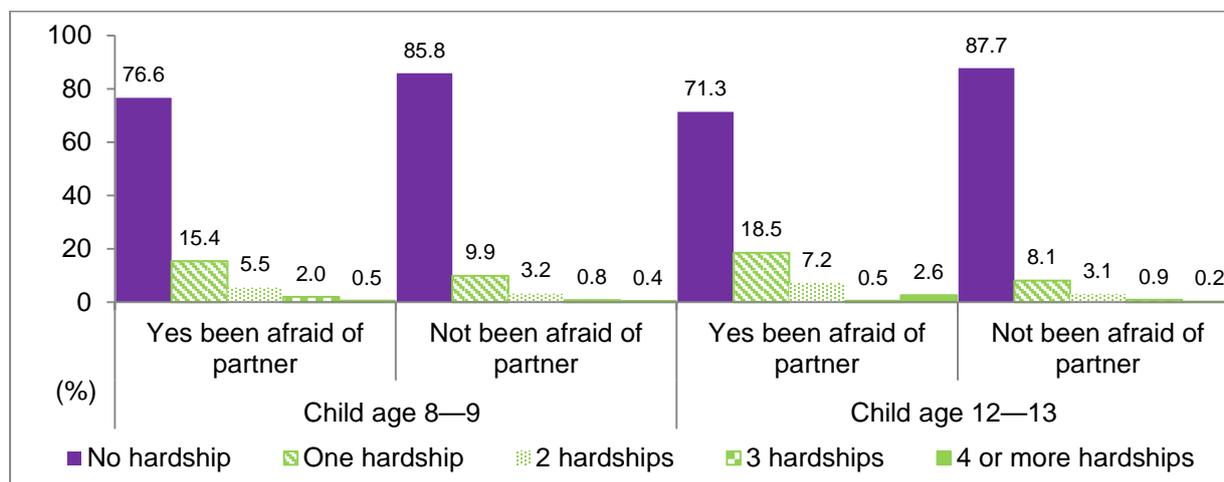
Mothers in the DV group were also more likely to experience multiple stressful life events (e.g., lost job, relationship break-down, moving house etc. (Figure 9) and financial hardship (e.g., was not able to pay bills, went without meals etc.) (Figure 10) than those in the non-DV group.

Figure 9: Major life events last 12 months (mother report)



| | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 |
|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid |
| None or one event | 27.2 | 43.6 | 32.2 | 45.1 |
| 2 or 3 events | 34.0 | 32.1 | 26.6 | 32.0 |
| 4-6 events | 27.2 | 18.8 | 23.6 | 17.9 |
| 7-9 events | 8.3 | 4.4 | 10.1 | 3.9 |
| 10 or more events | 3.4 | 1.1 | 7.5 | 1.1 |

Figure 10: Financial hardship last 12 months (mother report)

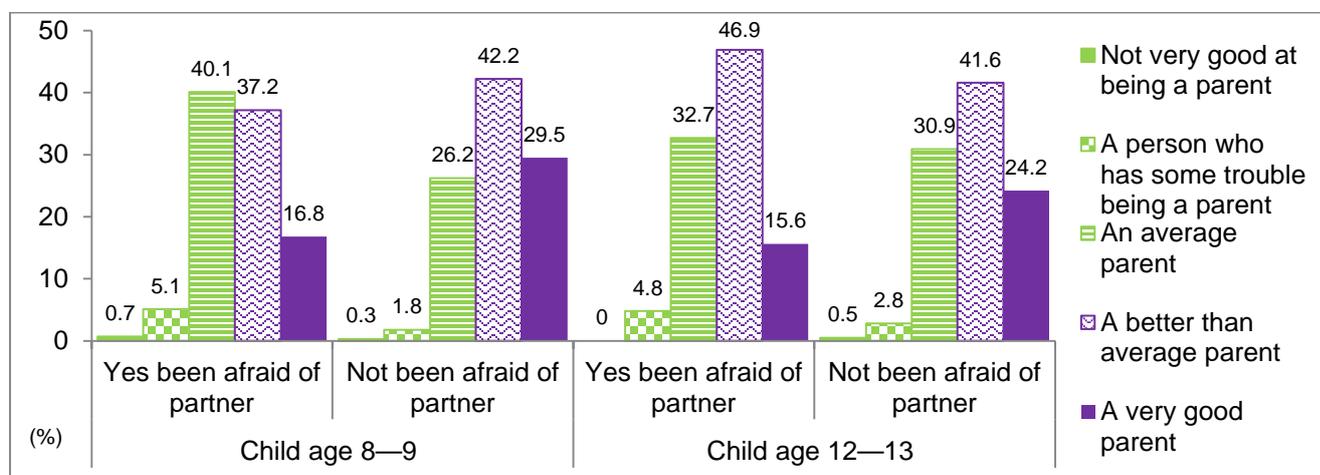


| | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid |
| No hardship | 76.6 | 85.8 | 71.3 | 87.7 |
| One hardship | 15.4 | 9.9 | 18.5 | 8.1 |
| 2 hardships | 5.5 | 3.2 | 7.2 | 3.1 |
| 3 hardships | 2.0 | 0.8 | 0.5 | 0.9 |
| 4 or more hardships | 0.5 | 0.4 | 2.6 | 0.2 |

Parenting efficacy and child's outcome

Mothers in the DV group were more likely to perceive themselves negatively as parents compared to mothers not experiencing DV (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Parenting self-efficacy (mother report)



| | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid |
| Not very good at being a parent | 0.7 | 0.3 | 0 | 0.5 |
| A person who has some trouble being a parent | 5.1 | 1.8 | 4.8 | 2.8 |
| An average parent | 40.1 | 26.2 | 32.7 | 30.9 |
| A better than average parent | 37.2 | 42.2 | 46.9 | 41.6 |
| A very good parent | 16.8 | 29.5 | 15.6 | 24.2 |

Children's social and emotional difficulties (measured using the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ, Goodman 2004)^x were compared for the DV and non-DV groups. While no difference was found in the children's pro-social scores, statistically significant differences were found in the total behavioural problems score between the two groups (Table 3). Children in the DV group were more likely to have higher problem scores at both 8-9 and 12-13 years.

Table 3: Comparing means of child's total behavioural problem scores for children of mothers DV and non-DV groups using independent samples t-tests (mother report)

| | Been afraid of partner? | Total problem score mean | SD | t | Sig. |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------|-------|---------|
| Child age 8-9 years | Yes (DV group) | 8.89 | 5.552 | 3.521 | p<0.001 |
| | No (non-DV group) | 7.56 | 5.236 | | |
| Child age 12-13 years | Yes (DV group) | 9.07 | 6.566 | 4.563 | p<0.001 |
| | No (non-DV group) | 6.90 | 5.226 | | |

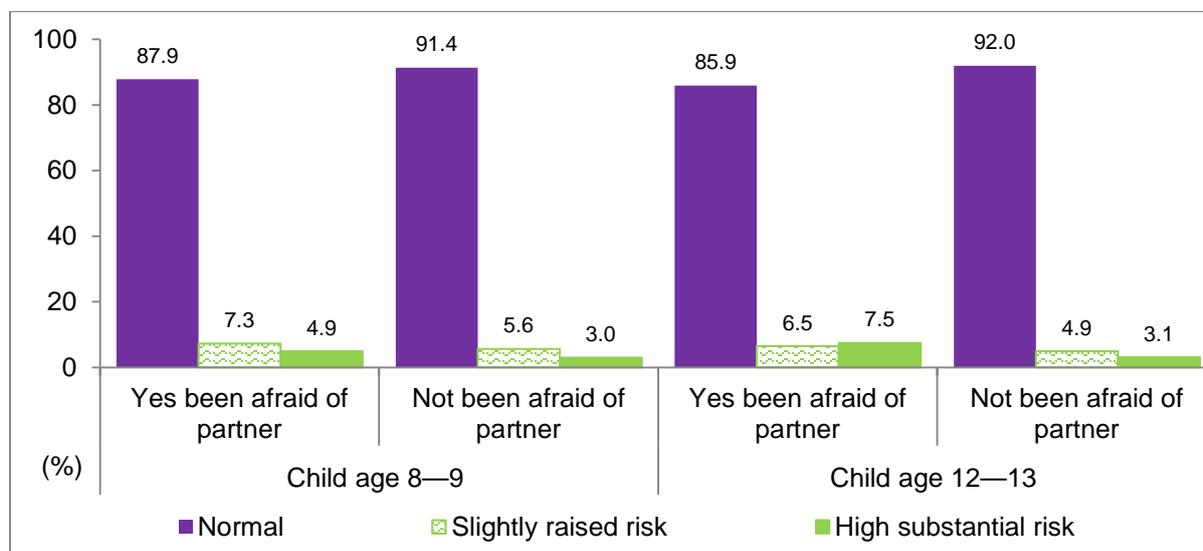
Note: SD=standard deviation; Sig.=significance.

In Figure 12, the child's total behavioural problem score was divided into three categories:

1. normal
2. slightly raised risk (may reflect clinically significant problems)
3. high substantial risk (likely to indicate clinically significant problems).

The negative effect of mothers being in the DV group was more pronounced for children aged 12–13 years. Children of mothers in the DV group were twice as likely to be in the high substantial risk group when they reached pre-teen years.

Figure 12: Child's total problem scores by risk groups (mother report)



| | Child age 8-9 | Child age 8-9 | Child age 12-13 | Child age 12-13 |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid | Yes been afraid | Not been afraid |
| Normal | 87.9 | 91.4 | 85.9 | 92.0 |
| Slightly raised risk | 7.3 | 5.6 | 6.5 | 4.9 |
| High substantial risk | 4.9 | 3.0 | 7.5 | 3.1 |

Conclusion

The results show that the majority of LSAC mothers were free from hostile arguments and physical violence in the home. Aligned with the existing literature, the current research supports the fact that domestic violence has complex associations with individuals, children's outcomes, communities and society. When mothers were in domestic violence situations, they were more likely to experience poorer health outcomes as well as multiple stressful life events and financial hardship, and to have more negative views on community safety and social support than their counterparts. There were no differences in most demographic characteristics analysed for mothers experiencing domestic violence and those who were not. However, of the few differences observed, mothers with partners who had medical conditions and were unemployed were more at risk of experiencing domestic violence. Children of mothers experiencing domestic violence also have higher rates of social and emotional problems than those with mothers did not experience domestic violence.

ⁱ In this analysis, mothers' reports were used because fathers' overall response rate was lower than mothers (around 70%) and their responses on DV indicators were not high enough to pursue further analyses.

ⁱⁱ Data on domestic violence indicators were only collected from parents who had live-in partners. The proportion of LSAC parents who did not have live-in partners at the time of the interview varied across waves between 9 and 17 per cent.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sohal et al (2007), 'The sensitivity and specificity of four questions (HARK) to identify intimate partner violence: a diagnostic accuracy study in general practice', *BMC Family Practice*, vol. 8, p. 49.

^{iv} All tables, figures and output texts from analyses of the LSAC data in this paper were statistically significant at least at the .05 level of alpha, otherwise noted. Also, unweighted data was used for the following analyses except demographic characteristics, which are analysed later in the paper. Weighting changes the results by 1 or 2 per cent only for representative samples.

^v Among mothers in a relationship across 2 waves (T1 and T2), a minority of mothers were with new partners in T2 (1.5% and 2.6% of mothers who were in a relationship in both waves, B and K cohorts respectively).

^{vi} Wave 4 SEP (socioeconomic position) was used as a SES (socioeconomic status) indicator

^{vii} Mothers in the DV group were more likely to report having restrictions in their everyday activities and chronic pain, other unspecified physical conditions, nervous conditions or other long-term conditions, etc.

^{viii} Partners of mothers in the DV group were more likely to report having restrictions in their everyday activities, mental illness, limited use of arms and fingers, nervous conditions, head injuries or other unspecified physical conditions, etc.

^{ix} Other household and parental characteristics were also investigated. No difference was found in mother's/father's drinking behaviours and homelessness experiences between DV and non-DV groups.

^x Goodman R (1997) The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A Research Note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38, 581-586.