Women Victims of Assault: Age Differences in Victim–Aggressor Relationship and Location

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This article presents the findings from a secondary analysis of the 1991 Queensland Crime Victim Survey. Although now more than 10 years old, this survey still has validity as it remains the largest of its kind conducted in Queensland, and it is a rich source of information about the experiences of victims of violence. The study investigated how the experiences of younger female assault victims differ from older female victims in terms of their relationship with their aggressor and the assault location. The following factors were examined: whether or not the assault occurred (a) at the hands of a partner or former partner, (b) in a private dwelling, (c) in a public place, and (d) in a leisure venue away from home. Results pointed to important differences between younger and older women in terms of their experiences of violence. Teenage women reported significantly more assaults in public places compared with older women, and were less likely to be assaulted in their own dwelling. Also, trends in the data suggested that compared to older women, teenage women were more likely to be assaulted in leisure venues away from home, and were less likely to be assaulted by partners or former partners. Considering that young women are at a much higher risk than older women of being assaulted, consideration of these age differences may be helpful in the design of violence prevention strategies. In particular, more attention should be paid to the public place prevention of violence against young women.

Violence against young women is very common. The phenomenon is not well understood by researchers, and prevention strategies to combat the problem have not been well-elucidated. Young women are particularly vulnerable to experiencing violence. In fact, women aged between 15 and 25 years face the highest risks of all...
Women (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 1994; Coumarelos & Allen, 1998; Egger, 1997; Mayhew, Maung, & Mirrlees-Black, 1993; Moran, 1993; Salmelainen & Coumarelos, 1993). In a study of around 5000 sexual assault incidents reported to the New South Wales police between 1989 and 1991 (Salmelainen & Coumarelos, 1993), the youngest age group, 16–20 years, had a risk that was about three times the average annual risk (113 victims per 100,000 population). The next youngest age group, 21–25 years, also had a higher than average risk (58 victims per 100,000 population). The risk for all age groups over 40 years was very low. Similarly, Moran (1993) in her study of 450 Queensland rapes and attempted rapes reported to police between 1991 and 1992, found that 83% of victims were aged 25 years or younger.

In addition to being at a high risk of sexual assault, young women are more at risk of being the victim of a physical assault than are older women. Stewart and Homel (1995) found that in the 1991 Queensland Crime Victim Survey (Government Statistician’s Office [GSO], 1992), of all women, those in the 15–19 age group were at the highest risk of being physically assaulted. By the time a woman had reached 25, this risk had levelled out. Similarly, according to the 1993 Crime and Safety Survey (ABS, 1994), around 44% of all female victims of assault (non-sexual) were aged 15–24. Coumarelos and Allen (1998), in their secondary analysis of the 1996 Women’s Safety Survey (ABS, 1996), found that, controlling for other factors, younger women had a higher risk of all forms of victimisation than did older women. For example, 16.1% of 18- to 24-year-olds had experienced physical violence in the 12 months prior to the study, whereas only 8.4% of 25- to 34-year-olds experienced it. These percentages were even lower for age groups over 34 years. Similar age patterns were evident for sexual violence and emotional abuse.

Although it is now well established that young, especially teenage women are the most vulnerable of all age groups of women, little research to date has differentiated the nature of the violent experiences of teenage women from those of older women. For example, little data is available which disaggregates victim age, location, and offender-aggressor relationship (Egger, 1997). The problem with the lack of attention to age differences in assault patterns is that overall patterns are assumed to hold for all age groups of women, and prevention strategies tend to be designed without taking into account women’s specific age group differences. An examination of how the assault experiences of teenage women differ from older women’s experiences is extremely important in developing prevention approaches tailored to preventing violence against young women, and women in general.

Currently, most Australian prevention efforts aimed at reducing violence against women, including young women, have involved large scale community education campaigns that emphasise the private, intimate nature of violence against women (for a review, see Egger, 1997). It is now very well documented that the largest proportion of violent acts against women in general occur in residential dwellings (Gardner, 1994; Koss, 1993; Moran, 1993; Salmelainen & Coumarelos, 1993) by someone with whom they are in an intimate relationship, usually a partner or former partner (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Egger, 1997; Gardner, 1994; Stewart & Homel, 1995). Estimates suggest variously that between 50% to 75% of all physical
and sexual assaults against women occur in domestic contexts, with lower percentages generally thought to reflect the underreporting of domestic violence.

As a consequence of these findings, Australian prevention approaches to date have usually involved national education campaigns that denounce violence against women and which emphasise the private, intimate violence perpetrated in the home (Egger, 1997). Such strategies are reflected in the most prominent Australian prevention programs, including the work of the National Committee on Violence (1989, 1990) and the National Committee on Violence Against Women (1992). In these campaigns, the role of public places are very much de-emphasised, and the role of domestic contexts are emphasised.

Although the intimate and private nature of violence against women is well documented for women as a whole, whether or not these risks are evenly spread across all age groups of women is not as well understood. It may be reasonable to suggest that there are differences in the experiences of violence between older and younger women. In particular, considering the lifestyle characteristics of the developmental phase of adolescence and young adulthood, there may be differences between older and younger women in terms of the types of situations and relationships out of which violence arises.

First, victim–aggressor relationship patterns may be somewhat different for teenage women than for older women. Specifically, as teenage women are less likely than older women to be partnered (NYARS and ABS, 1993), they may be relatively less likely to experience violence at the hands of partners or former partners compared with older women. It is likely that young women, because of the more changeable and dynamic friendship and relationship networks during this life phase, may experience more violence at the hands of a range of different types of known men. For example, young women may experience aggression at the hands of boyfriends, relatives, male and female friends, men they have just met that day, acquaintances, neighbours, strangers and lesbian partners.

This is not to suggest that young women are not at risk of experiencing violence at the hands of partners or former partners. Nor is it to suggest that they are not experiencing a high proportion of violence from those closest to them. Rather, it is to suggest that, relatively speaking, young women may experience less victimisation from partners and former partners than older women, and more victimisation from a range of other known men. Surprisingly, however, this possibility has not been adequately examined to date. Although age differences in levels of violence against women has been researched in depth (e.g., Salmelainen & Coumarellos, 1993; Stewart & Homel, 1995), and victim–offender relationships have been extensively investigated (e.g., ABS, 1996; Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Gardner, 1994; Strang, 1993), little research exists into how age and victim–aggressor relationships interact (Egger, 1997).

Another way young women may experience violence differently from older women has to do with where they experience violence. Women, especially young women, are routinely making more use of public space than previous generations (Franck & Paxson, 1989). For example, most young women spend a large amount of their time in education and employment activities, often combining them. Around 60% of single 15- to 24-year-old women are engaged in education (ABS, 1995). Of
these, around 50% of 15- to 19-year-olds are also employed, and around 70% of all 20- to 24-year-olds are also employed in paid work (ABS, 1999). In addition, recent Australian data show that young Australian women spend around 20 hours each week socialising with friends in leisure activities outside the home (ABS, 1995). Young people spend a high proportion of their free time with friends and groups of friends in places such as schools, campuses, friends’ homes, coffee shops, shopping malls, at the local swimming pool, and so forth. As they get older, these places often give way to other leisure venues such as bars and nightclubs.

Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that young women, as a result of common social activities during this life phase, may experience relatively more violence in public or semi-public locations, such as schools, workplaces, streets, parties and leisure venues (such as nightclubs) compared with older women. In fact, their friendship and relationship dynamics (out of which violence is most likely to emerge) are likely to be played out in these types of public settings.

In summary, one gap in our current knowledge of women’s victimisation has to do with the relationships among victim age, victim–aggressor relationship, and the location of violent incidents. Although it is surprising considering the high levels of violence against teenage women, little is known about how the violent experiences of young women differ from those of older women. This study aimed to shed light on this question.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addressed three research questions. The first was whether there were age differences among assault victims, particularly women victims, in terms of the location of the assault and the victim–aggressor relationship. The second research question addressed the issue of whether there were gender differences along these same lines. As we were mostly interested in how the experiences of younger women differed from older women, the consideration of gender differences along these dimensions was included mostly as a benchmark check. This research question has been posed by many other researchers (e.g., Kellermann & Mercy, 1992; Mooney, 1995). Findings generally suggest that men are assaulted less than women in their own dwelling, more than women in public places, more than women in leisure venues such as licensed pubs and clubs, and less by female partners or former partners (Kellermann & Mercy, 1992; Mooney, 1995).

A second reason for the inclusion of gender in the research design has to do with the third research question, which asked whether there were any age-gender interactions. In other words, do gender differences vary with victim age? For example, men may experience more violence than women in public places but this difference may only hold for older age groups. For younger age groups, the differences between genders may not be as apparent.

Method

In 1991, the Queensland GSO and the Criminal Justice Commission conducted the Queensland Crime Victim Survey to investigate Queenslanders’ experiences with crime victimisation (GSO, 1992). The objective of the survey was to obtain information about types of household and personal crime occurring in Queensland,
the characteristics of people most affected, and the reporting behaviour of victims. Although the Queensland Crime Victim Survey is now 10 years old, it represents the largest survey of its kind conducted in Queensland, and yielded more carefully gathered, comprehensive information about victims’ experiences than any other Australian survey.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by trained interviewers with members of 6315 city and country households throughout Queensland, using a stratified, multi-stage sampling design. Of households sampled, 16.1% could not be interviewed. There was only a 0.7% refusal rate, and other reasons for non-inclusion included no contact able to be made, illness, and lack of interpreters in rural areas (Stewart & Homel, 1995). Interviews were conducted in private where possible in the home of the households surveyed. Information about victimisation was obtained from a randomly selected usual household member over the age of 15.

One limitation of the survey was that the interviewing procedure resulted in the likely underreporting of domestic violence (GSO, 1992). Although this was unfortunate, this did not pose significant problems for the current study because there is no evidence to suggest that women report assault in a non-uniform way across age. Therefore, no age differences due to differential underreporting of private violence were expected. With respect to analyses concerning gender differences, it was expected that the underreporting of private violence would result only in dampening differences between the genders in terms of the variables of interest. For example, if women were to underreport private place assault, it would be expected that this would result in a decrease in the differences between women and men. Thus, any significant gender effects obtained would be robust.

In sum, although one limitation of the study was the underreporting of private place violence, the overall effects of this limitation were not expected to confound the results. Moreover, these limitations were somewhat ameliorated by the fact that the survey involved such a large sample size, and the fact that face-to-face interviewing can yield data with a higher validity compared with questionnaire data.

MATERIALS

The survey asked a range of questions, including demographic questions, whether the household had experienced any property offences, and questions about personal offences including assault (this large survey has been published elsewhere, GSO, 1992). In this study, only data from assault victims were utilised. Data from other victims (such as those who experienced threat of assault) were not included. It is important to note that in the current analyses data from non-victims were not utilised.

Assault

To screen for assault, the following questions were asked in order to obtain information about the most recent violent offence occurring against participants in Queensland in the 12 months prior to the interview. Participants were told “The following questions relate to offences which occurred in Queensland in the past 12 months. We are interested in incidents which relate to you personally, not other
members of the household”. Regarding assault, to obtain information about physical and sexual assault, participants were asked “Apart from what you’ve already told me, in Queensland, at any time during the last 12 months, have you been attacked, punched or kicked, or assaulted, sexually or otherwise, either by a stranger or someone you knew?”

Victims were then asked a series of questions concerning many aspects of the assault. Table 1 presents the items asked of assault victims concerning the issues of interest to the current study. These concerned the location of the assault, and the victim–aggressor relationship. Table 1 also presents the response categories into which interviewers coded assault victims’ responses.

**Location.** Two items asked about location of the assault. Assault victims were asked where the offence happened and interviewers coded responses into one of a range of locations, which were provided in their manuals. Interviewers were trained to prompt using the categories provided if necessary, and to code doubtful cases as “other”. A second item concerning location of the aggressive incident asked participants “What were you doing at the time it happened?” Among others, response categories included “sleeping” and “other leisure activities away from home”.

**Victim–aggressor relationship.** A filter question asked victims “Did you know the offender/s before it happened or was it a stranger/ were they strangers?” (All known/ Some known, some not known/ None known/ Don’t know). Those who were coded as knowing the offender were directed to a question which asked “Which of these categories best describes (the person’s/ each person’s) relationship to you?” Interviewers read out each of the categories.

**VARIABLE CONSTRUCTION**

**Overview of Statistical Methods**

The data concerning assault victims’ experiences were obtained in cross-tabulation form from the original data managers (after permission to use the data was obtained). Those items that matched the research questions of the current study were selected, and a series of dependent and independent variables were constructed. To address the research questions outlined above, a series of ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether there were any differences between young female assault victims and older female assault victims and male victims in terms of each of four dependent variables (described below). In addition, interactions between age and gender were also tested.

**Independent Variables**

There were two independent variables: age and gender. Age was divided into three categories: under 20, between 20 and 24, and over 24 years. This is in keeping with most Australian crime victim surveys, police statistics, and ABS data, which generally considers age groups 15–19 and 20–24 years separately from those older and younger. Linear and quadratic components were constructed for age and for the age by gender interaction. Linear and quadratic components for age were used because they are orthogonal (i.e., the SS for linear and quadratic add up to the total SS for age). Moreover, they are simply interpreted. The linear component is obvious —
| TABLE 1
Information Asked of Assault Victims about Context, Victim–Aggressor Relationship, Gender of Aggressor, and Interviewer Coding Categories |

**Where did it happen?**
- At or in own dwelling
- At or in detached building on own property such as garage, shed, etc.
- Open area under own house or own open verandah
- Own yard, footpath, driveway, carport, etc.
- Public area in own flats/units (hallway, laundry, etc.)
- On street immediately adjacent to own home
- At, in, or near a friend/relative/neighbour’s home
- Inside school/work building
- Outside but on school/work property (parking area, play area, etc.)
- Other parking lots/garages
- Inside commercial, shopping, or indoor sport facilities
- On the street (other than near home, etc.)
- In public park, sports field, playground, etc.
- On public transport or at station, bus stop, etc.
- Other
- Don’t know

**What were you doing at the time it happened?**
- Sleeping
- Other activities at home
- On holiday/away for weekend or more
- Other leisure activities away from home
- At work/school/college/university
- Shopping
- Travelling to/from work or elsewhere
- Other
- Don’t know

**Which of these categories best describes (the person’s/each person’s) relationship to you?**
- Spouse or de facto
- Former spouse or de facto
- Other relative
- Other household member
- Current boy/girlfriend
- Former boy/girlfriend
- Workmate/schoolmate
- Client/member of public contacted through work
- Friend/acquaintance
- Neighbour
- Known by sight only
- Other

*Note: Only those who indicated in a previous filter question that they knew the aggressor, or at least one of the aggressors was asked this question.*
it tests if there is a “straight line” trend up or down. The quadratic component simply tests whether there is any kind of significant departure from linearity (i.e., a “bend” of some kind in the graph). If there is a significant bend, the nature of the departure from linearity is obvious from the graph and doesn’t need any more testing. In technical terms, what is being tested is whether the means of the under age 20 and over age 24 groups are significantly different from the 20- to 24-year-old group.

Dependent Variables

Four dependent variables were constructed from the relevant items. These reflected the dimensions of interest outlined in the introduction.

Proportion assaulted at or in their own dwelling. A variable reflecting the proportion of those assaulted at or in their own dwelling was created from the questionnaire item, which asked assault victims where the assault had occurred. The number of those assaulted at or in their own dwelling was divided by the total number of victims to obtain the proportion. Those who were assaulted but did not answer the item concerning location, and those who indicated that they did not know where they had been assaulted were not included in the calculation of the total number assaulted.

Proportion assaulted in a public place. A variable reflecting the proportion of those assaulted in a public place was also created from the questionnaire item, which asked victims where the assault had occurred. Those who were considered to have been assaulted in a public place were those who indicated they had been assaulted in any of the following places: inside a school or work building; outside but on school/work property (parking area, play area, etc.); other parking lots/garages; inside commercial, shopping, or indoor sports facilities; on the street (other than near home, etc.); in public parks, sports fields, playgrounds and so forth; or on public transport, or at a station or bus stop. Again, the number of those assaulted was divided by the total number of victims to obtain the proportion. The total number of victims was determined in the same way as for the variable reflecting those assaulted in a private place. It is important to note that this variable did not just reflect the converse of the previous variable reflecting proportion assaulted at or in their own dwelling. Some categories reflecting assault locations such as assault “At, in, or near a friend, relative, or neighbour’s house” fell outside both categories.

Proportion assaulted during leisure activities away from home. This variable was constructed from the questionnaire item asking victims, “What were you doing at the time it happened?” The total number of victims was determined in the same way as the previous two variables: those who did not answer the question or were coded as “Do not know” were not included in the calculation of the total number of victims.

Proportion assaulted by a partner or former partner. Those victims who indicated they did know their aggressor were directed to answer the question “Which of these categories best describes (the person’s/each person’s) relationship to you?” Those who indicated victimisation by either their spouse or de facto, former spouse or de facto, their current boyfriend/girlfriend, or their former boyfriend/girlfriend were categorised as having been assaulted by a partner or former partner.
In a similar way to the other variables, the number of those assaulted by a partner or former partner was divided by the total number of victims to obtain the proportion. The total number of victims for this variable was obtained from the item which asked “Did you know the offender/s before it happened or (was it a stranger/were they strangers)?” which, as described above, was used to filter those who knew their aggressor. Once more, those who were assaulted but did not answer the item used to obtain the totals, and those who indicated that they did not know where they had been assaulted were not included in the calculation of the total number assaulted.

As the dependent variables were proportions, they were transformed using the arcsine transformation. When used in conventional two-way ANOVA, these transformed proportions stabilise the variances of the proportions in each cell and therefore yield sums of squares that are distributed as Chi-square variables (Cox, 1970, p. 28). This means more complex computational methods (which are at best only marginally more powerful statistically), such as generalised least squares models using the logistic transformation, can be avoided.¹

Results

SPSS program ANOVA was used to determine main effects and interactions between groups differentiated by age and gender. An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses. Because the dependent variables were arcsine-transformed proportions, ANOVA sums of squares were distributed as chi-square. Therefore, sums of squares were evaluated against the critical values of chi-square. Overall, there were 202 self-reported assault victims (123 men and 79 women).

ASSAULTS OCCURRING IN OWN DWELLING

Table 2 shows the number and percentage of those assaulted at or in their own dwelling, by gender and age. Figure 1 presents a graphical presentation of this table. Results of an ANOVA showed a significant gender main effect (SS = 24.42, df = 1, \( p < .01 \)), with women more likely to be assaulted in their own dwelling. There was also a significant linear age effect (SS = 4.51, df = 1, \( p < .05 \)), with younger victims (both men and women) being relatively less likely to be assaulted in their own dwelling than older victims. (This should not be taken to mean that young people overall are less likely to be victimised in their own dwellings than older people. The opposite is likely to be the case, given that young people have such a high rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Men % (victims/n)</th>
<th>Women % (victims/n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 20</td>
<td>6.7% (2/30)</td>
<td>17.6% (3/17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>10.3% (3/29)</td>
<td>57.1% (8/14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 24</td>
<td>14.5% (9/62)</td>
<td>46.8% (22/47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( N = 199 \). There were three missing data points throughout this variable.
FIGURE 1
Percentage of assault victims assaulted at or in their own dwelling by gender and age.

TABLE 3
Numbers and Percentages of Assault Victims Assaulted in a Public Place by Gender and Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Men % (victims/n)</th>
<th>Women % (victims/n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 20</td>
<td>86.7% (26/30)</td>
<td>58.8% (10/17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>65.5% (19/29)</td>
<td>28.6% (4/14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 24</td>
<td>72.6% (45/62)</td>
<td>31.9% (15/47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 199. There were three missing data points throughout this variable.

FIGURE 2
Percentage of assault victims assaulted in a public place by gender and age.
of victimisation across many settings. It is important to remember that the present analysis is restricted to victims). No other comparisons or interactions produced significant outcomes.

ASSAULTS OCCURRING IN PUBLIC PLACES
Table 3 shows the number and percentage of those assaulted in a public place, by gender and age. Figure 2 presents this table graphically. Results of an ANOVA showed a significant gender main effect (SS = 29.13, df = 1, *p* < .01), with women less likely to be assaulted in a public place. There was also a significant age main effect (SS = 8.13, df = 2, *p* < .05), with the age linear main effect also reaching significance (SS = 4.51, df = 1, *p* < .05). Although not reaching statistical significance, there was a trend towards an age quadratic main effect (SS = 3.62, df = 1, *p* < .06). Indeed, inspection of the graphed results suggests that teenage boys and girls are relatively more likely to be assaulted in public places than older men and women, but that these age effects tend to flatten out somewhat by the time teens reach the age of 20 years. There were no significant interactions.

**TABLE 4**
Numbers and Percentages of Assault Victims Assaulted During Leisure Activities Away from Home by Gender and Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Men % (victims/n)</th>
<th>Women % (victims/n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>53.3% (16/30)</td>
<td>47.1% (8/17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>55.2% (16/29)</td>
<td>35.7% (5/14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 24</td>
<td>46.8% (29/62)</td>
<td>21.3% (10/47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *N* = 199. There were three unusable data points in this variable (Missing, *n* = 1, Don’t know, *n* = 2).

**FIGURE 3**
Percentage of assault victims assaulted during leisure activities away from home by gender and age.
ASSAULTS OCCURRING DURING LEISURE ACTIVITIES AWAY FROM HOME

Table 4 shows the number and percentage of those assaulted during leisure activities away from home, by gender and age. Figure 3 presents this table graphically. Results again showed a significant gender main effect ($SS = 9.26, \, df = 1, \, p < .01$), with women relatively less likely to be assaulted during leisure activities away from home. Although not reaching statistical significance ($SS = 3.25, \, df = 1, \, p < .08$), there was also a trend towards an age linear main effect with young men and women both relatively more likely to be assaulted during leisure activities away from home, compared with their older counterparts. There were no significant interactions and no other comparison reached significance.

ASSAULTS BY PARTNERS OR FORMER PARTNERS

Table 5 shows the number and percentage of those assaulted by partners or former partners (including boyfriends and former boyfriends), by gender and age. In this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Men % (victims/n)</th>
<th>Women % (victims/n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>0% (0/28)</td>
<td>23.5% (4/17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>3.6% (1/28)</td>
<td>50.0% (7/14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;24</td>
<td>3.3% (2/61)</td>
<td>38.3% (18/47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 195$. In this sample, all women reported male partners and all men reported female partners. There were seven unusable data points in this variable (Missing, $n = 5$, Don’t know, $n = 2$).

FIGURE 4

Percentage of assault victims assaulted by a partner or former partner by gender and age.
sample of victims, all women reported male partners and all men reported female partners. Figure 4 is a graphical presentation of this table. Results again showed a significant gender main effect ($SS = 49.27, df = 1, p < .01$), with women much more likely than men to be assaulted by partners or former partners. Although not reaching statistical significance ($SS = 5.05, df = 2, p < .10$), inspection of Figure 4 reveals a trend towards younger female and male victims being less likely than older victims to have been assaulted by a partner or former partner. Again, there were no significant interactions.

**SUMMARY**

In terms of the first research question, results indicated that compared with older women victims, women victims under the age of 20 years were relatively more likely to have been assaulted in a public place, and were relatively less likely to have been assaulted in their own dwelling. Although not quite reaching statistical significance, trends in the data showed that young women victims were relatively more likely to be have been assaulted in a leisure venue away from home, and were relatively less likely to have been assaulted by a partner or former partner, compared with older women victims. In terms of the second research question, the results clearly showed gender differences in accordance with previous research. Women victims were relatively more likely than male victims to be assaulted in their own dwelling, relatively less likely to be assaulted in a public place and during leisure activities away from home, and were relatively more likely to have been assaulted by a partner or former partner. There were no significant interactions obtained in these analyses. Overall, these results suggest that younger and older women victims do indeed have different victimisation patterns and provide evidence for the idea that young women are more vulnerable to victimisation in public places than are older women.

**Discussion**

The results of this study suggest there are important differences in the ways that younger and older women experience assault, particularly in terms of where they are victimised and by whom. Trends in the data suggested that teenage women are more susceptible than older women victims to public place violence, including violence in leisure venues away from home. Further, trends in the data suggested that young women victims are relatively less likely than older women victims to be assaulted by a partner or former partner.

These findings are perhaps not surprising. Teenage women are frequent users of public spaces (Franck & Paxson, 1989) and they are less likely to be partnered than older women (NYARS and ABS, 1993). It is in public places that their friendship and relationship dynamics tend to be played out, and it is from these friendships and relationships that violence usually emerges. It is likely that young women experience assaults in public places by a wide range of known men (other than just partners and former partners) including friends, relatives, acquaintances, those they have just met, and others.

These results have a number of implications for theorising about, and preventing violence against, women. At the very least, when thinking about violence
against women and when designing violence prevention approaches, it needs to be recognised that women’s victimisation patterns differ across age. The results point to the importance of viewing violence against women in terms of the contexts in which women find themselves at different developmental phases — where and with whom they are spending their time. In particular, considering that, of all women, young women are the most at risk of experiencing violence, there is a need for policy makers and prevention specialists to focus more attention on public places as important sites of violence. Although this may seem like an obvious point, these issues are often overlooked in theorising and in the design of prevention programs.

More broadly, the findings suggest the need to incorporate an understanding of the role of developmental processes into theories of violence against women. To date, theories about the causes of violence against women have not taken into account life phase. Even theorists who have focused on victim characteristics have tended to view women of different ages as having the same experiences. What is required is better theorising about the role played by adolescent developmental task fulfilment, including the need for increased independence and peer identification, identity development, and experimentation with sexual relationships. Not only this, but developmental aspects of young women and men’s construction of sex and gender must also be understood more clearly. The contexts in which young women and men meet their developmental tasks and the development of the ways they construct sex and gender are likely to produce the types of interactions from which violence emerges. It is these types of gendered developmental influences that need to be incorporated into theories of violence against young women.

The fact that public places (as locations) and non-intimates (as assailants) play important roles in young women’s experiences of violence is perhaps not surprising but is important to demonstrate given the surprising omission of these types of variables in previous studies. This is especially true in light of the voluminous literature on violence against women in general, which is dominated by research into domestic violence. An obvious reason for the lack of attention to young women and public places is that, overall, intimate violence occurring in private places is widely recognised to be the most common form of violence experienced by women. But there may also be other reasons. Over recent decades, many researchers have actively resisted devoting attention to public place violence against women. This resistance has arisen partly from an historical context in which the “stranger danger” myth — the idea that violence against women usually takes the form of brutal bashings by strangers in dark alleys at night — prevailed in the community. Feminists have argued that this myth wrongly ascribes blame to geography rather than where it should be directed — towards men. In so doing, they rightly argued that these myths helped to reinforce the social control of women (e.g., Hamner, Radford, & Stanko, 1989; Pain, 1991; Riger & Gordon, 1981; Stanko, 1987).

However, the momentum generated by feminist researchers in their attempts to re-focus on men, rather than geography, has perhaps resulted in something of a “blind spot” towards the issue of public place violence against women. Feminist researchers do themselves a disservice by maintaining this position in light of
findings such as those in this study, that those most at risk of violence — young women — experience a large amount of violence in public places.

So, how do we focus some prevention energy towards young women and public places? There are a number of possibilities. As noted, in Australia, community awareness campaigns have been the approach of choice for combating violence against women (Egger, 1997), focusing on shifting attitudes towards women and violence. Other approaches have involved police interventions, probation orders, and the funding of women’s refuges. All of these have emphasised the role of private, intimate violence. However, particularly when aimed at young people, approaches such as these need also to emphasise that public places are common sites of violence, that young women are at risk of experiencing violence at the hands of a wide variety of men, and that violence is not appropriate in any context.

Schools may be important and neglected sites for intervention. For example, programs already in place in schools addressing gender-based violence (such as Ollis & Tomaszewski, 1993) could be adjusted to include educational strategies to enhance teachers’ and students’ knowledge about the particular risks faced by young women. Included should be the acknowledgment that teenage women face risks not only in private places, but also face high risks in public places (such as in nightclubs and in schools), and that these risks come from a broad array of men. Strategies aimed to change attitudes towards these types of violence are also necessary. It is important that these types of interventions are one facet of a “whole-of-school” approach and are reinforced with appropriate and explicit school policies which clarify normative behaviour and rules in conjunction with their contingent enforcement (Gottfredson, 1997).

There has been a long history of educating women about how to stay free of danger in public places, in the form of prevention booklets. However, these have not been without controversy. Education booklets in the past have been severely criticised and any development of one would require careful consideration. Violence prevention booklets were developed in the United Kingdom (UK) and in North America in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These booklets (such as the Solicitor General of Canada’s 1985 crime prevention booklet “Woman Alone” and the Home Office 1989 booklet “Practical Ways to Crack Crime”, both cited in Egger, 1997) included advice that crimes against them are rare, and offered practical suggestions such as avoiding isolated bus stops, avoiding shortcuts through dimly lit alleys, refusing rides from strangers, carrying a screech alarm, and sitting near the driver or guard on public transport (see Egger, 1997, for a full review).

Extensive criticism has been levelled against these booklets (DeKeseredy, Burshtyn, and Gordon, 1992; Egger, 1997; Stanko, 1990; Walklate, 1991) on the following grounds: (a) they did not acknowledge intimates as the most likely perpetrators of violence but rather focused on strangers, (b) the focus on strangers encouraged fear of strangers which in turn may encourage women to constrain their lifestyles, (c) the booklets may lead to blaming the victim for the violence if the precautions fail (Walklate, 1991), and (d) they focus on risk management and do not acknowledge the importance of structural dimensions (Egger, 1997). In fact, feminist scholars have tended to reject the idea of prevention booklets out of hand,
and have favoured other types of prevention approaches, particularly community education campaigns.

Nevertheless, the risk remains that if educational materials are not provided to young women concerning the circumstances surrounding violence in public places, young women will not be empowered to make their own choices about their own behaviour, and their feelings of vulnerability will also remain unaddressed. There has usually been the tacit or explicit assumption in feminist literature that violence prevention should not require women to change their behaviour in order to reduce violence. While it is true that women should not have to alter their behaviour, it is also the case that women should be provided with the information necessary to make informed decisions about whether or not to engage in behaviours which may place them at a heightened risk of assault. This should be no less true for younger women than it is for older women. In fact, it may be time to begin to place greater value on the decision-making capabilities of young women and to encourage their responsible choice-making by providing them with information concerning the risks.

At a minimum, any responsible prevention approach involving booklets would need to (a) provide accurate information pertaining to the actual risks faced by young women, (b) provide advice about what the important risk factors are, (c) acknowledge that most offenders are known to the victim (but are not necessarily partners or dates), (d) educate young women that they are not to blame for violence against them, and (e) encourage young women that they have a right to as much access to public places as men.

However, even if these issues were rectified in prevention booklets, there would remain a multitude of difficulties associated with educating young women about violence. First, as Stanko (1990) contends, letting young women know that they face most risk of aggression by a range of known men leads to countless dilemmas about how to advise women about safety within the context of women’s relationships, and about managing interactions with men who are assumed to be safe. In addition, if we let young women know they are in the highest risk category for violence in public places, we run the risk of encouraging both fear and social isolation. As Hanmer et al. (1989) suggested, a major task is to find a way to promote the view that women should be free of violence, without compromising their independence.

Given the dilemmas associated with designing responsible prevention booklets, perhaps what is first required is research investigating how much young women currently know about the risks with which they are faced and about how to stay safe in public places. It is possible that women have developed complex, intuitive knowledge systems concerning their own personal victimisation risks. More research needs to be conducted to determine the accuracy of this intuitive knowledge, and also for researchers to gain new insights from the “folk wisdom” of young women. Findings from these types of research could provide information on the risks about which young women have insufficient knowledge, and these could be targeted specifically in prevention campaigns.

One prevention approach which poses fewer dilemmas of the type described above is situational prevention approaches. Violence against women has not been an important focus for situational crime prevention researchers, and attention to these factors regarding women and public place violence has been surprisingly
sparse (Franck & Paxson, 1989; Schwartz & Pitts, 1995). This lack of attention to situational approaches to preventing this type of crime may be partly explained by the masculinist and gender blind nature of this dominant prevention approach (Walklate, 1997), but also may partly be explained because feminist researchers themselves have tended to view situational measures as “bandaids” and extensions of social control (Egger, 1997; Walklate, 1997). However, researchers should not dismiss situational methods as they lend themselves well to the prevention of public place crimes.

Bars, nightclubs, and other leisure venues away from home appear to be important and previously neglected sites of violence against young women. In particular, not enough situational work into violence against women has been conducted in licensed venues. What may be required is detailed analyses of the features of licensed premises that increase the risks for women specifically. From these types of studies, prevention programs could be developed which acknowledge and directly target the subtle forms of violence occurring in licensed premises, and which are often trivialised and remain unacknowledged, but which are common experiences for young women. Perhaps the responsibility should be on the management of licensed venues to create safe places for their patrons (Hauritz, Homel, Mcllwain, Burrows, & Townsley, 1998). For example, concrete codes of practice could be developed, where management explicitly acknowledge the needs of people using licensed premises, and undertake to create a safe environment. In addition, general community education campaigns may be required to educate young women and men that certain behaviours are not acceptable in licensed venues (e.g., “groping” on the dance floor, “taking advantage” of women who are drunk).

Finally, situational approaches involving improved street lighting can be effective in reducing violence. Farrington and Welsh (in press) have demonstrated in a careful meta-analysis that improved street lighting can lead to a reduction in crime and fear, and suggest that it does so through its effects on community pride and informal social control. Although this type of research has not focused specifically on the reduction of violence against women, improved lighting should contribute to reducing actual violence, fear, and the social isolation of women.

None of this is to say that the prevention of private place violence should be neglected in favour of public place violence. Rather, it is to say that relatively more attention should be paid to the problem of violence against young women in public places than has been in the past, and that violence against women should not be viewed solely as a private place phenomenon. This applies particularly in the case of young women, whose relationship and friendship networks tend to be situated more in public places. Broadening the scope of focus to public as well as private places is likely to contribute to the reduction of violence against young women and the devastating ramifications this has for their lives.

Endnote

1 The arcsine transformation (the arcsine of the square root of the proportion multiplied by two) overcomes the problem of heterogeneous variances arising from variable cell sizes and varying proportions (the variance of an untransformed proportion is p*(1–p)/n). This transformation is one of a family of transformations that are suitable for use with proportions, and
yields results that are asymptotically equivalent to the more commonly used logistic transformation, whether or not least squares or generalised least squares models are employed (Cox, 1970, p. 28). To illustrate the similarity of results obtained using the arcsine transformation with least squares ANOVA and the results using the logistic transformation with generalised least squares, the data in Table 2 were analysed using both methods. Results were almost identical, with the Chi-square for the main effect of gender being 24.42 for the arcsine ANOVA and 24.58 for the logistic model using generalised least squares. Similarly, the chi-square values for the other significant factor, the linear component of age, were 4.51 for the arcsine ANOVA and 4.52 for the logistic analysis.

References


