



PRINCIPAL  
HEALTH & WELLBEING SURVEY

# THREATS & VIOLENCE AGAINST SCHOOL LEADERS

NEW ZEALAND PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADERS' OCCUPATIONAL  
HEALTH AND WELLBEING SURVEY — 2018 DATA

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## INTRODUCTION

Along with their heavy workloads<sup>1</sup>, school leaders have to cope with behaviours such as threats of violence, actual violence, bullying, conflicts, gossip and slander in their workplace. This contributes to the stress and burnout experienced by school leaders and signals that their safety, and that of other educators, needs to be addressed urgently.

This report provides detailed information on these issues, which worsened from 2016 to 2018, and are experienced by school leaders at significantly higher levels than by the general public.

NZEI recommends that increased resourcing, staffing and programmes to support the growing number of students with challenging behaviours and additional learning needs is urgently prioritised. There should be a requirement, monitored by ERO, for all Board of Trustees to actively uphold safe environments at all schools, and school leaders should be provided with mentors and professional support; and counselling in situations of physical violence.

### Survey Background

The Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey 2018 was commissioned by NZEI Te Riu Roa and undertaken by Associate Professor Philip Riley (PhD) of the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University. The survey collects data and monitors the health, safety and well-being of primary school principals (including deputy- and assistant-principals), and has collected data for the past three years – 2016, 2017 and 2018.

Participation in the survey is voluntary, and to promote self-management, each participant receives personalised, interactive feedback through a secure website. As the survey and its benefits became better known, participation has increased significantly. In 2018, n= 1428 school leaders responded to the survey, up from n = 1215 in 2017 and n = 574 in 2016.

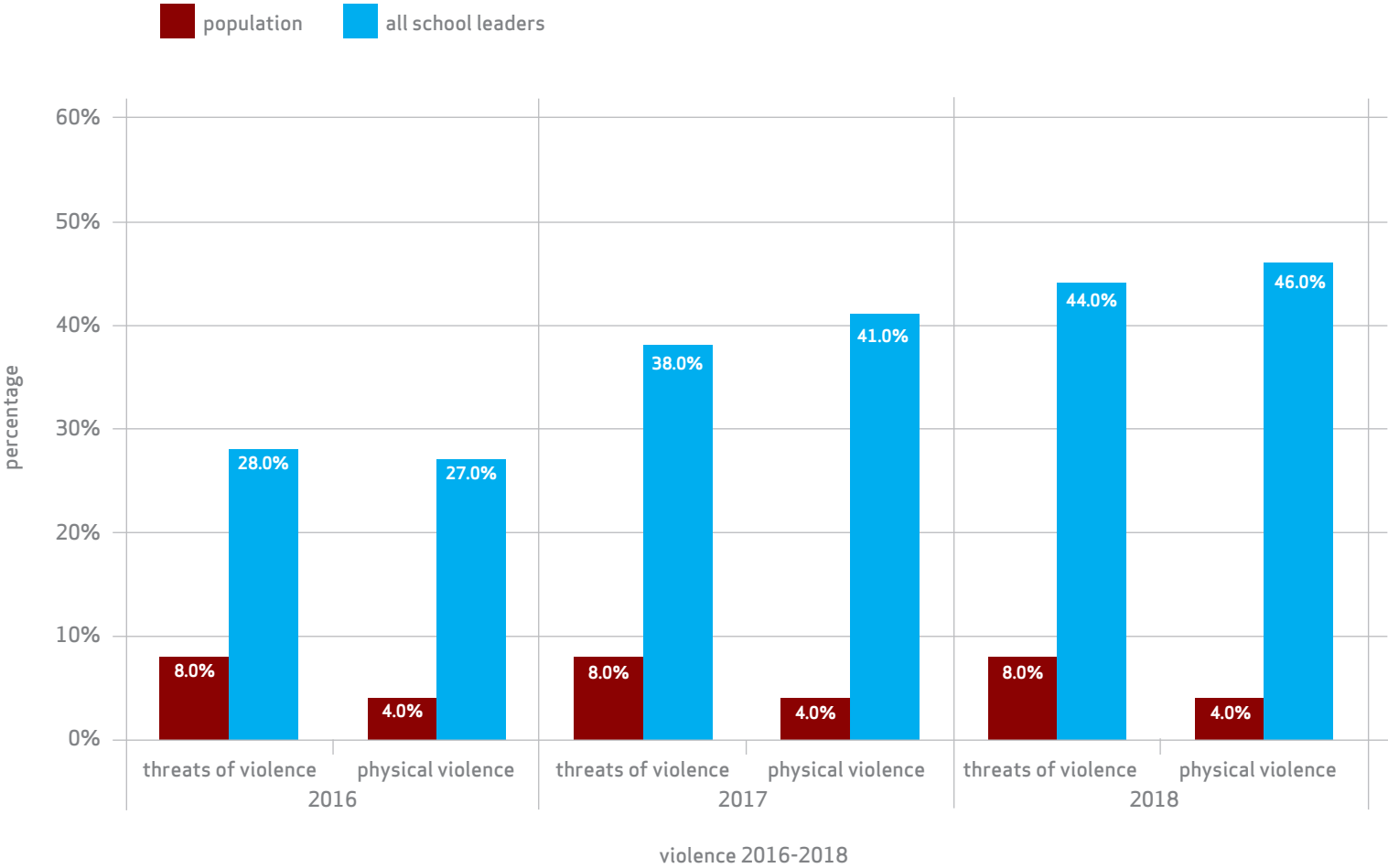
In 2018, more women (n = 978, 68.5%) than men (n = 450, 31.5%) took part, across various locations – urban (n = 965, 67.6%), rural (n = 403, 28.2%), and isolated (n= 50, 3.5 %). The percentage of Māori school leaders taking part has remained relatively stable, with 65 (11.3%) participating in 2016, 174 (14.3%) in 2017 and 170 (11.9%) in 2018. Likewise the average age of respondents has varied very little at 52.2 years in 2016, 51.9 in 2017 and 52.5 in 2018.

School leaders across all school types reported 1.76 times the rate of burnout<sup>2</sup> compared to the general population in both years, and 1.8 times the rate of work stress. This rate has remained constant across all three years.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nzei.org.nz/UploadedFiles/Media/Health\\_and\\_Wellbeing\\_FINAL\\_20190215.pdf](https://www.nzei.org.nz/UploadedFiles/Media/Health_and_Wellbeing_FINAL_20190215.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

**Figure 1. School leaders' experience of threatened and actual violence 2016-2018**



Overall, school leaders in 2018 were 5.64 times more likely than the general population to receive threats of violence in the course of their work, compared with being 4.87 times as likely in 2017 and 3.54 times as likely in 2016.

Rates of actual physical violence have also increased with all respondents being 11.79 times more likely to be subject to physical violence at work than the rest of the population, compared with being 10 times more likely in 2017 and 7 times more likely in 2016.

**Figure 2. Rates of threatened and actual violence by sex of respondent 2016-2018**

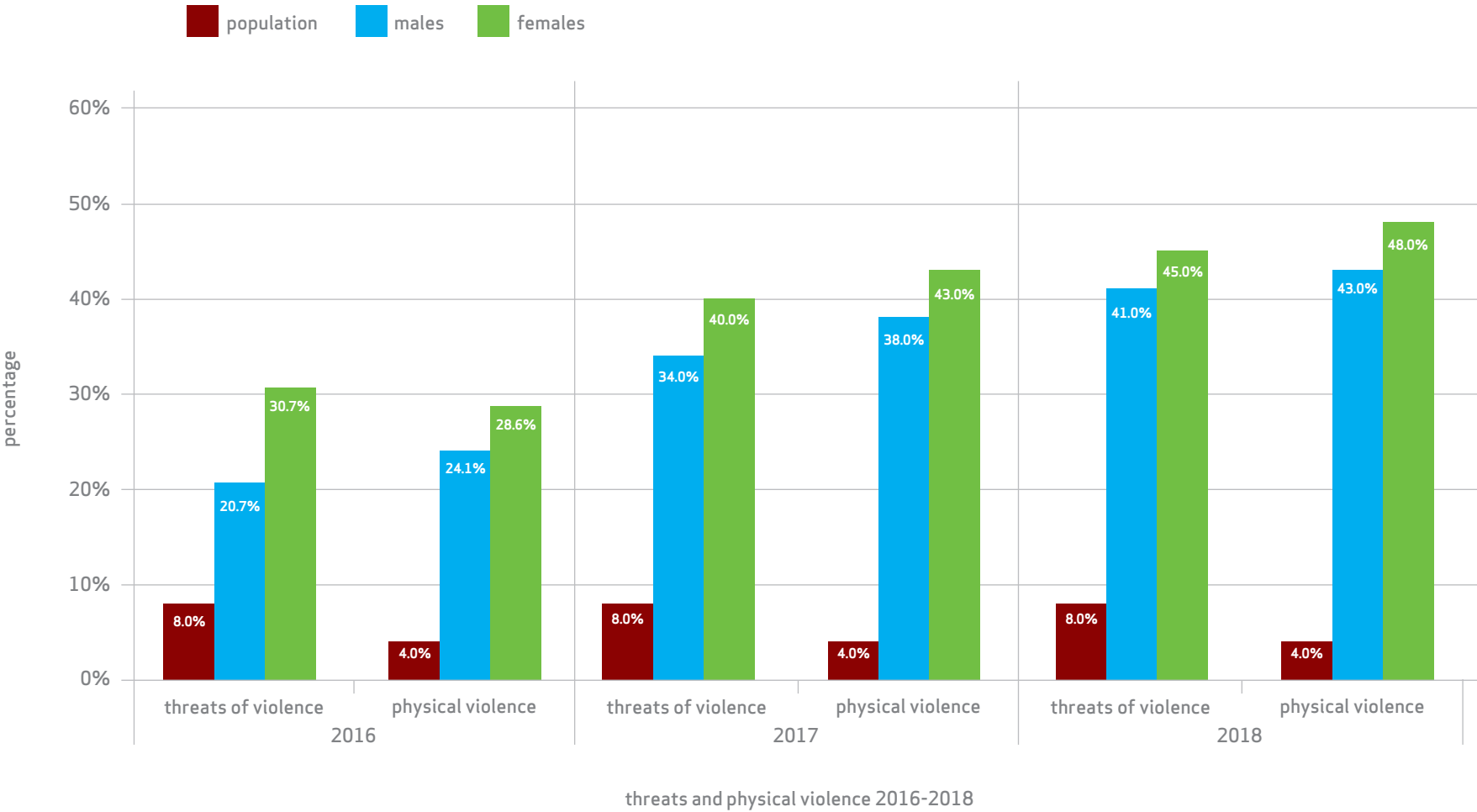
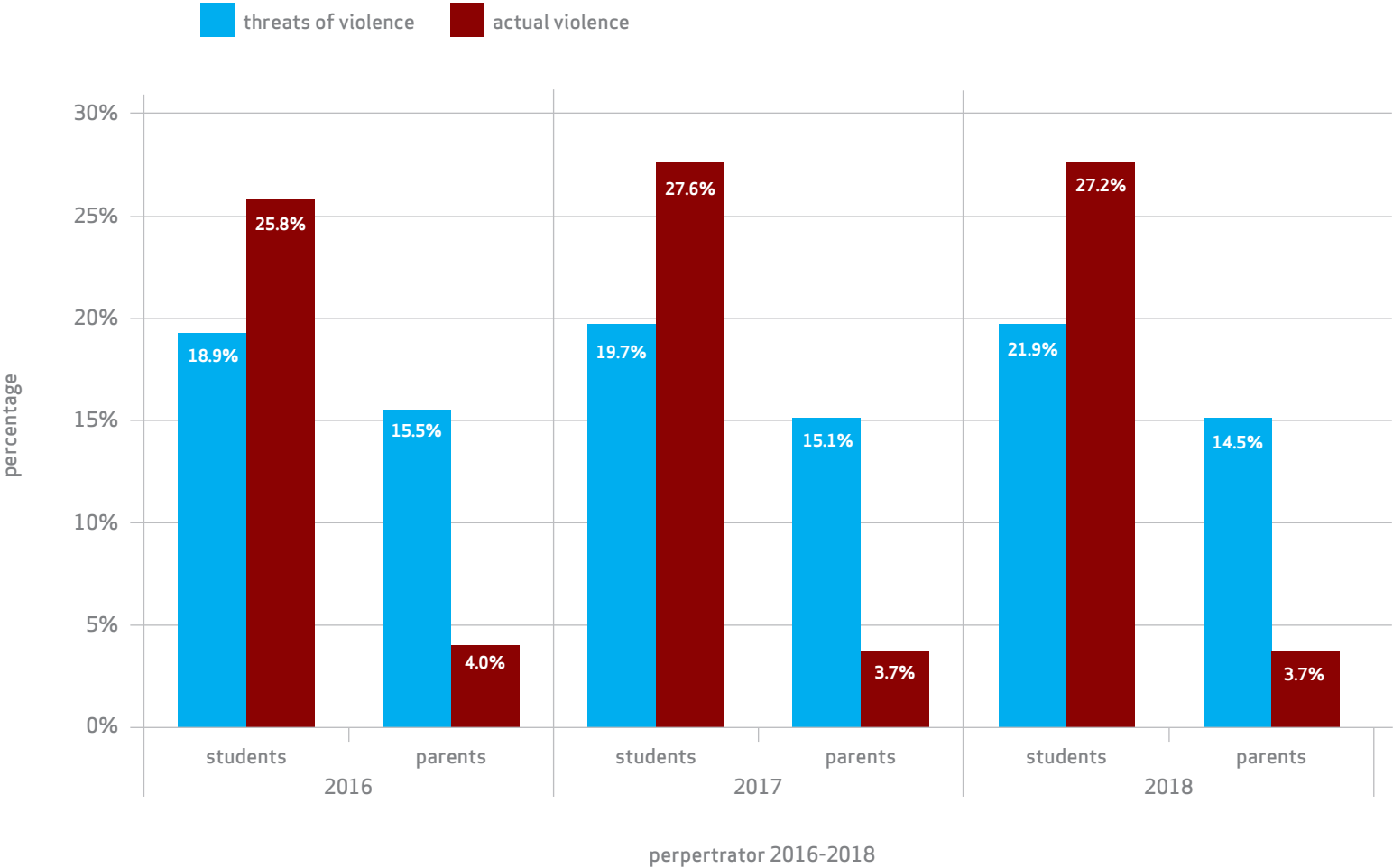


Figure 2 shows that rates of threats and actual violence against female school leaders were higher than those against male school leaders in every year, and have increased steadily since 2016. In 2018, 45% of female leaders were threatened with violence, compared to 41% of male leaders. Actual violence was reported by 48% of female leaders, compared to 43 % of male leaders.

**Figure 3. Rates of threatened and actual violence by perpetrator 2016-2018**



Threats of violence from parents were reported by 14.5% of school leaders, with 21.9% of school leaders receiving threats of violence from students. Twenty-seven percent had experienced actual physical violence from students, and 3.7% had experienced violence at the hands of parents.

**Figure 4. Frequency of threatened and actual violence 2016-2018**

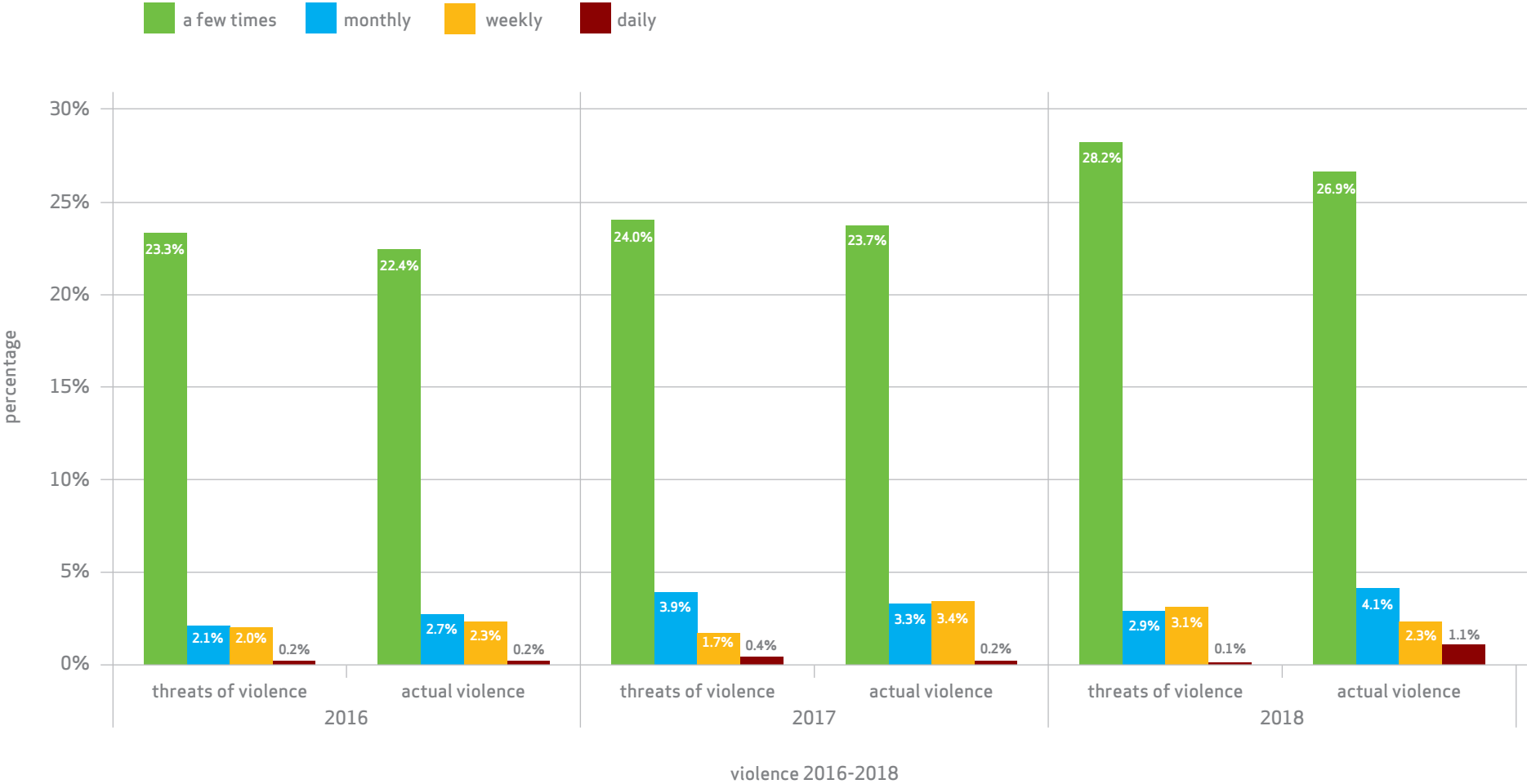


Figure 4 shows that in most cases (28.2% of respondents in 2018), threats were received “a few times” in the year, i.e. less often than monthly. This pattern is repeated for actual violence - in 2018, 26.9% of respondents were subject to violence less often than monthly.

## OTHER OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOURS

School leaders in special schools, where children are trying to cope with a range of significant issues and frustrations, have a greater likelihood of experiencing physical violence, which has remained stable across the period at around (78%). Seventy-three percent of school leaders were involved in conflicts or quarrels in 2018. These tense situations must sometimes be linked to threats and physical violence – whether student-to-student, or student-to-teacher. School leaders are also frequently the subject of gossip and slander (62% of participants in 2018), bullying (43%), and sometimes sexual harassment (4%).

School leaders experienced bullying at 5.18 times the general population prevalence in 2018. Those doing the bullying are most likely to be other adults – parents, other staff and managers.

While school leaders in urban schools experience higher levels of threats of violence, physical violence and bullying, school leaders in isolated/off-shore locations experience more verbal abuse.

## CONCLUSIONS

Maintaining dignity and safety at work should be the norm for every workplace. The levels of offensive behaviour and violence in schools are unacceptable for any workplace, and particularly for a learning environment involving children.

This data indicates two parallel but different issues with violence in schools. This research does not seek to lay blame, particularly when many young children with learning difficulties, poor communication skills or stressful or chaotic lives are simply not having their needs met because of under-resourcing and lack of capability in the education system. Instead, this research underlines the critical and urgent need to increase resourcing and capacity in teachers, school leaders and school support and specialist systems to manage and de-escalate the challenging behaviour of some students and to meet their needs. This data confirms that reforms and more resourcing to Learning Support, and the appointment of trained and well-supported Learning Support Coordinators in all schools and early learning services must be a priority.

The other issue is the behaviour of adults – parents and others – whose behaviour in a learning environment is unacceptable. The two issues are likely to require different strategies and interventions.

The consequences of offensive behaviour in schools are likely to become costly for employers, through time lost to ill health and reduced functioning in the workplace, as well as potential occupational health and safety claims against employers for failing to provide a safe working environment.

Reducing levels of offensive behaviour will produce significant educational gains for students. Previous research has shown that the most effective ways to prevent or diminish bullying and violence are through whole-school approaches (Antonio & Salzfass, 2007; Dake et al., 2003; de Wet, 2010; Espelage et al., 2013; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2001).