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# The Cycle of Violence

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# NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

Research in Brief

Charles B. DeWitt, Director

October 1992

## The Cycle of Violence

by Cathy Spatz Widom

### *Does childhood abuse lead to adult criminal behavior?*

### *How likely is it that today's abused and neglected children will become tomorrow's violent offenders?*

In one of the most detailed studies of the issue to date, research sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) found that childhood abuse increased the odds of future delinquency and adult criminality overall by 40 percent. The study followed 1,575 cases from childhood through young adulthood, comparing the arrest records of two groups:

- A study group of 908 substantiated cases of childhood abuse or neglect processed by the courts between 1967 and 1971 and tracked through official records over the next 15 to 20 years.
- A comparison group of 667 children, not officially recorded as abused or neglected, matched to the study group according to sex, age, race, and approximate family socioeconomic status.

While most members of both groups had no juvenile or adult criminal record, *being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent, as an adult by 38 percent, and for a violent crime by 38 percent.*

The "cycle of violence" hypothesis suggests that a childhood history of physical abuse predisposes the survivor to violence in later years. This study reveals that victims of neglect are also more likely to develop later criminal violent behavior as well. This finding gives powerful support to the need for expanding common conceptions of physical abuse. If it is not only violence that begets violence, but also neglect, far more attention needs to be devoted to the families of children whose "beatings" are forms of abandonment and severe malnutrition. An example of intervention for the prevention of neglect is described later in this *Research in Brief*.

The first phase of this study relied on arrest records to measure delinquency and criminality. A second phase calls for locating

and interviewing a large sample of the previously abused and neglected children to draw a more complete picture of the consequences of childhood victimization. The remainder of this report presents Phase I results in greater detail and introduces preliminary findings from Phase II.

### Study design

Several important design features distinguish this research from prior efforts to study the intergenerational transmission of violence.<sup>1</sup> First, by following a large number (1,575) of cases from childhood through adolescence into young adulthood, this "prospective" study was able to examine the long-term consequences of abuse and neglect. The sample, drawn from a metropolitan area in the Midwest, was restricted to children who were 11 years or younger at the time of the incident of abuse or neglect. At the time that juvenile and criminal records were checked, subjects ranged in age from 16 to 33; most were

### From the Director

Family violence—particularly violence against children—is a critical priority for criminal justice officials, political leaders, and the public we serve. The statistics are alarming. Almost a million children are victims of child abuse and neglect, according to the 1990 Annual Fifty State Survey conducted by the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse.

Family violence can be considered from a variety of different perspectives: criminal justice, psychology, sociology, and economics. Studies have produced varying estimates

of the magnitude of family violence; various methods have been considered for estimating its extent. None has examined its effect on the later behavior of children as does the NIJ study reported in this *Research in Brief*. Some of the findings are startling. For example, *being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent, as an adult by 38 percent, and for a violent crime by 38 percent.*

I have made child abuse a priority at NIJ, and this is the first in a series of five *Research in Brief* reports NIJ will publish

dealing with the consequences of child abuse. In addition, NIJ is supporting a multisite study of child abuse prosecution and a study of ways the justice system has addressed this critical problem.

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between ages 20 and 30, with a mean age of 25.

Matching members of the study group to others whose official records showed no childhood abuse or neglect was an equally important feature of the research. This design allowed the study to separate the effects of known correlates of delinquency and criminality (age, sex, race, and socioeconomic status) from the experience of abuse and neglect. Both groups were approximately two-thirds white and one-third black and were about evenly divided between males and females. Most were between 6 and 11 years old at the time the abuse was documented (see exhibit 1).

The study design also featured clear operational definitions of abuse and neglect. Combined with large sample sizes, this permitted the separate examination of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, defined as follows:

- Physical abuse cases included injuries such as bruises, welts, burns, abrasions, lacerations, wounds, cuts, bone and skull fractures, and other evidence of physical injury.
- Sexual abuse involved such charges as "assault and battery with intent to gratify

sexual desires," "fondling or touching in an obscene manner," rape, sodomy, and incest.

- Neglect cases represented extreme failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention to children.

Family members (often parents) were the primary perpetrators of the abuse and neglect. The most frequent type of perpetrator varied, however, by type of maltreatment (see exhibit 2).

Juvenile court and probation records were the source of information on the abuse and neglect, as well as the characteristics of the family. Arrest data were obtained from Federal, State, and local law enforcement records. Recognizing that much child abuse (as well as later delinquent and criminal behavior) never comes to the attention of any official authority, Phase II will supplement these official records with interview results.

### Study findings

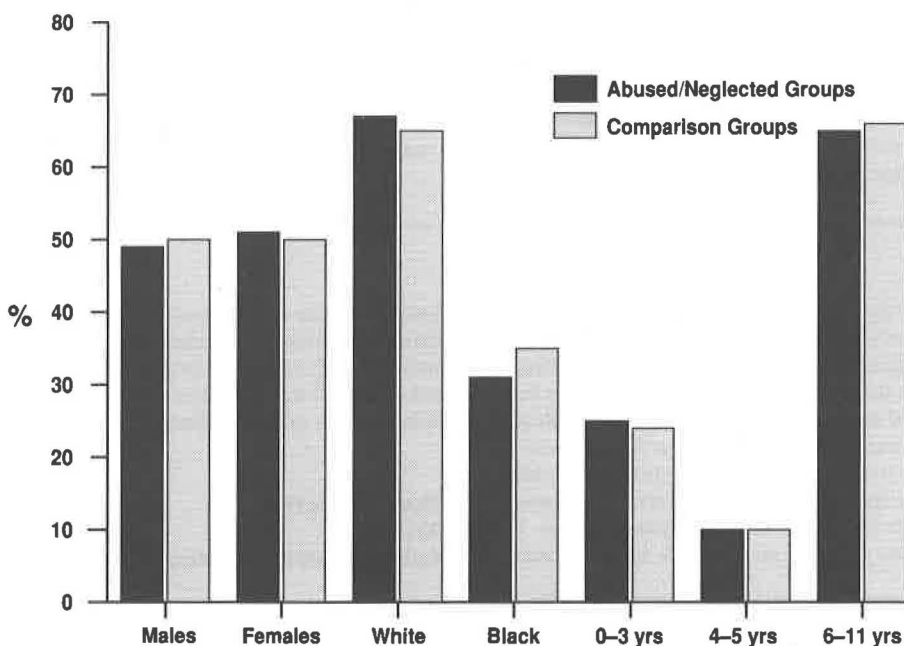
Of primary interest was the question, "Would the behavior of those who had been abused or neglected be worse than those with no reported abuse?" The an-

swer, shown in exhibit 3, was evident: those who had been abused or neglected as children were more likely to be arrested as juveniles (26 percent versus 17 percent), as adults (29 percent versus 21 percent), and for a violent crime (11 percent versus 8 percent). The abused and neglected cases were also more likely to average nearly 1 year younger at first arrest (16.5 years versus 17.3 years), to commit nearly twice as many offenses (2.4 percent versus 1.4 percent), and to be arrested more frequently (17 percent of abused and neglected cases versus 9 percent of comparison cases had more than five arrests).

**Sex.** Experiencing early child abuse or neglect had a substantial impact, even on individuals with little likelihood of engaging in officially recorded adult criminal behavior. Thus, although males generally have higher rates of criminal behavior than females, being abused or neglected in childhood increased the likelihood of arrest for females—by 77 percent over comparison group females. As adults, abused and neglected females were more likely to be arrested for property, drug, and misdemeanor offenses such as disorderly conduct, curfew violations, or loitering, but not for violent offenses. Females in general are less likely to be arrested for street violence and more likely to appear in statistics on violence in the home. Through interviews, Phase II will examine the incidence of unreported violence to learn more about the possible existence of hidden cycles of family violence.

**Race.** Both black and white abused and neglected children were more likely to be arrested than comparison children. However, as shown in exhibit 4, the difference between whites was not as great as that between blacks. In fact, white abused and neglected children do *not* show increased likelihood of arrest for violent crimes over comparison children. This contrasts dramatically with the findings for black children in this sample who show significantly increased rates of violent arrests, compared with black children who were not abused or neglected. This is a surprising finding and one that may reflect differences in an array of environmental factors. Phase II will investigate a number of explanations for these results, including differences in poverty levels, family factors, characteristics of the abuse or neglect incident, access to counseling or support services, and treatment by juvenile authorities.

Exhibit 1. Demographic Characteristics



**Juvenile record.** Previously abused or neglected persons were at higher risk of beginning a life of crime, at a younger age, with more significant and repeated criminal involvement. Notably, however, among those arrested as juveniles, abused or neglected persons were no more likely to continue a life of crime than other children:

- In both groups, roughly the same proportion of children with juvenile arrests also had arrests as adults (53 percent versus 50 percent).
- Similarly, in both groups, about the same proportion of those with violent juvenile arrests also had violent arrests as adults (34.2 percent versus 36.8 percent).

In short, childhood abuse and neglect had no apparent effect on the movement of juvenile offenders toward adult criminal activity. Distinguishing the factors that promote the onset of criminal behavior from those that affect persistence in a criminal career is clearly an important topic for future research.

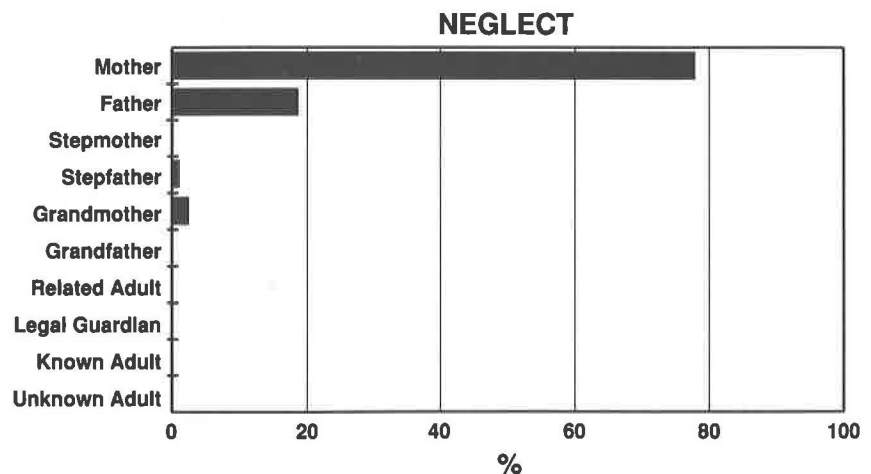
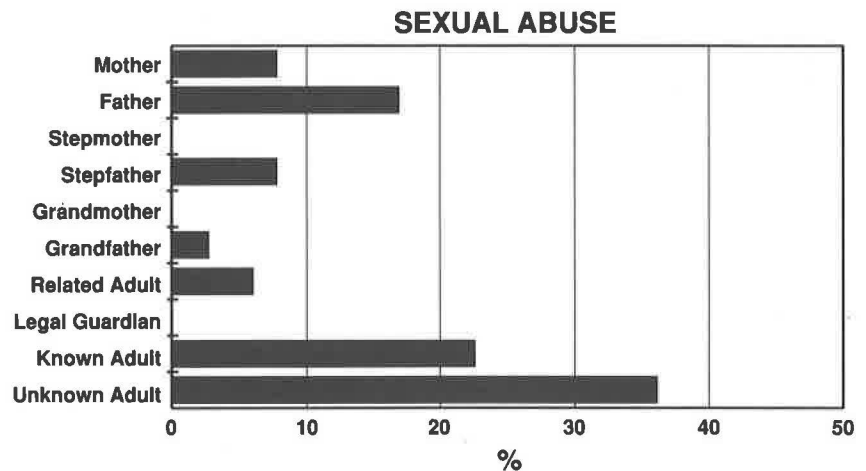
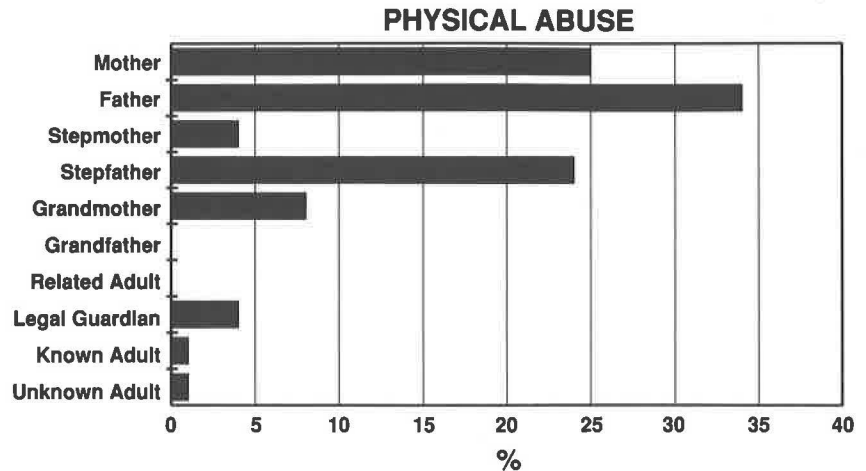
### Does only violence beget violence?

To test the notion that childhood victims of violence resort to violence themselves in later years, violent criminal behavior was examined as a function of the type of maltreatment experienced as a child. The results are presented in simplified form below.

Abuse Group	Number	Percent Arrested for Violent Offense
Physical abuse only	76	15.8%
Neglect only	609	12.5
Physical abuse and neglect	70	7.1
Sexual abuse and other abuse or neglect	28	7.1
Sexual abuse only	125	5.6
Comparison group	667	7.9

The physically abused (as opposed to neglected or sexually abused) were the most likely to be arrested later for a violent crime. Notably, however, the physically abused group was followed closely by the neglected group.

**Exhibit 2. Perpetrators of Abuse and Neglect**



**Exhibit 3. Extent of Involvement in Delinquency, Adult Criminality, and Violent Criminal Behavior**

Type of arrest	Abused and Neglected (n = 908) (%)	Comparison Group (n = 667) (%)
Juvenile	26.0	16.8
Adult	28.6	21.1
Violent crime	11.2	7.9

**Note:** All differences significant.

**Exhibit 4. Involvement in Criminality by Race**

Any arrest	Abused and Neglected (n = 908) (%)	Comparison Group (n = 667) (%)	Significance
<b>Juvenile</b>			
Black	37.9	19.3	<.001
White	21.1	15.4	<.05
<b>Adult</b>			
Black	39.0	26.2	<.01
White	24.4	18.4	<.05
<b>Violent</b>			
Black	22.0	12.9	<.01
White	6.5	5.3	NS

Because different types of abuse and neglect are not distributed evenly by age, race, and sex, these frequencies present an oversimplified picture. Even after controlling for age, race, and sex, however, a relationship between childhood neglect and subsequent violence remained evident.

This finding offers persuasive evidence for the need to take concerted preventive action. Nationwide, the incidence of neglect is almost three times that of physical abuse (15.9 per 1,000 children in 1986, compared to 5.7 per 1,000 for physical abuse, and 2.5 per 1,000 for sexual abuse).<sup>2</sup> Neglect also is potentially more damaging to the development of a child than abuse

(provided the abuse involves no neurological impairment). In one study of the influence of early malnutrition on subsequent behavior, previously malnourished children had attention deficits, reduced social skills, and poorer emotional stability than a comparison group.<sup>3</sup> Other researchers have found an array of developmental differences associated with childhood neglect.<sup>4</sup> This study now suggests that those differences include a greater risk of later criminal violence.

Research findings show how imperative are improved procedures for the identification of child abuse and neglect. Referring to the connection between child maltreat-

ment and adult criminality, New York City instituted new procedures for police response and followup in cases involving suspected child abuse and neglect.<sup>5</sup>

### Out-of-home placement and criminal consequences

Not all abused and neglected children grow up to become delinquents, adult criminals, or violent criminal offenders. What are some of the possible mediating variables that act to buffer or protect abused and neglected children? Placement outside the home is one possible buffer that was investigated with Phase I data. Scholars and practitioners have often criticized out-of-home placements (foster care, in particular). Children placed outside the home are considered a particularly vulnerable group, since they have experienced both a disturbed family situation and separation from their natural parents. Accordingly, child welfare policies today often seek to avoid removing the child from home and instead to mitigate negative family situations through counseling and related support.

In contrast to today's practices, the vast majority of a sample of the children abused and neglected roughly 20 years ago were placed outside the home during some portion of their childhood or early adolescence. Year-by-year information was available from juvenile court and probation records on 772 cases. For these children, out-of-home placements included foster care, guardian's home, and schools for the retarded or physically handicapped. Only 14 percent of these abuse and neglect cases had no record of having been placed up through age 18. The average amount of time in placement was about 5 years, and sometimes lasted through childhood and adolescence.

As exhibit 5 shows, there was remarkably little difference between the arrest records of those who remained at home and those who were placed outside the home due to abuse and neglect. (Predictably, both of these groups were strikingly different from those placed outside the home due to delinquency as well as abuse and neglect.) At least for this sample, then, an out-of-home placement did not lead to negative effects on the arrest measure for those who were removed from their homes due only to abuse and neglect.

The study also showed that stability may be an important factor in out-of-home placements. Children who moved three or more times had significantly higher arrest rates (almost twice as high) for all types of criminal behaviors—juvenile, adult, and violent—than children who moved less than three times. In turn, children with multiple placements typically had behavior problems noted in their files. These notations covered a wide spectrum of problem behavior, including chronic fighting, fire setting, destructiveness, uncontrollable anger, sadistic tendencies (for example, aggressiveness toward weaker children), and extreme defiance of authority. Whether the behavior problems caused the moves, or the moves contributed to the behavior problems, is unclear. In either case, children with numerous placements obviously need special services.

These findings challenge the assumption that it is necessarily unwise to remove children from negative family situations. While stability of placement appears to be important, the potential damage of removing an abused and neglected child from the home did not include a higher likelihood of arrest or violent criminal behavior.

## Phase II: Followup and in-person interviews

While the findings from Phase I demonstrate convincingly that early child abuse and neglect place one at increased risk for officially recorded delinquency, adult criminality, and violent criminal behavior, a large portion of abused and neglected children did not have official arrest records. Indeed, the linkage is far from inevitable, since the majority of abused and neglected children did not become delinquents, adult criminals, or violent offenders. However, because the findings from Phase I were based on official arrest records, these rates may be underestimates of the true extent of delinquency and criminality. Phase I findings also do not tell us about general violent behavior, especially unrecorded or unreported family violence.

Phase II was designed to address many of the unanswered questions from the first phase by finding and interviewing a large number of these people 20 years after the childhood victimization. Most are now young adults in their early 20's and 30's; some are beginning to have their own

**Exhibit 5. Juvenile and Adult Arrests as a Function of Placement Experiences for Juvenile Court Cases Only (n = 772)**

Type of Placement	N	Arrest (in percent)			
		Any Juvenile (n=209)	Any Adult (n=217)	Both Juv. & Adult (n=115)	Any Violent (n=93)
No placement	106	15.1	29.2	6.6	10.4
Abuse/neglect placement only	489	17.8	23.3	8.6	8.4
Delinquency placement plus abuse/neglect	96	92.7***	60.4***	55.2***	34.4***

**Note:** Adult arrest rates restricted to subjects age 21 and older in March 1988.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

children. The followup study aims to examine the full consequences of maltreatment as a child and to determine why some victims of childhood abuse and neglect fare well, while others have negative outcomes. The interviews will explore recollections of early childhood experiences, schooling, adolescence, undetected alcohol and drug problems, undetected delinquency and criminality, and important life experiences.

Preliminary Phase II findings, based on 2-hour followup interviews with 500 study and comparison group subjects, indicate that other negative outcomes may be as common as delinquency and violent criminal behavior. These interviews suggest that the long-term consequences of childhood victimization also may include:

- Mental health concerns (depression and suicide attempts).
- Educational problems (inadequate cognitive functioning, extremely low IQ, and poor reading ability).
- Health and safety issues (alcohol and drug problems).
- Occupational difficulties (lack of work, employment in low-level service jobs).

In addition to documenting the broader consequences of childhood victimization, Phase II is geared to identify "protective" factors that may act to buffer the negative

results of abuse and neglect. The ultimate goal is to provide a base of knowledge on which to build appropriate prevention and treatment programs.

## Conclusion and implications

Childhood victimization represents a widespread, serious social problem that increases the likelihood of delinquency, adult criminality, and violent criminal behavior. Poor educational performance, health problems, and generally low levels of achievement also characterize the victims of early childhood abuse and neglect.

This study offers at least three messages to juvenile authorities and child welfare professionals:

- *Intervene early.* The findings of Phase I issue a call to police, teachers, and health workers for increased recognition of the signs of abuse and neglect, and serious efforts to intervene as early as possible. The later the intervention, the more difficult the change process becomes. Specialized attention needs to be paid to abused and neglected children with early behavior problems. These children show the highest risk of later juvenile and adult arrest, as well as violent criminal behavior.

- *Develop policies that recognize the high risks of neglect as well as abuse.* Also important in its implications for juvenile court and child welfare action is the fact



that neglect alone (not necessarily physical abuse) was significantly related to violent criminal behavior. A picture emerges where physical abuse is only one point on a continuum of family situations that contribute to violence. Whether those situations result in active physical abuse, or more passive neglect, it is now quite clear that both forms of child maltreatment are serious threats. Neglect cases represent the majority of cases taxing the child protection system. Research shows that today's victim of neglect may well be a defendant in tomorrow's violent criminal case.

● *Reexamine out-of-home placement policies.* This NIJ study focused on cases during the period 1967–1971, when out-of-home placements were a common intervention. Detailed information available for 772 cases revealed that the vast majority (86 percent) were placed outside their homes for an average of 5 years. This contrasts sharply with today's efforts to avoid out-of-home placement on the assumption that separation may aggravate, rather than ameliorate, a child's problems. Yet, there was no evidence that those who were separated from their families fared any worse on the arrest measures than those who remained at home. Though these results are far from definitive, they do suggest that child protective policies in this area deserve close scrutiny. The assumption that removal from the home offers additional risk could not be confirmed by this study. Any policy founded on this assumption ought to be tested through careful local studies of the full consequences of out-of-home placement.

## Notes

1. For further information on the design and sampling procedures, see Widom, C.S., "Child abuse, neglect, and adult behavior: Research design and findings on criminality, violence, and child abuse," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 59(1989):355–367.
2. Westat, Inc. *Study Findings: Study of National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect: 1988*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
3. J.R. Galler, F. Ramsey, G. Solimano, and W.E. Lowell, "The influence of early malnutrition on subsequent behavioral development: II. Classroom behavior," *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 24(1983):16–24.
4. See, for instance, R.E. Allen and J.M. Oliver, "The effects of child maltreatment on language development," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 6(1982):299–305; B. Egeland, A. Sroufe, and M. Erickson, "The developmental consequences of different patterns of maltreatment," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7(1983):459–469; A. Frodi and J. Smetana, "Abused, neglected, and nonmaltreated preschoolers' ability to discriminate emotions in others: The effects of IQ," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 8(1984):459–465.
5. Benjamin Ward, Commissioner, New York City Police Department, press release No. 17, May 22, 1989.

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Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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