

Media Relations

Children Exposed To Domestic Violence Are At Greatly Increased Risks For All Other Forms Of Child Abuse And Family Violence, According To National Study

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DURHAM, N.H. — A new study led by the University of New Hampshire Crimes against Children Research Center finds that U.S. children exposed to domestic violence are even more vulnerable to child maltreatment than has previously been recognized in the general population.

More than a third (34 percent) who have witnessed one or more acts of domestic violence also experiencing maltreatment, compared to only 9 percent of non-exposed children. Across the span of childhood, more than half (57 percent) who are exposed to domestic violence were also victims of maltreatment, the researchers found.

"Children who grow up in homes with physically violent parents are not just at risk of being physically assaulted. They are also far more likely to experience all other forms of maltreatment, including neglect, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse," said UNH Crimes against Children Research Center research associate Sherry Hamby, lead author of the study and research associate professor at Sewanee, the University of the South.

"Some of the findings were remarkable—fully 72 percent of children who had experienced custodial interference (taking a child to deprive a parent of legal physical custody) came from domestically violent homes. More than 60 percent of neglect victims and more than 70 percent of victims of sexual abuse by a known adult had also witnessed violence between their parents. Violence between parents may create vulnerabilities that increase all sorts of risks," Hamby said.

The research was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The research results are presented in the October 2010 issue of the journal *Child Abuse and Neglect* in the article, "The overlap of witnessing partner violence with child maltreatment and other victimizations in a nationally representative survey of youth."

UNH researchers asked a national sample of U.S. children and their caregivers about a far broader range of family violence than has been done in the past. This study is also the first to take a truly child-centered approach to the measure of domestic violence, by not only including violence between the primary caregiver and her or his partner, but also violence between parents and stepparents, live-in boyfriends or girlfriends, and other caregiver arrangements. It is important to capture these exposures too, because many children do not live with both biological parents in today's society.

According to the research, these patterns of co-occurrence are not even limited to domestic violence and child maltreatment. Children exposed to violence between their parents were also six times more likely to witness a sibling being abused by one of their parents and six times more likely to witness assaults between other household members, compared to children who have not been exposed to inter-parental violence. There also were some disturbing evidence in these data that as children exposed to domestic violence become adolescents, they are at increased risk for entering problematic relationships themselves, with greatly increased risk of dating violence and statutory rape.

"We need to do a much better job of coordinating services for multiple victims within one family. Often, non-offending parents are told to leave a violent parent, but these findings on custodial interference suggest that may actually be making some children more vulnerable to types of maltreatment such as custodial interference," said David Finkelhor, director of the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center and professor of sociology.

The researchers also urge those charged with the safety of children and adult victims of violence to do

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more comprehensive assessments of the safety of all family members, not just the identified victim. This includes assessments of risks facing parents in families referred to child protective services, and dangers experienced by children of women seeking help at battered women's shelters.

The study was conducted in 2008 and involved interviews with caregivers and youth about the experiences of a nationally representative sample of 4,549 children ages 0-17. In addition to Hamby, the authors include David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center and professor of sociology, Heather Turner, professor of sociology at UNH, and Richard Ormrod, research professor of geography at UNH.

The UNH Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) works to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, and other child welfare practitioners. CCRC is concerned with research about the nature of crimes including child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, and physical and sexual abuse as well as their impact. Visit the center online at <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html>.

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Editors and reporters: The full journal article is available at http://www.unh.edu/news/docs/CCRC_Oct2010.pdf.

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