



National Institute of Justice

R e s e a r c h P r e v i e w

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The Cycle of Violence Revisited

What happens to abused and neglected children after they grow up? Do the victims of violence and neglect later become criminals or violent offenders themselves?

A series of ongoing studies (sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and the National Institute of Mental Health) are examining the lives of 1,575 child victims identified in court cases of abuse and neglect dating from 1967 to 1971. By 1994, almost half of the victims (most of whom were then in their late twenties and early thirties) had been arrested for some type of nontraffic offense. Eighteen percent had been arrested for a violent crime—an increase of 4 percent in the 6 years since arrest records were first checked. Rates of arrest were at least 25 percent higher among black victims.

Another key finding was that neglected children's rates of arrest for violence were almost as high as physically abused children's. Neglect was defined by the court as an excessive failure by caregivers to provide food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention.

Although the study is not yet completed, these preliminary findings indicate a need for criminal justice and social service agencies to take a proactive, preventive stance to stop the cycle of violence. The goal is early identification of abused and neglected children and careful, sensitive handling of these cases to avoid an early criminal justice intervention that could become the first in a spiral of sanctions.

Study methods

Begun in 1986, the initial study was designed to overcome many of the methodological problems of earlier studies conducted on this topic, such as dependence on a retrospective approach, a short-term timeframe, or data

derived from self-reports. The study was based on documented records: a sample of 1,575 court cases of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect that had occurred from 1967 to 1971 in a midwestern county. At the time the cases came to court, all of the children were under the age of 11, and the mean age was about 6. To isolate the effects of abuse and neglect from those of other variables, such as gender, race, and poverty, researchers created a control group whose members matched the sample on the basis of age, gender, race, and family social class.

During the first phase of the study, in 1987 and 1988, researchers examined the criminal records of sample and control group members and compiled histories for all nontraffic offenses at the local, State, and Federal levels. To learn what was happening to those who were not arrested, researchers performed a national death index search in 1989 and began interviewing victims in the sample group; more than 1,100 interviews have been completed. In 1994, researchers again examined arrest records of both the sample and control groups.

Risk of arrest

In the late eighties, researchers found that 28 percent of the sample group had been arrested—11 percent for a violent crime. Of the control group, 21 percent had been arrested—8 percent for a violent crime. They also noted that differences in arrest rates between members of the two groups began to emerge early—at the ages of 8 and 9. However, at this time, only 65 percent of the victims had passed through the peak years of violent offending—from age 20 to 25.

Six years later, almost 100 percent of the sample were 26 or older. After recompiling criminal histories, researchers found larger differences between the sample and control

groups. This time, 49 percent of the overall sample group had been arrested—18 percent for a violent crime—compared with 38 percent of the control group—14 percent for a violent crime. Although rates were high for the control group (who shared such risk factors as poverty), they were significantly higher for those neglected and abused as children.

Abuse and neglect appeared to magnify preexisting disparities between the races. Black individuals who had been abused or neglected as children were being arrested at much higher rates than white individuals with the same background: in the sample group, 82 percent of black males and 50 percent of black females had been arrested for some type of offense; 50 percent of black victims had an arrest for violence.

An important finding was that neglect appeared to be just as damaging as physical abuse. The rate of arrest for violent crimes among those sample group members who had been neglected as children was almost as high as the rate for those who had been physically abused.

Additional findings

During the interviews, both males and females reported having made suicide attempts. Males seemed to be at increased risk for antisocial personality disorder or psychopathy, whereas females seemed to be at increased risk for alcoholism and prostitution. Contrary to popular belief, however, no relationship was established between childhood abuse and neglect and teen pregnancy.

Breaking the cycle of violence

The researchers urged further study on the causes of the race-specific risk of arrest for blacks. Because differences in arrest rates between members of the sample and control groups began to emerge around the ages of 8 and 9, early identification of abused and neglected children and circumspect handling of their cases are essential. The community policing approach, which emphasizes problem-solving and prevention, may provide appropriate opportunities for thoughtful criminal justice interventions.

As part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series, Dr. Cathy Spatz Widom discussed the cycle of violence with an audience of researchers and criminal justice professionals and practitioners. This research is part of an ongoing NIJ grant to Dr. Widom, State University of New York-Albany, and Dr. Michael Maxfield, Indiana University. A 60-minute VHS videotape *The Cycle of Violence Revisited Six Years Later* is available for \$19 in the United States and \$24 in Canada and other countries. Ask for NCJ 153272.

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