

**RESEARCH INTO VIOLENT BEHAVIOR:
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

**HEARINGS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC
PLANNING, ANALYSIS AND COOPERATION
OF THE
"COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
NINETY-FIFTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION**

FEBRUARY 14, 15, 16, 1978

[No. 60]

Printed for the use of the
Committee on Science and Technology



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Testimony Before the Committee on Science and Technology
United States House of Representatives
February 16, 1978
Rm 334 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC

Overview of Research into Child Abuse

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I have been asked today to provide a brief overview of current research into the problem of child abuse. Before beginning it would seem beneficial to briefly review the history of research into child abuse and the role played by the Federal Government in sponsoring such research.

As far as can be determined from historical records, we have always had abused children in the United States (Bakan, 1971; Newberger, ND; deMause, 1974, 1975; Radbill, 1974). Children were abused by their parents and caretakers almost as soon as the Pilgrims settled in Plymouth. What was different about child abuse in Colonial times was that much of it was legally sanctioned and mandated. "Beat the devil out of him" is a homily derived from colonial times when parents were taught by church elders that children were born corrupted by original sin, and that the only path to salvation was to physically beat the devil out of the child. Some legislatures enacted "stubborn child laws" which gave parents the right to actually kill unruly children (although historical evidence implies that few if any children were ever killed under the mandate of this law).

In 1871 New York City church workers tried to get help for a badly abused child named Mary Ellen. They found that the only agency which was

equipped to help them and the child was the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The case of Mary Ellen brought about the creation of the first chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Fontana, 1964). Even today we still have more widespread organized services for the prevention of cruelty to animals than cruelty to humans.

A resurgence of attention to the issue of child abuse and child maltreatment occurred in 1946 when diagnostic radiologists used the technology of X-ray to diagnose patterns of healed fractures in young children which could have only resulted from repeated blows inflicted by parents or caretakers. (Caffey, 1946).

Yet, despite attention drawn to the problem of abused children by radiologists in the forties and early fifties, it was not until C. Henry Kempe and his associates published their paper on the "battered baby syndrome" in 1962 that national attention was focused on the plight of abused children (Kempe et. al., 1962).

By 1968, all fifty states had enacted legislation to mandate the reporting of child abuse to official agencies.

In 1972, the Federal Government began hearings on the problem of child abuse and neglect and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was passed in 1974, establishing the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect. The National Center was provided a modest budget to support research on child abuse and neglect, to establish demonstration programs designed to treat and prevent child abuse, to serve as a clearinghouse for all information on this topic, and to conduct a national incidence study on child abuse and neglect.

As of this date, the refunding and continuation of the National Center

for Child Abuse is still pending in Congress.

Throughout the entire history of concern over, and research into, the problem of child abuse, the same questions have been asked. Everyone wants to know: What is child abuse? How much child abuse is there today in America? Is child abuse increasing? What causes people to abuse their children? And, Can we prevent child abuse?

Unfortunately, when a topic is as emotionally charged as is the topic of the abuse of children, most people have little patience when it comes to waiting for answers to these questions. The clear mandate is that we "must do something about child abuse right now!" Consequently, researchers who answer the key questions by saying "we don't know yet," or "we need more time," or "we need more resources" are brushed to the side by those who feel they cannot wait for the orderly progress of research and believe that time and resources are needed to do something more than engage in research.

Investigators who study the topics of child abuse, wife abuse, husband abuse, and other similar issues face the grim task of having to "compete" for money to engage in research (which may not provide answers for years) alongside of social service personnel who require resources to do something immediately to stop and/or treat the abuse of children.

OUR PROGRAM OF RESEARCH

The program of research which we have engaged in at the University of Rhode Island, and in collaboration with our colleagues at the University of New Hampshire and the University of Delaware, has been designed to answer the

fundamental questions about child abuse. Our concern has been to adequately and accurately measure the amount of violence directed towards children by their parents in the United States. Our next concern is to examine, test, and develop theories which can explain the abuse of children.

In order to address these questions, we undertook a national study of the incidence, nature, and causes of violence towards children in the United States (along with Dr. Murray Straus, University of New Hampshire and Dr. Suzanne Steinmetz, University of Delaware).

This study was designed to overcome some of the major drawbacks of previous research into the topic of child abuse, and provide new and competent knowledge about child abuse.

Most of the published research on child abuse suffers from similar drawbacks:

1. First, nearly all of the research done on child abuse in this country focuses on cases of child abuse which have been officially designated "child abuse." The problem with this is that people who are labeled "child abusers" do not constitute the entire universe of child abusers. Moreover, those who get "caught" abusing their children are systematically different from people who injure their children but are not publically labeled child abusers (Gelles, 1975). Research which examines officially labeled cases of child abuse can not be used to estimate the incidence of child abuse, because many cases are not officially reported. Secondly, this research can not be used to explain what causes people to abuse their children because the factors which cause people to get caught

abusing their children are confounded with the factors which led them to abuse their children in the first place.

2. A second problem with most of the current research on child abuse is that the samples are usually small, regional and non-representative. Few of these studies employ representative sampling techniques, and even those samples which are selected using probability sampling can not be used to generalize to the country at large. The rate of child abuse in New York City is bound to be different than the rate in Kingston, Rhode Island, and the factors which cause people to be child abusers in one area may be different than the factors which lead to child abuse in another locale.
3. A third problem is that we are so new at investigating child abuse that errors and mistakes are common in our research. The methodological problems in the research on child abuse are varied and it plagues our ability to unravel the mystery of child abuse. A sampling of the methodological errors is provided in the appended paper titled "Etiology of Violence: Overcoming Fallacious Reasoning in Understanding Family Violence and Child Abuse."

We attempted to overcome some of the problems with current research on child abuse by conducting a national survey of the incidence and causes of violence in the American family. This study used probability sampling to identify a nationally representative sample of 2,143 American families. One-thousand one-hundred and forty-six of these families had children between

the ages of 3 and 17 living at home.

This sample is unique because it is a nationally representative sample and because it does not focus only on those people who are caught abusing their children. The study is also unique because instead of trying to define child abuse (a problem which still has not been solved by those people studying child abuse), we asked people to report on whether or not they had engaged in any of a series of seven acts of physical force, ranging from spanking a child to shooting a child.

The complete results of our examination of violence towards children are appended in the paper titled "Violence Towards Children in the United States." The major findings include:

- *53% of American parents with children between the ages of 3 and 17 living at home mentioned at least one violent episode during the survey year.
- *Between 3.1 and 4.1 million children were kicked, bitten, or punched at some time in their lives by their parents.
- *Between 1 and 1.9 million children were kicked, bitten, or punched by their parents in 1975.
- *Between 1.4 and 2.3 million children have been beaten while growing up.
- *Between 275,000 and 3/4 of a million children were beat up by their parents in 1975.
- *Between 900,000 and 1.8 million American children have had parents who stabbed or tried to stab them or shot or tried to shoot them in their lifetimes.

Our estimate of the incidence of physical child abuse in the United States, based on an "at risk index" is that between 1.4 and 1.9 million American children are abused by their parents each year.

It is important to keep in mind that our estimate of the incidence of child abuse, while considerably higher than previous estimates, probably

underestimates the true level of physical abuse. We have underestimated the incidence of child abuse for the following reasons:

1. Our data is based on parents' self-reports of acts of violence on their children. (Since child abuse is illegal and considered one of the worst things a parent can do to their child, we believe that many of our respondents might have underreported the actual amount of violence they used on their children.
2. Secondly, our study omits an examination of violence towards children under 3 years of age. Much of the child abuse literature suggests that children under 3 are at the greatest risk of being abused.
3. Thirdly, we examined only intact families. If, as some believe, child abuse is more common in single parent families, then we have again underestimated the true level of abuse.
4. We examined only a limited number of violent acts. We did not ask about sexual abuse, burning, or a number of other physically abusive acts.
5. Lastly, we examined violence a child received from only one parent. Again, this may have led to a conservative figure for the incidence of abuse of American children.

In addition to our estimates of the incidence of child abuse we have found that:

- *Mothers are more likely to use violence, and to use abusive violence on their children.
- *Sons are more likely to be the victims of child abuse than daughters.
- *Children 3 to 5 years of age and children 15 to 17 years old were at the greatest risk of being physically abused. Our findings

indicate that child abuse is not confined to only young children. A survey at the University of Rhode Island found that 8% of college freshmen reported being physically injured by their parents during the last year they (the students) lived at home (Mulligan, 1977).

Recently, we have turned our attention to examining factors associated with acts of violence towards children. We have been analyzing the relationship between abusive violence towards children and the following factors:

1. Area of the country.
2. Urban, suburban, rural residence.
3. Education.
4. Income.
5. Occupation.
6. Age.
7. Religion.
8. Race.
9. Family size.
10. Stress.
11. Family power and decision making.
12. Experience with violence as a child.

The final results of this analysis will be published in our book VIOLENCE IN THE AMERICAN FAMILY (Straus and Gelles, 1979). To date we have found that Gil's theoretical position which argues that child abuse is caused by a complex pattern of interrelated factors is holding up (1970). No single factor completely explains child abuse. Some of the expected relationships have not been found, while other relationships have surprised us.

Clearly poverty, stress, and experiences with violence are related to who abused their child, but the relationships are modest and leave many questions unanswered.

Other Research on Child Abuse

In addition to the national survey of violence towards children in the United States, we have also been involved in a number of exploratory studies on labeling of child abuse cases. Our concern has been to examine why certain families are "caught" abusing their children and why other families escape detection. Also, we have focused on false labeling--children labeled "abused" who are not victims of abuse--and children who are abused who are not identified by professionals who examine them.

Another focus of our research has been to study data gathered in Florida and examine what, if any, characteristics of children and families influence their interaction with official child abuse agencies. Our interest focuses on whether the reported injury or other social characteristics of the child and the family determine if the case is labeled "child abuse" or dismissed as "unfounded."

Lastly, we have begun an examination of longitudinal data in the State of New York which examines children who were labeled as "child abuse" victims in the 1950's. Our concern is to see if being labeled a child abuse victim increases the likelihood of that child having future contact with criminal justice or mental health agencies.

Summary of Current Research

The state of the art of child abuse and neglect research is not very

advanced. Researchers and practitioners still wrangle over a precise definition of child abuse. Because the definitions of child abuse vary from study to study, there is a major problem of comparability of current research projects.

We are at a point where we have a much more scientific estimate of the incidence of child abuse. Despite some of the problems in our national survey, it has provided the best and most scientific estimate of the incidence of child abuse to date.

We can not say what causes people to abuse their children because we do not really know. To paraphrase Dr. Edward Zigler (former director of the Children's Bureau), our knowledge about the causes of child abuse in 1978 is roughly similar to where we stood in our knowledge about mental illness in 1948 (Zigler, 1976).

Lastly, we can not be sure whether child abuse is increasing. There are no reliable scientifically gathered statistics which we can compare our national survey to. Any increase in the number of official reported cases of child abuse is almost certainly due to the recent increase in public concern and new legislation on this matter. Thus, we can only guess as to whether child abuse is a growing problem, is roughly the same as it has been in the past, or whether we actually are in the midst of a decrease in the incidence of child abuse.

To sum up, there are still many questions which we need to address in the study of child abuse. Unless we know what causes people to abuse their children, our strategies to treat and prevent abuse will be based mostly on intuition. We must also face the reality that there will be no simple

answers to our questions. It will take quality researchers who do quality research and considerable time before we can even begin to unravel the complex research issues in the study of child abuse.

PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Child abuse, wife abuse, husband abuse, and other forms of domestic violence are issues where researchers face major obstacles and hurdles which they must overcome if they are to obtain satisfactory answers to the crucial questions which are in need of investigation. In many ways the problems encountered by researchers interested in domestic violence are similar to the problems faced by any investigator who desires to study a phenomenon which is sensitive and where taboos exist against speaking about the behavior (see Farberow, 1966, for a complete discussion of researching "taboo topics" such as suicide, mental illness, sexual behavior, and homosexuality.)

However, research on domestic violence is unique and poses different problems than faced by investigators studying taboo topics. This is true because the family is different than other social groups. First, the family is a private group and second, it involves intimate social interactions.

Because the family is a private social group, most interaction takes place between family members behind closed doors--out of sight of neighbors, friends, and social scientists. The private nature of the family limits the types of investigatory tools which can be employed to study family behavior (Gelles, 1976).

A second important aspect of the family is that the relationships between and among family members are intimate. Thus, unlike other social groups, family structure arises out of intimate interactions. The special nature of intimate relationships tend to produce strong pressures against discussing family matters with those outside of the family. Parents often

reprimand children for discussing their family matters with school counselors, friends, and neighbors. Likewise, the tendency to view family matters as sacred, private, and intimate, makes many individuals reluctant to talk about their family life with outsiders. In fact, this reluctance often becomes an adamant stand against nosey, uninvited intrusions of social scientists, market researchers, and the like.

In addition to the problems caused by the family being private and intimate, there are roadblocks which confront researchers studying domestic violence.

One of the major problems in the area of domestic violence research has been in defining what is to be studied. Almost every major research conference on family violence, child abuse, wife abuse, and now husband abuse involves discussion and debate over definitions of the terms "violence", "child abuse", and "spouse abuse". The basic problem is that the terms "violence" and "abuse" are essentially political terms designed to call attention to a phenomenon which people believe to be problematic. There have been numerous attempts to actually define "child abuse", including the definition included in PL-93-237, "The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act" which reads:

"...the physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby..."

An alternative definition is offered by Gil who states that child abuse is an occurrence where a caretaker injures a child, not by accident, but in anger or deliberately (Gil, 1970, p. 50).

The problem with the definition offered in PL-93-237 is that it is too broad (probably because it is used to establish a mandate for a government agency). The Gil definition suffers because it is difficult, if not impossible, to scientifically measure "intent".

The inherent problem with the term "child abuse" or "spouse abuse" is that the terms are designed to point the finger at the behavior of parents or spouses which deviates from society's norms about how parents should behave towards children and how spouses should behave towards each other. The crux of the problem is that norms governing parenting and marital interaction change over time and vary from group to group.

A problem also arises when the term "violence" is defined (see Gelles and Straus, 1978 for a detailed discussion of defining "violence"). The central problem here is that the more common an act of physical force, the less people are inclined to view that act as "violent." Thus, most people have taken issue with us when we have defined spanking or slapping a child as "violent."

Because definitions of "violence" and "abuse" vary from discipline to discipline and from investigator to investigator, one problem we encounter frequently is that research on domestic violence is not comparable. It is difficult to know whether findings vary because of the research carried out or because the researchers defined their issue differently from one another.

There are three additional problems which confront investigators of domestic violence. First, they must find subjects to study; second, they must collect information which they can use to test their theories or hypotheses; and lastly, they must design data gathering instruments and techniques which insure that they are obtaining truthful information (for

a complete discussion of the problem in studying sensitive issues, and problems involved in studying domestic violence, see "Methods for Studying Sensitive Family Topics" which is appended to this paper).

The sensitivity and emotional charged nature of the topic of domestic violence creates numerous novel and significant obstacles which had to be faced and overcome in our research. We spent the first 6 years of our research hearing people say that it was impossible to study domestic violence by talking to people about violence in the family. We have faced the problem of actually having to ask, "did you stop beating your wife?" Currently, we encounter objection to our definition of violent behavior and the criticism that our subjects did not "tell all" about the level of violence in their family.

We concede that our definitions and our methods can be improved on, but we also point with some pride to the fact that we have overcome the initial problems in studying domestic violence and have shown that research on this important topic can be carried out. But, we have only begun to blaze the trail; much, much more is needed if we are to find the answers we seek.

PROBLEMS IN GOVERNMENT POLICY CONCERNING RESEARCH ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

We would not, and could not, be here today to report on our research on domestic violence if the Federal Government had not identified family violence as an important issue, and if the Federal Government had not set aside funds for research into this problem. Thus, to a certain extent, identifying problems in government policy in the area of domestic violence is, for us, looking the proverbial gift-horse in the mouth. However, there are problems.

It is unfortunately trite but true to say that resources and money lead the list of problems. Our individual research activities have been adequately funded, as have the activities of many of our colleagues. But the key problem is that in order to get at the important questions in the study of domestic violence, we need more good research. To get more good research, we need more good researchers. Thus, if the Federal Government is seriously interested in understanding and ultimately doing something about domestic violence, it will need to spend more money to attract more good researchers into this area.

A corollary issue is that the Federal Government will have to resist pressure from action groups to spend money only on services. Programs must set aside sufficient resources for basic research. It is very tempting to look for quick and easy answers to the problems of domestic violence, but if our eight year program of research on domestic violence has proved anything, it proves that easy answers do not exist.

Even with the establishment of the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect, there still is not sufficient funds available to fully investigate domestic violence. In fact, some believe that the establishment of the Center caused other funding agencies to bypass promising research proposals in the area of violence towards children.

A second problem with Federal policy is time. In many instances investigators have been asked to submit proposals to meet deadlines which are unrealistic in terms of thinking through and planning out good research. Requests for proposals are issued with government deadlines and timetables in mind, and often result in situations where researchers with good ideas are shut-out from competing for research funds. The shorter the time between the issuance

of a request for proposals and the deadline, the more competitive large research programs and profit making research corporations become, and the less competitive individual investigators are. Thus, many good, innovative, and important ideas are never funded.

A third problem has to do with the sensitive issue of protection of human subjects. Government policy designed to protect the rights of human subjects is necessary. But, if the policy is enforced with bureaucratic goals rather than protection in mind, many research projects on domestic violence which can protect subjects but require variances from mandated procedures will go unfunded.

A fourth problem is that the Federal Government, like many people, tend to see the various aspects of domestic violence as separate issues. Thus, we might eventually see Centers for Abused Wives and Centers for Abused Husbands. Our research has demonstrated that the real issue is family violence. One can not, and should not, separate these issues from one another. There seems to be an almost "knee jerk" reaction in Congress in 1978 to pass legislation dealing with abused wives. A number of proposed bills would only serve to separate abused wives out as an individual issue. This is not a useful tactic, from a researchers point of view.

A fifth problem has been the rather haphazard establishment of research priorities at the Federal level. In the beginning, the priorities were easy to establish--we knew nothing and we had elementary questions. However, as more and more research is carried out, the questions we need to address are more complex. However, at the Federal level, the questions are frequently formulated before the data are in. Thus, The Office of Human Development is establishing research priorities for the next cycle of funding even before the final reports from their first wave of research projects are completed!

A corollary issue is that in many cases research priorities are established at the Federal level without the benefit of input from researchers. This is sometimes necessary because it is unfair to let researchers have a say on the priorities which they will compete for funding under. However, it might be possible to bring in more expertise without giving away unfair advantages in the setting of Federal research goals.

To summarize the essential problems with Federal policy:

1. There is not enough funding available for basic research.
2. The allocation of research funds often prevents researchers from proposing adequate research projects.
3. Federal rules and procedures, while important and well intentioned, block essential and safe research on domestic violence.
4. The setting of research priorities is frequently haphazard and poorly informed.
5. The time frame of many Federal programs is often too narrow for supporting needed, long term research projects on domestic violence.

SUGGESTION FOR GOVERNMENT POLICY

The problems with Federal policy in the area of research on domestic violence are serious enough to hinder the development and improvement of basic research in the area of family violence. An example of the problems is the proposed fiscal year 1978 child abuse and neglect research and demonstration priorities issued by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare/Office of Human Development Services/Administration for Children, Youth, and Families (see the Federal Register, January 23, 1978). The proposed

priorities, if they were adopted, would be devastating for basic research in the area of child abuse. The priorities represent a retreat from basic research. The current 12 research projects would be reduced to 4 new projects in 1978 and the funds available for basic research would be drastically cut. Moreover, even the proposed basic research priorities are unrealistic, given the problems facing researchers in this area.

We suggest the following steps towards improving Federal policy in the area of domestic violence research:

1. The setting aside of adequate funds for basic research in any Federal program designed to deal with domestic violence.
2. The reserving of a portion of funds for basic research for unsolicited proposals so that researchers are not constrained by time and deadline demands in designing and proposing research in the area of domestic violence.
3. The establishment of between 6 and 8 centers for the study of domestic violence--much like the regional resource centers in the area of child abuse. Such centers would stimulate research and would also attract top flight researchers to the area of domestic violence.
4. The funding of longitudinal research on the topic of domestic violence. Present Federal research grants and contracts are granted for up to three years. However, we need 10 year projects (at a minimum) if we are to adequately track down the causes of family violence.
5. Maintenance of a flexible policy on the protection of human subjects which guarantees that the subjects involved in domestic violence research will be protected, but which recognizes the particular problems researchers face in studying domestic violence.
6. A consolidation of Federal programs on child, wife, and

husband abuse into one program on domestic violence.

7. A recognition on the part of the Federal Government that the problems of domestic violence are serious, extensive, and complex. One ought not expect that answers and solution will be forthcoming in two or three years. It took centuries to develop violent families, it will take some time to unravel the problem and even more time before we can take steps to ameliorate the problem. Domestic violence is not some kind of passing fad. The research we have done indicates that there is a direct relationship between domestic violence and violence in the streets, juvenile delinquency, homicide, and political assassination. We are only at the beginning of our research on domestic violence and we shall need continued Federal interest in this topic if we are to move from our very elementary state of knowledge to a more complete understanding of domestic violence.

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