



Domestic violence crimes and children: A population-based investigation of direct sensory exposure and the nature of involvement

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ABSTRACT

Children's exposure to domestic violence is a major national problem. Researchers and policymakers have called for research guided by comprehensive conceptual frameworks to advance understanding of this complex risk to children's well-being [Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2006). Preventing intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and child maltreatment. Retrieved June 3, 2006 from http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/research_agenda/07_violence.htm.; National Institute of Justice (2007). Adolescents, neighborhoods, and violence: Recent findings from the Project on Human Development. Retrieved on September 5, 2007 from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/217397.pdf>]. The present study used a developmental-epidemiological model to explore the prevalence and nature of children's exposure to and involvement in domestic violence crimes investigated by law enforcement across a population. During the year under study 1581 domestic violence crimes were investigated by law enforcement. Forty-three percent of all domestic violence crimes had children in the household, and nearly all of those children (95%) experienced sensory exposure to the violence. A logistic regression model revealed a relationship between child exposure and domestic violence event characteristics such as victim injury, mutual assault, and perpetrator arrest. This research also examined how children are involved in domestic violence events. Three distinct types of involvement were revealed: children were part of the precipitating event; children called for help; and children were physically involved. Findings highlight the importance of developing a comprehensive surveillance system to ensure children exposed to domestic violence are made visible so they can be referred to appropriate services.

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1. Introduction

In 1994, the Violence Against Women Act made domestic violence a crime and mandated data collection at the national, state, and local levels (VAWA, U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). As a result, all states enacted legislation to provide civil, as well as criminal, penalties for acts of violence in the home. This legislation required investigation and documentation of domestic violence. VAWA did not specifically address the issue of children's exposure to domestic violence, although children's exposure to domestic violence has been increasingly recognized as a major problem requiring significant attention.

Researchers and policymakers have called for research guided by comprehensive conceptual frameworks to advance our understanding of how child exposure to domestic violence adversely affects children's physical and psychological well-being (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; National Institute of Justice, 2007). The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (1999) published

a report emphasizing the importance of identifying families with domestic violence and providing them with appropriate services to support the welfare of both the direct victim and the children exposed to the violence. This report highlighted the importance of developing a comprehensive research agenda to understand the extent of this national problem and the effects of exposure to domestic violence on children's development. A major problem with our current knowledge base is the lack of precise prevalence figures for children exposed to domestic violence. The most commonly cited figures are between 3.3 million (Carlson, 1984) and 10 million (Straus, 1992) children exposed to domestic violence in the U.S. Current prevalence figures are not only gross estimates but have methodological limitations. The studies they are derived from have restricted definitions of domestic violence and often depend on adult recollections of childhood events that may have happened more than 20 years ago. Many researchers have found retrospective reports about emotionally charged memories to be inaccurate or incomplete (e.g., Bradburn, Rips, & Shevell, 1987; Ceci, Ross, & Tolia, 1989; Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langley, & Silva, 1994). Another problem with many current prevalence estimates is their reliance on parental reports of their children's exposure (Jouriles, McDonald, Norwood, & Ezell, 2001; O'Brien, John, Margolin, & Erel,

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1994; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Other studies indicate that parents are likely to report that their children were asleep or unaware of the violence, although these same children often provided detailed memories of the violent event when asked directly (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Peled, 1998). These methodological problems have made it difficult to collect accurate statistics.

Although there is little known about the prevalence of children exposed to domestic violence, there is a large volume of research on the impact of the problem. This research has provided evidence that children exposed to domestic violence show significantly more social, emotional, and cognitive problems compared to their non-exposed peers (Jaffe et al., 1990; Jouriles et al., 2001; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Osofsky, 1999). Although these impact studies contribute to the knowledge base on children's exposure to domestic violence, they reflect the concept of 'urgent knowing'. Research on impact has been conducted without an understanding of what children are actually being exposed to within domestic violence events, how children are exposed to violence, and what moderating factors affect outcomes. These studies are not only being conducted in the absence of a sufficient knowledge base, they often have methodological weaknesses that makes their implications suspect.

Studies comparing the psychological functioning of children exposed and not exposed to domestic violence have some significant shortcomings that limit our understanding of the extent and nature of the problem. First, although children's exposure to domestic violence events has been described as a public health problem of epidemic proportions (Glodich, 1998), the current research is not population-based and relies principally on convenience samples. More specifically, samples were often drawn from children who are with their mothers in domestic violence shelters (Jouriles et al., 2001). These samples represent a small percentage of children exposed to domestic violence. Children in shelters are also more likely to have been exposed to the most severe and chronic forms of violence (Ware, Jouriles, Spiller, McDonald, Swank, & Norwood, 2002). The shelter studies have provided some important information, but do not provide an accurate depiction of what the majority of children are exposed to within a domestic violence event.

An empirical examination of the prevalence and nature of children's exposure to domestic violence requires standard definitions of the nature of children's exposure to domestic violence. Children are often described as "observers" or "witnesses" to domestic violence (Edleson, 1999; Jaffe et al., 1990). However, these terms imply that children are passive observers of this violence; that they are in the background when the violence occurs. This terminology fails to capture the myriad ways children are involved in domestic violence events. These children may be more accurately described as being "exposed" to domestic violence, a term that is inclusive and incorporates a variety of children's experiences (see Edleson, 1999). Whereas the terms "observe" and "witness" imply passivity, *exposure* to domestic violence includes a wider range of indirect or direct involvement, such as intervening by placing one's self in harm's way or calling 911 (Edleson, Mbilinyi, Beeman, & Hagemester, 2003; Fantuzzo et al., 1997). The developmental epidemiological framework emphasizes the importance of standard definitions because they allow for greater comparability and generalizability of findings across studies.

Recent studies have effectively used police surveillance to gather information about domestic violence events and associated risk factors. Police officers collected data on substantiated domestic violence using standard methods in the Spouse Assault Replication Program (SARP). SARP was a large, cross-city field experiment assessing the impact of arrest in deterring subsequent misdemeanor domestic violence (Maxwell, Garner, & Fagan, 2001). The SARP database contained information on domestic violence events, individuals present in the household during the events, and associated risk factors across five municipalities (Milwaukee, Omaha, Atlanta, Charlotte, and Miami). Data were collected at the time of the incident, thus avoiding

the problems of retrospective reports. A secondary analysis of this database by Fantuzzo et al. (1997) showed that children were disproportionately present in households where there was a substantiated incident of domestic violence. Households where domestic violence occurred included higher levels of risk factors to children, such as poverty, single-female headed households, and substance abuse associated with the event. However, from an epidemiological perspective this study was limited in two ways. First, it was not a comprehensive study of events across a population. Only misdemeanor domestic violence cases were included in the study, and cases were excluded if they did not demonstrate male-to-female violence (Maxwell et al., 2001). Second, no data were provided to document the reliability and validity of the use of the standard protocol or police officer training.

A study by Gjelsvik et al. (2003) utilized the Rhode Island Department of Health Violence Against Women Public Health Surveillance System to examine factors associated with children in the household during police-substantiated domestic violence. Police collected data on the demographic characteristics of the victim, characteristics of the incident, and whether children were in the household. Results showed that 44% of all substantiated domestic violence events had children in the household. These children were more likely to be from ethnic minority households and 47% of them were less than 6 years old. Although this study illustrated police officers working as public health sentinels across a fixed population, it had several methodological limitations. First, no data on the characteristics of perpetrators were provided. Second, no details were given about the definitions of the domestic violence event variables or on the methods the police used to collect data. Third, no information was given regarding police officer training on direct assessment of domestic violence and children in the household. Finally, the reliability and validity of the data collection instruments were not reported.

Fantuzzo, Fusco, Mohr and Perry (2007) partnered with police officers to develop a standard, validated protocol, the Domestic Violence Event Protocol (DVEP), to gather information on all reported domestic violence events across an entire municipality. Results indicated that children were in the household in almost half of all events, and households experiencing domestic violence were significantly more likely to have children compared to households in the county at large. A multiple regression model revealed that when children were in the household at the time of the domestic violence event, the event was more likely to have high risk characteristics such as victim injury, the presence of weapons, and substance use during the incident. However, this study only looked at whether children were in the household at the time of the event; it did not provide data on direct sensory exposure to the violence, the number of children exposed, or the children's demographic characteristics. These data are important because the child trauma literature documents that the nature and degree of exposure to traumatic events moderate impact (Rossman, Hughes, & Rosenberg, 1998).

Fantuzzo and Fusco (2007) used an enhanced version of the DVEP, which added basic information on child characteristics and the nature of children's sensory exposure to domestic violence. A descriptive picture of all the children in the household during law enforcement-investigated domestic violence events across an entire municipality for 1 year was provided. This included whether the children in the household had direct sensory exposure to the violence as well as potentially moderating variables such as children's age, gender, race, and relationship to the victim. This study also examined the relationship between characteristics of domestic violence events and children's direct sensory exposure to these events. They found that children were disproportionately represented in household with domestic violence, and these children were more likely to be younger than age six. Domestic violence households with children, compared to overall households with children in the county, were more likely to

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