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The development of family violence as a field of study and contributors to family and community violence among low-income fathers

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Abstract

This article presents an overview of the development of family violence as a field of study and a discussion of selected factors that can contribute to family and community violence among low-income fathers. Methodological approaches used to study family violence and the challenges encountered with consistency of findings across the various approaches are discussed. Substance abuse and poverty are briefly examined as factors that can contribute, in some instances, to family and community violence among low-income fathers. Recommendations to help reduce and ultimately prevent family and community violence among these fathers are offered.

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1. Introduction

The family is the institution around which all others revolve in American society (i.e., school, community, and government). While the family is supposed to provide love, affirmation, respect, support, structure, guidance, discipline, and guidelines for appropriate behavior for all of its members, it is our most violent institution. This is because families are

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usually more tolerant of violence than society. To act in a violent manner, publicly, would reveal an aspect of one's character or predisposition to violence that is not in keeping with appropriate behavior. The rule outside the family is that, with the exception of self-defense, you cannot hit others, even if they behave terribly. However, in the privacy of the home, the same rule may not apply.

One of the many devastating effects of family violence is the impact of this phenomenon on communities (i.e., society). Often, what occurs in the family of orientation is mimicked, to varying degrees, in communities around the nation. This research examines the development of family violence as a field of study and focuses on factors that can, in some instances, contribute to family and community violence among low-income fathers.

2. The development of family violence as a field of study

Scientific investigations of family violence in the US have only been in existence since the 1960s. [Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, and Silver \(1962\)](#) published an article on injuries sustained by children, which were believed to be the result of child abuse, not unintentional accidents. This article was a catalyst for the investigation of child abuse by the scientific community. [O'Brien \(1971\)](#), in one of the early articles on family violence, noted that little scientific research appeared to have concentrated on this issue because it seemed to be too sensitive and there was an assumption that it was relatively rare. Or, perhaps, this topic was ignored because of what the findings might say, not just about American families but American society.

Shortly thereafter, the discovery of wife abuse and woman battering by women's groups and grassroots efforts occurred during the early 70s. [Gelles \(1999\)](#) writes that women's groups began to organize safe houses or battered woman shelters as early as 1972 in the US. In 1973, the results of research on violence against women in the US began to be published.

The prevailing assumptions about family violence have been that perpetrators of this behavior are men, that victims are women and children, and that more often than not the majority of family violence takes place among the dysfunctional, the mentally ill, the poor, and people of color. What has been learned over the last several decades is that the processes and circumstances by which family violence can occur are complex, multidimensional, and cut across gender, race, and class [i.e., socioeconomic status (SES)]. According to [Brown \(2000\)](#), family violence can be defined as an act of word or deed or the omission thereof, within a family, that results in psychological and/or physical harm.

3. The background and study of family violence

The family is supposed to provide sanctuary from all of the ills of society. Unfortunately, this is not the case in more homes than one might suspect. In 1994, it is estimated that 1271 children died as a result of abuse and/or neglect ([Weise & Daro, 1995](#)). In 1992, of the 13,805 US homicides where the relationship between the offender and the victim was known, 15%

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