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CHANGES IN REPORTS AND INCIDENCE OF CHILD ABUSE FOLLOWING NATURAL DISASTERS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this research was to investigate if there is a higher incidence of child abuse following major natural disasters.

Methodology: Child abuse reports and substantiations were analyzed, by county, for 1 year before and after Hurricane Hugo, the Loma Prieta Earthquake, and Hurricane Andrew. Counties were included if damage was widespread, the county was part of a presidential disaster declaration, and if there was a stable data collection system in place.

Results: Based on analyses of numbers, rates, and proportions, child abuse reports were disproportionately higher in the quarter and half year following two of the three disaster events (Hurricane Hugo and Loma Prieta Earthquake).

Conclusions: Most, but not all, of the evidence presented indicates that child abuse escalates after major disasters. Conceptual and methodological issues need to be resolved to more conclusively answer the question about whether or not child abuse increases in the wake of natural disasters. Replications of this research are needed based on more recent disaster events. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Key Words—Child abuse, Child maltreatment, Natural disasters, Earthquake, Hurricane.

INTRODUCTION

EACH YEAR THOUSANDS of families in the United States are impacted by catastrophes that leave homelessness, unemployment, injury and death in their wake. Disaster damage is usually measured in terms of casualties, homes destroyed, jobs lost, and expected dollar cost of recovery. Less documented and more difficult to measure, are the social, psychological, and family consequences of catastrophic events. Numerous anecdotes in the popular press imply that there are post disaster increases of domestic violence in general, and child abuse in particular. The question of whether or not child abuse escalates following natural disasters apparently has not been examined empirically.

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THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Theories from the fields of sociology, psychology, and family science lead to the prediction that an increase in family violence could be expected to follow catastrophic events. Societies develop ways to reinforce acceptable behaviors and discourage antisocial behaviors. Thus, as individuals mature, they learn to display acceptable social behaviors and inhibit those which are considered antisocial. When events like natural disasters occur, social connections are disrupted, the ability to sanction inappropriate behavior is reduced, and individuals are more likely to exhibit antisocial conduct (Berkowitz, 1993).

Psychologists historically accepted aggression as an instinctual response in humans as it is in other species (Eron, 1994). The frustration-aggression hypothesis asserts that frustration is always expressed as some form of aggression, and that aggression always derives from frustration (Baron & Richardson, 1994). According to the original theory (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), aggression can take either overt or covert forms, and can be directed at the source of the frustration or redirected at some other person or object. The frustration-aggression hypothesis has provided a framework for much psychological research on aggressive behaviors (Berkowitz, 1993, 1994; Baron & Richardson, 1994; Dill & Anderson, 1995). Many other variables have been demonstrated to affect aggressive behavior, but Berkowitz (1994) pointed out that research into these factors continues to find that frustration is a major contributor to aggressive behavior.

Most aggressive behavior toward children, whether physical, emotional or sexual, shares the common factor of perceived or felt powerlessness by the perpetrator. Finkelhor (1983) described child abuse as “acts carried out by abusers to compensate for their perceived helplessness or loss of power” (p. 19). This perceived helplessness or loss of power, whatever its source, often accompanies an individual’s feelings of frustration at not being able to attain goals. Bugental, Mantyla, and Lewis (1989) reported that “parents who find themselves not only confronted with real-world economic and social adversities but who also believe themselves to be helpless to control life events [are] likely to be at exceptionally high risk for physical abuse” (p. 263).

Following a major natural disaster, when many of the usual processes and patterns of life have been disrupted, it could be expected that individuals would feel increased stress, helplessness and frustration (Miller & Kraus, 1994; Tobin & Ollenburger, 1996). Bugental and colleagues (1989) predicted that “catastrophic life events are more likely to lead to ineffective coping strategies among individuals who have a low sense of their own control” (p. 263). Children may become targets of the aggressive behaviors which result from a parent’s frustration with events over which they have no control (Greenwald, Bank, & Knutson, 1997).

Society prescribes roles for family members but power is distributed and maintained somewhat differently from family to family (Farrington & Chertok, 1994; Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1994). When a social breakdown occurs, the social controls which both support and limit use of power in families are compromised. Disasters often elicit an outpouring of organized helping, but stress increases because existing social networks are disrupted (Kaniasty & Norris, 1995). Smith (1983) pointed out that families with few resources prior to a disaster are less likely to recover well afterward. Following a natural disaster it might be impossible to fulfill parental roles in the ways traditionally expected, and parents might be more likely to use force in place of the social supports which usually provide the foundation for both their roles and authority. Thus, under postdisaster circumstances of increased stress and decreased social support, child maltreatment might be expected to be more common.

In summary, anecdotal reports and social, psychological, and family theories all suggest that family violence increases after major disruptive events. Is there an increase in reporting and/or substantiation of child abuse following a natural disaster?

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