



The Overlap Between Child Maltreatment and Woman Abuse

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A great deal of attention is now being paid to both violence against women and to the effects of such violence on their children. One question that commonly arises is: How often does child maltreatment and woman battering occur in the same families? This document briefly summarizes what is known about the overlap between these two forms of abuse in the same families.

We currently have a very limited picture of this overlap. Existing studies allow us to state what degree of overlap exists, but - as will be seen below - not much more than this. Part of the problem is that most studies published to date report simple statistics on the percentage of overlapping violence in families based on survey questions or case-record reviews that were carried out for other purposes. The data on the overlap is often mentioned as an aside to the primary findings of a particular study. Hughes' (1988) study of children is a good example of this. Hughes mentions that 60% of the children accompanying battered women to a shelter were reported by their mothers to have also been physically abused. The focus of Hughes' study was the psychological and behavioral problems associated with a child's witnessing violence in the home, not on the overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering. As a result, we have an estimate of the overlap in this shelter-based population but little more about how these forms of abuse are interconnected.

How Families Were Identified

It is helpful to review the methods used to collect research data about families when trying to understand

the findings of studies available on overlapping abuse. Researchers have come to study the overlap between child maltreatment and woman abuse mostly from two different directions. One strategy has been to identify evidence of woman battering in families where known cases of child maltreatment exist. These studies have most often examined existing records in cases of child abuse and looked for information indicating that a child's mother was also being abused. For example, Hangen (1994) looked at the Massachusetts Department of Social Services' Child Protection case records for indications that an incident of adult domestic violence had occurred since the last case review. He examined computerized records for all active child protection cases in Massachusetts over a seven month period and found that the average incidence of adult victimization recorded in cases was 32.48% across all state child protection offices. The statewide average overlap jumped to 48.2% when Hangen added cases where records indicated a service goal of protecting the child from adult domestic violence. In another study, Stark and Flitcraft (1988) used suspected cases of child abuse and neglect at a major hospital to then search for indications of victimization in the mother's medical records. They found that records of 45% of these children's mothers showed some evidence of being battered.

A second strategy has been to look for evidence of child abuse in the families where abuse of the mothers is known to exist. The percentages of overlap offered include only battered women with children present in the home, not all battered women. Some of these studies have drawn their data from interviews of women residing in battered women's shelters, others

have advertised in the media to recruit families, and still others have located battered women who were using other social services. For example, Bowker, Arbitell and McFerron (1988) advertised in a national magazine, developed a national sample of 1,000 battered women -775 of which had children present in the home -and found that 70% of the wife beaters were also reported to abuse their children.

Accuracy of Reports

It is likely that the results one finds in a particular study are strongly influenced by the source of the data collected. We know from other studies that men and women differ in their level of reporting violence (see Edleson & Brygger, 1986; Szinovacz, 1983) and that children report different effects of witnessing violence than do their mothers or fathers (see Sternberg, Lamb & Dawud-Noursi, 1998). In the same way, child protection records are likely to give a very different picture of overlapping abuse than reports by battered women in a shelter or using another social service. Few studies have used multiple sources that include data collected from both battered women and from child protection sources. One such study (Petchers, 1995) found that 46% of the battered women interviewed reported that at least one of their children had been maltreated; because some women reported that one, but not all of her children, had been abused, this totaled 34% of the children in the study. Interestingly, when Petchers examined county child protection records she found that 62% of the children in her study had reports of child maltreatment. Petchers found that mothers' reports and those of the county were consistent in only 41% of the cases. Mothers reported many incidents of child maltreatment that were not recorded in county files and vice versa.

Still other studies examine the overlap between forms of abuse in one's family of origin as recalled by adults many years later. For example, Rosenbaum and O'Leary (1981) asked adult subjects in their study to recount their childhood experiences. The women in this study reported that 82% of their husbands who witnessed one parent abuse another (no gender specified) were also physically abused as children.

Studies that rely on only one source of informa-

tion are likely to underestimate the overlap. One needs to consider carefully the source of information reported and likely reasons for under or over-reporting of violent incidents. In some studies mothers may be fearful of reporting child maltreatment unknown to official sources. In other studies county child protection agencies are unlikely to record all instances of child maltreatment, or adult recollections of childhood experiences may be highly edited.

Reported Levels of Overlapping Violence

The Table below lists a selection of the available studies by author name(s) and date of publication, the sources of the information from which estimates were obtained, and the percent of overlap reported. Given the varied methods used and limitations pointed out above, one can still state that the majority of studies indicate that from 30% to 60% of families where either child maltreatment or woman battering is identified it is likely that both forms of abuse exist. For a more complete listing, see recent articles by Appel and Holden (1998) and Edleson (1999).

The Dynamics of Overlapping Violence

The above overview clearly indicates that there is a significant overlap between child abuse and woman battering in the same families. Most of the current research on this topic does not, however, indicate how these forms of violence co-occur, whether one precedes the other, or what impact their combination has on adult and child victims.

Bowker et al.'s (1988) study does shed some light on these dynamics. In addition to a high degree of overlap, Bowker and his colleagues found that the severity of abuse to a woman is associated with the severity of abuse to children in the home. That is, the more severely a woman is battered the more severely her child is likely to be abused. They found that child abuse was less severe than woman battering in the families studied. They also found that the more dominant a husband is in a family's decision making, the more likely a child is to be abused. Finally, the larger the number of children in a family the more likely there

is to be child abuse in the home.

Bowker et al. studied only children who were biologically related to the abuser. Others have reported that the presence of children fathered by previous male partners put women at greater risk of being abused (Daly, Singh & Wilson, 1993) and that the presence of a step-parent put children at greater risk of being abused (Wilson & Daly, 1987). Rosenbaum and O'Leary (1981) reported that men who batter their wives were much more likely than others to have grown up in homes where adult domestic violence was occurring. Similarly, Suh and Abel (1990) found that batterers who were abused as a child were more likely to abuse their own children.

Many questions regarding the dynamics of this overlap remain unanswered at this point. These include, for example, the relationship between a mother being beaten and her own use of violence toward her children. Almost 20 years ago, Hilberman and Munson (1977-78) suggested that one possible scenario in families was "husband beats wife who beats children"; (p. 463). More recently, Straus and Gelles (1990) reported that women who were beaten were at least twice as likely to abuse their children when compared to non-abused women. Walker (1984) reported that while 53% of the batterers were reported to abuse their children, 28% of the women she interviewed also reported perpetrating abuse against their children. These studies suggest some type of link between woman battering and subsequent abuse of the child by the mother. An in-depth understanding of this link, however, remains very unclear and in need of study.

Similarly, there are very few studies among those reviewed here that identify, much less discuss, the different dynamics of this overlap within varied racial, ethnic and cultural subgroups. Only a few studies state the racial, ethnic or cultural composition of their samples. Even fewer examine differences in regard to racial, ethnic or cultural influences on the overlap between these forms of domestic violence.

Conclusion

This brief review clearly suggests that there is a large overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering. Our present understanding of the link be-

tween woman and child abuse is limited to rough estimates based mostly on the analysis of records not originally intended for this purpose. Many questions remain to be answered and our understanding would be greatly enhanced by in-depth studies of the families in which woman abuse and child abuse jointly occur.

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For more information see:

There are several recent papers that should provide you with greater information on this topic. Many of these are available electronically and include:

In the Best Interest of Women and Children: A Call for Collaboration Between Child Welfare and Domestic Violence Constituencies is a briefing paper by Susan Schechter and Jeffrey L. Edleson prepared for a Wingspread Conference of a similar title. It was reprinted in the Spring 1995 issue of *Prevention Report* from the National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice at the University of Iowa. It was also reprinted in the Fall 1995 issue of *Protecting Children* (Volume 11, No. 3) from the American Humane Association. (<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/papers/wingsp.htm>)

Mothers & Children: Understanding the Links Between Woman Battering and Child Abuse is a briefing paper by Jeffrey L. Edleson presented at the Strategic Planning Workshop on Violence Against Women, National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC, March 31, 1995. (<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/papers/nij.htm>)

Evaluation of a protocol to identify battered women during investigations of child abuse and neglect by Randy H. Magen, Kathryn Conroy, Peg McCart Hess, Ann Panciera, and Barbara Levy Simon at Columbia University School of Social

Work. This paper was presented at the 4th International Family Violence Research Conference, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, July 22, 1995. (http://www.columbia.edu/~rhm5/FV_PAPER.html)

Also available are several recent bibliographies on this topic:

Children Who Witness Violence: Research & Intervention, by Jeffrey L. Edleson.
(<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/bibs/bibkids.htm>)

The Link Between Child Maltreatment and Woman Battering by Melody Bialke & Anna Hagemester.
(<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/bibs/bibchwom.htm>)

Woman Abuse Co-Existing with Child Maltreatment by Randy H. Magen.
(<http://www.columbia.edu/~rhm5/wacanbib.html>)

The Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse operates a World Wide Web-based Electronic Clearinghouse at <http://www.mincava.umn.edu> that you may wish to search for more recent additions to the above list.

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In Brief:
**The Overlap Between Child Maltreatment
and Woman Abuse**

- Studies show that children are being physically abused in approximately half the families where the mother is a known victim of domestic assault.
- Similarly, studies show that mothers are being battered in approximately half the families where her child is a known victim of physical abuse.
- Available studies differ dramatically in their methods, including definitions of abuse, families studied, data collection procedures, and reported results. The over-reliance in most studies on single sources of information most likely leads to underestimating the extent of the overlap.
- Research to date has provided only limited answers to the many questions that arise when studying this issue. Most studies are based on surveys designed to collect information on other topics. As a result, many questions remain unanswered.