Income Support May Reduce Violence for Poor Families

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After decades of reductions in official measures of family violence, annual incidence rates have plateaued over the past ten years. Poverty and the increased stress it causes can increase the risk for family violence, which suggests that economic downturns like the Great Recession may contribute to this stagnation. Income support in new and existing interventions may help reduce family violence, especially among high-risk, poor families.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) as “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse,” and Physical Child Abuse (PCA) as “the intentional use of physical force against a child that results in, or has the potential to result in, physical injury.”

Policy and interventions have, until recently, reduced official rates of family violence. Since 1990, official reports show a 67 percent reduction in IPV, and a 56 percent reduction in PCA reported by child welfare agencies. However, given stringent criteria for official reports, family violence rates in community-level research are often much higher.

Recent community-based studies find that up to 35 percent of children and 20 percent of all couples still experience physical family violence. Acts of violence range from the less severe (i.e., slapping) to those resulting in serious injury. While less severe family violence occurs most frequently, infrequent severe acts may have greater social, physical and psychological consequences.

Young families are at greater risk for greater amounts of family violence, and the youngest children are most often victims. Nearly half of first-time IPV victims are young adults 18-24; an additional 25 percent are victims by age 34. Young adults are also more likely to be poor, at a rate of 28 percent for 18-34 year olds. Furthermore, parents of young children are more likely to perpetrate PCA. Over 40 percent of PCA victims are age five and younger in verified child protective services reports.

Family Violence Involves Men and Women

Interventions have historically targeted groups considered most at-risk for severe violence victimization: women and very young children. The focus on family violence in which males are the primary perpetrators may overlook the elevated frequency and severity of both parents perpetrating IPV and PCA.

Recent research has exposed a great diversity within at-risk groups that includes male IPV victims and families in which multiple types of violence occur. Bi-directional violence, in which each partner perpetrates IPV against the other, is the most commonly occurring IPV profile. Across all age groups, men and women perpetrate PCA at nearly equivalent rates. Nonetheless, risk of severe injury may still be greater for females. IPV and

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5. SES: combined education, income, and employment.
6. Seldak et al., 2010, ibid.
15. HHS ACF, 2013. ibid.
16. ibid.
Poverty and Family Violence

Poverty increases the risk for family violence. A high proportion of IPV and PCA are directly related to specific stressors, including the loss of income or employment. For this reason, shifts in structural factors, i.e., national economic recessions, may indirectly influence increases in family violence. Indeed, the five-percent rise in the number of poor families following the onset of the Great Recession may have contributed to the stalled reduction in family violence.

A lack of steady work can cause problems in the home. Unemployment is a high risk factor for IPV and is associated with double the risk of PCA, as well as triple the severity of injury. While the vast majority of low-income parents are employed at least part-time, over 70 percent have not attained a high school degree, which limits their employment opportunities. Relying on low-paying part-time employment—often multiple jobs—can lead to income instability and high stress.

Preventing Family Violence

Many family violence interventions function via the judicial system, providing much-needed assistance to adult and child victims. However, this approach is less successful at changing perpetration rates, particularly chronic and severe family violence. Traditional interventions rarely include structural factors that may affect low-education, low-income individuals and families more substantially, such as shifts in the economy.

Two specific intervention strategies could address family violence holistically. Poverty increases the risk for family violence; income support for all poor families, especially for young parents, would help provide important economic stability. Funding and promoting integrated services that include both parents could also reduce risk of current and future family violence.

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Figure 1: Measures of Poverty, Intimate Partner Violence and Physical Child Abuse, 1993-2012

This graph shows the national poverty rate and the national rates per thousand of the total population of intimate partner violence and reports of physical child abuse.

Sources:
- U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Reports; ibid.;
- Truman & Morgan, 2014, ibid.;
- Sedlak et al., 2010, ibid.