

# Demographics of Child Abuse

*Synthesis Paper: The Child Abuse Crisis: The Disintegration of Marriage, Family, and the American Community*

A survey of the professional literature shows that the three main types of abuse most commonly researched are physical abuse and, to a lesser extent, neglect and the trauma of children who have witnessed violence against their parents.<sup>1)</sup> According to the professional literature, child abuse in the United States exhibits definite demographic patterns:

- **The safest family environment for a child is a home in which the biological parents are married.** Recent research demonstrates that marriage provides a safe environment for all family members, one in which child abuse and fatality are lowered dramatically.
- **Cohabitation, an increasingly common phenomenon, is a major factor in child abuse.** Cohabitation implies a lack of commitment. The evidence suggests that a lack of commitment between biological parents is dangerous for children, and that a lack of commitment between mother and boyfriend is exceedingly so. The risk of child abuse is 20 times higher than in traditional married families if parents are cohabiting (as in “common law” marriages) and 33 times higher if the single mother is cohabiting with a boyfriend.<sup>2)</sup>
- **The incidence of child abuse decreases significantly as family income increases.** The impression that there is a high incidence of abuse among the very poor is reinforced by the results of research into child abuse. In 1993, the overall rate of maltreatment (abuse and neglect combined) in the United States was lowest in families with incomes above \$30,000 per year; 10 times higher in families with incomes between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per year; and 22 times higher for families with incomes below \$15,000 per year.<sup>3)</sup>
- **Child abuse frequently is intergenerational.** Another generation of child abusers is being weaned by today's abusing parents, and many of these children will never know that children can be treated differently.
- **Child abuse is prevalent in “communities of abuse” characterized by family breakdown.** These also are communities of crime, characterized by the absence of marriage, the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, and a primary dependence on welfare.<sup>4)</sup> Children who grow up in these “communities” show signs of permanent damage; moreover, as statistics follow them over time, many prove to have been damaged for life. From these communities of abuse come society's “superpredators” (the psychopathic criminals of tomorrow), violent gang members, and other hostile, depressed, and frequently even suicidal young people.
- **Child abuse is directly associated with serious violent crime.** An increase in the incidence of child abuse precedes an increase in violent crime.

Although a home with biological parents who are married cannot guarantee that a child will be safe and happy, the evidence suggests that it represents the safest of all environments for children; at the same time—and in sharp contrast—the evidence also suggests that a home with adults who decide not to marry and to live together out of wedlock represents the most dangerous environment of all for children.

<sup>1)</sup> Physical abuse in the NIS-3 study includes such activities as punching, kicking, throwing, burning, stabbing, and choking. Sexual abuse includes such things as penile penetration of the oral, anal, or genital organs. Neglect includes physical neglect (failing to keep the child clean, fed, and warm); educational neglect; medical neglect; and emotional neglect, which frequently is coupled with witnessing violence between parents.

<sup>2)</sup> Robert Whelan, *Broken Homes & Battered Children: A study of the relationship between child abuse*

and family type, Family Education Trust, London, 1993.

<sup>3)</sup> Andrea J. Sedlak, Ph.D., and Diane D. Broadhurst, M.L.A., *The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3): Final Report*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, Washington, D.C., September 1996, p. 53.

<sup>4)</sup> Patrick F. Fagan: "Rising Illegitimacy: America's Social Catastrophe," Heritage Foundation F.Y.I. No. 19, June 1994, and "The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 1026, March 17, 1995.

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