

# Effects of Child Abuse on Crime Rates

*Synthesis Paper: [The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community](#)*

*Synthesis Paper: [The Child Abuse Crisis: The Disintegration of Marriage, Family, and the American Community](#)*

The increase in severe child abuse has another serious ramification. The evidence suggests that the United States will face increased levels of serious violent crime (murders, rapes, and assaults) at the hands of abused children when they reach their mid- to late-teenage years. According to Cathy Spatz Widom, Professor of Criminal Justice and Psychology at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Albany,

Early childhood victimization has demonstrable long-term consequences for delinquency, adult criminality, and violent behavior.... The experience of child abuse and neglect has a substantial impact even on individuals with otherwise little likelihood of engaging in officially recorded criminal behavior.<sup>1)</sup>

The association between child abuse and crime is significant. Neglected children are 4.8 times more likely to be arrested as a juvenile and 3.1 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime compared to those who did not experience child abuse or neglect.<sup>2)</sup> In one study, 26 percent of incarcerated delinquents who had committed murder had experienced physical abuse; they also were more likely than those who had not suffered abuse to have directed their violence toward members of their immediate families.<sup>3)</sup> In another report of 43 death row inmates, 36 had been physically or sexually abused, 37 had been neglected, and 31 had witnessed domestic violence growing up.<sup>4)</sup>

## 1. Child Rejection

Jill Leslie Rosenbaum, professor of criminology at California State University, writes: "Research consistently has shown that those youth whose bond to their parents is weak are more likely to be delinquent. [Y]outh who are more attached to their parents have greater direct and indirect controls placed on their behavior."<sup>5)</sup>

As a child's emotional attachment to his parents ensures a well-adjusted adult,<sup>6)</sup> so parental rejection of the child has powerful opposite effects. Ronald Simons, professor of sociology at Iowa State University, summarizes the research findings: "Rejected children tend to distrust and attribute malevolent motives to others, with the result being a defensive, if not aggressive, approach to peer interactions.... Such [rejecting] parents not only fail to model and reinforce prosocial behavior, they actually provide training in aggressive noncompliant behavior."<sup>7)</sup>

Rejection by the family, which is the child's first and fundamental "community," sets the stage for another social tragedy. Rejected children tend gradually to drop out of normal community life. Professor Simons continues: "Parental rejection... increased the probability of a youth's involvement in a deviant peer group, reliance upon an avoidant coping style, and use of substances."<sup>8)</sup> Many other studies in the professional literature replicate these findings.<sup>9)</sup>

## 2. Parental Abuse or Neglect

The professional literature is replete with findings of a connection between future delinquency and criminal behavior and the abuse and neglect visited upon children by their parents.<sup>10)</sup> This abuse can be physical, emotional, or sexual.<sup>11)</sup> “Overwhelmingly,” observes Patricia Koski, “studies conducted since 1964 have found a positive correlation between parent-child aggression-violence-abuse-physical punishment and aggression on the part of the child.”<sup>12)</sup> Or, as summarized by Cathy Spatz Widom, professor of Criminal Justice and Psychology at Indiana University, Bloomington, “Violence begets violence.”<sup>13)</sup>

Studies of the official records of abused children and arrested offenders put this connection in the range of 14 percent to 26 percent.<sup>14)</sup> But the connection triples to a range of 50 percent to 70 percent once researchers go beyond official reports of investigated cases of child abuse to reports of abuse by the delinquents themselves.<sup>15)</sup>

Significantly, West Coast Crips and Bloods gang members almost without exception grew up in dangerous family environments.<sup>16)</sup> Typically, they left home to escape the violence or drifted away because they were abandoned or neglected by their parents.<sup>17)</sup> Consequently, these young men have developed a defensive world view characterized by a feeling of vulnerability and a need to protect oneself, a belief that no one can be trusted, a need to maintain social distance, a willingness to use violence and intimidation to repel others, an attraction to similarly defensive people, and an expectation that no one will come to their aid.<sup>18)</sup> Young women delinquents who run away from home are also frequently victims of sexual abuse.<sup>19)</sup>

The close connection between child abuse and violent crime is highlighted also in a 1988 study of the 14 juveniles then condemned to death in the United States: 12 had been brutally abused, and 5 had been sodomized by relatives.<sup>20)</sup>

## 3. Impact on Boys versus Girls

Child sexual or physical abuse alone can outweigh many other factors in contributing to violent crime but affects boys and girls differently. Abuse visited upon girls is more likely to result in depression (the inversion of anger)<sup>21)</sup> or psychiatric hospitalization than in the more outwardly directed hostility of abused males. According to Cathy Spatz Widom, “Early childhood victimization has demonstrable long-term consequences for delinquency, adult criminality, and violent behavior.... The experience of child abuse and neglect has a substantial impact even on individuals with otherwise little likelihood of engaging in officially recorded criminal behavior.”<sup>22)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup> Cathy Spatz Widom, “The Cycle of Violence,” *Science*, Vol. 244 (1989), pp. 160-166.

<sup>2)</sup> Diana J. English, Cathy Spatz Widom, Carol Brandford, “Childhood victimization and delinquency, adult criminality, and violent criminal behavior: A replication and extension,” *National Institute of Justice*, Washington, D.C (2002)

<sup>3)</sup> Peter C. Kratcoski, “Families Who Kill,” *Marriage & Family Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1-2 (1987), pp. 47-70.

<sup>4)</sup> David Lisak and Sara Beszterczey, “The Cycle of Violence: The Life Histories of 43 Death Row Inmates,” *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, Vol. 8, No. 8 (2007), pp. 118 -128

<sup>5)</sup> Jill L. Rosenbaum, “Family Dysfunction and Female Delinquency,” *Crime and Delinquency* 35 (1989): 31-44.

- <sup>6)</sup> For a full and interesting development of this point, see Karen, *Becoming Attached*.
- <sup>7)</sup> Simons and Robertson, "The Impact of Parenting Factors, Deviant Peers, and Coping Style Upon Adolescent Drug Use." See also Phyllis T. Howing, J.S. Wodarski, P.D. Kurtz, J.M. Gaudin, and E. Neligan Herbst, "Child Abuse and Delinquency: The Empirical and Theoretical Links," *Social Work*, May 1990, pp. 244-249, esp. p. 245.
- <sup>8)</sup> Ronald L. Simons and Joan F. Robertson, "The Impact of Parenting Factors, Deviant Peers, and Coping Style Upon Adolescent Drug Use," *Family Relations*, Vol. 38 (1989), pp. 273-281.
- <sup>9)</sup> Ronald L. Simons et al., "The Nature of the Association Between Parental Rejection and Delinquent Behavior," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1989), pp. 297-310.
- <sup>10)</sup> Jeffrey Fagan and Sandra Wexler, "Family Origins of Violent Delinquents," *Criminology*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1987), pp. 643-669. For a more detailed overview of the delinquency-abuse literature, see Howing et al., "Child Abuse and Delinquency: The Empirical and Theoretical Links."
- <sup>11)</sup> For a deeper insight into the different effects, see Ann Burgess et al., "Abused to Abuser: Antecedents of Socially Deviant Behaviors," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 144 (1987), pp. 1431-1436, and S.E. Brown, "Social Class, Child Maltreatment, and Delinquent Behavior," *Criminology* Vol. 22 (1984), pp. 259-278.
- <sup>12)</sup> Patricia R. Koski, "Family Violence and Nonfamily Deviance: Taking Stock of the Literature," *Marriage and Family Review*, Vol. 12 (1988), pp. 23-46, from Wright and Wright, "Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker's Guide to the Literature."
- <sup>13)</sup> Cathy Spatz Widom, "Does Violence Beget Violence?" *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 106 (1989), pp. 3-28.
- <sup>14)</sup> D.O. Lewis, S.S. Shanok, J.H. Pincus, and G.H. Glaser, "Violence Juvenile Delinquents: Psychiatric, Neurological, Psychological and Abuse Factors," *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, Vol. 18 (1979), pp. 307-319; Peter C. Kratcoski, "Child Abuse and Violence Against the Family," *Child Welfare*, Vol. 61 (1982), pp. 435-443; F.G. Bolton, J.W. Reich, and S.E. Guiterres, "Delinquency Patterns in Maltreated Children and Siblings," *Victimology*, Vol. 2 (1977), pp. 349-357.
- <sup>15)</sup> C.M. Mouzakitis, "An Inquiry into Child Abuse and Juvenile Delinquency," in *Exploring the Relationship Between Child Abuse and Delinquency*, ed. R.J. Hunner and Y.E. Walker (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1981), pp. 220-231; P.W. Rhoades and S.L. Parker, *The Connections Between Youth Problems and Violence in the Home* (Portland: Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, 1981).
- <sup>16)</sup> Marc Fleisher, *Sentenced to Life*, forthcoming.
- <sup>17)</sup> An extract from a July 31, 1994, CBS "60 Minutes" interview with Cody Scott, convicted criminal leader of the Los Angeles Crips, confirms the import of the research: "My mother couldn't protect me...and Dick [his father] couldn't—he never came...I hate him. Because I think about where I could have been, you know. And I can't dig that, man, the running out on your kids, you know. The father thing, man...That's just heavy...because I wouldn't have had to go to the street to find the street people."
- <sup>18)</sup> Fleisher, *Sentenced to Life*, forthcoming.
- <sup>19)</sup> Magnus J. Seng, "Child Abuse and Prostitution: A Comparative Analysis," *Adolescence*, Vol. 24 (1989), pp. 665-675; K.B. Morrow and G.T. Sorell, "Factors Affecting Self Esteem, Depression, and Negative Behaviors in Sexually Abused Female Adolescents," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 51 (1989), pp. 677-686.
- <sup>20)</sup> D.O. Lewis, J.H. Pincus, B. Bard, E. Richardson, L.S. Prichep, M. Feldman and C. Yager, "Neuropsychiatric, Psychoeducational and Family Characteristics of 14 Juveniles Condemned to Death in the United States," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 145 (1988), pp. 585-589.
- <sup>21)</sup> In depression the person, afraid of the outside, buries his anger deep inside, beyond his ability to recognize it. Neither he nor the outside world sees the anger. They see the depression.
- <sup>22)</sup> Cathy Spatz Widom, "The Cycles of Violence," *Science*, Vol. 244 (1989), pp. 160-166.

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