

Link Between Family Structure and Child Abuse

1. U.S. Data

The National Incidence Studies draw the sharpest distinctions between income groups on rates of abuse: In the [United States](#), the poorest exhibit the highest rates of abuse.

The NIS-4 report, however, did not take into consideration the great differences in family composition across the three income groups it evaluated. At that time, major differences in the incidence of marriage within these same income groups did exist. When data from the second criterion are superimposed on the first, a disturbing picture emerges.

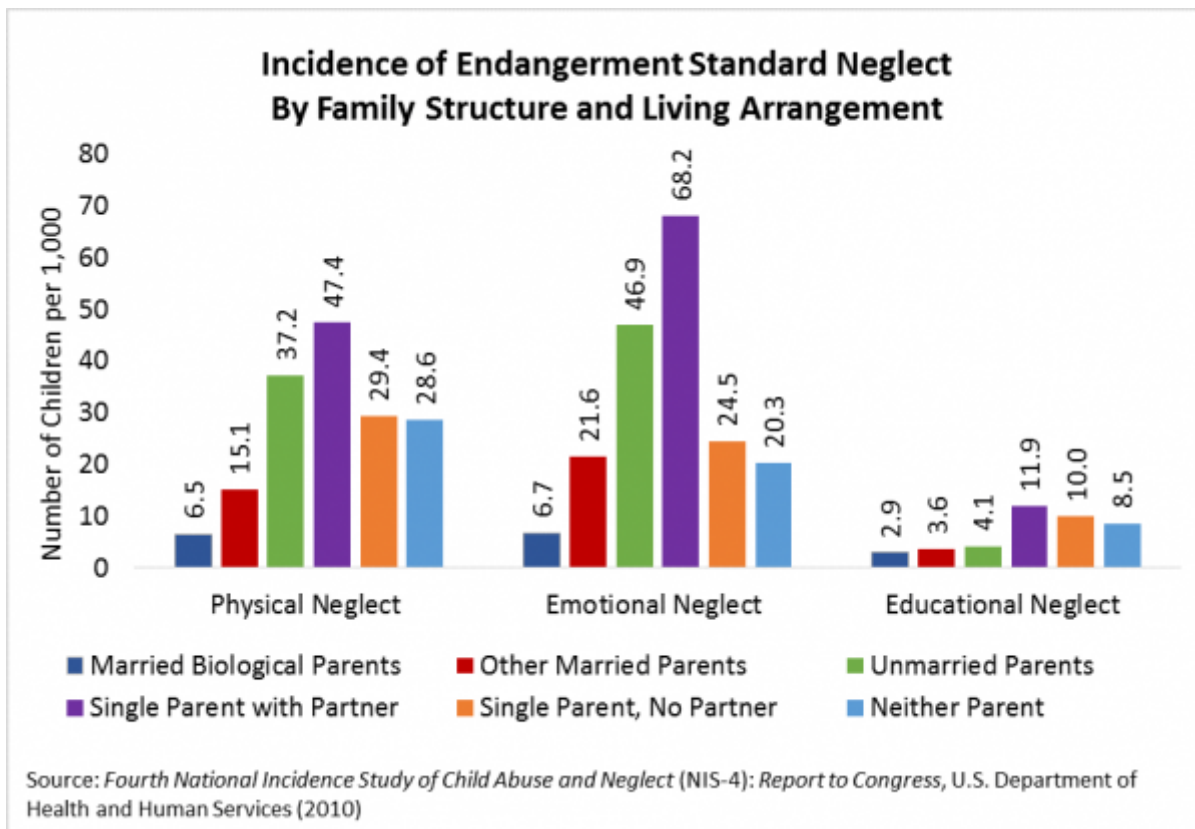
2. Data Illustrated

The NIS-4¹⁾ report is especially significant as it was the first examination by the Department of Health and Human Services exploring the relationship between [family structure and child maltreatment](#) in the U.S. Past reports looked at family structure but not to the same degree. For example, NIS-3 did not collect data on [cohabitation or stepfamilies](#).

Evidence from NIS-4 confirm the data from other countries indicating that family structure is tangibly linked to the likelihood of child abuse. Specifically:

- **The safest environment for a child**—that is, the family environment with the lowest risk ratio for physical abuse—is one in which the biological parents are married and the family has always been intact.
- **The rate of abuse is three and a half times higher** if the child is living with a single parent
- **The rate of abuse is four times higher** if the child is living with biological parents who are not married but are cohabiting.
- **The rate of abuse is six times higher** in the blended family in which the child is living with a married couple, most commonly in the case of divorce and remarriage but also possible in households of adoption.
- **The rate of abuse is 10 times higher** if the child is living with a parent who is cohabiting with another adult.

Although the marriage of biological parents does not guarantee childhood happiness and security, as the presence of child abuse in these families attests, children are still safest in a married household. Furthermore, an adult's decision not to marry but to live with someone out of wedlock provides one of the most dangerous family configuration for children.



3. Significance of Data

Many researchers have complained about the insufficiency of data available about child abuse in the United States due to a limited number of studies and national statistics on the issue. This can, in part, be attributed to the fact that most cases of [child abuse are never reported](#) to the authorities.

A simple way to correct this shortcoming in research would be to gather more exact data. This could be done quickly by using the police reports for the 2,000 cases of [death from child abuse](#) each year. These reports would offer researchers significant information about child abuse and about those who commit this abuse. The first step would be to access the data on family configuration in the most recent year for which records are available.

Too many Americans continue to tolerate the conditions that debilitate the family and weaken the child. The American demographic picture of abusive families could be likened to a population funnel of alienation and rejection: wide open at the top, with [out-of-wedlock births](#), divorce, and abortions; and narrowing down to families with children who suffer serious abuse and neglect. This is particularly true when the compounding effects of two, three, and four generations of broken families have created a subculture of abuse in the local community.

While the United States tries to figure out how to rebuild its broken families and communities, its religious, social, and political leaders must do all they can to keep intact those families that have adhered to a tradition of stable married life. The family environment provided by married biological parents is the primary resource for tomorrow's well-adjusted children, for the future of the country, and for the protection of both women and children.

¹⁾ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4): Report to Congress*, Andrea J. Sedlak, Jane Mettenburg, Monica Basena, Ian Petta, Karla McPherson, Angela Greene, and Spencer Li.,

(Washington, D.C.: January 2010). Available at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf. Accessed August 24, 2015

This entry draws heavily from [The Child Abuse Crisis: The Disintegration of Marriage, Family, and the American Community](#).

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