

Demographics of Child Abuse

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.¹⁾ 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.²⁾
- **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 4 times higher than in traditional married families if parents are cohabiting (as in “common law” marriages) and 11 times higher if the single mother is cohabiting with a boyfriend.³⁾
- **The incidence of child abuse decreases significantly as family income increases.** In 2006, the overall rate of maltreatment (abuse and neglect combined) in the United States was lowest in families with incomes above \$15,000 per year and more than 5 times higher in families with incomes below \$15,000 per year.⁴⁾
- **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 are [disadvantaged communities](#), characterized by the absence of marriage, little education, and dependence on welfare.⁵⁾ From these communities come society's “superpredators” (the psychopathic criminals of tomorrow), violent gang members, and other hostile, depressed, and frequently even suicidal young people.⁶⁾
- **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.

¹⁾ Physical abuse in the NIS-4 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.

²⁾ 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*, A.J. Sedlak, J. Mettenburg, M. Basena, I. Petta, K. McPherson, A. Greene, and S. Li. (Washington, D.C., January 2010). Available at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf.

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⁵⁾ D. Alessio, Stewart J., PhD and L. Stolzenberg PhD, "Stepchildren, Community Disadvantage, and Physical Injury in a Child Abuse Incident: A Preliminary Investigation," *Violence and Victims* 27, no. 6 (2012): 860-70.

⁶⁾ Patrick F. Fagan, "Rising Illegitimacy: America's Social Catastrophe," Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 19, (1994).

Patrick F. Fagan, "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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