

THE CYCLE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE AMONG CRIMINAL OFFENDERS: A STUDY OF INMATES IN ONE LOUISIANA JAIL

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the link between childhood family violence and adult family violence among criminal offenders. Results of a self-report study are used in the analysis. Data was obtained from 50 men and 50 women offenders who were incarcerated in a large urban jail in Southwest Louisiana. Results indicate a strong connection between experiencing family violence during childhood and continuing violence in adulthood (to a probability of about 90%). The findings also indicated that, among offenders who reported non-violent childhoods, women offenders were much more likely to go on to experience violent adult family lives.

INTRODUCTION

With the American public's continuing concern with high levels of violent crime, more attention has been directed to the role of the family in nurturing and shaping violent criminal behavior. How extensive is serious family violence, how is it transmitted from parent to child, and what are the long-term effects of a violent family life upon children?

Recent research has estimated that between three and four million American households experience at least one serious violent incident between spouses each year. If the effect on children in these families is taken into account, then the number of persons directly touched doubles. And many of these households experience multiple violent incidents during the year.

Children not only view these violent encounters between their parents (which increases the risk of adult family violence, according to Dolon, Hendricks 1991; Straus et al 1980), but over two million children are suspected victims of abuse each year. The impact of family violence on children is uncertain, but more authorities believe that many of these children will use violence within their own families as adults, creating a dismal and persistently repetitive pattern of family violence.

In her research into the connection between childhood abuse and adult criminality, Cathy Spatz Widom used the phrase "cycle of violence" to suggest that a childhood history of physical abuse predisposes the survivor to violence in later years (Widom 1992). She found that being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent, as an adult by 38 percent, and for a violent crime by 38 percent.

Other researchers (Dolon, Hendricks 1991; Elbow 1982; Walker 1979) have also used the "cycle of violence" explanation. In this scenario, violence is learned as the primary means

of conflict resolution. It is a coping mechanism—involving external blaming, projecting feelings and displacing rage.

The family provides the child with the early experiences which may provide an adult role model of abuser or victim. Children exposed to violence embrace the batterers as role models. Children and young adults emulate the behavior of aggressive models. When children, especially boys, grow up seeing their parents beating up on each other, they grow up to beat their own lovers and spouses, and ultimately their own children.

Sixty-three percent of men who batter their spouses either were beaten as children or witnessed family violence. Clinical reports indicate the inclination of male children of abused women to act out aggressively, frequently directing their offensive behavior toward the mother. The husband may provide a violent role model for the male child, while exposure to an abusive marital relationship may help the female regard violence as normative behavior (Dolon, Hendricks 1991; Elbow 1982).

Couples who abuse also abuse their children (Dolon, Hendricks 1991; Forsstrom-Cohen, Rosenbaum 1985; Jouriles et al 1987). Forsstrom-Cohen and Rosenbaum (1985) found that parental violence caused aggression in children. Women who had experienced violence during their childhood were more aggressive than those who had not witnessed parental violence. The cycle indeed continues as children of maritally abusive parents become abusive wives and husbands (Straus et al 1980).

Abusive relationships are relatively common. We know that children are frequently exploited by those closest to them. Moreover, when this abuse occurs during the formative years the battle against it can rage into adulthood. The upshot is that for adults the origins of their anger may be obscure. Thanks to

defense mechanisms they have used to ward off the menace emanating from adult attackers, it may not be clear to them that they are fighting for safety (Fein 1993). It may trouble them that they are violent, but they may not understand the sources of their behavior.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

This study was conducted to examine patterns of childhood family violence and adult family violence among criminal offenders. We were trying to answer two primary questions:

1. What is the extent of family violence among men and women offenders?
2. To what degree does a childhood history of family violence carry over into a pattern of adult family violence?

The study was carried out in 1993 in the Lafayette Parish Correctional Center. LPCC was at the time a five-story, 676-bed capacity parish jail in Lafayette, Louisiana. It housed local inmates in pre-trial status, local inmates awaiting sentencing or serving misdemeanor sentences, sentenced inmates awaiting transfer to state prisons, state prisoners serving their sentences in the parish jail (under a per diem contract with the sheriff), and a variety of pre-trial federal inmates and illegal aliens. The average daily population during the months of this study was in excess of 600, about half of whom were local pre-trial detainees.

We had determined that our ideal study group would consist of 50 adult male inmates and 50 adult female inmates. All would be volunteers whose identities would remain secret unless they chose to participate in follow-up interviews. The 100 respondents would each complete a six page questionnaire reporting basic personal information about themselves; then respond in some detail to questions about family violence in their lives as children and adults. The questionnaire included the following:

1. Sex
2. Age
3. Legal status (pre-trial, sentenced, etc.)
4. Marital status
5. Number of biological children
6. Number of children in household
7. Religious affiliation
8. Size of city raised in

9. Household income
10. Alcohol problem (no/yes, and level of severity)
11. Drug problem (no/yes, and level of severity)
12. Total number of felony convictions
13. Childhood family violence (no/yes, and frequency, self-report of victimization, frequency of victimization, hospital treatment for injuries, most violent family member, and frequency of use of firearms, cutting instruments, blunt objects, and hands or feet as weapons).
14. Adult family violence (no/yes, and same format as in question 13).
15. Most serious crime this confinement
16. Space for written comments
17. Willingness to be interviewed in person

Finding the 50 men to complete the "Domestic Violence Survey" was no problem. The jail runs an in-house treatment program called "Safecare," which is a combined self-esteem/substance abuse course in three parts or levels, each part lasting a few weeks. Over the course of several weeks, a member of the jail staff accompanied one of the researchers to Safecare classes, explained the nature of the survey and asked for volunteers. With over 500 men in the jail at any time, and the enrollees in Safecare turning over every few weeks, it was not hard to get the men's surveys completed right away.

The 50 women were much more difficult. The total number of women in the jail population never exceeds 52 (two 26-woman "pods") and was more likely to be somewhere between 35 and 45. The pool of possible respondents was much smaller from the beginning. Some women chose not to participate at all, others volunteered immediately, others declined but were persuaded by fellow inmates or jail counselors to take part in the survey later.

Obtaining surveys from the 50 women lengthened the process out beyond our expectations. We had been going through the surveys to assess their suitability as they were completed. Some (no more than 10 each from the men and the women) had been discarded as being incomplete or nonsensical (such as one with every blank checked and outlandish numbers cited). We had the 50 usable surveys from the men two months before there was enough turnover among the women to bring in

new respondents and finish out the set.

After the surveys were completed, nine of the respondents who volunteered to be interviewed were interviewed at length by one of the researchers. These interviews were recorded with permission and later transcribed. They are not a part of this paper but may be included in other reports later.

FINDINGS

The profile of the jail inmates surveyed reveals that both men and women were likely to be young, not presently married, with no more than two children. The men were more likely to define themselves as having drug or alcohol problems, and they were more likely to be in custody this time for a drug offense. The men reported about three times as many felony convictions as the women. The men were more likely to describe themselves as having had a violent family life as children, while the women were slightly more likely to report a violent adult family life. In both the men and the women inmates, violence in childhood was highly likely to persist in adult family life. The characteristics of the survey respondents broken down into categories follow.

Age

The men ranged in age from 20 to 47; no teenagers and no old-timers, only two were in their 40s. The women ranged in age from 17 to 52; most were in their 20s and 30s, but nine were either teenagers or over 40. The most reasonable explanation for the age variation is that the men, selected from Safecare classes were more likely to be either sentenced offenders or long-term pre-trial inmates. The women were probably closer to a true random sample of jail inmates.

Marital Status

We were struck that only seven of the men inmates and four of the women inmates reported being married at the time of the survey. Of these 100 offenders, 90 were in their 20s or 30s, so they were certainly of marriageable age, but why weren't they married? Even more than a history of family violence, not being married was a prominent characteristic of this group of offenders. Or maybe, as we will see in looking closer at the continuity of childhood and adult family violence later, the impact of family violence—along with alcohol and drug problems and a felony criminal record—makes

Table 1: Family Violence Among Jail Inmates

Men	Yes	No
Childhood	34	16
Adult	26	24
Women		
Childhood	23	27
Adult	28	22

it difficult for one to get married and stay that way.

Children

The 50 men offenders reported having a total of 70 children, an average of 1.4 each. Eighteen had none, and 13 had only one child. The 50 women offenders reported a total of 87 children; 16 of them had none and nine had only one child.

Alcohol Problems

Thirty-seven of the men but only 15 of the women reported varying degrees of alcohol problems. Of those who reported problems, 21 of the men but only four of the women characterized these problems as severe.

Drug Problems

Both men and women reported drugs as more of a problem than alcohol. Forty of the men (80%) and 21 of the women said they had drug problems. If they had a problem, it was likely to be severe: 26 of the men and 11 of the women put themselves in the worst category. We might remember again that the men were recruited from Safecare, which is designed for persons with substance abuse problems. But practically all of the long-term inmates in this jail, pre-trial or sentenced, go through the program at some point in their stay; it is something different to do for awhile.

Felony Convictions

To the best of their recollection, the men recalled 121 total felony convictions, the women only 41. Only four of the men had not been convicted of felonies, while 25 of the women had not. There was obviously a much more significant record of serious criminality among the men, although if we took only those in both groups with felony convictions the average number of convictions was less divergent: 3.07 per man versus 1.64 per woman. One

Table 2: Childhood Family Violence Into Adult Family Violence

	Childhood Family Violence	Adult Family Violence	No Childhood Family Violence	Adult Family Violence
Men	34	23	16	3
Women	23	17	27	11

woman reported five felony convictions, while eight men reported six felony convictions each.

Current Offense

The majority of the men offenders were in for either a drug crime (16) or a violent crime (14). The women's offense were much more evenly balanced: ten for drugs, ten for property crimes, and eight for violent crimes.

Childhood Family Violence

Among the men, 34 (68%) reported a history of family violence as a child (Table 1). Among the women, this figure was substantially lower: 23, or 46 percent (Table 1). In describing who was the most violent member of their childhood family, fathers made the list of 18 of the men inmates, or just above half of those who reported childhood violence histories, while 11 of the women inmates, or just under half, identified their fathers as most violent. We noted with interest that nine of the men and four of the women identified themselves as the most violent members of their families in childhood; of these 13, 12 went on to report histories of adult family violence, and in every case they also identified themselves as the most violent again. If this was a serious moment and they were telling the truth, theirs may be the saddest history of this entire group—to have done all this damage throughout their lives and to be apparently unable to stop it.

Adult Family Violence

The women inmates were more likely to report violence in their adult families than the men were: the numbers were 28 to 26, the percentages 56 percent to 52 percent (see Table 1). The slight variation did not appear particularly noteworthy to us; we thought it most significant that a majority of both groups indicated the presence of violence in their adult family lives.

What we did next was to look for continuity—childhood violence into adult violence (see Table 2). Of the 34 men who reported family violence as children, 23 of them said it continued on into adulthood. But seven of the

remaining 11 had no children (and six of the seven were unmarried), meaning they basically had no adult family to be violent with. So only four of the original 34 actually had adult families in which they reported no problems with violence. If we were looking for success stories, in overcoming violent childhood histories to lead non-violent adult family lives, the success rate among these inmates was exactly 12 percent.

Of the 23 women who reported family violence as children, 17 said it continued on into adulthood. Four of the remaining six were unmarried, with no children, leaving only two reporting family violence as children to escape the "cycle of violence" in their family lives as adults. The success rate among the women was only 9 percent, even lower than for the men.

What about the other side of the coin, the men and women inmates who reported non-violent family histories as children?

Of the 16 men who indicated no family violence as children, only three (19%) reported family violence as adults; 13 remained violence-free, even though the majority have children.

Of the 27 women inmates who indicated no family violence as children, 11 (41%) reported family violence as adults, while 16 (59%) did not. Of the 11 women in the "non-violent childhood/violent adulthood" category, nine of these women have children, and eight indicated that the problem was their husband: they married into violence.

We looked (only superficially so far) into the relationship of family violence and violent crime. Of the 14 men in jail for violent crimes, 11 had a violent family life as a child; two of the other three, and 10 of 14 overall, claimed a severe alcohol or drug problem. Among women the relationship was less clear. Of the eight in jail for violent crimes, only four indicated a violent family life as a child; four of the eight indicated a drug problem, none severe.

Our study to this point has two main observations:

1. Both men and women in jail show high rates of family violence, with two-thirds of the men and almost half the women reporting violent childhoods, and over half of both groups reporting violent adult family lives.
2. Both violence and non-violence tend to be continuous. If you had a violent family life as a child, you are very likely (in the range of 90%) to have a violent adult family life as well. If you had a non-violent family life as a child, your adult family life is likely to be non-violent also, unless you happen to hook up with a spouse (more likely a male than a female) who proceeds to give your life a violent turn.

DISCUSSION

Conflicts between people are inevitable, even among family members. The key to maintaining a healthy relationship, or mending a torn one, is how that conflict is handled.

Family rifts usually are not caused by a single incident, but stem from a series of events the latest of which sets off a powder keg. Sometimes a very small incident can bring about strong conflict and very strong emotions.

Childhood abuse and social conditioning contribute to a women's acceptance of emotional and physical abuse by men. The young girl who is socialized to be passive, to repress her own needs in subservience to the needs of others as part of her female role, is in essence being socialized to submit to the emotional and physical abuse of potential batterers. And when girls see that society does not punish their fathers actions against their mothers, these actions are seen as acceptable.

Domestic violence is the second most common cause of injury among women and the leading cause of injury to women 15-44, more common than injury from automobile accidents, muggings and rapes combined. The perpetrator in some 626,000 incidents a year nationally is usually a male who takes out his own hard feelings on the victim. Alcohol is often involved and guns are the weapon of choice.

Gelles and Straus (1988) maintain that violence occurs in American families because most people regard violence as a permissible solution way to resolve family disagreements. In their analysis of media reports of violence

they found that people tend to stereotype violent families as different (poor, black or mentally unstable). This, the authors say, labels families in which violence occurs as different; therefore the problem is not as likely to be seen as important or urgent. It is reminiscent of the problem of drug use; which was not "discovered" as an urgent problem until it reached the middle class. Americans deny that family violence is a middle class problem, and even violent families, rich or poor, tend to think of other families as having worse problems than their own.

Our research supports those who maintain that family violence is the number one social problem facing America. When you look at the tentacles of family violence, its connections with drugs, family disintegration and criminality and its effects on future generations, it far outweighs any other social issue of long-term consequence. Several members of the jail inmate study remarked, during their interviews, that family violence had ruined their lives before they even got started. Millions of American children today are getting off to the same start.

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