

Children see domestic violence that often goes unreported, research finds

April 7 2014

A nationwide study of children who have witnessed domestic violence found that parents or caregivers were physically injured in more than a third of the cases, yet only a small fraction of offenders went to jail and just one in four incidents resulted in police reports, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

"One of the most shocking findings is that less than 2 percent of the cases resulted in jail time for the perpetrator," said lead researcher Sherry Hamby, PhD, a psychology research professor at Sewanee, The University of the South.

Children were physically hurt in one in 75 cases, but they experienced fear and anxiety much more often. More than half of the [children](#) said they were afraid someone would be hurt badly, and almost two in five said the violence was one of their scariest experiences ever, according to the study, published online April 7 in the APA journal *Psychology of Violence*.

Children who witness [domestic violence](#) are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, nightmares, teen dating violence and disruptions with school work, Hamby said. The trauma can be very similar to when children experience abuse themselves, she added.

"Family violence definitely cuts across all segments of society and has a serious impact on children," Hamby said. "Parents are such big figures in a child's life. If a parent is endangered, that can threaten a child's well-

being. They get worried that if their parent is in danger, then who is going to protect them?"

The nationwide study included 517 children who had witnessed domestic violence, including beating, hitting or kicking of a parent or caregiver. Three in four children saw the violence, 21 percent heard it and 3 percent saw the injuries later.

The study contradicted stereotypes that domestic violence is more prevalent in low-income or minority households. The violent incidents crossed economic lines, with 28 percent occurring in households with annual incomes under \$20,000, 30 percent with incomes from \$20,000-\$50,000, 18 percent with incomes from \$50,000-\$75,000 and 24 percent with incomes of more than \$75,000. The violence also occurred in families from various races and ethnicities, including 53 percent white, 20 percent African-American, 16 percent Latino and 11 percent other races. Almost three out of every four perpetrators were male.

Researchers conducted confidential telephone interviews in 2011 with parents or caregivers for children less than 10 years old, while children age 10 to 17 were interviewed directly. The survey results were similar from parents or children so it didn't appear that adults were downplaying the violence, said Hamby.

Many domestic violence victims were dissatisfied with the police response. In cases where arrests weren't made, almost one-third of adults said police should have arrested the perpetrator, and 13 percent said police should have followed through with the investigation. The study also examined whether police followed best practices, such as providing information about protective orders, domestic violence shelters and safety plans to prevent further violence. Those practices had significant effects on separating victims and perpetrators, but less than half of

police responding to the violent incidents followed most of the best practices. "There is a lot of evidence that better training and responses by police could make a big difference for families," Hamby said.

All 50 states allow arrests in domestic violence cases without cooperation from the victim, but convictions can be more difficult to obtain if the victim refuses to testify, Hamby said. Victims may fear further violence or other repercussions from testifying since most perpetrators who are arrested will be released without serving any jail time, she added.

Fifteen percent of all cases led to contact with domestic violence advocates, but victims reported various obstacles, including lack of transportation, too much paperwork and concerns about losing child custody. The study also recommended other means of reaching victims, including websites, social media and text messages. The National Domestic Violence Hotline, at 1-800-799-SAFE (7223) or <http://www.thehotline.org>, offers assistance with safety plans and other resources.

More information: "Intervention Following Family Violence: Best Practices and Help-seeking Obstacles in a Nationally Representative Sample of Families With Children," Sherry Hamby, PhD, Sewanee, The University of the South; and David Finkelhor, PhD, and Heather Turner, PhD, University of New Hampshire; *Psychology of Violence*, published online April 7.

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: Children see domestic violence that often goes unreported, research finds (2014, April 7) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-04-children-domestic-violence-unreported.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.