



# The overlap of witnessing partner violence with child maltreatment and other victimizations in a nationally representative survey of youth<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

Sherry Hamby<sup>a</sup>, David Finkelhor<sup>b,\*</sup>, Heather Turner<sup>b</sup>, Richard Ormrod<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Sewanee, the University of the South, Sewanee, TN 37383, USA

<sup>b</sup> University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 23 July 2009

Received in revised form 3 March 2010

Accepted 8 March 2010

Available online 17 September 2010

### Keywords:

Intimate partner violence

Child maltreatment

Co-occurrence

Witnessing domestic violence

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To examine the co-occurrence of witnessing partner violence with child maltreatment and other forms of victimization.

**Method:** Data are from the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV), a nationally representative telephone survey of the victimization experiences of 4,549 youth aged 0–17.

**Results:** Witnessing partner violence (WPV) is very closely associated with several forms of maltreatment and exposure to other forms of family violence in this sample, with adjusted OR ranging from 3.88 to 9.15. WPV is also significantly associated with a wide variety of other forms of victimization, with OR ranging from 1.43 to 7.32. More than 1/3 (33.9%) of youth who witnessed partner violence had also been maltreated in the past year, compared with 8.6% of non-witnesses. For lifetime data, more than half (56.8%) of WPV youth had also been maltreated. Neglect and custodial interference were most closely associated with WPV.

**Conclusions:** These data support the poly-victimization model, indicating that many youth experience multiple forms of victimization. They also indicate that the various forms of family violence are especially closely linked.

**Practice implications:** These results provide new urgency to calls to better integrate services to adult and child victims of family violence. For example, screening to identify the needs of child witnesses could be done in domestic violence shelters, and screening to identify the needs of adult victims could be done in child protective service settings.

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## Introduction

Partner violence and child abuse share many common features, and it is not surprising that these phenomena often occur together (Bourassa, 2007). Indeed, in many cases the same perpetrator is guilty of assaulting multiple family members. The assaulted family member is not necessarily the only victim in these situations, however. Increasing attention has been paid

<sup>☆</sup> For the purposes of compliance with Section 507 of PL 104-208 (the "Stevens Amendment"), readers are advised that 100% of the funds for this program are derived from federal sources (this project was supported by Grant No. 2006-JW-BX-0003 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice). Financial support for this project was provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Injury Prevention. The total amount of federal funding involved is \$2,709,912.

<sup>☆☆</sup> Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the US Department of Justice or the CDC.

\* Corresponding author.

to the plight of children who may be doubly victimized in such families: first, by being maltreated themselves and second, by witnessing the victimization of a parent.

Numerous studies indicate that the overlap is substantial between witnessing partner violence (WPV) and child maltreatment (Appel & Holden, 1998; Jouriles, McDonald, Slep, Heyman, & Garrido, 2008). The overlap is observed whether one examines child abuse rates among the children of partner violence victims (Jouriles et al., 2008) or partner violence in families reported for maltreatment (Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004). The degree of co-occurrence is affected by several factors, however. In one review, the median prevalence of child abuse was 41% among children of battered women, but only 6% in nationally representative samples (Appel & Holden, 1998). In addition to sample characteristics, stricter definitions of abuse and shorter referent periods also typically decrease the level of co-occurrence (Appel & Holden, 1998; Edleson, 1999; Jouriles et al., 2008).

There are several limitations with existing information on the co-occurrence of WPV and child maltreatment. Samples from service settings, such as domestic violence shelters, represent families who often have multiple problems and few resources, and are not typical of the general population. Existing figures for representative community samples come primarily from older studies (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Most existing studies use adult or official record informants (Edleson, 1999; Jouriles et al., 2008), and thus the true exposure of youth is less well established, because they may not witness all violence between parents. This relates to a major controversy in the field, as the degree to which child protective services (CPS) should get involved in cases of WPV is much debated (Edleson et al., 2007). More specific data on WPV could help advance this policy debate.

Additionally, most research on the co-occurrence of WPV and child abuse has focused on a single form of maltreatment, child physical abuse. Although the shared physical assault component may make this seem a natural choice, it is not clear that there is any theoretical reason to focus on this particular overlap. A parent who is willing to use physical violence against loved ones, or even a parent who is traumatized from victimization themselves, may have difficulty with other inappropriate and abusive behaviors and with meeting children's basic needs. Much less is known about the co-occurrence of WPV with other forms of maltreatment, such as neglect, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and custodial interference (taking or keeping a child with the intent to deprive a parent of legal physical custody).

#### *WPV and its overlap with other forms of victimization*

The concern about the co-occurrence of WPV and child maltreatment is one of the earliest instances of attention to the problem of multiple victimizations. It turns out that these interrelationships are by no means limited to violence that occurs within the family; there are sizeable interrelationships among many different kinds of violence exposure and victimization (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2005). Yet there are few studies which have examined whether WPV overlaps with other forms of youth victimization. Our own prior work has established that there is an overlap between witnessing violence and other forms of direct victimization (Finkelhor, Turner, et al., 2005), but has not specifically focused on WPV. Given the high degree of overlap among a wide variety of victimizations, we anticipate that WPV will not only be associated with child maltreatment, but also with other victimizations.

#### *Purpose*

NatSCEV, the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009) offers an opportunity to examine the co-occurrence of WPV with all major forms of child maltreatment as well as other youth victimizations. NatSCEV provides recent nationally representative data on the rates and co-occurrence of WPV and other forms of victimization. We expect to find a significant overlap between WPV and child maltreatment, including but not limited to physical abuse. We also expect to find that WPV is associated with higher rates of exposure to a variety of forms of youth victimization outside of the home as well.

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

The experiences of 4,549 children age 0–17 comprise the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV), a nationally representative sample of children living in the contiguous United States. Most (67%) of the sample was obtained from random digit dialing a nationwide sampling of residential telephone numbers. The rest of the sample comes from an over-sampling of telephone exchanges that had a population of 70% or more of African American, Hispanic, or low-income households. The demographic characteristics of the sample were: 50% male, 50% female, 53% White, non-Hispanic, 20% Black, non-Hispanic, 5% other race, non-Hispanic, and 21% Hispanic, any race (see Finkelhor et al., 2009, for more information).

#### *Procedure*

An adult caregiver (usually a parent) was interviewed in each household to obtain family demographic information. One child was randomly selected from all eligible children in a household by identifying the child with the most recent birthday.

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