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Child abuse in blended households: Reports from runaway and homeless youth☆

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Building upon prior research that reveals an elevated risk of abuse to children in blended households, the study considers whether risk of abuse varies by the type of non-related parent figure (i.e., stepparent, adoptive parent, or cohabiting adult) in residence.
Method: A sample of 40,000 youths that sought services from runaway and homeless youth shelters in the US was examined. Holding constant the presence of a natural parent, the study evaluated the risk of abuse by the presence and type of an additional parent figure in the home.
Results: Compared with other household types, an elevated risk of sexual and physical abuse was observed for youths from homes with a non-related parent figure in residence. Among youths from blended homes, the risk of abuse was not found to vary as a function of the type of non-related parent figure in the home.
Conclusions: The study results are consistent with prior research that shows the presence of a non-related parent figure in a household is associated with a greater than expected risk of sexual or physical abuse to children. However, the findings suggest that the particular role or status of non-related parents may not be a meaningful risk factor when considering intervention strategies in suspected cases of abuse in blended households. The sample probably represents family conditions that are significantly worse for children than what would be found in the general population, and thus the results of this study should not be generalized to the population at large.

Introduction

A growing amount of research has revealed that youths in homes with non-related parent figures (hereafter referred to as *blended* households) are at substantially higher risk of abuse by parents than children living in homes with two natural parents (Daly & Wilson, 1985, 1988; Ferguson, Horwood, & Shannon, 1984; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996; Popenoe, 1994). To interpret this phenomenon, several scholars (e.g., Amato, 1994; Coleman, Ganong, & Cable, 1996; Whitsett & Land, 1992) have argued that parent figures who abuse non-related children may do so not because they do not love the children (or because they do not know such behavior is wrong). Rather, elevated rates of abuse in blended households may

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be the result of unmanaged anger or frustration that results from a household situation in which clearly defined roles and behavioral expectations are lacking to help individuals to understand and conform to social expectations (Anderson, 2000; Cherlin, 1978; Fine, 1995).

Parent figures can assume several roles that represent differing levels of social and legal responsibility to non-related children. There has been some speculation in the literature that abuse risks to children in blended households may vary as a function of the role or status of the non-related parent (Anderson, 2000; Mason, Harrison-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002). Daly and Wilson (1985), for example, hypothesize that adoptive parents may represent a lower category of abuse risk, compared to stepparents generally, because adoption demonstrates a commitment to accept legal and social responsibility for non-related children. In addition, households in which an adult marries another but does not legally adopt their spouse's children from previous relationships might be assumed to represent a mid-level of abuse risk, between homes in which an adult legally adopts non-related children, and households in which a person cohabits with a partner and children (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Indeed, scholars (Margolin, 1992; Starling, Holden, & Jenny, 1995) have calculated higher than expected rates of abuse and physical trauma to children in homes where a mother resides with a boyfriend who is not related to the children.

Nevertheless, the structural dynamics of blended households that may contribute to an elevated risk of child abuse remain poorly understood. It has not yet been established that abuse risks among blended households actually vary according to the different roles or statuses that may be assumed by non-related parent figures. The present study investigates this issue by examining the distribution of physical and sexual abuse by a parent figure among a sample of high-risk youth.

Methods

Subjects

The data for this study came from a large sample of youths who sought services from runaway and homeless youth shelters in the US during 1987–1990. The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) gathers information about the more than 300 such programs. HHS estimates that three-fourths of their grantees participate in data collection. The shelters represent all states and the District of Columbia.

A total of 87,909 cases were identified from participating shelters. The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN), which makes these data available for public use, provided the investigator with a dataset consisting of 40,000 randomly selected observations from all cases where information was collected. All results reported here are derived from analyses of this dataset. The Institutional Review Board at the author's academic institution reviewed and exempted the research protocol for the analyses and reporting of the data in this study.

Data

Shelters complete and submit Youth Information Forms on all children for whom they provide services. Data include basic demographic information about each youth and the family structure of the primary household. The data also detail primary and contributing problems of the youth and his/her family. Evidence of sexual or physical abuse by a parent figure was recorded by shelter personnel, but youths were not asked to identify which parent figure(s) were abusive. Thus, victimization risks are reported in terms of household structure, not in terms of the identity of an alleged abuser. Intake workers were also asked to provide an assessment of the overall seriousness of the youth's problems, but no additional information was solicited in the questionnaire in relation to the severity of abuse or maltreatment that a youth may have reported. In this study the veracity of all abuse reports is assumed, and cases are not differentiated by the intake workers' generalized assessments of the severity of presenting issues.

Design

In this study, abuse risks were calculated among households in which youths reported at least one natural parent in residence. The objective was to identify the relative risk of sexual or physical abuse associated with the presence and type of an additional parent figure in the youth's primary household. As reported in Table 1, the data allow for the identification of one of seven possible types of mother figures and father figures, respectively. For the first portion of the analysis, the seven categories were collapsed into the following groups: natural parent; adult relative; non-related parent; or none. Thus, the category of "non-related" includes all non-related parent figures (stepparents, adopted parents, and other [cohabiting] parental figures) that youths could identify in their primary household. This coding scheme facilitated an initial determination of whether blended households (in general) were over-represented in reports of sexual or physical abuse by a parent. To search for variations in abuse risk within different types of blended households, the sample was then restricted to include only those homes in which a youth lived with a natural parent and either a stepparent, adopted parent, or other [cohabiting] parental figure.