

Domestic Violence and Welfare Policy

Research Findings That Can Inform Policies on Marriage and Child Well-Being

Overview

For some time domestic violence has been recognized as an issue with profound implications for our society. Recently, evidence has accumulated to document in particular the effects of domestic violence on poor families. The welfare reform legislation of 1996 drew attention to the problem of domestic violence among individuals receiving public assistance who are among the poorest of the poor.

While among the general population about 22 percent of women have experienced domestic violence in their adult lives, this figure doubles when applied to women on welfare. Most studies of women on welfare find lifetime prevalence of domestic violence ranging from 34 to 65 percent, with most rates in the 50 to 60 percent range. However, disclosure of abuse to welfare caseworkers remains low.

Domestic violence has a profound effect on the well-being of children and on the quality and stability of marriage. As welfare law reauthorization efforts increase the focus on child well-being and marriage in addition to the continued focus on employment and self-sufficiency, addressing the high prevalence of domestic violence among the welfare population becomes especially important.

Key Findings on the Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

- ▶ Infants exposed to domestic violence can suffer from ‘failure to thrive’ and may not develop attachments to caregivers.
- ▶ Preschool and school-age children may experience aggression, anxiety, depression, sleeplessness, low self-esteem, and low levels of empathy, and may score lower on verbal, motor, and cognitive skill measures.
- ▶ Adolescents may be at risk for engaging in abusive relationships.

Marriage and Domestic Violence Issues

- ▶ Research indicates that outcomes for children are best with two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage.
- ▶ One study found that 47 percent of respondents in the state of Oklahoma who had ever received government assistance cited domestic violence as a reason for prior divorce.
- ▶ The Minnesota Family Investment Program evaluation found that increasing employment and earnings with appropriate financial incentives could lead to a decrease in domestic violence and a slight increase in marriage.
- ▶ Research suggests that one of the problems related to low marriage rates among the welfare population may be the lack of ‘marriageable men’ due to high rates of incarceration for nonviolent crimes, unemployment, and low levels of education. Problems with mental health, substance abuse, and propensity for violence can also affect the ‘marriageability’ of men.

Implications for Welfare Policy

The scope of marriage promotion and child well-being policies should include a broad array of programs and services that address the multiple risk factors that lead to marital instability among low-income families. Addressing these issues could in turn lead to healthier relationships that would ultimately improve child well-being.

- ▶ **Early disclosure of abuse should be encouraged.**
Low disclosure rates to caseworkers coupled with the high prevalence of domestic violence among TANF recipients is a serious problem and should be taken into consideration in designing policies to promote marriage and improve child well-being. If not, women in abusive relationships who have not disclosed abuse may be inadvertently encouraged to stay with their partners.
- ▶ **Abuse among youth may need special consideration.**
While there is limited research on the difference in prevalence of domestic violence by age among the welfare population, there is some evidence that rates of abuse are higher among younger women, including teens. Addressing issues of domestic violence and sexual abuse in teen pregnancy prevention programs could be useful.
- ▶ **Young children could benefit from early intervention and skills training.**
Research on the early effects of domestic violence on very young children and the cyclical nature of domestic violence (propensity for children who grow up in violent homes to engage in abusive relationships) underscores the need to start interventions early and to take a two-generation approach in addressing domestic violence.
- ▶ **Coordination between CPS and domestic violence organizations is important.**
Linkages between child protective services and domestic violence workers are essential for breaking the cycle of violence earlier given the tremendous impact of domestic violence on child well-being. It is important not to simply remove children from the home where domestic violence exists but to work with the mother to provide her with the options to make safe choices.
- ▶ **Increased income support strategies may make women less vulnerable to abuse.**
The findings from the Minnesota Family Investment Program suggest that women with more employment and income are less vulnerable to abuse and may make different decisions about marriage.
- ▶ **Increased investments in low-income men may be necessary.**
While the findings on the ‘marriageability’ of men and the characteristics of batterers among low-income populations are not yet conclusive, investments in low-income men in terms of job training and education may help to increase marriage rates by addressing problems of economic insecurity. In addition, investments in mental health and substance abuse services may help in combating domestic violence.
- ▶ **Addressing attitudes about domestic violence could be useful.**
The research on batterers also finds a correlation between belief in the acceptability of violence against women and perpetration of domestic violence. Thus it may be useful to address attitudes about domestic violence and gender stereotypes.

For more information about the effects of domestic violence on low-income women and children, as well as research citations, please refer to *Domestic Violence and Welfare Policy: Research Findings That Can Inform Policies on Marriage and Child Well-Being*. Copies of the full publication are available from the Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism, NCCP, 154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032; Tel: (212) 304-7100; Fax: (212) 544-4200; E-mail: info@researchforum.org.

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J. Lawrence Aber, Ph.D., *Director*

Barbara Blum, *Senior Fellow for Child and Family Policy and Director, Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism*

Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University
154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032 ■ TEL: (212) 304-7100 ■ FAX: (212) 544-4200
NCCP WEB: <http://www.nccp.org> ■ RESEARCH FORUM WEB: <http://www.researchforum.org>
E-MAIL: nccp@columbia.edu or info@researchforum.org